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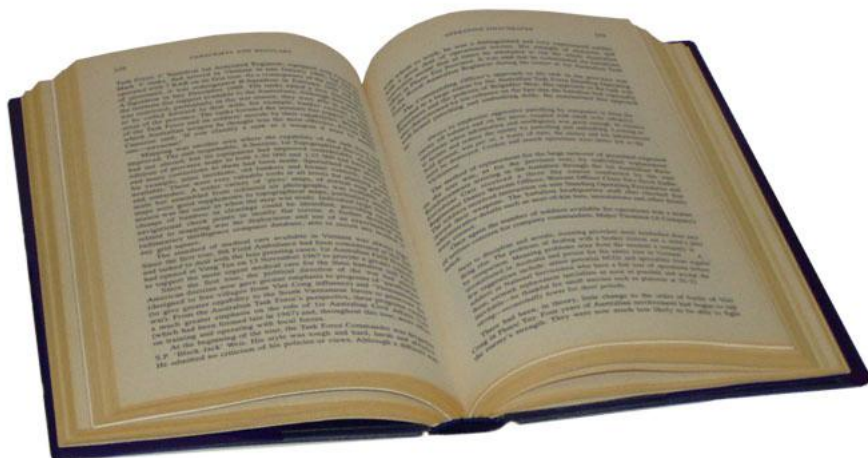
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deployment to Phuoc Tuoy  
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# CONSCRIPTS AND REGULARS

*with the Seventh Battalion in Vietnam*

---



'Duty First'

**MICHAEL O'BRIEN**

**ALLEN & UNWIN**

in association with Seventh Battalion  
The Royal Australian Regiment Association Incorporated

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# BATTLE HONOURS OF THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN REGIMENT

## **Korea 1950-53**

Sariwon  
Yongju  
Chongju  
Pakchon  
Uijongbu  
Chuam-Ni  
Maewha-San  
Maryang San  
**Kapyong**  
Kowang-San  
The Samichon

## **Vietnam 1965-72**

**Long Tan**  
Bien Hoa  
**Coral-Balmoral**  
Hat Dich  
Binh Ba

*Motto of The Royal Australian Regiment: 'Duty First'*

## **Affiliated Regiments of The Royal Australian Regiment**

*The Brigade of Gurkhas  
The Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment  
The Royal Malay Regiment  
Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry*

*7 RAR Affiliated Regiment: The Gordon Highlanders*

## **7 RAR Marches**

*Quick March (Military Band) — 'Australaise'*

*Pipe Marches*

*Battalion Quick March — 'Cock o' the North'*

*Battalion Slow March — 'Mo Dhachaidh' (My Home)*

*Support Company — 'Bonnie Dundee'*

*A Company — 'The Black Bear'*

*B Company — 'The Nut Brown Maiden'*

*C Company — 'The Glendaruel Highlanders'*

*D Company — 'The Barren Rocks of Aden'*

*Administration Company — 'The Muckin' o' Geordie's Byre'*

*Battalion Headquarters — 'Steamboat'*

*7 RAR Lanyard — 'Maroon'*



***Dedicated to all those who served in  
Seventh Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment,  
particularly those who died in their country's service  
and to  
300 Sergeant John Mansfield Thorn, 1st Tunnelling Company, AIF  
and  
NX204940 Lieutenant Maurice Stanislaus O'Brien, AEME, 2nd AIF***

An effective battalion in being ready to fight, implies a state of mind – I am not sure it is not a state of grace. It implies a giving and a taking, a sharing of almost everything – possessions, comfort, affection, trust, confidence, interest. It implies a certain restriction, and at the same time a certain enriching and widening of the human spirit. It implies doing a hundred things together – marching to the band, marching all night long, being hungry, thirsty, exhausted, filthy; being near but never quite mutinous. It involves not the weakening but the deferment of other bonds and interests; the acceptance that life and home are now with the battalion. In the end it is possible to say 'the battalion thinks' or 'the battalion feels' and this is not an exaggeration.

Henry 'Jo' Gullett,  
*Not as a Duty Only – An Infantryman's War*

Why are young men of our nation told to look in ancient history for examples of heroism when their own country furnishes such lessons?

Sir William Napier

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# *Abbreviations*

ACR	Armoured Cavalry Regiment
1 ATF	First Australian Task Force (Nui Dat)
1 ALSG	First Australian Logistic Support Group (Vung Tau)
1 ARU	First Australian Reinforcement Unit
2IC	Second-in-Command
2Lt	Second Lieutenant
AACC	Australian Army Catering Corps
AATTV	Australian Army Training Team Vietnam
Admin	Administration
AEME	Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
AFV	Australian Forces Vietnam
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AO	area of operations
APC	armoured personnel carrier
A Tk	anti-tank
Arty	artillery
ARVN	Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam
Aslt Pnr	Assault Pioneer
BC	Battery Commander
Bn	battalion
Brig	Brigadier
CAP	Company Aid Post
Capt	Captain
CASEVAC	casualty evacuation
Cav	Cavalry
CB	confinement to barracks
CBU	(US) cluster bomb unit
CHQ	Company Headquarters
CMF	Citizen Military Forces
CO	Commanding Officer
Col	Colonel
Comd	Commander

COMUSCMACV	US Commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam
Coy	company
Cpl	Corporal
CP	command post
CQMS	Company Quartermaster Sergeant
CSM	Company Sergeant Major
DF	defensive fire (task for artillery or mortars)
DOW	died of wounds
FAC	forward air controller
FCC	fire control centre
Fd Bty	Field Battery
Flt	Flight (Army Aviation)
FO	(artillery) Forward Observer
Frag O	Fragmentary Operation Order
FSB	Fire Support Base
FSPB	Fire Support Patrol Base
FUP	forming-up place
Gen	General
Gnr	gunner
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GPMG	general purpose machine gun
GSO	General Staff Officer
HE	high explosive
HEAT	high explosive anti-tank
HFT	heavy fire team of three helicopter gunships
H&I	harassing and interdiction fire
HQ	headquarters
JTC	Jungle Training Centre (Canungra, Qld)
KIA	killed in action
LAW	light anti-tank weapon
LCpl	Lance Corporal
L&D	Loss and damage report
LFT	light fire team of two helicopter gunships
LO	liaison officer
LOCSTAT	location state
Lt	Lieutenant
Lt Col	Lieutenant Colonel
LZ	landing zone (for helicopters)
Maj	Major
MATT	Military Assistance and Training Team
MAW	medium anti-tank weapon
Med	medical

MEDCAP	Medical Civic Action Program
MID	Mentioned in Despatches
MFC	mortar fire controller
MG	machine gun
Mor	mortar
MORTREP	Mortar Fire Report
MPC	Military Payment Certificate
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NDP	Night Defensive Position
NLF	(Viet Cong) National Liberation Front
NOTICAS	notifiable casualty
NS	National Service
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OC	officer commanding
Offr	officer
O Gp	orders group
Op	operation
OR	other rank
ORBAT	order of battle
Pdr	pounder (gun projectile mass)
PF	(South Vietnamese Army) Popular Force
Pl	platoon
PSDF	(Republic of Vietnam) Peoples' Self Defense Force
Pte	Private
Ptl	patrol
PW	prisoner of war
PX	Post Exchange
PZ	pick-up zone (for helicopters)
QM	Quartermaster
QMS	Quartermaster Sergeant
RAA	Royal Australian Artillery
RAAC	Royal Australian Armoured Corps
RAAChD	Royal Australian Army Chaplains Department
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAAMC	Royal Australian Army Medical Corps
RAE	Royal Australian Engineers
RAEME	Royal Australian Corps of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
RAP	Regimental Aid Post
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment
RASvy	Royal Australian Army Survey Corps
R&C	rest and convalescence
R&R	rest and recreation

RCL	recoilless rifle
Rd	round (of ammunition)
RDC	(Republic of Vietnam) Revolutionary Development Cadre
Recce	reconnaissance
Regt	regiment
RF	(South Vietnamese Army) Regional Force
RMO	Regimental Medical Officer
RNZA	Royal New Zealand Artillery
RP	Regimental Police
RPG	rocket-propelled grenade
RQMS	Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major
RSO	Regimental Signals Officer
RTB	Recruit Training Battalion
RV	rendezvous
SAA	small arms ammunition
SAS	Special Air Service
Sect	section
Sgt	Sergeant
Sig	signals or signaller
SLR	self-loading rifle
SMG	sub-machine gun
SOP	Standing Operating Procedures
SP	self-propelled (gun or howitzer)
Spr	sapper
Spt	support
Sqn	squadron
Ssgt	Staff Sergeant
Surv	surveillance
SVN	South Vietnam
TAOR	tactical area of operational responsibility
TF	Task Force
TFMA	Task Force maintenance area
Tpr	trooper
VC	Viet Cong
WO	Warrant Officer
WIA	wounded in action
WP	white phosphorus
Wpn	weapon
XO	Executive Officer

# *Vietnamese Terms*

Ap	hamlet
Bau	lake
Cau	bridge
Dinh	shrine
Lang	village or town
Nui	hill, mountain
Quan	district
Rach	swamp, stream
Song	river
Suoi	stream
Tinh	province
Xa	village or town (smaller than Lang)



## *Conversion Factors*

1 yard = 0.91 metre  
1 foot = 0.30 metre  
1 inch = 25.4 millimetres  
1 pound = 0.45 kilogram  
1 ton = 1.02 metric tonne  
1 quart = 1.14 litres  
6400 mils = 360°

# *Acknowledgements*

THIS BOOK IS the result of collaboration between the author and the Seventh Battalion Association. This large and enthusiastic group of former members of the battalion and its supporting arms, ably led by Jim Husband, BEM, supported the history project from its inception in 1990. The guidance of its senior office bearers, Colonel Eric Smith, DSO, Major General Ron Grey, AO, DSO, and Colonel Henry Guinn, DSO, ED, was invaluable.

The association sought the support of all its members and it was always willingly given. The response to a questionnaire distributed to them in 1990 was very encouraging. Many of the answers were given at no small emotional cost. In accordance with the wishes of those who replied, most of the responses are deposited at the Australian War Memorial, as are copies of many photographs and records relating particularly to the periods of service in South Vietnam. This effort has added considerably to the Memorial's collection relating to this war.

I was also privileged to be able to interview many of those who were key participants in the battalion's short history. Their names are listed in the bibliography. As would have been expected, all cooperated willingly – but more than that, they expressed many views that have not earlier been made public. I hope that the trust they put in the author, to use their information with discretion, has not been misplaced.

The association provided financial support for this book. I am also very grateful to have been supported by the Australian Army History Research Grants Scheme which enabled me to undertake a field trip to Vietnam in 1994. I would particularly thank Mike Gretton (Australian Defence Force School of Languages) who provided me with accurate and helpful Vietnamese interpretation. However, I should make it clear that, despite that grant, the Australian Army bears no responsibility for the opinions expressed in this book – they are mine alone.

The maps for this book have been skilfully drafted by staff at the Army Technology and Engineering Agency who also provided darkroom services. The Director of Army Survey and his staff assisted by providing copies of historical maps.

I would like to thank the Department of Defence for permission to have open access to the relevant records. The staff of the Australian War Memorial, particularly Mr Bill Fogarty (an ex-member of the battalion), were extremely helpful. Bill was able to pass on to me the extensive collection of valuable papers relating to the first tour which had been thoughtfully assembled by the battalion's first Regimental Sergeant Major (and later its Mortar Platoon Commander), the late Captain Doug Clively, and by its first Assistant Adjutant, Lieutenant Colonel Barry Caligari. John Egan, of the Central Army Records Office, was patient and helpful. Steve Conroy volunteered to help with detailed research. I was also assisted by Dr Peter Edwards, the Official Historian, Ian McNeill (the author of the ground operations volumes of the Official History of the Vietnam War), Colonel David Chinn, MBE, Bronwyn Self, Janet Marshall and Lorraine MacKnight. Their help was invaluable.

I would offer my wife Margaret and my family my sincerest gratitude for their essential and invaluable support.

Although many have helped in this project, the interpretations and any errors are of course mine alone.

# Foreword

*by Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Daly,  
KBE, CB, DSO, Chief of the General Staff  
1966–71*

ALTHOUGH THE OFFICIAL HISTORY of Australian operations in Vietnam is still in the course of preparation, much has been written on Australia's involvement. Accounts of the achievements of the nine battalions of The Royal Australian Regiment are gradually finding their way to publishers and it is important that they do so while those who served through the momentous days of the 1960s and 1970s are still able to recall their experiences. The history of Seventh Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment is the latest of these accounts.

It is an intimate story of a battalion and the men who gave it its life, beginning with its formation and following its course through war and peace until it became linked with Fifth Battalion RAR in 1973. It is told, within the framework of Michael O'Brien's very readable narrative, largely by the men of the battalion in the undemonstrative, matter-of-fact manner of the Australian soldier. It tells of countless engagements, those minor pieces in the complex jigsaw of war, it tells of death and survival, of success and failure against a skilful and determined enemy, it fleshes out the dry bones of history.

It all begins in September 1965 with the assembly of a small cadre of professional soldiers at Puckapunyal followed shortly afterwards by an influx of personnel, both Regulars and National Servicemen, most of whom had only recently completed their recruit training. I am only too well aware of the magnitude of the task which faced their first Commanding Officer, Colonel Eric Smith. Having been involved in a similar situation more than half a century ago, I could not but admire the thoroughness with which the Commanding Officer and his cadre of Regulars went about their task. The subsequent operational success of the battalion owes much to the good administration, the intense training program and the strict discipline imposed by Eric Smith on his young soldiers, a regimen that was to be repeated by

his successor, Colonel Ron Grey, who faced a similar challenge in preparing the battalion for its second operational tour in 1970.

Little has been written about the Seventh's operations in Vietnam. Journalists were not inspired to write about endless, apparently unrewarding patrols, about ambushes lying in wait for hours in pouring rain or about the dreary routine of cordon and search operations. Even major successes were often overshadowed by more spectacular events elsewhere. The gallant performance of the battalion during the Tet Offensive of 1968 was largely ignored by the media, which found the attack on the American Embassy in Saigon and the siege of Hue far more newsworthy. Similarly, such fierce engagements as that at Suoi Chau Pha and Ap Suoi Nghe passed unnoticed, but the long, exhausting patrols, the ambushes, the cordons and searches were by no means unsuccessful. The fleeting contacts with their occasional kills, the casualties inflicted by the well-planned ambush, the searching of villages, the destruction of camps, the discovery of caches of arms and supplies, the interdiction of trails used by the Viet Cong for maintenance together with the operations of other units of the Australian Task Force, gradually deprived the enemy of their sources of support, sapped their morale and eventually destroyed their dominance of the civil population. This was the payola for months of hard training and the self-discipline needed during those long patrols with dangers lurking around every bend in the track.

As is so often the case in war, operational success depends largely on the skill, courage and initiative of junior leaders, the subalterns, the sergeants, the corporals and private soldiers who find themselves isolated and faced with crucial decisions. The battalion was richly endowed with these fine young men, many of whom were National Servicemen. Not a lot has been written about the part played by the substantial proportion of National Servicemen in the RAR battalions, probably because there is not a great deal about which to write, for by the time they had completed their recruit training there was little to distinguish them from their Regular comrades. The same can be said of the young National Service officers. Once they had taken their place in that unique family, the infantry battalion, absorbed its spirit and been welded into those tight little teams – the platoon and the section in which they were to spend the remainder of their service – all differences had disappeared. They were soldiers of the Seventh.

Michael O'Brien has produced a serious but lively account of life in an infantry battalion. He has provided a moving story of the thoughts, fears, courage and self-sacrifice of the soldier in battle. He also, very properly, pays tribute to those who supported the soldier so valiantly; the helicopter pilots, the gunners, the sappers, the cavalry with their armoured personnel carriers and later the tanks – the 'bunker busters'. Without them, casualties would have been much greater, success far more costly.

I am glad to be associated, if only in a very minor way, with this project. It revived many memories of young men I had known at Duntroon, in Korea, in battalion football

teams and in various postings. And there were those splendid warrant officers and NCOs, the backbone of any unit, like the ubiquitous and irrepressible Danny Neville whom I had first met across the Orderly Room table in Korea, and who subsequently welcomed me into a hole in the ground in Pleiku (or was it Kontum?). Sadly, he and so many of his brave fellows are no longer with us.

This story deserves to be widely read, not only as an important segment of Australia's military history, but also as a gripping tale of young men who, at their government's bidding, went forth to battle to help a strange country try to attain the freedom which we ourselves so often take for granted; young men who put duty first.

Tom Daly

# Introduction

THE PURPOSE OF this book is to provide a serious study of enduring value which seeks to explain to the members of the battalion and their families, and to a wider public, what service in the battalion meant and what the war in Vietnam was really like for the men in infantry battalions who bore the brunt of it. I have therefore left it to the participants to tell their own story wherever this is possible. No amount of rewriting can improve on the directness of expression of those who were there. The book also tells the story of a battalion raised for service in the war in Vietnam and traces its fortunes to the time of its linking with the Fifth (5th). While eight years is a short time for a major Army unit to exist, the particular intensity of many individuals' identification with the Seventh (7th) and its unit association, and the unit's high *esprit de corps*, demand such an account.

Sufficient time has passed to allow the war in Vietnam to be viewed in a more objective perspective than may have been previously possible. While the memories of many of the participants may have dimmed, it has become apparent during the writing of this book that many wished their views to be written down not for personal glory, but simply so that their story could be placed on record. The members of this battalion felt a bond that they think few understand. Those who had this bond tested in Vietnam feel now, even more strongly, that the feelings that many of them had held back for twenty years or more need to be expressed, and in what they consider is an appropriate context.

There are several themes that are examined in the book. The central thread is the day-to-day life of the battalion and its members. These events happened in an environment peculiar to the Australian Army and its ethos, and in an Army altered by National Service. The battalion was a product of the scheme of training soldiers for the war in Vietnam. Soldiers are always representative of the community of which they are part. The members of the battalion experienced many of the stresses of that community; their loved ones felt these stresses to perhaps an even greater degree.

War affected the lives of all those who participated in it – too many still carry the mental and physical legacies of their service. The extensive questionnaire to which a high proportion of ex-members of the battalion responded provided a large source of data for conclusions in these areas. The key issues here are examined in the final chapter 'Legacies of service'.

The morality of the war in Vietnam, conscription, Agent Orange and other controversial issues are not central themes (although they are not avoided) because they are not central to the story of the battalion. The book seeks neither to destroy reputations of individuals nor to enhance those of others. War has its warriors and cowards, its silent heroes and its shirkers, its inspirational leaders and willing followers. Those who served with the battalion on active service have their strongly held views, little moderated by time, and no book will alter their opinions on whether one person was a mouse and another a lion.

The accounts of contacts with the enemy are, of course, particularly important to this book. Not all contacts are mentioned, nor is there detail of all Australians wounded. Readers will not be able to deduce the total number of enemy killed, because this statistic was never important to the battalion. As stated elsewhere, the problem in an account of this type is that it will always fail to describe the majority of the Vietnam experience for the infantry soldier: the tedium of scrub-bashing for weeks on end without sight of the enemy. In accordance with common usage at the time, the term Viet Cong is used for enemy soldiers whether they were local insurgents, main force guerillas or North Vietnamese Army soldiers.

Weights and measures are those used during the tours of Vietnam where the peculiar military mix of pounds (mass), metres and 6400 mils in a circle prevailed. The complex diacritical accent marks on Vietnamese words have been omitted. The book does not include a nominal roll of those who have served with the battalion because of the length of such a list, particularly for those who served with the battalion only in Australia. The ranks used throughout the main text of this book are those held at the time. I apologise to anyone for whom incorrect information is listed.

The practicalities of publication have restricted the contents of the book. In particular, it has not been feasible to include detailed footnotes on the individuals mentioned or the sources of most reference material. A longer manuscript, with this additional information, has been deposited at the Australian War Memorial to assist those who may need to research further. Sections of the book that deal with the raising of the unit, its training and the events after the second tour of Vietnam have also been deliberately abbreviated.

This book seeks to record the story of the battalion – the valiant 7<sup>th</sup> – and if, by doing this, it preserves and enhances its tradition and reputation, then the effort of all those who contributed has been worthwhile.



# 1

## Raising and Training

### *'Aged Lentils and Fresh Greens'*

Muskets and bullets and marching feet  
The smell of gunpowder and sweat  
The roll of the drum and the bugle call  
The memory of dangers we met.

'The Trooper's Song'

ON 1 SEPTEMBER 1965 the Seventh (7th) Battalion of The Royal Australian Regiment (7 RAR) was raised at Puckapunyal in Victoria. It was thought appropriate to send its first signal to the Colonel Commandant of The Royal Australian Regiment, Major General Sir Reginald Pollard. It read:

UNCLAS SIGNAL NO 1. BIRTH NOTICES 1ST SEP 1965. 7TH BN TO RAR AT PUCKAPUNYAL. PRESENT AT BIRTH 9 OFFRS. G AND A THRIVING, COMPLICATIONS WITH Q. ACCELERATED GROWTH GUARANTEED WITH SUPPLEMENTS OF OCT AGED LENTILS AND DEC FRESH GREENS.

The thriving G and A referred to the operations, training and personnel administration aspects of the new unit. As will soon be described, there were complications with the Q or stores aspects. October's aged lentils referred to the plan to man part of the battalion with seasoned veterans from 3 RAR; the fresh greens in December were to be National Servicemen.

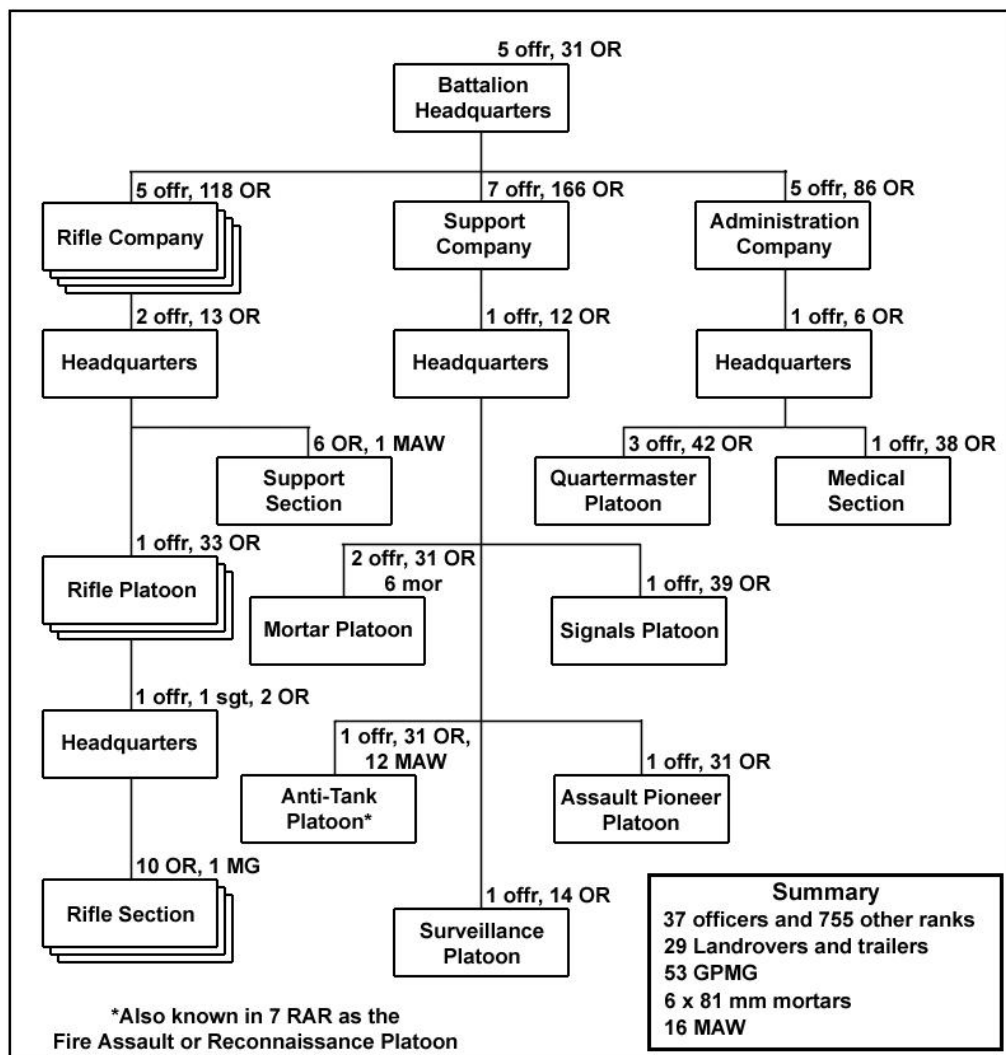
The Royal Australian Regiment is made up of the infantry battalions of the Australian Regular Army. The Regiment's founding can be traced to the raising of the 65th Battalion on 12 October 1945, to be followed by the 66th and 67th Battalions on 16 and 20 October, respectively. These battalions were specifically raised for the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan. These three battalions were retitled 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions, The Australian Regiment on 23 November 1948. The prefix Royal was added on 10 March 1949. The Regiment had consisted of three

to four battalions until the war in Vietnam. The commitment to this war, and the government's intention to provide what became a three infantry battalion Task Force as its contribution, as well as the commitment to the provision of a battalion in Malaysia, necessitated the expansion of the regiment.

What is an infantry battalion? The word battalion comes from the Italian word *battaglia* (a battle) and means, by implication, a group of a size that is capable of fighting an independent battle. A battalion is a self-contained unit that can fight on foot under almost any circumstances, regardless of season, weather or terrain. The theoretical organisation of an infantry battalion – called its establishment, and in this case called the 'Tropical Warfare' establishment – that applied during 7 RAR's existence is shown in figure 1.1. Commanding officers had the discretion to vary its organisation within the overall limits of manpower, weapons and major equipments.

The battalion consists of six companies. Four of these are its *raison d'être* – the rifle companies. These are the primary fighting elements of the unit, providing its small arms firepower and its ability to seize or hold ground, to patrol and search out the enemy, to ambush, to move on foot, in armoured personnel carriers (APCs), in trucks or in helicopters. Support Company provides the specialist services integral to the battalion – its limited but flexible indirect fire support from the Mortar Platoon with its six 81 mm weapons, communications from the Signals Platoon with its ANPRC25 very high frequency radios and its K phones, the construction and field engineering capability of the Assault Pioneer Platoon and the tracking and specialist reconnaissance and anti-armour capabilities of the variously named Anti-tank, Tracker, Fire Assault or Reconnaissance Platoon. The Surveillance Platoon, although listed on the establishment, was not raised in 7 RAR (the equipment proposed for it had not been procured) and commanding officers used its manpower, when it was actually available, for other tasks. Administration Company provides the battalion with its ammunition and stores holding capacity, its cooks, medical treatment and stretcher bearers and its limited motor transport. The battalion headquarters provides the means of command for the unit. Like any headquarters it provides a very necessary service for the Commanding Officer and for all the companies and indeed all soldiers in the battalion. Most soldiers in the battalion are from the Royal Australian Infantry Corps, but a few specially trained men are attached to it from other corps such as the Australian Army Catering Corps (AACC), the Royal Australian Corps of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RAEME) and the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps (RAAMC). Every soldier in the battalion is trained in infantry skills and is able to perform the duties of rifleman.

The variations that commanding officers applied to 7 RAR's organisation in Vietnam were designed to make the standard organisation better suited to its actual role in that war. An operations officer was needed to coordinate operational planning



**Figure 1.1** Battalion organisation

and to run the battalion command post. In the first tour this position was called S3 as it was in the US Army system of staff designations. The job was filled by a major, generally next in seniority to the battalion second-in-command. He was found by 'misusing' one of the other major positions, often the Officer Commanding Support Company. Similarly, the demands of base administration at Nui Dat called for a Second-in-Command of Administration Company to be found from one of the captain positions in the battalion. During operations, there were many other alterations

needed to officer establishment positions because of the requirement to provide liaison officers to other units.

If British soldiers identify with their regiment and Americans with their brigade or division, Australian soldiers identify with their battalion. It is indeed their family: it leads, feeds, clothes, directs and exhausts them. Its veins are the sections and platoons, its limbs the companies. It has the capacity to inspire their actions, to drive them beyond exhaustion, at times to subordinate their loved ones and to provide a depth of male comradeship rarely achieved elsewhere. This exclusive club has demanding rules of entry and offers few amenities. It seems to revel in adversity and prosper in challenge. It has fickle moods: a sense of purpose may be cemented by a mascot or nickname while, in contrast, wide dissatisfaction can be spread by a single remark from the commanding officer. It has a formidable capability that is derived from the action of 800 men with shared aims and *esprit de corps*.

A battalion is strongly influenced by its commanding officer. This seems a truism to those who have served in a battalion and have seen how all aspects of its existence hinge on the way the commanding officer deals with all his subordinates. He is a most powerful figure determining how military justice will be administered; who deserves to succeed; who will be promoted; whether the tactical grasp of an officer or non-commissioned officer meets his standards; who can lead; who will follow. He can inspire, constrict, delegate or centralise, call on wide resources, teach, exhaust and inspire. He can be the loneliest man in the battalion at the same time as being the most respected, revered or even hated. Eight hundred men will identify as belonging to him. He will remain the symbol of their service in *his* battalion as long as they remember their military experience. Some will fight him but few are likely to succeed. Many will imitate his style. Some will sacrifice their lives at his command. All will give him more effort and endure more hardship than they thought was possible.

There are two exclusive groups in a battalion – its officers and its sergeants. One group broadly represents military education, the other the result of military experience. The groups are paradoxically always rivals and always complementary. There is a dynamic competition that results from their differences. No group of officers completely dominates a battalion unless it has the co-operation of its sergeants. The regimental sergeant major, generally the closest confidant of the commanding officer, heads the hardest team of assessors any officer will ever face. And when this whole mechanism of double-based leadership unites to become the battalion's driving force, it is one that cannot be resisted.

Junior non-commissioned officers, the corporal section commanders and their lance corporal second-in-commands, particularly in South Vietnam, ran the day-to-day detail of the war. They allocated duties, watched, checked, trained, guided, cajoled and led. They were intimately responsible for the lives of all members of their sections at all times. Platoon sergeants provided the experienced overview, often commanding platoons or half platoon groups. One platoon sergeant from the first tour

felt that the most enjoyable aspects of his tour in Vietnam were: the closeness and mateship of his platoon; the opportunities to control the platoon; the closeness and mateship of the other platoon sergeants; and the togetherness that continued after an operation. He said that he identified more with the platoon than with any other part of the Army: it was as if the platoon was one person and he was its platoon sergeant.

Company sergeant majors provided leadership, discipline and support to all soldiers in their company and to its commander. Their particular job in battle was ammunition resupply. They assisted company commanders in the same way that the regimental sergeant major assisted the commanding officer.

Lieutenant (and, for the Signals and Mortar Platoons, captain) platoon commanders had a satisfying, responsible job and provided the youthful drive. They particularly undertook the burden of the manoeuvre and tactical employment of their three sections in battle. Most led from the front in the tradition of that particularly relevant infantry motto, 'Follow me'. Captains, the company second-in-commands, although understudying their company commanders, had the essential but at times unrewarding and unglamorous task of administration. Company commanders (majors) had the charge of the larger battles and the day-to-day planning for the tactical employment of their soldiers. One from the first tour said that at the time it was a company commanders' war in the Task Force.

The Commanding Officer commented that, at Puckapunyal, 7 RAR was given a set of tired old iron buildings for quarters – probably the worst buildings existing in the Army at the time. There was insufficient accommodation, very poor messes for the soldiers and nothing at all resembling officers' or sergeants' messes. Needless to say, there was no canteen for the troops.

The choice of Puckapunyal also dictated the way the battalion was to be made up. There were few married quarters available in that area. It was therefore decided that the Regular Army soldiers posted to the unit should be single. 3 RAR was chosen to become the nucleus on which 7 RAR would be built. On its return from active service in Malaysia, 3 RAR sent its single soldiers and officers to 7 RAR and kept its married men.

There were nine members present on the day that the battalion was raised: they included the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Eric Smith; the Second-in-Command, Major David Drabsch; the Assistant Adjutant, Lieutenant Barry Caligari; the Regimental Signals Officer, Second Lieutenant John Methven; and Warrant Officer Class Two Ron Sigg. The first private soldier in the battalion was Private Ray Rosenow, who later served with Administration Company in the battalion's first tour of Vietnam.

Lieutenant Colonel Eric Smith graduated from a two year course at the Royal Military

College, Duntroon, in December 1944, aged nineteen. He joined the 2/3rd Australian Infantry Battalion (2nd AIF) in July 1945 and was a platoon commander at Wewak. Later that year he was posted to the 4th Australian Infantry Battalion (AIF) for a short time before being assigned to the 67th Australian Infantry Battalion, the predecessor of 3 RAR, as one of its original members. He served in Korea with 1 RAR, became the senior instructor at the Officer Cadet School, Portsea, in 1953 and was selected to attend the Army Staff College at Camberley, UK, in 1956. He served as a major in 1 RAR and 2 RAR in Malaya and in Australia in the Citizen Military Forces and in training staff positions before being tasked to raise and command 7 RAR. He was the only commanding officer of an Australian infantry battalion in Vietnam who had had commissioned active service in World War II.

By 10 September the unit had its Regimental Sergeant Major, Warrant Officer Class One Doug Clively, march in. He had been on active military service in Korea and had been an outstanding parachute jump instructor. He was a tough and able soldier: an enthusiastic leader with a touch of the larrikin. The Regimental Sergeant Major had a mere seven days in which to prepare for the first unit parade for a visitor. On 17 September, the Director of Infantry, Brigadier Bill Morrow, was greeted by a parade of a forlorn fourteen all ranks. It was only at the end of the month when twelve reinforcements arrived from the Infantry Centre that other ranks (ORs) outnumbered officers in the unit.

When the Regimental Sergeant Major joined the battalion, the Commanding Officer quickly formed the opinion that he was a man of very high calibre and persuaded him to apply to become an officer. When Clively obtained his commission, Colonel Smith successfully fought to keep him in the battalion as his Mortar Platoon Commander. The new Regimental Sergeant Major was Warrant Officer Class One Alec 'Blue' Thompson. Although he was also nicknamed 'The Beast', it was, in the inverted manner of Australian nicknames, much more a mark of respect for his soldierly qualities and for the firmness of his discipline. He was a very experienced soldier who had served in Korea and Malaya.

The second month of the unit's existence was spent preparing for the arrival of more than 300 soldiers and officers from 3 RAR who were to return from their leave after service in Malaysia. This included preparation of training programs and the reconnoitering of training and exercise areas. By the end of October the move of 7 RAR to its own accommodation in B Block at Puckapunyal had commenced. In mid-November, the draft of 342 regular soldiers from 3 RAR arrived. Many of these soldiers had served together in Brisbane for several years before their posting to Malaya. Most of the 3 RAR rifle companies had served one or more six to eight week stints on counter-terrorist operations in the Malay – Thai border area. In addition most of the battalion was deployed against an Indonesian incursion south of Malacca and the whole unit completed a four month tour in Sarawak during Confrontation. The

battalion also rotated most officers through South Vietnam in 1964 (for familiarisation).

One of the most unifying aspects of 7 RAR was its nickname. To some the nickname was a triviality and an annoyance. Corporal Roy 'Doc' Savage gave this explanation of its origin:

*The single men of 3 RAR were sent to Puckapunyal to form a new battalion, 7 RAR. I arrived there on 11th November 1965. At first there were only regular soldiers. We used to keep the boozier open all weekend having the cooks bring our meals there. Anyway, on my second week there the new CO (Colonel Eric Smith) decided to inspect his new battalion area on a Sunday. He immediately closed the boozier. The next day he called a muster parade of the whole battalion and commenced to tell us what he thought of us. Half way through his speech he said and I quote, 'You are nothing but a mob of pigs'. Then from the back rank someone called out 'oink oink'. From that time onwards we became the Pig Battalion.*

On 10 November 1964 the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, had announced the government's decision to introduce a selective National Service scheme from mid-1965. It was designed to bring the size of the Regular Army from 22 750 to 37 500 and also to expand the Citizen Military Forces. The scheme chose future soldiers by ballot. A number avoided this by volunteering, while others exercised the option within the scheme – to join the Citizen Military Forces. National Service changed the profile of the Army. The conscripts came from a broader cross-section of the community. They were probably better educated on average than their Regular counterparts. They were, almost to a man, very well motivated to and by the Army.

The Army's initial plan for the battalion was for it to serve in Borneo. This information was secret and was known only by the Commanding Officer and the original Regimental Sergeant Major. After the Confrontation with Indonesia ended, this task was altered to training to go to Vietnam.

Australian infantry battalions had not all been well prepared for war in 1939–45. Some units, such as the 39th Battalion, had gone into battle with some soldiers who had not even fired their rifles. Preparation for battalions' deployment to the Korean War had also been less than perfect. Under the direction of the Director of Military Training, Brigadier Geoffrey Solomon, a system of training for battalions assigned to Vietnam was mandated. All soldiers would have done both recruit and Infantry Corps training. They would join their unit and proceed to be trained at platoon and company level and in any specialist roles. This training, which would take the best part of a year to complete, would culminate in a company-level Battle Efficiency course at the Jungle Training Centre, Canungra. This was followed by a battalion group test exercise at Shoalwater Bay which was externally assessed. Failure at Canungra or Shoalwater Bay could result in the removal of an officer or retesting of a unit.

Colonel Smith placed a particular emphasis on the battalion's shooting. He had arranged for each company to have its own small arms range at Puckapunyal which was used by every soldier every morning for a period of months. The Director of Infantry, Brig Bill Morrow, arranged for all small arms ammunition not used by other Army units to be made available to 7 RAR. This practice produced results: Colonel Smith later recalled an instance where a soldier in Vietnam killed three enemy with three shots.

Despite its grim reputation, Puckapunyal had some wonderful (although far from tropical) training areas within reach. A Company discovered some old gold diggings in a state forest at a place called Whroo. They used the diggings to simulate a Viet Cong camp and practised patrolling, attacking and tunnel searching. In the Howqua Valley below Mount Buller they spent many weeks practising all their basic infantry skills and still found time to catch a few trout by methods which might be frowned upon by a purist.

It was perhaps primarily a political requirement that every soldier serving in Vietnam should have passed through the Jungle Training Centre (JTC). The reason was that in the event of a death or wounding it could be said that a soldier had received the very best up-to-date training it was possible to give him prior to leaving Australia. Company groups progressively passed through Canungra. The staff rated the companies from very good to excellent and felt that 7 RAR was one of the best battalions to have passed through the Centre.

The battalion then took part in Australia's largest peace-time land exercise which was held in the Shoalwater Bay Training Area. More than 8000 troops participated, including 2 RAR and 7 RAR, Headquarters of 1st New Zealand Brigade Group, 3rd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment [UK] and elements of 2nd Battalion, Pacific Islands Regiment. The aim of Exercise BARRA WINGA was to practise the simultaneous concentration, lodgment and deployment of a task force with its logistic support force in a simulated overseas theatre. The setting was that of limited warfare in South-East Asia with simulated warfare of the type experienced in South Vietnam.

During the exercise, helicopters for troop lift were supplied by British Royal Marine Commandos flying Wessexes. The helicopters were part of the complement of the commando carrier, HMS *Bulwark*. There was a narrow escape for nine soldiers from the battalion who were loaded on a Wessex for a night move. The helicopter took off but its main rotor assembly broke away and the helicopter plunged to the ground from a height of about 9 m. Miraculously, all passengers and crew escaped injury.

Captain Peter Leeson recalled that he and Major Ken Bladen flew from Rockhampton to Cairns to join HMS *Bulwark* and to plan 7 RAR's activities while the ship sailed south to Rockhampton. The helicopter crash (all were then grounded) created chaos for the exercise planners trying to schedule 7 RAR into the exercise. Leeson wrote thirteen Operation Orders in three days as the planners kept changing



the requirement and ran out of paper at Order No 13, so the Administration and Logistics section of that order was written on toilet paper.

7 RAR captured some of the 'enemy' soldiers from 2nd Battalion, Pacific Islands Regiment. The problem of holding them was solved, it was thought, by removing their boots. Relieved of this burden, the captured soldiers proved to be even more fleet of foot as they made a swift escape!

Throughout 1966 and 1967 soldiers who had been trained in 7 RAR were posted to other units as reinforcements to go to Vietnam. One hundred (mostly National Servicemen) left for 6 RAR and the 1st Australian Task Force on 28 February 1966. Fifty left for the Infantry Centre on 26 August and a further 40 left on 13 September. On 7 January 1967, 50 National Servicemen of the second 1965 intake marched out of the battalion as reinforcements for units in Vietnam. Of these groups, two soldiers were later killed in action. Private Tony Purcell was killed with 6 RAR in a fierce engagement against a company of *D445* north-east of Long Tan in July 1966. Private Don Clark, who had been in 10 Platoon D Company, was killed in February 1967 as a result of a mine explosion under an armoured personnel carrier. The explosion occurred near the base of the Long Hai Mountains while Clark was serving with B Company 5 RAR.

The Commanding Officer undertook a reconnaissance trip to South Vietnam from 15–23 January 1967. He was sponsored by the Commanding Officer of 5 RAR, Lieutenant Colonel Warr. Colonel Smith was frustrated by the lack of information he was receiving from Vietnam and considered that this restricted the usefulness of battalion training. He therefore arranged for Major Des Mealey and Warrant Class One Officer Pat Sheddick and two others to be sent to Vietnam in February as a 'Pre-Advance Party'. They duly arrived at Nui Dat and were fostered by 5 RAR. That battalion, and particularly its Commanding Officer, were most cooperative. Both members of the party regularly reported back to 7 RAR in writing on all aspects of operations in Vietnam.

Exercise NILLA QUA (which was coined to mean 'no water') was held at Shoalwater Bay from 20 February to 6 March 1967. The *Army Newspaper* called it the 'mirror war' because it sought to be a close image of the war in Vietnam. The aim was to exercise 7 RAR in a wide range of operational techniques, the emphasis being on aerial surveillance and mobility, the use of supporting and covering artillery fire, rapid deployment, resupply of rations and equipment by air and the maintenance of ground forces. There was to be an emphasis on patrolling, control by junior leaders, quick reaction to information about the enemy, water discipline and conservation and the control of artillery by infantry officers. Forward observer parties from 106th Field Battery again formed part of the battalion team.

The 'enemy' were badly controlled on the exercise. Their tactics were nothing like the Viet Cong and the battalion was forced to waste some of its valuable training time. Although the exercise was designed to stress lessons at company level and below,

one platoon commander commented that Exercise NILLA QUA was of little value at even company level. At platoon level little was done except march and counter march around the training area. The enemy were seen by that platoon on only one occasion and its soldiers ignored them.

Colonel Smith believed that the main advantage derived from the exercise was in navigation done during the battalion's own training time. After a number of patrols became lost, the exercise was halted while all corporals and above, up to and including company commanders, carried out a navigation exercise set by the Regimental Sergeant Major.

On return to barracks, the Commanding Officer was surprised that the whole battalion was to be subjected to a comprehensive audiometric test (to check that soldiers' hearing was up to battle standards) several days before its Advance Party was due to leave for Vietnam. The Assistant Adjutant recalled:

*7 RAR was the first battalion to undergo audiometric testing before service in South Vietnam. The test was recorded in duplicate. The R[egimental] M[edical] O[fficer] advised the CO that early results showed a significant number of soldiers failing the test (ie PES: CZE'). The CO could not understand how a soldier could be PES: FE for hearing under the old system which had served the Army well for generations but be PES: CZE because of a machine. The CO would not accept the result. He 'ordered' the RMO to collect and hand him the originals and copies of the audiometric tests. The CO went to South Vietnam on the Advance Party and took all the audiometric tests with him. Before the CO left, I was not involved with the audiometric drama so when Southern Command demanded with menaces their copies of the tests I pleaded ignorance and sent a Flash<sup>2</sup> signal asking the CO the location of the tests. The lack of response was furious. I made further attempts. Southern Command and A[rmy] HQ made similar requests all to no avail. I was feeling the heat already but Southern Command turned it higher by raising the prospect of a court of enquiry. When the Main Body had embarked I left Puckapunyal with the Rear Party. On arrival [in South Vietnam] at Ap An Phu, I immediately sought out the CO and told him of the gathering storm. He said that now his battalion was on the water I was welcome to the tests.*

Captain Leeson wrote:

*I recall Eric Smith's concern about the failure rate. I was sent to the Camp Hospital, positioned so I could see the operator and the person being tested, and was told to signal the testee when to respond. The failure rate declined in the latter stages of the tests!*

Some felt that there was insufficient attention paid to training with supporting arms. One company commander commented (after the first tour) that training with other

services in Australia prior to the first tour was inadequate, and training with other corps – particularly artillery – was almost non-existent.

The lack of training with artillery can be attributed to the late re-raising of 106th Field Battery at Wacol, Queensland. Its formation in May 1966, as the battery destined to provide direct support for 7 RAR, was indeed too late to provide the depth of close understanding that is needed for an artillery battery to work with its infantry partner as a close-knit team. This problem was a symptom of the unbalanced expansion of the Army in order to accommodate its increased role and size. Nevertheless, due to the industry of some of the Forward Observers, the companies achieved a good level of training so that all non-commissioned officers and all signallers were able to call for fire effectively.

An Assault Pioneer Platoon private soldier commented that there was no effective helicopter training for him prior to Vietnam. Although Wessex helicopters (a type not used in Vietnam) had been available during BARRA WINGA, other helicopter training in Australia was restricted to emplaning and deplaning drills with helicopters on the ground. No command and control helicopters (which had a special fit of radios) were available for training in Australia. He also felt that the only true jungle training prior to Vietnam was at JTC (after having served with 3 RAR in Malaya and Borneo he found it irrelevant and easy). He considered that there was no training or knowledge of the workings of allied forces prior to Vietnam and only limited knowledge of engineer and assault pioneer tasks. At least some of his criticisms were justified.

As the time to leave for Vietnam approached, the unit's 'Q' administration was put to the final test when the books of account for Australia were closed. There was neither a single surplus item nor a discrepancy. Many other checks on administration, such as wills, inoculations and identity tags were completed, and rolls were closely examined.

Major Don Atkinson joined the battalion on 30 March. He wrote:

*7 RAR on the first tour had an unusual command structure, no doubt brought about by the circumstances of my arrival. I arrived at HQ 7 RAR late on the afternoon of the day prior to the Advance Party's departure. I was feeling pretty pleased with myself for the Director of Infantry, Colonel Bill Morrow, had promised me the first available company commander slot in a battalion going to Vietnam. Now there was a last minute replacement officer required in 7 RAR so I was on my way.*

*The Adjutant, Captain Peter Leeson, showed me into the CO's office. My welcome was as terse as it was unexpected. 'I don't know you. I didn't ask for you and I don't want you' said the CO, 'frankly, I don't know what to do with you but I'll tell you this – you'll not command any of my troops. Come back and see me in the morning and I'll work out what to do with you'. Stunned, I went and sat alone in my allotted room until late in the night.*

*Our meeting the next morning was more cordial. 'You have to understand Don that there is nothing personal in this,' the CO said, 'my soldiers' lives are at stake and you are an unknown quantity to me. Bill Morrow and Joel Langtry (my former CO) speak highly of you but I must know for myself before I can let you command my troops.' He had decided that Peter Leeson would command Admin Company as a captain and that I, a fairly senior major, would be 'Adjutant—or S3 as they call it over there'. Neither of us were very familiar with the duties of the S3 but I was to study them on the ship on the way over. The CO departed with the Advance Party that night. When I read the duties of the S3 (now called the Operations Officer) I thought that there must be some mistake, as this was the best job in the battalion.*

The Advance Party left Sydney airport by Boeing 707, which refuelled at Manila before landing at Ton Son Nhut airport near Saigon. Because they were going through other countries they could not wear uniforms so they wore Army shoes and trousers with civilian shirts which they felt was 'bloody ridiculous'.

The Main Body, about 515 strong, was transported from Puckapunyal by train on the afternoon of 7 April after tearful farewells at a Seymour railway siding. After eight hours leave in Sydney, they boarded HMAS Sydney (commanded by Captain E.J. Peel, RAN) on 8 April at Garden Island in Sydney. There were opportunities for families and loved ones to farewell the troops before Sydney sailed. Troops had a time to be on board the ship and some were punished for being late.

Private Hoppner described the accommodation on board and other aspects of the voyage:

*You should see us. There are 75 of us in a room 30' x 30'. We all have hammocks and when they are up they are just on touching. We started training today – done 4 hours P[hysical] T[raining] and fired a few shots at balloons thrown over the back of the ship.*

When Private David Milford saw the large rooms, he wondered when soldiers were to be shown to their separate cabins with beds. Private Milford finished his first letter home on the voyage to Vietnam aboard HMAS Sydney. He reassured his parents:

*I will say this. If you are afraid for me, don't be, because all through history men have fought and paid their all so that we may choose to be free and live our lives as we choose. If you think you are alone, don't, because there are thousands in Australia with you and millions will benefit in both Australia and SVN [South Vietnam] and all the free world will benefit.*

*If men can say they are happy, have a good home and family, have a good house to live in in a good country, freedom from want of either food or friends, they must be prepared to defend it. They must also be prepared to help other*

*people to defend their basic rights and have a life they can enjoy, so that our children and all children can live and grow up to enjoy life.*

*If you find that most people show ignorance about what the Army is doing (and you will), it is because they never have had in Australia much cause to worry about their freedom (and we hope never will) while there are good men to do their dirty work for them, which there will always be.*

Private Milford had missed out being called up in the National Service ballot. Like a significant number of others, he had decided to join the Army as a Regular Soldier.

7 RAR was the first Australian battalion to serve in Vietnam after more than twelve months' effective training time. It was ready for war – a finely balanced team of Regulars and National Servicemen, of 'aged' and 'fresh'.

# 2

## Phuoc Tuy Province and the Context of the War

Phep vua thua le lang

(The laws of the emperor yield to the customs of the village)

Traditional Vietnamese proverb

ARMY POLICY WAS to ensure that soldiers were informed about why they were going to South Vietnam and the reasons behind the conflict. This was achieved by unit training, backed up by the issue to all soldiers of the *Australian Military Forces Pocketbook – South Vietnam*. This small booklet gave a short outline of Vietnamese history and culture and a guide to its government, armed services and some notes on the enemy. Although the pocketbook was superficial and in many respects out of date, it was designed as a brief guide that would have been supplemented by unit training in most of the areas covered. Nevertheless, some omissions in the version issued to 7 RAR soldiers prior to the first tour, such as mention of the most common Viet Cong weapon from 1967 on – the AK47 – are hard to explain. It is also easy to condemn the almost caricature-like depictions of the 'part-time village guerilla' and 'regular insurgent soldier' it contained. In retrospect, it is also difficult to understand that none of the information in the pocketbook was directly related to the Province of Phuoc Tuy itself.

An understanding of the history of the Long Hai Mountains and of those who live within their shadow in Phuoc Tuy Province cannot be gained from text books. This brief account is the result of the collation of information gathered almost entirely by interviews with the people of the area and is largely based on local legend and popular stories.

The peaks of the Long Hai Mountains were first explored over 1000 years ago, when Buddhist monks climbed the hills in search of suitable refuge for monasteries and pagodas to be used as retreats. For almost 800 years the mountains were visited only by those seeking religious seclusion. Monasteries and pagodas were carved out near the rocky peaks, each being improved upon and reconstructed over the centuries.

It was customary during times of reconstruction for those living around the base of the mountains to make a pilgrimage to the sites of the pagodas in the hills, each man and woman from the surrounding villages carrying a stone to be used for rebuilding. The last of these pilgrimages was made in 1954 when the centuries-old pagoda on the Hon Vung peak was painstakingly reconstructed.

The mountains were occupied almost exclusively by religious recluses until the beginning of the nineteenth century; the succeeding century and a half saw the invasion of the Long Hais by numerous different groups seeking the seclusion of the hills for their own particular purposes. As a result, the Long Hais no longer provided the security which attracted these religious groups. By 1957 the last of the Buddhists were driven from their traditional retreats in the Long Hai Mountains and now only ruins remain where for centuries they had worshipped.

The southern areas of what is now known as Phuoc Tuy Province were the scenes of widespread civil unrest during the closing years of the eighteenth century. When reports of open revolt reached Emperor Gia Long in Hue, General Nguyen Van Tiep was despatched with an army from the capital to his birthplace in Tam Phuoc in order to settle the dissidence in the region. General Tiep was to inveigle and, if necessary, enforce popular allegiance to the throne at Hue. On Tiep's arrival many fled to the mountains seeking refuge until the army had moved on.

Tiep's operations were so successful, however, that he remained in the vicinity of his native Tam Phuoc, using the area as a base from which he could launch operations further afield. A huge dam was built to the west of An Nhut so that horses and elephants could be washed down after returning from operations.<sup>1</sup> These elephant baths still stand, but now only listless buffalo wallow in the tepid water. When it became obvious that Tiep intended to remain and that his army was not just another in a series of marauding forces which had passed through the area, those who had fled to the hills returned to their homes, and the Long Hais once again became solely a religious retreat.

Tiep remained at Tam Phuoc until his death, and in honour of his memory a Dinh (temple) was constructed. Within it were enshrined many of his personal belongings. The Dinh still stands, untouched and revered, on the western edge of Tam Phuoc.

In 1789 a Vietnamese woman called Thi Ria settled in the province. She established many villages in Long Dien around Tam Phuoc. When she died in 1803 she left all her property to Tam Phuoc village and a temple called Nui Co was erected in her honour outside Tam Phuoc on the road to Long Hai. Baria is named after Thi Ria.

Under Tiep's influence the southern areas of what is now Phuoc Tuy Province remained relatively docile, and remained loyal to Gia Long in Hue until about 1830.

It was at this time that Day Shon entered the capital and forced Gia Long to flee to Cambodia in exile. Gia Long formed an army with a nucleus of Cambodian mercenaries and marched east to Binh Tuy Province; from there he planned to launch attacks against Saigon and Hue in an attempt to restore himself to the throne of Vietnam.

During his march to the west from Binh Tuy, Gia Long took advantage of the shelter and security afforded by the Long Hai Mountains, remaining in the area for some considerable time. It is believed by some of the locals of Long Dien that Gia Long entered the sprawling village with a white tiger by his side. The tiger was trained to fight beside him and protect the Emperor in battle. Even to this day the people of the village named after Gia Long worship in the temple of the White Tiger and pray for its return, so that it will bring with it good luck to the village of Long Dien.

In 1859 the fleet of the French Admiral Rigault de Genouilly destroyed two fortresses at Vung Tau (Câp St Jacques) which had defended the waterway to the Saigon River. After taking possession of Saigon, the French forces were exhausted and had to cease operations. However, in December 1862, the French occupied Bien Hoa. Baria was also occupied by the French and placed under the governance of M. Coquet, a battalion commander and local affairs inspector.

The advent of the French in Phuoc Tuy Province met only token resistance, and the people quickly settled under French colonial rule. Those who resisted were forced to flee, many seeking refuge in the Long Hai Mountains where they remained as small pockets of resistance. These groups were considered by the French to be mere bandits rather than nationalists and they constituted no real threat at that time to French rule in Phuoc Tuy. It would be almost 100 years before these 'bandits' could muster sufficient force to take an effective part in the resistance against French rule.

Brutal suppression by the French forces quickly stemmed any efforts at ousting the colonists, and those who did not take refuge in the mountains were pacified so effectively that the foothills of the mountains facing the South China Sea were soon developed by the French and a few Germans into a 'New Riviera'. The fishing village called Long Hai, to the west of the mountains, became a popular resort, while on the southern foothills, facing the sea, the châteaux of a more exclusive élite were built.

The southern Long Hai Mountains remained for almost a century as the holiday ground of the French and the wealthier Vietnamese, and the caves in the hills, which had sheltered both Buddhists and 'bandits', became a popular tourist attraction. After World War I a road was constructed leading from Route 44 in the south up to the Hon Vung, and tourist brochures printed in 1935 advertised tours into the Long Hai Mountains, offering adventurous exploration of the labyrinth of caves.

The 'New Riviera' remained as a playground for the French until 1938, when invasion by the Japanese interrupted the comfortable course of colonial life. The Japanese also brought with them the opportunity that a growing band of nationalists



had so long awaited – the chance for independence. The next twenty years were to see an overt struggle in which the Long Hai Mountains again played a significant part.

In the face of Japanese invasion, the French forces withdrew from the area, and the Vietnamese could offer only token resistance. The invaders landed at Vung Tau and advanced along Route 15 towards Phuoc Le (Baria). The destruction by the Vietnamese of the Song Co My bridge halted the advance, and after a brief skirmish the invaders by-passed the area in commandeered sampans and pushed on towards the north. On reaching Baria the Japanese wreaked swift revenge on a frightened population; after this all armed resistance against the Japanese ceased.

During the Japanese occupation of Phuoc Tuy, a large airfield was constructed in the north-western corner of the province near Phu My and was marked on maps as Phu My 5. This was the first Australian experience of the province: some 200 Australian prisoners of war assisted in the airfield's construction.<sup>2</sup> One group left Saigon to work on the strip on 20 February 1945. They were camped in tents in a rubber plantation about 3 km from the aerodrome while it was being built. The capitulation of Germany occurred while they were there and there was rifle fire between the Japanese and some of the remaining Vichy French. After the airfield's construction the Australians carved an airstrip out of jungle near Phan Rang. They were in Saigon on their way to Phnom Penh to be executed when the war finished.

Although the Japanese were by no means regarded by the locals as their saviours from the French, their occupation provided an opportunity to gain a greater degree of independence than had existed under French rule. The Japanese were burdened by their relatively small numbers and therefore relied upon the Vietnamese themselves to undertake much of the minor local administration which formerly had been strictly controlled by the French. The new level of participation in administration engendered a good deal of optimism among the Vietnamese nationalists, and this feeling was fostered and encouraged by the Japanese when, in 1945, they realised that their withdrawal was inevitable.

During the period of occupation the Japanese had developed and manned defensive positions within the Nui Chau Vien and Nui Trong features of the Long Hai Mountains. When withdrawal was forced at the end of the war, Vietnamese nationalists under a new leader called Minh occupied these positions. They remained firmly ensconced within the fortress of the Long Hais, armed with weapons abandoned by the retreating Japanese and emboldened by aspirations of independence.

The end of hostilities saw the occupation of the area surrounding the Long Hais by another entirely foreign group. As part of the allied reparation and restoration scheme, Indian troops, including some Sikhs, were stationed in both Dat Do and Long Dien, along with the British forces sent to 'maintain the status quo' while reoccupation by the French was organised. Vietnamese nationalist groups reacted strongly to yet another foreign presence, and resisted the efforts of a British force

determined to restore the pre-war system of colonial administration. The Indians were swift to react and quickly suppressed and disarmed the groups of dissidents who attempted open revolt. Under their leader Minh and his lieutenant Dam, the nationalists had long been planning to establish an independent administration to fill the vacuum created by Japanese withdrawal, resolving to move swiftly before the French could regain their balance to reoccupy and re-establish l'ancien regime. The swift occupation and strict control by the bearded Sikhs and disciplined British came as a bitter blow. Strongly resentful at being so easily contained, the nationalists withdrew again to the shelter of the Long Hai Mountains.

Throughout the period of occupation from early 1946 until 1947, the nationalist groups remained in the Long Hai Mountains and watched with loathing the French army and administration again take control. The long awaited chance for independence had passed; the attempt to gain autonomy had been thwarted by an occupation force determined to maintain the status quo. From their hides in the Long Hai Mountains, the nationalists impatiently watched for the complete withdrawal of the British, waiting for the moment when Minh would order them to strike.

For over ten years an uneasy alliance had existed between the nationalist forces and the communist groups throughout Indo-China. This relationship had been gaining strength as communist and nationalist common aspirations for independence grew. The events of late 1946 which culminated in the naval bombardment by the French of Haiphong on 23 November, and the ground attack on Hanoi on 19 December, served to cement the relationship and led the nationalists and communists to open warfare against the French under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh and the military command of Vo Nguyen Giap.

It was not until a year later that the backwash of these open hostilities reached Minh and his growing force in the Long Hai hills. Then under the guidance of a strong political cadre, Minh initiated open hostilities against the French. Minh received a great deal of popular support, and his Viet Minh forces soon occupied most of the villages east of Long Dien. The French were well prepared for outright warfare, but were unable to cope with the guerilla tactics of the Viet Minh. The French influence was quickly reduced to the immediate vicinity of their outposts at Dat Do, the Horseshoe, Phuoc Hai and Long Dien. Before long, only large French forces could move successfully anywhere east of Long Dien.

Minh was responsible for military activities in an area which encompassed the Long Hai Mountains, extending north to Dinh Co to include Tam Phuoc village, east as far as his native An Nhut and south through Long My to the sea. All the area west of the mountains to the coast was also included in his area of responsibility, which became known by the Viet Cong after his death as the Minh Dam Secret Zone.

The twin headquarters of the Minh Dam Secret Zone were located at Tam Phuoc

and Long My, and it was in these villages that Minh raised the *Quoc Ve Doi* – a Viet Minh form of regional force – commanded by Co Tam and Co Vinh. The French launched numerous operations to find his headquarters, and as a result Long My and Tam Phuoc were almost completely destroyed. Tam Phuoc was eventually resettled by the French at Phuoc Trinh, barely 1 km east of the remains of Tam Phuoc – astride and south of Route 326. The new village was sparsely populated as most of the 2000 pre-war inhabitants had fled to the Long Hai Mountains to seek refuge or to join the Viet Minh. When Tam Phuoc was resettled Minh moved his headquarters to the Chau Vien mountain where a large cave hospital had been established to care for the wounded of the *16th Viet Minh Regiment*.

In 1947 the political headquarters of the Viet Minh Baria Province were established under the command of Xa Hai at the village of Phuoc Buu. Xa Hai was responsible to Zone 7 Headquarters at Bien Hoa for the political and military activities of the Viet Minh War Zone D, which encompassed the areas of the Hat Dich, Long Phuoc, Long Tan and the Minh Dam Secret Zone. French prisoners of war captured in the Minh Dam were taken from the prison camp the Viet Minh had established on the Nui Truong Phi to Phuoc Buu for interrogation and subsequent execution. It was on one of these journeys to Phuoc Buu that Minh was ambushed and killed near Long My. Dam, his assistant, was also ambushed and killed by the French as a result of information given by the 2nd Chi Doi Company which to a man had defected to the French. Phuoc Buu became known to the French as Saigon Moi (New Saigon) and remained as the area of War Zone D Headquarters despite several bombing raids and a large scale operation by ground troops against it in 1950. The place that was later to become the Australian operational base in Phuoc Tuy, Nui Dat, was used by the Viet Minh in the early 1950s as a practice area for their infantry attacks and for tactical exercises without troops. The political headquarters of War Zone D were located at Phuoc Buu until 1954, and the village itself was eventually abandoned by the civilians in 1956. Phuoc Buu village, which was once larger than Dat Do, is now only ruins.

By 1954 the Viet Minh had gained control of almost all of Phuoc Tuy Province. Only the capital Baria remained under complete French control and movement by other than large, well armed groups became most dangerous for the French forces. Repeated successful ambushing by the Viet Minh had forced the French to abandon the outpost nicknamed 'Con-O' at the base of the Hon Vung feature, and resupply of the Moroccan Company stationed at Phuoc Hai became a hazardous task which almost invariably resulted in savage fighting on Route 44 between Dat Do and Phuoc Loi.

Many of the French troops in the Long Le and Dat Do Districts had been relieved by French colonial troops, and in most cases Moroccan units. Indiscriminate raping and looting by the Moroccans did little to appease the fierce hatred the locals felt towards

the French. Despite the capitulation of French forces in the north, the Viet Minh continued to attack French outposts and ambush their convoys until virtually the last day of the first Indo-China War. The final battle resulted in heavy Viet Minh casualties on 19 July 1954 when a coordinated Viet Minh attack was launched on the garrison at the Horseshoe and a reinforced platoon at Long Tan.

The French left Phuoc Tuy almost immediately after the Geneva Agreement was signed. The Viet Minh buried their weapons and cached their ammunition, and all but the hard core cadres returned to their homes. The headquarters at Phuoc Buu was disbanded and many Viet Minh returned to the north. Reconciliation between Vietnamese who had fought on opposing sides was not difficult as all were united in their hatred of the French. To the majority of the people of the area the new peace was a welcome opportunity to rebuild – Tam Phuoc was reconstructed; many villagers climbed the 245 steps to the shrines on Dinh Co, while others made their pilgrimage to the Hon Vung Pagoda in the mountains.

After the French had withdrawn there was a general feeling of relief, and the people of Phuoc Tuy Province settled down to rebuild, looking forward to the promised elections which would re-unite their country. Refugees who had taken advantage of the 'Hundred Days Truce' (provided by the Geneva Agreement) poured into Phuoc Tuy Province from all parts of North Vietnam, and under the resettlement scheme were settled at Binh Gia and the neighbouring villages of Phuoc Tinh and Phuoc Ham. Almost 8000 North Vietnamese were settled in Phuoc Tinh and Phuoc Ham under the leadership of two Catholic priests, and over the years these two communities developed into model villages. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces took control of most of the posts abandoned by the French. The southern areas of Phuoc Tuy Province remained peaceful for several years.

It was not long before the devout were making pilgrimages into the mountains, and for a brief period in 1956, guided tours were again conducted over the Hon Vung feature in the southern mass of the Long Hai Mountains.

In 1956 a government decree formally incorporated the Province of Baria and its capital at Phuoc Le. In 1962 the province name was changed to Phuoc Tuy. The Chinese character for *phuoc* means 'prosperous' or 'happy', that for *tuy* means 'peaceful'. Many of the villages in the province have incorporated the name *phuoc* to emphasise the wish of a high government official that the province should resound with peacefulness.

Unfortunately the peace was not to last. By 1958 it had become obvious that the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem did not intend to keep the promise of nation-wide elections. The corruption and graft of the Government of the First Republic had grown to such a large scale that whatever popular support the regime had enjoyed in its early years rapidly disappeared. As disillusion and dissent became widespread, the underground political movements of various factions emerged into the open. In particular the political cadre of the Viet Minh became very active. Caches of weapons

were unearthed and the people were pressured to join or give support to the re-formed guerilla units.

Between World War II and the late 1960s, the people of Phuoc Tuy had been subject to many rulers. The list included the French, Vichy French, Japanese, Viet Minh, Viet Cong, British, Sikh, South Vietnamese and effectively the Americans. It is little wonder that the influence of the Australians might have been seen as transitory. Indeed, as the village was the centre of life and the primary influence on most of the province's population, he who ruled, or in the words of the proverb at the start of the chapter, the man who was emperor, was much less important than those who regulated the routine of village existence. The success of the rice crop and the freedom to till the fields to produce it were far more important issues than who held sway in Saigon.

When it was decided in 1966 that Australian forces would be responsible for Phuoc Tuy Province, preliminary operations were planned to clear the designated base area at Nui Dat from the immediate threat of Viet Cong attack. In April 1966 a series of operations by US and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces levelled the villages of Long Tan and Long Phuoc, removed their inhabitants and resettled them into Dat Do, Long Dien and Hoa Long. Viet Cong tunnels remained undetected in the ruins of Long Phuoc. In many cases, this resettlement caused resentment and in others just transferred Viet Cong sympathisers from one village to another. In May 1966 two battalions of the 173rd US Airborne Brigade cleared the area around Nui Dat. They encountered fierce resistance. One US company suffered eight killed and 23 wounded in an action late in the month. US forces left the province in strength on 8 June and handed over effective responsibility for its security to the newly arrived 1st Australian Task Force and to 5 RAR in particular. The succession of Australian units' tours of Vietnam in Phuoc Tuy had begun.

