The Member for Wannon and Minister for Defence, Mr. Malcolm Fraser, said today he found a good spirit prevailing among Australian troops he visited in South Vietnam.

He was commenting on his recent three-day visit there during which he had talks with South Vietnamese, U.S. and Australian civil and military authorities.

Mr. Fraser flew by helicopter to the Australian Task Force Headquarters at Nui Dat and visited some of the field posts to get a first-hand impression of how things were going with the Australian troops in Phuoc Tuy province.

He inspected some of the civic action work being done by the Australians including the start of a re-building plan for a village market place.

At Vung Tau, Mr. Fraser said he inspected the hospital facilities and was greatly impressed with the standard of these and the concern of all those involved for the welfare of the wounded and ill.

In Saigon he was thoroughly briefed on the progress of the war, on Vietnamisation and the pacification program.

The Minister said on the advice given him, the process of Vietnamisation was proceeding efficiently.

The South Vietnamese forces had been accepting greater and greater responsibility, and, according to information given him, the performance of their troops had been good.

He discussed the matter of troop withdrawals with South Vietnamese leaders, the Australians and with General Abrams, the U.S. Commander, as well as Ambassador Bunker of the U.S.
An intensive round of discussions took place with the American representatives in a frank and forthright atmosphere.

Mr. Fraser said he had talks with U.S. Secretary for Defense Mr Laird on three or four occasions and spent a good deal of time with him on the last day in final discussions.

It had become quite clear that there were differences of view between the United States Air Force and the Australian scientific and technological advisers.

These differences arose as a result of the crash of December 22, caused by the failure of a wing pivot fitting, and new problems of fracture mechanics were now involved. Inspection techniques had to be further developed and evaluated.

At the end of the visit he issued a joint communique with Secretary Laird in which the U.S. Government indicated that it understood the particular Australian problems. It therefore showed a willingness to make arrangements which would ensure the technical and operational capability of the FIIIC's was proven to agreed requirements before delivery to Australia.

It was agreed there was a necessity to delay delivery of the FIIIC aircraft until present technical difficulties were fully evaluated and corrected.

Because of the uncertainty and time required to accomplish these corrections, agreement had been made to provide to Australia on a lease or other reimburseable basis up to 24 F4E Phantom aircraft for the interim period — should the Australian Government so desire.

A number of alternative courses of action which the Australian Government could pursue to meet its strike aircraft requirements were discussed and remained as options, said Mr. Fraser.
President Thieu understood and accepted the Australian position, and the talks he had with him were useful, Mr. Fraser said.

Since the visit, President Nixon had announced the proposed withdrawal of 150,000 U.S. troops over the next twelve months and the Prime Minister, Mr Gorton, had informed Parliament that the Government had decided that one Australian infantry battalion and some supporting personnel would be withdrawn.

This would be done by withdrawing, without replacement, the 8th Battalion which was scheduled to complete its tour of duty next November.

To assist the growth in South Vietnamese self-reliance, a number of small mobile Army teams, totalling some 130 men, would be provided to work with the regional and popular forces in Phuoc Tuy.

These teams would operate on a similar pattern to that developed by some members of the existing Australian Army Advisory Group, which would continue its work.

A further proposal was being developed for Australia to provide instructors and other help to a South Vietnamese training centre for junior leaders of the popular and regional forces.

Cabinet was also giving urgent attention to the results of comprehensive studies now being made of other forms of assistance which might be offered to South Vietnam.

The major part of his visit abroad was spent in Washington, where he was accompanied by a high-powered Australian team, in examining all possible aspects of the problems besetting the FIII swing-wing bomber project.