MOVING A VILLAGE - VIETNAM STYLE

No smiles, few words - neither of them springboards to instant success in the resettlement of South Vietnamese in Phuoc Tuy Province.

"Just look at those faces, We're behind the start line before we even make the first move", said Major John Donohue, of the Australian Task Force Headquarters.

"They are certainly an unhappy bunch, but I don't suppose Australians would be either if they had been told to move out of their homes and leave their livelihood behind".

Only the day before Major Donohue, of Mosman, Sydney, New South Wales, had been given the task of re-establishing a complete village of just over 70 people in co-ordination with provincial headquarters Baria. It would be a full scale attempt to re-settle an entire village. The villagers had been given time to consider the proposal. They could use their own ox-drawn carts as well as United States Army trucks.

But there was a final ultimatum - they would have to move: an American operation was to be launched against the Viet Cong.

A decision to move could not be made lightly. Few of the villagers had rarely moved more than a few thousand yards outside their homes.

But their area - 12 miles to the north east of Task Force Headquarters at Nui Dat - was also Viet Cong territory.

Time was short. Major Donohue and his small team of Australians and Americans had to work quickly.

Few Australians have heard of Duc Thanh. Till now they have had little reason. No military battle of any significance has ever been fought there by the Australians, but it is now the centre of a new step in the Civic Aid Programme.

How it turns out depends a lot on the "Man from Wham", Major Donohue.

Once his new charges crack just one smile, he will know that he is well on the way to "winning their hearts and minds".

The plan was devised quickly. The villagers were to be moved into Duc Thanh village of Binh Gia (population 5000) made up of North Vietnamese Roman Catholics, six miles north of the Task Force.

With assistance from the district chief, land was acquired and levelled by bulldozer. Construction was started on two Army Tropical huts, 70 and 120 feet long and 15 feet wide, complete with cement floors and galvanised roofs. Australian soldiers worked alongside villagers and Vietnamese soldiers to complete them.
"It is not just moving the people and their belongings", Major Donohue said. "The whole village fabric must remain unbroken. The South Vietnamese are proud people and want to keep their village life intact. It is for this reason that we must not take over their lives, but stay in the background to guide them. We work through the village chief because of this.

"We try and do as little physical work as possible for them. We put their feet on the path, tell them what to do in some cases, advise them, and let them make as many decisions as possible. They have to become self reliant," he said.

For the new village the district chief has allocated land to farmers, and their farm stock. Major Donohue said that lack of food had been a problem earlier. Many families had been forced to leave rice supplies behind them when they were moved hurriedly.

"Rice is being supplied to them till they can plant their own crops. These people also like a fair deal and are intelligent", Major Donohue said. Since the village was set up a week ago an additional family has arrived. Apparently they received the message that the village is number one ("all right").

A few days after the village was set up, one member of the additional family wandered into the area, spoke with the inhabitants, and then left.

A few hours later he arrived back in the area with the family and their possessions. He asked that he be placed on the village register.

A week after the initial move, Major Donohue said the villagers looked firmly established.

"It looks as if we are succeeding - they will now come out and talk - and of course they are smiling", Major Donohue added.

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