Phuoc Tuy Province, which was about 50 km from north to south and 40 km from east to west, had an area of 1958 km<sup>2</sup>, which is approximately the same size as the Australian Capital Territory. Baria is about 110 km from Saigon by road. At the time of Australian involvement, it had a population of about 106 000 in villages and hamlets grouped around Routes 15, 23 and 44 to the south of the province. The economy of the province was primarily agricultural, with rice the staple crop. Many other tropical crops were grown, such as tobacco, peanuts, coffee and pepper. Coastal villages centred on fishing and the production of Nuoc Mam, the Vietnamese fermented fish sauce. There were herds of cattle and groups of water buffalo to till the fields. Buffalo carts of a timeless standard design, old motor bikes and Lambros (step-through motor bikes with micro-bus bodies) of amazing capacity, together with some decrepit buses, provided the transport. The climate was very predictable: the dry season from November to April and the wet season with its overbearing high humidity from May to

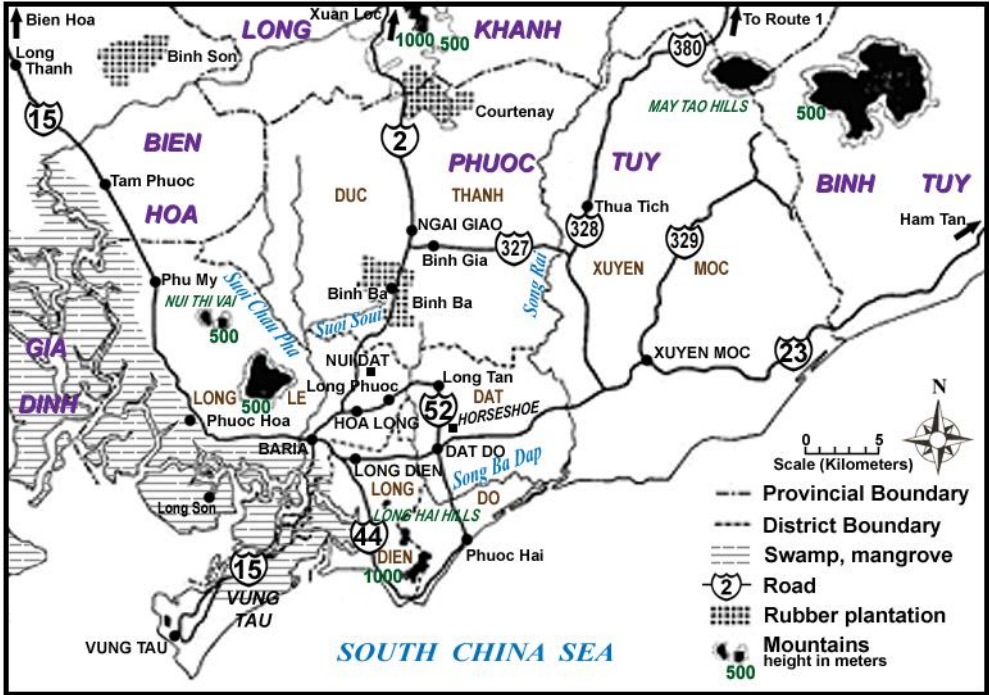


Figure 2.1 General Map of Phuoc Tuy

October, with year round day temperatures of 27°C (80°F) except January and February, which averaged about 16°C (60°F). The religion of the provincial inhabitants was primarily Buddhism although there was a significant proportion of Catholics. There was an adequate primary schooling system and the opportunity for some to proceed to secondary schooling. The village was the centre of most people's lives.

The view that the inhabitants of the province had of the region's security situation is very difficult to understand. The province was clearly in an armed state just short of open war. Each village and vital point had its protective military posts, usually occupied by soldiers, their families and assorted pigs and poultry. All men of military age were liable to be called up for compulsory service in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, Regional Force (RF), Popular Force (PF) or Peoples' Self Defense Force (PSDF). The South Vietnamese Government controlled the province – at least by day. There were schools, an electoral system, rudimentary municipal services in the larger towns, mayors and village chiefs and relatively free travel. The effective state of war drew artificial lines of access around villages: there were the relatively safe havens of the allied defined civilian access zones – the areas to which curfews applied – and the anarchic free fire zones in the countryside where almost any movement was defined as Viet Cong. But it was clear that the Viet Cong also ruled, particularly by night. They imposed taxes, kidnapped officials and young men seemingly

at will and were able to assassinate village officials. The contrast between government semi-control and Viet Cong terrorism seemed to be viewed with Buddhist resignation.

The adjacent Vung Tau Special Zone was considered secure from Viet Cong interference and provided an area 'in country' for rest and convalescence (R&C), where allied troops could wander through streets unarmed and quite secure. Many suspected that Vung Tau also provided rest and convalescence for the Viet Cong. Vung Tau had a port and airfield, both of which were relatively secure and provided the nucleus for development of US and Australian logistic facilities.

Most Australian soldiers will remember Nui Dat (and indeed all of Vietnam) by one enduring thing – mildew. The tropical atmosphere attacked clothes, tentage, paper and, it seemed at times, one's body as well. Twenty years later, soldiers can still detect the residual smell on items brought back with them. Many of the written records of the battalion still carry the characteristic marks of the foxing and the odour. Although mildew dominated, it was just part of the spectrum of the smells of South-East Asia, consisting of a blend of the fetid vegetation in the rubber plantations, the hint of village sewage, dried fish, a cocktail of the sump oil used to lay dust on the roads of Nui Dat, body odours, the residue of the mist from a C-123 Provider aircraft spraying for mosquitoes, the remnant of cordite after a fire mission, the tangible humidity, the acrid remainder of anti-mite and mosquito repellent on one's clothing, the greasy slick of rifle oil – all overlaid by the layer of red, staining dust. A further odour was that of the rice-based starch used by the Baria laundry that achieved creases of metallic rigidity in jungle greens that sometimes could only be separated by bayonet. To the smells must be added the constant sound of gunfire – the nightly 'harassing and interdiction' (H&I) fire of the guns designed to strike terror into any Viet Cong in range, as well as the constant rattle of daily test firing of small arms. Soldiers became conditioned to a peculiar mix of sounds: while they might sleep while artillery fired, they might awaken instantly when a nearby twig snapped. Soldiers could (and did) sleep near the wheels of artillery that fired throughout the night.

It is difficult to describe the sights of Phuoc Tuy Province. Most of its people seemed to ignore the presence of Australians. The young willowy girls in their black and white Ao Dai (pronounced 'ow zai') dresses moved in knots of giggles to and from school. The street urchins grinned and begged. The placid, patient rice farmers worked their padi under their conical straw hats. Tropic sheet lightning, strangely soundless, flashed in afternoon storms. The untended rubber trees of Nui Dat with remnant tapping bowls and the under-carpet of fallen leaves stood between the lines of tents. The rust-red lateritic soil and its fine invasive dust covered and stained everything. The contrast between the wet and dry seasons, the jungle and the padi fields: all were key aspects of the soldiers' view. Add the seemingly chaotic villages hidden in their islands of vegetation in oceans of padi that were tilled by the old, the female and the young. There were water buffalo, slow but muscular, occasionally

prompted into fierce aggression. Small fish were improbably found in inch-deep water in the fields, and were fished by old and young. In the jungle, there were the thorns, the almost impenetrable bamboo thickets, the tangle of B52 blow-downs in the jungle that could make 100 m progress take hours. There were the signs of barking deer, wild pigs, the rare tiger spoor, glimpses of wild dogs, crocodile, the occasional bear and even elephant. In the jungle, trees contained the leaf-nests of innumerable predatory green ants who, when disturbed, could cause groups of soldiers to shed their clothes in record time with their potent bites.

Many of these characteristics of the province could be misleading. Barking deer were often perceived as dogs, implying enemy presence. Flares dropped from aircraft a long distance away could look like lights moving through the jungle. The glow of phosphorescent decaying leaves together with the flash of fireflies could cause a tired sentry to see phantoms in the jungle.

The Australian forces in Phuoc Tuy formed the 1st Australian Task Force. In 1967 it consisted of two infantry battalions, one of which had an extra rifle company provided by the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment under its command. The tactical ground mobility for the Task Force was provided by a squadron of M113A1 armoured personnel carriers of three troops, each of which could provide transport for one company of a battalion and its intimate supporting arms. Fire support was provided by a three battery field regiment (each battery with six 105 mm field guns), one battery of which was provided by the Royal New Zealand Artillery (RNZA). A divisional locating battery gave the capability to track and locate the source of enemy mortar fire. There was a field squadron of engineers and a civil affairs unit. Army aviation support was provided by an independent reconnaissance flight of Sioux helicopters and fixed-wing Cessnas. A topographical survey troop provided mapping support. The task force headquarters had a defence and employment platoon and commanded a reinforcement unit and an intelligence detachment. There was also a task force maintenance area with supply, transport and electrical and mechanical engineering capabilities and a field ambulance.

Battalions served a nominal twelve month tour of duty in Vietnam. This system suited the limited length of operational service that could be done by National Servicemen and ensured that well trained units remained fresh for the challenges of the war. At unit level, the system of unit rotation worked well, although at least another six battalions were needed to support the three eventually fielded in the Task Force at it highest strength.

At an individual level the problem was different. The regular turnover of National Servicemen during the tour could be quite easily forecast. As well as replacing these National Servicemen, a means of replacing casualties was needed. The 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit was formed to acclimatise, hold and train all such individual reinforcements. A unit of company size, it took part in patrols of the tactical area of operational responsibility (TAOR) around Nui Dat and in occasional operations. The



source of most reinforcements was units in Australia. Sick or wounded casualties in Vietnam who were able to recover were sent directly back to their units. This system worked in the main. However, battalions were never up to authorised strength and were continually short of specialists.

One of the reinforcements to the battalion on its first tour, Private Noel 'Dinga' Bell of A Company, expressed the feelings of many of the reinforcements. He felt that his section commander seemed to resent his intrusion as a reinforcement into his section. Although he was proud to have served with 7 RAR, he was just as proud of the fact that he was originally a volunteer to Vietnam with the Reinforcement Unit (the quickest way to get there). They filled in when the battalions were down on men. Theirs was not a very easy task, to take the place of a 'best mate' or member of a very close knit unit which had trained together, spent several weeks on board a ship, then established themselves in Vietnam, before going home together.

The battalion was supplemented on its operations in Vietnam by what were termed its normal attachments. The Direct Support Artillery Battery (106th Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery) provided its Battery Commander's (BC) Party to the battalion headquarters and each rifle company had a Forward Observer (FO) Party. These groups provided observation to control artillery fire support and the liaison and command facilities to ensure that it was adequate and timely. The artillery detachments formed strong links with the battalion and became an integral part of it. The battalion was always supported by a small detachment of signallers from the Task Force Signals Squadron that provided the radio communications link from the battalion to the Task Force. They became a key part of the Signals Platoon command post team. On almost all operations, the battalion had a troop of 1st Field Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers placed in its support. This troop had a small command element that provided combat engineer advice to the commanding officer. It also provided combat engineer teams to supplement the rifle companies. These teams had a wide range of skills that included expertise in constructing field defences, demolition of enemy ordnance or bunkers, tunnel clearance and mine and booby trap clearance. Like the Forward Observer Parties, they also performed as infantry when required. In most cases the battalion was provided with a Sioux helicopter to support it directly. These Sioux were flown by experienced Australian Army Aviation Corps pilots who were generally far more mature at their age than might have been expected.

On many operations the battalions had the support of armoured personnel carriers. An armoured personnel carrier troop provided the transport capacity to lift a fully laden infantry company. As well as this, the armoured personnel carriers had considerable firepower from their integral heavy calibre machine guns. They also provided a significant enhancement to the radio communication capability the troops carried. Their armour offered protection from small arms fire. They could carry ammunition and water to supplement the items carried on a soldier's back. They provided much more than a 'battle taxi service'.



Figure 2.2 The Nui Dat Base (Northern Section)

The mobility of the battalion was supplemented by the generous availability of helicopters. The Bell Iroquois 'Huey' was the utility helicopter. It provided troop lift, resupply of ammunition, food, water and mail. All troop lift Hueys were armed with M60 door guns, although (other than for RAAF Hueys during the early part of the first tour) it was a rarity to find a helicopter fitted with doors. The capacity of the helicopters was theoretically eight fully equipped soldiers, but what a 'slick' actually carried was determined by its commander using mysterious formulae involving air temperature and fuel weight. The evocative sound of an approaching Huey was always welcome. The rush on to and off a helicopter, often when it was hovering, was an exhilarating experience. The dust and leaves whipped one's face and blinded one. The lurch of the lift-off seemed always to be followed by a turn at improbable angle with bodies being re-arranged by the chopper loadmaster so that limbs were inside

**Table 2.1 The daily routine at Nui Dat**

Disarm claymores and commence day routine	First Light
Reveille and flag raising	0630
Paludrine parade <sup>3</sup>	0635
Breakfast	0715
Inspection of lines and weapons	0800
Training commences	0815
Daily operations briefing	0900
Lunch	1215 – 1315
Paludrine parade	1515
Sports parade	1515 – 1600
Wet canteen open	1645 – 1730
Administration conference	1730
Evening meal	1730 – 1830
Flag lowered	1830
Sleeves down	1830
Night routine, arm claymores	Last Light less 15 mins
Films commence	1945
Canteens and messes close	2130
Soldiers in lines	2200

Nui Dat was unique in at least one very important way: unlike American bases, no indigenous labour was used. Indeed, with the exception of rare South Vietnamese Army visitors, the base was the sole preserve of Australians, New Zealanders and Americans. There is little doubt that this sensible rule contributed very greatly to the base's security.

The routine of a typical day in the Nui Dat base is shown in Table 2.1.

Like other battalion areas at Nui Dat, 7 RAR's area became somewhat like a village, but an all-male one. The battalion area was referred to as Ap An Phu, as the small hamlet of An Phu had previously been in its area.

7 RAR's village had a siege mentality: it was surrounded by a system of interlocking defensive pits and bunkers, the most important of which were armed with .50 calibre Browning machine guns. A ring of barbed wire and claymore mines and carefully registered defensive fire targets for mortars and guns supplemented the direct fire weapons on its perimeter. The patrolling program extended this influence to at least enemy mortar range. Within the village defences was the living accommodation. At first this consisted of 16 ft x 16 ft tents with duckboards. As time passed and the opportunity for improvement occurred, beds ('Bed Aust Mark 5') were acquired and the tents surrounded with a protective shield of sandbags enclosed by sheets of corrugated iron. Some soldiers added chairs and furniture made from artillery and mortar boxes. Many added stereos purchased at advantageous prices from the unit store or the American Post Exchange (PX) system. The village had its

power supply (generators in the battalion area supplying lights in each tent), water supply (tanks on stands and running water, sometimes heated, to some showers), rudimentary sewerage system (deep trench latrines and 'thunder boxes'), garbage disposal, post office, general stores (canteen and Q store), amenities (company 'boozers', the Salvation Army tent, US Forces television and radio network and the battalion outdoor cinema), food shops (company, sergeants' and officers' messes), transport service (the transport platoon), doctor (at the Regimental Aid Post) and communications hubs (the command post and switchboard as well as the helipad, Porky 7). Many buildings in the battalion were constructed using rudimentary 'Scale A' prefabricated aluminium structures. Others were made by unit tradesmen scrounging whatever was available from Australian or allied sources.

Alcohol was available at canteens in Nui Dat, but its use was subject to strict controls. There was a limit of two cans of beer per man per day (perhaps!). Hours of sale to soldiers on rear details were lessened when the battalion was on operations. There were many examples of soldiers drinking excessively when they returned to the camp after operations. In almost all cases, the Australian love of beer (together with a strong sense of unit identity and high morale) ensured that there was no use of drugs. But alcohol caused concerns. One company commander felt that alcohol abuse was the most severe disciplinary problem and remained a source of friction right to the end of the tour. Letting off steam was not the real problem. Drinking while on, or just before, duty was the problem.

There were two methods of rest from the routine of Nui Dat or operations outside its perimeter. Rest and convalescence leave (R&C), taken in Vung Tau, gave a two day break that was virtually away from the war. Because there was some unruly behaviour on early breaks, rest and convalescence was not taken by 7 RAR as much as it was by other units. Rest and recreation leave (R&R) provided a chance to get leave outside Vietnam. Each soldier was entitled to one such five day leave during his tour. Opportunities were provided for soldiers to take this leave in places such as Bangkok, Hong Kong, Manila and Australia. Some married members took advantage of this opportunity to have a reunion with their wives in South-East Asia. Others returned home to their families. Most single members took their leave in a South-East Asian destination.

The doctrine for counter-revolutionary warfare was contained in several military publications. Doctrine at a higher level was in a 1965 pamphlet called *Counter-Revolutionary Warfare*. They were supplemented by *The Battalion*, *The Platoon* and *Patrolling and Tracking and Ambush and Counter Ambush*. The first two pamphlets covered the doctrine for the battalion and its platoons and sections in the counter-guerilla operations. The material covered more techniques than might be employed in counterinsurgency operations alone, but the principles and techniques were well detailed and explained. The doctrine was sound and was well employed in Vietnam.

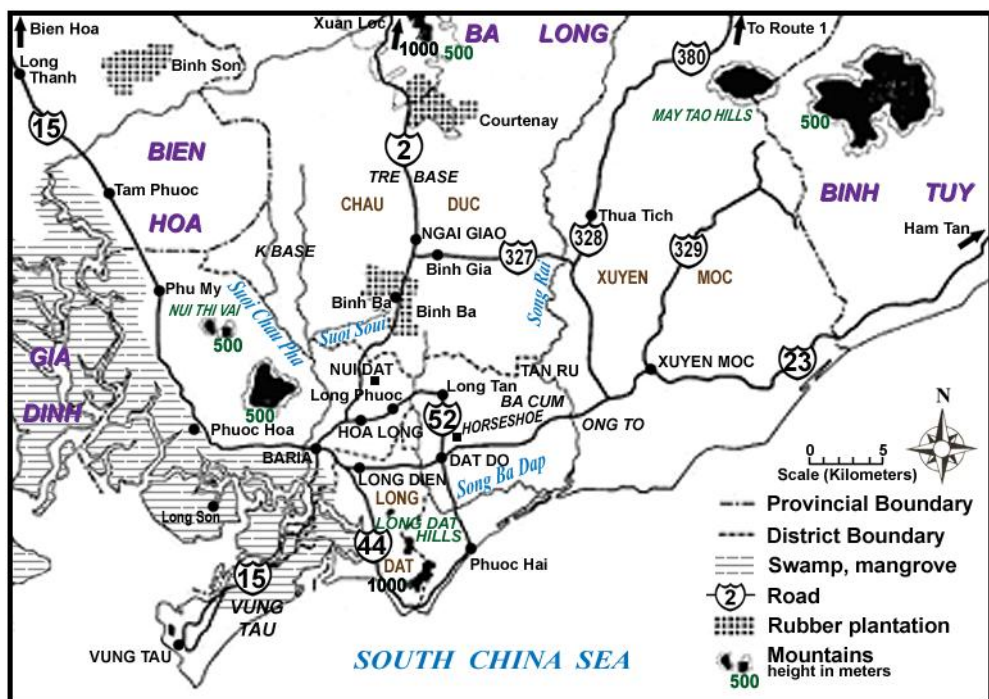
The last two pamphlets (which were written by the second Commanding Officer of the Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Ron Grey, during his posting to the Directorate of Military Training) were more directly related to the task undertaken in Vietnam. They have been reprinted overseas and there are good reasons to view them as minor classics of small unit military doctrine.

Patrolling is a particular Australian Army skill in which its soldiers have a well-practised expertise. The purpose of patrolling around the Nui Dat base was to establish domination of the surrounding area and particularly to preclude the likelihood of enemy mortar attacks against the base. The patrol program in the Tactical Area of Operational Responsibility was carried out by all units. When the battalion was not on operations, a heavy demand was placed on it to supply these patrols. For example, in the period between 15 and 19 July 1967 (between Operations PADDINGTON and SOUTHPORT) the battalion mounted three platoon strength fighting patrols of between two and three days duration and four half-platoon night ambushes. In the same period, there were also three SAS reconnaissance patrols of five days duration and one half-platoon patrol mounted by the 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit. The 7 RAR patrols were coordinated with those of other units by the Task Force Headquarters.

It is often a matter of surprise to those who have not served in battalions that so few soldiers seem to be available for operations outside the base areas. In practice in Vietnam a battalion on operations had to provide a minimum number of soldiers to defend the Nui Dat base. Standing Operating Procedures called for ten or more fit soldiers per company to be left at base. This number was often increased by those who were left out of battle – those with minor injuries such as sprained ankles – and by those in transit to rest and recreation. A number of soldiers were also required to run the battalion element of the base: to collect and distribute water, rations, ammunition and mail; and to run the personnel administration of the battalion and its stores elements so that the soldiers in the field would be properly supported.

When the battalion was at Nui Dat between operations, as well as providing men for the patrolling task, it was rostered to provide a company for ready reaction tasks at short notice. In addition, there was always a need to retrain, to help soldiers pass promotion subjects and to familiarise reinforcements.

There were four levels of enemy in Phuoc Tuy Province. 274 Viet Cong Main Force Regiment, 1200 to 1500 strong, was based in the area of the border between Bien Hoa, Long Khanh and Phuoc Tuy Provinces and operated in all these areas. It was the most capable and best equipped enemy unit. There were two Viet Cong Local Force Infantry Battalions: D440, 350 to 400 strong, based in the Phuoc Tuy–Long Khanh border area astride Route 2; and D445, of about the same strength, based in the south–east of Phuoc Tuy. There were also three substantially district-based Viet Cong Local Force Companies: C23, the Xuyen Moc District Company, 30 strong;



**Figure 2.3** Viet Cong place names in Phuoc Tuy

C25, the *Long Dat District Company*, 110 strong; and C41, the *Chau Duc District Company*, also 110 strong (the boundaries of Viet Cong districts are shown on figure 2.3). The lowest level of enemy was found in numerous village guerilla units from eight to 20 strong. 274 *Regiment* had been bolstered by some North Vietnamese Army (NVA) reinforcements and at times there was evidence of North Vietnamese Army in D440 and D445. Village and local forces frequently included female soldiers who shared all military duties. There were occasional forays into Phuoc Tuy by regular units such as 33 *North Vietnamese Army Regiment*, particularly at times of general enemy offensives. From time to time, units from other provinces seeking recruits or supplies were contacted.

The enemy was armed with a wide array of weaponry. Main Force and Local Force units had Chinese or Soviet 7.62 mm AK47 assault rifles and SKS rifles as their standard weapons. Officers often carried 7.62 mm K54 pistols. The most common machine gun was the Chinese or Soviet 7.62 mm RPD. It was quite common for many small arms weapons, particularly those used by village guerillas, to have been captured from the allies. Perhaps the most effective Viet Cong weapons were the rocket propelled grenades – the RPG2 (often called B40 by the Viet Cong) and RPG7 (B41), which each had the capacity to inflict a mass of shrapnel wounds with single shots and had considerable anti-armoured personnel carrier capability. Some small calibre recoilless rifles were also used. The Viet Cong were experts at the art of improvisation: many of their mines were fashioned from captured allied explosives. A semi-standard product was the D10 directional above-ground mine made of explosives and shrapnel. Many

ground–emplaced mines were similarly manufactured. The Viet Cong carried a variety of communist hand grenades that had stubby throwing sticks. There were limited numbers of 12.7 mm heavy machine guns with an anti–aircraft capability to 1500 m. The enemy had no anti–aircraft missiles. Each large unit might be equipped with small and medium calibre mortars with limited ammunition. However, the Viet Cong were not able to call on artillery support in Phuoc Tuy.

The enemy had quite a few advantages in their quest to dominate the province. Firstly, their intimate knowledge of the area enabled them to move with great facility, using either known routes or local guides. They were familiar with the large array of signs that were used to mark water, camps, letterboxes, mines, caches and safe routes. Their mastery of fieldcraft was excellent. They had been trained in the arts of camouflage and movement to a degree probably much greater than their Australian counterparts. For example, they had been trained in the art of crossing ground covered with dry leaves noiselessly and this training was conducted over several days. They were also expert in digging with a speed that amazed westerners. Viet Cong bunkers were elaborate, well sited and often only found when fire was opened. The enemy also gained several advantages from the attitude of the local population. It could be said that a further advantage was gained from the fact that, for most Vietnamese, the village was the centre of their existence. This perception meant that, far from identifying government with Saigon, most equated government with their village. But the Viet Cong in Phuoc Tuy could never compensate for the allied advantages of artillery, naval and air support, of seemingly limitless resources of manpower and ammunition, of relatively secure bases, better tactical mobility by helicopters and armoured personnel carriers and, not least, the easy supply of food.

A large number of the enemy lived constantly in the jungle and carried many documents with them. These documents included personal items such as diaries and letters and often included military items such as commendation certificates, nominal rolls and even plans. These documents were frequently captured on prisoners or found on enemy bodies or in packs that had been abandoned. The documents were always treated as valuable sources of information.

Viet Cong diaries were a constant source of interest apart from any tactical value. The handwriting was always neat and the text frequently illustrated with drawings of plants, insects and birds. Little poems were popular, and there were often touching references to family and village life. These diaries were crafted by a quite cultured group of men and women.

The Commanding Officer's approach to the forthcoming year in Vietnam was summarised by him as follows:

*I knew the battalion was well trained and could shoot well and I knew that the SOPs were good. I also knew that the NCOs were properly trained and morale was high. A large proportion of the unit had received both recruit and corps training in the battalion and were strongly unit–oriented. We had trained without*



*interruption for month after month with ample time to go through the cycle of individual, section, platoon, company and battalion training. We had trained our own NCOs. We had conducted officer and NCO training religiously every Monday night for more than a year. Some of the exercises around Puckapunyal had lasted for three weeks. Specialist training had been carried out at specialist schools or special wings had come to the battalion to train Support Company specialists. Members sent to external schools and courses had invariably passed out top or near top of their class. For myself, the only instruction I ever received was to train the battalion well. Those superior to me showed absolute confidence and let me get on with the job without interference of any kind. All of these advantages placed us in a strong position to undertake the tasks ahead.*

*By comparison, when I left for Korea in 1952 with 1 RAR, there had been personnel changes right up until the last minute and the battalion had had the opportunity for only one exercise – a patrol exercise conducted at Green Hills near Ingleburn. There had been no opportunity for battalion headquarters to be deployed in the field. 1 RAR did not even have all its weapons and our transport was collected in Japan on the way through to Korea. Yet in action 1 RAR was outstandingly successful, as were 2 RAR and 3 RAR.*

*No unit ever to leave Australia had the opportunities for preparation that we had in 7 RAR – and we had not wasted them. I knew that we were ready.*

*So what was my approach to the year and what did I expect. In a word I expected excellence. I expected the battalion to excel at all times and in all tasks: For my part, I was determined to protect my officers and men in every possible way, and above all by using artillery, mortars and air to do the job whenever possible.*

The Advance Party departed by air on 1 April 1967 and was welcomed at Nui Dat by 5 RAR. Each group of company representatives from the Advance Party spent some time with its counterpart in 5 RAR. Lieutenant Peter McGuinness was attached to 4 Platoon B Company 5 RAR near Phuoc Loi when it was involved in a series of mine incidents involving M16 mines. Two Australian soldiers were killed (including the newly appointed Platoon Commander of 4 Platoon) and two others were wounded. He was shocked by the severity of the injuries and the effect the mines had on the morale of the soldiers.

Lieutenant Barry Caligari felt that 5 RAR had done all it could to make life at Nui Dat comfortable for the battalion. He felt that 5 RAR had handed over the camp in much better condition than could ever be expected in an operational environment. He received every assistance and felt grateful for their efforts. Many soldiers felt grateful that they were taking over a well-constructed camp and its defences, and they didn't have to dig-in themselves.



# 3

## The First Tour

### *Puckapunyal to Southport*

*The Australians, who were not blessed with prodigious logistic support, learned faster than the Americans what [the French Marshal] Lyautey long ago had taught: Pacification is a slow business.*

Robert B. Asprey  
War in the Shadows—  
The Guerrilla in History, 1975

THE BATTALION MAIN BODY disembarked from HMAS *Sydney* on 19 April 1967 using US Army Chinook helicopters. It was greeted by a cheering 5 RAR, one company of which was being ferried back to the *Sydney* by the helicopters.

Five days later on Anzac Day, three battalions of The Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR, 6 RAR and 7 RAR) were able to parade together on Luscombe Field, the 1st Australian Task Force airstrip at Nui Dat. This is one of the rare occasions that three battalions of the Regiment have paraded together on active service.<sup>1</sup>

And so the battalion was deployed to do what it had been trained for: to fight. The soldiers in the unit perceived little of strategy or grand planning. Their chief milestones were operations, punctuated by short breaks. Their contacts with the enemy are, of course, the incidents that they remember most. What follows is the story of these operations, but little is or can be said about the times that most soldiers spent on unrewarded patrolling, ambushing and searching – the 95% inaction that is a characteristic of most protracted wars.

#### **OPERATION PUCKAPUNYAL**

Operation PUCKAPUNYAL was the battalion's first deployment and was used as a shake-down exercise. It took place from 27 to 28 April in the Nui Nghe area, 6 km north–

west of Nui Dat. The operation had three phases: the securing of a fire base (called ASPRO, 5 km west of Nui Dat) by A Company; a helicopter assault on a landing zone (LZ), called BONDI BEACH, by C Company; and a battalion search and destroy operation with companies following independent routes. The battalion had 161st Field Battery, Royal New Zealand Artillery (equipped with 105 mm L5 pack howitzers) in direct support. The battery (and one section of the battalion mortars) was lifted into the fire base by CH-47 Chinooks of the US Army. Two US Army air mobile helicopter companies (with UH-1 Iroquois 'Huey' helicopters) lifted the remainder of the battalion (other than the mortar platoon and tracker teams) in five lifts. Two light fire teams (again 'Hueys') used their suppressive machine gun fire to clear each landing zone. They were followed by a bombardment of the landing zone by four RAAF Canberra bombers from 10 000 feet using 500 lb bombs. As the area of responsibility of the Binh Ba Regional Force Company was adjacent to the operational area, a liaison officer (Second Lieutenant Brendan O'Brien) was sent to this unit. The Operation Order was written by the Battalion Operations Officer, Major Don Atkinson (called by the radio appointment title Seagull), a very efficient officer well suited to the task of running the Battalion Command Post.

The battalion followed a standard procedure for orders, except in the case of small operations. The Commanding Officer first received orders from the Task Force Commander. This was generally a private briefing when the operation was to be a battalion effort. Such a briefing allowed for discussion of various aspects of the planned operation — troops under command, the number of days it would take and so on. When there was a Task Force operation, a discussion with both battalion commanders invariably preceded a formal orders group. This approach worked well, and allowed, for example, the Task Force Commander to suggest particular rifle companies for particular tasks.

On his return to the battalion lines, Colonel Smith immediately briefed his planning group, who would be assembled waiting for him. This group comprised the Second-in-Command, the Regimental Sergeant Major, the Officer Commanding Support Company, Intelligence Officer, Battery Commander, Operations Officer and Officer Commanding Administration Company. The Commanding Officer informed this group of everything the Task Force Commander had told him and invited comment. This achieved a number of objectives. It put the administrative machinery into action. It stopped rumour and the bad feelings that could have been generated if one person had received information ahead of another. It enabled the key people in the battalion (other than the rifle company commanders) to put forward ideas, particularly in their sphere of expertise, so ironing out any irritants that might otherwise have arisen. This briefing was really an extension of the Task Force Commander's orders to the Commanding Officer.

After the planning group, the Commanding Officer briefed the Operations Officer

on his outline plan and set a time for a battalion briefing and orders group. At the appointed time, the entire battalion, with exceptions made only for those on absolutely essential duties, assembled on the battalion helipad, Porky 7, and was briefed in turn by the Intelligence Officer, who gave the enemy situation and any relevant intelligence information, followed by the Operations Officer who specified the troops attached and under command, followed in turn by the Commanding Officer who stated the mission and general outline of the way he saw the operation unfolding.

Next followed a formal battalion orders group, after which the procedure above was repeated at company level. This method of committing the battalion to battle ensured that all soldiers began each operation fully briefed with the best information available.

The fire support base (sometimes called a fire base or fire support patrol base) used on this and most other operations gave our troops an edge over the enemy. The artillery battery could give quick, accurate and effective fire on call to any troops within about a 10 km radius. This fire could be supplemented by the battalion's mortars if they were in range. Troops could also call on the considerable air support resources available. Helicopter fire teams were rarely more than 30 minutes away. Ground attack fighters could nearly always be called on within about the same lead time. These sources of fire support gave our soldiers a distinct advantage in any fight.

While there was some possibility of enemy activity in the area of Operation PUCKAPUNYAL, none was encountered. The terrain was a mixture of padi, patches of springy bamboo (which limited movement to 500 m per hour) and some light rain forest. The operation helped the battalion to familiarise its members with the terrain, to assist their acclimatisation and to help them gain a good working knowledge of operating with US helicopters. This operation enabled the troops to get over their initial nervousness and to practise many of their procedures. The battalion returned to Nui Dat on foot on 28 April.

During this operation and those immediately following it, several drills were developed to deal with contacts with the enemy. At the point of contact, the machine gunner fired a complete belt of 100 rounds whatever the size of the engagement. This was good for the morale of our troops in contact and gave initial covering fire for deployment, as well as frequently killing or wounding Viet Cong who had not been seen. At the Battalion Command Post, there were a series of actions set in train as soon as contact had been reported. The Battery Commander was expected to get an artillery round off immediately. The Mortar Platoon Commander was also expected to fire a round immediately if within range. Both sources of indirect fire support were required in order to adjust the fall of shot needed by the troops in contact. The Operations Officer stood-by a Dustoff helicopter, allowing the crew to be ready to fly if they were needed. A similar alert was passed to helicopter gunships. The Task

Force was asked for details of attack aircraft in the vicinity and their armament load, callsigns and frequencies. These actions ensured the maximum readiness of all support for the troops in action.

Both the Task Force Commander (Brigadier Stuart Graham) and the Commander Australian Force Vietnam (Major General Tim Vincent) flew in to visit the battalion during this operation. Afterwards, General Vincent commented, 'They are well-trained troops who know their jobs. I was pleased with their effort on this first operation'.

## **OPERATION LISMORE**

Operation LISMORE was planned as a search and destroy operation<sup>2</sup> in the Long Green area south-east of Nui Dat from 2 to 8 May. Once again the battalion's artillery support was provided by 161st Field Battery. It was also supported by two combat engineer teams from 1st Field Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers and A Squadron of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment, Royal Australian Armoured Corps (organised as an armoured personnel carrier squadron and equipped with M113A1 armoured personnel carriers). The battalion also had a Sioux OH-13 helicopter from 161st (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight, Australian Army Aviation Corps supporting it. As became standard practice, ten fit men from each company were left to defend the 7 RAR Nui Dat base area together with the usual Administrative Company personnel.

The operation commenced with the lift of the battalion (less D Company) in US Army UH-1s from Nui Dat into landing zone MAROUBRA. This was accomplished efficiently using two air mobile helicopter companies in 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> hours. RAAF UH-1Bs were also used for troop transport, water resupply and minor medical evacuations. Once again, careful liaison and planning ensured that complex air moves were achieved without confusion or fuss. D Company deployed by armoured personnel carriers.

During this operation, 1200 M16 mines were laid by the Assault Pioneer Platoon around Army of the Republic of Vietnam posts on the Route 23 crossing of the Song Rai without engineer assistance (other than a sapper sergeant for recording the minefield). This was the first laying of minefields by infantry assault pioneers since the Korean War. Almost all government military posts had minefields surrounding them, laced with wire and generally ineffective booby traps. Some of these dated from French colonial times. The mines were often poorly laid and almost never properly recorded by the South Vietnamese. These fields provided a ready source of supply of mines to the Viet Cong. This example of Australians laying mines, although they did it very well, was a good case of misplaced trust in minefields and in their oversight by Regional and Popular Forces. It added to the growth of indiscriminate mining in the province.

LISMORE was a short but rewarding operation. The first contact with the enemy was on 3 May, just twenty months after the raising of the battalion. It was made by a

patrol of two sections from 3 Platoon A Company commanded by Second Lieutenant Wayne Bannon. A group of three enemy was encountered 7 km east of Phuoc Loi and the forward scout, Private Ken Lang of 8 Section (commanded by Lance Corporal Danny Kelly), who had been seen by the group, opened fire at a range of 20 m, killing one Viet Cong and wounding another. The patrol sought the assistance of the battalion tracker dogs, Justin and Cassius, handled by Private Tom Blackhurst and Lance Corporal Norman Cameron. When the dogs arrived, they followed the enemy trail and led straight towards another enemy who had been wounded earlier. This female soldier was killed when fire was directed to the bushes where she was hiding. Although no weapons were captured, a quantity of documents (letters being carried to soldiers in D445) were recovered. This was the first time that dogs had been used by Australians on active service in Vietnam and their use was quite successful. Private Lang was Mentioned in Despatches for his 'great calm, determination and presence of mind'.

On 3 May at 1600 hours Corporal Roy 'Doc' Savage's section came under small arms fire about 70 m away from the rest of C Company, 2 km north of the mouth of the Song Rai. Corporal Savage wrote:

*I immediately put in a section attack. When we got to the area the firing had come from, we found four men tied up. One was dead, the other three badly wounded. We had stumbled on a Viet Cong execution squad. They got away and we found out from the wounded they had taken with them seven prisoners, one being a youth leader from Dat Do.*

The remainder of Lieutenant John Paget's 7 Platoon was sent to investigate the enemy camp. The dead Vietnamese had been executed about 24 hours previously. All the prisoners' hands had been bound by wire.

On 4 May a patrol from 1 Platoon A Company located an enemy camp 2 km north-west of the mouth of the Song Rai and found some documents in it. While the camp was being searched, a Viet Cong approached a sentry position protecting the search. Corporal Don 'Lofty' Aylett opened fire and wounded the enemy in the stomach. Despite the wound, this Viet Cong evaded the swift follow-up.

The aggressiveness of the Viet Cong became more evident the following day when 2 Platoon A Company found an enemy camp. The camp was noticed because Corporal 'Jock' Henderson had seen that a number of trees had been recently cut. Corporal Henderson and Private Phil Archer did a careful reconnaissance of the immediate vicinity and Private Archer noticed enemy movement 40 m away, revealing the location of the camp. The platoon was preparing to assault the camp when it was seen and fired on before the enemy group conducted a fighting withdrawal. Private John Hulin, the machine gunner of 4 Section, returned the fire. A tracker team was brought in to follow a trail of blood. When the platoon had followed this trail for several hundred metres, the enemy appeared to form an immediate ambush

and fired on Corporal Henderson's leading section. The hostile fire was not accurate and the platoon did not suffer any casualties. Corporal Gordon Tredrea's section swept through the position from a flank but did not encounter any enemy. The likely escape routes were subjected to fire from helicopter gunships and artillery. The engagement had taken more than 2½ hours.

Lieutenant Jim Fitzsimon's 9 Platoon C Company came across fresh trails on the afternoon of 5 May near a bunker position the platoon had destroyed the previous day, 2 km north-west of the mouth of the Song Rai. While the tracks were being followed, three enemy were spotted. The first was shot and killed at close range by the number two machine gunner of 8 Section Private Barry Fulton and the second by Corporal Tom Bourke, but the third escaped. Private Tony Scott was slightly wounded in his chest from a piece of shrapnel from a grenade he launched at the enemy, becoming the first soldier in 7 RAR wounded in action. The two enemy dead were brothers. One of the rifles they had been carrying, a German 7.92 mm Mauser, had been split open by an Australian bullet.

2 Platoon laid an ambush on 6 May. Second Lieutenant 'Pud' Ross sited it on a track and three Viet Cong walked into it. They were allowed to penetrate to the centre of the platoon's position when Private Hill of 6 Section triggered the ambush by detonating a claymore mine. One enemy fell to the ground dead and the remainder fled into the thick secondary jungle and escaped.

Battalion Headquarters deployed into the field on LISMORE and became involved with incidents with the enemy on two occasions. On the afternoon of 4 May a very effectively camouflaged enemy soldier was seen by Private Ron 'Scouse' Dickman to approach within 50 m of the perimeter of the headquarters position, but no enemy could be found by clearing patrols. Two similarly dressed enemy were seen on 7 May, 70 m away from the headquarters which was moving at the time. It was thought that the headquarters was being shadowed and later in the operation unsuccessful attempts were made to catch the enemy doing this. There was also an instance of shadowing of B Company on the afternoon of 4 May, when a small patrol led by Sergeant Eddie Browning of 5 Platoon was fired on at point blank range but was not hit. The confusion and danger of his closeness to the main body of the company caused Sergeant Browning not to return the fire until all doubt was removed, by which time the enemy had fled.

Several significant enemy installations were found during LISMORE. These often included bunker systems with up to 50 well made bunkers or weapon pits, some of which had huts and small tunnels. One complex, 3 km west of the Song Rai's mouth, found by Second Lieutenant Rod Smith's 1 Platoon, had hundreds of bunkers with overhead protection. Another camp had a 56 seat underground instructional classroom. One more unusual installation found by Lieutenant John Paget's 7 Platoon C Company on 5 May, 3 km north-west of the mouth of the Song Rai was a large fish farm, which was close to a camp with eight weapon pits where about 150

cubic feet of unpolished rice was hidden. The fish farm measured 100 by 150 m and contained a very large number of catfish, estimated to be sufficient to feed a company for six months. Second Lieutenant Ian Cameron's 6 Platoon B Company found a similar fish farm on 3 May. The next day his platoon found a forge and the equipment to make mines and booby traps from allied explosives. These installations were all destroyed. One rice storage hut was found to be booby trapped by a grenade, but the Company Sergeant Major of B Company, Ray Robinson, was able to see the mechanism and neutralise it.

US Army helicopters flew the battalion back to Nui Dat after this operation. Corporal Savage commented:

*My platoon (7 P1) was last to be picked up. When the choppers landed, we raced across the wet paddy to them. I was standing on the skids helping my section to get in when I realised that this big buck Negro door gunner had hold of my webbing and was pulling me in. We were 20 feet up and rising rapidly and I was still on the outside of the chopper. When I finally got in the pilot turned round and yelled to me 'Nearly left you behind that time boy'. He was laughing his head off. Me – I was just relieved to be heading back to Nui Dat.*

In Operation LISMORE there were a total of sixteen contacts with the enemy, all with small groups. The most significant result, other than those enemy who had been killed or wounded, was the destruction of 30 installations of various types, including a bunker system large enough for about 500 soldiers. Although Operation PORTSEA had passed through this area several weeks before, these installations had not previously been found. LISMORE proved that the battalion was ready for battle and that its soldiers had a high standard of bushcraft and marksmanship. The Commander of the 1st Australian Task Force, Brigadier Graham, commented that the lack of enemy activity in the area covered during the operation confirmed his belief that previous operations by 1st Australian Task Force had been successful in severely limiting Viet Cong penetration of the populated areas south of Dat Do. However, in a press release, the Task Force Commander was also quoted as saying that:

*From the number of small groups of Viet Cong contacted by 7th Battalion . . . during the operation, it was obvious that attack plans had been made . . . against both civilian and military targets in the area [to coincide with the anniversary of the fall of Dien Bien Phu on May 7].*

Shortly after LISMORE, the oppressive climate proved too much for Cassius, the tracker dog. He was treated by US Army veterinarians at Vung Tau in ice baths, but succumbed to a heat-related disease. (The Minister for the Army, Mr Fraser, promised in the press to enquire into his death.) A replacement dog, called Tiberius, was flown in from Australia, but it took time for him to get sufficiently used to the other dog, Justin, in order to work effectively with him. The battalion's dog handlers took great

care of their charges, even making raincoats to help them handle the wet season. Justin continued to serve with successive battalions in Vietnam until he retired in January 1970 and was given to the manager of the Chartered Bank of Saigon to live in what was described as his 'stately villa'.

The routine hazards of patrolling were tragically demonstrated by an accident on 10 May. Five soldiers from C Company were wounded in action by Australian artillery fire. Their injuries were caused when a shell was detonated by a tree that was obstructing the target area. Private David Young lost a leg as a result of his wounds.

On the afternoon of 15 May, a group from 9 Platoon (led by Second Lieutenant Fitzsimon) was on its second day of a patrol in the Tactical Area of Operational Responsibility near the base of the Nui Thi Vais. The patrol was following a creek line to keep out of view from the hills. Corporal Jim Baty saw a group of four enemy with varied clothing and weapons who appeared to be digging into the river bank. His platoon commander described what happened:

*We were in the fortunate position that they were absorbed in their task and had not become aware of our approach. With this in mind I took Lcpl Sydney Cox (the 7 Section 2IC) and Pte Peter Frost (the scout) with me so that we could approach the enemy at right angles to the support fire. (They had closely observed the enemy and knew their location.) All orders were given by silent hand-signals. This was not a problem for the platoon but attached to us was a MG {machine gun} group from CHQ and a cook. The CHQ MG Group were travelling immediately behind my signaller (Pte Peter Davis) and I signalled him to remain where he was and for the remainder of the platoon to follow through into the creek. However, the MG Group understood my signal to Peter Davis included them and no movement forward actually took place. In the meantime I had moved off with Lcpl Cox and Pte Frost to secure the FUP [forming-up place]. After some time I realised that no one was following. I made the decision that, rather than risk discovery by back-tracking, and having complete confidence in the support group, Pte Frost would secure our flank while Syd Cox and I mounted an assault.*

*Having made the decision, Syd and I advanced out of the creek and, as soon as we sighted the enemy, we opened fire at about 20 m range. Syd despatched his man with a perfect double tap to the head from his SLR. I struck my man in the chest with my M16 but it jammed on me (it was before they had chrome bores). Les Morrall opened fire just after we did and he also wounded one of the enemy. The fourth one immediately decamped leaving his M1 rifle behind. The other two wounded also took off. Cpl Spanky MacFarlane and 8 Section moved through the support group to pursue, while Syd Cox fired about 10 rounds from his M79 and I also fired at the fleeing figures with his SLR. At one stage fire was*



*returned but it went high and no one was wounded. After a short pursuit, Cpl MacFarlane finished off the enemy I had wounded and the third was also accounted for. The fourth escaped, seeming to span the 15 m creek in one stride.*

*After we had accounted for the enemy dead, we discovered that the digging had been to lay CBU [US cluster bomb units] as mines. We stepped on several during the assault. The next day we encountered more mines that had been laid earlier.*

Lieutenant Fitzsimon was Mentioned in Despatches for his 'coolness, quick thinking and determination' in this action.

## **OPERATION HAPPY BIRTHDAY HO CHI MINH**

Operation HAPPY BIRTHDAY HO CHI MINH was planned as part of a Task Force contingency operation called COLLAROY to counter an expected attack on three targets in the district of Long Dien on Ho's birthday on 19 May. The information had come from a Chieu Hoi from *D445*. A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment, 6 RAR and 7 RAR were to be deployed as blocking forces, the SAS Squadron was to provide early warning and a reaction force of 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit and Headquarters Company of 1st Australian Task Force was formed. Although 7 RAR issued an Operation Order for this action, the battalion did not move into its planned positions and *D445's* attack did not eventuate.

## **OPERATION LEETON**

Operation LEETON was conducted between 24 May and 1 June south-east of Nui Dat to assist in the completion of the controversial minefield and wire barrier between Dat Do and the seaside village of Phuoc Hai. In this operation the battalion had 161st Battery Royal New Zealand Artillery providing it with supporting fire. A troop of A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment assisted with troop lift and stores transport, and a troop of 1st Field Squadron Royal Australian Engineers was in support to lay the M16 mines, assisted by the battalion Assault Pioneer Platoon. The minefield consisted of three strips of M16 mines laid in the 80 m gap between two catwire type II (with double height and width concertina barbed wire) fences. The two outer strips of mines had anti-lift devices consisting of M26 grenades triggered by US Mark V pressure release switches. Some mines also had trip-wires fitted.

The battalion was deployed on to the beach near Phuoc Hai by armoured personnel carriers supported by landing craft. The artillery forward observer with A Company, Lieutenant 'Nobby' Clark, described the deployment:

*We left by companies at dawn and landed on the beach – it felt like a General Macarthur effort on Luzon or Guadalcanal. And looked like it. Sand and sun, soldiers stripped to the waist under the watchful eyes of the Cavalry.*

*The armoured personnel carriers acted also as tractors for barbed wire haulage. The work was not difficult but was rather monotonous; the lads worked with a good heart.*

During this operation A and B Companies were used to construct about 8000 m of the fence. C Company provided the protection at a distance to the east and north-east, while Army of the Republic of Vietnam forces provided protection west of Route 44. D Company provided close protection to the battalion. Battalion Headquarters deployed to control the operation and was protected by the Fire Assault Platoon. The battalion placed six liaison officers with interpreters with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam units of the Popular and Regional Forces for safety and coordination. Theirs was far from a routine task. One remembered:

*I hope that the minefield was worth it as I had a rough time whilst the battalion was building it. I was given the job of LO with an ARVN Coy for two weeks and we were hit every night.*

South Vietnamese troops were also allocated to the battalion to help construct the fence. Private Ross 'Colson' Jack of 4 Platoon B Company commented:

*Had ARVN working our wire with us this morning [26 May]. Did OK too. In the afternoon they hid in the scrub so we would not find them ... ARVN did nothing today. [29 May] – they came down about 11 am and left about 3 pm. They just come for the Yankee rations and the luncheon meal.*

The South Vietnamese soldiers turned out to be of little use, particularly when a RAAF Caribou dropped tear gas targeted at caves in the nearby hills. This was somewhat of an experiment: the gas drum was supposed to explode near the ground. It detonated early, causing CS gas to drift widely and particularly towards the battalion. This caused a temporary halt in work for some minutes, and was too much for the South Vietnamese soldiers. After this incident, this labour force was sent home.

The mine laying was always hazardous. On 30 May an accident occurred involving the sappers laying mines. The explosion killed Sapper Terrence Renshaw and wounded two other sappers, one seriously. Lance Corporal Barry 'Obie' O'Brien admired the bravery of his Assault Pioneer Platoon Commander and the Platoon Sergeant (Vince Thompson and Eric McCoombe, respectively) 'who went into the minefield to bring out the dead and wounded with no thought of the danger to themselves'. The battalion Regimental Medical Officer, Captain Tony Williams, flew in to assist the wounded.

Brigadier Graham felt that the minefield would succeed in protecting the villages from Viet Cong incursion and would also channel the enemy movements to increase their vulnerability. He erroneously assumed that the local South Vietnamese forces would provide the necessary minefield protection. It was a principle that any minefield needed to be constantly covered by both observation and potential fire. His judgment

on this issue was faulty. Even if sufficient local forces had been dedicated to this task, their motivation and dedication to the job would have been more than suspect. In fact, sufficient troops were not and were never likely to be available. Nor could Australian troops undertake this essentially static task. An unsupervised obstacle, particularly a minefield not covered by observation and fire, will quickly become a useless obstacle. In this case, it became a convenient source of supply of lethal weapons for the Viet Cong, to be tapped at their convenience. This miscalculation cost many Australian (as well as South Vietnamese military and civilian) lives. The minefield was a costly error.

Major Des Mealey commented:

*The 'minefield disaster' and its concept have been retrospectively and almost universally condemned. However, the level of enemy movement in the 'Long Green' area, the Horseshoe and Nui Thi Vai mountains had been assessed by our own, US and SVN intelligence as justifying such a measure. The number of mines subsequently lifted by Charlie confirms the accuracy of the intelligence assessments. The minefield concept failed because the ARVN, who had agreed to provide subsequent minefield security, failed dismally to honour the agreement.*

Another company commander's view was that:

*Even during its construction we knew it would never work because it would need permanent vigilant protection. Right from the start we knew it was no more than a source of mines for the VC.*

In June, after the operation, seven soldiers from the battalion were detached to form a quite unusual unit as part of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment. Together with four gunners and some Armoured Corps troopers, they operated four American M108 105 mm self-propelled howitzers in a subunit called 6 Troop, 3rd Cavalry Regiment. The unit was involved in patrols, fire missions, the perimeter defence of both Australian and American units, convoy protection and combined search and ambush operations with New Zealand infantrymen. The infantry soldiers were, in the words of one of them (Private Paul Ryan), 'repatriated to 7 RAR' in March 1968. Their places were taken by soldiers from the Armoured Corps.

## **OPERATION BROKEN HILL**

Operation BROKEN HILL (7–13 June) was conceived as a combined operation with US and South Vietnamese forces with the purpose of destroying 274 Viet Cong Main Force Regiment. 7 RAR's part in the operation was to act as a blocking force to the north-west of Binh Ba while the US 1st Brigade of the 9th Division and 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (11 ACR) together with 35th Battalion, Army of the Republic of Vietnam Rangers swept the enemy towards the battalion position from the north in an

operation called AKRON. The battalion's area of operations was called JUDY.

The Commanding Officer's plan for this operation was to insert his companies into their blocking positions with the maximum possible security. The companies were to fly into the Binh Ba 2 airstrip by helicopter and move to their positions by an approach march of about 5 to 6 km through rubber and padi. The battalion, other than C Company, was flown in by RAAF Iroquois helicopters to Binh Ba on the first day of the operation. C Company was moved by a supporting troop of A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment. Battalion Headquarters and the Mortar Platoon were located at Binh Ba 2 airstrip throughout the operation, protected by C Company. A fire support base with 106th Field Battery was established on 7 June using the remainder of the Cavalry Squadron as protection until the morning of 8 June, when B Company of 2 RAR became responsible for its security. 106th Field Battery fired 1124 rounds in support of this operation.

Lieutenant 'Nobby' Clark described the first part of the operation:

*A Company was to occupy and ambush the high ground, the other companies were to ambush the rubber fringes. The monsoon season was by now in full swing, with daily and nightly rains. We were soaked on our way up the crescent shaped feature but occupied the dripping jungle on the crest cheerfully enough. Throughout the next few days we remained here.*

On the first day of BROKEN HILL 112 civilians, including 26 children, were detained and back-loaded by RAAF Iroquois to Nui Dat for questioning. The next day all but two, the President of the *Chau Duc District Women's Committee* and a Viet Cong female known supplier of food, were released.

On 8 June five separate contacts occurred involving A, B and D Companies and small enemy groups, although no enemy were killed. One contact involved a machine gunner in D Company who had a stoppage in his weapon when the belt of ammunition became entangled in his webbing. While clearing his gun of the stoppage, the machine gunner was shot in both his legs: this was the first gunshot wound casualty in the battalion. Private Peter 'Tommy' Tucker, who was a sentry for a 12 Platoon D Company ambush 1 km north-west of Nui Nhon, found that he had to fire on an enemy who would have trodden on him. The enemy soldier was wounded and dropped his M1 rifle. The other Viet Cong dragged their wounded comrade away.

The first soldier of the battalion to be wounded by enemy action was Private Kevin Stephens, a machine gunner of 8 Section 12 Platoon D Company on the morning of 11 June, 6 km north-west of Ngai Giao. Lieutenant Noel Reeves (the company second-in-command) wrote that, 'the company was together and travelling in single file with 12 Platoon leading when they were hit by four Charlie. They bounced down the flank of 12 Platoon'.

Private Stephens initiated the contact with bursts of his M60 from his shoulder while he was in a kneeling position and received gunshot wounds in both legs from the returned fire. The Company Headquarters was adjacent to 12 Platoon and the Forward Observer (Captain Tony Williams), the Company Commander (Major Don Paterson) and Corporal Henry King of Support Company became involved in the fire fight when one of the Viet Cong moved obliquely towards them in a series of bounds. The Viet Cong came to rest about 7 m from Major Paterson who could see his forehead and the muzzle of his rifle pointing at him. Both Private Stephens and Major Paterson shot the Viet Cong. The remainder of the enemy group withdrew. The shot Viet Cong had been armed with a .30 calibre M1 rifle which had only one round left in its chamber.

Private Stephens wrote about his experiences:

*I understand that I was the first [7 RAR] RAAF DUSTOFF in Vietnam . . . [W]hilst being winched out the cable became jammed with me swinging about under the chopper. The crew finally fixed that but not before I was knocked out on the skid of the chopper. Whilst I was in 8 Field Amb[ulance] in Vung Tau one of the crew came in and said that the cable only had a few more strands of wire left before breaking completely. But I am most grateful for their efforts in getting me to hospital. Whilst being 'medevaced' to Aust by Hercules one motor caught fire approx 3 hours out of Penang then another motor started playing up which required us to return to Penang. So you can see that I was a little worried about the RAAF equipment, but the crew and nurses etc were terrific. I was finally discharged from R[epatriation] G[eneral] H[ospital] Heidelberg in Feb 69 after many operations to my legs and 20 months in hospital.*

When Private Stephens had been lifted off by his Dustoff helicopter, one very unsettled RAAF crewman, armed only with a pistol, was inadvertently left behind.

Several large camps were found during this operation. On 11 June, an eight man patrol from 11 Platoon D Company found a company-sized camp. The forward scout, Private Bob Schaeche, saw several enemy seated sipping tea. As a blocking force was being positioned, firing was started by the enemy. Another soldier in 11 Platoon, Private Ian 'Mac' McKnight, considered Bob Schaeche's action, when he stood and returned the fire of three machine guns, to be extremely brave. An estimated twenty enemy fled the camp leaving a blood trail. They had at least six automatic weapons and an M79 grenade launcher. Private Barry 'Yogi' Klemm recounted his feelings during the contact:

*What seemed to happen was that an eight man Oz patrol inadvertently attacked a massive enemy complex under a deluge of return fire and drove them out of the camp. No casualties. Good clean fun. [Before contact.] No possibility of any*

*enemy or danger here. [On contact.] Get to the front. Get Schaeche out. They're firing too high. Stop laughing at Northcott's [the Section Commander] jokes. We gotta get in there. [Just after contact.] Astonishment at the proportions of the enemy camp and disregard of the danger. Still laughing at Northcott's joke. About an hour later, I was overcome by nausea and fainted.*

11 Platoon were left to clear the camp while the rest of the company followed the blood trail. It led to another camp which appeared to have been vacated 30 minutes earlier. The company estimated that 50 enemy had occupied it. The camp had a well appointed medical aid post with considerable quantities of modern drugs, vitamin tablets and blood plasma with signs of very recent use. The depth of the overhead protection in the bunkers in this camp was quoted as being 'almost unbelievable' — five to seven layers of logs 1 ft in diameter supported 1 to 2 m of earth. Follow-up of the enemy from this camp was prevented by dark. In this case, as became almost standard procedure, assessed escape routes were subjected to artillery and mortar fire in an attempt to inflict casualties on the enemy. This fire was often given the misleadingly inaccurate label of 'cut-off' fire. It was seldom (if ever) of an intensity likely to cut escape routes.

A Company also found several camps on 11 June. One was found by 2 Platoon's Second Lieutenant Ross to have a Viet Cong claymore mine — commonly called a D10 — set as a booby trap to be initiated by stepping on a hollowed piece of bamboo on the track into the system. Second Lieutenant Ian Cameron's 6 Platoon B Company found perhaps the most interesting installation of the operation on 12 June. It was a camp of fourteen bunkers big enough for 100 people including a hospital, weapons cache, prisoner of war cage and a food cache with 4 tons of rice. The food was hidden in two areas 200 and 250 metres from the bunkers. An ANPRC10 radio of US origin was also found. There was a hand-drawn map in the camp measuring 6 ft by 4 ft showing Phuoc Tuy Province and what the Viet Cong thought to be the order of battle of the troops at Nui Dat. The Viet Cong view at that time appeared to be that the 1st Australian Task Force base was occupied by one Australian battalion and one US battalion!

The Commanding Officer assessed that it was possible that Hill 101, a known enemy base 12 km west of Binh Gia, could be occupied by the enemy. He planned and controlled the execution of a battalion attack with A, B and D Companies. The hill was found to be unoccupied. The training gained from such practice was very worthwhile. One Support Company soldier was impressed that a large quantity of shell dressings were delivered to the Regimental Medical Officer (RMO) at Battalion Headquarters in wicker panniers as preparation for the attack. Fortunately, there were no casualties to use them.

The extraction of B Company was achieved by RAAF helicopters with some difficulty. The commander of the helicopters decided that the pick-up zone (PZ) could only take one helicopter at a time, although earlier that day another RAAF pilot had felt

that four craft could use the pick-up zone simultaneously. Use of only one Iroquois endangered the last section to be lifted out because it left too few troops for security. Colonel Smith insisted in his report that planning of such moves by the RAAF be tied in with their execution, if necessary by physically walking over the ground with the company commander, and not be subject to arbitrary changes at the time of extraction.

After this operation the RMO, Captain Tony Williams, reported that the local mosquitoes easily bit through the Australian jungle green shirts. He was disturbed by this and drew it to the attention of the Task Force authorities. There was no evident response.

Although there had been only minor contact with the enemy in Operation BROKEN HILL, the destruction of their bases was significant. It perhaps should have been anticipated that the expected driving of the enemy by Operation AKRON into the battalion's blocking positions would not have eventuated. Viet Cong forces seemed always able to evade grand sweeps and avoid static blocks. The limited value of the use of artillery fire in a 'cut-off' role was felt by the Commanding Officer to be a significant lesson. He was also interested that the enemy withdrew from very strongly prepared positions when they were first engaged, and attributed these withdrawals to the element of surprise on each occasion.

During the operation an order was issued to the battalion relating to the carriage of M60 ammunition. It was decided that M60 ammunition was not to be carried in bandolier fashion by soldiers other than the machine gun numbers one and two, who could do so if they desired. The order resulted from the incidence of machine gun stoppages that were caused by the belted ammunition picking up foreign material such as vegetation, outweighing the need for the machine gunners to be able to produce a large volume of fire almost instantaneously.

An issue of *Smith's Weekly* noted the arrival of the Official War Artist in the battalion's midst. Honorary Lieutenant Bruce Fletcher had been wounded in the leg by an accidental discharge caused by the movement of a bundle of captured Viet Cong weapons on a RAAF transport aircraft just after he had arrived in Vietnam. He could easily be identified by his crutches and cast. He was given the radio appointment title 'Picasso'. Soldiers were told that if they saw anyone painting without a beret or beard it would be Picasso. He painted several major works in 7 RAR and, indeed, there are more of his paintings of 7 RAR on operations than there are paintings of other units. This happened because Mrs Bett Smith, who had a mutual art connection with Fletcher, had asked the Commanding Officer to look out for him in Vietnam. Colonel Smith found that when the battalion first arrived and he enquired after Fletcher, no one seemed to know or care where he was. The Commanding Officer found him, flew him to the battalion and gave him a tent next to his. He also told the Regimental Sergeant Major to ensure that there were as many soldiers to paint

as he wanted. He was also flown out to operations in his plaster cast several days after their commencement. For months no one realised that 7 RAR had monopolised the artist. Colonel Smith even tried to 'capture' his replacement, but by that time the Task Force Commander had realised the significance of a War Artist. One of Fletcher's best paintings depicts a soldier from 7 RAR, Private Ernie Mustafa, who was of Turkish descent, sitting with his personal weapon with a gold crescent and star partly exposed on his chest. Mustafa's grandfather had fought at Gallipoli – on the Turkish side – and his father had fought with the British 8th Army.

## **OPERATION COOPAROO**

On 16 June Brigadier Graham briefed all officers and non-commissioned officers of the battalion in the theatre on the forthcoming operation, COOPAROO. He used this opportunity to get across his ideas of what the Task Force was trying to achieve in the province. He referred to the Viet Cong as having many of the best and most capable people whose skills would be needed by their country when the war was over.

Operation COOPAROO (named after the Queensland town, but misspelt) (23 June to 1 July) was a search and destroy operation in area of operations PINKY. PINKY was bordered in the east by the Song Rai and in the west by the Suoi Lo O Nho. Its southern and northern boundaries were east–west lines through Nui Dat and Ngai Giao. The area had been assessed by the Commander of the 1st Australian Task Force as a long-term staging area for D445. 2 RAR sent its C Company to secure a fire support base for the operation. This fire base was occupied by the 106th Field Battery and a section of 2 RAR's Mortar Platoon. Three companies of 7 RAR (A, B and C) swept to the south-east in the area of operations while D Company took up a blocking position. The sweeping companies were positioned using armoured personnel carriers from A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment. Companies (other than D) then searched their allotted areas. D Company was retained as a reserve and for destruction tasks within the area of operations. A platoon of A Company 2 RAR was to assist with the protection of Battalion Headquarters which deployed separately from the fire support base to the horseshoe-shaped hill 5 km north-east of Nui Dat 2, although it had the battalion Mortar Platoon there as well. During the operation there were three separate occasions when groups of two or three Viet Cong did a close reconnaissance of the headquarters area, although they were not caught.

The Mortar Platoon took a typical ammunition load on this operation. It was flown into the area by RAAF Iroquois helicopters, each of which would transport about 100 rounds at a time. The platoon had a stock of 680 high explosive rounds with both point detonating and delay fuses, 80 illumination rounds and 40 smoke rounds.

While this operation progressed, there was debate on where to travel in armoured personnel carriers. Travelling inside was uncomfortable and disorienting and there was



vulnerability to large mines. Travel outside restricted the manoeuvrability of the armoured personnel carriers through thick jungle and troops were also vulnerable to small arms fire and command detonated mines. It was decided that most troops would travel inside the armoured personnel carriers and that the floors be sandbagged for protection. Commanders and machine gunners would stand in the hatchway to keep navigation and to provide additional firepower,

There was little contact with the enemy in this operation. One soldier in 11 Platoon D Company, Private Kevin Liddell, suffered a flesh wound on 24 June when an enemy soldier exchanged fire with him. 10 Platoon and 11 Platoon were involved in an unfortunate patrol clash on the next day when two soldiers were wounded. There were indications that an enemy party of two men carried out a reconnaissance of the Fire Support Base on three separate occasions, but the swampy nature of the terrain defeated the efforts of the Tracker Platoon to find them.

In the evening of 24 June 2 Platoon A Company (Second Lieutenant Ross) found an unoccupied tunnel complex 3 km north-east of Battalion Headquarters. The area extended for 80 m by 80 m and its tunnels were up to 9 m deep. A sewing machine and printing press were found there. The platoon destroyed the installation with extensive assistance from the combat engineer team from 1st Field Squadron, commanded by Sergeant R. Francis.

Two days later Private Jim Cox of 7 Platoon C Company was tragically shot when another soldier's weapon discharged accidentally. He was evacuated by helicopter but died before he arrived at 8th Field Ambulance. It was an inauspicious day for the company. Several soldiers were stung by wasps, and the Company Sergeant Major, Ted Lewis (who was allergic to their stings) had to be medevaced. One soldier was stung by a scorpion and a corporal had a close encounter with a venomous snake.

On 1 July, B Company found a Viet Cong sign. Translated it read:

*Do not wander from the track to pick flowers or catch wild butterflies. The enemy soldiers think we mine the track and they walk on its edge. Here we mine the track edge and use the track ourselves.*

Some installations, including a battalion-sized camp and other tunnel complexes, were found and destroyed during the operation. In the last days new tracks were found in the north-east of the area of operations. The Commanding Officer considered that further attention needed to be given to this area in the future. After COOPAROO, Commander 1st Australian Task Force assessed that the area had been cleared with light contact and that the effect of the operation was the denial and destruction of another Viet Cong base area.

