



Crossing the millennia with the Friendship Bridge

THAILAND/LAOS: Australia's decision in 1989 to build a bridge across the Mekong River between Thailand and Laos has had far wider ramifications than generally understood. Its impact has been felt not only by the countries involved but in the pace of development of nearby nations early in the 21st century. AusAID's Geir Martinsen reflects.

also means much faster delivery times to markets – particularly important for producers of perishable goods. Longer-term benefits include the establishment of new businesses, such as tourism and light industry. These in turn have led to greater employment opportunities.

But one of the greatest long-term benefits has been the transfer of Australian skills in modern bridge design and construction technology to the Vietnamese people. For AusAID in terms of development assistance this has been a remarkable success. 'We can already see clear evidence of the lasting benefits in the recent design and construction of the Rach Mieu Bridge further down the Mekong,' says Palmer.

The Rach Mieu Bridge in Ben Tre Province, which has been designed and built by the Vietnamese Transport and Engineering Design Institute, is also a concrete cable-stayed bridge with a large main span. A further cable-stayed bridge, the Phu My Bridge over the Saigon River in Ho Chi Minh City, is due for completion in October 2009. Commissioned by the city fathers it will be an impressive eight lane structure with a main span of some 380 metres.



Vietnam is a nation of wide rivers. Its future depends on the building of many more long span bridges to link existing road and rail networks. The My Thuan Bridge has set the standard.

FAR LEFT: Cars, trucks and motorbikes hurtle across the My Thuan Bridge.
Photo: Joe Garrison

TOP: The My Thuan Bridge is a cable-stayed structure with a central span of 350 metres and two side spans of 150 metres. At each end of the main structure there is a 443 metre-long approach span. Support cables on either side of the slender deck are two 121-metre high

concrete towers. These are located in the river at either end of the main span and are supported on massive concrete piles driven level into the river bed.

Photo: Jim Holmes
ABOVE: The old system. People and vehicles spill from the ferry.
Photo: Peter Palmer

After more than 30 years of studies and feasibility assessments, the first major crossing of the Mekong would prove a tangible demonstration of a conscious shift in Australia's geopolitical focus away from Europe. Australian eyes turned eastwards to be recognised as a nation in Asia. And the bridge proved far more than a physical connection between culturally similar – but politically opposed – nations on the Mekong. The tripartite processes brokered by Australia for the construction brought together the two sides in a mutual endeavour. The demand for full cooperation in a partnership arrangement finally brought to an end decades of episodic clashes along the banks of the river that forms their common border.

But the Friendship Bridge was to have a far greater 'downstream' influence on Australia's relationships and standing in the region. During its construction between 1991 and 1994, the project was the centre of technical and political interest and a 'must see' stop on the itinerary of every visiting head of state, political or technical delegation.

In 1991 Vietnam's policy of economic renovation was still in its infancy when bilateral cooperation between Australia and Vietnam resumed after a 12-year hiatus and Vietnam soon requested support for its bridge in the Mekong Delta.

VOLUNTEERING

Infrastructure was a key sector in the new program for which the My Thuan Bridge project became the centrepiece and focal point for relationships reaching to the highest levels.

The project arrangements were unprecedented in Vietnam, with a partnership approach involving joint decision making and a Vietnamese government contribution of over a third of the capital costs for design and construction. Project completion in March 2000 – within budget and under time – achieved international standards of quality. Together with a safety record that surpassed that achieved in developed countries, the project set a benchmark for infrastructure construction in Vietnam and proved a fitting metaphor for the country's progress into the new millennium.

Since the completion of My Thuan, more than six major cable-stayed bridges have commenced in Vietnam. Two are across the Mekong at Can Tho and Ben Tre, while a third is planned upstream at Cao Lanh. In the north near Haiphong, the Kien, Binh and Bai Chai bridges were completed in 2003, 2005 and 2006 respectively. These projects include a number of wholly Vietnamese designed and built bridges – a tribute to My Thuan's dedicated training and technology transfer program. The Phu My Bridge across the Saigon River, recognising the quality of Australian expertise, is being designed and built by the former My Thuan contractor Baulderstone Hornibrook in joint venture, and supervised by Maunsell Engineers.

To attribute all of this to Australian involvement would be to grossly overstate our role and underestimate the drive of our partner nations and economies. Nevertheless, the often criticised decision by Australia nearly two decades ago to build the first major bridge across the Mekong, has undoubtedly had an important influence on investments in modern bridge technology. These large-scale infrastructure projects, properly planned and well managed, can connect people and places in ways that contribute significantly to poverty reduction.

Geir Martinsen was involved with both the Friendship Bridge and My Thuan Bridge for AusAID, as well as civil and building infrastructure and other projects in Asia between 1990 and 2004.



Trading places

PAPUA NEW GUINEA: James Allsop is a carpenter who spent 10 months working in Milne Bay Province under the Australian Youth Ambassador for Development program.

If you're a tradesperson – or anything like me – you're probably thinking that becoming an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development sounds pretty fancy. But I can also tell you that it has been one of the most challenging and rewarding things I have ever done.

It's taught me not to assume or to take anything for granted.

The first day, for example, I turned up wearing my work boots and tool belt. The locals turned up in bare feet, no tools.

Over the following weeks we got round the tool situation but not the boots. If we'd laid a slab I was sometimes the only one able to carry on working. The others couldn't take the heat coming off the concrete without burning their feet!

My host organisation, the Uniting Church Mission of Papua New Guinea, is based in Milne Bay Province and is in touch with many communities on small isolated islands. The church provides these communities with basic care and, when and as it can, opportunities for development. Boat

and sometimes radio are the only means of contact with larger centres like Alotau.

Working with the locals was one of the best parts of my assignment. When I was preparing a team for a new construction I always tried to get a good mix of abilities – some with building skills and others with absolutely none. It was the best way to achieve the two most important things – getting the work done and teaching new skills to as many people in the community as possible.

It was also a lot of fun working with the local guys. We had interesting talks and lots of good laughs. For instance, I asked one labourer how old he was (he looked 25ish). He sat and thought for a while before answering, 'I think 50 or 48, yes, 48'. He didn't look too certain so I asked him in what year was he born. Straightaway he said, '1978'. He was rapt when I told him he was only 31!

One of our most important projects was building a local health centre. As it progressed so did my understanding of what it would mean to the community. The icing on the cake was when an extra \$30,000 was given to the centre as a result of the quality of our building work. The donors liked how the centre was taking shape and could see things were really starting to happen. I think it is great that the health centre will now be able to afford an ambulance to transport urgent cases to Alotau Hospital.

Sometimes after finishing a job I felt like I wanted to do more. In some

My time in Papua New Guinea was incredibly challenging. I will never think back and say it was easy, but I will always say it was worth it.

ways, constructing a building is the easy part – it's the ongoing maintenance that is the challenge. I look back at my 10-month assignment as an important first step towards sustainability – but there are no guarantees. My host organisation and I trust – hope – we've done enough in training local workers in building and maintenance skills. It's up to them now to take care of the buildings so that they will last and continue to fulfil their functions for local communities.

Papua New Guinea gave me the kind of experience that you can only get from working abroad. I constantly overcame work related challenges – usually related to transport and the availability of materials – just because I had to. There's no option but to get on with it.

I also found working closely with communities a humbling experience – people with so little were incredibly generous to me. And I could see that my being there really made a difference.

The most valuable thing I have come back with is a renewed confidence in my abilities and a solid understanding of what can be achieved with a bit of perseverance and hard work. I've often heard that being a good tradesman isn't about how you react when things go well, but how you