The battalion returned to Nui Dat after the operation and resumed the routine of base defence. Infantry battalions are always happier on operations. Some of the characteristics of life in a base were revealed in a minute that the Commanding Officer sent to all his subordinate commanders on 6 July on the tidiness of the area. He

pointed out that untidiness was a manifestation of lack of pride, both personal and group. He made it clear that the standard he expected was, 'for the living quarters – as for the lounge room of your own home and for surrounding roadways, company areas and common property – as for your front garden at home'.

## OPERATION PADDINGTON

Operation PADDINGTON was a combined operation from 9 to 15 July which sought to destroy *274 Viet Cong Main Force Regiment*. Intelligence assessment by the Australian Task Force indicated the presence of *274 Regiment* and *Headquarters 5 Viet Cong Division* north and north-east of Xuyen Moc. The Commander of 1st Australian Task Force commented that it took some time to convince the Americans that these enemy units were in this location. The forces taking part included Headquarters of the US 9th Division (commanded by Major General George O'Connor), the 1st Brigade of the 9th Division, Task Force Bravo (consisting of two battalions of the Vietnamese Marine Corps) and most units of 1st Australian Task Force with the US 2/47th Mechanised Battalion and 1/11th Armored Cavalry Regiment under operational control. The concept of this operation was to have the Armoured Cavalry Regiment attack north astride Route 329 to seize an objective. 2 RAR was then to conduct an airmobile assault. 7 RAR was to fly in to a landing zone and then occupy a blocking defensive position north of Xuyen Moc, some 4 km from the landing zone. D Company was also tasked to secure the Nui Dat feature 2 km west of Xuyen Moc for subsequent occupation by Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force. At this stage 1/11th Armored Cavalry Regiment was to link up with Task Force Bravo and attack to the south-east against the blocking positions occupied by 2 RAR and 7 RAR. Artillery support was provided for the battalion by the 108th Field Battery at Fire Support Base TOM at Xuyen Moc.

The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment was described by an Australian officer as:

*A sort of Army within an Army. They had over 1,300 armoured vehicles (tanks to armoured personnel carriers), thousands of men, their own supporting aircraft, and a change of command every six months. There was always a shadow commander to take over from a failed commander. Hence they were always geared to success. One 'Tiger' was the CO at this stage. He fought 11 ACR from a command chopper: he was everywhere, forever dropping in on some unfortunate platoon commander and saying 'Get your ass into gear, Lootenant'. His control was rigorous—an iron man, one of the legendary 'goddams'. He was far more than a Hollywood hero however.*

7 RAR's insertion on 9 July was carried out in US Iroquois as planned and without incident. There were no contacts with the enemy and the first night was spent

in the defensive position east of Xuyen Moc astride the Suoi Soc. This was far from comfortable for the soldiers. Private Ross Jack of 4 Platoon B Company wrote:

*[9 July] Moved out at 7 am to Xuyen Moc by chopper. Jumped off – moved 1000 yds. Then dug in to 4'6". Then went on patrol and found nothing but got soaked with sweat. That arvo it poured rain just as they put Arty into our area. We were sitting in our pits and the water came up 2 ft. Shorty [Private Brian Doyle] stood on a shovel but still got wet to his knees.*

The battalion moved to a blocking position called BERT on 10 July by two routes. This position was held until 12 July. Corporal 'Doc' Savage described the digging:

*My section dug in near an old well which I converted into a fighting pit. However, whilst digging I dislodged six small snakes which dropped into the well. That night mortars started falling close to us. Everyone headed for their pits. I had a choice: risk the mortars or the snakes. I chose the mortars. The next day I dug another pit. Just doesn't pay to cut corners!*

The move of the American cavalry did not force any Viet Cong on to the blocking positions of either 2 RAR or 7 RAR, although there had been some contact during their sweep. On 12 July 7 RAR searched the area around its blocking position for Viet Cong installations and caches without any notable finds being made. 7 Platoon's search, done in cooperation with US tanks, was eventful as Sergeant Savage described it:

*We moved to the east of Xuyen Moc and linked up with three M48 tanks from the US 9th Division. That night my section was to ambush a track junction 1,000 metres out to our front. That afternoon I approached the tank commander and told him of our intentions for the night. He said 'No sweat' and ringed our proposed positions on his map. At 2215 hrs that night all hell broke loose as the night exploded with high explosive shells falling all around us. I called for a check-fire over the radio as I could hear the primaries going off. The bloody tanks were firing at us. The next day my men wanted to go and punch the Yanks up. I found out later that when the commander had gone off picket, the oncoming picket was still half asleep and got his orders mixed up so he ordered the tanks to fire six rounds into the area that was circled. I think I aged ten years that night.*

On 14 July 7 RAR returned by foot to fire support base TOM to act as divisional reserve for the 9th Division. On 15 July it was flown from Xuyen Moc airfield to Nui Dat by a US airmobile company and remained standing by as a reserve until midnight on 16 July. Private Jack wrote:

*Moved out by chopper back to camp [at Nui Dat]. Had to move through 2 ft of red mud to pad. All the Yanks moved at 6.30 am and the front of their column was at Nui Dat (approx 20 miles) when we arrived back at 9.45 am.*

7 RAR did not make any contact with the enemy during the operation nor did it locate any significant sign of the enemy. Companies found the digging-in to the planned depth of 4 ft 6 in in the blocking position difficult because of rock 18 in below the surface. Nevertheless positions were dug to include overhead protection. The linking with 1/11th Armored Cavalry Regiment on 11 July occurred without incident as the US unit had a helicopter directing its movement as it approached the company positions. 7 RAR troops stood to in their weapons pits as the Americans covered the final 500 m towards them. A Company indeed felt much more scared of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment than of the Viet Cong.

Brigadier Graham commented that the elements of 9th Division and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam Marines were 24 hours late moving into their blocking positions and that this prevented the planned encirclement of the enemy. However, between 12 and 14 July camps were found (by other units taking part in the operation) which were occupied by an enemy battalion and two companies. These positions were subjected to extensive air strikes and artillery and a confirmed 29 enemy were killed. He felt that, although 274 *Regiment* was not destroyed, casualties were inflicted on it (by the other units) and its plans to mount a belated monsoon offensive were seriously disrupted.

## OPERATION SOUTHPORT

On 19 June the new Regional Force post at Ap Hean (4 km north of Ngai Giao) was attacked by the Viet Cong. There was a further attack on this post and the nearby post at Duc Thanh on 22 June. Sergeant Errol 'Edes' Eadie was the Australian Liaison Officer at the post. He recalled:

*There were approx 600 rounds of Regional Force mortar ammunition adjacent to our base plate position. I was initially shocked by the fire, however training took over and once I started helping direct countering fire on the suspected VC baseplate position I forgot about the incoming rounds. I was elated when we silenced their fire.*

Lieutenant Clark, the artillery forward observer, wrote:

*What had happened was that John [Phillips, the C Company Forward Observer] was calling in counter-mortar fire. The range of the 175s, some 32,800 m (well over 22 miles), was sufficient for this. Duc Thanh was being mortared heavily and our men were under cover. Very courageously, John had hopped out of his APC to take a Mortrep [mortar fire report] direction with his compass – it was no doubt the quickest bearing he ever took in his life. But it was a good one: he worked out that the mortars were set up on the fringe of the rubber about 1,000 metres*

*across the cleared defence area. They were very accurate. John called the 175s in right on top of them and their fire was quickly suppressed. The next day our patrols found the baseplate areas: the surrounding rubber was blasted away by the big American shells that John had so accurately directed. The Cong mortar men must have had a most uncomfortable time.*

There was a further attack a few days later on the Headquarters of 3/11th US Armored Cavalry Regiment by Viet Cong forces of up to battalion strength. The security of this part of the province was deteriorating. As part of the allied response, Operation SOUTHPORT, conducted on 23 July, was designed to clear and secure a section of Route 2 previously under effective Viet Cong control so that an engineer convoy that was to improve the Vietnamese Army post at Xa Bang could pass along it. It took place on 23 July.

The task included the responsibility of searching the route for mines and of patrolling 200–500 m on each side of the road. Each company had three mine detector teams attached to it from either 1st Field Squadron or the Assault Pioneer Platoon. The battalion was flown in by a US airmobile company to Duc Thanh airfield and each company was positioned by a troop of armoured personnel carriers in turn. 106th Field Battery had a section of guns flown in, but one was dropped accidentally from the Chinook carrying it. By 1100 hours the route security task had been completed and the companies searched the remainder of their areas of operations. Several small finds of enemy equipment were made. The most interesting find, at a location known by the locals as 'Slope 30', was several tunnels that had been made under the road, each joining local shops on either side of Route 2, in conjunction with twenty bunkers on both sides of the road. The tunnels offered easy and covered access underneath the road and avoided the strips cleared of vegetation parallel to it. C Company found an observation tree 200 m east of Route 2 that had climbing spikes on the trunk. The tree top had an unobstructed view of at least 1 km of the road.

The battalion felt that the inhabitants of Slope 30 were noticeably unfriendly. This was perhaps not too surprising as the area was one where French forces had been constantly ambushed by the Viet Minh. The operation, and particularly the need for section patrols during it, convinced the Commanding Officer that there was a need for the battalion to be equipped with a hand-held radio to allow communications between platoons and their sections.

After the operation a non-commissioned officer cadre course was conducted at Nui Dat to boost the numbers of soldiers qualified for promotion. It used the battalion's warrant officers as its instructors. Six candidates per company were trained on this course. One course member, Private Chris 'Lofty' Cannin from 12 Platoon D Company, received a minor shrapnel wound on 28 July when a double feed of rounds in an M60 caused a round to explode and to lacerate his hands and burn his

face; however, he remained on duty. The final assessment for the course was a three-day fighting patrol. On its return, the Regimental Sergeant Major called the roll. He then declared that, since no one had been lost on the patrol, they had all passed the course!

The battalion was reminded in Routine Orders for 1 August of the need for anti-mite precautions. Prior to any operation, the task of saturating clothing with anti-mite fluid needed to be carried out. All soldiers were reminded that scrub typhus (carried by the mites) could kill, but that these precautions would render soldiers safe. The application of the anti-mite fluid, which tended to wash out of clothing that was continually saturated with rain, did not actually guarantee protection. At one stage of the tour, 4 Platoon ambushed within an abandoned Viet Cong camp and had several of its members down with scrub typhus soon afterwards.

A Company carried out a company operation, called CAROLINE, on 2 and 3 August. Their artillery forward observer described it:

*It was the same dreary and exhausting patrolling, humping great loads along thorny tracks, dropping your hat for the fiftieth time, losing count of paces, never having enough time to brew up, continually searching what the gods of Infantry considered to be 'interesting' areas, and being sodden with stream and swamp-wading for 24 hours a day.*

Four months of operational experience had refined the fighting capabilities of the battalion. It was confident, practised and capable: ready for contact with the enemy at greater intensity.

# 4

## Suoi Chau Pha

### *'A Broad and Noble Stream'*

*For this was guerilla warfare, this was Vietnam, weeks of trudging and then a contact of a few seconds, over almost before it began.*

Lieutenant N. J. Clark, RAA

#### **OPERATION BALLARAT AND THE BATTLE OF SUOI CHAU PHA**

OPERATION BALLARAT WAS planned as a battalion-sized search and destroy operation between 4 and 16 August in an area of operations north-west of Nui Dat called LION. The Commanding Officer's concept called for a 'covert' move by foot into the area by companies so that the element of surprise would be preserved much more than if insertion were to be made by helicopters. Corporal Bill Fogarty of the Fire Assault Platoon wrote to his father: 'We set off with 5 days rations much to the consternation of the [Vietnamese Army attached] interpreters who think we are a bit simple to carry so much when there are choppers on call'.

The operation was to be supported from a Fire Support Base (GIRAFFE) with the 106th Field Battery and the battalion mortars with protection provided by the 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit. Companies were firstly to gain knowledge of the enemy dispositions, strengths and tracks and then to capitalise on this knowledge by ambushing. When the ambush phase had been completed, enemy camps and installations were to be destroyed. Battalion Headquarters was located on Nui Nghe throughout the operation. Private Barleif 'Leif' Harstad of A Company wrote to his parents on 2 August:

*Anyway, tomorrow we have to go out again. This time we will be heading further north to where B Company has had several contacts with the enemy in the past week. That is not all!! Gabby [Hayes], our Section Commander, is in Saigon on*

*guard duty and Blue, our 2IC, is in hospital with some skin disease, so guess who will be in charge of the section tomorrow? Yep, me! ... Today I've had to supervise the test firing of all the weapons in the section, give the section a briefing on what the next few days activities will concern and prepare my maps etc for the op . . . The lieutenant thinks I can handle it, and anyway it will be good practice for my up and coming officer training, eh? ... PS. This may be a long op so don't worry if you don't hear from me for about 2 weeks.*

A Company had been in the area of operations since 3 August. It needed a resupply on 5 August, which was accomplished as quickly as possible using RAAF Iroquois helicopters and a technique used for SAS insertion. In this way, the complicated resupply process was completed in 2 min 40 sec with a minimal compromise of security. A Company's experiences on the next day were carefully recorded in the diary of their artillery forward observer, Lieutenant Neville 'Nobby' Clark. His description of the events follows:

*It must have been a quarter of an hour later when the electrifying thumbs down sign [infantry field signal for enemy] passed swiftly down the line. Voices had been heard. Within seconds there were two or three loud reports followed by a sustained burst from a machine gun. And then an awful silence. Two Viet Cong KIA was the message. Cpl Tredrea (later Mentioned in Despatches) in command of the point section, had heard oriental chattering coming directly towards him. He quickly waved his men into ambush off the track and waited. Two heavily armed VC strolled into sight, as if they had not a care in the world. Within a second in fact they had none, quite literally. Gordon Tredrea and the forward scout shot them and the machine gunner put in a burst for good measure.*

*As I lay down to begin the shoot I saw not five yards away the smelly and weirdly contorted bodies of the dead men. They were the first enemy I had seen in the jungle. They had of course been horribly mutilated by the machine gun fire. However I soon had a shoot on my hands and was obliged to gather my professional wits about me. The guns fell nicely and I directed them left and down as a cut off and deterrent. After 'Shot' we reported the two VC killed. Major O'Donnell had sent 2 Platoon on a sweep directly ahead of the company. Far back, 1 and 3 Platoons lay waiting for any developments. We expected none. For this was guerilla warfare, this was Vietnam, weeks of trudging and then a contact of a few seconds, over almost before it began. I had the [gunner] Regimental net to myself. Time stood still.*

*They waited for the expected sweep. It came, boldly enough, and they opened fire with rockets and machine guns on our 2 Platoon. Within seconds 2 Platoon had lost the initiative and had sustained several casualties, including 'Speedy' O'Connor (seriously wounded), the Platoon Sergeant 'Jock' Sutherland (a Scot who had joined our Company only the other day) and the Platoon Commander (lightly). A regular fire-fight commenced immediately, a real*



*soldiers' stoush, with 'Pud' Ross going up again and again to hurl grenades at the enemy. He was wounded by shrapnel in the leg. Major O'Donnell still estimated the enemy at platoon (plus) strength and did the correct thing. The VC used to say that when in contact with the Australians, you had to watch your flanks. They were right. The OC [officer commanding], going by the book, sent Rod Smith and 1 Platoon out to the right to outflank the enemy. Rocket fire again slashed through our company with sickening concussion. 'Jock' Sutherland received a direct hit and lost a leg and an eye.*

Second Lieutenant Ross repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire while throwing grenades so that his men could adopt better fire positions. He dragged two wounded men to safety. During the remainder of the battle, he reorganised his platoon and moved around it under heavy fire, encouraging his men and directing their fire on the enemy. Although he suffered a shrapnel wound to his leg, he refused medical attention until the enemy had been beaten off and all the other wounded had been treated. Private Dennis 'Bottles' Bathersby, a machine gunner in the platoon, was wounded in the arm when he exposed himself to fire in order to gain a better position to return fire. He continued the battle, throwing two grenades with his left arm. He then saved a badly wounded comrade by dragging him back to a safe area, returning to his machine gun to keep firing. Finally, his right arm became completely numb. He was then ordered back, but at platoon headquarters he continued to help the other wounded and went around giving out cigarettes. Private Keith Downward, a forward scout in 2 Platoon, came under heavy fire early in the battle. He continued to crawl towards the enemy until he was within 10 m of a machine gun that was causing the casualties. He leapt to his feet and, disregarding his own safety, charged the machine gun, killed its operator and captured the weapon. He was wounded shortly afterwards by a hand grenade but continued to bring fire on the enemy. When it became necessary to order him to move rearward for treatment, he dragged a wounded comrade with him.

Lieutenant Clark's narrative continued:

*Meanwhile I had the guns in to about 400 metres at Battery Fire for Effect. I was following Regimental Standing Orders for Close Targets, and, in fact, had them open in the mud before me. It was at this stage that 1 Platoon was hit from their right flank. Far from outflanking the enemy they had walked straight into them. We began to revise our estimates of the enemy strength. As 'Speedy' O'Connor was dragged past me, the top of his head shot away by the VC machine gun, and moaning 'for Christ's sake, for Christ's sake', I seemed to see quite clearly the urgency of the situation. I ended my present mission and began two more: a Close Target with 106 Battery to our right front (NE) and a more distant (and, I hoped, deterrent) mission to our front with the 155 mm howitzers*

*of Battery 'A' 2/35th US Artillery. Of course, to save time, I should merely have corrected 106 onto the enemy instead of ordering a fresh grid [reference], but I did not think of that. My mind must have been quite inflexible at the time. The guns began to fall, and very nicely too. The Mediums (155s) fell with a particularly satisfying 'crump'. I ordered them to fire for effect. The uproar increased. Speech of course was impossible and I had long ago taken the set from Gunner Lane, ordering him to keep a watchful eye to the front and to shoot anything that moved. (Our wounded enemy in front showed faint signs of returning aggressiveness until Jack Higgins put a bullet into his brain.) I shall never forget that diabolic and continuous crash of the automatic fire. It is the loudest noise I had ever heard – until the shells came. Every VC seemed to have an automatic weapon – the Soviet Assault Rifle AK47 – and each one sounded like a light machine gun. The leaves in front of me flicked each time a round passed. Worst of all were the cries of the wounded. Our boys cried out in pain when they were hit, but the enemy screamed. You could hear them above the sound of battle – piercing and soul destroying.*

*1 Platoon had really walked into it. Within minutes, two sections were leaderless, 'Lofty' Aylett being shot leading his men into action, and 'Gabby' Hayes, taking cover at the head of his men behind a log which unfortunately lay the wrong way, receiving a direct burst from a machine gun not ten yards away.' Two section commanders dead, a dozen men wounded, and Rod Smith was in trouble. A shot for shot battle commenced.*

Private Des Burley, the machine gunner in Corporal Hayes's 3 Section of 1 Platoon, (who was later wounded) said:

*The bravest act that I saw in Vietnam was Gabby Hayes so intent on making sure that his section was down on the ground in firing position that he left himself completely exposed to enemy fire. He never fired a shot, he was riddled with machine gun bullets. My thoughts then were, what a waste of a great leader. Lieutenant Clark continued:*

*Now the guns of 106 Battery were over 10,000 metres away. Ten kilometres and very near their maximum range of 11,000 metres. I had little room to play with. The big 155s of 2/35th US Arty were well within range, but I was already using them, as I fondly hoped, on the enemy's rear and lines of communication, (if any). Besides the mind balked at bringing the big guns in below 400m. Their shells have a casualty radius of 400 – 600 metres, and I had not always found the Americans as accurate as I could wish. One slight error, one sum miscalculated and we in the Company would be wearing six 80 lb projectiles of high explosive. I ordered them a fresh method of fire for effect (10 rounds per gun) and decided to concentrate all my energies on my own battery. I had little time to play with as the casualty evacuation choppers were on the way back.*

*Both the fire and the rain increased. The noise was absolutely appalling, the visibility down to a few metres, and all I could think of was 'Jesus, make it stop'.*

*'Guns: Splash, Over.'*

*Instantly I was alert. I never answered that report of splash. The Command Post Signaller at the guns repeated it. Then with the whistle and hollow roar of an express train they were on us. They constitute the loudest noise I have ever heard in my life. The first one, flicking down out of the monsoon, crashed fair and deadly right on the spot I had identified as the most troublesome. Before I could draw breath, the second one fell in exactly the same hole. The third one hit a tree and the crack was ear splitting. The Company was showered with shrapnel. Screams were heard, a cry of 'Stop the Artillery' from 1 Platoon's radio. Hot fragments of metal scythed through the jungle above our heads.*

*'Stop!' to the guns. 'What's up, Sir? How are they falling?' Jake: '1 Platoon says they're amongst them'. (If only I'd dropped 25, I thought. If only. Perhaps the final ranging round was muffled and was much closer than my ear had detected.) I added 200 and went to Battery Fire for Effect with the whole Battery. Crump, Crump, Crump Crumperump, Crump. 'Drop 100 Repeat'. Again, louder, crump crump crump ...*

*CASEVAC [casualty evacuation] coming in! Stop the Artillery. 'Rest' to the guns. Wait. The whirr and heavy whine, the flap, flap-swish of the Huey's rotor blades. And I, wondering whether I hadn't foolishly annihilated 1 Platoon with my boldness. Casualty reports came in – 5 killed in action, 12 wounded. Fourteen wounded. Major O'Donnell had gone to the aid of a 2 Platoon medic on our left, pinned down by fire. He'd brought the wounded man out while still directing the battle.*

*The small arms petered out and then ceased altogether. More Casevac choppers, and the wounded began coming back once more. They passed through us and 2 Platoon on their way to the rear. Some being carried, others walking or leaning on their mates. Barry Heard, the company radio operator, went to their aid. I remember one lad in particular, a big, strapping machine gunner with a horrible wound in his back, walking out, too proud to be carried. He typified the spirit of A Company that day.<sup>2</sup>*

Lieutenant Clark had acted calmly, methodically and with complete disregard for his own safety throughout the action. His calmness under fire and his professional skill were an inspiration. Major O'Donnell showed courage, leadership of an outstanding calibre, coolness under fire and calmness in directing all his resources during the battle. His resolve dealt the enemy a severe blow.

After the engagement, while reviewing the captured material, Colonel Smith assessed that A Company had engaged the *Reconnaissance Platoon* and *C12 Company* of *3 Battalion 274 Regiment*. The enemy had shown themselves to be well disciplined, well armed and well trained, and their tactics were similar to our own. He

praised the RAAF helicopters and their determination in evacuating the wounded despite the fire that they took (which, as well as wounding the pilot, Squadron Leader 'Big Jim' Cox, and a crewman, Corporal Reginald Atkin, on the first helicopter, rendered its winch inoperative). Squadron Leader Cox's aircraft was hit eleven times. Five other RAAF helicopters, disregarding the enemy fire, evacuated the casualties to hospital. US Army helicopters also assisted in the Dustoffs. The RMO, Captain Tony Williams, was winched down to assist in the treatment of the wounded.

The Commanding Officer believed that at least a second company of 274 *Regiment* helped the enemy recover many of the bodies of their killed, perhaps staging through the battalion-sized camp found 900 m away by B Company the next day. Brigadier Graham assessed that the length of the contact indicated that the enemy company was fighting a delaying action to allow the rest of its battalion to move. He also found that a notable aspect of the contact was the 'hugging' tactic employed, whereby the enemy remained close to our troops to limit the effect of our artillery. Nonetheless it appeared that our artillery had inflicted moderate casualties on the withdrawing enemy, evidenced by the many blood trails found.

A Company suffered heavily in this action. Five of its soldiers were killed in action and a further one died from wounds.<sup>3</sup> The letters of Privates Leif Harstad and David Milford quoted above were their last. This toll was the heaviest suffered by 7 RAR. On 6 August, seventeen casualties<sup>4</sup> were evacuated and a further three were evacuated over the next two days suffering from 'minor shrapnel wounds which went unnoticed on 6 Aug 67'. Three of those evacuated, including one who was wounded, had been stung by wasps. These wasps were disturbed from their nest in a tree early in the battle when Lieutenant Ross was throwing grenades. The wasp stings were so severe that some soldiers (including Corporal Tredrea) were incapacitated during the battle. It is interesting to note that twelve of the wounded had returned to duty with the company by 19 August. One of those who was hospitalised, Private Laurie Hoppner, wrote on 13 August in his first letter to his fiancée after being wounded:

*By now you will have received my tape [recording] and I know it sounded shocking. My right hand has been stitched up and there are 8 stitches on the back. My thumb is a bit of a mess. I had had 24 stitches on the right side of my hand, 2 in my cheek and 4–6 in my right shoulder. I don't know what my back is like but I know there is quite a hole in it. But don't worry darling. I'll be as fit as a fiddle in a few weeks.*

The aftermath of being wounded was often traumatic. Private Rick Brown was transferred to the US 36th Evacuation Hospital at Vung Tau. While he was recovering consciousness, his camera and the money he had drawn for the rest and recuperation leave he had expected to take in just a few days were stolen. Although

he informed the Military Police, no investigation effort was evident to him. He received few visitors and no debriefing on the battle prior to being evacuated to Australia to recover from his wounds. Like too many National Servicemen, he felt abandoned by the battalion and the Army. He was not invited to join the battalion's march through Sydney when it returned. To its shame, the military often did little to thank those who had sacrificed most in its service.

Five enemy bodies, including those of a platoon commander and two non-commissioned officers, were recovered after the battle as well as several weapons including a B40 rocket launcher that was painted red and had been conspicuously visible throughout the action. There is little doubt that the enemy suffered crippling casualties, most of whose bodies were dragged from the battlefield. Although the number of enemy soldiers killed is probably the least important aspect of this battle, there is an unwarranted slur cast on it in Terry Burstall's *Vietnam – The Australian Dilemma*. Because Burstall had not found the record of enemy casualties he deduces that the five enemy were 'possibles'. He therefore implies that enemy casualties were exaggerated by 7 RAR in this instance. He does not make clear that he had not been granted access to official records. These records confirm the enemy killed as bodies counted, however unnecessary this detail will seem to those taking part.

Artillery played a vital part in the battle, emphasising the close cooperation that had been achieved with the infantry. The number of rounds fired is not recorded, but the average monthly expenditure rate of nearly 46 rounds per gun per day in August (more than twice the usual monthly average for the 105 mm guns) was greatly boosted by this one day's firings. To commemorate the part played by the guns in this battle, the accommodation of the 4th Field Regiment in Lavarack Barracks, Townsville is called 'Suoi Chau Pha Lines'.

The Battle of Suoi Chau Pha, as it is called by the battalion, was a relatively minor but vigorously fought engagement between approximately equal forces. Three Military Crosses were awarded for bravery during this action (to Major O'Donnell, Lieutenant Clark and Lieutenant Ross). Sergeant Sutherland was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for repeatedly exposing himself to fire while moving among his soldiers, reassuring the wounded and directing the fire of the remainder on enemy strong points until he himself was seriously wounded. He arrived at 1st Australian Field Hospital in Vung Tau without a pulse but responded so well to repeated transfusions that within 12 hours of having a leg amputated above the knee and losing his left eye he sat up in bed and wrote two letters home. He spread hope and inspiration among the other wounded and kept their morale high by his example. Although even a change of bandages required a general anaesthetic, he never failed in his cheerfulness and exhortations to others. He was visited at Vung Tau by General William Westmoreland, the US Commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV), who was so impressed that the General recommended him

for a Congressional Medal of Honor (which was not awarded). He also wrote to Sergeant Sutherland's sister saying how impressed he was with his heroism during the battle and with his determination and cheerful attitude while hospitalised.

Private Downward was awarded a Military Medal. Corporal Spradbrow, a section commander in 1 Platoon, showed cool and calm bravery in this action which contributed to a later award of a Military Medal. Corporal Tredrea and Corporal Bathersby were Mentioned in Despatches. Squadron Leader Cox's part in the action contributed to his later award of a Distinguished Flying Cross.

As a result of A Company's battle, B Company was deployed by the helicopters of a US airmobile company to a blocking position to A Company's north. Once again, difficulty was experienced with this emergency move. The airmobile commander advised that one aircraft could fit in the landing zone and take five soldiers at a time. Two aircraft actually used the landing zone and picked up six soldiers at a time. The company estimate of the landing zone was that it would take five aircraft at once. The Officer Commanding B Company also experienced quite a deal of difficulty with the radio communications in the aircraft used for command and control. He felt that an aircraft commander gave an incorrect order to troops on the ground to prepare for immediate extraction. Although this air move was eventually completed successfully, it was far from efficiently achieved.

On 7 August, A Company wounded one Viet Cong who was spotted by a sentry from 2 Platoon. Later that day, B Company located an extensive track system and patrolled along it, engaging three Viet Cong without result. The tracks led to a freshly vacated newly dug battalion-sized bunker position. Warm rice sufficient to feed 50 men was found. On 8 August it was decided to continue the search for enemy from *274 Regiment* with companies in groups of two: one searching while the other was close enough in a firm base to give support if needed. B Company experienced several stoppages with M16 Armalite rifles during this operation and the Officer Commanding (Major Des Mealey) withdrew it from use in his company. M16s were frequently criticised by experienced soldiers for their proneness to failure and perceived lack of hitting power. The age of the battalion's M16s, which were handed down from unit to unit, was a contributing factor to the former. Many soldiers chose to carry the heavier L1A1 self-loading rifle to compensate for the latter.

The possibility of further contact with *274 Regiment* caused 1st Australian Task Force to have 2 RAR stand by to fly into the area if needed. US forces were also positioned to the north. No further contact occurred until 13 August when at 1100 three Viet Cong were engaged by Lieutenant McGuinness's 4 Platoon B Company. Private Ross Jack described the contact:

*11 am. Harry [Private Edwin Harrison] and I were back having a smoke, with two number twos [on the M60s] and two section commanders there. Tony [Private Anthony Bennett] was on sentry, looked up and put himself on the deck. Shorty [Private Brian Doyle] said to Go Go [Private Patrick Goggins ] 'Look at Tony sighting up'. He also looked out front and saw the nogs, as Tony said, 'Head down, arses up, moving fast'. Tony opened up with the gun. Accurate. There were at least two, for a Cong rifle opened up when their scout went down.*

One enemy soldier was killed and the other fled. 4 Platoon had a further three Viet Cong approach its ambush position at 1600 hours the same day. This group exercised quite a degree of caution and it was felt that they were attempting to recover the body of their comrade killed earlier. A further Viet Cong was killed in the resulting fire fight, the other two were wounded and escaped despite M79 fire by Corporal Michael Logan. The dead enemy was from the *Chau Duc District Company*.

Private Chris Seymour of C Company recorded an encounter on the evening of 14 August:

*On stand-to Slip, Allen, Ary and myself were in one pit. The light was in between dark and light and we could make out this shape coming towards us. We could make out that it was an animal, big as well, but were unable to tell what sort it was till it was some 15 yards away. It stopped as if it had smelt us, which wouldn't have been hard, as we stank. It turned and started to run. It was not until then that we knew what it was. It was a tiger about four to five feet long and stood three feet high. We were relieved to see it high-tailing the other way.*

At the end of the operation the next day, the unthinkable occurred. A soldier from C Company became lost. Private Allan West had been the 'tail-end charlie' of the company and had not been remembered after a halt. The company had split into its platoons and Private West found it impossible to follow their tracks. Two helicopter searches and one by a fixed wing Cessna aircraft were conducted without finding him. The Assistant Adjutant told what happened:

*Eventually the CO came to the conclusion that further search would only jeopardise more lives. The CO went to Task Force HQ to outline the situation; no other avenue presented itself and the search was called off. Returning to Battalion HQ in the helicopter, the CO spotted a lone figure in a small jungle clearing. He got the pilot to investigate and sure enough it was the lost soldier. The helicopter landed and for his effort the CO got a smack across the face from the soldier's rifle in his mad scramble to board the helicopter. He was a very lucky soldier who owes his life to a good pair of eyes that never stopped searching and a pilot who was prepared to take a risk with his aircraft and crew.*

Private West had been lost for almost eight hours. He described being picked up by the helicopter:

*I thought to myself, Jesus, I am in trouble now but the CO said, 'Jump in quick'. Being only a two-seater I had to sit on his lap—the only bloke in 7 RAR who did I think! But, all jokes aside, I was bloody glad to see him. We flew back to Battalion Headquarters at Nui Nghe and he had his batman make me a brew. Seeing the operation was ending the next day, the CO said I could go back with the helicopter to Nui Dat.*

BALLARAT caused a heavy enemy toll. As well as the confirmed seven enemy killed, a further five dead had been seen but their bodies not recovered. Twenty-eight enemy soldiers had been wounded and a considerable quantity of their equipment captured or destroyed.

In summarising the lessons from this operation in his report, Colonel Smith suggested that thought should be given to training section and platoon commanders to control their groups by a simple system of whistles and passing orders from man to man, rather than the existing practice of shouting orders. He pointed out that the enemy used whistles, did not shout and had good fire control. He noted that the enemy practice of firing very short bursts from their light machine guns made them very difficult to locate on the battlefield. He also noted that the M79's projectile failed to arm on many occasions, and saw the need for a weapon like it that produced an enhanced shrapnel effect and that would be able, for example, to dislodge an enemy behind cover if it were fired at a tree above him. This weapon could be used just as the enemy used their RPGs. Once again, the Commanding Officer commented on the need for section radios: 'Radios from platoon to section are *absolutely* necessary. These should be obtained at once'. And again it would appear that his advice was not heeded. It took the Army until 1993 to raise a project (called PINTAIL) to acquire section radios for all infantry battalions.



# 5

## Atherton to Forrest

*It's Johnson – McNamara and Co who kindle this dirty war of aggression,  
who send you here as gun-fodder for their interests!*

Viet Cong Propaganda Leaflet  
1967

### OPERATION ATHERTON

Operation ATHERTON was held west of Route 2 from 6 August to 3 September. It was a combination of Operations MOSMAN, BURNSIDE and ULMARRA.

### Operation MOSMAN

The battalion then began a series of search operations of villages in the province. Village searches are operations that are manpower intensive and methodical, needing careful planning and close coordination. The tasks undertaken in an operation like this are best performed by groups of about infantry company size. The aims of these operations were to capture Viet Cong and their supplies and to detain males who might be avoiding the draft and those without identity papers and hand them over to local authorities. The opportunity was also taken to assist the villagers in any feasible way, such as providing medical and dental assistance, while they were being inconvenienced.

Operation MOSMAN (named after the Sydney suburb) was held on 18 August. It searched the agricultural village of Hoa Long, south of Nui Dat, which had a population of about 5000, including a considerable number of refugees who had been resettled from destroyed villages in the province. This operation was performed without a prior cordon. The operation was undertaken by A, B, C and Support Companies

and search groups formed from Administration Company (commanded on this operation by Captain Peter Stokes), 1 SAS Squadron, 106th Field Battery (reinforced with a 'platoon' from 161st Battery), 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit and a company of 2 RAR. One Troop of A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment provided movement assistance and protection. A rehearsal of all the search techniques was held on 17 August for all groups under the Regimental Sergeant Major's critical eye.

The search had been prompted by the forthcoming national elections on 3 September 1967 as it was thought elements in the village might try to disrupt them. Parts of Hoa Long had most recently been searched by 5 RAR and 6 RAR in January 1967, yielding a few Viet Cong on each of the several days of searching. Although the battalion expected to find large amounts of food, tunnels and hides, explosives, arms, ammunition, medical supplies, propaganda posters and other caches, no item of significance was discovered. Some houses had large quantities of unmilled rice, but it was found that rice from the province capital at Baria was used as currency and given an exchange rate greater than that of the local Hoa Long rice, although those searching could not discern any difference between them. Private Chris Seymour of C Company commented:

*During the morning we went through the village searching for weapons and things that the people shouldn't have had. We would mark down who had rice and who had too much, then in the afternoon we were to come back and bag it. When we did go back we started filling about 10 bags and then we got word to leave the rice alone, so we put it back in the bins. The nogs did not know what was going on. In the next issue of the Battalion newspaper, Smith's Weekly, was the snide remark, 'The villagers of Hoa Long are very interested in the Australians' religious rites known as the 'August Rice Bagging Festival' and would like to know its origins (so would we).'*

The After Action Report commented on several shortcomings in the control of the population and its food. There was no register of the houses and their occupants. No clear guide was given to ascertain what was an excessive quantity of rice. This was a serious matter because this staple food could have been held to supply the Viet Cong. No pamphlet in Vietnamese was available to tell the locals being searched what was going on.

Despite the lack of results on MOSMAN, the battalion practised the complexities of this type of operation and developed tactics and procedures for section searches, control and reporting and protection; for example, it was felt that searchers should use householders to help as much as possible to save time and to remove the risk of setting off booby traps. A good system of recording and of dividing search areas was needed. The prior rehearsal was found to be invaluable. A Company recommended that

a useful rule of thumb was to allocate a platoon 40 houses and their gardens as a daily search task.

Brigadier Graham noted that when the Australians had moved into Phuoc Tuy Province fourteen months previously, Hoa Long had been a Viet Cong dominated village. MOSMAN confirmed his belief that the Viet Cong had lost control of the village. His belief may not have been entirely justified: the Viet Cong may have just temporarily tactically withdrawn.

### **Operation BURNSIDE**

Less than a week later the village of Dat Do was searched during Operation BURNSIDE on 24 August. 2 RAR was tasked to search the eastern half of the village simultaneously. 7 RAR's western half of the village was divided into eight areas to be searched by A, B, C, D and Support Companies with 1 SAS Squadron, 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit and 106th Field Battery as additional search groups under the operational control of the battalion. D Company was moved to Dat Do by armoured personnel carriers and the remainder of the search groups flew in by helicopters provided by a US airmobile company. Once again, the plan was to search without prior cordon.

Dat Do, which had a population of about 12 000, was the rice marketing centre of Phuoc Tuy Province and had not been previously searched by Australian troops, although some ARVN searches had been made. The villagers were warned by aircraft equipped with loudspeakers ('voice aircraft') to remain indoors until the search was completed.

The search was largely uneventful. Less bulk rice was found in Dat Do than had been found in Hoa Long. Because of the simultaneous search by 2 RAR, fewer interpreters were available. However, a leaflet in Vietnamese explaining what was going on and apologising for any inconvenience helped alleviate this shortcoming. The villagers were quite friendly once their initial reticence had been overcome. There were indications that the search was expected and that some males had left the village several days before. The Vietnamese Province Chief, Lieutenant Colonel Le Luc Dat, watched this operation. He commented that the Australians were very courteous and very thorough.

### **Operation ULMARRA**

The third village search operation in the space of eight days was called ULMARRA, named for the town near Grafton, NSW, the Task Force Commander's home town. On 26 August, 7 RAR was tasked to search the western half of Phuoc Hai while 2 RAR searched the rest of the village. The search was again timed to remove any threat to the national elections that might have emerged.

Phuoc Hai was a prosperous fishing village of about 9000 people, although it was more densely settled than Dat Do or Hoa Long. The Commanding Officer's plan was to fly A, B, D and Support Companies and the additional search groups under operational

control (1 SAS Squadron, 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit and 106th Field Battery) direct to Phuoc Hai from Nui Dat and to commence the search at 0630 hours. This timing, which was decided by Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force, was substantially after the fishing boats were permitted to leave the village at 0400 hours. The late arrival of the US airmobile company delayed the start by two hours but little of significance, other than several possible draft avoiders, was found in the village. The people did not appear to be as cooperative as those of Hoa Long or Dat Do. To help in the search, many soldiers used the long bolts from artillery ammunition cases as improvised probes.

After these three village search operations the Commander of 1st Australian Task Force remarked that the lack of suspicious finds indicated the success of the pacification of the province. He noted that the elections attracted a large turnout, with 90% of registered persons in the province recording their vote. The rate in Xuyen Moc District was almost 100%. However, these turnouts may have been influenced by the strong military presence.

## **OPERATION AINSLIE**

Operation AINSLIE (named after the mountain in Canberra) was planned as a Task Force operation to relocate villagers in scattered areas to a new village (named Suoi Nghe, meaning 'sweet water') to be constructed for them as part of the operation. A Company preferred to call it Ap Suoi Nescafé – or the instant village. AINSLIE took place between 31 August and 21 September. The area around Xa Bang, called Slope 30 by the Viet Cong, was the same as that traversed during Operation SOUTHPORT. It was strongly under enemy influence and was a traditional crossing area over Route 2 from the Viet Cong base areas in Hat Dich to Tam Bo and May Tao hill areas, while the many gardens in the area were a source of supply to the enemy. The area was settled by many scattered groups of houses and this fact, together with the hostility of the inhabitants, made 1st Australian Task Force reaction and fire support in the area difficult. The Commanding Officer had advised Brigadier Graham to group these houses into a new village to achieve a measure of control and to restrict Viet Cong access to food supplies. It was therefore decided to resettle the inhabitants of Slope 30 in this Task Force operation which was planned for 31 August to 21 September.

The first phase of the operation was to construct a resettlement hamlet. The next phase was the deployment of the main body of the Task Force and the establishment of a fire support base together with the clearance of part of Route 2, while units conducted a census of the inhabitants in their area of operations and evacuated them to the new village. The operation was planned to conclude with a search and destroy

operation in a wider surrounding area of operations. At the same time, the US 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment conducted a similar operation north of the 1st Australian Task Force operational area.

The first part of the operation consisted of an approach march to be made through an area known to be sown with Viet Cong mines and booby traps. The Commanding Officer made a difficult decision in order to facilitate this move. He used some of the local inhabitants to guide the routes taken by the companies. Colonel Smith assumed that the locals had a good knowledge of safe routes. He was correct. No mines or booby traps were encountered. However, Colonel Smith was later accused by the press of using these locals as human mine detectors. He felt his use of their local knowledge was justified. This justification was made more compelling by the strong likelihood that the locals used were at least Viet Cong sympathisers and probably supporters or actual soldiers. To the Commanding Officer's mind, The proof that his actions were justified was that his soldiers had safely passed through an obstacle belt. No harm had come to the guides.

From 31 August until 3 September, A Company provided security for the resettlement village (called Hamlet 3) and assisted with its construction during the day. Prefabricated house frames were assembled by the 1st Field Squadron. They made four 60 ft by 24 ft huts and 100 houses that were 20 ft by 10 ft. The A Company building tasks, which included the erection of the prefabricated buildings and marquees, were considerably helped by rehearsals.

A mortar round fell inside the Battalion Headquarters position during this operation. This round was fired by the 7 RAR mortars. Fortunately, the set-back (the impulse that sets the fuse train in motion) was too weak to arm the bomb which fell harmlessly into a thick carpet of mud, although it certainly scared Private 'Darkie' Butler and Corporal Bill Fogarty near whose pit it fell. 'Drop-shorts' had occurred in the battalion before but the seriousness of this incident set an investigation into motion into the mortar propellant charges which were manufactured in the US. It was found that there were three types of propellant, one of which was unreliable, due to inadequate quality control during manufacture, when up to 17% moisture had entered the explosive. As a direct result of this, 7 RAR abandoned fire over own troops by the Mortar Platoon unless it was in support of a major engagement. The Fire Assault Platoon's 106 mm recoilless rifle was fired from Battalion Headquarters at a sighting of lights during this operation. The back blast caused havoc to the Signals Platoon's hutchies.

On 4 September the remainder of the battalion moved on foot to a night harbour position. Fire support was provided by the Mortar Platoon located at Duc Thanh and 161st Field Battery from Nui Dat. On 5 September A Company secured a fire support base for 161st Field Battery nearer to the operational area, while the remainder of the battalion moved by armoured personnel carriers to area of operations MARK. Warrant Officer Class Two Jim Mahoney was deployed to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam post at Xa Bang as a liaison officer, with instructions to warn all Regional

Force troops to remain within the post for the duration of the operation. This move was delayed by the need to clear Route 2. On 6 September the companies commenced the census in their assigned areas by moving from north to south through them. The census was quickly completed without incident. From 9 to 16 September, two days earlier than had been planned, the battalion conducted a search and destroy operation in the area of operations. The battalion received orders to resettle the village of Cam My on 11 September. This potentially difficult operation, which involved moving 255 persons in 51 family groups, was completed sensitively and successfully on the same day with the cooperation of the Vietnamese District Chief. From 12 to 15 September, the search and destroy operation continued in MARK.

B Company was involved with further construction work on Sunday, 10 September. Private Ross Jack described the job:

*We were called out for work at the new village site. Found we had to put roofs on the makeshift homes. After putting sheet metal and roofing on they were becoming quite habitable. After doing the second home with the Viets moving in at the same time, [Private Barry] Dellar and I were asked to help a widow with two small children to furnish the home. She had no one to help her and she had no furnishings. We extended her house out by putting tin on the walls and also made two tables for her. She was one Viet who was very grateful for our help. We then moved down to a second house where a 14 year old girl who had a baby was also alone. With the help of the ARU [Australian Reinforcement Unit] guys we extended hers too and built two tables similar to the first house. This task took all day. It was quite a change from the norm and we were doing something constructive and the people were thankful so all in all it was quite an enjoyable day. Most of the women are alone with their kids. 200 people took off when we first went into the village, mostly males, either Cong sympathisers or Cong themselves. Will be a shock when they sneak back after we have left to find the [old] village flattened to the ground, while the rest of the innocent people are well housed and getting a free supply of tucker with no taxes to pay on food or land or housing.*

The layout of Suoi Nghe and the shape of its houses remained in 1994 just as the battalion had helped make it, although wood and corrugated iron had been replaced by brick in most cases.

The three days of searching produced the first contact with the enemy in this operation. 3 Platoon found that one of its claymores had been stolen during the night. On 13 September 1 Platoon and the company headquarters were checking a proposed firm base position when a Viet Cong soldier surrendered to them. He had escaped from C4 (the fourth company) of D445 the previous afternoon. He was evacuated by helicopter for questioning within fifteen minutes. He was quite young and had been pressed into service as a cook. He also gave quite a deal of information about D445's recent operations and its location. He told of a camp location

where about 200 kg of explosive was stored above ground. An immediate airstrike was made on this location and a secondary explosion resulted.

On 14 September 5 Platoon B Company (commanded by Second Lieutenant Wal Harris) made contact with three Viet Cong at 1100 hours. The platoon was divided into three groups of six and was engaged in the protection of the demolition of a battalion-sized bunker position by engineers, when the three Viet Cong crept towards the northernmost group and removed the rifle belonging to one of the engineers. Lance Corporal Michael Lloyd, in an example of marksmanship rarely equalled by Australians in this war, fired three shots from his self-loading rifle, killing two Viet Cong and wounding the third. He said, 'I waited till the leader was about 15 metres away before firing. They were walking quickly but as silently as possible'. His platoon commander remarked that he could not afford to have missed as the Viet Cong rifles were cocked and ready for action. The platoon followed the wounded soldier and when Private Michael Berrigan saw movement he fired and killed this third Viet Cong. Among the documents recovered was an accurate and detailed sketch of the Nui Dat base made by the *Reconnaissance Section* of the *Chau Duc District Company*, with a covering letter addressed to the *Combined Artillery Group of 5 Viet Cong Division*. This was 5 Platoon's first contact with the enemy. It is a good example of just how much patient and unrewarding searching for Viet Cong had to be done before results were obtained.

On 19 September a patrol from 1 Platoon, led by Corporal Harry Spradbrow, located a Viet Cong camp containing medicine, letters and a map. Later that afternoon the patrol killed a North Vietnamese Army soldier holding further documents and equipment. The soldier was seen walking through the rubber and did not see the patrol. Corporal Spradbrow allowed the enemy to come to within 15 m and shot him. The soldier carried a large amount of money and a photograph signed in North Vietnam a short time previously. As the patrol was returning to the company base, it saw five Viet Cong sprinting out of the jungle 250 m ahead of them. Although the tracker team with its dogs was flown in, darkness gave the Viet Cong the opportunity to escape.

During the early evening of 20 September two mortar rounds landed within the C Company defensive locality which was protecting the US 155 mm gun battery. Eight rounds had been fired by the 2 RAR mortars on a defensive fire task, but two fell short. The company had dug pits to 4 ft 6 in but troops were sleeping above ground. The rounds lightly wounded three soldiers, Private 'Kiwi' Lamb, Private Wal Brown and Corporal Jim Baty, who were then evacuated by helicopter. They were fortunate that they had not been in their trenches. One round had fallen in Lamb's pit, exploding a grenade on a small shelf. 'Kiwi' later tried to get his Company Quartermaster Sergeant, Staff Sergeant 'Sooky' Sawers, to change his hutchie, which

had 23 fragmentation holes in it. In the tradition of generations of quartermasters, Lamb was quite seriously told (at least at first) that the shelter was insufficiently damaged to be exchanged.

During the operation, B Company experienced a significant number of radio problems and warned that the ANPRC25 sets that had been taken over from 5 RAR were now becoming unreliable. D Company found that the Australian mosquito repellent, an important part of the anti-malarial precautions used by all soldiers, was only effective for 30 to 40 minutes on damp nights. Due to the tactical situation, mosquito nets could not be used. D Company recommended that a more suitable repellent for these conditions be developed.

Operation AINSLIE had caught the Viet Cong by surprise, adding substantially to the intelligence held on the provincial enemy forces. It had the effect of denying what was felt to be the last remaining purchasing and resupply area in the province to the Viet Cong. It also allowed the resettled civilians a chance to be self-sufficient and free from the task of constantly supplying the insurgents with food, money and supplies. Brigadier Graham considered that this operation might in time make the major Viet Cong base area of Hat Dich untenable. He also felt that the operation had dealt the Viet Cong a psychological blow by showing that their potential and unwilling supporters could be effectively placed under government control without allowing the enemy any opportunity to interfere.

On the evening of 25 September, Private 'Bluey' Ward was doing sentry duty outside the 2 Platoon lines in Nui Dat. He saw a figure and challenged it. Indeed, he challenged the man three times. When he received no response, he fired, wounding the challenged man. Tragically, the soldier was not a foe but Private Michael Green. Colonel Smith supported Private Ward's action; however, in a reflection of the toughness required by battle discipline, he criticised him for not acting after the first challenge.

## **Operation KENMORE**

The purpose of Operation KENMORE (named after the Brisbane suburb), which took place from 30 September to 11 October, was to search for the enemy in the area between the Song Rai and Binh Chau and destroy them. Intelligence information indicated that the area had been used by the Viet Cong for a long period as an area to receive seaborne resupply from North Vietnam. There had not been a ground operation by the Australians in this area. The operation was conducted by both 2 RAR and 7 RAR, with 2 RAR operating to the west of 7 RAR throughout. Fire support was provided from fire bases by 106th Field Battery and 108th Field Battery, with the main fire support base being protected by Headquarters Company 1st Australian Task Force and A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment.

The Commanding Officer's plan was to insert A Company into an intermediate landing zone by helicopter and then move by armoured personnel carriers along the beach



to the area to be searched. The rest of the battalion was then to be flown into a landing zone by a combination of RAAF and US UH-1s and US CH-47 Chinook helicopters.

After it arrived in its allotted search area, 1 Platoon A Company located an occupied enemy camp on the afternoon of 1 October. The camp was occupied by at least seven enemy. It was found because a patrol led by Corporal Spradbrow found fresh tracks and some meat and fish beside a creek. Second Lieutenant Rod Smith manoeuvred the rest of the platoon in a semi-circle to the north of the camp while Corporal Spradbrow's 1 Section crept to the outskirts of the camp and took up fire positions. They saw two Viet Cong moving near a cooking area. Corporal Spradbrow's section opened fire and the enemy were seen to fall. A further enemy rushed from a bunker and swept up one of the wounded enemy and dived over a bank with him to the nearby beach and escaped. The platoon converged on the camp and found seven packs and the body of one Viet Cong, who was the assistant platoon commander of G57, a main force logistic unit responsible for receiving equipment arriving from North Vietnam by sea. Although the tracker team was flown in to follow the other Viet Cong, the dogs lost the scent in a torrential downpour. The company ambushed the camp overnight without contact with the enemy. The camp, which had bunkers sufficient for 40, was destroyed the next day. Close searching on 3 October found a cache of 600 lb of rice about 300 m from the camp.

3 Platoon A Company had an unusual find in the late morning of 1 October: a small camp 11 km south-east of Xuyen Moc with decayed shelters, some fishing gear, toys – and a bowler hat. They irreverently suggested to the Battalion Command Post that the hat should be given to Shell Drake (the appointment title indicating the Battery Commander of 106th Field Battery) – Major Evard Cape. On the morning of 4 October, two enemy walked into the A Company firm base and were shot and killed instantly by Private Jeff Kirkman, a machine gunner in 3 Platoon, who opened fire when the enemy had approached to within 20 m of his position. The enemy were local guerillas from the Xuyen Moc District Company.

Six days later three Viet Cong walked into an ambush set by 2 Platoon A Company 5 km south-east of Xuyen Moc. The machine gunner of 5 Section, Private Gordon McCall, saw them about 60 m away and let them approach to 15 m before opening fire. His burst of fire killed two of them and a third was seen to be wounded and flee. The platoon commander, Lieutenant Ian Gay, called in the tracker team and followed the trail. The next day 1 Platoon and the tracker team continued to follow up, but the enemy walked into a 9 Platoon C Company patrol and was killed when he was fired on by Lance Corporal Ron Thomas. The soldier was identified as the inspector for the Province Current Affairs Committee.

On the afternoon of the next day, the sentry from 7 Section of 3 Platoon heard noises near their position 5 km south-east of Xuyen Moc. When Corporal Peter Sanderson went to investigate, he fired at a Viet Cong and wounded her in the hip. Corporal Sanderson captured the wounded Viet Cong who was evacuated to

8th Field Ambulance at Nui Dat for treatment. She was the leader of the *Xuyen Moc Women's Association Cadre*.

The tension and excitement affected the results of some contacts with the enemy. Private Guy Watkins of D Company described a contact on 9 October when his platoon had ambushed the approaches to a village:

*A listening post pulled the string to advise the ambush of VC approaching down the track. [The ambush's] first reaction was to throw grenades and then to open fire. After the contact was over no kills (but plenty of blood). Someone made the remark that the grenades did not go off. We had forgotten to take the tape off the [striker lever] handles. Spent the rest of the night looking for the pins.*

After Operation KENMORE, the Commanding Officer emphasised that well laid ambushes were the best way to kill the enemy. He pointed out that ambush skills are only optimised after very considerable training and that this subject should be emphasised more in Australia. He also noted that the enemy were more tied to movement on tracks than we were, because, as a rule, they did not have the skills or the maps and compasses to navigate through the jungle. Once the track system in an area was understood, it could be extensively ambushed and the enemy's means of movement would become denied to them.

Press reports after this operation quoted the 'jubilant' Task Force Commander as saying:

*The operations we have conducted this year have put a logistic stranglehold on the Viet Cong which he will not be able to break. Charlie may take time to admit it, but he is virtually finished in Phuoc Tuy Province. He has lost the people and resources and without these he cannot live.*

On 20 October command of the Task Force changed from Brigadier Graham to Brigadier Ron Hughes. Brigadier Hughes had been Colonel Smith's company commander in the 2/3rd Battalion AIF at the end of World War II. While he was decisive when it was needed, he was a commander who left the detailed planning of 'how to get on with the war' to his battalion commanders.

On 21 October B Company, which was involved in a three day company operation called MAROUBRA, found an improvised minefield consisting of about 22 re-used US cluster bombs that the Viet Cong had set up 5 km north-west of Hoa Long near the Chau Pha river. The minefield had been laced with glass to increase its effect. The company blew the 22 mines with engineer help and without any casualties being suffered.

At the end of October, soldiers in the battalion were issued with a new and lighter style of Australian jungle green uniform. It was not mosquito proof and was not universally liked. Private Ross Jack wrote: 'Were issued with 2 sets new J greens. They are dumb. Skin tight in legs, baggy round hips and long crutch. The 3rd intakes were not issued with them'.



- 1** ABOVE: Members of the Assault Pioneer Platoon (with their cased mine detectors) take a break during Operation AINSLIE.  
AWM P01979.003

- 2** RIGHT: Two soldiers from D Company on patrol during Operation COBURG.  
(AWM EKT/68/0083/VN)







**3** ABOVE: A careful check of dead Viet Cong following successful ambushing during Operation COBURG. (AWM CRO/68/92/VN)

**4** BELOW: Soldiers from the Fire Assault Platoon moving along Luscombe Field prior to transfer by helicopter at the start of Operation COBURG. *Left to right:* Corporal Bill Fogarty with self loading rifle, M79 and cylinder on his pack which is a round for the 90 mm RCL; Private Russ Hollings with a self loading rifle and one RCL round under his pack; Private Stephen Craig; Lance Corporal Robert Hite; and Corporal Kevin Hawkins. (AWM P1539/02)





**5** Corporal Trent Grail (Assault Pioneer Platoon) leading the lone wounded Viet Cong survivor of an ambush during Operation COBURG. Captain Don Gillies is in the background.  
(AWM P01798.001)





**6 ABOVE:**  
Troops from B Company  
race to unload rations  
during Operation  
COOPAROO.  
(AWM COL/67/528/VN)

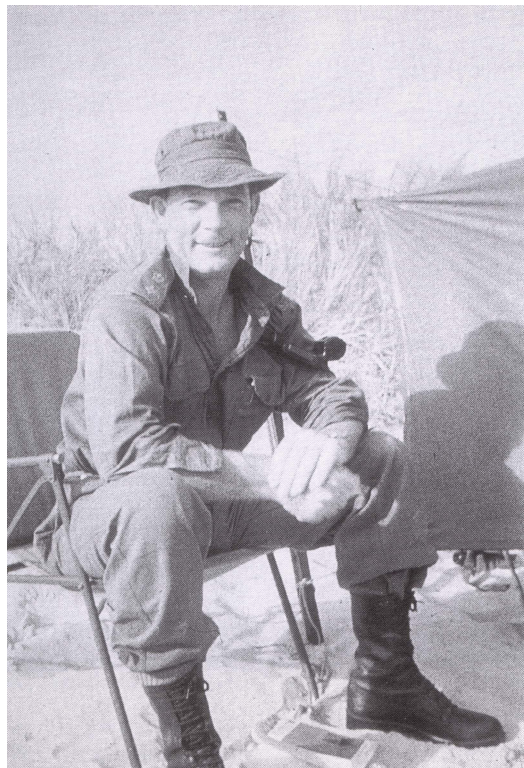


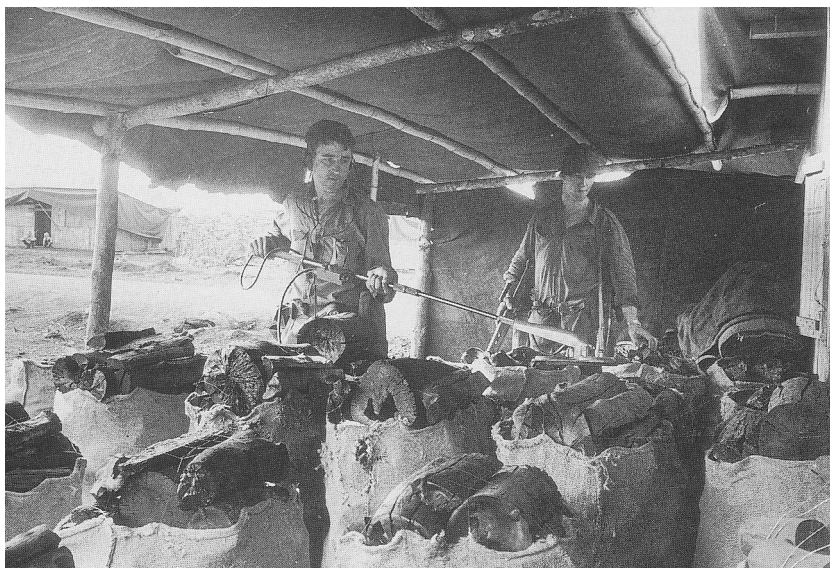
**7 LEFT:**  
A pause during Operation  
COOPAROO in June 1967  
in a rubber plantation.  
(AWM COL.1053.VN)



- 8** ABOVE:  
Soldiers being landed  
from US Army  
Chinooks on  
Operation SANTA FE  
in late October 1967.  
(AWM COL.1053.VN)

- 9** RIGHT:  
Lieutenant Colonel  
Eric Smith directing  
Operation LEETON.  
(AWM P1706/007)





**10** ABOVE:  
Bags of charcoal being  
carefully checked with a  
mine detector for hidden  
articles and booby traps by  
assault pioneers Corporal  
Trevor Bourke (left) and  
Private Lawrie Hughes  
during Operation  
DANDENONG.  
(AWM SKE/68/201/VN)



**11** LEFT:  
A signaller on patrol ?á  
Private 'Darkie' Butler of  
the Mortar Platoon. The  
painting is by the Official  
War Artist, Bruce Fletcher.  
(AWM 40563)



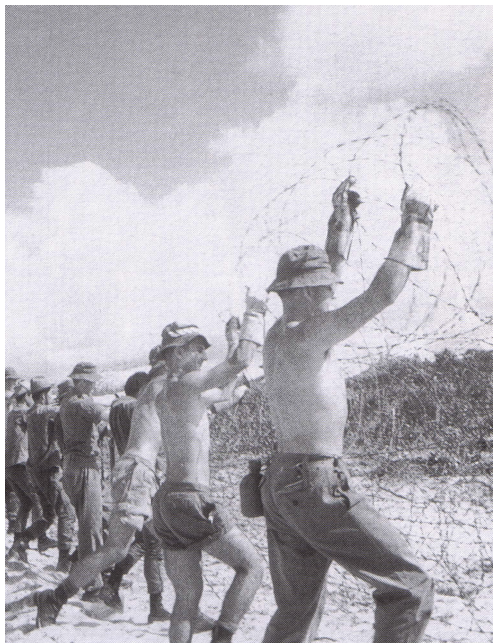


## 12 ABOVE:

Two Viet Cong captured during a fire fight by troops of 2 RAR/NZ and Support Company 7 RAR against a Viet Cong force during a search of the village of Hoa Long. The prisoner on the right is held by Corporal Chris O'Neil and the prisoner on the left is held by Private 'Dinger' Bell of the Fire Assault Platoon.  
(AWM CAM/68/144/VN)

## 13 RIGHT:

Members of 5 Platoon, B Company and South Vietnamese soldiers constructing the barbed wire perimeter fence along the minefield which ran between the Horseshoe and Phuoc Hai.  
(AWM P1582/002)





**14** Tracker dog Justin gets a cooling off from his handler, Private Tom Blackhurst, during Operation SANTA FE.  
(AWM SKE/67/1139/VN)

There were many delays to soldiers' mail in October. One contribution to *Smith's Weekly* read:

*From the seven-day week diggers in Vietnam to the 'go-slow' postal workers in Sydney. Thank you very much for holding up the mail in your efforts to get a five-day working week. It is our sincere hope that your working hours are cut back even further – let's say to about one hour per week – just enough to draw your unemployment relief pay, you bludging b—s!*

A later postal 'go slow' in February 1968 prompted the printing of a small leaflet in the Task Force which read:

**SOLDIERS OF AUSTRALIA!**

**UNITE AGAINST PMG STRIKES!**

**PUNCH A POSTIE ON RTA**

**SOCK IT TO 'EM DIGGERS!**

## **OPERATION SANTA FE**

In Operation SANTA FE (27 October to 16 November), described as a search and kill operation, 1st Australian Task Force combined with US forces (Headquarters 9th Division, Headquarters 9th Division Artillery, Headquarters of 1st Brigade of 9th Division, one infantry battalion, one mechanised battalion (the 3/5th Cavalry), part of 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, a company of Special Forces and a land clearing team) and a regiment from 18th Division of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. The operation covered the Viet Cong area named the May Tao Secret Zone; the 1st Australian Task Force portion was the south-west of that area, including the abandoned village of Thua Tich. 7 RAR's part in the operation included the securing of two fire support patrol bases (WILTON and LION) and searching the allotted area of operations for the enemy.

In this operation A Company, together with A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment, was tasked to secure WILTON from 27 October to 2 November. The remainder of the battalion was flown into WILTON, 4 km east of Binh Gia, by US CH-47 Chinook helicopters and proceeded on foot to search allotted areas in Area of Operations SWORDFISH with a view to securing LION at Thua Tich by 2 November. SWORDFISH was bounded in the south by Route 327 and in the east by Route 330. The western and northern boundaries were the Suoi Tam Bo and the Song Rai. After the securing of LION, the battalion was to continue to search in areas of operations OCTOPUS and GROPER. Battalion Headquarters was deployed into the field and was protected by the Fire Assault and Assault Pioneer Platoons.

This was the first time the battalion (less A Company) had been substantially deployed by CH-47 Chinook helicopters. This was achieved in fourteen lifts by four Chinooks, with typical loads of 33 soldiers.

At 0945 hours on 1 November, 7 Platoon C Company was patrolling towards Thua Tich when it came under fire from its front. Corporal 'Doc' Savage described a lucky escape:

*We shook out with Jock Henderson on my left. We moved forward cautiously when all of a sudden, out of the grass popped this VC. He aimed his Thompson sub-machinegun at Jock. Before he could react there was the deafening sound of a bolt going forward on an empty chamber.*

The enemy escaped. At the same time, Second Lieutenant Kevin Lewis's 9 Platoon had sent a reconnaissance party out from the company harbour 500 m south of Thua Tich. It spotted a group of six enemy about 400 m distant. The platoon moved towards the enemy and fired on them, killing one of them and capturing his Thompson sub-machine gun.

Lieutenant Peter McGuinness's 4 Platoon had a brush with the enemy 2 km south-west of Thua Tich; on the same day Private Ross Jack described it:

*It was 11.45. We had moved 500 [metres], hit a track and Warren Madden heard a noise to the front – saw bushes move. Signalled enemy and we crept forward. Found a bunker, freshly dug. Lt McGuinness decided on ambush. Warren saw a naked man creeping towards the camp. Nog spotted [Max] Menzies and ran. Warren fired as he ran but only to speed him up. No chance of hitting him with Fl. 12.20. Ken [Wright] was trying to sleep. John [Grove] was asleep. Idiots! Yogi [Jeff Behrend] signalled to me – movements, footsteps. I had heard them also. Just then the Nogs (2) came into view. 10 ft from Yogi and CLUNK! went the gun. [Darryl] Tinker (new reo) (week old) put off 15 rounds immediately while Jeff [Behrend] carried out IA [immediate action drill] 15 rounds and downed both of them. A split second later Ken and I opened up but they were already riddled.*

Lieutenant McGuinness said:

*When we saw 20 sets of freshly laundered clothing hanging out to dry, we expected to see some naked VC close by. The man we saw must have seen the ambush and ducked back behind the tree then made off as the digger opened up. We are wondering how the rest of his party are faring because we burned the clothes before we left the camp.*

Some of the important documents captured indicated a critical shortage of both food and manpower for the Viet Cong in Ba Bien (the enemy name for the provinces of Phuoc Tuy and Bien Hoa). Another Viet Cong Directive revealed serious shortcomings on the part of enemy units in Phuoc Tuy and surrounding provinces that had resulted in the defection of Viet Cong soldiers. This was 'adversely affecting the political standpoint of the populace which had ceased to have absolute confidence in cadres, combatants and guerillas'.

In the early hours of 2 November 7 Platoon C Company's ambush, 200 m from Jock Henderson's contact the previous day, was sprung. Corporal Savage described what occurred:

*At 0100 hrs we were awakened by the sound of ox carts approaching. They were approaching from our left along an old unused road (Route 330). Myself and Smarty (my machine gunner) plus Dave Willis were on the right flank of the ambush. At 0115 hrs the first oxcart was alongside me when the ambush was sprung. The first enemy, being only three feet from me, was thrown out of his cart by my first burst. The enemy that had been in the second cart took off and ran the gauntlet of the whole ambush. I was changing magazines when he ran past me. Smarty's machinegun blew the back of the guide rod off and jammed, so I directed Dave to get him. He fired one round and his rifle jammed . . . On checking the body of the VC he was wearing a belt with a buckle made out of an artillery shell. I still wear it now and again to remind me of how lucky Jock had been on 1st November.*

One Viet Cong body and two weapons were found, together with both ox carts and four dead oxen.

On the morning of 2 November the platoons of D Company approached the village of Thua Tich on separate routes. 10 Platoon's route took it along a track beside quite a substantial running creek. The Platoon Commander, Second Lieutenant Dave Webster told what happened during his first contact:

*The track was well worn and we were not far from the now deserted ruins of the village. It dropped quite steeply into the thickly wooded creek bed. The lead section had followed the track and were down into the creek when shots were fired at them. The forward section returned the fire. My initial reaction was to fire into the creek area to the right of the forward section in the direction of the enemy fire. I then realised that the platoon required some direction if something other than returning the enemy's fire was to be accomplished. I brought the second section in line past me and along the river bank to fire into the area of the enemy position. Willie Wilson brought the rear section up behind me. I then ordered the lead section to sweep down the creek covered by the section on the bank. During the sweep we encountered four people – two children and two elderly adults. The children, a boy and a girl, would have been about 10 and 12 years old, the adults in their late 50s. The girl at one point ran screaming into a cave in the river bank. The blonde-haired medic [Private Richards] bravely ran into the cave without concern for his own safety to retrieve the girl and carried her out in his arms. She had an M16 wound in her left shoulder and within what seemed to be a few minutes she was dead. The boy also died but I do not recall his injuries. While searching the river we came across the elderly woman lying in the water –*

*her leg had almost been severed just below the knee by a bullet – most likely from an SLR or M60. The elderly man was lying badly wounded on the river bank.*

*The wounded VC were carried to an open area and prepared for evacuation by helicopter. We had thrown smoke to mark our position for the chopper and the aircraft was approaching when a member of the platoon trod on a booby trap and it went off with a muffled bang giving off a fair amount of brown smoke. This smoke was seen by the chopper pilot who veered away seeking clarification of the situation on the LZ. The sympathy which some members of the platoon felt for the VC group diminished somewhat at the thought of what might have occurred had the booby trap worked. Investigation showed that it was formed by two pieces of wood each about 2' wide and 5" long joined by a hinge. Fixed to the bottom piece of wood was a bomblet from a cluster bomb unit (CBU). The top piece had a nail driven through it such that anyone standing on the top piece of wood would push the nail into the detonator on the CBU. The booby trap device had worked correctly but the bomblet did not explode properly. The LZ was searched for further signs of booby traps and was found to be clear. The wounded VC were then placed on board. When I placed my hand under the right buttock of the elderly male VC to lift him into the helicopter I realised the extent of his injuries. A bullet had hit him from the front in the area of the pelvis and blown his buttock away. He later died of wounds. Two dead children were buried in shallow graves on the bank above the caves that had been their home. Luckily no one in the platoon had suffered any injury.*

*The incident, which was 10 Platoon's first contact, left a sour taste in everyone's mouth. It also had a profound effect on some members of the platoon – especially Cpl 'Rock' Harris. We had killed two children and an old man and had, in effect, severed the leg of an old woman. None of the VC casualties were armed. They were members of what the VC called a family production cell. It was one of those unfortunate incidents which always accompany wars – especially dirty counter-insurgency wars. We did not initiate the contact nor did we act improperly. No one aimed at or saw unarmed children or old people. They were found after the shooting had stopped and the area was being searched. This VC family were unfortunate casualties of a difficult conflict.*

Lieutenant Webster saw the old woman who had had one of her legs amputated sitting on the verandah of the 36th Evacuation Hospital when he went to visit members of his platoon wounded on Operation FORREST in mid-December.

On 4 November, a D Company clearing patrol close to the gun area in Fire Support Patrol Base LION saw about four Viet Cong hiding in the grass about 30 m from the perimeter. Although the area was subjected to small arms fire, no further sign of the Viet Cong was found. During that night, two enemy claymore mines were detonated inside the wire in the 108th Field Battery sleeping area. Their detonation had

been timed to coincide with an harassing fire mission by 106th Field Battery in the adjacent position. Gunner Barry Tregear died of wounds that he had sustained. The fire support base patrol was subjected to a mortar attack on 5 November, and was probed from three directions. All mortar rounds fell outside the perimeter and there were no friendly casualties suffered. There were signs that several enemy remained outside the perimeter for most of the night carrying out reconnaissance tasks, although none was found by the clearing patrols the following morning.

Two days later A and C Companies were airlifted to an area 4 km west of Thua Tich (which had been secured by the Fire Assault and Assault Pioneer Platoons). They continued their search of the area of operations. Before midday on 7 November, at a location about 2 km north, 8 Platoon C Company engaged and killed three Viet Cong and captured four weapons, five packs and a large quantity of documents. There was an east – west track in the area of the contact and 8 Platoon followed it carefully. The forward scout, Private Leon Fitzsimmons, heard a cough. When his section had deployed, Lance Corporal 'Massa' Clarke saw one enemy soldier lying in a bed. When the rest of the platoon had moved towards this man, a further Viet Cong was seen in a hut and engaged with a machine gun by Private Peter Stapleton. A large unoccupied bunker system was found 600 m north of the contact area. It was later destroyed by the Assault Pioneer Platoon and a combat engineer team flown in to assist them.

Corporal 'Doc' Savage wrote about what happened to 7 Platoon C Company on 7 November:

*I am sitting in the middle of an enemy bunker system. At 0800 hrs this morning, we started our day's patrol. At 1040 hrs we came under fire from 3 to 5 VC in a bunker system to our front. We immediately went into our contact front drill and started sweeping forward. The fire–fight was brief and lasted only about 20 minutes, resulting in 3 VC KIA, 1 Thompson submachinegun, 1 M1 carbine, 1 AK47 and 1 BAR captured. The system is a battalion–sized camp with over 100 bunkers and 100 metres of trench. In the area we have found 3 M26 grenades, 9 BAR mags, 4 Thompson mags, 440 rounds of assorted ammo and a 500 lb bomb with the explosive removed. We also found some mines. The camp was booby trapped. I had an 'A' frame for my pack, something that I didn't usually carry. I dropped my pack by sitting with my back to a tree, then releasing the straps. I then went to search the camp area. We found 3 M16 mines set up. These were deloused. After that I sent Barry Brown to get my pack. He came back white as a ghost. Between the two spikes of my 'A' frame was a mortar round set up as a booby trap. Without the 'A' frame my pack would have set it off.*

On the following day in the A Company area, 1 Platoon killed a Viet Cong and captured his M79 6 km west of Thua Tich. The company also found an unoccupied camp



4 km west of Thua Tich with two weapons, documents, food and clothing. The next day a cache was found 4 km north–north–west of Thua Tich that apparently belonged to a Viet Cong entertainment group. It contained a violin, flags, stage materials, costumes, film and photo albums.

In the late afternoon of 8 November C Company Headquarters, which had been following a telephone cable, found an occupied Viet Cong hut 3 km north–west of Thua Tich. Two Viet Cong were killed but a third escaped. This find led to a bunker system 200 m away with telephone wires radiating south–east, south–west and north–north–east from it, indicating its importance. There were twelve bunkers, six fighting pits, five tunnels and four graves in the complex, as well as nine huts, some equipped for living, while others were set up as kitchens, a tailor shop and medical huts. A large quantity of medical supplies, three weapons and many other items of equipment were found. During the contact there was a bizarre exchange with the enemy. Private Jack of 4 Platoon recorded that:

*While Charlie Company were in contact with the enemy at a large camp, a phone began ringing in one of the bunkers. The Viet interpreter went down, answered it and said 'How is the war going your end?' – 'Not too bad, who am I talking to, the Uc Da Loi [Australians]?' – 'Yes, Interpreter for the Uc Da Loi. I think you all better Chieu Hoi. There are enough of us Uc Da Lois to finish you all off' – 'That's all right, there are enough of us to handle ourselves!' With that the phone was hung up the Cong end. Cool and calm for the Nog to talk like that, but then he probably thought he was pretty safe at the end of the phone. Apparently he was ringing for ammo supplies for that particular bunker was an ordnance and supply dugout. C Coy got two kills, the CSM getting one of them.*

The enemy struck aggressively at A Company 6 km north–north–west of Thua Tich on 10 November. The platoon commander of 2 Platoon, Lieutenant Ian Gay, told what occurred:

*I believe the whole thing started the night before. We were in a harbour that was quite tight even for jungle conditions . . . Later on that night, it was reported to me that the sentry on one of the guns thought he had heard movement to his front. I went out to the gun and spoke to the sentry who was Pte Hulin. We both listened and no doubt there was some sort of shuffling noise out there. However it was raining, the noises were of a quite indistinct nature and could easily have been pigs. I told Pte Hulin to keep listening and not to fire the gun. (He almost jumped down my throat when I said this, asking whether I was stupid or something.) I told him to let me know if he could be sure that it was trouble out there. I think that all of this happened at about 2200 hours. The remainder of the night passed peacefully.*

Next morning, A Company found a camp which contained propaganda material



including documents, posters, flags and pamphlets. There were two booby traps in the camp, but they were found and carefully neutralised by engineers during the search. Lieutenant Gay continued:

*The next morning the OC, Jake O'Donnell, had been given the task of following an enemy signal wire that we had located the day before . . . Later, Jake ordered me to send out half of my platoon on a patrol under the command of my Platoon Sergeant, Tom Bourke. Tom gave his patrol briefing and duly set off perhaps at 1100–1200 hours. I have no idea who he took out on patrol with him, except that being half the platoon, there would have been 10 or 11 men. Average platoon strength on operations was about 24 by the time you allowed for people on R&R, sick, courses etc.*

*At about 1220 hours, I was told by CHQ that our task to follow the signal line was cancelled. I called in the remaining section commanders to let them know. One of them was Gordon Treadrea. We, about four of us, I suppose, were standing near my HQ when the mine went off.*

Private Pat 'Coges' Cogan, who had been sheltering under a hutchie waiting for the rain to stop, turned to his mate and said, 'What's that?' His mate just lay there, dead, with a shrapnel hole in his forehead.

Lieutenant Gay continued:

*I remember a clear sequence. First I felt a pain in my right thigh then I was blown off my feet and then I heard the noise of the explosion. There was immediately a lot of yelling and screaming. I looked at my greens which were wet and dark from the rain and saw a darker patch spreading on my right thigh. I slipped my pants down and saw a one centimetre thick surge of blood which was pumping out about 30 centimetres from my leg. My first reaction was to shove my thumb into the wound which was only a centimetre or so in diameter. I just laid there with my thumb in my leg for a while, I don't know how long, probably only a minute or two, in a state of shock.*

*The medic came along and said something like 'Are you all right Skip?' I said 'No, I've been hit in the leg' or something like that and showed him the wound. He said, very cheerfully, 'Oh, we'll soon fix that!' which I found very comforting as I still wasn't too sure that I was going to be all right. With that he put a tight field dressing over the wound, put a second one over it to be sure and went off to help the other wounded.*

A bicycle wheel-sized Viet Cong claymore had been exploded about 45 m from the platoon perimeter. Of those wounded,<sup>1</sup> George Cossey, a solid 1.8 m man, was particularly serious. Private Jack Doulis and Staff Sergeant Wally Brown (the A Company Quartermaster Sergeant) were among those who visited him in 36th (US) Evacuation Hospital Vung Tau after SANTA FE. He seemed to be 'an emaciated skeleton' and they doubted whether he would survive. But they were pleasantly

surprised when they saw him at the 'Welcome Home' parade in Sydney in 1987 and he had fully recovered.

In common with all casualties, Lieutenant Gay's next-of-kin (his parents) received a telegram. It read:

*NOT SERIOUSLY OR VERY SERIOUSLY ILL STOP IT IS LEARNED WITH REGRET THAT YOUR SON 235289 LIEUTENANT IAN MAXWELL GAY HAS BEEN WOUNDED IN ACTION ON 10TH NOVEMBER 1967 AT PHUOC TUY PROVINCE VIETNAM AND EVACUATED TO 36 EVACUATION HOSPITAL VUNG TAU STOP HIS CONDITION IS SATISFACTORY STOP IF A CHANGE OF CONDITION OCCURS YOU WILL BE NOTIFIED IMMEDIATELY*

*ARMY HEADQUARTERS*

One of the typewritten propaganda Viet Cong leaflets in English and Vietnamese found in the camp read (with the mistakes included):

*AUSTRALIAN SERVICEMAN IN SOUTH VIETNAM*

*Here's something for you to think out:*

*Who destroys your happiness makes you far from your sweet home?*

*Who brings hardship, infirmity, death to bear on you?*

*—Is it the Vietnamese people? surely not!*

*—It's Johnson—McNamara and Co who kindle this dirty war of aggression, who send you here as gun-fodder for their interests!*

*Now more and more Australian an American servicemen have seen through it. It's why a good many among you repeatedly staged anti-war acts.*

*—OPPOSE THE U.S. AGGRESSIVE WAR IN SVN!*

*—DEMAND IMMEDIATE REPATRIATION!*

There was not a rush for repatriation! Such leaflets were not effective propaganda by the Viet Cong: they were only a source of amusement and good souvenirs.

In the early morning of 11 November, Private Guy Watkins of D Company was going out to relieve a listening post when he was fired on and wounded. He returned the fire. It was later found that he had been fired on by the listening post of another platoon. He was wounded in his right knee. His leg was later amputated above the knee. Despite this, he still considers that all his 86 days in Vietnam were exciting and enjoyable.

On 13 November, there was a further booby trap incident, again involving A Company, 7 km north of Thua Tich. The forward scout of the leading platoon, Private Des Goodwin, tripped an M26 grenade rigged as a trap. He immediately took cover behind a tree and suffered only minor shrapnel wounds when the grenade exploded.

He showed great presence of mind. He was lucky that the grenade had not been fitted with an instantaneous fuse. Further animal traps and snares were found during the operation. One snare caught the leg of Sapper Geoffrey Russell (an attached engineer) and hoisted him 3 m off the ground. Some bear traps were over 1 m deep and concealed with thin covers of sticks and leaves.

The report made by the battalion after the operation mentioned several health concerns. It made the rather pained point that, as had been stated in the report on BROKEN HILL, mosquitoes were able to bite through issued uniform clothing. This was even more of a problem on this operation as a new type of combat uniform clothing, of even thinner cloth, had been first issued. The hazard to health of destroying enemy camps (35 were destroyed on this operation) was also emphasised. In many cases 'troops are rained on, required to cross water obstacles and occupy lying ambush positions in lice and vermin infested enemy camps'. Clothing was changed when it could be, but often torn clothing was worn for days, exposing soldiers to dirt from digging-in as well as ticks, leeches and thorns and the high consequent risk of infection. As a result of these conditions, about 30 members of A Company, including its company commander, were suffering from malaria and other fevers by the beginning of the next operation. Medical authorities at first suspected that they had not taken their Paludrine tablets or observed the other standard anti-malarial precautions. The soldiers were all adamant that they had.

RAAF Iroquois were used more extensively on this operation than previously. They performed the full range of administrative, movement and evacuation tasks. In the eighteen days of this operation, aircraft evacuated 60 medical casualties (nicknamed OTTERSKIN) and eleven battle casualties (CREPEMESH). Relationships with the RAAF had improved considerably during this operation. The report concluded that: 'The RAAF is to be congratulated on a fine performance. All tasks were undertaken and successfully carried out in an efficient and professional manner'.

Brigadier Hughes, the newly appointed Task Force Commander, concluded that,

*The operation was run smoothly. The troops were thorough and performed their tasks well . . . Our operations have not denied the area to the VC because he was free to return after our withdrawal, but he is faced with a major task in restoring this logistic area if he does wish to return.*

The break in operations that followed provided a welcome rest for most of the battalion. On 18 November, a concert party, the Queensland Show, played at Luscombe Bowl. There was great relaxation and therapeutic value in these concerts. Soldiers got their most poignant reminders of home. They certainly appreciated the performers but also the Australian Forces Overseas Fund and its Returned Services

League supporters who provided these concerts. Nearly every soldier still has a soft spot for those who had the courage to perform for them in Vietnam.

## **OPERATION FORREST**

Operation FORREST was aimed at denying rice supplies to the Viet Cong in the 1st Australian Task Force tactical area of operational responsibility, close to the Nui Dat base and west of Route 2. 2 RAR had a similar area of operations east of Route 2. The rice harvest in Phuoc Tuy extended from December to early January. This was a period when the Viet Cong would make a major effort to obtain a year's rice supply by extortion so that their caches could be stocked for the wet season. It was known that the enemy units were particularly short of rice prior to the harvest.

The area of operations was also nicknamed FORREST. The operation took place between 23 November 1967 and 5 January 1968. The operation was planned as a concerted effort by 1st Australian Task Force and it included some subsidiary operations to search the area of operations and destroy enemy assets in it, as well as a series of cordon and searches of villages. The subsidiary Operations OODNADATTA, SHEPPARTON, DIMBOOLA, MELBOURNE, LORNE and LAWLEY were carried out as part of the major operation.

The support to the battalion during the operation was provided by combat engineers from the 1st Field Squadron, a battery of 4th Field Regiment's guns and a Sioux from 161st Reconnaissance Flight. A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment provided armoured personnel carriers when needed and the US airmobile companies and 9 Squadron RAAF provided helicopter support. Vietnamese Army personnel gave assistance to cordon and search operations when it was required.

### **Operation OODNADATTA**

OODNADATTA was the first of a series of sub-operations within FORREST. It involved the cordon and search of Hoa Long, a village of about 5500 people, on 24 November. The aim of the operation was to ensure that the villagers only held reasonable stocks of rice. 106th Field Battery covered the deployment of the cordon for the operation. It then was dismounted and assisted in the search of the village. There was no contact with the enemy but nine suspects were detained within the village. The techniques learned in this cordon and search formed the pattern for the similar operations carried out later in FORREST.

On 26 November, elements of the Mortar Platoon were located in a Vietnamese Army outpost north of Nui Dat. They received incoming enemy mortar and small arms fire. Private Philip "Gift" Gifford was plotting the target to engage the enemy baseplate when he was wounded by shrapnel. He continued at his post, describing the contact in this way:

*As we received incoming fire – the smell of gunpowder & smoke & dust was incredible – after being wounded I didn't tell anyone until we had given the enemy a good pounding back and then I realised there was blood all over the plotting board. I was very fortunate as a direct hit would have meant curtains as I was sitting in a tiny place with 400 high explosive mortar rounds.*

### **The D and B Company action against the *Chau Duc District Company***

The second phase of Operation FORREST for the battalion was an attack on an enemy base camp about 12 km south-west of Nui Dat on the afternoon of 27 November. A five man SAS patrol had found the camp and observed it for three days from 15 November without being detected. They gave a detailed description of the camp and reported that it was occupied by between fifteen and twenty Viet Cong. The camp had three tracks leading from it, from the east, south and west and there was a disused logging track 200 metres north of the camp. It appeared to the SAS that the camp was a good target for a surprise ground attack. The SAS Squadron was concerned that the Task Force had not often followed up its reports of occupied camps. The SAS was understandably sceptical about whether the camp would still be occupied, although the battalion was, in contrast, enthusiastic to be able to react to such 'fresh' intelligence.

The Officer Commanding B Company (Major Des Mealey) described his orders group:

*I gave my orders to an expanded O group which, in addition to B Company members, included the FO, MFC [mortar fire controller], SAS guide, NCO in charge of the engineer Splinter Team and a liaison officer from D Company. The Battalion Intelligence Officer gave the intelligence briefing. I remember that the orders took longer than normal – approximately 50 minutes. It was done at Nui Dat, with a colonel observer from Army Headquarters with World War II experience present. Later, he accused me of stage managing the O group for his benefit. It was, he said, 'far too large and far too formal'.*

*I remember thinking at the time that this officer, who had not been without influence in the final selection of officers to be posted to 7 RAR, betrayed the ignorance in Canberra about the way the war was being waged and in particular its technical nature.*

On 26 November the support for the attack was put into position. The Fire Assault Platoon marched 9 km and secured a landing zone while 106th Field Battery moved to a suitable fire support base called ALPHA, 2 km north of Nui Nghe. B and D Companies flew to the landing zone on the next morning and were guided into position by the SAS patrol (which was led by Sergeant Laurie Fraser) that had found

the camp. Second Lieutenant Dave Webster of 10 Platoon D Company described the events leading up to the attack:

*We deployed by helicopter early on the morning of 27 Nov. It was overcast and grey. We were dropped into a swampy clearing and any thoughts of staying dry for at least a little while evaporated when we disembarked from hovering choppers into various depths of water from ankle to waist deep. Once on the ground, the company started the long haul to the area of the camp. The approach march lasted from 0730 to about 1600 and was complicated by map errors (a creek was incorrectly marked) and the SAS guides having difficulty finding the camp and the old logging track which was to be the start line for the attack. It had rained for most of the day and every member of the company was wet through. Despite placing plastic bags (from ration packs) over the radio handsets and securing them with elastic bands (also from ration packs) most of the radios were out of action or only effective over a very short range.*

Lance Corporal Syd Cole described the rain:

*We had marched under the cover of rainfall and the assault was to be a complete surprise. Waiting around in incessant rain would normally have afforded us a certain satisfaction, believing that any sentries they had out would have made themselves comfortable and be too unconcerned to be fully alert. This, of course, was one of the reasons for the Australian's success in SVN: who else walked all day in the steaming rain?*

Lieutenant Webster continued:

*After some adjustment we eventually lined out on the track which formed the start line. 12 Platoon, commanded by 2Lt Jim Slavin, was on the left with 10 Platoon on the right. 11 Platoon (Sgt Donnelly) was depth platoon as well as reserve. The company second-in-command, Captain Tony McGee, and his party also stayed with 11 Platoon. Packs were not to be carried during the assault and had been centrally stacked by 11 Platoon for ease of protection. Company HQ was between the two forward platoons and about 20 metres to the rear. At about 1700 hours in very poor light due to the lateness of the hour and the thick jungle canopy, 10 and 12 Platoons, cold, wet and hungry and each with two sections forward and one in depth, crossed the start line and headed towards the enemy camp. 11 Platoon was to remain in the vicinity of the start line until called forward. The SAS guides, armed with silenced Stirling sub-machine guns, travelled with platoon HQ and assisted with navigation on to the huts and bunkers. During the early stages of the assault we came across the first sign of enemy activity – saplings which had been partially cut through and then bent over parallel with the ground at right angles to the line of assault. They formed a series of hurdles which we were required to step over. They were intended to impede our progress and would have been most effective had we been using*

*fire and movement. The rain had made the ground under-foot very soft and we were able to approach without making much noise and alerting the enemy. The next sign of enemy presence was an unoccupied ammunition point and armoury which we came across during the early stages of the assault.*

*Seven VC were seen at a bunker about 20 metres further into the complex and in front of 12 Platoon. They were engaged by an M60 and three enemy were wounded before the gun operated by Syd Cole stopped firing. The firing pin was bent after firing only 24 rounds. One of the sections then came under heavy fire from the enemy bunkers. Jim Slavin moved his reserve section forward to strengthen his other sections. The closest bunker was then engaged with an M72 killing the two VC who were still occupying it. The second bunker was assaulted using fire and movement. Two VC were engaged and wounded near a third bunker but were dragged away to the south by their comrades. 12 Platoon's assault had carried them into the centre part of the enemy camp and had enabled them to secure a foothold. As the enemy withdrew through the camp they were able to bring effective fire to bear on 12 Platoon from at least three bunkers and an open trench system, pinning down some of the platoon including the Platoon Sergeant, Ron Allan. At one point Jim Slavin, although wounded in the thumb, crawled forward to recover wounded soldiers and drag them to safety.*

Private Doug 'Harry' Harrison of 12 Platoon (who was himself wounded) commented on the tenacity of Second Lieutenant Slavin during this action:

*Our platoon was pinned down by enemy fire. 2Lt Jim Slavin ran forward under fire and opened fire into a bunker, knocking out the machine gun that was doing the damage. Jim's Armalite [M16 rifle] jammed so he grabbed my Armalite and continued to fire.*

At this stage, the Platoon Sergeant of 12 Platoon (Sergeant Ron Allan) saw that the heavy fire had caused casualties to his men. He rushed forward without regard for his safety and began dragging the wounded into the comparative safety of a captured bunker. He thus saved these men from more serious wounds. He then assumed command of his platoon as his officer (Jim Slavin) was one of the wounded. Ron Allan was later awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his bravery in this and a later action. Lieutenant Webster continued:

*There was a short lull in the battle after it appeared that we had gained the centre of the bunker system and the two platoons had organised themselves into a position of all-round protection. We had completed our part of the plan by driving the enemy out and securing the camp. It was up to B Company to ambush the VC trying to escape. Alas, the pause in the battle was short-lived. The enemy, instead of using the track to make good his escape, had moved around behind the two platoons and engaged us from the rear using rifles, machine guns,*

*perhaps M79s and RPGs. The attack came from the area that would have been occupied by 11 Platoon had the principles of the attack been observed and a reserve platoon employed for the assault, This counter-attack by the enemy inflicted most of the 2 KIA and 22 WIA suffered by 10 and 12 Platoons that day. Pte Bryan Cullen died instantly when struck in the forehead by a burst of rifle or machine gun fire when he raised his head and looked over a log to try and get a better look at the attacking enemy. I was standing in the centre of the 10 Platoon area shouting commands to my platoon to try and reorient them to the direction of the enemy counter-attack when a burst of enemy fire aimed in our direction struck Private 'Porky' Hawker, my signaller, who was standing beside me. Either my shouting had attracted the attention of the enemy or they were attracted by the long aerial which was fitted to the radio at the time. The bullets hit him in the temple and in the forearm. He died a short time later. I remember being incensed by this and called out 'they've shot Porky!' I then angrily fired at least a magazine from my M16 into the jungle in the direction of the enemy. I recall the look of anxiety on the bespectacled face of Private 'Julius' Edwards who was lying on the ground just in front of me.*

Bryan Cullen, a champion cyclist and trainee accountant, had served as a clerk in Battalion Headquarters and had recently asked to be posted to a rifle company to see action.

The Second-in-Command, Major Alf Garland, had been observing the battle from the Sioux helicopter. He felt that the enemy had been using tunnels to move behind the attacking force and throw it off balance.

*A series of loud explosions immediately followed in the centre and forward or eastern sections of the combined 10 and 12 Platoon perimeter. The explosions were so close that the blast knocked some soldiers to the ground. I remember thinking that we were being mortared.*

Lieutenant Webster continued:

*The enemy were known to employ a tactic of withdrawing from an occupied position when it was being threatened and moving to and firing mortars which were set up to engage the vacated position. I recall seeing a momentary bright reddish orange glow at the point where the rounds were impacting and detonating. I later realised that the glow was the burning of the tracer flare in the tail of the RPG projectile. The effect of this attack with RPGs was demoralising. Thinking they were mortars and that they were coming straight down through the jungle canopy made it difficult to find a fire position which offered any protection. It did not occur to me to make use of the bunkers we had cleared earlier. After the attack I realised the enemy had deliberately fired the RPGs so as to hit the trees about 6–8 feet above the ground showering the soldiers beneath the*



*point of impact with shrapnel. Apparently elements of Company HQ including a Public Relations officer, Capt Bob Skelton, had sought refuge in a bunker under a hut constructed of logs with a thatched roof. An RPG round passed under the roof and above the heads of the CHQ personnel standing in the bunker, finally detonating when it hit a tree on the perimeter of the company position.*

*The enemy counter-attack ended when the enemy, deterred to some extent by rifle and machine gun fire from the company position, had exhausted his ammunition. Two of the three M60s in 10 Platoon had malfunctioned. I recall seeing the weapons partially stripped in the wet sandy jungle floor with the gunners desperate to find the cause of the stoppages. Had all three M60s been working, perhaps the enemy counter-attack would have been less effective. We were also conscious that by firing back in the direction from which we had just assaulted we may hit 11 Platoon back on the start line. The malfunctioning M60s were replaced the next day with weapons which looked almost new! (Why have new weapons in some Q store and worn weapons out with the platoons?)*

Corporal Cole described the use of the machine guns:

*I began firing short bursts. We had used less than a half a belt [100 rounds] when the gun stopped. I cocked the weapon, opened the cover and went through the stoppage drills. One more shot and again it stopped. By now we were drawing heavy enemy fire. The crack of rounds overhead increased and ominous explosions erupted all round the area. I dropped down behind a mound and began frantically stripping the weapon. Perhaps the damp sand from the ammunition belt had got into the gun and was interfering with the action. A feeling of utter helplessness overtook me as I assembled the gun. Once more it jammed. I tried another belt, cleaned the gun again.*

Lieutenant Webster continued:

*Throughout the action, B Company positions were raked by fire by both D Company and the enemy and small arms fire passed two to three feet overhead for almost an hour and a half. By 1830 hours all firing had ceased and darkness had set in. Only one B Company ambush had been sprung resulting in two VC KIA – all were female camp followers.*

This ambush was mounted by Second Lieutenant Harris's 5 Platoon, 300 m south of the Viet Cong camp. They allowed the enemy to pass almost through their ambush, in case any others were following them. When the bodies were examined, it was found that they were carrying two boxes of documents.

Lieutenant Webster continued:

*Casualties suffered by the two assaulting platoons were of the order of fifty percent – two soldiers had been killed and twenty-two wounded [though some of those who suffered lesser wounds did not report them]. The evacuation of wounded could not wait until morning. About 15 minutes after the battle had*

*ended the first of the DUSTOFF helicopters arrived. A gap had been found in the jungle canopy inside the camp large enough to allow the wounded to be winched into the aircraft. Three aircraft were involved in the evacuation. One hovered over the hole in the canopy with its belly light on to illuminate the evacuation point, one was en route from the hospital to the contact point. The aircraft hovering over the position did so with lights on and did not move away until another aircraft had moved into position behind it so that the hole in the canopy would not be lost. 13 of the 24 casualties (those with the most serious wounds) were evacuated between 1845 and 2230 hours with the remainder being evacuated the following day.*

*Treatment of the wounded was carried out by the unit RMO who was winched into the position in the first DUSTOFF aircraft. The seventy feet trip down through the wet jungle canopy in the glare of the Huey belly light must have been a nightmare. The 10 Platoon medic, Pte Alf 'Doc' Hawken, although wounded in the groin by shrapnel, assisted in treating the casualties as did the 12 Platoon medic Private John Pettigrove. The SAS troopers also assisted. The evacuation point was controlled by the company medic, Cpl 'Mick' Fahy.*

The SAS troopers had been trained as medics and, unlike the battalion medics at that stage, carried saline solution. Indeed, the RMO subsequently trained battalion medics in the use of saline solutions and those at company level carried them in later operations.

Corporal Cole described his feelings:

*Seeing the forward scout and one or two more out of a platoon of 20 odd men, we could only manage a diffident grin which largely concealed what we felt: the vague astonishment that we had actually come through it. Later, the exchange of reports – yeah, Johnny Cowan's OK – piece of shrapnel in his leg – poor old Porky, killed in his first op after getting rid of the [machine] gun – somewhat draws the survivors together; the catalyst which forges the deep affection which men feel for their comrades in these circumstances.*

RAAF Dustoff commenced to remove the wounded by winching them out at 1845 and continued until all thirteen were evacuated by 2225 hours.<sup>2</sup> The first RAAF helicopter on the scene was flown by Flight Lieutenant Bob Thompson of 9 Squadron. He told a reporter:

*Conditions were bad. We were flying in heavy rain with a cloud base only 200 feet from ground level. Communications with the ground forces were a problem, but we finally found a smoke beacon from them and went in. There were real problems finding the landing area as the ground troops were out of flares*

*[smoke grenades]. However an Army pilot in a Bell Sioux helicopter was hovering in the area and gave us the direction to get in. He was a fantastic help all night.*

*Then we found another problem. It was too dark to hover without light – but we were getting machine gun fire across the nose of the aircraft and did not want to turn the lights on. Finally we were forced to turn the lights on. We winched out the first man and flew to the US 36 Evacuation Hospital in Vung Tau.*

The Company Commander of D Company later commended the Dustoff pilots for their tenacity, skill and courage under fire. They were assisted by the RMO, Captain Tony Williams, who was lowered by winch in total darkness to attend the wounded on the ground. It took five efforts to find the canopy hole: each time he was lowered so that his feet touched the trees. It was not generally known that he suffered from severe fear of heights.

Major Garland had been airborne in Sioux helicopters during the contact: he had to employ three pilots in succession as their flying hour limit had been reached. The Second-in-Command now hovered above the evacuation site in the direct support Sioux helicopter mentioned by the RAAF crew, which was skilfully piloted by Captain John Coggan so that the small hole for winching could be lined up by successive Dustoff helicopters. The Sioux was later replaced by the intense illumination provided by a US Air Force 'Spooky' (a Dakota fitted with a powerful searchlight). This was the first occasion that the battalion had used this type of illumination.

Lieutenant Webster continued:

*At about 2300 hours the company stood down and commenced the normal picket system.*

*On the morning of 28 Nov 67 groaning was heard to come from deep within one of the bunkers. Company members occupying the bunker leapt smartly from the entrance on hearing the groaning. Options for putting an end to the source of the noise were then considered. There were no volunteers to crawl into the bunker and drag the VC out. A grenade would be too noisy so it was eventually decided that the SAS troopers with their silenced 9 mm sub-machine guns would fire a 30 round magazine into the interior of the bunker before someone would enter and retrieve the VC. This was duly completed and the dead enemy recovered. A grenade had been tossed into the same bunker during the assault the previous evening. The effect of the blast on the enemy was clearly visible. Six other VC bodies were recovered in the bunker system the following day and buried in the open trench system from which they had been fighting the day before.*

The entire approach march and attack by the infantry, the fire-fight and the evacuation had all been carried out in torrential rain. The total friendly casualties suffered, beside those killed, were 22 wounded, one severely. Nine men were not

immediately aware of their wounds and were evacuated the following afternoon. The company commander felt that classing all men as wounded, whether they were severe gunshots or a small piece of shrapnel in a thumb, produced statistics that were not representative of the facts. One soldier wounded in the contact had the tip of a vital part of his anatomy shot away. He sent an expressive card to his mates when he had recovered from the wound. Its two words were, 'It works!'.

The camp had been occupied by at least 25 Viet Cong of the *Chau Duc District Company*. They fought from about six of the bunkers and the communication trenches linking them. The intensity of the fight was probably caused by the enemy realisation that they were trapped. The onset of darkness allowed them to slip away through the jungle. Among the large quantity of equipment captured in the camp were two machine guns, an 82 mm mortar and over 70 000 piastres.

In one of those bizarre aspects of this war, the battalion was showing the film *Hawaii* at Nui Dat while the contact was occurring. Soldiers could walk outside the theatre to see the lights and hear the noise of the helicopters over the battle area, then go back to watch the movie.

The story of Private Bryan Cullen's death has been related above. His father received the usual clinical telegram which read:

*IT IS WITH DEEP REGRET THAT I HAVE LEARNED THAT YOUR SON 217314  
PTE BRYAN THOMAS CULLEN HAS DIED OF WOUNDS SUSTAINED IN ACTION  
IN PHUOC TUY PROVINCE VIETNAM ON 27TH NOV 1967 STOP I DESIRE TO  
CONVEY TO YOU IN YOUR SAD BEREAVEMENT MY SINCERE PERSONAL SYM-  
PATHY AS WELL AS THAT OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH  
OF AUSTRALIA AND OF THE MILITARY BOARD STOP*

*MALCOLM FRASER MINISTER FOR THE ARMY*

The Cullen family also received letters from Second Lieutenant Slavin, Lieutenant Colonel Smith, Brigadier Hughes and from the US Military Assistance Commander, General Westmoreland. In later years a chapel was dedicated to Bryan's memory at St Leo's College, Wahroonga, NSW. The Cullens' other son also joined the Army as an apprentice, but was killed in a motorcycle accident while serving in 1976.

### **Later incidents in FORREST**

As a result of the D Company contact, a 'Frag O' [Fragmentary Operation Order] was issued for a search and destroy operation in an area of operations called NILE close to the Firestone Trail, a large land-cleared lane that followed a north-east to south-west path across the area of the common border between Phuoc Tuy, Long Khanh and Bien Hoa Provinces. This phase continued until 11 December.

On 29 November at 1100 hours, B Company was crossing an area that had been

cleared by the effect of shell explosions, with 5 Platoon leading. The leading section was engaged by a group of enemy. B Company hit the eastern flank of the enemy ambush. The enemy initiated fire with a claymore mine and followed by light machine gun fire at the leading platoon. The forward section commander, Lance Corporal Stan Whitford, was wounded and the rest of his section stunned by the explosion, four of them being knocked unconscious. 5 Platoon deployed a section to the left flank, but it also came under machine gun fire and was unable to move. The sections went to ground and extricated themselves by fire and movement. Major Des Mealey then manoeuvred his platoons to provide fire support and to sweep through the enemy area. No enemy were found, although fresh blood was seen. The sweeps were followed up by a napalm strike and light fire team and artillery strikes. It was assessed that this ambush had been set to catch any D Company follow-up of the enemy after the contacts on 27 and 28 November. B Company moved north after the Dustoff had been completed. It soon became evident that the Viet Cong were shadowing its movement. The company stopped and harboured and patrolled to find the enemy. At 1600 a Viet Cong sniper was seen and fired on. He was wounded but could not be found. The company then harboured for the night.

The next morning, B Company sent out its platoons and the Support Section on patrols. The Support Section Commander, Lance Corporal Whiteside, found a Viet Cong camp 1 km east of Nui Toc Tien. He saw four enemy and signs of a larger force. Major Mealey withdrew the section and planned a company attack on the camp. The company (less 6 Platoon which was left at the company base) then concentrated in a forming-up place (FUP) 400 m south-east of the camp. The camp was bombarded by artillery prior to an assault on it from the south-west. The artillery engagement was adjusted by the Forward Observer (Lieutenant Russ Martin) relying on the assessment of Support Section. After adjusting rounds from one gun, the Forward Observer called for the six guns to fire for effect. All rounds but one fell in the desired place. One stray artillery round hit a tree 50 m from the forming-up place and wounded three soldiers, two of them seriously. When the company assaulted the camp, it had been vacated by the enemy, leaving behind a quantity of documents and equipment. One of the wounded described what happened:

*I can remember sitting there and waiting to be given the order to advance thinking, 'What the hell have we hit here?' We moved forward and then stopped. This is when some object hit me in the left side of the head. All I can remember is waking up and looking across at my partner Ronald King and thinking, 'Where was that lump of wood that hit me in the head?' All Ronald could do was to point to my elbow. I looked down and saw blood dripping from it. I fainted and woke up a short time later to find they had applied a field dressing to my wound. I asked what had happened. I was told that two of our blokes had been shot up very badly.*

*Because I had done a first aid course back in Australia I offered to help these diggers.*

*One was a friend of mine, Mick Logan. We used to run against each other in Australia. He looked at me and asked, 'How are my legs?' I already knew, but I lifted the hutchie and said 'You will be all right mate, out on the track holding your own against me again'. He held my hand and said, 'Thanks, that's all I wanted to hear'. He had in fact lost both legs, one above and one below the knee. One of our diggers had some plasma and morphine and administered it. Should we have told him the truth at the time? It may have sent him into shock while waiting to be Dusted off.*

*The other bloke, Mick too, had a piece of shrapnel that had entered his right temple. It went right through to the left side but didn't break the skin. We couldn't keep him quiet. We gave him dose after dose of morphine. We believed we had no alternative. We were very close to the enemy and had to keep him quiet to stop drawing attention to ourselves and risking many lives.*

Corporal Murdoch, the company medic, did a sterling job treating the wounded. He was assisted by Corporal Don Bryan who, with Lance Corporal Lyons, gave mouth to mouth resuscitation to one of the wounded, Private Berrigan, when he had stopped breathing and saved his life. When Private Stickland was evacuated to hospital for treatment, he refused it until he could be sure that the doctors knew what morphine dose had been given to Private Berrigan. It took Private Berrigan three months to regain consciousness. He is still (in 1995) hospitalised as a result of his wounds, a lasting casualty of the war.

At 1520 hours on 3 December the Fire Assault Platoon (commanded by Sergeant George 'Jock' Logan) was ambushing a north – south track very close to the location of their contact the day before, when a Viet Cong soldier moved cautiously into the ambush area from the north. This enemy soldier displayed all the soldierly skills: he was alert and moving with great care, closely watching his arc of fire and looking for signs of our presence. Lance Corporal Bob Wall saw the enemy and judged that he had seen the ambush. He shot and killed him. While the ambush brought a large volume of fire into the killing ground of the ambush, a second enemy was seen fleeing. There were indications that a larger force of enemy may have been following these scouts. The dead Viet Cong's AK47 was captured.

## **Operation SHEPPARTON**

The tempo of FORREST changed again on 11 December when orders were issued for the cordon and search of the village of Phu My (a village of about 3000 people) on the next day. The cordon was positioned by 2030 hours. A succession of six ox carts were apprehended by C Company. The search, involving A and C Companies, commenced at 0815 hours and was completed by 1130. A change to usual procedure was the insertion of Battalion Headquarters on the morning of 12 December to act as the control

headquarters on the morning after the rifle companies had set their cordons. Twenty-six suspects were detained during this operation and handed over to the South Vietnamese authorities.

### **Operation DIMBOOLA**

The purpose of DIMBOOLA was to conduct a cordon and search of the village of Ong Trinh situated on Route 15 on 14 December. The village had two parts: the northern Ong Trinh proper had a population of about 500 with a military post to its south that had a protective minefield, while the southern hamlet of Phuoc Loc had a strongly Catholic population of about 600.

During this operation A Company walked into an unmarked minefield on the periphery of Ong Trinh while they were establishing the cordon. They managed to extract themselves from the minefield without suffering any casualties. This incident emphasised the need for more detailed research before such operations. It was clear that Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force had insufficient information about mines laid by South Vietnamese forces and that these mines were often laid haphazardly. While troops were told to avoid the areas near Regional Force and Popular Force posts, and particularly areas enclosed by barbed wire, such guidance was not enough to avoid the extreme hazard of such mines. In this instance, A Company's vigilance and good luck were sufficient to save its men from injury.

The village search started at 0815 hours and was completed by 1130. Fifteen suspects were detained.

### **Operation MELBOURNE**

On 16 December a cordon and search of the village of Phuoc Hoa (population 7700) on Route 15 was conducted. The C Company cordon was in position by 2145 hours on 15 December. The first of twelve fishermen was apprehended at 2230 hours and others followed throughout the evening.

The search operation, which started at 0815 hours and was completed by 1100, was executed without any noteworthy incident. Twenty-nine suspects were detained. The report afterwards noted that the repetition of such routine operations tended to induce a certain atmosphere of complacency in execution and planning if care was not taken. Such a reaction would have been dangerous if the Viet Cong had been able to determine predictable patterns in the battalion's operations.

### **Operation LORNE**

Operation LORNE was planned to attack a suspected *Chau Duc District Company* camp near the summit of Nui Bao Quan in the north of the Nui Dinh hills by C Company on 18–20 December. The information leading to this operation had been provided by a rallier

who had been kept as a prisoner by the Viet Cong since February 1967. He had previously been the commander of the *Administrative Section* of the *Chau Duc Company* so his information was considered sufficiently accurate to warrant the swift mounting of this operation.

The Commanding Officer's plan was to attack the camp from the south with two companies and to block the likely enemy escape routes generally to the north with three companies. C and D Companies were given the assault task. A and B Companies were supplemented on the blocking task by C Company 2 RAR which was placed under 7 RAR's command for this operation. The blocking forces were in their planned positions by the evening of 17 December. On the morning of 18 December, C and D Companies and Battalion Headquarters were flown into a landing zone 1 km south-west of the Nui Thi peak by a US airmobile company. This landing zone had been secured by an SAS patrol so that it could be used without artillery preparation that might have warned the enemy.

C Company moved forward to a patrol base and secured it after midday. They were followed in the order of march by D Company. Two C Company platoons (7 and 8) then commenced searching for suitable routes forward to the objective. They returned at 1600 hours. The company moved some 400 m to a night defensive position. At 0745 hours on the following day the company moved towards the objective on two routes and at midday reached a rendezvous where the Commanding Officer visited and gave orders for the assault. The company then moved off towards its objective at 1500 hours on fifteen parallel routes to obtain full coverage of the expected 600 m wide camp. This formation was difficult to control but was felt necessary.

The first contact with the enemy occurred at 1645 hours when two or three Viet Cong fired on the Company Headquarters group. The headquarters was moving in three single file columns (Support Section, the Company Headquarters slightly in the rear and the group of engineers and assault pioneers attached). The Support Section Commander, Lance Corporal Stewart 'Ned' Kelly, came under fire from an automatic weapon and one or two rifles. He wrote:

*I was doing my own scouting for the section on the left flank of 8 Platoon. We were halfway down the slope in an area of large boulders, and I was just taking another look at my compass while standing on a ledge between two large rocks when suddenly all hell broke loose. Their rounds stitched the boulder I was standing on and, not having any cover, I just dropped and lay on my back hoping they would think they had got one. It seemed to work because they lifted their fire about eight feet up and brassed up the blokes behind me. One ricocheted hitting Bob Brien in his thigh. At the same time, as I*



*dropped, my machine gunner Barry Clarke had a clear field of fire and got about sixty rounds away before he had a stoppage and had to take cover.*

Private Clarke and Major Chapman returned the fire, allowing Lance Corporal Kelly to move to safety. The Company Sergeant Major, Warrant Officer Class Two Ted Lewis, arranged for an M72 and some M79 rounds and grenades to be fired at the enemy position. 7 Platoon then conducted a right flanking sweep through the camp and cave complex. No enemy casualties were seen and the area was secured with the company remaining there for the night. As most of the company left the area the next morning, one male and one female Vietnamese were found dead at a tunnel exit which led to the contact area. They had been executed by the Viet Cong. A sandbag full of documents, four Mosin–Nagant rifles and a circular directional mine were recovered.

It appeared that the bulk of the *Chau Duc Company* had actually left the camp before it was attacked, and that a caretaker group from its security element was left to guard it.

2 Platoon A Company (commanded by Second Lieutenant Brendan O'Brien) was ambushing a track in the morning of 20 December in the area between Nui Bao Quan and Nui Toc Tien when three enemy moved into the killing ground. The leading enemy saw one of the platoon's machine gunners and fired two shots, missing him. They were engaged with M60s and a claymore and were killed. Their rifles (two Mosin–Nagants and an M1 Garand) were captured. One Viet Cong was identified from his documents as Vo Van Thanh, a second-in-command of a section in the *Hoa Long Village Guerilla Unit*.

The battalion was extracted by a US airmobile company and RAAF Iroquois on 21 December to Nui Dat.

## **Operation LAWLEY**

Operation LAWLEY was a Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force operation mounted to cordon and search the hamlets of Le Van (population 800) and Vinh Than (750) in the village of Ngai Giao on 23 December. As part of the operation, 2 RAR was to establish a fire support base and to search the smaller hamlet of Ngai Giao. The cordon was to be in position by last light (1830 hours) on 22 December and construction of the screening centre was also to begin at that time.

The village had always had an active Viet Cong Party Committee. On 16 December the Viet Cong had ambushed a vehicle just north of the village and killed two Australians and four soldiers from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, capturing their weapons. One of the hamlet chiefs (appointed by the South Vietnamese government) had been kidnapped by the enemy on 1 September. Ngai Giao was felt

to be the village providing supplies for the Viet Cong operating in bases in the jungle to the east and west of it. It was considered that there could be enemy groups of up to platoon strength inside the village.

It was a difficult Christmas for Lance Corporal Ken Wright of 4 Platoon B Company. On Christmas Eve, he was bitten at night by a snake. He had raised his hand to stop himself being bitten in the face and was bitten on his wrist. He remained conscious for a short time before being evacuated by helicopter to 8th Field Ambulance at Vung Tau. He recovered consciousness several days later.

Prior to the one-day Christmas and New Year truces (which were honoured to the letter by allied forces), a Viet Cong typed propaganda leaflet in Vietnamese and English was found by a soldier in the battalion. The English side of the leaflet read (with its mistakes included):

*US AND AUSTRALIAN ARMYMEN!*

*Correctly implement the cease-fire order of the SVNFL on the occasion of Christmas and New Year days! Resolutely oppose your cruel commander's order to set off on raids, killing Vietnamese people, demand your immediate repatriation.*

*Heartily welcome the SVNFL's lenient policy towards US and satellite prisoners!*

*Heartily welcome to the "political program" of the SVNFL!*

The abbreviation 'SVNFL' was for what we termed the NLF (National Liberation Front).

Some soldiers' families had a better Christmas present. Television channels throughout Australia screened pre-recorded 'Christmas Messages from Vietnam' and several soldiers from the battalion appeared in them. Their next-of-kin had been warned to watch the programs several days beforehand. In Adelaide, the ABC wrote to those interested in an impersonal form letter, but said that it was not practicable to name the soldiers who would appear, because that would involve a lot of letter writing! Despite the volume of letters, the notification by Channel 7, sent two days earlier, named the individuals. The battalion celebrated Christmas with a four course meal including turkey and ham and Christmas pudding and brandy sauce.

What the Army Press Release coyly called 'a leading Australian cigarette manufacturer' donated a pack of 100 cigarettes to each Australian and New Zealand soldier in Vietnam. The 750 000 cigarettes were all specially packed with a cover showing Australian wildflowers and had a goodwill message enclosed.

On 28 December 3 RAR joined the 1st Australian Task Force to form its third infantry battalion. They had arrived earlier in the month. Major O'Donnell, who was recovering from malaria, was attached to 3 RAR to assist its Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Jim Shelton, to become familiar with the Nui Dat routine. It was a

pleasant task because so many of the 3 RAR men and almost all its non-commissioned officers were known to him from his days in Malaya.

### The last phase of FORREST

The second 'Rag O' for FORREST was issued to control the plan to search for the enemy and destroy them in area of operations ELIZABETH (named after the Commanding Officer's wife) in the area of the Cu Bi rubber plantation north of Nui Dat from 2 to 5 January. Rifle companies searched through the area generally from east to west, while Battalion Headquarters was located on Nui Nhan 3 km west of Ngai Giao and a fire support base (ALANBROOKE, with 106th Field Battery) was situated 500 metres northwest of Ngai Giao.

On 2 January, D Company were inserted by helicopter at the Xa Bang Regional Force post. They then moved 2 km south-west and detained one draft dodger. Five km north-north-west of Ngai Giao they detained five persons, three of whom were later shown to have had permission to be in the area. One km further to the south-west three Viet Cong were contacted by 12 Platoon D Company and two of them killed. A 7.92 mm rifle and a D10 claymore were captured. The third enemy escaped when the scout's self-loading rifle was jammed by a separated cartridge case. The enemy were from the *Ngai Giao Village Guerilla Unit*, including one identified as the Political Officer of Hamlet 3, Pham Thanh Son.

A Company had flown into Xa Bang on 2 January and moved to the north-west. They had fleeting glimpses of small enemy groups before and after midday. The aggression of the Viet Cong in this area was indicated when they exploded a DH10 claymore in the area the company had harboured for lunch. The area was engaged with artillery with no evident results. Ambushes were set around the area that night. Because of the chance of further Viet Cong claymores, it was decided to clear around 1 Platoon and Company Headquarters areas with gunships the next morning. While this was in progress, three enemy moved down a track into the 1 Platoon ambush (commanded by Second Lieutenant David Ward) and two were killed immediately, 3 km north-west of Xa Bang. The third enemy, who had been wounded, fired on the later sweep made by the platoon and was also killed. The enemy had been carrying SKS rifles and probably were members of *D445*. Major O'Donnell commented that this was a neat ambush and good work by the platoon.

On 4 January at 1400 hours, 8 Platoon C Company (commanded by Lieutenant Mark 'Pinky' Moloney) was moving along a creek to check an old Viet Cong camp 6 km north-west of Ngai Giao. Just before the camp was reached a track was seen. It was followed and the forward scout heard the sound of voices. The scout moved forward carefully and came face to face with an enemy sentry who fired at him but missed. Four Viet Cong were sighted as the platoon used fire and movement to clear the area. One Viet Cong was killed and several were wounded in the fight. Six weapons,

including a Smith and Wesson revolver, were captured. The camp turned out to have been used for a group of enemy, probably the *Ngai Giao Village Guerillas*, as sixteen packs were found in it.

The battalion was lifted out of the area and returned to Nui Dat on 5 January by helicopters and armoured personnel carriers. During Operation FORREST, the guns of 4th Field Regiment (the parent unit of 106th Field Battery) were deployed by US Chinook helicopters ten times, a rate of deployment of artillery rarely equalled by the Australians in Vietnam.

The Intelligence Officer, Captain Roger Pettit, felt that FORREST had done much to disrupt the Viet Cong, particularly the *Chau Duc District Company*. The enemy lost a large quantity of weapons and equipment and the security of a number of carefully prepared defended installations. The enemy rice collection effort was probably successfully interrupted, greatly increasing the difficulty of their subsequent operations.

The battalion was by this stage a very efficient and experienced fighting team. It had become expert in small actions, careful in its searching and aggressive in its response to enemy fire. It was very competent in the skills of helicopter operations, air support and working with allied forces. It had developed a clear sense of purpose that had been sharpened by the substantial contacts that had occasionally occurred. It was a determined and patient team and, although the end of its tour of duty was within sight, it was confident about continuing its operations against the enemy.

# 6

## Duntroon to the Tet Offensive

*My God, I didn't know what you were up against. But your determination prevailed and you won.*

Brigadier R.L. Hughes  
after Tet, 1968

EARLY IN JANUARY, the Regimental Sergeant Major together with the Chief Clerk (Staff Sergeant Cliff Abel) and the Company Sergeant Major of Administration Company (Warrant Officer Class Two Don Cruden), returned to Australia to do an officer qualifying course at the Jungle Training Centre, Canungra. Warrant Officer Class Two Jim Mahoney was appointed acting Regimental Sergeant Major.

### **OPERATION DUNTROON**

From 10 to 21 January 1968, 7 RAR was deployed on Operation DUNTROON (named after the location of the Royal Military College) which was designed as a block (to restrict enemy movement) and search and destroy operation. It took place in area of operations BULLER north of Nui Dat and west of Cam My in the south-western part of the Viet Cong Hat Dich area, centred on the junction of the borders between Phuoc Tuy, Long Khanh and Bien Hoa Provinces. The operation was part of a 1st Australian Task Force operation planned in cooperation with Operation AKRON V, involving a US brigade (1st Brigade of 9th Infantry Division) of three battalion-sized units (2/39th Infantry Battalion, 2/47th Infantry Battalion (Mechanised) and 3/5th Cavalry). The concept of the operation was for 2 RAR and 7 RAR to occupy blocking positions on 10 and 11 January in the west of BULLER. 1st Brigade was to deploy to its area of operations on the morning of 11 January, and assault that afternoon until 14 January with two battalions towards the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Task Force

blocks and a further block provided by 3/5th Cavalry on the east–west Firestone Trail. From 15 to 17 January it was planned that the 1st Australian Task Force battalions would conduct the search and destroy phase of the operation with 2 RAR's area of operations (GLASSHOUSE) to the south of 7 RAR's area of operations BULLER. Fire support to the battalion was provided by 161st Battery, Royal New Zealand Artillery.

The operation was preceded on 7 January by the execution of a plan which sought to deceive the enemy into believing that the operation would be conducted to the east of Route 2. It included a heavy artillery fire plan by two field batteries, firing from Duc Thanh into all known enemy camps north of Duc Thanh in the area midway between Thua Tich and Binh Gia.

The battalion divided its task into four phases. In the first, the battalion moved to Xa Bang by having A Company (in armoured personnel carriers) escort one battery of artillery to an initial fire support patrol base. Almost simultaneously, B Company moved to a further fire support patrol base in armoured personnel carriers and secured a landing zone. The remainder of the battalion flew into the landing zone DAMPIER, 13 km north–west of Ngai Giao. From 11 January to 17 January the battalion occupied its planned blocking positions. Its indirect fire support was provided by 161st Battery. The fire support bases used were called FSB 2 (5 km north of Ngai Giao) and BERRYMAN (3 km south of the province boundary with Long Khanh).

It was expected that this operation, in the traditional operational area of *274 Viet Cong Regiment*, would flush out elements of at least one of its battalions. Elements of A Company sighted small enemy groups on the evening of 11 January and the following morning, but their engagements were unsuccessful. These fleeting sightings were the only contact with the enemy experienced by the battalion and it became clear that the early momentum of the American sweep was not kept up, perhaps accounting for the lack of the expected exodus of *274 Regiment*. The search and destroy phase, which took place from 18 to 20 January, was similarly fruitless. The area of operations was devoid of major enemy presence and had few signs of any transit traffic.

As the battalion concentrated for its fly–out phase on 21 January, A Company was engaged for a short time by M79 fire from the adjacent US unit, despite the fact that the Americans had received and acknowledged A Company's locations. Fortunately, no casualties were caused. The incident emphasised the need for close liaison between adjacent allied troops. The battalion returned to Nui Dat by US helicopters, except for B Company which assisted in convoy protection of the 1st Australian Task Force controlled move mounted in the armoured personnel carriers of A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment.

The Commanding Officer felt that the concept of DUNTROON was sound and felt that it deserved better results. The Officer Commanding B Company for this operation, Major Peter Stokes, considered that it would have been better to have patrolled the

blocking area rather than simply to have occupied static positions. He felt that Australian soldiers had neither the temperament nor the patience to remain in blocking positions for seven days without contact.

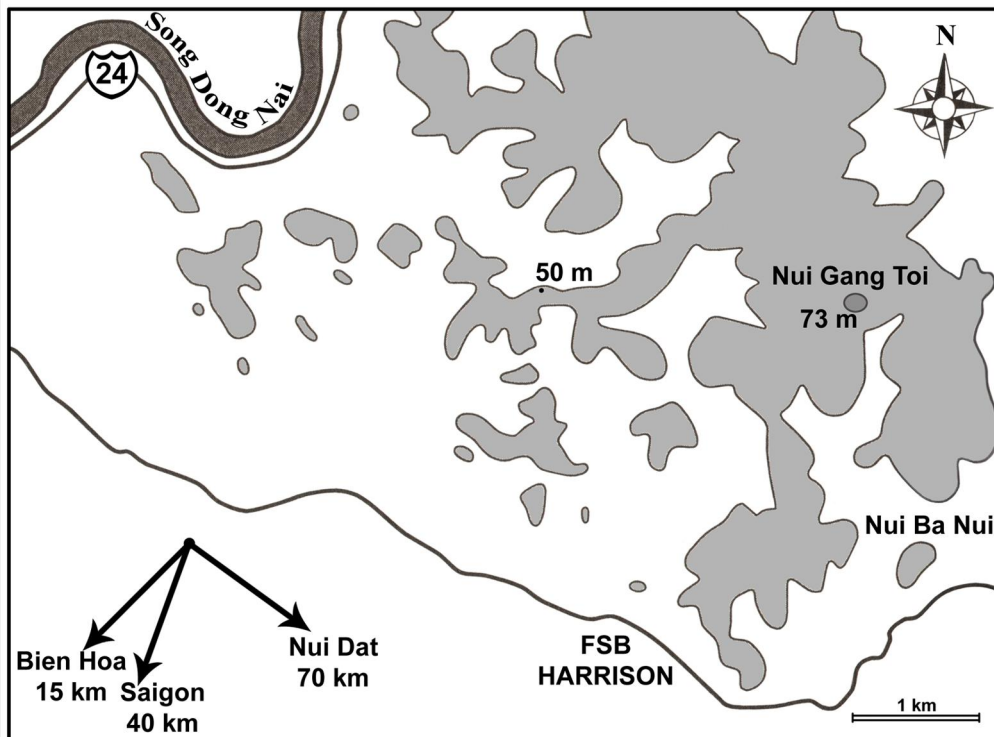
## **OPERATION COBURG**

The part that Australian battalions played in defending the approaches to major American bases in the battles of Tet 1968 has not become well known or appreciated. The major reason for this lack of knowledge was probably the magnitude of the Tet attacks in Saigon and Hue and the coverage given to them by press and television. Soldiers in 7 RAR, a battalion that played a key part in the Tet battles, have gone as far as to suspect that there was a conspiracy of silence to conceal their actions over this period. There has been no such conspiracy: simply, the battles have not been written about, and certainly not from the perspective of the battalion.

The 1st Australian Task Force was deployed out of Phuoc Tuy for Operation COBURG, in the border area between Bien Hoa and Long Khanh Provinces, to counter an expected Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army threat to the US Bien Hoa air base and the associated Long Binh base area during Tet, the Vietnamese festival for the Lunar New Year centred that year around 31 January. The estimates of pending enemy action were mostly based on the probability that the enemy would attempt to fire rockets from the same general area as they had in the past. The aim of the operation was therefore to deny the enemy access to the area and to sites from which they could rocket the base areas. It was the first time the Task Force had operated in strength outside Phuoc Tuy. During this operation, 7 RAR was allocated the western sector, while 2 RAR operated to its east. 7 RAR took part in this operation from 24 January to 13 February.

The battalion was given quite short notice of the operation. On the afternoon of 22 January, Brigadier Ron Hughes, the Task Force Commander, had been tasked by the six foot four inch tall Commander of II Field Force Vietnam, Lieutenant General Frederick C. Weyand, on 10 January and had been told: 'Say, Ron, would you mind bringing your Task Force up to this area here?' (waving vaguely at the map).

The Task Force Commander gave his orders to Lieutenant Colonel Smith at Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force on the morning of 23 January. 7 RAR's mission was to destroy enemy elements in area of operations AYRE (a roughly rectangular area 11 km from north to south and 6 km from east to west), 40 km north-west of Nui Dat in Bien Hoa Province. The concept of operations called for the battalion to provide two rifle companies to accompany the Task Force road convoy from Nui Dat to the Task Force Maintenance Area (TFMA) to be set up at Fire Support Patrol Base ANDERSON, 35 km east of Bien Hoa and near a rubber plantation on Route 1. When this road move had been completed, the remainder of the battalion would move by air



**Figure 6.1** Operation COBURG – Tet 1968

to a landing zone secured by US forces at Fire Support Patrol Base HARRISON, 10 km north-west of ANDERSON. The two rifle companies would then rejoin the battalion prior to commencing search and destroy operations in AYRE.

Prior to the operation, the battalion was as usual briefed *en masse* by the Commanding Officer on the helicopter pad near battalion headquarters. One platoon commander recalled:

*We realised that the operation we were about to undertake was going to be different. Firstly, we were to operate beyond the boundaries of our own Province in an area where contact with significant enemy forces was not uncommon; we had been told that the Viet Cong had to mount a serious offensive in the short term to achieve their goals or lose the initiative. Intelligence reports suggested that Tet (31 January) was the time the Viet Cong had selected for their 'uprising'. We realised that we were about to become embroiled in the real war, the likes of which Australians had not experienced since 18 Aug 66 in conflict with D445 at Long Tan.*

The battalion was supported by 106th Field Battery located at Fire Support Patrol Base HARRISON throughout the operation. The battalion had two combat engineer teams from 1st Field Squadron supporting it as well as the usual Sioux helicopter. The operation commenced on 24 January when A and D Companies left for ANDERSON in the morning mounted in armoured personnel carriers. The Officer Commanding A Company recalled:



*It was an impressive convoy. It was a beautiful day and as we travelled up Route 15 we could look back and see this enormous convoy stretched out behind us, while helicopters played sheepdog above. At Bear Cat we passed through the Thai Army contingent and as we travelled through Bien Hoa Province we passed a number of US units going in the opposite direction. This pre-Tet deployment has always stuck in my mind as a counter to the claims that the Tet uprising came as a surprise.*

Two airmobile companies of US Army Iroquois and six Chinooks were used to lift the rest of the battalion (and elements of 1st Australian Task Force) in what was the largest single heliborne lift executed by 7 RAR. The landing zone, which had been secured by 2/3rd US Battalion, was about a kilometre away from the expected location but this caused only temporary difficulties. A and D Companies were airlifted to join the battalion in the afternoon. Companies then moved south to their allotted search areas, except for C Company which stayed at HARRISON to secure it for the fly-in of 106th Field Battery on 25 January. C Company was then placed under the command of the Second-in-Command of 4th Field Regiment and, together with a troop of armoured personnel carriers, tasked to defend the fire support base and dominate its area of operations to stop enemy reconnaissance and the setting up of rocket sites. Battalion Headquarters remained close to the Fire Support Patrol Base overnight.

One C Company corporal felt:

*It will be a quiet operation. All we have to do is to sit out the Tet (Chinese New Year) four clicks north-east of the Bien Hoa airbase . . . We flew out from Luscombe Field up to Bien Hoa Province and landed in an area secured by an American company from the 9th Division. I spoke with one of the squad leaders to get the idea of the area we would be working in. He asked me what our intentions were. I told him we intended to set up a Fire Support Base and patrol out into the mountains. His words to me were 'Man, you don't go out there, that's Cong country'. They had been sitting in the one spot without moving, without digging in either. That afternoon, the guns were flown in and Fire Support Base ANDERSON was born.*

Private Chris Seymour of C Company wrote:

*7 Platoon went out on a motorised patrol with APCs. The task was to do a complete recce and patrol of the clearing known as HARRISON. From our position we walked. Then we had to cross a river so the platoon joined toggle ropes and proceeded to cross. The water was quite cool on the body. After crossing we met up with a section of tracks [armoured personnel carriers]. We were still wet and they asked us why. We told them we had just crossed the river. They said that we were pretty game because when they had come over they had seen about half a dozen crocodiles.*

25 January was a relatively quiet day. Battalion Headquarters moved to a new location 1 km north of HARRISON, in an effort to reach a new position on high ground so that best radio communications could be obtained. The headquarters did not reach its desired location during the operation: the pace of contacts with the enemy was so intense that it did not make any further moves. Indeed, at one stage during COBURG all rifle companies and the Battalion Headquarters were in contact at once. The Commanding Officer of 2 RAR (Lieutenant Colonel 'Chick' Charlesworth) radioed Colonel Smith and asked whether he was busy! On another occasion, the Commanding Officer advised the Task Force Commander not to visit him by helicopter because of the danger of ground fire. Brigadier Hughes ignored his advice.

Corporal Savage's diary for 26 January gives a good idea of the developing tempo of this operation:

*We have just had an 'O' [orders] group and the enemy score so far for this op is that A Coy have 1 VC KIA when bedding in the mortars, B Coy got 4 VC KIA, D Coy got 2 KIA. Callsign 22 (5 P1 B Coy) found a VC minefield sign and recently built bunkers. 1 Brigade 9th Division (US) have moved north. C Coy's mission is twofold: search and kill in parts of AOs SAM, SIERRA and ROMEO, from there we move into block positions on tracks etc . . . Jade (forward air controller aircraft) spotted 4 VC and called in arty. The results were 1 VC KIA, 1 WIA.*

*While we were moving into our position this afternoon, an American gunship mistook us for enemy and opened fire on us. They did two runs on us. I believe they mistook us because we were wearing bush hats and not American steel helmets. The bullets were landing all around us yet no one was hit. (A bloody miracle.) The problem we had was we could not talk to the aircraft, so we had to go through company to battalion. However, after two runs, they were either satisfied or they recognised us, as they flew off north.*

*I have a bad feeling about this op . . . The VC we are contacting are mainly guerillas and have been operating up to section strength. My section consists of myself and five men. I will carry the M79, Smarty the gun plus 300 rounds of ammo, O'Hare SLR plus 200 rounds for the gun, Hayes SLR plus a claymore, Seymour SLR plus a claymore. Tonight is the start of the Tet ceasefire so we should have a breather for at least 72 hrs.*

On 26 January 4 Platoon B Company contacted a group of three enemy 1 km north of Nui Ba Nui at 1145 hours. Private Ross Jack wrote about what occurred:

*Stickland was up front as new scout in Dellar's place. Sat down on a track and, whoops, there was a nog! He opened from the hip and killed him. A second and third popped around the corner. Winged the second and the third guy dragged*

*him away. The dead bloke had an MI, 6000 piastre (\$60), various papers, credits from Ho Chi Minh himself. Must have been a top notch soldier. Had dodged the Yanks for years and the Aussies got him first time up there.*

At 1400 hours that day, 5 Platoon B Company were moving parallel to the axis of an east–west track. The forward scout fired on a group of enemy who were probably ambushing the track. The scout received a bullet hole in his hat as he bent under a vine but was not wounded. He was 'advised to buy a ticket in Tatts and to submit an L&D [loss and damage report]'.

At 1035 hours on 27 January, Support Section of B Company contacted three Viet Cong 200 m south of the B Company contact on the previous day and killed two of them. The enemy soldiers were couriers and were not carrying weapons other than several grenades.

### **The D Company contacts on 27 January**

D Company 7 RAR became involved in a major fight on 27 January. The description of this action in the Commander's Diary of 1st Australian Task Force was quite brief. It read:

*At [grid reference] YT 169213 [a half km west of the crest of Nui Gang Toi] at 1043H on 27 January 10 P1 D Coy 7 RAR made contact with an unknown number of VC estimated to be a company plus. After an airstrike, artillery and a light fire team were called in on the VC, they withdrew with an unknown number of casualties but leaving evidence in the form of a great deal of blood behind. D Coy sustained 8 Aust WIA, mainly from M79, RPG2 or 7 fire. After the VC broke contact, D Coy followed up and came across a large camp complex.*

Second Lieutenant Dave Webster described the events leading up to this engagement:

*After receiving orders from the OC, I returned to my platoon position and commenced preparation for the patrol. During this period, Pte Trzecinski, one of the members of the Assault Pioneer section which had been attached to D Company for the operation, left the perimeter to relieve himself. The Assault Pioneer section was commanded by Sgt Eric McCoombe. McCoombe recalls reminding Trzecinski to let the appropriate people know that he was leaving the perimeter. He did apparently let someone know but the message was not passed on to the sentry. On his return to the perimeter, Trzecinski was mistaken for a VC and shot dead. Not long after the shooting a Dustoff helicopter evacuated his body. Sgt McCoombe escorted him back to ensure that his body found its way back to the correct Australian destination.*

Private Trzecinski had been married on R&R leave five months earlier. His son, born after his death, joined the Army and has served with 5/7 RAR. Lieutenant Webster continued:

*Not long after the Dustoff helicopter had departed the D Company position, members of the lead section commanded by Lcpl Paul Diemos moved out cautiously on the first leg of the patrol. The shooting and the helicopter evacuation would have alerted any VC in the vicinity of our presence and location. The whole platoon was tentative and sensed that trouble was imminent.*

*Not long after clearing the company base and as the forward scout, Pte Tommy Tucker, had moved down a slight slope into a re-entrant and had started to move up the slope on the far side, a shot rang out. The round, fired by an enemy sentry in a bunker at a range of 20 metres, missed the forward scout and struck the forward section commander Diemos. Deimos must have been in the act of turning around to pass back a message to the rest of his section as the enemy bullet entered under his arm and exited through his chest, shattering his sternum. With sections of only four or five men instead of the normal ten, a single scout was employed. This resulted in the section commander travelling about ten paces behind the scout and placing himself in the firing line in the event of any chance encounter with the enemy.*

*The platoon medic, Pte Doc Hawken, without regard for his own safety, moved forward under covering fire to tend the wounded section commander. He was unarmed at the time, having given his M16 to Sam Davies whose M60 had refused once again to fire. Doc was bent over Paul Diemos treating his wounds when he too was shot in the chest with the bullet exiting his body near his hip. While lying wounded on the ground beside Paul Diemos he was struck in the body by M79 grenades which failed to detonate. Being hit by an M79 grenade would be akin to being hit by Greg Norman with a 1 wood while standing 20 metres in front of the tee. Private John Davidson tended Alf Hawken's wound. The VC, because of his ability to see and engage Hawken, was probably in the same bunker from which Diemos was shot and was probably firing the M79 from within the arming range of the grenade. As this was occurring, the platoon, now down to 16 men, manoeuvred into a position which in effect placed most of them in an extended line facing the enemy position.*

*Immediately following the shooting of Diemos and Hawken by the enemy sentry, a long series of cries in Vietnamese could be clearly heard passing around what seemed to be a fairly extensive enemy position perimeter. It was obvious that we had made contact with a significant enemy force. In the fire fight that followed, six more members of the platoon were wounded, some seriously. Some of the casualties were caused by Chicom claymore mines sited on the perimeter of the enemy position. The VC also used M79s firing 40 mm grenades. Thankfully, many of these did not detonate. I recall either Pte Percival, my signaller, or Pte John Brewer, my batman, bringing to my attention that the enemy were using M79s by pointing out an unexploded projectile very close to us. The nose section had been crushed in at the point where it had struck the ground. Sam Davies remembers being a target for more than a half a dozen*

*M79 rounds which failed to detonate. Although some of the M79 rounds may well have been duds, some may have also failed to detonate because they impacted inside the 28 metre arming range. The volume of fire from the enemy position was such that I fully expected the men in black to appear over the small ledge in front of us in assault formation at any moment and overrun the remnants of the platoon. The ledge at the top of the re-entrant prevented the majority of the enemy in the position from seeing and engaging the platoon and no doubt this was a factor in our survival.*

*In an attempt to postpone the inevitable attack on my position, the one GPMG [general purpose machine gun] which was operating reliably was moved from one side of the platoon position to the other in an attempt to give the impression that the platoon was in fact operating with all its weapons. I recall Pte Sam Davies experiencing difficulties with his GPMG M60 which had malfunctioned with a double feed. When kneeling to carry out an immediate action drill to rectify the problem, Davies was hit in his thigh by shrapnel from a claymore. Claymore ball or shrapnel also hit the plastic forehand grip on his M60 injuring his hand to the point where he was unable to carry the weapon. Davies also recalls about nine or ten M79 grenades impacting within a metre or so of him as he lay wounded beside the track. Not one of them detonated. I also remember the action of Pte Johnny 'Tubby' Cowan (who spent most of his time in camp behind bars – or so it seemed) who had taken over one of the M60s from a wounded comrade (or he may have been the machine gunner for this operation) with a long linked belt over his shoulder moving from one side of the platoon to another firing long bursts into the enemy position.*

*During FORREST, two of my three platoon GPMGs stopped working and new guns were dropped in to me the following day and the malfunctioning weapons removed. On return from the operation the diligent Battalion Q organisation ensured that the new guns were withdrawn from me and handed back to the Q store armoury. The old unreliable guns were re-issued and they were the ones which again malfunctioned during this contact. The sound of the GPMG firing instilled great confidence in the platoon. When they did not work it had precisely the opposite effect on the platoon morale.*

*Pte Brewer was wounded in his thumb and later evacuated. My signaller, Pte Percival, received a shrapnel wound to the side of his head from either enemy mortars or M79 grenades. Despite this, he soldiered on until he was evacuated later in the day. Bob Atkinson then took over as platoon signaller. I can recall the wounds of Pte Keith (Jack) Gent (who came from a VFL football family) with quite a long gash in the area of his hamstring.*

Keith Gent said to a platoon medic (Private John Davidson) that he could not feel his leg. An M79 shell had hit him but had failed to explode.

Lieutenant Webster continued:

*Just prior to COBURG the M72 light anti-tank weapon was introduced into the battalion. It was to be used in the same way as the VC used the RPG2 and RPG7 so successfully against us on 27 Nov 67. Not long before leaving for Bien Hoa Province, I attended a course of instruction on the firing and employment of M72s. Short warning of Operation Coburg prevented me from instructing the platoon members in its use. When the contact was under way and to deter the enemy from assaulting the platoon position, all M72s carried by members of the platoon were passed to me to be fired from the centre of the platoon position. I fired about twelve M72s in the direction of the voices which I had heard earlier. I aimed for the trees about eight to ten feet above the ground employing a technique similar to that used by the Viet Cong with their RPGs. The M72 makes an extremely loud noise when fired and my hearing was significantly impaired for a period of about three days.*

*Artillery support was provided by the artillery Forward Observer (FO) Capt Tony Williams. Very soon after passing the necessary information to the FO, rounds fell on the platoon position. I advised the FO in no uncertain terms that the rounds were falling short of the enemy position and on to my platoon, only to be advised by the FO that friendly fire had not yet commenced. I had confused incoming enemy mortars and M79 rounds with our own artillery. The FO was then urged to speed things up!*

Private 'Teeny' Preston recalled that, not long after finishing the chopper pad for Private Trzcenski's evacuation, the 11 Platoon section commanders were called in for orders to go and assist 10 Platoon. Preston was the forward scout of the lead section and he recalls moving forward at a fast pace to link up with 10 Platoon.

Lieutenant Webster continued:

*The offer of support from a US Army heavy fire team (Huey Cobras) was gratefully accepted. Smoke thrown on the right flank to mark the platoon position for the helicopter pilots hit a tree and bounced back presenting a somewhat skewed strike axis to the Cobra pilots. On the first pass each Cobra fired its 2.75 inch free-flight rockets. The whoosh whoosh whoosh of the first three rockets was clearly audible above the noise of the rotors before the noise of the rockets impacting on their targets drowned out all other sounds. The American gunship and FAC [forward air controller] pilots always sounded so matter-of-fact and reassuring when asking for target details and own troop locations and as a result instilled great confidence in those being supported by their lethal cargo. After the rockets came the 7.62 mm miniguns with bursts of indescribably intense fire which seemed to fill the jungle with projectiles causing leaves and bark to fall on the forward edge of the platoon.*

*The OC advised that the airstrike was being conducted 1000 metres to the rear of the enemy position. (The minimum safety distance for an air-strike was 1000 metres to the flank of the strike axis – safety distances along the strike axis*

*were much greater. These distances reflected the accuracy of F100 Super Sabres and F4 Phantoms when dropping 500 lb bombs in support of ground troops.)*

The Commanding Officer used a napalm airstrike to within 250 m of the D Company troops to boost their morale. He had felt that Webster's platoon may have been a 'write-off'. He was winched into the area with some difficulty, becoming entangled in a tree and having his helicopter driven off by enemy fire twice before he could reach the ground. On arrival, he could plainly see over ten black outlines on the ground, which was all that remained of a group of incinerated enemy.

Lieutenant Webster continued:

*The third section of 11 Platoon together with 12 Platoon were required to provide protection to Company HQ. Jim Slavin (12 Platoon) had initially been briefed by the OC to conduct the patrol on which I had embarked. Jim had argued against sending a single platoon to investigate the sighting because at the briefing by the company commander he had seen markings on the map which made it quite clear that the camp we were required to reconnoitre could easily have been of battalion strength. Jim suggested to the OC that the complete company undertake the patrol. Apparently the OC was not impressed with this suggestion and dismissed Jim by sending him on patrol in another direction advising him that he would send 10 Platoon to investigate the camp. I do not recall seeing any map during the patrol briefing which indicated that the position I was to investigate was a battalion strength installation. I was, however, told that there had been a sighting of two or three enemy from the air. Jim Slavin, expecting that we (10 P1) would run into trouble left the company harbour but propped about 200 metres out. As soon as he heard the shooting and explosions which indicated the start of the contact and my report over the radio that the enemy strength was far greater than the strength of my platoon, he started moving quickly in our direction. He made his intentions known to Maj Paterson but was ordered back to the company HQ to provide them with protection. The Assault Pioneer section was also with CHQ.*

One Australian was killed and seven wounded in this D Company action.<sup>1</sup> Found in the camp was a cache which contained 81 mm mortar rounds, claymores and two rifles.

A Company had set an area ambush on a broad ridge line covering one major track and a complex of smaller tracks coming up the spur lines and leading towards the Bien Hoa airbase complex. The tracks were so well used that Major O'Donnell felt confident that some enemy would arrive before long. These tracks turned out to be one of the main enemy approach routes for the forthcoming attacks on the base. On 28 January at 1430 hours three Viet Cong entered the ambush that had been set by 2 Platoon A Company (commanded by Second Lieutenant Brendan O'Brien) at a junction of a creek and a system of well used tracks 2 km west of Nui Gang Toi. The platoon was in the valley below the rest of the company's area ambush. One was killed

by a platoon machine gunner and his SKS rifle and 80 rounds of ammunition were recovered. Private John Brewer was wounded.

The allied forces had planned a truce for Tet to take effect from 1800 hours on 29 January to 0600 hours on 31 January. The intense enemy activity caused the cancellation of this truce. At 1615 hours on 29 January, 2 Platoon A Company ambushed a group of enemy at the same place as their contact the previous day. When Second Lieutenant Brendan O'Brien had just finished giving orders for the evening, an enemy group was heard approaching the ambush. It was sprung when the first five were in the killing ground. It became evident that the enemy strength was at least 20 to 30, as the fire that was immediately returned covered the whole platoon width. The initial violent fire fight lasted about seven minutes during which time the platoon was engaged with RPG2s and 7s (which moved to the flanks and fired towards the centre of the platoon), AK47 and RPD fire. Those wounded in this first few minutes included the platoon commander, his signaller and the platoon medic. Four enemy were killed in the first few bursts of fire. The Platoon Sergeant, Tom Bourke, described the contact:

*Helicopter gunships drove the enemy off. Platoon commander and section commanders were WIA – all were Dustoff casualties.<sup>2</sup> The platoon had killed one enemy the previous day and one had escaped. He must have gone and fetched his mates back the next day. Morale was high. When the contact was started I was unable to hear because of rocket explosions. Only six personnel left able to defend. The Dustoff was driven off three times by enemy rocket and small arms fire. The platoon commander, although wounded, had to man the radio set as I could not hear.*

One enemy climbed a tree and directed fire until he was killed. After the first fire fight, the enemy used small arms covering fire to screen their withdrawal to the east.

During his fire fight, Lieutenant O'Brien had called in gunships, airstrikes, mortars and artillery. He was also given assistance by the Battalion Second-in-Command, Major Alf Garland, who was airborne above the contact in a Sioux and helped the gunships to distinguish between the enemy and our troops. The enemy continued to engage 2 Platoon with small arms and M79 fire to cover the evacuation of their wounded. The first Dustoff helicopter arrived and was shot at by the Viet Cong. The Battalion Second-in-Command heard the Dustoff pilot say 'Hell, what was that? I seem to have bitten off more than I can chew'. Major Garland replied that an RPG rocket had passed in through one door of the helicopter and out the other.

Despite the enemy fire and with the continuing assistance of the Battalion Second-in-Command, three litter and three winch casualties were lifted off before last light. The engagement continued for two and a half hours, with the platoon employing artillery and mortars on likely enemy escape routes. It was not possible to



estimate the total enemy casualties because of the dense vegetation. However, eight were seen to be killed, although only six bodies were found in a sweep conducted that evening, by which time the enemy had withdrawn. The battlefield was thoroughly cleared the next morning.

When Sergeant Bourke was asked to describe the bravest act he saw in Vietnam, he wrote:

*Private 'Dinga' Bell was platoon medic on the late afternoon of 29 January 1968. In the first few moments the Platoon Commander, 2Lt O'Brien, and all the NCOs were wounded including Private Bell who had received a direct hit from a rocket. Even though shockingly wounded, Private Bell tried to get to the other wounded. When he could not move he gave orders to another soldier as to how to help them. Even when we finally got him on to the Dustoff stretcher, Private Bell was still giving advice as to the care of the other wounded. As he was lifted up through the trees the enemy opened fire again. The Dustoff was forced to leave the area with Private Bell and stretcher hanging underneath. We later learned that he was dead on arrival at hosp[ital]. . . . I later confirmed with then Cpl Clutterbuck, himself wounded, as to what Pte Bell had been saying.*

It was subsequently confirmed that the enemy group was from C235. Their task was to act as scouts for the main attack on Bien Hoa airbase. 2 Platoon's action disrupted this plan. Sergeant Ron Allan of 11 Platoon D Company was awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal for his gallantry in this action and his part in the action on 27 November 1967 in Operation FORREST.

7 Platoon C Company was patrolling from the company firm base in the early evening of 1 February. They were on the second leg of their task. Private Chris Seymour described the events that followed:

*The forward scout of 3 Section spotted four VC following our previous tracks. They must have thought that we were another party of VC. They were very casual and that was their mistake. The scout opened up and put the first two down wounded. The second two made a hasty retreat. The wounded tried to put up a fight and were cut down by our intense hail of fire from 2 and 3 Sections' M60s and rifles. While we started to sweep through we spotted the other two VC. Slippery [Dowling] and I saw them start to make another break for it and we opened up. Then Ross McMillan's section saw them moving to the left flank. They all opened up. Paddy Craig, Doc [Savage] and I went after them. We went about a hundred metres and found a blood trail but no further VC. We did get two VC and two rifles.*

8 Platoon had several engagements with the enemy in this period. On the evening of 1 February, their position was approached by a group of enemy. They were fired on by a machine gunner, and although no enemy were hit, an abandoned pack was found.

The next morning, a Viet Cong approached their perimeter wearing a camouflage suit and net. He was fired on at very close range. A tracer round exploded the rocket rounds he was carrying. The dead enemy soldier was also carrying an M1 rifle and an RPG launcher.

On 2 February at 1255 hours there was a clash between 4 and 5 Platoon B Company half a km east of the summit of Nui Gang Toi, causing seven soldiers of 3 Section to be wounded. Lieutenant Wal Harris described this tragic event:

*During the Tet offensive a 4 Platoon B Company patrol accidentally walked into the killing area of a 5 Platoon ambush. Claymore mines were initiated and a short but fierce contact resulted. Seven members of 4 Platoon were wounded including the Platoon Commander.<sup>3</sup> Corporal Bob Darcy, who realised that it was a clash with friendlies, bravely stood up in the ambush and gave orders to the 5 Platoon killing group to stop firing.*

Afterwards, Private John Hart marched for a long period without complaint even though he had a shrapnel wound in his lung.

7 Platoon C Company was struck by tragedy on 2 February. Lance Corporal Ross McMillan was accidentally shot and killed by a member of the platoon while he was checking his section's claymores. The soldiers on gun piquet changed over while he was out and information was not correctly passed on. Corporal McMillan was coming back into the position crouched low in the grass and all the machine gunner could see was a forehead and dark hair approaching. The loss of Corporal McMillan was felt particularly hard as he was a very popular member of the company.

On 2 February Private Bob Perrin and another soldier were being returned to B Company by helicopter. They needed to be winched in as the terrain was too rugged for a landing. Private Perrin was the first to be winched. He was about 5 m below the helicopter when the wire cable started to part. The door gunner saw what was happening and tried to throw Perrin a cable while drawing the winched rope back in. The cable snapped and dropped Private Perrin about 20 m to the ground. He died immediately from a broken spine. Private Chris 'Simmo' Simpson of 5 Platoon B Company said: 'I was next on the winch and saw his broken body removed from the company location. When he died we were numb and depressed for days'.

On 4 February both B and D Companies had a number of fierce engagements. At 0810, 1.5 km west of the summit of Nui Gang Toi, D Company killed an isolated enemy. His AK47 was captured. Four hours later a platoon of B Company contacted one enemy 1 km north-north-east of the summit of Nui Gang Toi. He was killed and his RPG2 captured. Half an hour later, 11 Platoon D Company shot and killed one Viet Cong and captured his AK47 and pack 1.5 km west of the summit of Nui Gang Toi. At 1505 hours, 5 Platoon B Company 1 km north-east of that summit killed another

enemy soldier who was carrying a grenade. At the same moment, D Company reported that it had found three enemy bodies near an A Company contact area.

On 5 February at 0830 hours 1 km north–west of the site of the major contact on 27 January, D Company contacted five Viet Cong carrying AK47s. Three were killed and one captured. The prisoner was a 32–year–old North Vietnamese Army lieutenant. Australian newspapers published a photograph of him being tied up by one of the assault pioneers attached to the company, Corporal Trent Grail. The photograph, as was the practice, listed Corporal Grail's home town. His parents received a string of abusive phone calls from anti–war protesters, accusing him (because the enemy soldier appeared small in the photo) of being an abuser of Vietnamese children!

### THE C COMPANY BUNKER ACTION (5–7 FEBRUARY)

C Company had been detached from the battalion's command and placed under the command of the Task Force Headquarters in order to provide its local defence. The local defence commander was Major Gerry Salom, an artillery officer who was Second–in–Command of 4th Field Regiment. C Company left the Battalion Command radio net and joined the Task Force base defence net.

During this period, C Company was involved in a major contact 6 km north of Trang Born over a period of three days. Private Clive Swaysland described the action from the perspective of 8 Platoon:

*In the morning of 5 February at about 1015 hours] C Company was moving through a forest along the side of a hill just north of Bien Hoa air base. We were in one up formation and I was the forward scout of the lead section. I was alerted by the sound of chopping off to my left so I called a halt and called the section commander, Corporal Graham Griffiths, forward and he brought the platoon commander, Lt Mark Moloney, with him.*

The platoon commander discussed the situation with Major Chapman who decided that 8 Platoon with elements of the Forward Observer Party and Company Headquarters should go forward to reconnoitre. Private Swaysland continued:

*After discussion it was decided that our section should go ahead and investigate. The company remained on the side of the hill while the section moved down the slope in the direction of the sound until we struck a dry creek at the foot of the hill. The sandy bed of the creek showed signs of recent use by a large number of troops. I signalled enemy and moved into the creek, following it until I came to a path that led up out of the creek. The chopping began again and it was now very close so we continued very cautiously. I saw movement up ahead throughout the trees. I signalled enemy once more, only this time there was a lot more urgency about it. The section deployed silently on each side of the track. A VC soldier*

*came into view carrying an AK47 assault rifle. He was obviously unaware of our presence and did not know what hit him when our machine gunners Bill Henderson and Tony Norris initiated the contact, killing him instantly. No sooner had our firing stopped than we were met by a hail of fire of such intensity and accuracy that we were forced to withdraw in a leapfrog movement. It was made extremely dangerous as there was no substantial cover and we were exposed to automatic weapon and rocket fire. However, we were able to withdraw to the company. As we pulled back through 7 Platoon, I saw Peter 'Slippery' Dowling holding Mick Ayres. Mick had been shot through the chest and he had died almost instantly.*

Lance Corporal Peter 'Slippery' Dowling described the incident:

*During the Tet offensive we made contact with NVA in a well fortified camp on and off over 3 days. We had 1 KIA and approx 20 WIA. When the contact had been initiated I was really frightened by the amount of fire coming our way. Pte M. Ayres was wounded and I tried to put a dressing on him and was forced down by machine gun fire each time. I finally dragged him off the track but he died in my arms. After the contact I was still frightened as we had to go back up again the next day.*

Gunner Mike Williams described the contact:

*We moved into the bunkers where we were all pinned down by heavy fire to our front. There was one main bunker with what sounded like the equivalent of a fifty cal firing at us but above our heads. The trees were falling on us as the heavy machine gun fire was having the same effect as a chain saw on the trees. We were lower than the bunker and the NVA could not depress the gun low enough to cause us casualties, other than Mick Ayres, who was a good fifty metres behind where we were pinned down when he was hit by a stray round in his chest.*

There was a particularly ugly aftermath to Private Ayres' death. In a vicious gesture, anti-Vietnam war protesters phoned his parents and said, 'He got what he deserved'. His parents have this despicable act imprinted on their memory to this day. There were also four other soldiers wounded in the first day of this action.

Private Swaysland continued:

*The company withdrew to some high ground where we dug in. An O Group was called and Massa Clarke, Leon Fitzsimmons and I were asked to attend it and asked if we were prepared to carry out a reconnaissance of the enemy position. We agreed and got rid of everything we did not think we would need, paying particular thought to moving quickly and quietly over the ground. Artillery and airstrikes were called in on the VC position. After they finished pounding it, we moved out of our harbour and made our way to the perimeter of the VC position. We were able to observe VC moving around the camp. They appeared*

*confident, calling out loudly to each other. Quite obviously the air and artillery strikes had not ruffled them. We thought they must be in numbers because if they did not have a numerical advantage they would have made themselves scarce after our first contact. We observed well-constructed bunkers. We reported our findings back to company and artillery was called in on the position throughout the night.*

*The next morning [6 February] after standing-to, the company moved to a staging point from where we could mount an attack on the VC position. We were moving in two up formation with 9 Platoon to the right of 8 Platoon and 7 Platoon just behind and in the centre. About 100 metres from the perimeter of the position, the foliage had been cleared, making it a killing ground. As we broke from cover, 9 Platoon came into contact, killing one VC soldier and wounding another. The VC were waiting for us and we were met by a wall of automatic fire, including the unmistakable deep thump thump thumping of 50 calibre machine guns. George Turner, a 9 Platoon machine gunner, got hit in the lower leg and was calling out for a medic. I watched the medic run forward through the fire. How he wasn't hit was a miracle. It was one of the most unselfish acts of bravery I have ever witnessed. He treated George and I helped to make a stretcher to carry him out through the firing. We got George back to where a Dustoff chopper could winch him out. This was extremely hazardous as the chopper crew took small arms fire during the later Dustoff operation.*

*The company had broken off the fire-fight and had withdrawn to the staging area. We were harassed by VC following us to this staging area. I believe they were trying to find out our strength. Airstrikes were again called in on the position, including napalm runs and bombing runs by Australian Canberra jet bombers. Artillery again pounded the position during the night.*

On the recommendation of the Company Commander and at the Commanding Officer's insistence, C Company reverted to 7 RAR's command on 7 February. Major Alf Garland soon free-dropped much needed ammunition to the company from his helicopter, giving (as one platoon commander said) 'an air of confidence that we were at last back home'. Gunner Mike Williams of the Forward Observer's Party described the actions on that day:

*The first shells landed beyond the NVA and as we started to call the shells closer, Major Graeme Chapman, the Company Commander, ordered us all to pull back a bit so we could re-group. The bullets and shrapnel from the RPGs made movement difficult but we started to inch our way back. I was a bit slow as the radio which had become partly detached from my webbing was giving me trouble. I had to climb over a tree which had been knocked over and just as I reached the other side I felt a tremendous whack to the head – a bit like being thumped on the footy field but a lot harder. Everything went black but I do not know whether I was knocked out or momentarily stunned. After I realised I*

*could move and stopped the flow of blood a little I was by myself. I yelled out and located John Phillips and someone else about 30 metres to my rear. Tony Keech, the mortar bloke, was off to one side of John and in a slight depression. In front I could see the bunkers where the fire was coming from. Bullets were ripping through the undergrowth and I can distinctly remember a succession of RPGs detonate in the trees to my right, not the bright flashes of the movies but dirty brown explosions. I could not move back or forward, so I just hung on in there passing the coordinates John was calling out to the Battery and listening to the shells coming in. We called them in so close we asked for delayed action fuses to reduce the risk of shrapnel to ourselves from tree bursts. I told the Battery I had been hit and to double-check the coordinates I gave them as I was not feeling very well and the rounds were landing very close. I estimated the closest shells landed about 30 metres to my front. The small arms fire was deafening and never let up. It was about this time that the Battery Commander (Major Paul Jones) came up on the radio net and asked for a situation report. I was not very polite when I asked him to get off the net.*

*After half an hour I developed a painful backache, paralysis set in down my right side and I had a great deal of trouble with the chomper ants who liked the taste of my blood. Eventually the shells started to slow the NVA down and, when I sensed a lull in the shooting, I started to move towards Tony Keech. He pulled me into his depression and bandaged me up as best he could. The shells were still roaring in and as the small arms fire diminished further I belly-shuffled to John Phillips where we continued to call in fire. John was marching the pattern up and down which I am sure took a great toll on the NVA. 7 Platoon were called up to go through and clear out the bunkers, I passed my radio set to a new bloke who was on his first operation and slithered back to where the wounded were being gathered in a large depression. As darkness fell the NVA broke off the contact and bugged out.*

*It was the heaviest and longest contact I had been involved in, lasting most of the afternoon.*

Private Swaysland continued:

*I gave Griffio covering fire, then I scurried back. A soldier next to me said he had been shot in the back and I had a look and found a spent round protruding from his back. He had lost some blood and would need a new shirt but he was OK. I gave him the round and told him to keep it for luck.*

Corporal Griffith's part in this action was summarised in the citation for his Military Medal, which read in part:

*Corporal Griffiths directed the fire of the rest of his section and twice exposed*

*himself to enemy fire so that the wounded could be evacuated. He then volunteered to indicate the well hidden bunkers to the follow up assault force so that they could be neutralised.*

The citation noted his complete disregard for his own safety and the inspiration he gave his men, setting an example of resolute and courageous leadership.

Private Swaysland continued:

*It was decided to call in an airstrike to try and take the initiative away from the VC. They were extremely confident and were mocking our shouted commands and also shouting insults at us from their bunkers. We threw smoke for the airstrike and, with the VC counter-attack stepping up, the strike was ordered into the smoke no more than 20 feet away. The ground shook as the planes attacked. Shrapnel was screaming through the air and the noise of the aircraft climbing steeply away after strafing and firing their rockets was deafening.*

*Hooky Hughes and Bert Baayens, an 8 Platoon machine gun team, were just off to my right and getting plenty of attention from the VC gunners. Hooky and Bert kept hammering away at them until their gun was destroyed by rocket and machine-gun fire. Bert was badly wounded (he had been hit in the head) and I asked Hooky if I could help him to get Bert out. He told me he would be OK. It wasn't until after the contact that I found out Hooky was also seriously wounded. John Sargent, the 8 Platoon radio operator, had been wounded and his radio knocked out. Lt Mark Moloney, the 8 Platoon Commander, collected all the M72 rocket launchers he could and single handedly attacked bunkers until he was unable to carry on because of wounds sustained during his assaults. This was one of the greatest acts of individual bravery I witnessed on the day.*

Gunner Mike Williams's bravery resulted in an award of a Military Medal. His citation in part read:

*At about 1400 hours Gunner Williams was seriously wounded in the head but still remained at his post, passing fire orders which resulted in most effective artillery fire which was a major factor in ensuring the final success of the assault. Once the position became relatively stable a replacement for Gunner Williams was brought forward but even then Gunner Williams remained on duty until he was satisfied the replacement had been fully briefed and communications were still open. Only then did Gunner Williams seek medical attention.*

Private Chris Seymour described a further incident:

*The company was suffering casualties in 8 and 9 Platoons. Corporal Roy Savage was on the left side of a VC machine gun fire lane with a bunker commanding the area. Roy and Cpl Bob McFarlane (8 Platoon) made plans to take out the bunker, Roy up one side, Bob up the other, myself and another gunner from 8 Platoon giving covering fire. Roy moved up half way and propped. Bob was to move but*

*said, 'You're half way, you can go the rest'. Roy did and dived over the bunker and dropped a grenade as he went. That started the clearing of the rest of the camp.*

Private Swaysland continued:

*Massa [Clarke] and Graham Steele, along with quite a few other wounded, were being pulled back for Dustoff. The VC were starting to break out of their bunkers and retreat. What was left of us [9 Platoon] started to form up for a last attack on the bunkers. However, 7 Platoon took over this task and swept over us and cleared the area just before last light. We had been in contact for most of the day. Peter Dowling told me afterwards that when 7 Platoon swept over our position he was surprised that any of us were still alive. We were spread through the VC bunkers, and after standing my watch, I curled up beside a bamboo mat with my arm draped loosely over it.*

*The next morning, I decided to inspect the bamboo mat I had slept beside. I lifted an end and a foot fell out. The Platoon Sergeant of 8 Platoon, Paddy Craig, Leon Fitzsimmons and I attached toggle ropes to it and pulled the VC soldier's body out of the bunker. I breathed a sigh of relief that it was not booby trapped. Some of us were put to work clearing a helipad to fly in an engineer team to blow up the bunker system. A team of high-ranking officers also came in and inspected the area. The bunker system itself was huge and well constructed. Each bunker had fire lanes cleverly cut so they would be undetectable to an attacking force. The system was expertly designed and easy to defend.*

*We captured a large cache of enemy weapons including machine guns, assault rifles, rifles, recoilless rifles, rockets, grenades, ammunition, clocks, papers, money, a large amount of rice and assorted food items.*

The use of napalm on the third day followed the Commanding Officer's practice of employing this weapon as close as possible to friendly troops to stabilise the situation. In this instance, he felt that the napalm strike concluded the action. The 75 mm recoilless rifle had six flechette rounds ready when it was captured. If the assault and its fire support had not kept the enemy from firing these captured US rounds, very much heavier casualties would have been suffered.

The Commander's Diary of the 1st Australian Task Force rather cryptic description of this action is, 'After calling in artillery and airstrikes to 100 metres and light fire teams to 25 metres, the enemy withdrew leaving 2 VC KIA and a 75 mm RCL'.

Lieutenant Mark Moloney felt strongly that the inspiring leadership of the Company Commander (Major Graham Chapman) saved many lives in this action. He praised the Company Sergeant Major (Warrant Officer Class Two Ted Lewis) who had looked after the casualties and distributed ammunition throughout. He remembered that the medic and stretcher bearers had won the praise of all the company for their devotion to their job in those hazardous circumstances, particularly



when one of them was himself wounded. He praised the thirteen soldiers of 8 Platoon who were in the fight. Characteristically, he made no mention of his own bravery.

This was a significant battle. There was good evidence that most of a North Vietnamese Army regiment had occupied the bunker system. Private Seymour wrote after the engagement:

*In searching the camp we found documents and personal letters. They showed that there had been about three companies in the camp. They were the HQ Company, Support Company and a rifle company of a North Vietnamese Army regiment. Brigadier Hughes flew in to take a look that afternoon. When he arrived and did a cook's tour he said, his exact words, 'My God, I didn't know what you were up against. But your determination prevailed and you won. Congratulations on a job well done. You can all be proud of this achievement and showing the spirit of fighting Australians'.*

While this battle had not resulted in Australian casualties<sup>4</sup> to the extent of the Battle of Long Tan or of Suoi Chau Pha and did not last as long as the Battle of CORAL, it was nevertheless one of the more significant engagements during Australia's war in Vietnam. Its story would have been more evident if it had not taken place among the confusion of Tet. C Company fought a long and hard battle: they won it because of their tenacity and the volume and accuracy of the extensive fire support used.

There were a series of contacts on 6 February. In mid-morning, 12 Platoon D Company captured a wounded Viet Cong 2 km west of Nui Gang Toi. Twenty minutes later the Fire Assault Platoon contacted four Viet Cong 1.5 km north-west of Nui Gang Toi and killed one of them, capturing a Chinese machine gun. Private 'Jock' McKay, a machine gunner from this platoon described a contact later that day:

*I was in an ambush with the platoon alongside a track. My 2IC and I were behind an anthill in sapling growth. The track was in good condition indicating recent use. We saw a group in black coming along the track. As they came I thought, I was first in line and I had to hit them. The adrenalin was going as I waited for the Corporal to initiate the contact. Then I saw the bloody clowns discussing the claymore. I felt that for God's sake they had to initiate before the VC spotted us. The firing started. I concentrated on my group – where the hell were they – like ghosts – got to have a hit – shit, they have lined us up – M60 jammed – shit, not jammed, gas cylinder bracket shot off. Incredibility – no bodies in front of us – we're all OK after all that brass they threw at us. A later patrol discovered blood trails but no bodies. Bill Fogarty subsequently got 1 VC KIA while fixing a claymore.*

3 RAR relieved 7 RAR from its participation in COBURG on 10 February. At the same time 106th Field Battery was replaced by 161st Field Battery. This was claimed to be the first time in the war in Vietnam that an Australian battalion had been relieved

in the field by a sister battalion. However, A Company was left to continue the defence of Fire Support Patrol Base HARRISON until it returned to Nui Dat on 13 February.

The results of the operation were encouraging to the battalion. Thirty-six enemy were confirmed killed and 52 others were likely fatal casualties. Some 30 weapons of many types were captured as well as a large quantity of ammunition and equipment.

The battalion Intelligence Officer, Captain Roger Pettit, viewed the operation as essentially falling into two parts: the enemy movement to their areas to attack the American installations and the actions during their planned attack. The contacts prior to 3 January gave some early warning of the events to follow. These initial heavy contacts by the battalion effectively prevented a large part of the planned attack against Long Binh.

During this operation, the Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant, Warrant Officer Class One Pat Sheddick, decided to take action on his own. He got himself into the crew of a US helicopter as a door gunner and took part in several airborne missions. He was awarded the US Air Medal for Valor for his bravery in those actions.

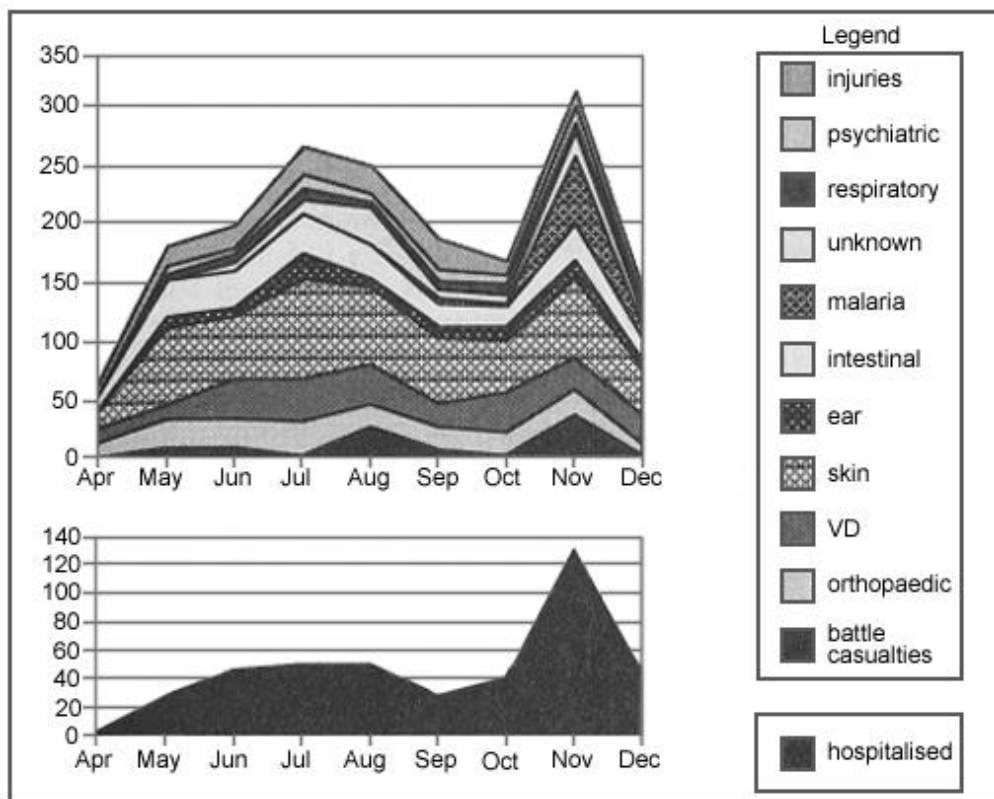
After the operation the Commanding Officer had several recommendations to make. He felt that the operation was interesting and successful. The enemy had been well armed and well trained. He remarked that the RPG family was the enemy's most potent weapons and felt that we should look at the M72 critically with a view to developing a better weapon. He felt that our section tactics in engagements where rockets were used needed to be revised. Once again the need for a small radio communicating from platoons to their sections was shown. He concluded by stating that ambushing is a highly developed infantry skill that deserved more emphasis in training. He noted that the success of an ambush is directly related to its siting and the weight of fire that could be brought to bear into the chosen killing ground.

At the end of COBURG, the Commanding General of II Field Force Vietnam, General Frederick C. Weyand, signalled the Commander of the 1st Australian Task Force:

*Upon the termination of Operation Coburg, please accept my highest commendation and appreciation for the exceptional performance of the 1st ATF in defeating the enemy's Tet offensive attacks against the critically important Bien Hoa -Long Binh complex. The action in discovering the movement of the 274 and 275 Regiments into their attack positions, the subsequent disruption of their attacks and the way-laying of the enemy forces as they withdrew were key factors in his defeat and reflect great credit upon the officers and men of your fine command; well done.*

## TET IN SAIGON

A normal task of the battalion was to provide a guard for the Australian billets in Saigon



**Figure 6.2** Medical chart 1967

(nicknamed the 'Hotel Canberra') in rotation with other units. The task during Tet was 7 RAR's. The guard was commanded by Warrant Officer Class Two Keith Smith. One of his guard sergeants, Bob May, recalled what happened:

*There were two guards sent from 7 RAR for the normal rotation of guards from the battalions at Nui Dat. My guard was positioned in the sandbag 'pill boxes' out front. At approx 2030 hours we were confronted by approx 40 enemy. I was in the closest bunker to them with Private Clement. We opened fire, killed one, the others retreated around a corner. We killed another that fired an RPG at us about 60 minutes later. The contact was unexpected as the streets were crowded with Vietnamese civilians and White Mice [Vietnamese Military Police]. Once the firing commenced all appeared calm until after the adrenalin stopped pumping. It is interesting to note that the guard duration ended up being three weeks rather than the planned ten days.*

The soldier who had killed the Viet Cong rocketeer was a 7 RAR cook, Private 'Pop' Fraser Clement. He held off a Viet Cong attack with his L2A1 despite weapon stoppages. He fired because he saw the Viet Cong bringing the RPG into action. The

round was fired and skidded down the road towards the hotel but did not explode. He said afterwards, 'I knew when I saw him lift up that drainpipe that he wasn't coming round to fix the plumbing'.

The RMO, Captain Tony 'Doc' Williams, left the battalion during Operation COBURG at the completion of his tour. 'Doc' treated all his patients as if they were civilians in an Australian general practice surgery. He saw an average of 40 patients each day. He had the highest tally of flying hours in the battalion, flying every day that the unit was on operations. He treated Australians, South Vietnamese, Americans, Viet Cong and even the battalion tracker dogs. His detailed charting of the medical statistics within the battalion were always of particular interest. The figure shows the main chart that he kept up-to-date until the end of his tour.

The peak battle casualties in August (Suoi Chau Pha) and November (the C Company action) are clear. It can also be seen that the number of those affected by sicknesses, particularly malaria, was much higher than the battle casualties. The numbers hospitalised were similarly much higher than the number of battle casualties. Malaria seriously sapped the unit's strength. Captain Williams argued that the problem was caused by the ineffectiveness of the suppressants being taken rather than soldiers not taking their tablets or other precautions. It would appear that his argument prevailed after 7 RAR departed, when an additional anti-malarial treatment (Dapsone) was added over the time of worst threat. The peak illness rate in November, when the medical officer recorded over 300 illnesses, was a very good indication of the low number of soldiers who could be deployed on operations.

# 7

## Oakleigh to the End of the Tour

*Twelve months of operations in South Vietnam had engendered in most diggers a healthy respect for the protection afforded by a good stout tree.*

Lance Corporal Syd Cole  
7 RAR

### OPERATION OAKLEIGH

The 1st Australian Task Force planned to cordon the village of Hoa Long on 15 and 16 February to allow it to be searched on 17 February. 7 RAR's task was to provide the cordon. To do this it had 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit (with the Task Force Defence and Employment Platoon) and 1 SAS Squadron, as well as a troop of A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment, under its operational control. D Company was 'left out of battle' at Nui Dat. At last light, A Company, 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit and 1 SAS Squadron approached the village on foot along Route 2 and cordoned the north and east. C, B and Support Companies approached along the engineer road and provided the south and west parts of the cordon. All cordon elements dug in.

There had been contacts and incidents with the Viet Cong in and near Hoa Long every few days in early February, culminating in a clash which killed two ARVN soldiers on 13 February. The cordon around this large village was therefore established using section posts rather than two man positions because of the assessed enemy threat. This left gaps between sections of about 140 m. At this separation, it was impossible for a section commander to coordinate fire on an approaching enemy group. Once again, the need for at least a pool of short range radios for such situations was demonstrated. It was also difficult to control these gaps because there were few starlight scopes. All troops in the cordon dug 'shell scrapes'

(shallow defensive trenches) which provided some protection from enemy rockets or grenades and from friendly fire from adjacent positions in contact with the enemy.

The night of 15 February was uneventful, as was the next morning. As the 2 RAR search progressed, it became clear that there were a considerable number of Viet Cong in the village. Just after midday, the Support Company cordon position on the west of the village had two Viet Cong, one of whom was armed, surrender to it as they unsuccessfully tried to break the cordon. They had been disturbed by 2 RAR mortar fire in an area of thick timber west of the village. They were identified as members of the C41 Chau Duc District Company and stated that there were at least a further ten Viet Cong in the village.

There were further attempts to break out on the night of 16 February. At 1940 hours, the headquarters of Support Company heard rattling of the village perimeter wire. It was very dark and one figure was seen at a range of 2 m, fired on by Sergeant Tony Keech, and was killed. His rifle was captured. There was probably a group of enemy there and although a claymore was fired, no others were found. At 2155 hours the B Company cordon on the north-west was approached by three Viet Cong from outside the village. One enemy soldier was killed and his AK47 captured.

Half an hour later, the A Company cordon on the south-east had a group of at least ten enemy attempt to break out of the village. The sentry of 9 Section 3 Platoon, which had a strength that evening of seven, heard noises on the wire about 50 m south of his position. He woke up his machine gunner, Private Roger Gentle, who opened fire on the middle of the Viet Cong group. Another soldier in the section, Private John 'Finny' Finn, described Private Gentle's actions as those of a man 'who never took a backward step during a two hour contact'.

The acting platoon commander, Sergeant John Sexton, moved to 9 Section's position and controlled artillery fire being coordinated by the company forward observer. The enemy returned small arms and RPG fire, with two RPG rounds falling into the section position without causing casualties and a third blowing a gap in the wire. The section then swept the area twice, finding two bodies and the signs of two more having been dragged away. Lance Corporal Parker, the section commander, commanded his soldiers confidently throughout the engagement.

At 2140 hours B Company engaged a group of three or four Viet Cong who were trying to enter the village. One enemy, who was almost in the section position, was killed. The others returned fire with AK47s and withdrew. At midnight, Corporal Arnold 'Sunshine' Moylan's section of 4 Platoon B Company fired on six to eight Viet Cong inside the cordon. The enemy had been seen through a starlight scope. Fire was opened at a range of 20 m and B Company fired claymores and small arms. The enemy replied with several RPG2 rockets and AK47s. Although some Viet Cong were seen to be hit, none was found when the area was searched. Sporadic fire continued

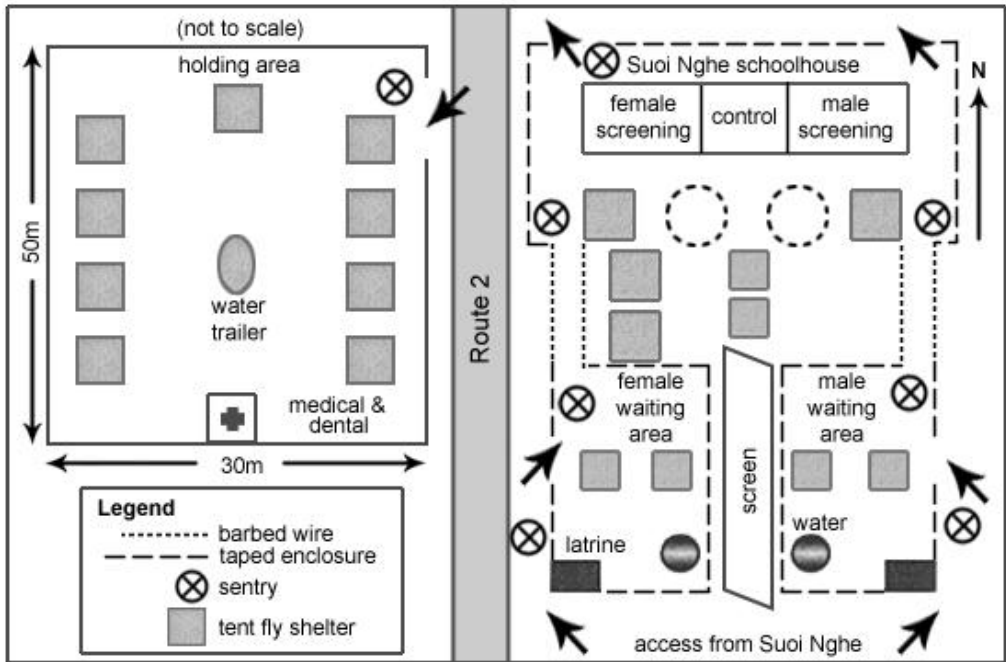
for most of the night. At 0300 hours, 7 Platoon (commanded by Lieutenant Jim Langler) and Company Headquarters of C Company on the south-west fired at a group of three or four Viet Cong who were trying to break through the cordon. They had crawled under the village perimeter wire and approached the cordon, one confidently smoking a cigarette. Fire had to be held until the Viet Cong had passed the cordon so that safe arcs of fire between adjacent positions could be ensured. Fire was opened at 50–70 metres with M79s and M16s. One enemy was killed and his pistol and an M1 carbine recovered. Private Chris Seymour described the action:

*We were digging in and preparing for anything that was to come during the night. From the start of darkness till first light the sounds of battle were in the air. Tracer filled the air like stars. It all seemed to be coming from the other side of the village. Then the sound of firing from our next pit. I looked up and with an automatic action brought my rifle up to my shoulder, followed the line of firing and opened up. Paddy [Craig] was firing a[n] [M]79 and in the burst of the grenade I saw what I was firing at. One VC was running out, then all of a sudden he disappeared. All firing stopped and we settled down for the night again. At first light we went out. We searched through the paddies and found him dead. He had tried to take refuge behind the bund but shrapnel had hit him in the head. He was an officer, carrying two weapons, documents and tax money.*

During the rest of the operation A and B Companies killed a further three enemy soldiers on the outskirts of the village. In all, the 1st Australian Task Force operation killed ten Viet Cong, captured four and caused 35 enemy agents and 41 suspects to be detained. The Commanding Officer felt that better results might have been obtained if there had been more troops available for the cordon.

## **OPERATION DANDENONG**

The purpose of Operation DANDENONG was to conduct a cordon and search of the village of Suoi Nghe on 18 and 19 February. A and D Companies remained at Nui Dat during this operation. B and C Companies moved by armoured personnel carriers from Nui Dat to a perimeter on the south and north of the village respectively at last light on 18 February and dug into their positions. The whole operation was facilitated by the regular layout of the village, which was the resettled population of Slope 30. Battalion Headquarters flew in to a control position the next morning by RAAF Iroquois to meet a Support Company convoy of stores which was to set up a screening centre. The centre was ready to operate by 0900 hours and was manned by intelligence personnel from 1st Australian Task Force and Vietnamese Government officials. B and C Companies then swept through the village, gently moving the inhabitants to the screening centre. They then returned to the village to search it in detail. Although there were no incidents in the cordon and no finds during



**Figure 7.1** Operation DANDENONG: schematic layout of Screening Centre

the search, the screening process found 37 persons with identity card irregularities as well as seven draft dodgers and nineteen suspected Viet Cong. The report after the operation called it 'a simple operation which was completed without incident'.

**OPERATION CLAYTON**

CLAYTON was a Task Force operation to cordon and search Long Dien village on 20 and 21 February. It was the largest cordon and search operation undertaken by the battalion so far in its tour of duty and, indeed the largest mounted by the Task Force. The district capital of Long Dien had a population of about 9000 at the time of the search (although it had normally been up to 14 000) and was the economic hub of the province. Army of the Republic of Vietnam efforts to dislodge formed bodies of the



enemy from the village during and after Tet had caused damage by airstrikes and looting (by the ARVN) particularly in the southern part of the village. Since the Tet Offensive, there had been constant enemy harassment of the village with destruction of government installations, and almost nightly contact with Viet Cong groups of squad to platoon size near the Regional Force and Popular Force posts to the south of Route 23. There had been contact with groups of enemy in this area on the two mornings prior to the operation.

As Viet Cong had been dressing in government uniforms, special care was taken to ensure that all South Vietnamese troops remained confined to their posts during the operation. The cordoning of the village was achieved by 2 RAR with A Company of 7 RAR under its command and was put in position on the afternoon of 20 February. Support Company and an engineer troop then began the construction of a screening centre outside the village. C and D Companies occupied blocking positions to the south-east of the village on 20 February. The screening centre was completed on the morning of 21 February. The search of the village was then undertaken by clearing the village of its inhabitants by moving them through the processing centre. A sweep through the village was then made by A, C and D Companies from south to north to ensure that it was unoccupied. All 7 RAR companies then took part in a methodical area by area search of the village.

The screening centre processed about 5200 people. Despite intelligence indications prior to the operation, no contacts with the enemy occurred. Thirty-two suspects, 45 draft dodgers, six deserters, six South Vietnamese soldiers absent without leave, an illegal resident and 59 persons without identity cards were detained by government authorities. As was the practice on all cordon operations, as much opportunity as possible was taken to compensate for the inconvenience caused to the inhabitants by providing medical and other help during the screening. In this case, the battalion provided two medical officers to visit sick inhabitants and to provide ad hoc treatment.

This cordon and search was a routine operation. Although the results appeared to be disappointing, the Viet Cong infrastructure in the village was probably weakened and the villagers' confidence in the authority of the government boosted.

On 23 February, B Company took part in a company operation called MILDURA. It moved to the province capital, Baria, to relieve a company of 2 RAR which had been positioned there since the Viet Cong incursion into the town at Tet. The company was sited in a dug-in defensive position in the surrounding padi fields. On 28 February, 6 Platoon (commanded by Second Lieutenant Ian Cameron) was sent to the village of Long Dien in armoured personnel carriers together with an engineer tunnel searching team. They were acting on information from civilians that there were Viet Cong hiding in a small group of houses. Eight houses were cordoned. The search revealed one Viet Cong hiding in a haystack. A brick and concrete entrance to a bunker was found. Captain Geoff Boscoe, an officer from the Task Force Intelligence Unit,

squeezed through the small bunker entrance and saw one Viet Cong. One surrendered. Another, an officer, tried to throw a grenade but it bounced back in to the bunker and exploded, killing him and wounding a third enemy.

On 28 February, which was Private Chris Seymour's birthday, he wrote during a C Company operation:

*Today was just like any other day and I couldn't celebrate. Lunch was a can of pineapple pieces and ham pieces. That night in a harbour position 7 Platoon moved out on an ambush some three hundred metres away. The blokes in one of the sections were in area defence and the VC walked in on them. The bloke who was supposed to be on picket was asleep but another bloke woke up and saw them coming. He just wasn't quick enough. The VC sprung the ambush and threw a grenade. The rear section opened up but the VC evaded. When the grenade exploded it wounded Kelaher. It wasn't real bad but bad enough, he was hit in the shoulder, chest and abdomen. They took him to Vung Tau hospital. That was the last we saw of him. He was taken back to Australia.*

In the late morning of 13 March, 2 km east of Binh Ba, 10 Platoon D Company, which was patrolling the area, contacted a group of woodcutters in a free fire zone which was a prohibited access area for civilians. They behaved suspiciously and were engaged by the patrol. One was killed and the other wounded, but he died on the helicopter that evacuated him.

## OPERATION ASHGROVE TRAM

Operation ASHGROVE TRAM, on 25 and 26 March, was a 2 RAR operation to cordon Long Hai and search it. Long Hai was predominantly a fishing village of about 5000 persons. The orders for the operation noted the expected departure of the fishing fleet at 0400 hours. They also reported that there were two hotels in the village that were conspicuously (and suspiciously) untouched by the war. It was stated that the village was not the place to spend one's R&C at this stage.

A Company of 7 RAR was placed under the command of 2 RAR for this operation. A Company took as many of the 1 RAR Advance Party (which had arrived on 18 March) with it as it could. It was suspected that Viet Cong who had been driven down from the adjacent Long Hai Mountains may have hidden in this village. A Company, which flew into the area on the afternoon of 25 March, provided the cordon together with a troop of armoured personnel carriers on the south-east of the village. Lieutenant Lucaci recorded a warning to the villagers in French to tell them what was expected of them during the operation. The cordon passed without incident. The search of the village was made by 2 RAR on the following day. They detained nine Viet Cong suspects and found 106 draft dodgers or soldiers who were

absent without leave and 80 persons with irregular identity cards. All these persons were detained by the Vietnamese authorities.

On 28 March, the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Daly, visited the battalion and dedicated a memorial cairn outside Battalion Headquarters to the sixteen soldiers of the battalion killed in action. The brass plate from that cairn is now located outside the headquarters of 5/7 RAR at Holsworthy.

## **OPERATION WOOLGOOLGA**

Operation WOOLGOOLGA (named after the home town of the Officer Commanding A Company) on 28 and 29 March was aimed at searching in detail an area of jungle measuring 2 km by 1 km, known by the Viet Cong as the Cay Den Jungle, which was situated about 1 km south-east of the centre of Hoa Long. This area had been searched before without any success. The operation was undertaken by A Company with 2 Troop of A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment, a combat engineer team from 1st Field Squadron. There were also two intelligence detachments: one from the South Vietnamese 10th Military Intelligence Detachment, commanded by Captain Le Ba Trung, a friend of Major O'Donnell, and the other from the 1st Division Intelligence Unit. The operation was undertaken because 10th Military Intelligence Detachment had received information from a prisoner that Viet Cong were hiding in this area. The prisoner was brought on the operation and he was able to guide the Australian troops. It was the battalion's first attempt to find a static hidden enemy.

On the early morning of 28 March, A Company met the other elements of the force in the Hoa Long marketplace, planned the operation and issued the orders for it. The plan was to cordon the north, west and south of the area using 2 Troop and 1 and 2 Platoons of A Company. The area was then to be searched in detail from south to north by 3 Platoon, along with the engineers and the intelligence detachments. The ground to the east was open padi and could be effectively covered by fire from the cordon. The force left Hoa Long at 0930 hours and, after some problems with bogged armoured personnel carriers, the cordon was positioned successfully by 1045 hours. 3 Platoon, commanded by Second Lieutenant Wayne Bannon, commenced searching by forming up two sections abreast and moving forward in line. With their usual dash they covered the first 400 m in about ten minutes and reported that it was clear. Dai Uy (Vietnamese for Captain) Trung and his soldiers watched this with amusement. Trung then asked if his men could demonstrate how to search the area properly. He went back to the start line and his soldiers demonstrated their technique to 3 Platoon and the engineers. They showed how to search barefoot, with toes wriggled through the soil to discern the subtle changes that marked the tops of hides.

The search was started all over again. Confidence increased when a Moison-Nagant rifle wrapped in cloth was found only a few metres from the start line. After

about 40 m a camouflaged trapdoor was located on the ground. The engineer detachment commander, Sergeant 'Snow' Wilson, attached a line and slowly lifted the door. There was a chilling moment when a hand reached out, placed an M26 grenade on the ground, and pulled the trapdoor down again. The company all hit the ground. As soon as the grenade exploded, a Viet Cong jumped out of the hide and sprinted away into the undergrowth. Major O'Donnell and Lieutenant Bannon both fired and hit him. His body was found about 30 m away. The grenade wounded two members of 10th Military Intelligence Detachment and a returnee. The Viet Cong's companion who remained in the hole was killed by grenades and his pistol recovered. A few minutes later in the cordon, 1 Platoon spotted an armed Viet Cong and captured him after a brief exchange of fire. He was identified by 10th Military Intelligence Detachment as the platoon commander of the *Long Phuoc* (a hamlet in Hoa Long) *Guerillas*.

At 1410 hours 3 Platoon found another hide with two Viet Cong in it. They were killed by small arms fire. The prisoner earlier taken by 1 Platoon joined the search and led 3 Platoon to a further hide where two enemy surrendered. They were identified as a member of the *Baria Province Finance and Economy Committee* and a member of the *Vung Tau Chinese Proselytising Committee*. Their weapons (a pistol and a sub-machine gun) were captured. A further hide was discovered at 1630 hours. There were three enemy in it and an attempt was made by 10th Military Intelligence Detachment to induce them to surrender. This attempt failed and the hide was engaged with small arms. During the firing, a woman attempted to surrender but she was wounded by one of the enemy. The other two Viet Cong were killed. By 1800 hours the company had taken up ambush positions. Two hours later, 2 Platoon saw a group of Viet Cong but could not fire on them because elements of 2 RAR, who were involved in searching the village of Long Dien to the south as part of Operation PINAROO, were close to the line of fire.

The search was renewed the next morning. Several hides and six weapons were found as well as a further two killed Viet Cong. They had been killed the day before when a grenade had been dropped into their hide in an anthill. There had been so much dust raised that their bodies had not been noticed until the next morning's search. When the cordoned area had been completely combed, the prisoner indicated the position of a hide outside the cordon. It was found to be a tunnel entrance in a banana clump. A female Viet Cong from the *Long Phouc Party Chapter* was found wounded in the tunnel and evacuated by Dustoff for hospital treatment.

3 Platoon developed a good rapport with the supporting South Vietnamese forces in this operation, picking up their search techniques particularly well. Unfortunately the Platoon Commander, Second Lieutenant Wayne Bannon, was wounded on the second day of this operation when he fired a grenade at a hide in an anthill and was hit by a ricocheting piece of shrapnel. The wound in his abdomen was

serious enough to cause his evacuation to Australia. He had commanded the platoon since its forming at Puckapunyal.

This brief operation showed that the combination of good battle intelligence and cooperation produced very good results: there were four Viet Cong captured and six killed. The result of work with 10th Military Intelligence Detachment was heartening. The detailed search of an area 400 m by 300 m took 40 troops five hours. This operation again dealt a considerable blow to the Viet Cong infrastructure in Hoa Long. Captain Trung was delighted but complained that the Australians seemed to spend too much time on far-flung operations in corners of the province, when better results may have come from destroying the Viet Cong infrastructure in the villages and exploiting the up-to-date intelligence that could be gained from prisoners.

A Company continued to be involved in searching for Viet Cong cadre and infrastructure members close to the village of Hoa Long. The bund surrounding the village had been avoided during the tour because it was full of unmarked mines and booby traps. It occurred to Major Jake O'Donnell that it was the logical place for the Viet Cong to have their hides, especially as they knew that we avoided the area. Before the search was begun, the company took the precaution of burning the long grass and thorn thickets along the bund to expose any mines or tunnel entrances. On 10 March a 30 m long tunnel complex was discovered in the scrub west of the village. This tunnel, when searched for five hours by an engineer mini team, was found to be vile-smelling and infested with spiders, insects and a krait snake. The tunnel also had twenty small bombs and several hundred rounds of small arms ammunition concealed in it. It was blown up. A Company also found two smaller tunnels and nine hides capable of concealing groups of between two and six enemy soldiers. These hides, which were also destroyed, contained medical supplies, rice, mines and ammunition.

During March, joint patrols were held with both 7 RAR and 1 RAR soldiers. In one of these, on the northern outskirts of Baria on 20 March, Private Mick Shreeve was involved in a difficult fire fight:

*After stand-down I went to a weapon pit to talk to a mate from 1 RAR. Shots were fired from houses surrounding half our position. We were on a search and destroy and protection of the minefield from Dat Do. We had two M113s present, dug in. There was continuous fire for more than three hours. No support fire was possible. We killed an old man and a girl. The M113 had to resupply a forward pit during the action. I was pleased to have survived.*

Private Delville 'Sticks' Stickland told of his last patrol in Vietnam:

*My last patrol was on 23rd March which was 16 days before we were to depart for home. It was a listening post just at the end of Luscombe Airfield at Nui Dat. We were only about three kilometres out. During the day we found a good*

*camping spot and set up camp. We had a swim in the river nearby, read books and of course played cards.*

*Night had come and we had fortunately set up all our trip flares and put out our claymore mines. About 11 pm the Viet Cong decided to drop mortars on to our location, after which they decided to attack. We used all but a few rounds of ammunition. Gee, it's scary knowing the Viet Cong are out there when you are running out of ammunition. During the evening I was hit in the arm by a piece of shrapnel. I really did not know much about it as we were so frightened. What saved us? We were able to call the artillery in, on and around our position. At first light Dustoff came in and transported me to hospital.*

Lance Corporal Syd Cole of D Company told about one of the final patrols in the battalion sector of the tactical area of operational responsibility surrounding the Nui Dat base on 29 March:

*After the cessation of major ops, overnight patrols were initiated in the vicinity of the camp at Nui Dat. These five man patrols were viewed with dismay as the date for embarkation on the Sydney drew near. Three days before the battalion was due to be relieved by 1 RAR, I was called in for an orders group and instructed to report, together with four members of the platoon, at 1700 hr with the equipment necessary for a night fighting patrol. It was necessary to move into the overnight position just on dark in order to minimise the chance of observation. The patrol arrived at the nominated place on the map and I selected what we hoped was a not too obvious clump of trees for the harbour position. While offering only minimal protection, they gave us a sense of security in the relatively open country of that area. Twelve months of ops in SVN had engendered in most diggers a healthy respect for the protection afforded by a good stout tree.*

*The men moved quickly now, in an often rehearsed drill, as they cleared sufficient space to lay a groundsheet, pegged out claymores and ensured weapons and ammunition were in position before complete darkness enveloped everything. The hours until dawn had been divided by five and the first sentry positioned himself behind the machine gun. The luminous watch was essential but not so the pocket transistor and earpiece I passed over. However, we were in a relatively safe area and it might be an aid to wakefulness. The men were now left to their own thoughts; most surely turned to that day three weeks or so away, when the converted aircraft carrier would dock in Sydney Harbour and waiting would be parents, girlfriends, wives.*

*I was alerted by a whisper and became wide awake instantly as a footfall, slow and hesitant, disturbed the leaves some distance to the left. It was pitch black and the familiar sensations of the adrenalin rush made my fingertips tingle. The air was charged with expectancy when the snort of a buffalo and the trampling of the undergrowth indicated its slow progress towards us.*

*The relief was almost perceptible and everyone sighed as the footsteps lumbered slowly off in another direction.*

*Some sort of prescience jerked me to wakefulness, probably some hours later, in time to hear a burst of automatic fire and some strangled cries. 'What's happening?' I waited, nerves taunt, for some response. A voice, 5 or 10 metres in front, shouted 'Uc Dai Loi, number one, I am your friend'. He might have said more but a burst from the M60 silenced him. Brian Tulip had moved in behind it. Nobody had wanted to risk a grenade being lobbed in among us at this stage. There was no more firing now and somebody said 'Roger's hit'. I crawled over and asked him how he was. 'I've been hit in the upper arm.' He was still with us. I instinctively felt for the shell dressing in my shirt pocket—God, this would be the one night when I did not put it in. Not one of the five of us had a dressing. I tried, in the dark, to feel the extent of his injuries. It was bleeding but did not feel as though the bone was broken. It was unbelievably dark and, in my imagination, he was going to bleed to death, right there in front of me. I tried to locate his pressure point but the wound obscured it. The radio procedure seemed interminably slow; I could not see Gidman die, not with 2 or 3 days to go. I got on the radio and stated baldly that we had got a man hit, maybe badly, and we needed assistance. I knew that there was a patrol with a medic only 1000m or so away. I begged and blustered. We were told that the patrol would come to our location. Relief! Gidman did not seem to be getting any worse. He was in pain but remained conscious. It seemed an age until we got a message from the other patrol that they were in our vicinity. A few stage whispered calls and the medic was there, able to shine a torch and bind up the wound. Apparently it had missed the artery. I cannot remember how they got him back into the camp; I think they RV'd [rendezvoused] with a vehicle nearby, but I saw him a couple of days later with his arm in plaster, looking as large as life. He was flying out that day.*

*I don't imagine we slept much for the remainder of the night but it was quiet anyway. We were told that the intelligence people would be out for the VC in the morning so we tied him up in a poncho. He was in his mid twenties with a fine profile. The back of his head was gone. A photograph in his top pocket showed a woman and a young boy. I wondered if his wife would hear the circumstances of his death. She probably would have been there as there had been two, probably three, in their patrol. We heard later that he was an officer in D445 Battalion and had probably been on recreation leave in the local village. A man not too different from ourselves.*

Private Gidman was the last 7 RAR soldier on this tour of duty to be wounded in action. His recollection was:

*When the contact was over Snowy [Richards] applied a dressing to my arm and was wondering where all the blood was coming from when we realised that the*

*bullet had entered my left shoulder, passed down the arm bone, broken it and exited from the arm near the elbow. I was feeling very second hand by the time the helicopter came in but with Snowy holding me up I just had to have a leak against a rubber tree before boarding the chopper. When on the operating table out to it, the staff had to bring me around to ask me my blood group as my dog tags had been taped up for so long they had gone rusty and were unreadable.*

By 26 March, companies were holding farewell barbecues. The Support Company function raised US\$138 which was forwarded through the *Sydney Morning Herald* to Legacy.

At the end of the operational tour of duty, the Commanding Officer summed up his thoughts on the battalion and the enemy:

*The biggest thing I can say about my men in Vietnam during the past year is that they always have been so obviously brave. It has been a hard and often trying year, but in an emergency, the soldiers of the 7th Battalion always seemed to work as a team, moving coolly and swiftly.*

*In conjunction with other units in the Task Force, 7th Battalion had driven all the main force units – a divisional headquarters and two regiments – out of the Province. They still come back from time to time, but they no longer live here. By a series of search and destroy operations, the battalion has destroyed something like 150 enemy camps and installations, which has obviously made it harder for the Viet Cong to operate and stage through Phuoc Tuy. Because of our continuous operations, the Viet Cong are now finding it more difficult to recruit in this Province and have been reduced to forcibly recruit young males and females.*

Major David Drabsch rejoined the battalion as its Second-in-Command early in April for its return to Australia, and Major Alf Garland took his place as the Australian Liaison Officer with II Field Force Vietnam.

The Advance Party left Luscombe Field on 2 April by RAAF Caribou and departed by the Qantas Boeing 707 *City of Tamworth* from Saigon's Ton Son Nhut airport, flying direct to Sydney.

Just before the departure of the Main Body of the battalion, many congratulatory signals were received. Of particular note was the one from the Commander Australian Forces, Vietnam, Major General A.L. MacDonald. It read: 'On the eve of your departure to Australia, I wish to express my thanks and admiration for the job done by all ranks of the 7th Battalion during their tour of duty in this country'.

## **OPERATION HOLSWORTHY**

The Warning Order which was issued in signal format for the battalion's last operation on this tour was brief and to the point. It read:



ROUTINE

040005Z APR 68

FROM 7 RAR

UNCLAS

TO: DISTRIBUTION LIST A

WNG 0 (.) OPERATION HOLSWORTHY 0 7 RAR WILL CONDUCT A HELIBORNE ASSAULT ON TO HMAS SYDNEY 0 NO MOVE BEFORE 090630H (.) PLANNING CONF (.) FOL TO ATTEND CLN BN 21C CMM MAJ PATERSON CMM COY 21CS CMM RSM CMM SHIP ADJT CMM IN CONF ROOM AT 060830 HRS

CALIGARI ADJT EMPEROR

EMPEROR was the nickname for the battalion telephone switchboard. To ensure the smooth running of this important operation, the battalion signalled HMAS *Sydney*. This message was a model of clarity. It read, 'Hurry up!'.

However (as one ex-first tour soldier put it) in the best traditions of the Australian Infantry, the heliborne assault actually became at the last moment a truck-borne move. One group of the Assault Pioneer Platoon felt more endangered by this move than it had for some time. The driver, who had arrived from Vung Tau replete in the 'pogo' rig of steel helmet and flack jacket, stalled his vehicle and missed the start of the returning convoy. He then sped up to catch it, so annoying the passengers that Sergeant Eric McCoombe had to point a rifle (unloaded) at him to adopt a reasonable speed. This nearly caused a disaster as he reacted by braking so severely that the pioneers were nearly prematurely discharged in bulk from the Army.

On the morning of 9 April, the soldiers of the battalion were met at Vung Tau by HMAS *Sydney*'s landing craft, which disgorged the most welcome replacement battalion, 1 RAR, before the short trip to the troop carrier. The scramble up the landing nets was a struggle for some, including at least one soldier who dropped his luggage into the ocean. The RAN Clearance Diving Team, which was tasked to ensure that the Viet Cong did not mine the vessel, retrieved his soggy goods. HMAS *Sydney* left harbour in the company of HMAS *Parramatta* at 1400 hours.

Although the battalion had remarkable luck with mines during this tour, its good counter-mine training ensured that soldiers acted correctly when mines were present. There were some mine incidents and several times companies were very close to incurring mine casualties but, with the exception of one soldier wounded by a detonator while neutralising an enemy mine, there were no mine casualties suffered in the battalion.

The battalion had achieved much in its tour of duty. It had inflicted significant casualties on the enemy in Phouc Tuy and around Bien Hoa. The severe losses suffered by 274 *Regiment* and the *Chau Duc District Company* in particular lessened the threat that these units posed in Phuoc Tuy. The major Viet Cong offensive had been withstood and turned back. A considerable improvement in the security of villages

and villagers in the province had been achieved.

One company commander felt that search and destroy operations were the most successful method of countering the enemy. He felt:

*There is no doubt that the ATF achieved its aim in Phuoc Tuy through constant, unremitting search and destroy patrolling operations, tedious and often unrewarding though they seemed at the time. Nevertheless at the time we kept 'Charlie' on the move and off balance.*

At the end of the tour the Commanding Officer distributed a volume called *Lessons Learnt from Operations in Vietnam*. It sought to consolidate the experience gained by the battalion during its tour of operational service in Vietnam in such a manner as to be available to all members of the rank of sergeant and above who served with the unit during the period. Twentynine chapters were written on subjects as diverse as 'Sentries and passwords' (by Lieutenant Colonel Smith), 'Administration in the field' (Major Peter Leeson) and 'Navigation in Phuoc Tuy Province' (Lieutenant Noel Reeves). The publication was carefully studied prior to the battalion's second tour of Vietnam.

Colonel Smith paid particular regard to the weapons with which the battalion had been issued. He wrote a careful comparison of the performance of our weapons and compared them with those used by the Viet Cong. He found the self-loading rifle an excellent weapon with good penetrating capability. It did not need its carrying handle. While the M16 rifle was not as hard-hitting, it was an ideal weapon for the forward scout. The FI sub-machine gun was a disappointment because of its poor penetrating power. He rated the self-loading rifle and the AK47 to be 'on balance, about even', taking into account the AK47's lighter weight and automatic fire capability. The M16 and AK47 were also about even, although the AK47 was better balanced. He rated the M60 as 'greatly superior to anything encountered in the enemy arsenal'. He felt it was time to review the old catch-cry of the rifle being the soldier's best friend – an M60 or an M72 was a better friend.

At the end of the tour, Major Trouc, the Province Chief of Phuoc Tuy, presented the battalion with a lacquer work picture called *Running Horses*. Major Trouc had been wounded in his shoulder by the Viet Cong in Baria during Tet. This painting is now kept in the Officers' Mess of 5/7 RAR.

Over 1180 men served with 7 RAR on this tour of duty. There was a high turnover of non-commissioned officers during the tour. Although the unit had run two non-commissioned officer promotion courses in Australia in 1966–7, there was a need for a further non-commissioned officer course to be run in Vietnam. It was conducted by the Regimental Sergeant Major, company sergeant majors and selected sergeant instructors over six weeks for 58 soldiers. The syllabus was adapted for conditions in Vietnam. Seventy-three per cent of the students passed this course.

The battalion newspaper, *Smith's Weekly* (subtitled *Porky's Paper*, its masthead two fat smiling pigs recumbent with the irreverent motto *Semper et Excreta*), started reappearing in May 1967 and continued to be printed throughout the tour. There had been several issues in Australia but the build-up to departure for Vietnam and the involvement in the first few operations had delayed its relaunch. The paper was welcomed eagerly by the soldiers. It included jokes, requests for penfriends from Australia, poems (often by the Transport Officer, Lieutenant John Renowden), birthday greetings, letters from members of the 2/7th Battalion Association, cartoons, hospital states, notes on rest and recreation and notes on the history of the 7th Battalion AIF. It was also used by the Commanding Officer to pass on his views to a unit that was almost always widely spread. For example, after the Battle of Suoi Chau Pha, the Commanding Officer included a summary of the action, expressed his sadness at the losses and thanked the supporting arms. *Smith's Weekly* became an important part of the image of the unit and made a tangible contribution to its morale.

There was always a difference between the way fighting soldiers – infantrymen, gunners, sappers and troopers – respected and treated each other and the way they were dealt with by those who had a more supporting role – the 'pogos'. An example of this difference, which at times became a gulf, was given by the Assistant Adjutant:

*On one operation in South Vietnam, several of our soldiers were wounded and taken by Dustoff to the Australian Field Hospital. An influx of wounded filled the hospital and our boys were sent to the R[est] & C[on]valescence Centre for convalescence. The OC of the R&C Centre refused to accept medical realities and forced the soldiers to work. As a result some soldiers split their stitches and required further hospitalisation. One of the soldiers was an old 3 RAR mate and he rang me. I was horrified and spoke to the OC who pleaded ignorance. I saw each soldier and had him complete a statutory declaration before approaching the CO. His reaction was entirely predictable. As he read my report I could see the blood rising and started to fear for my safety (ie kill the messenger if it's bad news). He exploded and was incoherent for a few minutes. When he could speak he ordered me to go immediately to Vung Tau with an armed escort and arrest the OC and bring him to Ap An Phu. I went to 1 ATF and consulted Major Fergus Thomson the Legal Officer. He settled me down in the mess with a quiet ale and after an appropriate period he rang the CO pointing out that maybe there could be a better way of dealing with the situation. EH calmed down but wanted satisfaction for his men. As I recall the OC was sent home if for no other reason than to protect him from EH.*

After the tour was completed, awards were announced for key members of the battalion. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Eric Smith, was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. The citation read:

*At all times Lieutenant Colonel Smith's planning, coordination and supervision were of the highest order. He at no time hesitated in exercising his command responsibilities, to go forward to where his sub-units were in contact with the enemy. By so doing he frequently exposed himself to danger without regard for his own safety. By his professional competence, careful attention to detail and constant consideration for all members of his unit, Lieutenant Colonel Smith commanded a unit which, throughout its tour in Vietnam, distinguished itself in every operation in which it participated. His men possessed a fierce pride in their battalion; a pride nurtured and inspired by their Commanding Officer whose rare combination of the qualities of leadership produced in his men a desire to excel always.*

The Second-in-Command, Major David Drabsch, was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire. The award stated that:

*. . . during the entire two years . . . Major Drabsch has consistently worked long hours, maintained a sense of humour in the face of many adversities, and won the respect of all by his forthright manner, diligence, foresight, ability, devotion to duty, exacting standards and good results.*

The Regimental Sergeant Major, Warrant Officer Class One Alec Thompson, was also made a Member of the Order of the British Empire. His citation stated that:

*The preparation of the unit for overseas service would have been seriously hampered if it were not for the unfailing energy, drive and wisdom of Warrant Officer Thompson. His fine example of soldierly qualities was an inspiration to the non-commissioned officers. His excellent arrangements for their training and guidance ensured a uniformly high standard of competence. He also, with considerable imagination and foresight, started on the early training of a reserve of potential non-commissioned officers. As a result replacements were always available when needed at short notice.*

*During his service with the battalion in South Vietnam he continued to set a fine example of loyalty, devotion to duty and pride in the Regiment. He also took an active part in operations, commanding a number of outstandingly successful patrols.*

Several of the soldiers who served with 7 RAR were killed after this tour. Sergeant Brian 'Bull' Walsh had left the battalion as the Platoon Sergeant of 9 Platoon C Company. His platoon commander described him as 'a great man and a great soldier'. He returned to Australia and was posted to the 3rd Training Battalion. He volunteered to join the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam, and after he completed his training for it, he returned to Vietnam in March 1969 as a Warrant Officer Class Two. On 11 May, he was serving as the commander of a Mobile Strike Force company of Vietnamese on a battalion search and clear operation when his company came under

enemy fire from close range. Three South Vietnamese soldiers, including the battalion commander, were killed and another Australian warrant officer was wounded. Brian Walsh moved forward on his own and, despite sustained close range enemy machine gun fire, reached some wounded soldiers and moved one of them out of the line of fire, saving his life. Still under fire, he retrieved documents from the body of his battalion commander and, when reinforcements arrived, continued to assist in the evacuation of the wounded. He also retrieved the wounded Australian warrant officer from the line of fire, undoubtably saving his life. Warrant Officer Class Two Ray Simpson won his Victoria Cross for the part he played in this same action. Warrant Officer Brian Walsh was later awarded the Military Medal for his bravery in this action. Sadly the award was made after his death.

Warrant Officer Walsh was killed in action on 27 June 1969 from enemy fire in an ambush while he was making a security sweep of his perimeter. He was operating as a member of the Australian Army Training Team, Vietnam in the Ben Het area of Kontum Province which was close to the tri-border area between South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. He had written to his mother just before his death, on paper supplied by 'The Patriotic Fund of Queensland', saying:

*I have been posted to a place called Pleiku. I have about 40 Montagnard tribesman under my control. Good Men! At the moment I'm out on a 30 day operation and don't know when I'll be back in camp. Nothing to worry about though, it's a pretty cushy job.*

Private Fred Annesley had been a forward scout in 1 Platoon A Company. The machine gunner in his section, Private John Morton, who had known Fred's father, described Fred as 'a bloody good scout, thorough and keen'. His section commander said that he was 'utterly dedicated and a very professional soldier who earned his superiors' respect and was very popular amongst his peers'. He considered himself a career soldier and extended his tour of duty by six months and was posted to 1 RAR when 7 RAR left. He was promoted to corporal in that battalion and had distinguished himself in a number of engagements with the enemy. On 24 November 1968 he was killed in action with A Company 1 RAR in a fierce bunker contact.

The routine of return to Australia commenced. A small Rear Party, commanded by Captain Peter Leeson, remained in Nui Dat after the Main Body left. It assisted 3 RAR as best it could in settling in. They then flew from Luscombe Field to Saigon and on to Sydney. Few were there to greet them. The voyage of the Main Body to Australia on HMAS *Sydney* was made via Sattahip in Thailand, where a signals squadron that had been taking part in a SEATO exercise was picked up. Their commander was a brave man. Because his troops were tired after their exercise of several weeks duration, he asked Colonel Smith whether 7 RAR soldiers could be used

to piquet their signals vehicles chained to the deck. The Commanding Officer's reply was not at all gentle.

After the detour to Thailand, Private 'Rosco' Kelly contracted a severe case of peritonitis which caused him to be flown to the British Military Hospital in Singapore for treatment. A sergeant's promotion course was run on the voyage. As HMAS *Sydney* neared Australia, mail was transferred to it from Darwin. The ship berthed at Garden Island in Sydney Harbour at 0801 hours on 26 April. Soldiers felt that HMAS *Sydney* had deliberately avoided an Anzac Day arrival by 'sailing in figure eights'. They felt that it was a political decision to avoid the unique chance for a returning unit to march in the parade.

The battalion marched through Sydney, accompanied by a 200 man naval contingent from HMAS *Sydney* and HMAS *Perth* and a small RAAF group. The salute was taken at Sydney Town Hall by the Prime Minister, John Gorton. They were enthusiastically cheered by the crowd and showered with confetti. There were about 6000 people outside the Town Hall itself. In a continuation of the mood of Anzac Day and the march through the city the next day, Sydney shoppers booed about 1000 anti-war marchers the following day.

The march through the city was an important ceremony for many soldiers, particularly those being discharged from the Army soon afterwards. In this case, as in almost all others, the marching troops received a warm reception. Many felt that this ceremony indicated the community's approval for their job done in Vietnam. It was a great pity that only a small proportion of the National Servicemen who served on the tour of duty took part in the march. Many had already been discharged and were not recalled for the march. Others had been transferred to 3 RAR to complete their twelve month tour. Soldiers who missed marching with their battalion resented it and felt much less appreciated by the community than those who did.

What were the achievements of this tour? The Commanding Officer had said that he had expected the battalion to excel. He commented on its performance:

*Excellence is what I got. The battalion did excel. Bearing in mind it was 7 RAR that substantially cleared Phuoc Tuy Province grid square by grid square and bearing in mind also the number of contacts, the bunker systems, the major engagements fought, Tet 68, the constancy of operations following one on top of another, the close support fire tasks and the close support air strikes for the loss of 16 killed, it was a remarkable effort and is reflected still in the special pride ex-members take in the battalion.*

# 8

## Re-forming and Retraining the Battalion

*Body and spirit I surrendered whole  
To harsh instructors – and received a soul.*

Rudyard Kipling  
'The Wonder'  
*Epitaphs of the War, 1919*

AN AUSTRALIAN COMPONENT of the battalion was formed in April 1968 to prepare for the battalion's return to the quite modern and new Finschhafen Lines at Holsworthy. This was a change to the earlier plan to have 7 RAR in the new barracks in Townsville: at the time of the unit's return, Lavarack Barracks had not been completed. The unit was placed under the command of the 10th Task Force at Holsworthy, initially under the acting command of Colonel Eric Smith and then in late 1968 of Brigadier Don Dunstan. Colonel Smith was then appointed as the Australian Defence Attaché in Pakistan.

A Company was the first sub-unit brought up to strength in the battalion. It first consisted of a nucleus of corporals and sergeants and some Regular Army soldiers who had remained with the battalion after the first tour, and was commanded by Major Chris Thomson. A Company, which was soon brought up to strength by new march-ins, became a busy organisation, providing the enemy for 5 RAR and 9 RAR exercises in Holsworthy, the Colo Putty area, Puckapunyal, Jervis Bay, the Flinders Ranges in South Australia and Shoalwater Bay in Queensland.

An officer who joined the battalion in June 1968 wrote:

*There was only skeleton manning, most of the officers, NCOs and diggers having been posted elsewhere or discharged. The CO was still Eric Smith at that stage, with Don Paterson as 2IC, Robbie Cathcart as Adjutant and Barry Caligari as Operations Officer.*

The task ahead of the battalion was quite clear: it was to prepare for return to Vietnam. The mission was to bring the battalion up to its full strength and to train it to reach its full fighting potential.

On 6 October 1968 the Governor of New South Wales, Sir Roden Cutler, presented the Queen's and Regimental Colours to the battalion at a ceremonial parade at Holsworthy.

The new Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ron Grey, took command of the unit on 25 November. He was educated at Perth Modern School, the educational institution of several other famous people including a former prime minister (R.J.L. Hawke) and a former governor general (Sir Paul Hasluck). He graduated from the Royal Military College Duntroon in 1951. He served with 3 RAR from 1952 to 1953 as a rifle platoon commander in the mortar platoon. He was wounded twice in Korea and then became an instructor at the 1st Commonwealth Division Battle School at Hara Mura in Japan from 1955–7. He then served as Adjutant of the 2/14th Queensland Mounted Infantry before posting to the Royal Military College for three years. He then became an infantry officer instructor at the School of Infantry. He was posted as a company commander in 2 RAR and was selected to attend the Staff College in Camberley, UK, in 1961. After returning to Australia, he was posted to the Infantry Centre and to the Directorate of Infantry. He then was selected as the Deputy Assistant Quartermaster General (Operations and Maintenance) in Headquarters 17<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Division in Borneo where he was Mentioned in Despatches. In his next posting in the Directorate of Military Training in Canberra he compiled two pamphlets that were to form the basis for much of the Australian minor tactics used in Vietnam: *Patrolling and Tracking* and *Ambush and Counter Ambush*. He was then appointed as the Chief Instructor of Battle Wing at the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra in 1967. The Commanding Officer had a thorough knowledge of military history, particularly the campaigns of Wellington and the American Civil War. He had made three operational visits to Vietnam (in 1964, 1965 and 1968), seeing much of the whole country and some of Phuoc Tuy Province. He had made a detailed study of the French campaigns in Indo-China and Algeria. His particular enthusiasm was battle discipline, the demanding type of discipline that a soldier imposes on himself so that he does not let his mates down – exemplified by the tired sentry who would rest his chin on his bayonet.

When Colonel Grey took command of the battalion his presence was immediately felt. All officers were supposed to be on parade at 0630 hours on the day he arrived, but because the subalterns had partied the night before, all other than the Duty Officer (who had neglected to wake them) were late. Their tardiness was rewarded by seven consecutive days as Duty Officer.

The Regimental Sergeant Major, Warrant Officer Class One Reg Bandy, enlisted in the Second Australian Imperial Force in 1941 and served in New Guinea and later in the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces in Japan. He went to Korea in September



1950 with 3 RAR and took part in the battle of Kapyong as an acting platoon commander in April 1951. He served in South Vietnam with the Australian Army Training Team, Vietnam in 1963 and 1964. The Regimental Sergeant Major was a tall, steely-eyed, impressive leader whose steady guidance and unambiguously soldierly manner inspired his senior non-commissioned officers to aspire to a very high standard in both the barracks and the field. He had a fine parade ground manner and took pride in a well turned-out battalion. He was a firm disciplinarian who was respected for his fairness. His wide operational experience made him far more than a figurehead: his knowledge of tactics and the enemy made him a formidable fighting soldier. He had the unquestioning respect of all the battalion. One officer said:

*Reg Bandy was an outstanding RSM. He was tough, resourceful, very experienced and cared deeply about his diggers and the battalion. He could have (perhaps should have) been commissioned, but he refused, because he felt that the Sergeants' Mess would be weakened if every warrant officer with potential left for the Officers' Mess. He was a role model for any young and aspiring NCO. He was a good friend too.*

Many of the postings in the battalion changed during lead-up training and during the tour of Vietnam. For example, the battalion had several adjutants during the period from 1969 to 1970. The first was Captain Derek Napier, a former Gordon Highlander. He recalled:

*I remember having one of the Orderly Room staff come in and tell me that the female typists were all in a state because one of the newly joined platoon commanders was holding an FFI [freedom from infection] inspection with his platoon lined up outside their barrack block – stark naked. I seem to remember having words with Lieutenant O'Brien on that occasion! Mind you, the state that the female staff were in was because they couldn't get a good enough view!*

The Commanding Officer's approach was governed to a large degree by his attitude to training. It was expressed in a favourite quotation of his:

*You cannot go into action with an open book in your hand. You must then rely on what your study and experience has taught you and hope to make the best of what you know. And – to avoid being found wanting, you must know a hell of a lot.*

He issued a series of training directives, some aimed at the officers, one at the battalion staff; other directives were more general, clearly setting out for all members of the unit the requirements and standard to be reached. One of the views was that discipline and example began with the officers and senior non-commissioned officers; the Army could use the average or mediocre man but not in an infantry battalion at war. Thus over the retraining period for the battalion some officers who would not or could not

reach the standard he demanded fell by the wayside and were reposted, sometimes amicably for further experience in Australia, sometimes with evident trauma. Some non-commissioned officers in the unit saw these 'sackings' with surprise – they were not aware that officers could be removed. There were no short cuts in preparation for war: hard training and continual supervision were essential and became normal as the months went by. Particular attention was drawn to the skilful, accurate and rapid handling of the infantry family of weapons.

Colonel Grey ensured that the officers and senior non-commissioned officers met his expectations. After Standing Operating Procedures had been rewritten, all these appointments and those undertaking promotion training in the battalion needed to pass an exam, marked by the Commanding Officer, to prove their knowledge. Officer and senior non-commissioned officer training was conducted at regular intervals to ensure that the unit was led not only by example but also from a strong base of knowledge. This training included detailed examinations of the geography and tactical situation in Phuoc Tuy Province, quick decision exercises, military law, war administration and lectures from supporting arms and from the RAAF.

Each soldier in the battalion was issued with two handbooks which gave an outline of the history of the Royal Australian Regiment and of 7 RAR, provided a guide to customs of the Army and to conditions of service, and included an *aide-memoire* on the prevention of diseases in the field and the '7 RAR Rules for Battle' with by an epilogue listing the 'Ten Keeps'. The 'Rules' were:

- Clean and protect your weapons always. Examine your ammunition frequently. Check and clean your magazines.
- Soldier in pairs; look after your mate; be loyal to your leaders.
- Be ready to move at a moment's notice. Keep your equipment handy at all times. Keep your gear packed.
- Tell no lies in battle. All information must be accurate or your sub-unit may suffer. Exaggerate to your girl friend later but NEVER in battle.
- Take no unnecessary risks.
- Stand to properly. At night you must be able to have confidence in your sentries.
- Make a fetish of cleanliness and take pride in your appearance. Shave every day. Clean your weapon, clean yourself, eat, clean your area.
- Be aggressive but not rash in attack – be stubborn in defence.

These 'Rules' originated from those used by 'Roger's Rangers' in North America in the 1760s. They were more directly derived from the rules issued by 'Mad Mike' Hoare to his 5 Commando in the Congo with a slight alteration to their order.

The 'Ten Keeps' were not at all Maoist although they were all exhortative. They each had an accompanying quotation – another of the Commanding Officer's characteristic

enthusiasms. The 'Keeps' were first published in Lieutenant General Stan Savige's pamphlet *Tactical and Administrative Doctrine for Jungle Warfare* published in January 1945 and were but one indication of the wide knowledge and understanding of military history that the Commanding Officer had (and enthusiastically spread to his somewhat less than receptive subalterns). They were:

- Keep fit. ('To attack with unfit troops is to fight with a putty sword.')
- Keep well fed. ('Hunger kills courage stone dead.')
- Keep clean. ('Contamination causes canker. Canker causes casualties.')
- Keep your feet under constant medical supervision. ('To get cold feet is synonymous with losing one's courage.')
- Keep good battle discipline. ('Only mobs stampede.')
- Keep the principle of mutual support and cooperation. ('Love thy neighbour as thyself.')
- Keep up the ammunition. ('A gun without a cartridge is like a well without water.')
- Keep good communications. ('Evil communications corrupteth good manners.')
- Keep cool. ('A hot head means fever.')
- Keep up morale. ('Praise the Lord; and pass the ammunition and victuals.')

The *Field Handbook* was oriented much more to the forthcoming task in Vietnam. It listed the rules of engagement, procedures for sentries and safety, handling, zeroing and siting of weapons. It gave practical procedures for calling for fire support from mortars and artillery. It listed bush survival hints and action to be taken if captured. It included further health and hygiene drills, including malarial and heat stress precautions. The Geneva Conventions for the handling of prisoners were listed. A summary of enemy tactics, together with indicators of their presence and particularly signs that might indicate the presence of mines, concluded the booklet. The fact that each soldier of the battalion had this brief but relevant reminder of the essentials of what could be expected on active service was a strong indication of the importance placed on training of individuals in the battalion. Each officer and non-commissioned officer was also issued with a specially printed *aide-mémoire*. It provided, in a waterproof cover, checklists for orders, the common operational reports and returns, details of the characteristics of supporting weapons and procedures for calling fire, treating wounded and other operational procedures.

The Commanding Officer had a close bond with Lieutenant Colonel Colin Khan, the Commanding Officer of 5 RAR. 5 RAR left for its second tour of Vietnam from Holsworthy and it was planned that it would occupy the lines next to 7 RAR on 5's return when 7 RAR took over from it. 7 RAR would once again occupy the same area as 5 RAR had in the Nui Dat perimeter. Personal friendship reinforced these links. Colin Khan wrote frequent letters that were used to supplement the lessons taught in

officer and senior non-commissioned officer training. 5 RAR's After Action Reports were sent directly to the battalion and studied closely. This relationship was all that could be expected of two sister battalions in the regiment.

Colonel Grey had issued a series of Training Directives to govern the build-up of the unit's capabilities. The Operations Officer, Major Kevin Cole, was charged with implementing the program. He planned a series of activities for this. Companies were responsible for training in individual skills. There was a need to do Infantry Corps training for a large group of National Servicemen. These activities were followed by training, building up from platoon to company and unit level. Specialist training was interlaced. The need to be able to operate in conjunction with other arms was handled by exercises at company and unit level and by command post exercises. The basis for training was a rewritten set of Standing Operating Procedures which Major Cole compiled. As these procedures were the basis of operations, all officers and non-commissioned officers were obliged to commit them to memory and to pass a test to prove their knowledge.

Political considerations directed that the unit be made up from an approximately even mix of National Servicemen and Regular Army soldiers. The National Servicemen were to be from the third and fourth intake of 1968 and the first, second and third intakes of 1969. One hundred National Servicemen commenced Infantry Corps training with D Company in March 1969. While this was, in theory, a job for the 3rd Training Battalion at Singleton, there were advantages in doing this training in 7 RAR. The soldiers immediately identified with their unit and the unit was able to identify those with junior leadership potential very quickly.

There were a number of ex-British officers and non-commissioned officers in the battalion, just as there had been in the first tour. One such sergeant said:

*As a career soldier in the British Army, with the reduced operational commitments in the mid to late 60s, the opportunity to gain experience in South East Asia and the reputation of the Australian Army in Vietnam, it seemed natural to join the Australian Army at the time. It was a decision I never regretted.*

After the battalion's first tour of South Vietnam, 106th Field Battery had returned to its barracks in Wacol for three months before it moved to Townsville as the first field battery of 4th Field Regiment which was being formed there. During 1969 the battery trained with 2 RAR and 6 RAR in the Townsville area. Despite the distance between Townsville and Holsworthy, elements of the battery, including its Battery Commander's and Forward Observer Parties, participated in five field and command post exercises with 7 RAR. The Battery Commander, Major David Gilroy, and his assistant (his 'Ack'), Sergeant Brian Ruddock, became very closely identified with 7 RAR, sometimes to the surprise and vexation of the Commanding Officer of 4th Field Regiment (Lieutenant Colonel Brian Forward), himself a field gunner of high reputation.

These exercises formed the basis of the fine team spirit which continued throughout 1970 and 1971.

The unit's training had to take place at the same time as it met its requirement for local and external duties. While in barracks, a duty company provided soldiers as guard, kitchen hands, runners and other essential positions. The unit was rostered in turn with other NSW units to provide guards at Victoria Barracks in Sydney for periods of one week. A Company, the strongest sub-unit and the one with the largest number of experienced soldiers at this stage, was used for many external tasks. It was used as the enemy on several exercises. It provided a guard with the Colours for the 50th Anniversary of the Royal Easter Show. The company also went to Canberra to provide the guard to farewell Lord Casey as he departed from the office of governor general.

Exercise FIRST FLUSH was conducted at the Holsworthy Training Area from 8 to 11 April 1969. Captain Derek Napier wrote about the return to barracks:

*I was quite happily slouching down in my Land Rover for a quiet kip on the way, when Kevin Cole [the Operations Officer] came over and told me to lead the way, as whoever was supposed to do it had fallen out for some reason or other. I also remember the eighteen mile route march back from that exercise, feeding salt to the Diggers with cramp and encouraging Support Company to keep going to the last. The agony of the last mile, and the satisfaction of bringing every man in past Ron Grey as he, having completed the march, watched the battalion march into barracks.*

The first battalion exercise was held in Gospers, NSW, from 15 to 23 April 1969. It was called HIGH FLIGHT referring to the plan to fly the battalion in in RAAF Caribou aircraft. The actual fly-in in high winds was extremely risky, so much so that only one aircraft landed, and then by the spectacular method of landing on one wheel at a very slow speed at an angle to the runway and seemingly pivoting on that wheel to follow the path of the rough landing field. Further deployment to the exercise was done by road after the rest of the aircraft returned to Richmond.

In May, A Company conducted Exercise UNDARRA in Holsworthy Range. This provided skill-based training to the other companies on a bullring system. In the same month, the unit conducted specialist courses for mortarmen, assault pioneers and signallers. A two month course for stretcher bearers was started at the 2nd Military Hospital. It culminated in a four week attachment to St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, including experience in its casualty ward. To complete the round of specialised training, the battalion's echelon (the tactical grouping of its administrative elements) was deployed on an exercise (MAILED FIST) in June. Exercise TELLSTAR was held at Holsworthy as the final command post exercise in early July.

Exercise WILD FURY, which practised combined work with helicopters and armoured personnel carriers, was held from 11 to 15 August in Holsworthy Range. The exercise name was only too well chosen: the weather on the range was sufficiently

inclement to flood all weapons pits to their brim. The exercise was a severe introduction to the infantry for the new RMO, Captain Bob Porter.

Exercise KING KONG, based on reconnaissance in force and cordon and search operations, was held at Tianjara from 24–31 August. Many aircraft types supported the exercise. There were RAAF C130 Hercules, RAN Iroquois, Skyhawks and Sea Venoms and Army Sioux and Cessnas. The exercise was used by the RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam to train for its rotation in Vietnam. The naval aviators were most cooperative and professional. No task was too much trouble, an attitude which contrasted at the time with that of the RAAF in training in Australia. The Navy would 'fly anywhere, do anything'. The Platoon Commander of 4 Platoon B Company, Second Lieutenant Karl Metcalf, particularly recalled his involvement with the Commanding Officer on this exercise:

*My memory of KING KONG is vivid because it was the first run—in that I had with the CO who left me with an indelible impression that he was the boss and I had better do as I was told. The situation leading up to the confrontation involved a series of platoon patrols against minor enemy opposition. We had been strictly warned not to take any of the enemy's equipment should we capture any of them. They were to be released and would then reappear as enemy after a suitable delay. 4 Platoon had just been pursuing a small group of enemy up a steep hillside and just on dusk we reached the edge of a large clearing.*

*Knowing that the enemy would be encamped on the other side during the night, I roused the platoon well before dawn, crossed the open space, and then attacked the enemy position at dawn, killing or capturing the enemy patrol. We then, as instructed, let them go. They then retreated some 50 metres and commenced to fire at us. We were not pleased! After several platoon attacks on each of their new positions as they withdrew up the hill, each resulting in them being killed or captured, we all began to lose our patience with this indestructible enemy. I then ordered one of the sections to make a wide sweep behind the enemy while we pretended to keep them engaged with fire. Eventually we captured them all again and at this stage I removed the firing pins from their rifles and had the enemy soldiers tied (lightly) to trees so that we could be well clear of them by the time they released themselves. I think the firing pins were either tied to another tree or Sgt Crowther kept them. Needless to say, when we got back to the Tianjara airstrip I received a severe warning from Niner [the Commanding Officer's callsign] although he was somewhat pleased that we had captured the enemy.*

Army Headquarters required all soldiers going to Vietnam to have passed through a course at the Jungle Training Centre. In the case of the battalion, each company completed a four week course that exercised it in operations and tropical techniques

at up to company level. Rotation through Jungle Training Centre commenced in September and up to three companies were there at a time until the instruction was completed in late October. The Jungle Training Centre Battle Wing staff supervised a cadre group from the battalion who adhered to a set syllabus from the Directorate of Military Training at Army Headquarters. Each group lived in the tented accommodation on Battle Ridge and followed this rigorous and well proven course of instruction. Reports were issued on the standard of each sub-unit to Army Headquarters and to Headquarters 10th Task Force.

The battalion had its Catholic padre, Father Keith Teefey, march-in in September. He described his introduction to the Army:

*I did a two week Chaplain's School which explained the structures of the Army, showed me how to put on a uniform, salute, put up a hutchie, handle a ration pack, etc. After that one is on one's own. I was amazed and often embarrassed by the welcome and the cooperation I received wherever I went. I was always made aware of those who had gone before me, and that I was always trying to fill 'big boots'. My way was just to go with the troops. In the preparation for SVN [South Vietnam] I went on exercises with them in the cold and the wet and the heat of the Putty Ranges and Shoalwater Bay, dug fighting pits, did early morning PT at JTC, or whatever.*

On 3 October the battalion and 106th Field Battery were formally warned for active service in Vietnam. This had the particular effect that the units came under the more severe disciplinary constraints of the *Army Act* rather than the peacetime *Defence Act*.

Since many calibres of artillery would be used in support of the battalion in Vietnam, a live firing exercise was arranged for non-commissioned officers and officers on 28 and 29 October on Holsworthy Range by 8th Medium Regiment, using its 5.5 inch medium guns to demonstrate weapon effects comparable to those that would be obtained from the US 155 mm guns in Vietnam. This exercise also proved further training in the procedures for calling for fire.

Infantry-tank training with Centurion tanks (Exercise SABRE TOOTH TWO) was conducted from 10–14 November with 1st/15th Royal New South Wales Lancers. The training was done with much help and cooperation from the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Warren Glenny, a very efficient and dedicated Citizen Military Forces soldier who later became General Officer Commanding the 2nd Division.

Helicopter training for the battalion was conducted in several phases. Firstly, all companies used corrugated iron static mock-ups in the close training area to practice emplaning and deplaning drills. This training would have seemed to any World War II soldier to be faintly reminiscent of rifle drill with broomsticks. Small numbers of RAAF Iroquois helicopters supplemented this basic practice. For example, on 28 and 29 November, two 'Hueys' provided actual air training at Holsworthy. Greater numbers of

helicopters were used on the later exercises to provide up to company-size lifts.

The standard of M60 machine guns on issue to the battalion was appalling. The Second-in-Command and the Quartermaster (Captain Cliff Nord) took a kit bag of typical faulty parts and emptied the lot on to Lieutenant Colonel Stan Maizey's shiny desk at Headquarters Eastern Command. They were replaced by brand new weapons trucked overnight from Adelaide. The staff was extremely responsive to well-put complaints.

On 31 October the battalion's Regimental Funds Committee met and decided to buy some items for use in Vietnam that the Army would not supply. The items included 50 sets of secateurs (recommended by 5 RAR, as cutting with these was much quieter and more efficient than using machetes and indeed recommended as long ago as 1964 by 3 RAR after their Borneo experience). Seventy section radios used between platoons and sections (continually recommended by Colonel Smith on the first tour) and several sets of a locally designed tripod for the GPMG M60 were also approved for purchase. The use of what were actually soldiers' funds to provide items the battalion felt were essential for its operational task was a good example of the parsimonious attitude taken by some military authorities. It was a disgrace that the logistic and supply system just did not understand the demands arising from hard-won field experience, and how much such small items meant to soldiers in combat. Attitudes varied from, at best, sympathetic but inflexible because of 'procedures' to aggressive refusal.

The exercises at Shoalwater Bay were designed to test whether the battalion was ready for war. There were several parts to the exercise program in this area. During 23 and 24 November, the Main Body of the battalion moved by RAAF Hercules aircraft from Richmond to Shoalwater Bay. The next few days until 26 November were spent in familiarisation training from a non-tactical base area. The program included training with Army and RAAF helicopters, forward air controllers (in ancient RAAF Winjeels), armoured personnel carriers, combat engineer teams and artillery forward observer parties. Some platoon commanders were ordered to have a flight in a Winjeel, although no fire was being observed. Second Lieutenant Metcalf, not noted for his height, remarked that he couldn't see out of the plane unless the pilot banked it 90°.

During this period, Captain Peter Murphy, the Officer Commanding the supporting armoured personnel carrier troop, reported for duty. He was summoned to meet Colonel Grey and remembered:

*I duly confronted this awesome figure (I was already acquainted with his even more awesome reputation) in a dingy 11 by 11 tent. He proceeded to lay down the law in no uncertain terms as to how things were to be run. Fair enough, he was the CO. He finished up by saying, 'There is only one thing wrong with these exercises, they are stuffed up by the cavalry, there are a lot of fools in the*



*cavalry'. Well . . . it was now or never, so I told him, 'In my opinion, there are a lot of fools in the infantry too Sir'. That was the only time I ever saw Colonel Grey pause for a breath. He sure was not lost for words. I consider that we had a great working relationship ever since.*

Exercise CLARION CALL, from 27 November to 1 December, was a warm-up exercise to assist the battalion in settling down and becoming a cohesive force. There was a skeleton umpire organisation operating. The exercise was conducted in the aptly named Dismal Sector and involved the establishment of a fire support base to support reconnaissance in force operations, the location and attack on an enemy base camp and the cordon and search of a village.

Exercise COLD STEEL was the main test exercise and took place between 2 and 11 December. It was fully controlled and umpired and was designed to exercise the battalion group in various aspects of counter-insurgency operations. The setting of COLD STEEL depicted the Shoalwater Bay Training Area as being analogous to Phuoc Tuy Province in Vietnam. The units at Samuel Hill were representative of a Task Force base similar to Nui Dat, including the Task Force Headquarters and a maintenance area. As far as possible all the procedures used during the exercise were based on the Standing Operating Procedures of the 1st Australian Task Force in Vietnam. The exercise started with a six day reconnaissance in force operation and the establishment of a fully-developed fire support base. The reconnaissance in force culminated in a blocking operation to repel a Main Force threat. The battalion was then required to locate and attack a major bunker system. The exercise ended with the redeployment of the battalion by air and armoured personnel carriers to a concentration area, followed by a cordon and search of a village called Long Hoa. The Commanding Officer was put 'out of action' and the Second-in-Command, Major Smethurst, took over. He later recalled:

*The cordon and search was like an old [assessed] TAC5 [a course to qualify officers in tactics for promotion to lieutenant colonel]. General Mackay [the exercise controller] had written an article on cordon and search. As he was assessing, we followed it to the letter.*

The detailed planning for the cordon was assisted by air photographs taken by the Adjutant, Captain Andy Mattay, and developed in the field. This technique was later used in Vietnam. The enemy for the exercise was provided by B Company 3 RAR and the Airfield Defence Guard Flight from RAAF Base Williamtown.

The Commander of 1st Division, Major General Sandy Pearson, noted in his report that the exercise served to cement the good relationship which had already existed between 7 RAR and 106th Field Battery. He stated that the battery operated

well both technically and tactically and appeared to be well prepared for overseas service. He assessed that 7 RAR was a fit, well trained and confident battalion with good leaders at all levels. The unit worked hard and well throughout the exercise and was quick to learn from the lessons that evolved. The morale of the battalion was high and its health good. Standing Operating Procedures were well understood. Communications security was of an unusually high standard. The main credit for this achievement belongs to the Regimental Signals Officer, Captain Ken Ryan, and his sergeant, Sergeant Frank Curphey, who had already served a tour of Vietnam (with 2 RAR) as its Signal Platoon Sergeant.

The Battalion Senior Umpire, Major John Deighton, remarked:

*The battalion performed exceptionally well. The highlight [for me] was the chance to put Ron Grey out of action for some hours and to see how the battalion reacted. Although he was cranky and wanted to tell Neville Smethurst and Kevin Cole that he had been made a casualty, for the first time in my life I had him where I wanted him and I wouldn't let him call . . . There was no doubt, however, who commanded the battalion, and that he commanded it with great effectiveness.*

On 12 December General Pearson visited 7 RAR and conducted a comprehensive critique on the detailed lessons learnt from the exercises at Shoalwater Bay. Private Grieg Ball was left with a vivid impression of the exercise. Writing in 1991, he stated: 'The final exercise at Shoalwater Bay Qld was the hardest and most strenuous physical endeavour I have ever done in my life'.

How did the pace of unit training affect the soldiers? One soldier from D Company wrote:

*One thing I can remember is the number of weekends (14) we spent training between July and December 1969. All of our exercises seemed to start on Saturdays or finish on Sundays. This is not a complaint – if all that training saved one life it was obviously worth it.*

As a prelude to operations, the self-loading rifles and M16 Armalites of the battalion were painted with green and brown heat-proof camouflage paint. Army Headquarters did not approve of this action, but in Major Smethurst's words 'learned to live with it'. Later, the battalion was visited in Nui Dat by a senior ordnance officer, who said he thought that it would be a good idea to camouflage weapons. He was then shown that it had been done, and forced to agree that it had indeed been a good idea. All kitbags and soldiers' trunks were painted with the unit's symbol – a kangaroo, three coloured stripes forming a pyramidal shape, and the number 1201 with the letters AMF for Australian Military Forces. Each soldier was brought up to a standard of readiness, called 'DP1' (draft priority one) which ensured that all his documents were correct, his inoculations up to date and all his mandatory training,

such as attendance at the Jungle Training Centre, was to the required standard.

A soldier in B Company summed up his feelings about the year of training prior to going to Vietnam as: 'I believe that we were very well trained in Australia. When we went overseas we were probably much better trained than most, if not all, of the units sent overseas in 1914–18 and 1939–45'.

The Commanding Officer was an enthusiastic admirer of Scottish military music. There were times when his propensity was not shared. Among these times were weekday mornings, when the sleepy inhabitants of the Officers' Mess were treated to the not always melodious drone of the pipes. Nevertheless, the small but capable pipe band was a boost for unit morale.

The final battalion ceremony in Australia was a combined Church Service and Farewell Parade at Holsworthy on 4 February 1970. A final practice was held the previous day. The Commanding Officer was determined that no one would faint so he had all soldiers dress in jumpers in the heat as training for the real day. At this rehearsal, the hymns were practiced. The first effort was a dismal drone. When Colonel Grey threatened to cancel the next week's pre-embarkation leave, the next effort, although musically awful, was at least loud! The parade itself was reviewed by the General Officer Commanding Eastern Command, Major General Mervyn Brogan. The Eastern Command Band provided music that supplemented the Battalion Pipes and Drums led by Sergeant Trevor 'Blue' Walker.

As planned, the Advance Parties left Australia by Qantas charter from Mascot in February. There were two: the first of 100 on 10 February, followed by 50 on 17 February. Soldiers were bused to the airport, although dependents could accompany them. The flights left at about 2300 hours. Both flights stopped in Singapore, when soldiers disguised themselves again in the conspicuous garb of a civilian shirt with summer uniform trousers and Army shoes and breakfasted at Singapore Airport Terminal Café. The groups arrived at Ton Son Nhut, then one of the busiest airfields in the world, at about 1015 hours the next day, to the utter unreality of an airfield at war. It was shared by civil flights, USAF and US Army aircraft of all types, bristling with bombs, Vietnamese Air Force propeller-driven aircraft seemingly lost from World War II, civilians, RAAF Caribou, heat and confusion. Qantas Boeing 707s taxied behind F4 Phantoms taking off for combat missions. Soldiers looked on, as if they were seeing a movie set of doubtful reality.

The majors attended a briefing at Headquarters Australian Force Vietnam in Saigon while the rest of the party moved to Luscombe Field at Nui Dat by C130 to commence the take-over of duties from 5 RAR.

5 RAR was most hospitable and took the business of briefing the incoming group very seriously. The Operations Officer, Major Kevin Cole, led a group to 5 RAR's Fire Support Patrol Base PAT from which the Commanding Officer of 5 RAR, Lieutenant Colonel Colin Khan, was commanding that battalion's last

operation, BOND1. The briefings there were followed by road and air reconnaissances of the province. Platoon commanders and others were then added to their 5 RAR equivalent sub-units and took part in patrol activities in BOND1.

The battalion Main Body embarked at Garden Island on Monday, 16 February, under the command of Captain Andy Mattay. Over 2000 relatives, families and friends farewelled the fast troop transport, HMAS *Sydney*, when it departed at 1130 hours.

The ship picked up mail on the outward voyage at Melville Island from HMAS *Assail*. *Syd. News* (printed by the 'Port Jackson–Vung Tau Ferry Service' – HMAS *Sydney*) reported the daily routine. When the ship's Captain was asked to contribute his service history to the news sheet, he replied, 'I have no time to write history, I'm too busy making it'. HMAS *Sydney* was joined by HMAS *Yarra* on 24 February. The ship crossed the Equator on 25 February and those soldiers crossing the line for the first time were suitably treated by 'King Neptune' and later given a commemorative certificate for the occasion.

Promotion courses for corporals and sergeants, run by Warrant Officer Class Two Errol Eadie for 39 students, were conducted from 18 to 26 February during the voyage. Rifle and machine gun shooting was continually practised during the voyage. The normal method was to shoot at balloons from the stern. Private Bobby Hughes shot with such concentration in a B Company shoot supervised by Captain Owen Cairns that he managed to damage some liferaft capsules.

As the ship approached South Vietnam, blackout precautions were taken, a sign of the dangers ahead. As an appropriate defensive precaution, the ship's defence watches were closed up on the afternoon of 26 February. HMAS *Sydney* docked at Vung Tau at dawn on 27 February and the disembarkation at Vung Tau by landing craft started at 0830 hours. It was a well executed naval operation. The Naval Orders for the Day stated that:

*If you don't know your job and the general procedure now you'll probably never know it . . . The main point about the whole operation is that it must go safely, smoothly and expeditiously . . . Don't slacken on alertness or response, don't slope off for a smoke or a brew without authorisation. Expect the unlikely and be ready, be prepared for anything.*

As 7 RAR left the ship in the assembled 'Landing Craft Medium 6' barges, 5 RAR eagerly awaited its turn to board and return to Australia. The Captain of HMAS *Sydney*, Captain 'Nobby' Clarke, RAN, commented that it was the quickest turnaround yet achieved.

A rear party, commanded by the Quartermaster, Captain Cliff Nord, departed from Australia by air on 24 February, completing the battalion's move and its transition to active service.

# 9

## The Second Tour

### *Operation Finschafen*

*Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will not be in peril.*

Sun Tzu, 400–320 BC

Of those who arrived in Vietnam ('in country'), 57 soldiers and one officer had served on the battalion's previous tour of duty. Two soldiers were commencing their third Vietnam tour. Most of these men were former 3 RAR soldiers who had also seen operational service in Borneo. There were others, both officers and non-commissioned officers, who had served on an earlier tour in Vietnam with other battalions or the Australian Army Training Team. These men formed the nucleus of experience that was the backbone of the unit, setting the standard for the demanding tasks that characterise small unit operations.

A road convoy of 36 troop-carrying vehicles took the battalion to its base camp at Nui Dat. It was escorted by RAAF helicopter gunships. The convoy's travelling on the right side of the road gave some soldiers an eerie feeling that the watching villagers seemed to be in danger of being run over. The last vehicle in the convoy was a Military Police Landrover with the battalion's padre as 'tail-end charlie'. Guides to company lines were provided by the advance party. 5 RAR Main Body departed as 7 RAR arrived, handing over many items of their equipment including vehicles, heavy machine guns and the 68 ANPRC25 very high frequency radio sets used for communication within the battalion.

106th Field Battery had completely arrived in South Vietnam by 3 February and briefly supported 5 RAR in its last operation (Operation BOND I in area of operations ROSSLYN, which ended on 16 February) before resuming its role as the direct support battery for 7 RAR.

Since the first tour, there had been several changes to the 1st Australian Task Force.

C Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment, equipped with Centurion Mark V tanks, had arrived in Vietnam in late January 1968, but had not operated with 7 RAR on its first tour. As a consequence of the unit's rotation of personnel, it was redesignated B Squadron in February 1969 and then A Squadron in late December 1969. The tanks added a new dimension to the intimate fire support available to the Australians. Although their mobility was restricted, particularly in the wet season, they were able in most cases to be called forward to deal with, for example, bunker systems in most areas of the province. The tanks boosted the intimate fire support capability of the Task Force and its soldiers' morale by their capabilities. When asked which Australian weapon he thought was the most effective, Private Wally Cameron said, 'If you classify a tank as a weapon it must be number one – awesome!'

Mapping was another area where the capability of the task force had improved. The unit responsible, A Section, 1st Topographical Survey Troop, had not altered, but its equipment had improved considerably. Australian editions of province maps in both 1:50 000 and 1:25 000 had been printed and many corrections to them had been made. Specialised maps showing, for example, mine incidents, old bunkers and former contacts, were also available. These were very valuable tools at all levels for planning patrols and ambushes. A wider variety of 'picto' maps, of normal map size and scale but assembled from coloured air photographs, was available. Picto maps were good supplements to topographical maps, particularly when the season was the same as when the map was made. Individual large trees and clumps of bamboo in clearings could be identified, providing excellent navigational check points in mostly flat terrain. A further development related to mapping was the deployment and use of an experimental and rudimentary intelligence computer database, able to record any incident in any grid square.

The standard of medical care available in Vietnam was always high. Since the first tour, 8th Field Ambulance had been concentrated at Nui Dat and tasked to deal with the less pressing cases. 1st Australian Field Hospital had opened at Vung Tau on 13 November 1967 to provide a greater capacity to support the more urgent medical care for the three battalion task force.

Since the first tour, the political direction of the war had altered. American doctrine now gave greater emphasis to programs of 'pacification' (designed to free villages from Viet Cong influence) and 'Vietnamisation' (to give greater capability to the South Vietnamese forces to prosecute the war). From the Australian Task Force's perspective, these programs caused a much greater emphasis on the role of 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit (which had been formed late in 1967) and, throughout this tour, more effort on training and operating with local forces.

At the beginning of the tour, the Task Force Commander was Brigadier S.P. 'Black Jack' Weir. His style was tough and hard, harsh and abrasive. He admitted no criticism of his policies or views. Although a difficult man with whom to work, he was a

distinguished and very experienced soldier with a great deal of operational service. His strength of character and conviction meant that at times he attempted to run the whole Australian effort in Phuoc Tuy Province. It was said that he commanded six battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment during his tenure at 1st Australian Task Force.

The Commanding Officer's approach to his task in the province was governed to a large extent by the Australian Task Force Standing Operating Procedures and the policies of Brigadier Weir. His approach to the task was also characterised by his reliance on the fact that the battalion had especially well-honed patrolling and ambushing skills. He summarised this approach as:

*. . . always to emphasise aggressive patrolling by companies to keep the enemy off balance and on the move, coupled with small scale offensive operations when information and intelligence was good enough. In essence, to isolate and reduce the enemy by patrolling and ambushing. Looking to hold ground, was per se, a waste of time: the enemy and his infrastructure must be destroyed. Cordon and search operations were better left to the Vietnamese.*

The method of replacement for the large turnover of personnel expected on the tour was, as for the previous tour, by individual replacement. Reinforcements arriving in the battalion through the 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit received a three day course conducted by the unit Regimental Duties Warrant Officer, Warrant Officer Class Two Errol Eadie. The soldiers received instruction on unit Standing Operating Procedures and zeroed their weapons. The battalion headquarters staff also checked that administrative details such as next-of-kin lists, inoculations and other details were correct.

Once again the number of soldiers available for operations was a matter of serious concern for company commanders. Major Thomson (A Company) noted:

*Next to discipline and morale, manning provokes more headaches than anything else. The problems of dealing with a bunker system are a child's play by comparison. Manning problems arise from the moment a company is reconstituted in Australia and persist for the entire tour in Vietnam . . . A few suggestions include: select potential NCOs and specialists from regular soldiers or National Servicemen who have a full tour of operations before them; earmark replacement specialists as soon as possible and accept the inevitable – be thankful for small mercies such as platoons at 20–22 strong – occasionally fewer for short periods.*

There had been, in theory, little change to the order of battle of Viet Cong in Phuoc Tuy. Four years of Australian involvement had begun to sap the enemy's strength. They were now much less likely to be able to fight in company-sized groups.

They were less well supplied with ammunition, although they were probably equipped with a higher proportion of better weapons than they had in 1968, particularly more AK47s and RPD machine guns. Their caches of food in the deeper jungle were depleted and they had to rely on more frequent incursions into villages to restock. Four years of bombardment with artillery and aircraft had sapped their morale. Their reservoir of potential recruits from the local population had probably diminished with the increasing amount of government control. One platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Ian 'Macka' McNee, felt that, 'The enemy in 1970 was not looking for contacts. He was using his bushcraft skills and moving around quietly'.

The local population had become much more secure. There was less random Viet Cong assassination and fewer attacks on government posts. All scattered villagers had been resettled into more controllable areas. While this helped government control, there was still resentment at the controls on access to traditional rice-growing and fishing areas. All province roads were much safer, particularly by day. Civilian access areas had expanded markedly. The nightly curfew still restricted movement, although not inordinately. There was less Viet Cong interference with rice harvesting, less levying of taxation. The Viet Cong infrastructure in villages still existed, and while not prospering, was firmly entrenched.

There was a well publicised amnesty program to allow surrendering Viet Cong or soldiers from the North Vietnamese Army to be re-integrated into South Vietnamese society. The program (called Chieu Hoi, which meant, 'open arms') sought to persuade enemy soldiers (who were then called returnees or Hoi Chanh) to surrender. They were entitled to monetary rewards which were scaled to the value of the weapons surrendered and the information about their former comrades passed to the government. The program was a carefully run campaign, with safe conduct passes, propaganda leaflets, publicity in villages and a supplementary array of psychological operations. All methods of appeal were used. Some emphasised the effectiveness of allied operations and the danger of being killed in them. Others broadcast ghostly music from voice aircraft to lower morale. Grisly pamphlets, containing photos of killed comrades were dropped on Viet Cong camps.

The Hoi Chanh were most useful to the allies. Their Confucian acceptance of fate often meant that a soldier, who perhaps had faithfully served the Viet Cong for many years, would lead Australian forces to attack their camps in a matter of hours after surrender, without duress. Although captives taken in battle would often give information of similar value, Hoi Chanh had the extra motivation provided by built-up frustration and dissatisfaction to cooperate with allies. The battalion knew that Hoi Chanh (and prisoners) were potentially of much greater value than dead Viet Cong. A very high proportion of prisoners and returnees were taken during the tour.



From its arrival in South Vietnam, the battalion had up to a dozen Bushmen Scouts (a more acceptable name to Australians than the US choice – Kit Carson Scouts) attached to it. These 'scouts' were former Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army soldiers who had rallied to the allied cause and volunteered to serve in this capacity. Some had soldiered with the enemy in Phuoc Tuy Province. They were one of the very few exceptions made to the rule that Vietnamese nationals were not permitted access to Australian base and operational areas. Australian soldiers (and other western allies) found it hard to accept and understand the ability of Vietnamese to change their allegiance and questioned the permanency of their change, although their loyalty to the allies seemed to remain constant in most cases. The job of the Bushmen Scouts was to accompany sub-units on operations and to assist them by providing the direct knowledge of how the enemy operated. Their English was generally workable rather than fluent and they were also some use as interpreters. Their overall utility was more a function of each man's personality and motivation than his background and perceived experience. Some were successes, others dismal failures. The Bushman Scout attached to Battalion Headquarters was an ex-North Vietnamese Army lieutenant called Mot – Vietnamese for 'one'. He was cooperative and inquisitive but withdrawn, an extremely fast and skilful digger of weapon pits – clearly a defensive technique often used by the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong alike. He claimed to have five wives! Mot became a valuable interpreter of the mode of operation of the Viet Cong forces and could discern motives for their reactions and dispositions. He disappeared – went absent without leave – after about six months with the battalion. While his defection from the allied cause confirmed the suspicions held by some, there was no evidence that the information he gained about the method of operation of the battalion or Australian forces was passed on to our enemies.

The battalion undertook a comprehensive two week orientation and familiarisation program before it was committed to operations. A separate program for company and platoon commanders included air and road reconnaissances of the province, as well as visits to all the major units to be briefed on their capabilities. All ranks attended a series of demonstrations that included Operation LIFESAVER, a mine warfare course run by 1st Field Squadron and a large-scale fire support and Dustoff demonstration. During this period, the Task Force Commander and the new Commander of Australian Force Vietnam, Major General Colin Fraser, visited to check on the battalion's progress.

## **OPERATION FINSCHHAFEN**

The battalion's first operation on this tour of duty was named after its barracks at Holsworthy. It was a reconnaissance and ambush operation from 9 March to 7 April 1970, designed to locate and destroy the enemy in the area of operations KURRAJONG in the eastern half of Phuoc Tuy. The operation was supported from fire

support base ANNE (named after the wife of the Battery Commander of 106th Field Battery), which was located 6 km east of Binh Gia. The fire support base was manned by Battalion Headquarters and elements of Support Company including the Mortar Platoon and 106th Field Battery.

The Commanding Officer's plan was to insert three rifle companies in the south of the area of operations in order to drive north towards the fourth company which was to act as a block. At 1000 hours on 10 March, Support Company deployed by road to establish ANNE, followed closely by the other elements that would occupy it. Between 1400 and 1600 hours the rifle companies conducted separate helicopter assault landings into the area of operations and commenced searching their allotted areas.

Many soldiers copied the briefing for this (and later) operations in their Field Notebooks. Private Tony Shaw of D Company noted that D Company was the last in order of fly-out 'as usual'. He summarised the intelligence briefing for the operation, nominating *D445* as the most likely enemy group to be encountered. Its strength was about 200. It was thought to be armed with one recoilless rifle, two 82 mm mortars, four 60 mm mortars, a .30 (inch) calibre machine gun, eleven RPD 7.62 mm machine guns, 30 B40 RPG2s, six B41 RPG7s and two 12.7 mm heavy machine guns, as well as its other small arms. The other possible enemy group was *C25*, the *Long Dat District Company*, thought to be 45 to 50 strong. It was equipped with one 60 mm mortar and had three RPDs and five Browning automatic rifles. Briefings like these at platoon level ensured that every soldier had a good idea of the threat that he faced.

A close bond had developed between 7 RAR and its direct support artillery battery. Although the battalion had some earlier association with its supporting armoured personnel carriers, this operation built on the earlier relationship to form a strongly cooperating team throughout the tour. 2 Troop of B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment, commanded by Captain Peter Murphy, provided sterling support to the battalion. The Commanding Officer had requested Captain Murphy's troop and, though it was not Armoured Corps practice to allocate a particular troop in support on a permanent basis, the rule was broken on this occasion.

In the first few days of the operation, there was a build-up of indications of enemy presence. On the second day, B Company found a small unoccupied bunker system near a map feature nicknamed 'The Bone' which was midway between Nui Dat 2 and Xuyen Moc. The next day, 3 Platoon A Company had a fleeting glimpse of one enemy soldier 4 km north-east of Nui Dat 2 at long range but could not fire on him. On 11 March, 4 km north-east of Nui Dat, Private John Rodgers was slightly wounded by shrapnel at 0015 hours but he was able to remain on duty.

On the morning of 18 March a Viet Cong surrendered at Fire Support Base ANNE. It was quite unusual for an enemy soldier to rally to an Australian base. He was Doan Tien Dat, the Adjutant of the *Dental Unit* of *K76A Hospital*, which was part

of the area logistic unit, *84 Rear Services Group*. He later led a patrol to his SKS rifle which he had hidden near a Cao Dai temple close to the fire support base.

Private Paul Lusk of 5 Platoon B Company was wounded on the afternoon of 13 March at 'The Bone'. Second Lieutenant Karl Metcalf described what occurred:

*5 Platoon (commanded by Doug Gibbons) moved out of the Company harbour some 40 minutes ahead of the rest of the Company. The plan was for the rest of the Company, with 4 Platoon leading, to follow the same track as 5 Platoon. Naturally, we moved much quicker than 5 Platoon. The forward section commander sighted some movement across the other side of a clearing and he and the gunner opened fire. I moved forward. There was obvious confusion, so I called cease fire. I then heard over the radio 5 Platoon call 'Contact, wait out!' I realised what had happened. Lusky was very lucky, only taking a very slight bullet wound across the ear. He later became the Company Storeman, having no doubt used up all his luck. He had looked as though he was dressed in black as we all did when drenched in sweat.*

*The aftermath was that we were all so nervous that night that 4 Platoon, which had an ambush on the edge of the Bone where Lusky was shot, initiated, at my order, an ambush because we mistook a bunch of fireflies for a VC patrol! So much for our cool demeanour during the nervous early days of patrolling!*

That evening a soldier in C Company deliberately shot himself in the lower leg. He was evacuated by Dustoff and, on recovery from his wound, served out his tour of duty with another unit.

During the year, small groups of Citizen Military Forces officers visited the battalion for periods of about two weeks. The first group (Major W. V. McDonald and Captain K. Newton) joined the battalion on 15 March. The purpose of such visits was to allow officers from the Citizen Military Forces to gain experience in Vietnam that could be passed on when they returned. They were usually treated well, but sometimes they were seen as impediments to infantry patrols that preferred to focus on their primary mission, rather than having to look after outsiders who lacked operational experience. There were times when these observers were better left to orient themselves in base areas. Soldiers had a similar attitude to journalists, some of whom were seen as dangerous 'glory hunters'. One later Citizen Military Forces observer, Major Jack Demmery, recalled:

*On the patrols I took part in during my stay, the briefing, conduct and debriefing was spot on. I discovered that once a patrol commenced there was no need for further orders or queries: such was the high standard of discipline and trust in the corporal patrol leaders.*

On 23 March six soldiers in the Assault Pioneer Platoon of Support Company<sup>1</sup> were

accidentally wounded 5 km north-east of Binh Gia by a mortar round fired from Fire Support Base ANNE. The error was due to sound ranging at night when the first ranging rounds had fallen into a depression, muffling the sound somewhat and a subsequent over-correction that brought the next rounds too close. The investigation found that there was no error or fault by the Mortar Platoon. Private Len 'Blue' Schulz suffered damaged ears and his wife was notified of this the following day. A Sydney newspaper reported the engagement with Schulz's name (and three others) under a subheading 'Death'. His distressed relatives dealt with many phone calls about his expected funeral. Their anger was not alleviated by the refusal of the newspaper to print a retraction.

Private Tony Shaw (D Company) described a typical day in this operation:

*Day 6, 25 Mar, Loc[ation] [grid reference YS] 546802, Final [location] 531797. Started out through thick scrub. Found enemy transit camp with a fishing rod in it. Then we ran into wasps' nest, managed to get stung 5-6 times. Found bush too thick so we took to the water. Wading along Charlie and J. Hardie fell in. When we harboured up for lunch we found an unexploded CBU [US cluster bomb unit] in the middle of CHQ and all we could do was sit around and laugh. Had a terrible night, shivering and wasp bites itching. Mortars started landing too close for comfort.*

On the same day, the area of operations was extended by an area of about 9 km by 9 km to the north of the original area to allow operations to be conducted against the Nui Sao base area. The Nui Sao hill area is located about 6 km east of Cam My. This part of the operation was performed by C Company assaulting by helicopter directly into the target area on 26 March, D Company moving on foot and driving from the south, with A and B Companies deploying by air to the north-west and north-east of the area of operations and driving towards the centre on 28 March.

Private Shaw chronicled the events of another day in the operation:

*28th, Day 18. Moved out leaving Fred's section behind. Other two [sections] to search bunker system. CO came over in chopper. Had a lizard playing around me for an hour. After lunch went digging around. Found nails, fish hooks, M1 magazine and 12.7 mm round. Picked up water. Most of pl[atoon] run out of food. Ran out of hexy [hexamine heating tablets]. Started using PE [plastic explosive]. Dick found a sapphire in the creek when we went for a water resup[ply]. Loc[ation] no change from yesterday. Nothing happened at night.*

In the early morning of 31 March two Viet Cong walked into the 3 Platoon A Company position. Both enemy soldiers were killed by Second Lieutenant Ian McNee's platoon. An M1 carbine and some documents were captured. One of the enemy soldiers was identified as Chau Ngoc Long, a section second-in-command of K76A Hospital.

The Company Sergeant Major, Warrant Officer Class Two Jim Husband, suggested that it was important for those soldiers who had not seen a dead body to look at one. The company filed past to see the dead enemy. Although some found the experience traumatic, it was a necessary experience for many, one which they would perhaps next see when they were less prepared for it. This was the only significant contact with the enemy in this area, but several bunker systems and staging areas, that had not been used for weeks or months, were found.

The second extension to the area of operations, on 31 March, was given as part of a joint operation with 6 RAR, Army of the Republic of Vietnam and US forces. This new area straddled the Phuoc Tuy – Long Khanh Province border and was centred 10 km east of Route 2. The target was the *Ba Long Headquarters*, the Viet Cong organisation in charge of operations in both Phuoc Tuy (Baria) and Long Khanh Provinces. 7 RAR's task was to provide blocking forces to the west and south of the 6 RAR area of operations. Three companies (A, B and D) were positioned along the general line of the Suoi Luc, which flowed in a north–west to south–easterly direction across the inter–provincial border 12 km east of Route 2. The remaining rifle company (C Company) was held as a reaction force in an area about 4 km south–west of the other companies.

On the morning of 1 April, 2 Platoon A Company, while patrolling 17 km north–north–east of Ngai Giao, contacted two Viet Cong in an area with well defined and well used tracks. The Platoon Commander, Second Lieutenant Ian Dunn wrote:

*As 4 Section was crossing the track, Corporal Read noticed movement to his left on the track. There was one enemy running about 20 metres away. He engaged this enemy with his M16 followed closely by all of his section except the last man. A second retreating enemy was seen and engaged by gun number two, Private Dixon. All shots were from the hip. A good fast reaction from the section. Located body of first enemy 25 metres along the track. Armed with 7.62 mm Chicom pistol which he had not drawn from its holster. The other enemy left a heavy blood trail for another 120 metres. We then found his pack beside the track and saw him behind a tree. He was dead when we reached him.*

The patrol heard the enemy 'scrub bashing' and had some difficulty identifying that they were indeed enemy. One of the Viet Cong killed was Nghiem Xuan Phu, the Adjutant of *D65 Engineer Battalion*, who was carrying the equivalent of \$A16 000, about half a year's pay for his battalion. Most was handed in to Battalion Headquarters and later used by padre Keith Teefey to help support orphanages in Vung Tau. The rest seems to have been held by the platoon and company. It provided the funds for what can only be described as a great party on their next rest and convalescence break at Vung Tau.

That afternoon, the headquarters of A Company encountered one enemy soldier

16 km north-east of Binh Gia and 2 km north of the province border. He was wounded and captured and after treatment was evacuated by Dustoff. He was carrying a large quantity of documents that identified him as Hong Ky Nam, the commander of the *Xuan Loc District Unit (B720)* of Long Khanh province. The documents gave the Viet Cong plan for this province for April 1970. There were also two directives issued by the Viet Cong Headquarters (the *Central Office for South Vietnam*, known as *COSVN*) for the Spring 1970 campaign. The documents also included orders for assassinations in villages. When the prisoner was interrogated by a US team, he gave dates of proposed attacks in Long Khanh, enemy locations and information on enemy tactics.

On 2 April Private Gary Strickland, an ex-5 RAR soldier, of 7 Platoon C Company (which was commanded by Lieutenant Mick Hughes) was on sentry duty at Suoi Ngac 9 km east of Cam My on the border between Phuoc Tuy and Long Khanh Provinces. He had positioned himself behind an ant nest and was flicking the insects with a stick when he looked up and saw an enemy soldier very close to his position. The Viet Cong fired at him just as Private Strickland fired a claymore. The mine blasted the enemy soldier off his aim so that he only wounded the sentry in his thigh. Another section moved quickly from the other side of the river to come to Private Strickland's assistance. The machine gunner, Private Peter Riley, committed himself with some determination to uncharted waters. His five foot height became fully submerged. It was said that he was so determined that he walked across the bottom of the river, gun and all, completely unfazed. The Viet Cong soldier evaded the subsequent sweep of the area. Private Strickland was returned to Australia for treatment.

Fire Support Base ANNE was visited by several dignitaries in the first few days of April. On 2 April, the Minister for Defence, Malcolm Fraser, MP, accompanied by the Commander of Australian Forces Vietnam, Major General Colin Fraser, was briefed by the Commanding Officer for a short period. The next day the leader of the Democratic Labor Party, Senator Vince Gair, and the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, Lieutenant General Sir John Wilton, visited the fire base separately. Senator Gair was an unusual apparition in a large white hat and carpet slippers. He was interested in any soldier – so long as he was from Queensland. Sir John questioned the Commanding Officer closely on operations and the enemy. He left behind, as he usually did, a feeling of great confidence and calmness with those to whom he had spoken.

Another visitor to ANNE was Lieutenant General Julian J. Ewell, the Commanding General of II Field Force Vietnam. He was a very senior and experienced US commander who later became senior military adviser to the Paris Peace Talks. Ewell seemed very critical of the style of operations – the careful, painstaking patrolling and searching for the enemy and mines before committing troops to assault. He emphasised the importance of statistics and body count. The atmosphere of his discussion with

Lieutenant Colonel Grey was cold and one of overbearing disagreement. His visit was not one to be remembered with either respect or affection. There was evidently a contrast in the atmosphere between a senior US general visiting his own forces with starched fatigues and a 'can do, yes sir' response and the more informal attitudes of an Australian battalion in the field. Lieutenant Colonel Grey disagreed with the General, perhaps something that few of the General's US subordinates would dare to do. In contrast, later visits by Ewell's successor, Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison and by the Commander US Army Vietnam, Lieutenant General W.J. McCaffery, provided interesting and useful dialogue.

Second Lieutenant Ian Dunn wrote on 3 and 4 April:

*Father Teefey has been with the platoon for a few days. I think he was a bit upset when we killed two enemy on 1 April, but he has recovered now. [4 April] He will be saying Mass for us today. A rather novel setting, in the middle of a VC bunker system.*

This bunker system was 10 km north–north–east of Binh Gia and covered an area of 400 m by 100 m. It would have been big enough to hold a battalion and had three wells and a spring. It did not seem to have been used within the last three months

On 3 April at 1735 hours, 9 Platoon C Company (commanded by Lieutenant Rob Pothof) contacted a group of five Viet Cong 19 km north–north–east of Ngai Giao. Three were wounded and the documents captured indicated that they were from the *Signal Company* of *274 Viet Cong Regiment*. During the engagement, Private Ron Smith fired two full magazines at the enemy before he moved to a kneeling position without cover and was mortally wounded in the chest by enemy M16 rifle fire. His medals for his service in Vietnam were presented to his son on the battalion's 25th anniversary gathering at Holsworthy in 1990.

Throughout the tour, whenever any soldier of the battalion was killed in action or had died of his wounds, it became the custom to play the lament, 'Flowers of the Forest', at dusk, casually but reverently. Corporal Robbie Cameron piped this haunting tune at ANNE at dusk on the evening of Private Smith's death.

In the early evening of 5 April, 8 Platoon C Company (Second Lieutenant Gregg Lindsay in command) had just completed a harbour drill for night defence with Company Headquarters and 9 Platoon 16 km north–north–east of Ngai Giao. Sentries had been posted and claymores were being laid. The Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant Graham Griffiths (a veteran of the first tour) was checking the sentries and claymores when a group of four enemy dressed in black came towards him down a well worn footpath. He shot the first enemy in the chest with his self-loading rifle and killed him instantly. The enemy was later identified as Nguyen Van Doanh, a company commander in *274 Viet Cong Main Force Regiment*. The other three enemy escaped.

On 6 April companies commenced to move to pre-arranged rendezvous points in

an area of operations called TULIP (east of Route 2 at the northern boundary of Phuoc Tuy) in preparation for the extraction back to Nui Dat. B Company was lifted out by Iroquois helicopters; A, C and D by Chinooks. The Battalion Headquarters, 106th Field Battery and Support Company moved back to Nui Dat by road on 7 and 8 April. Fire Support Base ANNE was levelled and abandoned.

As each operation progressed, the unit became more proficient. Experience changed earlier practices. Second Lieutenant Karl Metcalf (4 Platoon B Company) recalled:

*Towards the end of Operation FINSCHHAFEN, B Company was tasked to clear a helicopter landing zone in some tall trees. The OC called for each platoon to provide its supply of plastic explosive (each platoon was supposed to carry so many slabs). I was somewhat embarrassed when we could only produce, I think, one slab instead of the stipulated five or so we should have had. It turned out that the diggers carrying the stuff got sick of lugging it around and had been carving off pieces to burn to boil water in their bush mugs for brews! It was an effective method that boiled the water in about 10 seconds flat, but burnt a hole in the metal mug if you weren't careful. Thereafter we gave up carrying plastic explosive because everyone was already heavily laden with other equipment.*

*The other item we discarded after this first operation was the M72 light anti-tank weapon because it was very difficult to move through the vegetation with the M72 slung across your back.*

The Commanding Officer considered that several important lessons had flowed from this operation. The enemy seemed to move away from the landing zones that had been used for troop insertion by Iroquois helicopters. A quick move away from the insertion point was needed to contact the enemy. The fact that helicopter movement signalled our intentions to the enemy meant that soldiers needed to carry a minimum of five days rations in order to remain relatively undetected while being mobile and self-sufficient.

The description of FINSCHHAFEN and the other operations that follow could be misleading. While the key events – the contacts with the enemy and the casualties suffered – have been described, the routine from day to day has not. Most soldiers experienced a tour of Vietnam that had a few contacts with the enemy, but for the rest of their time routine prevailed. This routine included the anticipation of enemy activity at any time. Sentries were always posted when halted, scouts were always alert when moving. The alertness carried with it the tension of war, the chance of any peaceful moment erupting into instant action. An enemy who was extremely difficult to differentiate from the population as a whole exacerbated this tension. A further factor, particularly evident as the war progressed, was that the support of the Australian people for their troops was perceived to be diminishing.

Add to these circumstances the random threat of mines – principally the M16s of Australian and US origin, with the chance of death or awful maiming – and this strain is increased. Look then at the responsibility of the junior leaders, of incessant



concern with navigation, of consideration of responses to the next unexpected eventuality, and the routine becomes even more difficult. Consider the forward scouts, and their reliance on the alertness of those who follow to make up for the hoped-for inaccuracy of enemy fire that might burst forth at any time. Bear in mind the dependence on one's mates for support at any time. Add the strain of the loads carried, the oppressive climate, the long hours, the need for constant alertness. One platoon commander commented:

*It is difficult for outsiders to understand that the soldier was under constant tension once he stepped out from the relative safety of the fire support base to go on patrol, at times for up to ten weeks of continuous patrolling. At any time, day or night, a contact could occur. There was no chance to relax unless you were asleep. A mere perusal of dates, times, distances covered by patrols, number of contacts, etc, cannot convey this constant tension of expecting contact with the enemy at any time.*

*Additionally, our patrols were conducted in a world of silence. Hand signals, muted whispers and silence were the keys to successful patrolling and ambushing. There was a requirement to be alert to both visual signs of the enemy as well as aural signs, while at the same time moving through the jungle as quietly as possible. This meant that the soldier not only had to watch his assigned arc, he also had to watch where every step would be placed, duck around or under a vine or branch, or step over a twig; always fearful of making a noise himself and thus alerting an enemy who could be around the next corner. The occasional mistake, such as stepping on a stick which snaps loudly, would jar our nerves because we knew that our survival depended on our ability to move through the jungle noiselessly.*

All these factors have existed for the infantryman in other wars to differing degrees. Perhaps they added to a greater sum in Vietnam. Colonel Grey, who had commanded a platoon in Korea, later discussed the comparative stresses with his platoon commanders when the battalion returned to Australia on HMAS *Sydney*. His opinion was that the pressure applied to soldiers patrolling in Vietnam was far greater than that experienced in Korea, despite the more numerous enemy and higher casualties in that earlier conflict. The fact that all these stresses and strains were daily overcome in Vietnam was a tribute to the tenacity of the Australian infantryman. Those who served in these operations, whether routine or not, were as good as any soldiers the nation had seen. And the quality of their leadership at all levels equalled that of those who had gone before them.

Nevertheless, the Australian soldier was not one to be overwhelmed by circumstances, however threatening. National Servicemen and Regular soldiers together mastered this burden, enjoyed the bond of mateship and tackled each day and night with a sense of humour as much as a sense of purpose. In the periods between operations, scant as they were, the battalion undertook a program of training.

The subjects covered were wide ranging and included ammunition safety, malarial precautions, handling of weapons at night, and ambush techniques. In addition, officers and non-commissioned officers were trained further on artillery employment, enemy tactics and medical evacuation techniques.

When the battalion had returned to Nui Dat, the Commanding Officer announced a series of appointment changes. Major Smethurst was appointed to command D Company while Major Robb became Officer Commanding Administration Company. Major O'Brien, as Base Commander, became responsible for all unit 'A' (personnel administration) and 'Q' (quartermaster stores) administration. Staff Sergeant Col Rowley was appointed to command the Reconnaissance Platoon.

The battalion policy on webbing and uniforms was that in the bush, comfort and ease of access for equipment was paramount so long as the required amounts of ammunition and rations were carried. However, in the base areas standardised dress and equipment were required. Battalion Routine Orders therefore decreed that US boots could be worn in the bush but not in base. Many soldiers found that these boots, which included an eyelet above the sole near the instep, and therefore tended to pump water out of them in the wet, were more practical than the Australian General Purpose Boot. This lesson on the importance of methods of keeping dry feet in wet conditions is one still not put into practice by the Army. A further Routine Order passed on from the Task Force underlined the parsimonious attitude that was taken by the government to its soldiers. It stated: 'When a soldier is killed in action, the Army buys wreaths on behalf of the battalion, company and platoon. This charge is then debited against Regimental Funds'. So soldiers paid for these wreaths. Many were not aware of this scandalous Army order.

While the battalion was in Nui Dat, many other activities took place. Private Allan Lloyd (6 Platoon B Company) wrote:

*Yesterday I went on a civil aid program, guarding a doctor and a dentist. They do a marvellous job over here you know. You have to laugh when you see the kids getting needles. They cry and run everywhere. They are very sad to look at. They are under-fed, have sores and big fat bellies through malnutrition.*

On 15 April, C Company came under the direct command of 1st Australian Task Force and was deployed to the Horseshoe until 8 May. While located there, the company conducted training in basic infantry skills, weapon handling and minor tactics for 3 Company, 3rd Battalion 52nd Regiment, part of the 18th Division of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. The company also ambushed likely Viet Cong supply routes into villages in Dat Do District. The period of detachment was not without incident, as the Task Force Commander directly influenced day-to-day events. Majors do not necessarily enjoy the direct scrutiny of brigadiers. It was a somewhat relieved Company Commander who returned to the fold after 8 May.



**15** Preparing for deployment by helicopters from Kangaroo Pad for Operation CONCRETE. (COLONEL A. MATTAY)



- 16** ABOVE: The Horseshoe in 1970, looking toward the Long Hais to the south-west (COLONEL A. MATAY)

- 17** BELOW: Dismounting from helicopters at the Horseshoe after an operation in the shadow of the Long Hais (COLONEL A. MATAY)

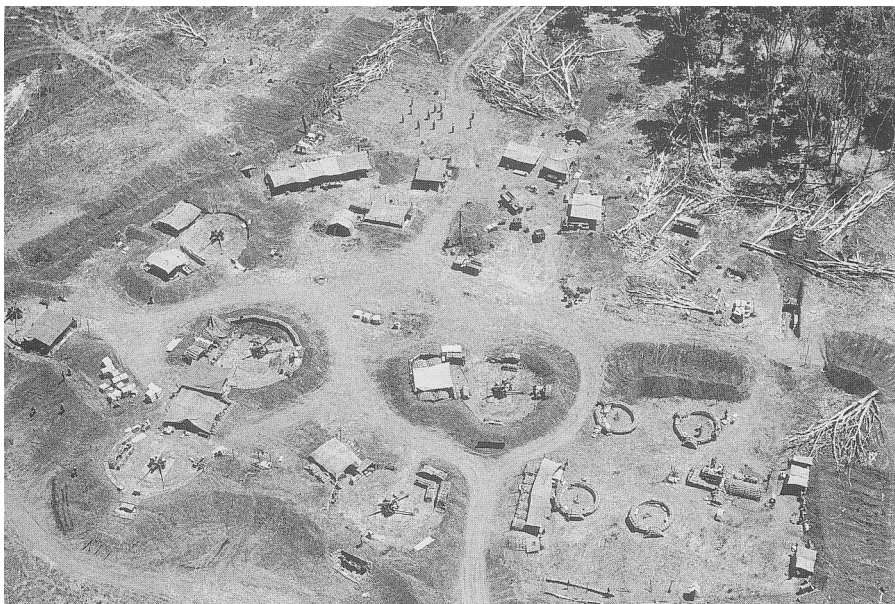




- 18** ABOVE: D Company  
deploying by armoured  
personel carriers  
during Operation  
CUNG CHUNG  
(COLONEL A. MATTAY)

- 19** RIGHT: Lieutenant  
Colonel R.A.Grey  
Dismounts from his  
Sioux helicopter  
During Operation  
CONCRETE With his  
Colt Commando rifle  
(COLONEL A. MATTAY)





**20** ABOVE: Fire Support Base Anne from the north, March 1970  
(COLONEL A. MATTAY)

**21** BELOW: B Company re-deploying during Operation  
FINSCHHAFEN (COLONEL A. MATTAY)



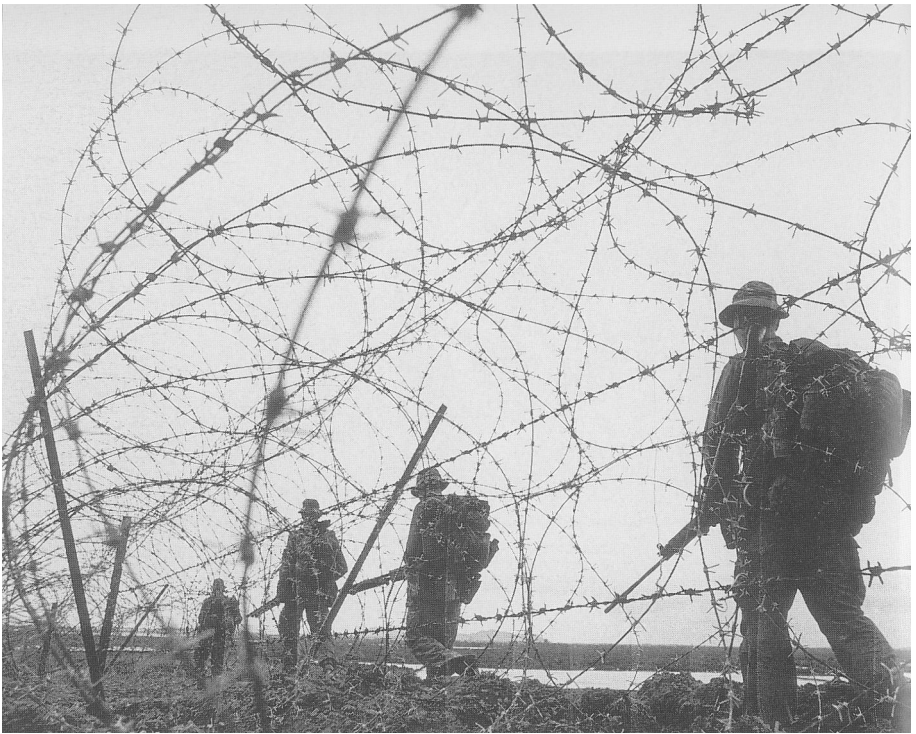




**22** ABOVE: Private Gary Strickland being evacuated by Sioux helicopter, 2 April 1970. (COLONEL A. MATTAY)

**23** BELOW: A Company returns to Fire Support Base ANNE for a day's rest and replenishment, April 1970. (COLONEL A. MATTAY)





**24** ABOVE: D Company at night defensive position ISA deploying to a night ambush, June 1970. (COLONEL A. MATTAY)

**25** BELOW: A Company filling sandbags, night defensive position BRIGID, August 1970. (COLONEL A. MATTAY)







**26** ABOVE: Awaiting lift-off by 9 Squadron RAAF helicopters.  
(COLONEL A. MATTAY)

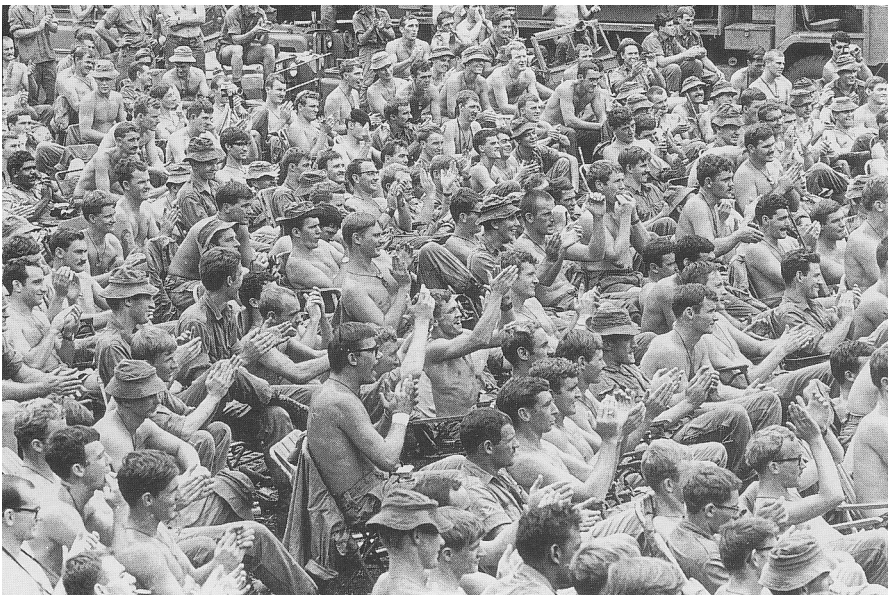
**27** BELOW: D Company crossing a padi toward the Long Green,  
Operation CUNG CHUNG, August 1970. (COLONEL A. MATTAY)





**28** ABOVE: B Company dismounts from armoured personnel carriers after an ambush. (COLONEL A. MATTAY)

**29** BELOW: ABC Concert, Nui Dat, 1970: the 7 RAR audience. (COLONEL A. MATTAY)



# 10

## Increasing Ambushes

### *Concrete and Cung Chung*

*Conceal your troops well, preserve security and attack quickly and unexpectedly.*

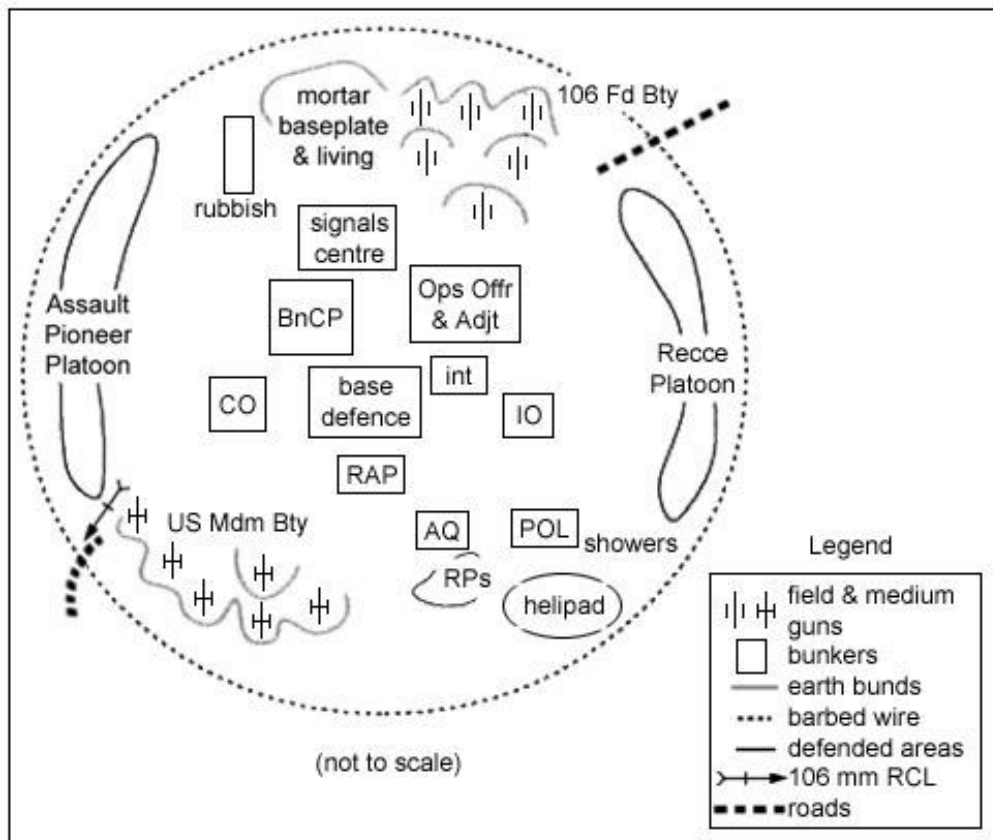
*Tactical Ambush Principles for Infantry Companies*  
(Viet Cong booklet captured by 7 RAR in 1970)

#### **OPERATION CONCRETE I**

The purpose of Operation CONCRETE I (19 April to 7 May) was to destroy those elements of *D445* located in the Tan Ru, an enemy nickname for the area midway between Nui Dat 2 and Xuyen Moc, in an area of operations which was called PENNY. The plan called for a rapid night move by foot to position troops in the area of operations without compromising secrecy. Once in the area of operations, companies were to conduct reconnaissance and establish track and movement patterns. They were then to conduct ambushes on likely enemy routes. Support for the operation was provided from fire support base DISCOVERY, located in a rubber plantation 5 km west of Xuyen Moc. The night move by the battalion reflected a growing confidence in the unit's capabilities and a lessening of the enemy threat.

The detailed siting of DISCOVERY was planned using photos taken on an aerial reconnaissance of the area. These photos were developed and enlarged using the darkroom facilities of the Intelligence Section.

106th Field Battery was located throughout the operation in DISCOVERY. Additional artillery support was provided from the fire base by C/2/35th US Field Artillery (with 155 mm guns). A troop of B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment supported the battalion for most of the operation, providing troop lift and setting up night ambushes of armoured personnel carriers. 2 Troop of 1st Field Squadron provided engineer support to the companies and to battalion headquarters. Elements of



**Figure 10.1** Fire Support Base DISCOVERY

9 Squadron RAAF provided troop lift, Dustoff and fire support when it was required.

On the afternoon and evening of 19 April, A, B and D Companies deployed from Nui Dat on foot to infiltrate their area of operations, a distance of typically 10 to 15 km, depending on the route. This was the first substantial night move made by a unit of the Task Force for several months. Second Lieutenant Metcalf (4 Platoon B Company) wrote:

*On the move—in the company was in single file with 4 Platoon in front, myself leading. I had taken this decision because I needed to navigate from the front and, in this instance, the move was fraught with danger if we hit an enemy position because we sounded like a herd of elephants. Compared to our normal daytime patrolling, the noise was horrendous as we slipped and fell over boulders in the creek bed which formed our route for the most part. As can be imagined, the company was spread out over hundreds of metres as we struggled along with full packs in the creek bed. It was a very high risk infiltration into the area which thankfully resulted in good dividends.*

The next day Battalion Headquarters, Support Company and 106th Field Battery

deployed by road to DISCOVERY and companies commenced to search their area of operations.

After midday on 20 April, 4 Platoon B Company was approached by six enemy. They were engaged by two sentries, who withdrew under covering fire from a GPMG M60. The enemy quickly executed a contact drill and returned accurate automatic fire. Although one enemy was killed and another wounded, three RPG2 rounds were fired at the platoon and at company headquarters. A bushfire was started by a 4 Platoon tracer round. In accord with Murphy's Law, the wind was blowing towards the platoon and in a short time the tinder-dry bamboo leaves were ablaze and several packs set on fire. The fire enabled the enemy to recover their wounded and withdraw. Lieutenant Metcalf, using a tracker dog team, took Corporal Allan Aldenhoven's section and quickly followed the enemy for about 2 km and this resulted in a further contact. Lieutenant Metcalf remembered:

*We left our packs behind. Corporal Allan Aldenhoven was in the lead when we reached the enemy body at the junction of the creek and the Song Rai. The only reasons he wasn't shot by the VC who were attempting to recover their comrade's body was because of his dark complexion and the fact that he was wearing a sweat rag around his head, making him not exactly look like a VC, but certainly not making him look like an Australian digger. The VC actually spoke to him, possibly thinking he was one of theirs, before they realised their mistake. Then all hell broke loose as we attempted to get out of the creek bed to fire on the VC on the bank above us.*

Corporal Aldenhoven saw the group of three enemy and engaged them at a range of 5 m, killing one of them. The enemy group returned fire with AK47s and an RPG2 which caused a shrapnel wound to Private John Walker's nose. He remained on duty.

In the afternoon of 21 April Private Graham Kavanagh of 6 Platoon B Company collapsed from heat exhaustion and died. The fact that his fate was contributed to by the harsh climatic conditions and the arduous insertion into the operation by foot compounded the tragedy of his death.

Just after midday on 22 April, a nine-man reconnaissance patrol commanded by Lieutenant Doug Gibbons from 5 Platoon B Company ('Gibbo's Gorillas', whose motto was 'Get Mobile') sighted two enemy on the western bank of the Song Rai. The patrol moved south, crossed the river and then moved north towards the enemy. The patrol commander saw the enemy at about 15 m range and opened fire. There were about ten to fifteen enemy in the group and they returned fire with AK47s and a small calibre mortar. The patrol's forward scout, Private Colin Tilmouth, was seriously wounded by a gunshot in his neck. He was recovered by the patrol commander under covering fire by the rest of the patrol. The patrol withdrew south to enable the casualty to be evacuated by helicopter. 4 Platoon and Company Headquarters moved to the north of the enemy group to cut off their escape routes. 5 Platoon completed the Dustoff and moved to the south of the contact area. By mid-afternoon, B Company's Support Section (commanded



by the Company Second-in-Command, Second Lieutenant Peter Winter) had become involved in a heavy contact from the bunker system in the immediate area. The enemy fired at a range of about 40 m with AK47s, 60 mm mortars and RPG2s. It was found that M26 grenades fired from self-loading rifle (SLR) spigots were an effective and accurate counter to the RPG2s. During the hour it remained in contact, the Support Section was supported by RAAF gunships which gave accurate suppressive fire as close as 10 to 15 m in front of the assaulting troops. Private Bruce Ravenscroft noted the succession of the air support to the contact:

*1430, Dustoff flying overhead, plus two Bushrangers in support. 1435, Bushrangers open up. 1540, Bushrangers open up on nogs in bunker system, and how! 1620, gunships are out of ammo and low on fuel, returning. 1650, gunships return. 1700, they open up again with rockets, mini-guns and M60 door guns. 1750, gunships out of ammo again. 1800, bombers taken over. They dropped 10 napalm bombs. We had to move 200 metres away.*

The Commanding Officer was flown around the area of the contact in the direct support Possum, observing the extent of the bunkers and assisting with ammunition resupply. At this stage, a section of 4 Platoon, which had been in reserve, was ordered to assault the bunkers to allow the company to withdraw its wounded. Private Bob Hughes was mortally wounded at this stage. Second Lieutenant Metcalf recalled:

*Bob was unlucky, as I guess most are who get killed in action. He was almost behind me by about 15 feet when the VC fired an RPG at me (aiming at the sound of my voice). I didn't see the rocket coming but distinctly remember the deafening explosion and the kick in the arse when the shrapnel hit me. Unfortunately for Hughesy, the rocket hit a tree just above me and to my rear, sending most of the shrapnel straight forward towards him. At the time of the rocket explosion we had no idea that he had been hit, as we were intent on firing on the bunkers to our front. A few moments later we were almost all out of ammunition and I then decided to withdraw, as we had little choice with only nine of us and virtually no ammo left. Also we had no radio as that was with the rest of the Platoon which, at the Company Commander's insistence, was back guarding Company HQ. Was therefore unable to provide any directions to the gunships on station which had ceased their covering fire once we commenced our assault.*

*Since we had by this time expended almost one complete first line in an assault of no more than 50 yards, the VC must have thought they were being attacked by a complete company! Thus, having got no closer than 30 yards to the nearest bunker, we withdrew. As we came back we found Hughesy lying*

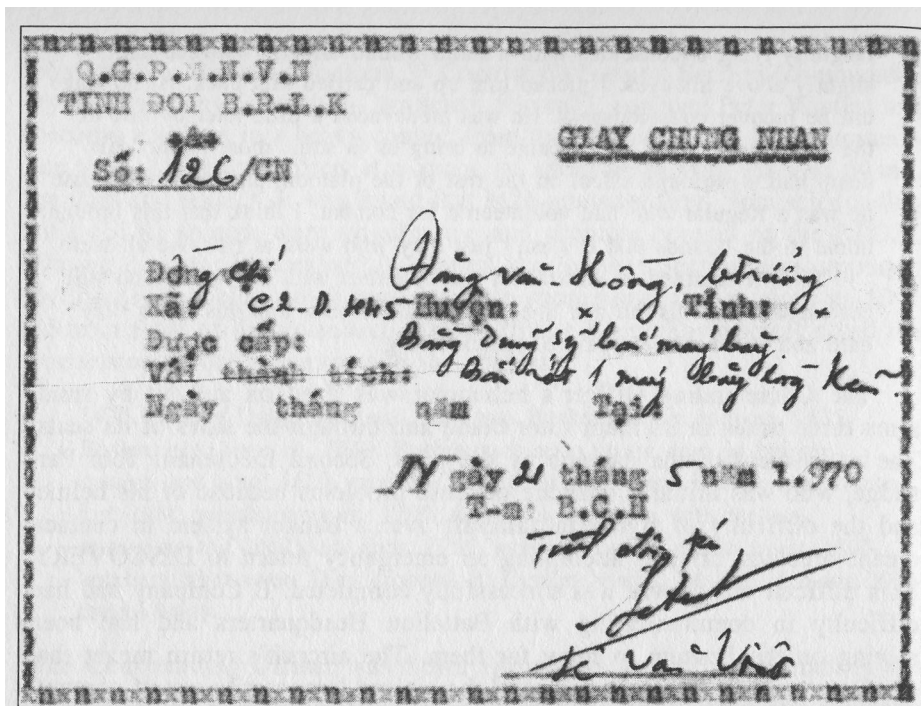
*unconscious with a small wound directly between and slightly above his eyes. I picked him up and carried him back. At no stage did he recover consciousness. He was medevaced a little later by one of the Sioux helicopters which came to bring us in some more ammo. His death had a profound effect on the rest of the platoon, particularly because he was a Regular who had volunteered for combat. I think that this brought home to the Nashos that it wasn't just they who were at risk, we all were.*

*When I returned to Australia I made contact with his family and still correspond with his mother. She, like most mothers, took his death very hard and still bears the pain of remembering.*

The Commanding Officer's helicopter was fired on and hit by small arms three times in its main rotor blade and through the sides of its seats. The assessment of the damage by the pilot, Second Lieutenant Tom Partridge, who was initially unaware of these problems because of his helmet and the difficulty of flying the aircraft over a bunker system in contact, meant breaking off and attempting an emergency return to DISCOVERY. This difficult manoeuvre was successfully completed. B Company had had difficulty in communicating with Battalion Headquarters and had been relying on the Possum to relay for them. The aircraft's return meant that the Commanding Officer was out of the air and temporarily out of communications. The Task Force Commander directed that the attack cease until tanks were in a position to assist. This intervention, which led to a strong difference of opinion between the Commanding Officer and his commander, allowed the enemy to withdraw to fight another day before effective redeployment of other troops could block their likely escape routes.

Two Centurion tanks were placed under B Company's operational control for use in the contact. They were not able to reach the start line for the assault before last light because of the density of the jungle. A napalm airstrike was made on the enemy camp at 1820 hours. It missed the target, but hit the area just vacated by 4 Platoon which had retired to a safe distance. This concentrated the mind of all in 4 Platoon. The attack was postponed until the next morning. At first light the system was cleared, although the enemy had withdrawn. There were eighteen bunkers in it, several of which had heavy blood trails around them. One had been used as a dressing station. There were four enemy bodies found in the camp. They were members of C3 of *D445 Battalion* and K6 of *D440 Battalion*. Five soldiers from B Company were wounded in this fierce engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Corporal John Lawson deliberately exposed himself to the enemy in order to give better neutralising fire while the other wounded were being retrieved. He received minor shrapnel wounds to his knee and chest but was able to remain on duty. The other three wounded (Second Lieutenant Metcalf, Private Allan Howarth and Private R. Bye) were evacuated but later recovered. On 3 May a further four enemy dead were found buried near this contact and it is very likely that their deaths were caused by it.



**Figure 10.2** Viet Cong commendation

This engagement was a good example both of opportunity lost and second-guessing by those remote from the action. Despite this it was a successful action by B Company who fought well and a severe blow for D445. A nominal roll captured from the bunkers showed that C3 had a strength of 35 before the contact. It was one of the few contacts where the enemy abandoned weapons, in this case the highly valued RPD machine gun, when withdrawing. After the contact, K6 moved out of Phuoc Tuy and C3 sought refuge by moving towards the relative safety of the Long Hais.

On 23 April 3 Platoon A Company (commanded by Second Lieutenant Ian McNee) was ambushing in a dry creek bed 2 km north-east of 'The Bone'. At 0300 hours a group of Viet Cong walked into the ambush. Lieutenant McNee described the events that followed as 'a hell of a lot of noise'. After the contact the platoon could hear rustling sounds just east of its position. One enemy body, later identified to be Nguyen Van Luong, a platoon commander in C3 of D445, was found together with his K54 pistol.

Half of 9 Platoon C Company (commanded by Sergeant Savage) was ambushing 2 km north-west of Phuoc Hai in an area of rice padi on the evening of 23 April, when a group of four enemy was sighted through a starlight scope 200 m from the ambush at 0120 hours. When they passed what was judged to be as close as they would come, fire was opened by the platoon at a range of 150 m. The enemy ran without returning fire, leaving a dead enemy behind. The enemy made a further approach



towards the ambush at 0300 hours to try to recover this body but fled when fired on.

At dusk on 23 April at least three enemy approached half of 12 Platoon D Company in their ambush position 7 km north-west of Xuyen Moc. The ambush had been in position in bamboo for four days and was covering tracks on both sides of the Song Rai. Sergeant Barry Coble went to the sentry who had heard the approaching enemy talking. He saw the Viet Cong and fired on them at a range of 30 m, killing one and wounding another. The enemy returned fire with AK47, RPD and a 7.92 mm rifle and then quickly withdrew. Artillery and mortars were fired to attempt to cut off

Second Lieutenant Ian Dunn's 2 Platoon A Company had stopped to closely examine a well used track on the morning of 24 April. He wrote:

*VC tea for brew this morning. It is green and requires much boiling, tastes great though. 0945 hours we were propped on a VC track for a break. Five VC walked out of the scrub into the side of my last section, close to the machine gun. Result 1 VC KIA, captured 1 AK47, 1 RPD, 3 anti-tank rockets, 1 anti-tank grenade, a very large quantity of drugs and medical supplies, 5 VC packs. Another successful contact. We have been lucky.*

The dead soldier was identified as Lam Van Thang, a section commander in the *Province Medical Unit*. The engagement of one enemy in this group had been prevented because one soldier's self-loading rifle caught its flash eliminator in foliage, spoiling the aim. The platoon commander concluded that the weapon should be shortened by getting rid of the flash eliminator. Major Thomson disagreed, pointing out that the self-loading rifle was a general purpose weapon, hard-hitting at long and short ranges and that the flash eliminator, by actually doing its named job, was an extra for which many have been eternally grateful when firing at night behind flimsy cover.

On the night of 24 April, Sergeant Savage's ambush position was approached by four enemy who walked almost into those manning the ambush. The fifteen men in the ambush engaged them at ranges between 20 and 150 m. One enemy was killed immediately. The enemy did not return any fire until fifteen minutes later when they were withdrawing. They then fired RPG7 rounds which wounded five of the members of the ambush.<sup>2</sup> Sergeant Savage was slightly wounded near his eye, although he and all the other wounded chose to remain on duty as their injuries had been caused by very small fragments.

In the early morning of 25 April, the Reconnaissance Platoon was returning from operations in armoured personnel carriers to Fire Support Patrol Base DISCOVERY. As they were clearing their weapons outside the base, Staff Sergeant Col Rowley saw an armed Viet Cong hiding under a tree just a few metres away. He jumped from the carrier and pointed his (unloaded) weapon at the Viet Cong. The enemy soldier aimed his AK47, but resolved the stalemate by shouting 'Chien Hoi' to surrender. His weapon had been loaded with its safety catch off. He was questioned by members of

the Intelligence Section. Like most captured or surrendered Viet Cong, he willingly answered questions and revealed that he was a member of the *Ba Long* (the Viet Cong name for the combined Phuoc Tuy or Baria Province and Long Khanh Provinces) *Province Medical Unit*. His hesitant surrender was probably prompted by the fact that one of the members of his unit had been killed the previous morning by A Company.

Anzac Day in 1970 was the fifth successive night of ambushing for Sergeant Savage's half of 9 Platoon C Company. One of the soldiers in the platoon, Private Frank Wood, described the day:

*Nothing unusual about today, just the same routine chores as any other of the three days we have spent here at Support Base Timothy. We've been warned out for an ambush tonight some 2,500 metres south of here. There are twelve going under the command of Sgt Doc Savage, Packy, Stretch and myself, 2nd group Bottles, Mick, Bruce and Kittle and our rear protection being Dennis, Ian Trimmy and Ross. Lt Pothof was to have taken us out but yesterday he kicked his left foot on some weldmesh and he can't get his boot on.*

*In our briefing we were told of a well used track running from the base of the Long Hai mountains into the fishing village of Lang Phuoc Hai. Our ambush site was to be on high ground overlooking a portion of the track. We had been told by Intelligence reports that numbers of VC had been seen to use this track to obtain supplies from the village.*

Sergeant Savage's story of the night follows.

*I have to take an ambush patrol out to GR [grid reference] [YS] 505525 [1 km west of Phuoc Hai], some three clicks [km] from here in the sand dunes near the beach. I spent the afternoon doing the usual preparations for the patrol such as being briefed, conferring with the FO (Capt Denis Byrne) and the tank commander as to what would be available in the way of fire support should I need it. Just after last light we left [Night Defensive Position] Timothy. At about 1000 metres out we were told to prop [halt] as there could be an ARVN ambush in the area. It was a black cloudy night. After we got clearance to move again, I took over as forward scout as the scout seemed a little jumpy. I can't say that I blamed him as I wasn't too fussed being out in front, knowing that any minute we could walk into an ARVN ambush. We arrived at the grid reference just after nine o'clock which was a track junction. I was not happy with the area so I informed Three Zero Alfa (the Company command station) I was relocating two hundred metres back the way we had come, on the high ground. I didn't go completely to the top. I set up a triangular ambush concentrating on catching the enemy on the way out of Lang Phuoc Hai.*

*We came off 100% stand to at 2200 hours. At 2230 hours I was woken by the picket (Corporal Dennis 'Bottles' Bathersby) saying, 'Sarge, enemy'. I asked, 'How many?' He said, 'I've counted twelve so far'. I then said 'for Christ's*

sake give me the scope" [starlight scope]. The enemy were approaching us from the Long Hai Mountains. I immediately turned the radio off (just in case some callsign decided to ask for a radio check). At 42 I stopped counting. I could still see between 10 and 20 behind them: they were still coming round the bend. The thought passed through my head to let them go as I only had twelve men, of which only four could bring fire to bear on the enemy. I could see two men laughing and pushing each other. About twelve men down the line they didn't seem to have any weapons so I took it that they could be section commanders. With this in mind I lined them up in my sights and thought to myself just before pulling the trigger, 'In for a penny, in for a pound'. Our gun began ripping into them. After the initial surprise they started to throw a lot of stuff back at us such as RPGs, MGs etc. I immediately grabbed the radio and turned it back on. The initial message went like this, 'Zero Alfa this is Three Three Alfa, contact heavy, wait out to you, Tango Zero Delta fire target one'. The tank from Timothy immediately went into action firing high explosive (HE) to our immediate front. I then called for a Fire Mission [artillery]. At one stage I was directing tank fire, 105 [mm] arty, 155 [mm] and 8 inch guns, all by sound, all at the same time. Information was passed up to me that the enemy were wheeling something into position to our left front. Thinking this to be a 12.7 [mm] heavy machine gun, I directed fire to that area. We had high ground to our right which the enemy could have used to roll us up in no time, so I started yelling orders, hoping someone down in the enemy area could understand English. I called for a fictitious platoon on the high ground to hold their fire. The enemy kept attacking up the valley so they could extract their dead. They counter attacked three times in quick succession so I yelled out for my men to fix bayonets, knowing full well that we'd be lucky to have a bayonet between us (anything to put the wind up the enemy). It was during one of these attacks that an RPG7 landed just in front of us blowing me arse over tit. I had to crawl back into my position after I had orientated myself.

Private Mick O'Halloran, another soldier in the ambush, noted:

*When the contact had been initiated I was very frightened because the gun jammed. The contact seemed to last for hours. No one slept for the rest of the night. The black outfits of the VC contrasted against the white beach sand.*

Sergeant Savage continued:

*At around midnight a Shadow aircraft came into the area and asked could he help. I had trouble with all the noise going on understanding the Yank pilot. He wanted me to mark my position with a strobe light. I refused and told him to watch closely as my machine gunner would fire 100% tracer. We waited for a break in the cloud cover, then fired. He acknowledged our position and then*

*asked me if he could expend. I had to ask John Sexton [the Company Sergeant Major] who was listening in on the Company net, to translate for me. Once I realised what he was saying, I gave him the go ahead. I was worried he would shoot us up, but he was bloody good. He opened fire from behind us over the top and into the enemy area with four mini guns, which fire 6000 rounds per minute each. Believe me it was a terrifying sound. He then asked me did I want white light. Not knowing what this was, I said yes and immediately night became day, as he switched on a searchlight, the type that was used in World War Two. After he'd finished I thanked him for his help. He then said he'd send me the bill for the electricity and the 28 000 rounds he had expended. He then asked me for an AK47 which I sent him [after this engagement]. I then spotted a bright light off the coast and thought the enemy were trying to escape by sea. I was about to bring fire from the 8 inch guns to bear when I was told it was a friendly destroyer standing by off the coast to give assistance if required.*

*I was never so happy to see three Australian tanks with Australian troops on board rolling towards us just after first light. Some of the bodies were dressed in South Vietnamese uniforms – friendly by day, enemy by night. I was right about the first two blokes, they were commanders and both had 7.62 [mm] K54 pistols on them which I ended up with. Down in the valley were spent shells from an M60 [allied machine gun] plus M72 [allied light anti-tank weapon] cases. Drag marks were everywhere along with blood and bone. Another platoon took over from us to do a search of the area. They reported finding a pagoda covered in blood with Ho Chi Minh written in blood on the wall.*

*That morning I was flown back to Task Force Headquarters where I was interrogated. I had to explain what had happened. After one officer had finished, another one came in and I had to repeat my story over again. This happened four times during the day. I was flown back to [night defensive position] Timothy at 1500 hours. I had not slept and was bugged.*

The ambush was sprung when the enemy was only 5 m from it. At the end of the six hour engagement, more than 1100 rounds of small arms fire and 220 rounds of artillery had been expended. Private Frank Wood was wounded by shrapnel in this action but was able to remain on duty. Both Sergeant Savage and Warrant Officer Class Two Sexton had served with the battalion on its first tour. Sergeant Roy Savage was awarded the Military Medal for his part in this action. The citation noted that he 'coolly directed and controlled the fire of his patrol so that numerous casualties were inflicted on the enemy despite heavy retaliatory rocket and automatic fire. His leadership under fire was an inspiration to his patrol'. Four enemy bodies were recovered and a large number of drag marks found. The Commanding Officer had counted fifteen bodies from the air during the engagement. Several weeks later,

a further body was found buried nearby. The enemy were identified as members of C25, the *Long Dat District Company* and the *Phouc Hai Guerillas*. Several had their weapons roped to their bodies to avoid losing them if they were killed.

Sergeant Savage commanded another ambush patrol on 26 April. His Platoon commander, Lieutenant Rob Pothof, would have taken the patrol but he had developed a tropical ulcer on his leg. He agreed to do the job that Sergeant Savage would have done, that is to go out with the armoured personnel carriers that would drop the group off and on the way back to find a good spot for the platoon to ambush the next day. On the way back to the night defensive position the armoured personnel carrier carrying Lieutenant Pothof hit a mine that had been made from 60 lb of high explosive. Sergeant Savage saw the armoured personnel carrier 'coming back to earth upside down'. He had the sad task of collecting the remains of his platoon commander, whose place he might have taken, but for an ulcer. Four armoured personnel carrier crew members from B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment were also wounded by the explosion of this large pressure mine. This incident was the first mine fatality suffered by the battalion; sadly it was far from being the last. One of Lieutenant Pothof's soldiers said: 'I felt extreme sadness. We lost our leader after 2 months in country. Morale [in the platoon] slumped dramatically'.

The battalion padre, Father Keith Teefey, held a memorial service for Lieutenant Pothof on 30 April. The moving ceremony was ended by his platoon sergeant who played the 'Last Post' on his own trumpet. Another soldier in the platoon felt that this service marked the end of his grieving for his commander as his soul had been laid to rest.

Over the next four days several unoccupied bunker positions were found. The most unusual was one discovered by the attached tanks 4 km south of Thua Tich on 28 April. It had 180 circular 'spider holes' (one man circular pits with overhead camouflage trapdoor) without any overhead protection in an area of 200 m<sup>2</sup>. Some of these holes had been used several days previously but others had not been used for six months or more.

There was further action for C Company in the early evening of 30 April. The evening became pitch black, with visibility restricted to about 2 to 3 m. 7 Platoon was setting up its night ambush in open padi 1 km west of Phuoc Loi after it had moved about 1000 m. Private Brian Webb, who was covering his section commander (Corporal Terry 'Rags' Halcroft) as he placed the claymores, saw seven enemy crouching behind a bund observing the ambush. He fired on the enemy at a range of 1 m. Corporal Halcroft was pinned down by the enemy fire and was only able to crawl back to the ambush after the application of extensive covering fire. The enemy were engaged with rifle, machine gun and 90 mm recoilless rifle splintex. (Splintex rounds, which were also available to artillery, fired clusters of many small arrow-shaped flechettes.) The enemy returned fire with AK47s and RPGs. Private Peter Lloyd described the situation as being caught in the killing ground of a Viet Cong force. One AK47 round struck an M26 grenade and its adaptor on a rifle and exploded it.

The explosion caused the death of Private Henry Stanczyk and wounded Private Noel 'Pop' Cooper, Private Peter Lloyd, Private Michael 'Chuck' Berry and Bombardier Dave Drummond (from the artillery forward observer party). The enemy withdrew and the casualties were evacuated by helicopter. An hour later, an enemy was seen 75 m away approaching and attempting to recover a body. Although he was fired at, further observation by the starlight scope was prevented by heavy cloud cover and light rain. No enemy bodies were found in the morning. It appeared that the enemy had been moving in single file, had seen 7 Platoon move to its ambush and had frozen in the exposed position in the hope of avoiding being seen. Private Geoff Hughes was also wounded in this action by the back blast from the firing of a 90 mm recoilless rifle.

There were several acts of bravery in this contact. Private Berry had borne the brunt of the grenade explosion and had been partially blinded by its shrapnel. He remained in position, returning the enemy fire, until he was evacuated. Private Ian 'Flappers' Reid was the platoon medic. He saw that Private Cooper had been wounded in his throat and was bleeding profusely from his jugular vein. He cradled him in an upright position to reduce the blood flow, putting himself between Cooper and the enemy and exposing his back to incoming fire for a prolonged period. His care enabled Private Cooper to survive. The aftermath of the contact was traumatic. Private Peter Lloyd, who had been wounded by shrapnel, had shared a tent with Private Stanczyk. He stated that the period to follow was never the same.

D Company found a freshly dug bunker system 8 km north-west of Xuyen Moc in late April. The system was at least company-sized. In the hope of catching D445 occupying it at a later date, the system was left intact, and the enemy pattern of movement was closely watched to see when this might happen.

In April the battalion captured a detailed twenty page enemy training pamphlet called *Tactical Ambush Principles for Infantry Companies*. The Commanding Officer had it translated and distributed. Its doctrine was broadly similar to Australian ambush techniques. Some extracts of interest or with a different emphasis were:

**Enemy Situation.** *Of importance are: the operating procedures of the enemy throughout the course of their operation, their patterns of searching, their patrolling habits, their range and rate of operational progress, and time taken going out and returning. In addition, whether the operation is mechanised or on foot; find out unit identities, the proportion of officers to troops, their fighting spirit, combat skill, equipment and arms, their technical prowess and their tactics; and what reinforcement potential does he have (aircraft, artillery, infantry or helicopter assault landings).*

...

**Party Chapter Committee Conference.** *If time permits, conduct the committee conference, convening the group and the soldiers' congress. If time does not allow the soldiers' congress, then consult the committee.*

. . .

**Securing Battlefield Positions.** *Normally we must move to secure our positions on the battlefield during the night but we must make every effort to complete our preparations before morning. There are occasions when we can move in to secure our positions before it is dark and they are: in well concealed jungle or mountain areas, where the population is sparse and our organisation is strong or in areas far from the enemy where it is easy to maintain secrecy.*

The battalion Military Assistance and Training Team (MATT) was set up in the last week in April with a warrant officer (Danny Neville), a sergeant (Jim 'Porn' Northcott, who had served on the first tour) and a corporal or lance corporal from each company. The purpose of the team was to assist in improving the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese Army forces in the province. Lance Corporal Graham Nix (D Company) described what happened:

*We initially moved into the military post on the western side of Dat Do. After one or two nights we were relocated to the ARVN military post on the southern side of Dat Do on the road to Phuoc Loi. This location was known as Phuoc Hoa Long. We spent a couple of days improving the defences of the compound particularly as far as we were concerned and also improving our living quarters which comprised a galvanised iron shed. We were able to construct a shower and we also commandeered an outhouse from the compound we had left. During our time at the compound we went out on a couple of ambushes in the paddy fields to the south of Dat Do with the local ARVN from the compound. Typically, we thought the ARVN lazy as we fell into a typically Australian routine of shaving, showering, breakfasting and then working through the hottest part of the day filling sandbags and improving defences while the ARVN lolled around in hammocks. They all had their families living with them in the compound. They tended to rely on the US and Australian Armies to provide for them. We were only at the compound for a maximum of two weeks when apparently AATTV were being withdrawn from locations outside Phuoc Tuy and a couple of sergeants were posted to our compound. We went back to our companies on about 7 May 1970.*

On 3 May 4 Platoon B Company was 8 km west of Xuyen Moc on the Song Rai when at 1015 hours it contacted six or seven enemy. The Viet Cong returned fire with AK47s and RPGs. Two Australian soldiers, Corporal Weightman and Private Gavan Brown, were wounded in this action (although both remained on duty). A heavy blood

trail led away from the contact area. An AK47 and some documents were captured. During a visual reconnaissance by the direct support Possum over the contact area, the helicopter was hit in its main rotor blade by small arms fire but landed safely. A dead Viet Cong, probably resulting from this contact, was found in a nearby shallow grave on 15 May.

## **OPERATION CONCRETE II**

Operation CONCRETE II (8 May to 11 June) followed on from CONCRETE I and continued its concept. The plan was to ambush the built up areas astride Routes 23 and 44, using three companies operating from firm bases at the HORSESHOE and at night defensive position (NDP) BRIGID (near the village of Phuoc Hai). A fourth company was to continue operating in the Tan Ru area to deny freedom of movement to the enemy from the north into the southern populated area. A, C and D Companies were assigned the ambushing tasks and B the operations in depth until 20 May. The battalion area of operations was nicknamed CATHY. Battalion Headquarters re-located to the Horseshoe, an old volcanic formation just north of Dat Do. It was to remain at this location for the remainder of this tour.

On 10 May 2 km west of Phuoc Hai at 2000 hours, the Reconnaissance Platoon ambushed three or four local Viet Cong who were moving between the Long Hais and Phuoc Hai. One enemy soldier, a courier for units in the Long Hais, was killed and his body found by the platoon. Two further dead Viet Cong from this contact were found by local citizens and soldiers (together with an AK47 and an SKS rifle) on 15 and 20 May.

On the evening of 11 May, 2 Troop of B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment had adopted a wagon wheel formation in the middle of a rice padi south-west of Phuoc Hai, so that any passing enemy would see them and divert towards the infantry ambushes sited in complementary positions. At 2040 hours they sighted a group of thirteen enemy moving to the east. The enemy had obviously seen them and had moved out of the range of unaided vision. The enemy had not realised that most armoured personnel carrier commanders had a good set of field glasses which, on many clear nights, seemed to perform better than starlight scopes. The enemy group displayed good fieldcraft, freezing every time an artillery round passed overhead, in case it was an illumination round. The Armoured Personnel Carrier Troop Commander found it 'fascinating viewing: it was a pity our shooting was not as good as their movement'. One wounded enemy soldier surrendered to the District Headquarters the next morning.

At 1120 hours on 12 May, an eleven man patrol of 5 Platoon B Company, operating in the Tan Ru area halfway between Nui Dat 2 and Xuyen Moc, was returning from collecting water. Its forward scout saw a group of eight to ten enemy sitting around an anthill eating and drinking. The patrol carried out an immediate contact drill and engaged the enemy at a range of 30 m. Four enemy were killed. The



remainder fled, dropping seven packs. A further enemy body, with an M1 carbine, was found near the area on 19 May.

On 12 May at 1434 hours near Route 326, midway between Tam Phuoc and Long My, an M16 mine explosion wounded three soldiers from the Assault Pioneer Platoon. They were Corporal DeBomford, Private Rod Gillis and Private Graham Edwards. After the incident four mine marker signs, with a skull and crossbones on one side and the words 'Nguy Hiem – E3' (meaning M16 E3 mines) on the other, were found.

Second Lieutenant Ian Dunn's account of the night of 13 May for A Company was as follows:

*Had a terribly interesting night last night. The whole company was in ambush around Phuoc Loi, a hamlet just west of here. 3 Platoon to the north on Route 44, Company HQ to the north-west in the paddy, 2 Platoon to the south-west in the paddy and 1 Platoon to the south on Route 44. We were last into position at about 2030. Shortly after we got on the ground, Company HQ saw 8 VC between themselves and the hamlet. Under the light of artillery flares they opened fire with machine guns and rifles. Charlie returned fire with anti-tank rockets and small arms. As soon as this firing started, we came under automatic fire from the hamlet. It was a merry old fight, the air was full of tracer, theirs and ours, and the rounds from the hamlet were cracking over our heads and into the paddy bunds behind which we were lying. Because of the possibility of hitting civilians we did not return fire. 3 Platoon swept across in front of Company HQ but did not pick up any VC bodies. They were just returning to their position on the road when a VC walked past our 4 Section machine gun position. We challenged him, he ran, we opened fire and after a hectic chase of about 2000 metres we killed him. It was the first time we have really been conscious of being under enemy fire. It was quite an experience.*

The dead Viet Cong was later identified from the papers he had been carrying as a squad leader in D445. Private Graeme Roberts sustained an eye injury during this contact and was later evacuated to Australia.

Operations, particularly those involving saturation area ambushing, always ran the risk of accidental clashes between friendly patrols. One such clash occurred between two groups of 9 Platoon C Company on 15 May. Private Wood wrote:

*We began our nightly routine and at 1945 hours it appeared we could see three enemy to our front mingling around some old ruins. Then [the two soldiers in] one pit, who were still laying claymores, reported over a dozen with packs on their backs. It was a quarter of an hour after sighting the initial movement that we opened fire. The machine gunner in the firing pit had two stoppages which later proved to be the best thing that could have happened.*

The soldier on whom they fired, Private Keith Molyneaux, later found that the machine gunner had him in his sights when there had been the two stoppages. He had bent down behind a padi bund by the time the machine gunner was able to open sustained fire. He was unhurt, although a Bushman Scout in the platoon was wounded.

On 18 May, the aggressive and quick follow-up of an enemy party by Sergeant Dennis 'Eddie' Edmonds of 7 Platoon C Company resulted in a number of enemy killed with no casualties suffered by his patrol. He described the action, which took place 500 m west of Lo Gom:

*The platoon operated as patrols and was part of the battalion's task to ambush the approaches from the Long Hais to the populated areas from Dat Do to Phuoc Hai. My patrol had set up an ambush in the dry paddy fields and observed a group of VC moving towards Lo Gom at approx 2120 hours. Once the patrol stood to on sighting the enemy, my concern was how the enemy would react when the ambush was sprung. I felt confident that the soldiers could handle the situation but my concern was for the battalion chaplain (Father Teefey) who had decided to join us earlier in the day and how he would react. Two hours later what appeared to be the same VC returning from the village were spotted moving towards the ambush area. Although they were beyond the killing area, the ambush was sprung and the VC broke away in three groups. One group [of three enemy] took cover behind a paddy bund about 80 metres away, which we engaged with fire and movement resulting in them being killed. The bodies were dragged back into the ambush position for the remainder of the night. I can clearly remember extending the illumination for five minutes to allow the smokers (including myself) to light up and wind down before returning to night routine.*

It is worth examining the role Father Keith Teefey played in the battalion. Although he had been quiet and unused to the military life when he first joined the battalion in Australia, he certainly found his feet in Vietnam. He was respected by all from the Commanding Officer down and became a soldier's padre, willing to suffer any conditions a soldier put up with in order to minister to his flock. He was well described as 'one of us, without a gun'. Father Teefey wrote:

*I did not carry a weapon and this was always a talking point. The CO insisted at one point that I take one, and that I could not go into the field without one. I carried an Armalite on one occasion for five days and the CO's short weapon about twice on night patrols. I spent most of the time checking the safety catch was on! Worried I'd shoot myself in the foot! Or someone else! I had no need to carry a weapon. That was not my role. I had utmost confidence in the soldiers who were trained to do their job. I kept telling them, 'you don't have to worry*

*about me. It doesn't take any training to hit the ground. If it ever gets to the time when I need a gun there will be plenty around'.*

He celebrated Masses in some desolate and some spectacular places: for example, few cathedrals had the grandeur of a yellow sweep of unoccupied beach near the mouth of the Song Rai when he said Mass there in December. As he put it:

*Mass celebrated on the ground, on an ammo box, in D Company Mess at the Horseshoe, on a table in a deserted VC hospital camp, at dawn on a deserted beach, Midnight Mass at Luscombe Bowl 600 there, with the school children, Sisters and people in the Baria Parish Church. God's covenant of old renewed: 'I will be your God, you will be my people'.*

2 Platoon A Company had the same nightly task on 19 May as it had for almost every evening – ambushing, but with the added knowledge that Ho Chi Minh's birthday might be a catalyst for enemy activity. The Platoon Commander wrote:

*It is nearly dark, we must be off shortly, the insects are bad, crabs everywhere, quite a few snakes around too. Fun, fun, fun. Tonight I am carrying a 90 mm recoilless rifle. We have canister rounds for it. With these rounds we have in effect a giant shotgun, firing 700 small steel arrows, effective in excess of 200 metres. When fired it makes one hell of a noise, louder than anything you would ever hear back there. The backblast alone would knock a man over at 50 metres.*

The discomfort of the evening was felt acutely by the soldiers in 9 Platoon:

*At 0400 I was awoken to do my piquet and it started to spot with rain. By 1500 hours it was teeming and continued to do so for an hour. We were in a paddy field and had four inches of water in places which made it not very comfortable to sleep. It proved a fruitless night. Once the rain stopped it was not bad at all. Nevertheless, it took some two hours to dry out.*

On 21 May at 1330 hours, 1 Platoon A Company, commanded by Lieutenant Chris Johnson, Reconnaissance Platoon (commanded by Staff Sergeant Col Rowley), a troop of tanks and a section of armoured personnel carriers moved to the north of Dat Do to locate a camp of C2 of D445. They were guided to it by a Hoi Chanh from that sub-unit. The force attacked the bunker system, guided by the Commanding Officer in a Sioux helicopter. Staff Sergeant Rowley, who was on the rear tank with some of his platoon, saw a bunker which had not been observed by the leading tanks. He recalled:

*Almost simultaneously, I saw a helmeted head pop up and down from this bunker. The head again reappeared and I fired a single shot which commenced the contact. The next few minutes were quite vague but there was one hell of a lot of return fire from the bunker system. The tanks kept on going although most*

*of my men on the last tank alighted with me. We were receiving fire from all directions with nowhere to go and an open area to our rear. We were in trouble and pinned down by two bunkers to our front and another on the immediate right about 25 metres away. It was then that I re-assessed the situation. I had the platoon's Bushman Scout, Quang, David Attwood with an M60, Dennis Warren, Bill Kennedy, Lcpl Shorty Gobold and Leroy Collins. All the others including my signaller were gone. I saw no other option but to attack. We did so using fire and movement against significant odds. It was soon evident that I had two men wounded, one (Collins) quite seriously. I heard the tanks return – I'm not sure how long it would have been – not long, I suspect, and it was a welcome sound. We continued to receive spasmodic enemy fire but as the tanks arrived this increased but was being redirected towards them. I saw a Russian type hand-held parachute anti-tank grenade being thrown against a tank – I think it hit one. Shortly after I was reunited with my signaller who organised the tracks to take the wounded away.*

*We were lucky people as we were all in some way wounded, some seriously. In many respects we were extra lucky, as when we assaulted the position we were confronted by bunkers which we didn't use for cover for some reason, perhaps a sixth sense. I have since reasoned that we didn't use them because they were unoccupied by the VC. We found later that these bunkers were rigged with trip wires and instantaneous grenades.*

The Australian force withdrew to evacuate its casualties. As this was occurring, 3 Platoon and A Company Headquarters, led by Major Chris Thomson, moved by armoured personnel carriers from the Horseshoe to the contact area. When they arrived, Major Thomson called for helicopter gunship support. Three Australian Bushranger helicopters pinned down the estimated 50 man Viet Cong force in bunkers within 100 m of the company until the A Company group re-assaulted the position. During the battle the Hoi Chanh shouted out to his mates in the bunkers, waited for them to appear and very happily blazed away at them. The entire position was secured by 1600 hours. The enemy casualties were five killed and three prisoners of war. A large quantity of food, documents and stores were captured. A Company suffered one soldier, Private Noel Crouch, killed in action. When Corporal Powell saw that Private Crouch had been killed, in a retaliatory act of bravery, he charged the bunkers and was wounded himself. There were twelve soldiers wounded in this action.<sup>3</sup>

Captain Peter Murphy, the Officer Commanding 2 Troop of B Squadron wrote:

*As part of the relieving force from the Horseshoe I was most impressed with this action as it defied all the popular doctrine: a mounted assault on a bunker system in close country was doomed to fail. Obviously another principle ruled the day – shock action – the enemy never had a chance.*

The enemy, as expected, were from C2 of D445. The prisoners, one of whom was identified as Nguyen Toan Trung, a financial supervisor in C2, indicated that the camp, which had 53 Viet Cong in it at the time of the assault, was completely surprised by the rapidity of the initial assault with armour and infantry and that the occupants had retreated in confusion. The enemy group had only been occupying the camp for several days before they were attacked.

Staff Sergeant Rowley was awarded the Military Medal for his part in this action and subsequent contacts in June, July and August. His particular bravery in the action above, when he had deliberately exposed himself to aimed enemy fire to recover one of the wounded from a bunker entrance, was mentioned in the citation.

On 22 May at 1500 hours a reconnaissance patrol from 4 Platoon B Company was moving on the western side of the mouth of the Song Rai. The section commander saw a Viet Cong asleep by a tree. He tried to creep up on him. As he approached, the enemy soldier awoke, was challenged and fired on at about 30 m range. The Viet Cong was killed. He was identified as a specialist surgeon of the *Medical Platoon of D445*.

Two days later Hoang Cong Sinh, a section commander in the *Surgical Section* of the *D445 Medical Platoon* surrendered to Dat Do District Headquarters. He led B Company to a cache containing several mines the next day. He later became a Bushman Scout with C Company.

Lieutenant Dunn looked forward to returning to his bunker at the Horseshoe on 27 May. He wrote:

*I hope the rats in my bunker have not eaten too much of my gear. They ate part of my shelter and my pack before I came out. In addition to rats, we have snakes in the bunker, but they eat the rats. I always sleep with my loaded .45 beside me in case I get one coming through the firing slit. To complete the story we have the mongeese, they live in the sandbags at the top of the bunkers. They eat the snakes. They are quite welcome.*

Sergeant Edmonds (7 Platoon) was involved in a further incident on 27 May when, by a combination of good fire control and fast movement over 800 m of open ground, he surprised an enemy party, killing one and taking two prisoners, one a high ranking local Viet Cong. The other was identified as Tran Van Luyen, the second-in-command of the *Hoi My Village Farmer's Association*. Two weapons were captured. Sergeant Edmonds's comment was:

*Callsign 31A (half the platoon) spotted 3 VC going to ground in an overgrown paddy field. On arrival at the area, the patrol swept through in extended line and killed one VC and captured the other two. Each man knew the VC were there and waiting, but continued to move forward. That was a collective act of bravery.*

Sergeant Edmonds was Mentioned in Despatches for his part in this action and the one on 18 May.

On 31 May 7 Platoon C Company saw four enemy 5 km east of Phuoc Loi at midday. The enemy group were crossing wet overgrown padi. When fired on, they retreated in two groups using fire and movement. In what the company commander described as 'fast and aggressive action by the platoon', two Viet Cong (a male and a female) were killed and one weapon and some medical stores captured. The other enemy escaped into an area with a 1 m deep swamp.

On the last day in May, Brigadier Weir handed over command of the Task Force to Brigadier Bill Henderson. Brigadier Henderson was three years older than his predecessor and was also a very experienced infantryman with service in World War II, Korea and Malaya. He was a genial, conscientious and personally caring man (perhaps to a fault) to those entrusted to his command. In contrast to Brigadier Weir, he was a commander who sought counsel, leading to consensus. It was certainly true that there was a different feeling in the Task Force when he took command.

For the months of June to August the wearing of shorts or going without shirts was prohibited during the day in base areas because of the increased danger of encephalitis from mosquitoes.

At the beginning of June, A and C Companies were continuing to ambush the approaches from the Long Hais to the populated areas. B Company remained in depth in the Tan Ru area north-east of Dat Do. D Company was involved in preparation for an operation against a suspected occupied bunker system. On 1 June, Sergeant Henry King of 3 Platoon A Company was commanding an ambush in the sand dunes west of Phuoc Hai village. Contact was made with a group of enemy, some of whom were killed immediately while the remainder withdrew, dragging their wounded with them. Sergeant King immediately appreciated the need for quick action and without hesitation moved forward to clear the ambush area and pursue the surviving enemy party. Using fire and movement, he led his patrol after the enemy for 300 m. His actions prevented enemy access to Phuoc Hai that evening.

Intelligence reports and the pattern of enemy movement indicated the strong likelihood that the bunker system discovered by D Company in late April might now be occupied. D Company, commanded by Major Neville Smethurst, deployed by armoured personnel carriers well to the north of the system to the line of Route 327. They walked to a company assembly area north-west of the target area. On the nights of 30 May to 1 June close reconnaissance of the system was undertaken. On 2 June airstrikes were mounted against the bunker system. Artillery based at the Horseshoe and from a step-up fire base at DISCOVERY (previously used on Operation CONCRETE I) bombarded the position. The artillery used was a 105 mm howitzer section of 106th Field Battery, C Battery of 2/35th US Artillery with its 155 mm self-propelled guns, and a platoon of A Battery 7/8th US Artillery with its 8 inch guns.

The guns were supplemented with two sections of the battalion's 81 mm mortars. In all, the system received the impact of 406 105 mm, 222 155 mm, 80 eight inch and 360 81 mm rounds. There were also sixteen 500 lb high drag bombs used. All these munitions fell within the target area. As the artillery bombardment commenced, D Company approached the bunker system from the north and north-west. They found that the system was, and had been, unoccupied. The attack was not without incident. Sergeant 'Jock' Cain and several other soldiers in 12 Platoon suffered stings from wasps during the assault and Sergeant Cain needed to be evacuated by helicopter to be treated. One of the platoon commanders had carefully guided his soldiers during this assault on a compass bearing. When he reached one of the bunkers, he took out a grenade but threw his compass at the bunker.

It was interesting that no bunker in the system had suffered a direct hit and very few had structural damage. However, there was no doubt that any enemy who might have occupied the system at the time would have had their capacity neutralised during and perhaps just after the bombardment (protecting the assaulting troops), thus achieving the purpose of the fire plan. Destruction of the bunker system would have entailed a much greater expenditure of ammunition. The exercise was a rare and valuable opportunity to practise the complex business of an attack on a bunker complex by an infantry company with the full range of fire support. It was valuable experience for the company and the battalion. It may be seen as a great pity that the calculated guess – that it was occupied by the enemy – was wrong.

On 6 June an eleven man ambush from 9 Platoon C Company (commanded by Second Lieutenant Dave Kibbey) – close to Route 44, 2 km south-west of Phuoc Hai, had a contact at 0325 hours. It was a dark, wet and miserable night. Second Lieutenant Kibbey described what occurred:

*We were in the beach dunes between the Long Hais and Phuoc Hai. One enemy walked through the middle of the ambush, tripped over the radio antenna on to me. I had a quick wrestle and shot the enemy. We followed the blood trail at first light.*

Lance Corporal Keith 'Molly' Molyneaux was part of the ambush. He described what happened:

*The Viet Cong walked through the middle of [our] ambush in open sandhill country, tripped over the radio and we could not fire because he was in the middle of the ambush. (A bloke fell asleep on picket.) It was a moonlit evening and I was facing in the opposite direction when he approached us. When he cleared the ambush area I engaged him with M16 fire. [We were] in sandy country between Phuoc Hai and the Long Hais. Unfortunately my partner swung the 90 mm recoilless rifle around and cleaned me up in the back blast. I received superficial wounds to the legs, face and ears.*

Corporal Molyneaux's wounded ear drum was treated by the doctor at Vung Tau who blew antibiotic powder into it with a horse syringe and tube – an experimental and quite successful initiative.

The next morning's clearance of the ambush site triggered an M16 anti-personnel mine. Private Mick O'Halloran, the only survivor of the search group, received shrapnel wounds and was evacuated by Dustoff helicopter to Vung Tau. He later returned to the battalion and a period of light duties. The soldiers killed by the explosion were Private Stanley Larsson, Private Stephen Dickson and Private Paul Navarre. At this stage, five soldiers in the platoon had been killed in three and a half months of active service. There were some repercussions that followed Private Larsson's death. Major Cole noted on 18 June:

*Problems are arising from death of Pte Larsson in the mine incident east of the Long Hais. Larsson did not have perfect vision and required glasses to rectify the sight defect. His parents had tried several times before the battalion departed from Australia to get their son out of the Army. Strangely, the unit, as a result of a Ministerial directed investigation, recommended that the soldier be discharged from the service. His discharge was recommended on compassionate grounds and not for reasons of poor eyesight. As with all Ministerial investigations, the findings and recommendations were sent to the Minister for the Army for his personal attention. It was the decision of the Minister that the soldier should remain in the service. Yet he is prepared to infer that if he had been aware of the poor eyesight of Larsson he would have been released. It is interesting to note that the soldier was considered to be one of the better shots in the company. Perhaps the Minister has considered discharging or at least reposting from infantry battalions all soldiers who do not have 6/6 vision without correction.*

On 25 August he wrote:

*The political interferences have come to the fore again and again over the case of Private Larsson. It has been decided, and at present it is not clear whether the decision is a political one or a completely military one, that soldiers with an uncorrected eye disability of less than 6/60 will be employed in other than 'at risk' postings. At risk being riflemen. The stupidity of the decision is staggering, or rather the manner in which the decision is to be implemented is staggering. No soldier with defective eyesight (by the new standard) is to be told why he is being moved out of his present posting because quote 'It might give Mr Larsson senior ammunition to use against the Army'. No he'll just have to guess at where he has gone wrong. Also there is an obvious lack of knowledge of what constitutes an 'at risk occupation'. Medical orderlies are considered to be a safe occupation, yet the number of times a medical orderly is required to move forward and attend a wounded man under enemy fire is very high. The members of the artillery observation parties are not 'at risk'. Again some one no doubt thinks artillery is a*



*depth weapon . . . Stupidity, sheer stupidity and complete lack of knowledge of this type of war . . . The powers that be are trying to close the stable door at the same time as pretending that the horse hasn't got out.*

*Of course the other gross stupidity is that Larsson did not step on the mine! It was activated by another soldier with perfect vision who was three paces behind Larsson.*

*Yet this seems to have been completely forgotten. Thus the actual incident which took the poor fellow's life had absolutely no bearing whatsoever on his ability or lack thereof to see.*

A Company Headquarters was involved in an unfortunate accident on 7 June causing gun shot wounds to Private Pat Egan and Sapper I.S. Pitt (an attached mini team member from 1st Field Squadron) at 1420, close to the coast 9 km south-east of Xuyen Moc. The accident involved a clash between two patrols. It was caused by a navigation error. Private Egan had just joined the company as a reinforcement the previous day. His wound necessitated his evacuation to Australia.

The Commanding Officer grouped the lessons from CONCRETE I and II. There were several learnt from the experience gained from mine incidents. It had to be realised that operations in areas where mines were likely would be slow and painstaking. Tanks were very effective devices for clearing landing zones of anti-personnel mines. Perhaps the oldest infantry lesson, that bunching can cause more casualties, was painfully demonstrated. The training of platoon medics in casualty wards of civilian hospitals prior to arrival in Vietnam paid off well. Of the several weapon-related lessons, the usefulness of the 90 mm recoilless rifle was put as 'once it fires flechette rounds, the enemy loses interest in the battle'.

Much was derived from the experience of the enemy, particularly *D445*. Its habit of having pre-arranged withdrawal routes and small delaying groups was particular noticeable. The counter to this habit was to ensure that close contact was maintained, although this might limit the use of fire support. The enemy showed that they returned to land-cleared areas and constructed new bunker positions. They also renovated old bunker positions. They tended to move away from positions when tanks were heard, so that special care had to be taken to ambush their likely escape routes.

The continual ambushing had developed the unit's skills in this complex form of fighting. It was felt that the killing ground of a night-sprung ambush needed to be swept as soon after the engagement as possible, unless there was a high mine threat. The value of deceiving the enemy about ambush intentions, using methods such as moving in troops in closed-down armoured personnel carriers, was emphasised.

The battalion found a small double-sided typewritten and hand-duplicated propaganda leaflet directed at the Australians. It read (with its mistakes included):

## AUSTRALIAN SERVICEMAN!

The U.S. aggressive war in S.V.N. is a dirty one. The 'Thieu-Ky Kiem administration' cruel and rotten cannot survive!

In the past five years, thousands of mercenary Australian servicemen were Killed in S.V.N. for the interests of warmongers in the U.S.A. and those of the reactionary government in Australia

The Australian people are struggling for your repatriation while the Nixon Government are withdrawing its troops.

The Australian Government must also declare it will withdraw Australian troops from S.V.N. But to get more U.S. dollars, it lengthens your repatriation and so causes you more sufferings diseases and death!

Australian servicemen!

To return home early and to meet with your families you must:

—Struggle for immediate repatriation of Australian troops from S.V.N.!

—Refuse to go on operations!

—Don't commit new barbarous crimes against S.V.N. people!

—REVOLUTIONARY COMMITTEE OF PEOPLE—BARIALONG/KHANH

Just as in similar instances on the first tour, there was not a rush for repatriation.

## OPERATION CUNG CHUNG

Operation CUNG CHUNG (Vietnamese for 'together') was conducted by 7 RAR with Vietnamese forces' cooperation from 12 June to 29 June. Its aim was to deny enemy access to the principal villages astride Route 23 and Route 44 within an area of operations called BETSY. The operation was controlled from Battalion Headquarters located at the Horseshoe. Direct support for the operation was provided by 106th Field Battery and a Sioux from 161st Independent Reconnaissance Flight. Other support included a troop of Centurion tanks from 1st Armoured Regiment, a troop of M113 armoured personnel carriers from B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment, C Battery of the US 2/35th Field Artillery with 155 mm howitzers, a troop of engineers from 1st Field Squadron and Iroquois helicopters from 9 Squadron RAAF.

The Commanding Officer's plan called for a permanent presence at three bases in the area of operations: the Horseshoe and two night defensive positions, BRIGID (half a km north of Phuoc Hai) and ISA (on the western side of the Long Hais between the base of Nui Hon Thing and Route 44). Ambushes were to be established nightly by troops from these positions in order to deny enemy access to the adjacent village areas. This was to be backed up by daylight patrolling in areas of restricted civilian access close to the villages. Close liaison was to be maintained with Vietnamese officials throughout the operation. In addition, one company was to be

used on reconnaissance and ambush of the area of operations. The plan was a continuation of the approach taken in Operation CONCRETE. It acknowledged that the key to enemy success during this period was their continual access to the villages.

There were calculated risks to the Australian troops taking part in this operation. When operating close to villages, the restrictions placed by the limited number of locations for ambush positions could indicate a pattern of these operations. Even though particular efforts were made to deceive the enemy, it was probably easier for them to select routes to mine. In this type of operation, extensive use of M16 anti-personnel mines and improvised anti-tank mines could be expected. A further risk was that the enemy could discern a pattern and avoid ambushes. The use of minor ruses, such as the occupation of a position and laying out claymores at last light prior to moving to an actual ambush site, were practised. Operation CUNG CHUNG frequently used joint ambushes, manned by soldiers from 7 RAR with local Popular or Regional Force Vietnamese soldiers. These ambushes, to put it mildly, were risky. Although much effort was put into training the local soldiers in ambush techniques and in weapon handling, it is fair to say that their battle discipline and motivation were poor. An additional hazard was the likelihood of compromise of planned ambush locations, but sensible precautions were taken to minimise this possibility.

The Horseshoe became the battalion's second home. Indeed, more time was spent there than at Nui Dat. The feature was easily defensible, having good fields of fire and slopes that could be dominated by direct fire. It had been the site of one of the last battles between the French and Viet Minh in the Indo-China War – the French garrison there had inflicted heavy casualties on an attacking Viet Minh force on 19 July 1954. When 7 RAR moved to occupy the Horseshoe, its previous occupants (of company strength) had left it far from tidy. Many dump truck loads of rubbish had to be removed to make it habitable. Some of the soldiers stationed there permanently (on tasks such as radio relay) seemed to have been victims of poor leadership and discipline, shown by poor hygiene and other bad habits. This problem was swiftly rectified.

The operation followed from CONCRETE II without a break. The battalion remained deployed in Dat Do District with A Company in the Long Green, B and C Companies ambushing the approaches to the groups of villages on Route 44 and D Company initially on rest and convalescence leave and thereafter occupying Night Defensive Position ISA.

Some soldiers of 11 Platoon experienced a moment of apprehension and terror on 8 June on the north-west side of the Long Hais. Private Terry McCleary stepped on an M16 mine. Private Fred Jones's pack was hit a full blow by the mine as it came out of the ground. It did not explode.

On 14 June an armoured personnel carrier hit an improvised mine on the western outskirts of Phuoc Hai within view of the villagers, killing one of the armoured personnel carrier's passengers (Sapper Ian Scott) in the mid-afternoon. Another passenger,

Private Bruce Flockhart, was also wounded. He remembered:

*We had just passed through the village when the explosion occurred. I can remember the incident as clearly as if it happened yesterday, or I should say feel it because, strange as it may sound, I can still vividly feel being blown off the APC, landing heavily in the sand and the smell of the explosive. I was only lightly wounded. I spent a week in hospital and a further week recuperating at Vung Tau. I then rejoined 7 RAR and completed the tour.*

The evening of 16 June was, in the words of Private Merv Hains, 'one of the worst nights I have ever experienced'. There were frequent and violent lightning strikes during a stormy evening. About 500 m north of Lo Voi, in one of those unfortunate freaks of nature, one bolt struck an armoured personnel carrier antenna which Private Garry Cashion of D Company was leaning against. Private Cashion died that evening as a result of his injuries.

On the morning of 20 June A Company's support section contacted one Viet Cong about 2 km east of BRIGID. They wounded and captured him. He was identified as Le Van Cau, the Secretary of the *Hoi My Party Chapter*.

That evening, 2 Platoon A Company took part in one of the many joint ambushes with the South Vietnamese during this and later operations. As the platoon commander described it:

*I ambushed with eleven of my men and twelve Regional Force soldiers from the local company. I had expected that they would be pretty slack, on the contrary their discipline was excellent. Their commander showed good appreciation of ground and weapons. They are a pretty mean bunch, they seem to be as good as us and that should put them in front of Charles ... Sergeant Hung, our interpreter, was telling me that the OC, 2IC, CSM and at least one of the platoon commanders in the RF Company are North Vietnamese who came down in 1954, probably Catholics, certainly strong anti-communists. This probably accounts for the company being so good.*

On the evening of 21 June a group up to 20 Viet Cong were attempting to enter Phuoc Hai. 1 Platoon A Company had carefully sited an ambush 3 km south-west of Phuoc Hai, close to Route 44, and dug concealed bunkers. The sentry on the machine gun saw the enemy and opened fire on them at about 5 m range. His gun jammed after about seven shots. The Platoon Commander, Lieutenant Chris Johnson, thought the gunner must have fired accidentally as he had not seen the Viet Cong. The gunner tried to tell him what had happened but he didn't have his false teeth in and could not be understood in the excitement. Lieutenant Johnson went forward the 5 m to the gunner's bunker with Billy, his Bushman Scout. As he did so, the enemy fired on them. The firefight lasted for about half an hour, with the Viet

Cong finally withdrawing under constant mortar illumination and artillery fire. In the encounter, two Viet Cong from the *Long Dat District Company* were killed, and drag marks indicated that a further four were killed or wounded.

### **Operation ELANORA**

On 8 June a platoon second-in-command from C2 of D455 surrendered. It was quite usual for Viet Cong who had rallied or been captured to provide quite detailed and timely information about their comrades. In many cases, the usefulness of their information was limited by the Viet Cong internal security measures (such as their cellular structure) or by the inability of the ralliers to read maps or to identify terrain from the air. In this case the rallier was able to give quite detailed information about the intentions of C3 of D445. He indicated that C3 was preparing a company base in the Phuoc Buu area and also said that he felt that his company might move to that new base once the fact that he had rallied was discovered.

The Task Force responded to this information by deploying SAS patrols into the area from 10 to 19 June. These patrols saw groups of enemy moving towards the Nui Dua and Nui Kho areas, 6 km south of Xuyen Moc. A total of 40 to 50 enemy were seen and the patrols were engaged by isolated bursts of fire, including one by a heavy automatic weapon. The Task Force Commander decided that dealing with this likely company position was a task best undertaken by the battalion, using the information gained from the SAS. ELANORA was mounted as an operation within CUNG CHUNG and took place between 19 to 23 June. To restrict Viet Cong access to villages as much as possible, the Commanding Officer assigned B Company (less a platoon), C Company, D Company and Support Company (organised as two rifle platoons) with a section of two 81 mm mortars to the task. The plan was to deploy into the area of operations east of the area for CUNG CHUNG, locate the enemy installation and destroy the enemy in it. B, D and Support Companies were to move by armoured personnel carriers to lie-up positions north of Route 23 during the daylight hours of 19 June. A step-up fire support base, DISCOVERY (used previously on CONCRETE I), was also to be established 5 km west of Xuyen Moc. These first moves were designed to induce the enemy to expect activity north of DISCOVERY, an area where the battalion had frequently operated. Then, under cover of darkness on the night of 19 June, these three companies were to approach the target area on foot so that they were in position on three sides of the area by first light on the next morning. The fourth company (C Company) was then to fly into the southern side of the target area and occupy blocking positions. Then the eastern and western companies were to sweep within company boundaries while the other companies remained in their blocking ambushes.

Soon after B Company had reached its position on the Song Hoa, 1 km south-west

of Nui Kho at 0530 hours on 20 June, the gun picket of 6 Platoon (commanded by Second Lieutenant George Wenhlowskyj) saw one enemy approaching along a footpad 15 m away. He engaged the Viet Cong at a range of about 5 m and killed him with a burst of machine gun fire. Although the enemy soldier was carrying a letter and notebook, his unit could not be identified. He was also carrying 30 lb of rice. A further enemy soldier was probably wounded in this engagement.

In the mid-morning of 20 June, 9 Platoon C Company found the bunker system it had been seeking 9 km south of Xuyen Moc. They encountered it by following two enemy. They cautiously searched the well-developed system found as they swept to attack these enemy soldiers but it was soon evident that the bunkers were not defended. There were about seventeen bunkers, and a fresh trail of blood, probably from B Company's last contact, led through them. The bunker system was carefully searched. It contained 1000 lb of rice, five M16 mines, a 105 mm explosive shell, some Chinese explosive and a considerable quantity of medical supplies. The system had been extensively booby trapped. The traps included two cross bows. None of the booby traps caused any injuries as they were neutralised. Documents found in the bunkers identified its use by the *Xuyen Moc District Company*, but no clear sign of *D445*'s presence was discovered. Nevertheless, it was assessed that the returnee's information had been basically accurate. The loss of this amount of stored rice was probably quite a blow to the Viet Cong. C Company destroyed this rice by heaping it on all the mines and explosives they had found in the bunkers. When they exploded this pile, the rice was widely scattered. It was a sunny day, but 'the sound of the rice falling on the leaves was like heavy rain'. The next day they found several more caches in the area with some explosives, tools and a fishing net. They also found a further M16 mine on a track which nearly everyone in 9 Platoon had previously walked over. Luck was with the platoon that day, but there was a lingering suspicion that the enemy had re-mined the bunkers during the night.

During the search of the bunkers, a journalist had been flown in at the insistence of the Task Force Headquarters. He sought out and found a corporal with a weakness for alcohol, plied him with Scotch and tried to lever stories of 'atrocities' from him. The platoon commander ordered the reporter to be flown out.

At about the same time, D Company found a system of ten bunkers, 3 km north-east of Nui Kho, with about 1 m of overhead protection on each pit. They assessed that the system had not been used for three months. A small amount of ammunition and equipment was found there.

On 21 June at 2030 hours, 1 Platoon A Company sighted fifteen enemy moving towards its ambush 3 km south-west of Phuoc Hai near Route 44. Ten Viet Cong were fired at in the killing area of the ambush. Two enemy bodies were found. One was identified as the Secretary of the *Phuoc Hai Party Chapter*.

In the mid-morning of 22 June the Reconnaissance Platoon was heading towards

a rendezvous 1 km south-west of Nui Kho to be redeployed by helicopters. Staff Sergeant Col Rowley, the platoon commander, described what happened:

*We had to cross an overgrown north – south vehicle track. As mines were the predominant threat, I had a pathway cleared and marked across it. I crossed the path first and had Corporal 'Bull' Mahoney's section cross next, providing protection until the others crossed when we would brew up to await the choppers. I spoke to him in the middle of the cleared path crossing the track and then I went back towards the direction from which we had come. I was only a few feet away when the explosion blew me several feet forward. I heard the screams and immediately shouted to all that we were in a minefield. We practised our drills and moved towards the wounded, prodding with bayonets. This was a slow and agonising job but I was fearful that the area was maybe covered by fire. The wounded were becoming quieter as the realisation of what had occurred and shock set in. I recall that Bull Mahoney was chanting the rosary. This was the first time I had ever heard it. It had quite an effect on us all: it inspired us to work quicker and harder to extricate them. I must say that the platoon members were outstanding in the face of this incident, which I think must be of the worst kind you could ever encounter.*

*Pioneer Platoon were working to our north and brought their mine detectors to help us. The Dustoff choppers were on the scene so quickly that we didn't have time to dress some of the wounds. I considered that any delay would be detrimental to the wounded as the medics on the chopper had better training and equipment. I have been criticised for this tough decision, I have never regretted it.*

The M16 mine, which had been laid for three to six months, had wounded four soldiers. Corporal Pat Mahoney's right leg had to be amputated as did Private Ken Butler's. Lance Corporal Ted Molloy and Private Jim Knight were also seriously wounded. All the wounded had to be evacuated to Australia.

On the same day 4 Platoon B Company had a contact at 2015 hours. An enemy patrol, attempting to reach the village of Dat Do, actually walked in on top of one of the platoon machine gunners just as the ambush was being set up. It was an exceptionally dark night. Second Lieutenant Metcalf commented:

*The enemy's quick reaction contact drill was excellent, firing an RPG round immediately on contact. I remember watching it fly past my right shoulder and thinking how beautiful it looked at night, just like a large firecracker!*

Private Peter Crossley, Private Gavan Brown and Corporal Barry Noble were wounded in this contact and evacuated by Dustoff. The helicopter was guided in under hazardous conditions by a hand-held strobe light. It was fortunate that the helicopter was

not fired on by the enemy. Corporal Noble and Private Crossley were later returned to Australia.

C Company returned to the Horseshoe on 23 June. Private Frank Wood wrote:

*There was a marked change since the last time we were there. After all the rain the grass was growing profusely and there were also many new buildings which had been constructed. Wire had been laid all over the place. Battalion Headquarters was now stationed there which meant that there was bullshit flying everywhere.*

As part of the constant need to retrain replacement specialist soldiers, during late June and July two stretcher bearer courses were run at 1st Australian Field Hospital at Vung Tau for platoon and company medics. These men bore the brunt of immediate medical attention to casualties and prepared them for helicopter evacuation. Fourteen soldiers attended this course and assisted with the treatment of real casualties.

This operation augured well for the battalion. The unit had settled in to its operations well. It had gained ascendancy over the enemy by a combination of good battle discipline and an increasing familiarity with the area of operations. After the operation Lieutenant Colonel Grey considered that a quick method of destroying rice needed to be developed. He also criticised the GPMG M60 for its lack of robustness – well maintained guns had been found to stop firing at critical times. This statement was not made lightly: considerable effort had been made to ensure that these weapons, which represented the main firepower of the battalion, were very well looked after. The Commanding Officer also stated that there was a need for a lighter mine detector for use by rifle platoons, as the capability was required wherever the battalion deployed and the detectors used by the engineers were too heavy and bulky for this task.



# 11

## Pacification and Vietnamisation

*It is most important that . . . the responsible military commanders should fully understand the concept which lies behind successful anti-communist guerilla operations, ie. the physical and political separation of the guerillas from the population.*

Sir Robert Thompson, 1966

IT HAD BECOME clear that two types of operation would be successful in Phuoc Tuy. Some enemy groups were able to be sustained in the remoter parts of the province by their own resources, living from the small supplies that were coming into the area, meagre crops of rice and fruit grown in remote areas or from the caches of food that still existed. Combating these groups required 'operations in depth' as the battalion described them. The majority of the enemy was forced to supply themselves with food from the population centres. As Sir Robert Thompson, the eminent British guerilla warfare expert indicates, tactics that isolated the Viet Cong from their sources of food and moral support caused them to begin to wither. Neither tactic was likely to be successful alone: the combination kept the enemy insecure in their remoter havens and harried them whenever they tried to supplement their meagre supplies from the villages. It was probably true that tighter food control, such as that practised in Malaya, was not likely to succeed as not only was there lack of government will to impose it, but also the means of policing such controls would have been poorly coordinated.

Isolation of the enemy from the population relied on several factors. Firstly, the most effective method was that most demanding of small unit skills – ambushing. Successful ambushing relied on high levels of individual and small group skills, together with careful planning and the provision of good means of fire support. Secondly,

intelligence of enemy routes, intentions and tactics was of great importance. Without good information and its careful interpretation and dissemination, most ambushing would remain a fruitless undertaking. A third important factor was a detailed knowledge of the terrain. Were these factors present?

The battalion had been well trained in the art of ambushing. There is no doubt that the techniques of ambush are best honed by continual practice, and practice the battalion had to the full. There is a minimum size for an ambush. It must be able to remain alert throughout: since most ambushes were at night, this requirement was taxing. Ideally, each ambush needed double sentries on its primary weapon – almost always the M60 machine gun because of its firepower. If it is assumed that the duration of the ambush is about twelve hours and that the concentration required of a sentry is such that a duty of longer than an hour is risky, it can be seen that, even with single sentries, groups of about twelve or more are needed. The battalion used many half-platoon ambushes but, though the theoretical strength of a platoon was 34, the half platoons were rarely more than twelve strong. In circumstances where saturation ambushes were needed, strengths of seven were not uncommon. These ambushes were extremely risky and exhausting. They succeeded by the dedication of the soldiers, by good junior leadership, by good coordination (so that a degree of mutual support between ambushes was provided when possible) and by careful planning of fire support, both high explosive and illumination. Deliberate ambushes were supplemented by always harbouring near likely enemy routes.

The Officer Commanding A Company, Major Thomson, put his views on ambushing:

*We don't harbour any more, we ambush, The solutions to deploying an ambush, compatible with being able to alert everyone without giving the show away, are too complicated. We like to form ourselves into strong-points of 4 to 5 men while using a simple method of inter-strong point alert. Why 4 to 5 men? We'd prefer 6 to 7 really. This allows a reasonable individual piquet of an hour or so and a chance to get a real rest before being awakened for the next one.*

The intelligence available to the battalion from outside sources was probably not of a high quality. There was too little coordination and too much jealousy between competing collection agencies and too much concentration by Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force intelligence on the 'bigger picture'. Ambushing needs good battle intelligence, particularly what number of enemy will use what route to where at what time. While collection by battalion intelligence from local sources provided some isolated successes, the local population understandably felt that to trust the Australians was to trust a group that would be in the province for a year at most. It was fairly certain that the Viet Cong would have a far longer memory for acts that would be seen as betrayal. Nevertheless, the battalion Intelligence Officer was able

to build up a comprehensive enemy order of battle, mainly from captured documents. This enabled identification of enemy soldiers within hours of their death.

Throughout Australia's involvement in Phuoc Tuy, good intelligence on enemy movements was obtained from signals intelligence. Not all details of its success have been revealed. What is clear is that radio direction finding was able to locate a certain number of the few enemy radios accurately and almost daily. The information was treated on what was considered as a 'need-to-know' basis. In the battalion, only the Commanding Officer and Operations Officer were told of these intercepts. They were forbidden to tell others. The information was passed to them in code, sometimes thinly disguised as 'stock market prices'.

At about this stage, Brigadier Henderson decided to divide the responsibility for the province between the two battalions with the longest residual time to serve there. 7 RAR was allocated the half east of Route 2, 2 RAR that to the west. 8 RAR was kept as the battalion able to be used for deployment to either area. The terrain knowledge gained by 7 RAR during the rest of its tour improved greatly with its increasing experience of the effectively 'half province' area of operations.

While the battalion operated constantly in the eastern half of the province, the opportunity was taken to develop close links with the local military and civil officials. Each day the Intelligence Officer, together with an interpreter, visited a large number of these officials. He discussed the results of earlier operations, asked for suggestions about enemy patterns of activity and sought information. In many cases the information gained helped the battalion to site ambushes more successfully. Villagers became used to the presence of the Intelligence Officer and slowly became more confident and trusting. Village officials could often help in the quick identification of Viet Cong who had been killed, adding to the knowledge of enemy units and in some cases identifying them as well. In rare cases, good intelligence was obtained and some satisfactory results obtained. One of these rare examples followed the incident recounted on 14 June. After Sapper Ian Scott was killed by a mine explosion under an armoured personnel carrier near Phuoc Hai, a village policeman told the Intelligence Officer that a further mine was some distance down the track. It was found, defused and lives were potentially saved. This sort of close liaison at least built the confidence of locals and helped coordination with them.

Close liaison existed between the battalion and the network of US Army advisers in the province. The US Team (Advisory Team 89) was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Carl G. Smith. The relationship that developed between the US District Senior Adviser for Dat Do, Major John E. Dunlop Jr, and the Commanding Officer was particularly close. Major Dunlop, a cigar smoking Armored Corps officer, spent many hours with the battalion at the Horseshoe and became a regular member of the

Commanding Officer's orders group. Operation BIRDWOOD (named after Field Marshal Lord Birdwood who, as a general, had been the General Officer Commanding the Australian Imperial Force in France in World War I) continued the approach of denying enemy access to villages that had been adopted in CUNG CHUNG. It took place in area of operations SHEPHERD in the eastern half of the province from 29 June to 23 July. The battalion had the same troops providing it with direct support (106th Field Battery and a Sioux helicopter from 161st Independent Reconnaissance Flight) and similar supporting arms (Centurion tanks from 3 Troop 1st Armoured Regiment, M113 armoured personnel carriers from 2 Troop B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment, a battery of 8 inch guns from A Battery 7/8th US Artillery, combat engineers from 2 Troop 1st Field Squadron and helicopters from 9 Squadron RAAF).

Although there was no change to the method of operations used in Operation CUNG CHUNG, two elements of the task were more sharply focussed upon in the mission for this operation. There was particular emphasis on interdicting the enemy's approaches to the villages from their safe haven of the Long Hai Mountains, where their extensive use of M16 mines lifted from the Australian minefield gave them effective protection. A further task was to attempt the destruction of *D445* grouped (it was thought) in the Viet Cong area called the Tan Ru, centred 1 km south-west of The Bone.

When the operation commenced, Battalion Headquarters, Support and C Companies were at the Horseshoe. D Company was located at Night Defensive Position ISA. Each of these companies was engaged in the task of ambushing at night. B Company had just deployed by armoured personnel carriers to the area close to Phuoc Hung for a reconnaissance in force operation. During the operation B, D and Support Companies took rest and convalescence leave at Vung Tau.

At first light on 30 June, 2 Platoon A Company filled in the bunkers dug by 1 Platoon near Phuoc Hai which had served their ambush purpose. One of the soldiers, Private Dennis Aldis, who was working with 'Roo' Dowley, struck the side of an M16 mine which had been planted within half a metre of where 1 Platoon had dug the bunker. The primary fuse had gone off but the mine had not jumped and exploded. It was probable that one of the 1 Platoon soldiers had set the fuse off. As the Platoon Commander of 2 Platoon said: 'God must be on our side. Charlie never plants just one mine; it looks like we lived in a VC minefield for three days. We are a lucky platoon'.

On 1 July an ambush from the Support Section of C Company, led by Private Barry Gissell, contacted fifteen enemy moving in two groups. The five who were leading were engaged initially by the patrol at a range of 15 m. The ambush was sprung with claymores but soon afterwards one of the machine guns broke its firing rod. The second machine gun, despite suffering stoppages caused by mud, fired about

**Table 11.1 D445 organisation and equipment, 10 July 1970**

SUB UNIT	C1	C2	C3	C4	HQ AND C5
No. of platoons	4	3	4	?	?
Strength	30	29	25	30	68
Mortars	1x 60 mm		1x 60 mm	1x 82 mm	
MGs	2 x RPD	3 x RPD	3 x RPD		
RPGs	1 x RPG7 3 x RPG2	1 x RPG7 5 x RPG2	1 x RPG7 3 x RPG2	3 x RPG7 1 x RPG2	2 x RPG2
Rifles	AK47s	15 x AK47	AK47s	13 x AK47 4 x SKS	Ak47s
Pistols	K54s	4 x K54			K54s
Mines				DH10s	6 x DH10s
Other weapons				1 x carbine 1 x 75 mm RCL	

600 rounds. Illumination rounds were called for and the other group of ten sighted. Many enemy soldiers were seen to be hit by the patrol's fire. One enemy body was recovered and his RPG2 captured. Several heavy drag marks were found in the subsequent sweep. The results of this contact and some that followed it showed a particular effort by the enemy to avoid carrying identifying documents. For some time the normal habit of all enemy soldiers carrying all their personal papers was not followed.

Twenty minutes later half of 3 Platoon was in an ambush on Route 44, 500 m south-west of Phuoc Hai, when a party of five enemy who were moving from the Long Hais was sighted. Corporal John McCabe, who commanded the ambush, had carefully sited it below the summit of a rise so that the group would not be silhouetted to the enemy. He directed the fire of his patrol with great coolness and sound judgment. He led a small group of it well forward of the initial position to search for enemy who had broken contact and were trying to escape. His initiative and determination caused several more enemy casualties and resulted in the enemy abandoning the position. One of the two Viet Cong killed was identified as Nam Binh, the Secretary of the *Phuoc Hai Party Chapter*, and therefore a key figure in the Viet Cong structure of this village. A document he was carrying indicated that some village guerilla units were now practically non-existent.

Half an hour before midnight on 3 July, 2 km south of the bridge over the Song Rai on Route 23, Support Company had completed moving by foot to a new area. The Reconnaissance Platoon was establishing a night harbour when its sentry saw one enemy about 25 m away. The enemy approached and the sentry shot him at a range of 1 m. A second unseen enemy engaged the sentry. The platoon illuminated the area with M79s and then fired machine guns and threw a grenade at this second enemy soldier, killing him. The pack of the first Viet Cong, thought to contain explosives, blew up during the fire fight, wounding two soldiers from the Reconnaissance Platoon

– Private Kerry Richards (who was evacuated to Australia on 13 July) and Lance Corporal Maurice Callanan. One AK47 was captured.

The hazards of joint operations in close proximity were brought home to 2 Platoon on the evening of 8 July, as Second Lieutenant Ian Dunn wrote:

*We moved down Route 44, swung into dunes north of village, dropped Tom [Sergeant Tom Bourke] with 4 and 6 Sections in dunes 250 metres east of road, 150 metres north of village. Moved with APCs and 5 Section to midway between the eastern RF post and Tom's position. Much firing, including high rounds from VC.*

*Tom engaged by PF ambush, thinking him to be VC, had to withdraw to evade indirect fire from 40 mm grenades. Corporal McNeilly and Graeme Haywood both knocked over by grenade blast. Not wounded though. Picked up Tom's push as soon as we could. The RF from the main post continued to lob in 40 mm grenades. They ceased fire after threatened retaliation from .50 calibre MGs. Once again our luck held.*

On 10 July the battalion was issued with an intelligence assessment of the organisation, strength and weapons of the unit it considered to be its main opponent, D445. The information came from captured documents. Table 11.1 summarises this information and shows that D445 was 182 strong.

Private Bruce Ravencroft's diary for 11 July read:

*Left with eight men at 0930 for a recce. 1100 and boy did we find a bunker system! Still being built, 34 already completed and 14 others marked out. Overhead protection four feet thick. Thank goodness it's not being occupied. From marks and things lying around, they have been here within the last 12 hours. Dave Cruse, Don Ford and myself are going in to clear them. Bunkers clear, but on the way out Fordy nearly trod on a mine. 1130 and calling for a sapper and mine detector. 1230 and sappers arrived and started sweeping. 1500 sappers finished. Only two entrances mined. Four mines found, two with anti-lifting devices.*

On 12 July a twelve man patrol from 8 Platoon C Company (commanded by Second Lieutenant Gregg Lindsay) sighted one enemy at 1935 hours 3.5 km south-west of Dat Do and deployed an immediate ambush. Six enemy at about 25 m intervals were seen moving out of the village scrub line into the open area before the padi fields. The enemy were seen because of the shine on their faces and their movement. The patrol opened fire at 150 m range for three minutes. The Platoon Commander described the action:

*There was reasonably heavy automatic fire and lots of tracer. There was a lot of noise and confusion and I had the idea that I had 4–5 diggers down (which wasn't so). We were taking automatic fire from the scrub line, our position being*

*in the open. Jimmy Howard and I with automatic Slurs got into the scrub to sort it out. I remember looking back and seeing Dave Matley my sig – he was sitting in the open casually adjusting the illumination artillery. He had rounded up all the para flares and was filling in the gaps of artillery illumination with them. He had called the Dustoff and was keeping the OC up to date – under fire. I rebuked him later for 'sitting up like a bloody sore thumb'. He solemnly told me he couldn't see what was going on to pass on to 39 [the Company Commander's callsign] if he was on his guts – so he just sat up.*

*Totally mad – but very cool under fire.*

The patrol had aggressively assaulted towards the enemy using fire and movement. The enemy in the open took cover as best they could and returned fire. Those still in the scrub hooked around the left rear of the patrol, inflicting a wound on Private Ashley Lamb. The patrol withdrew the casualty and saturated the enemy area with small arms and grenades. The enemy withdrew, dragging away two wounded, leaving four of their group dead in the area of the engagement with an M16 rifle and an M16 mine. Private Lamb was evacuated to Australia from 1st Australian Field Hospital on 27 July. The Company Commander, Major Geoff Skardon, commented that the fast aggressive action of the patrol under good covering fire threw the enemy off balance. It was a well conducted attack.

A Hoi Chanh stated that on 13 July the Political Officer of *D445* had told the battalion that it would move from the Long Hais to the May Tao Mountains. On 17 July, C Company killed a platoon commander of *C2 D445* and a squad leader from the *Reconnaissance Platoon* of that battalion. The squad leader's pack contained many letters that indicated that the battalion was planning to move from the Long Hai Mountains to Long Khanh Province. Both these pieces of information tended to indicate that the operations to restrict enemy access to the villages had begun to have considerable effect on the enemy.

At 2025 hours on 14 July, 2 km east of Phuoc Loi, two soldiers from C Company were wounded when a patrol from 9 Platoon detonated a booby trapped M26 grenade. They were Corporal Greg Masters and Private Ross Ferris. Both had to be flown home to Australia to recover from their wounds. A further M26 fixed about six inches above the ground with a 1 m trip wire was found nearby the next morning and neutralised.

The luck that had held for 2 Platoon A Company throughout the tour changed on 15 July. A soldier stepped on an M16 mine 4 km east of Hoi My, just before 0800 hours. Private Leigh Christie was the platoon signaller when the mine exploded, very seriously wounding the Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant Tom Bourke, seriously wounding Private Christie and wounding Private Graham Bellette. Although in pain from his wounds, Private Christie assessed the situation, reported it on the radio and guided others in the patrol to assist the wounded. His calmness and control of the situation was such that for some time it was not realised that he was seriously wounded. The

Commanding Officer felt that his resourcefulness and courage did much to ensure the prompt evacuation of the other wounded and reflected great credit on him. Lieutenant Dunn, who was quickly on the scene, wrote:

*The chopper (Dustoff 26) was overhead within 10 minutes but it took us till about 0830 to clear a path through the minefield to Tom and carry him out to the landing point. He was then on board within a minute. He would have been in Vung Tau in 10 minutes.*

The bravery and fortitude that Tom Bourke showed when very seriously wounded is remembered to this day as an example of his leadership and soldierly qualities. The resultant double leg amputation was a further tragedy for Sergeant Bourke, who had served on the battalion's first tour: his brother Michael (also a sergeant) had been killed in action in Vietnam with 1 RAR in 1965 and Michael's wife's first husband had also been killed in action in Vietnam. Both Private Christie (who lost his spleen) and Sergeant Bourke had to be returned to Australia on 27 July for further treatment.

On 15 July at 2241 hours, 1 km north–north–east of the Horseshoe, 7 Platoon C Company was conducting a night fighting patrol with eleven men under Sergeant Edmonds' command. The conduct of these moving patrols was an indication of the skill and confidence of the battalion at this stage of its tour, as well as of the lessening capability of the enemy. The patrols were hazardous. In this case, the patrol saw an enemy about 12 m away from it. Corporal Bob Andrews, one of the section commanders, fired on the enemy who threw a grenade at him and quickly disappeared into the dark. Corporal Andrews was wounded but was able to remain on duty.

Corporal McCabe was involved in an incident on 17 July at 0818 hours, 7 km north–east of the Horseshoe when he was in an ambush with Private Gissell and saw two enemy moving. He fired on them at a range of 30 m and, feeling that this was too far for a certain shot, moved forward quickly with a few of his patrol, sought out the enemy and killed them. They were Thanh Lam, a platoon commander of C2 of D445 and an unidentified squad leader from the *Reconnaissance Platoon* of C5 of D445. The documents they were carrying indicated that D445 was planning to move to a sanctuary area in the May Tao Mountains. Also captured in one of the packs was the first official document originated by the *Headquarters of the South Vietnam Liberation Army* (the Viet Cong headquarters) since the Cambodian campaign had begun in late April.

On 18 July a Hoi Chanh took 7 Platoon C Company to an area 3 km south–south–west of the bridge over the Song Rai on Route 23, where a base camp that belonged to C3 of D445 was found. The camp was destroyed. C3 had moved to this camp because one of its soldiers had rallied. They moved to the Mao Tao hills to avoid being caught by the information from this second rallier.

The same evening, half of 4 Platoon B Company (commanded by Sergeant Jim Crowther)



was in a triangular ambush on the north-east fringe of Dat Do with twelve men when two enemy approached from the village. The enemy was 20 m away from a section commander on the machine gun who could not bring the weapon to bear without rattling the link belt. He fired an M79 instead, hitting one of the enemy in his chest. The guerilla, later identified as belonging to the *Long Dat District Company*, was killed.

The operation ended on 23 July. Battalion Headquarters and the companies other than Support Company returned to Nui Dat for a ten day retraining period. Support Company continued to be based at the Horseshoe and to maintain its pattern of ambushing.

## OPERATION CUNG CHUNG II

This operation took place from 3 August to 10 September in area of operations CARMEN, corresponding to the majority of the eastern half of the province. Battalion Headquarters was located at the Horseshoe throughout. The battalion was directly supported by 106th Field Battery and a Sioux helicopter from 161st (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight. Support was also provided by a troop of Centurion tanks from A Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment, 2 Troop of B Squadron of 3rd Cavalry Regiment and 2 Troop of 1st Field Squadron.

The intensity of the battalion's ambushing was reflected in Private Bruce Ravenscroft's diary for 4 August:

*Returned 0650. A quiet night. During the night we are putting 54 ambushes around Dat Do and nine inside. From Chieu Hois, Charlie is getting desperate and is going to come in in strength. Moving out tonight at 1830 by tracks. Pouring with rain at the moment.*

A daily mobile checkpoint was commenced on 6 August to check personnel and vehicle movement on roads in the area of operations. It was jointly manned by the battalion and Vietnamese Regional Force soldiers. It found examples of irregular identity documents (which were referred to the South Vietnamese authorities) and acted as a deterrent to overt enemy daylight movement.

On 7 August at 0833 hours Lance Corporal Ross 'She' Schaefer of the Reconnaissance Platoon Support Company, was standing sentry to the platoon harbour when two Viet Cong approached it along a track. He initiated the contact, killing one while the other ran off. He described his feelings just prior to firing as 'What am I doing here?' but felt very calm and collected after firing. Some time afterwards he felt a mixture of elation and being sick in the stomach. He could still remember the details of the contact more than twenty years later.

The battalion was visited by the Commander, US Army Vietnam, Lieutenant General W. J. McCaffery at the Horseshoe on 11 August. He understood and had considerable affection for

Australian soldiers. It was a successful and productive visit with a good discussion on operations and tactical techniques.

On the morning of 8 August, Sergeant 'Eddie' Edmonds's eight man patrol from 7 Platoon C Company was moving in single file out of its night ambush position 8 km north-east of the Horseshoe. The lead section commander, Corporal John 'Abo' Abernathy, saw a suspected Viet Cong 5 m away. He challenged him but as he did so a second enemy raised his weapon to fire. The section commander shot and killed the leading enemy and wounded the other. The enemy soldier killed was identified as a member of the *Phuoc Tho Viet Cong Infrastructure*.

On 12 August Second Lieutenant Peter Bysouth, a pilot from 161st (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight in the Sioux directly supporting the battalion, was flying a morning low level reconnaissance over Hon Vung mountain in the Long Hais. His helicopter was hit by automatic small arms fire and it was clear that damage had been sustained. Using minimum power, he limped the aircraft to the nearest fire support base and completed a low speed running landing safely, but with great difficulty. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for this incident and another involving a successful 8 RAR ambush earlier that morning. His citation praised his skill, courage and determination and the inspiration he gave his fellow aviators.

The return to Australia of the 4/68 National Service intake by chartered jet took place in drafts on 13 and 20 August. There were 72 members of the intake in the battalion. In their two years service, ten became corporals and a further seventeen had been promoted to lance corporal. Like all soldiers returning home, they had to pay the difference between the air and rail fare from Sydney to their home if they wanted a quick return; for example, a miserly government extracted sums of up to US\$65.78 from the soldiers who lived in Perth.

On 14 August, a joint patrol (with twelve Australians and seven Vietnamese Regional Force soldiers) from 2 Platoon A Company, commanded by Corporal Bob 'Lurch' McNeilly, set up an ambush 1 km west-south-west of Lo Gom. The ambush had been in position for 30 minutes when at 2029 hours the sentry saw a group of seven enemy approach from the south-west. The contact was initiated at a range of 15 m and four Viet Cong were killed, two of whom were females. All were carrying empty packs to pick up food from the village. Some 264 rounds of artillery were fired to assist the cutting-off of the enemy escape and 80 rounds of mortar illumination were used. This ambush was assessed by the Company Commander to be well laid and controlled. Private Bruce Ravenscroft from a nearby 5 Platoon B Company ambush picked up a piece of shrapnel from the US 8 inch guns that had fallen within several metres of his position. The serial number on it confirmed that it had been fired that evening.

On 20 August, the Operations Officer wrote:

*Night is the time of the VC. Under the cover of darkness when the Allies cannot make maximum use of all the paraphernalia of war and particularly air, the VC come out of their hides and come into villages seeking food and supplies and attempting to recruit new blood and turn the people against the government. But even night activity has been seriously curtailed with the active patrol program around the villages over the past three months.*

The Police Chief of Phuoc Hai, Sergeant Chay, had picked up two Viet Cong agents a few nights previously. They had talked and this had led to the arrest of a further five infrastructure cadres. It had been a bad week for the communist cause in this area.

A typical wet season ambush patrol from the Horseshoe was described by Private Frank Wood:

*We ambushed out in the paddy. It began to pour with rain at 2100 hours and never stopped all night. It wasn't long before we found ourselves with only our webbing and a slight mound to keep our heads above water. By God it was miserable lying in over eight inches of water for the night! No sign of nogs.*

At this stage, 106th Field Battery had supported the battalion for six months. In this time it had fired 40 000 rounds, including high explosive, variable time, white phosphorus smoke and flares for night illumination. These rounds had been fired to provide close fire support to contacts and to provide some cut-off capability to deter enemy escape. They were also fired at targets chosen to harass the enemy (called harassing and interdiction or H&I fire), particularly during the night, so that no enemy soldier in gun range could predict whether or when artillery could fall on him. This had the effect of distinctly lowering enemy morale and was a factor that frequently led to individual Viet Cong surrendering.

In the days following 23 August, 2 Platoon A Company made a rare attempt to penetrate the Viet Cong base area of the Long Hais. A half-platoon patrol moved carefully into a position in the eastern foothills of Hon Vung mountain that evening, moving through the thickest scrub at times at progress rates as low as 20 m an hour, carefully avoiding areas likely to be mined, although using their attached engineers to clear a way when necessary. They expanded their position on 24 August. The next morning, at 1020 hours, four enemy walked into their position. They were engaged at a range of 15 m. Several enemy were wounded and one of them, a female, was captured. She died while waiting for a Dustoff helicopter.

On 21 August a platoon of B Company was lifted from Nui Dat to Xuyen Moc by helicopter. The plan for B Company was to use this platoon in a blocking position south of the line between the Suoi Da and the Suoi Mon, centred on the area 4 km east of Xuyen Moc. The rest of the company would then drive from north to south along the line of the Suoi Da,

5 km north-east of Xuyen Moc. The operation was to capitalise on the knowledge of the area that B Company had and to use the technique of long insertion marches to avoid enemy detection. Private Sam Ward of 4 Platoon B Company described the circumstances leading to a succession of contacts that occurred towards the end of August:

*On the previous day, 5 Platoon and ourselves had had a contact on a fairly major foot track running basically east – west. There was at least one enemy KIA. We had just come across the track as we were moving south. It wasn't an ambush. Some VC came strolling down the track as we came across it. I think a nasho called Gilewicz initiated the contact.*

This contact had occurred in the early afternoon of 27 August, 2 km west of Nui Tam Bo. 4 Platoon had hit three enemy (two male and one female). One of the Viet Cong was killed. He was later identified as the Assistant Political Officer of C2 of D445. Corporal Steve Taylor was wounded but he was able to remain on duty. Five minutes later and 100 m away, 5 Platoon, which was with Company Headquarters, saw another Viet Cong approaching it. He was called on to stop and surrender. He failed to do so and was killed. These two contacts had probably occurred because the enemy had not expected B Company to be in the area. The company had moved 6000 m in two hours that morning, using its proven ability to move quickly through the area to conceal its presence rather than advertising it by the use of Iroquois helicopters. It was able to do this because of its good knowledge of the terrain and the track system. Private Ward continued:

*I can remember feeling intensely alive and 'switched on'. I don't think I had ever felt quite the same before or since. The adrenalin was really pumping and I was excited. After a while (I have got no idea how long, probably about an hour) another section took over the lead and I switched down a gear. We kept moving and then suddenly there was a contact front. The scout, almost certainly Dick Aly (NS), had walked into a bunker system and fired at several VC, incredibly without hitting any. Schoie (Kerry Schofield) and I were immediately ordered forward with the M60 to aid the lead section. I can remember dropping my pack and running past Platoon HQ and one or possibly two engineers who were attached to the Platoon. They were all lying flat along the track. Kerry and I ran into the first line of bunkers and took up fire positions as the VC withdrew without putting up much return fire. There was lots of noise of firing and general confusion.*

This action had started at midday and had taken only two minutes. Major Greg Warland then used artillery fire (a total of 108 rounds) to drive the Viet Cong into areas where he had cut-off groups positioned. An hour and a half later, half of 6 Platoon, 9 km south of Xuyen Moc, commanded by Sergeant Jock Henderson, saw one enemy and attempted to capture him. He would not surrender and he was killed by machine gun fire. An hour later, the Company Headquarters blocking position, 9 km

south–south–east of Xuyen Moc, was approached by two enemy. One prisoner was captured and the other Viet Cong wounded. The enemy was from the *Phuoc Buu Guerilla Unit* and he later indicated that he had been on a resupply mission for C2 of D445. Two hours later, the 5 Platoon ambush 9 km south–east of Xuyen Moc sighted one enemy about 100 m away. Although he was followed, he escaped. Quick movement and intelligent siting of blocking ambushes had provided B Company with a good result at a very small cost. It was a fine example of the battalion's effective use of saturation ambushing.

On 25 and 26 August a US Army Searchlight Detachment was deployed at the Horseshoe. This was an example of the sort of tactical weapons research used by the Americans to see whether technology could assist the war. The searchlights were not very successful at the Horseshoe because the enemy could easily avoid them. Other examples of technology employed by the American ground forces included 'People Sniffers' (sensors that detected the emanation of ammonia from human bodies), 'Red Haze' (infra–red sensors to find the heat given out by bodies and equipment), stabilised binoculars that assisted visual reconnaissance from helicopters and movement detecting radars. Much of this equipment was tested by the Australians. Some devices were successful; others, like the 'People Sniffers' met the ingenuity of the Viet Cong, who countered the device by putting human waste products in bags up trees – commonsense was an excellent foil for technology.

On 26 August, the Reconnaissance Platoon had been detailed to search for signs of enemy activity around the feature nicknamed the Ear, midway between Dat Do and Xuyen Moc. It was so called because the shape of the map contours on a 1:50 000 map of the area were similar to an ear. The next day, the Platoon Commander, Staff Sergeant Col Rowley, was selecting a night harbour position for the platoon 1 km south of the Ear at about 1615 hours. He had been leading for about 25 m when he sighted an enemy soldier going to ground behind a tree. He opened fire on the enemy and took cover. The Viet Cong returned the fire, wounding the scout (Private Ray Gladman) and the section commander of the forward section (Lance Corporal Neil Richardson). The forward section deployed and returned the fire. Enemy fire was now coming from the left, centre and right of this section. The second and third sections deployed into an assault and swept through the enemy position under Staff Sergeant Rowley's command. The Platoon Sergeant (Sergeant Williams) and seven soldiers were detailed to care for the wounded. The assault group fought through a camp with accommodation for about fifteen men. While they were using spigot grenades to clear one of the huts, a further burst of fire detonated one of these grenades, wounding a further three soldiers – Private Pat Kelly, Private Neil Nitshke and Private Darrel Gillies – with the shrapnel.

In this action, one of the documents captured by the Reconnaissance Platoon was

the training program of *C2* of *D445* for the fortnight beginning 13 August. The program was translated and issued widely in the battalion on 30 August. It gives a good idea of the attention paid by the local enemy battalion to tactical, weapon and fieldcraft training (see table 11.2).

The Operations Officer, Major Kevin Cole, prefaced the captured translation with the thought that the lecture on the afternoon of 27 August had been rudely interrupted by the attack by the battalion's Reconnaissance Platoon. If the Viet Cong conducted the course critique that afternoon as planned, it must have been interesting. The training

**Table 11.2 C2 D445 Training program, 13-27 August 1970**

DATE IN AUG	MORNING	NO. HOURS	AFTERNOON	NO. HOURS	EVENING	NO. HOURS
13	Crossing dry leaves	4	Individual mine training	3	Flare training	3
14	Crossing trenches	3	Crossing enemy wire	3	Crossing dry leaves, mine warfare and flares	3
15	Crossing swamps	3	Obstacle crossing	3	Obstacle crossing	4
16	Range practice – infantry weapons	2	Obstacle crossing	3	Swamp crossing under flares	3
17	Trench crossing	3	Revision of weaker subjects	2	Enemy obstacle crossing	4
18	Crossing swamps	2	Range practice	3	Revision of weaker subjects	2
19	Section attacks on bunkers and bridges	4	Crossing dry leaves and wire	3	Night firing	3
20	Attacking points from tunnels	3	Shooting infantry weapons at aircraft	3	Attack on bunkers and bridges	4
21	Revision of weaker subjects	2	Recce and guerilla warfare	3	Attack from tunnels	3
22	Section attacks on bunkers	3	Range practice	3	Crossing enemy obstacles	4
23	Revision of weaker subjects	2	Section attacks	3	Attack on bunkers and bridges	3
24	Recce and guerilla warfare training	3	Weapon handling	3	Revision of weaker subjects	2
25	Practice in company raids	4	Recce and guerilla warfare	3	Attack on bunkers and bridges	3
26	Practice in company raids	4	Sapper recce	3	Revision of weaker subjects	2
27	Practice in company raids	4	Sapper and recce methods lecture	3	Course critique	2

program was an intensive one: perhaps the fact that training took only seven or eight hours on some days indicated a Viet Cong sports afternoon.

Technological assistance, in the form of Patrol Seismic Intrusion Devices, had become available. These consisted of a set with four transmitters and one receiver, able to detect movement within 20 m of their conical sensors. While not a substitute for alert eyes and ears, they extended the range of an ambush's observation and helped cover 'dead ground'.

Lieutenant Ian Dunn wrote:

*I'm writing this from ISA, a night defensive position at [grid reference] 437535 on Route 44 about 3 kilometres from the resort and fishing village of Long Hai. About 1.5 km down the road is a Mobile Strike Force camp which is training Cambodian soldiers. Near the coast is a very large refugee camp where I believe about 5000 Viet refugees from Cambodia are housed.*

*We arrived here on 3 September to relieve a platoon of D Company who were to rejoin their company for operations around Dat Do. I only brought half a platoon with me, it amounted to myself and ten men. Our job here is to protect a quarry and the men and plant of 17 Construction Squadron who are working the quarry and building roads in the area. Our position is at the very foot of the Long Hais and is dominated by the hills. Previously a company had always been here so we were a bit pushed to fill the positions of one hundred and eleven men. The CO visited me on 3 September and as a result Sgt Harker and the rest of the platoon arrived the following morning. Since then we have been hard at work building a couple of strong bunkers.*

*The village of Long Hai was a resort centre in the days of the French. There are a few hotels catering for the French and wealthy Viets. The beautiful old French villas which lined the coast past Long Hai are now deserted. The VC are too close. Lo Voi, a Catholic village, is a small farming settlement. Neat and clean by Viet standards. Long Hoa is quite a large fishing village, Catholic, clean and apparently prosperous. It has two large churches, tree lined streets and very friendly people. Most of the kids seem to be in Boy Scouts and Girl Guide movement which is supported by the church and government. VC influence in Lo Voi and Long Hoa is said to be about nil.*

The battalion's fifth birthday was celebrated at 0700 hours on 1 September. The Commanding Officer placed a battalion pennant and the pennants of the unit's supporting arms units on the highest point of the Long Hais from a Sioux helicopter. It was a daring gesture of defiance to this Viet Cong stronghold and included a full program of artillery fire into the area that evening. Among the more irreverent greetings received by the unit was: 'Happy Birthday from 4th Field Regiment. May you get Grey from age alone!'.

Half an hour after midnight, early on 6 September, a group of at least three enemy

were seen leaving the village of Phuoc Hai by the half of 1 Platoon A Company commanded by Lieutenant Chris Johnson ambushing its western outskirts. The half platoon had twelve Australians and seven soldiers from 124 Regional Force Company, Phuoc Hai. The sighting was made at a range of about 300 m through a starlight scope. The enemy moved away from the ambush and when they came into sight again at a range of about 400 m, they were engaged. A sweep was conducted by both the South Vietnamese and Australian troops, but it was found difficult to direct the local element. One Viet Cong soldier was killed and a heavy blood trail and drag mark were found. The group were identified from the documents they carried as members of the *Long Dat District Company*. Ten minutes after the ambush was sprung, the rest of 1 Platoon, commanded by Sergeant Terry Slaney, which was to the south-east of the village, saw an enemy soldier staggering towards it. They fired on him but he escaped. Once again, this ambush was a joint effort (ten Australians and eight Regional Force soldiers). The battalion mortars fired 106 rounds of 81 mm illumination in support of these two contacts.

Shortly before 1300 hours the same day, a three man group from Headquarters C Company, commanded by Corporal John Abernathy, saw a Viet Cong. The Operations Officer described the action:

*As the three Australians approached, the VC made his presence known by stepping out from the bamboo patch where he had been. At the same time, he called out and beckoned the patrol across to him, apparently thinking they were VC. The mistake was probably due to the small force which is not normal for our patrols. The patrol immediately called upon the VC to become a Hoi Chanh and as soon as they spoke the VC, realising his mistake, turned and ran. The patrol had no option but to open fire which they did, hitting the VC in the chest. A rapid follow-up was conducted by another patrol that was in the area. Again the deep indoctrination and soldierly qualities of the VC were demonstrated. When the follow-up patrol came upon the VC, he was attempting to tear up and burn the documents he had with him. He refused to surrender and was shot. The papers gave the unit identification of HQ D445 and a personal photograph showing him in North Vietnamese Army uniform. A brave enemy and a worthy opponent.*

The enemy soldier was identified as the Assistant Political Officer of the *Long Dat District Company*, and his actions and letters confirmed the suspicion that this unit was trying to liaise with elements of *D445* known to be in the area.

The pattern of operations was now fixed for the battalion. The combination of ambushing around the villages and seeking out the enemy from their now less safe havens was working smoothly and efficiently. All companies had gained a very good working knowledge of the eastern half of the province and had the confidence to move



quickly within it by foot to deceive the enemy. The enemy had little respite. They could get to the villages, but only at great risk. They had lost control of the night. Their jungle bases were increasingly less secure. They were hungry, their morale had weakened. The capability of the South Vietnamese forces in the province was growing. The battalion had begun to dominate its enemy.

# 12

## Final Operations

*Besides being an infallible cure for enemy constipation, the canister fire does much to alter the geography of the place.*

Major C.F. Thomson, 1970

### OPERATION CUNG CHUNG III PHASE 1

At this stage a new phase of CUNG CHUNG began. It took place between 10 and 22 September and included the arrangements for the phasing out of the third battalion in 1st Australian Task Force (8 RAR) in accordance with the government's recently announced policy. The battalion area of operations was renamed NAOMI for this phase. Battalion Headquarters remained at the Horseshoe throughout this operation.

The concept of operations for this phase focussed on three separate but complementary tasks. The most important task was the protection of the civilian population by restricting enemy movement in and out of the villages in the area. The second task was the destruction of the enemy and their assets in the depth areas. This was done by having a constant strength of between a platoon and a company in the area at all times, built up to two companies when specific intelligence information warranted this reaction. The third task was the fostering of joint operations with the companies and platoons of the battalion and the Regional and Popular Forces in the area.

As part of the plan to increase the effectiveness of the involvement of South Vietnamese forces in the security of the province, armoured personnel carriers picked up 124 Regional Force Company from Phuoc Hai on 11 September and deployed them into the Light Green area 6 km south-east of the Horseshoe for a search and destroy operation.

As one example of the attempt to use technology to assist in the fighting of this war, a radar detachment from the US Second Ground Surveillance Radar deployed to

the Horseshoe from 15 to 19 September. This radar was able to detect human movement to several thousand metres but was subject to false readings from trees moving in the wind. It was certainly not a substitute for active patrolling, and from an infantry viewpoint it was not helpful.

At 0430 hours on 17 September, Private Hector Holden was a member of an Assault Pioneer Platoon ambush on the eastern outskirts of the middle of Dat Do. He saw enemy movement about 30 m away. Rather than risking detection by alerting other members of the ambush, Private Holden carefully watched as the enemy scouted the area for Australian troops and then moved back into the village to lead out a larger group of about seven. Holden remained very still until all the enemy were in the killing area of the ambush and then initiated it with two claymores and his M16 rifle. Of the seven enemy, four were killed and two wounded. A further enemy soldier was taken prisoner as a result of this contact when he was captured by 609 Regional Force Company in Dat Do. The dead included Nguyen Van Nam (also known as Nam Vu), the Second-in-Command of *D445* and a group that was examining targets in Dat Do. Private Holden had made a calm assessment of the situation. His good battle discipline was instrumental in the success of the ambush and in thwarting the enemy's plans for entry into Dat Do. The ambush also captured two AK47 assault rifles and two K54 pistols.

After dusk on 18 September three Viet Cong walked into 8 Platoon C Company's ambush 2 km north-east of Phuoc Loi. The group was carrying one wounded Viet Cong on a stretcher. This enemy soldier was captured. He had been wounded by the Assault Pioneer Platoon ambush two days earlier. He had with him the satchel of documents that the Second-in-Command of *D445* had been carrying. These documents were probably the most useful captured by the battalion during this tour. They confirmed that at the time Nguyen Van Nam was the acting Commanding Officer of *D445*. The documents included his diary which Lieutenant Colonel Grey ensured was carefully translated. The first extract – one page of the extensive diary – perhaps shows the patriotic fervour and sense of poetry typical of the dedicated Viet Cong soldier:

### ***On a Country Road***

*Anyone who has been to Quang Tri [Province] Thua Tien, my home,  
has crossed Highway 9 [which goes from Quang Tri city on the coast  
west to Khe Sanh near the border with Laos] and at Do Linh has  
heard the hails of victory, the song that rises from the Ba Long River.  
Our country is growing larger every day.  
With the rhythm of the march I move to the front, through the jungle  
by night and by day to supply food and munitions. I have overcome  
much hardship. Blood has fallen on the country road under a hail of  
bombs and bullets. Still I feel free to march with the rhythm.*

*Hail our country's liberation troops. In the morning I was on Highway 9. There were American bodies on the road. Oh, oh, oh, this is the sound of victory.*

*The moon lights my way. With faith in my country, I march for miles. Today I carry arms through the mountain pass, across stream and Highway 9 with faith in tomorrow.*

*On the main road I am worried. On this road I live from day to day. I am on my way to the battlefields of Cambodia. I will return to my country victorious.*

*Hail, our country's liberation troops. From the North to the South the bombs are falling like rain but we are on our way to victory stepping, across the dead bodies of the Americans.*

*Oh, oh, oh, this is the road to victory.*

The page ends with an inscription by a female friend, Tuyet Fu: 'Life without love is not life but a game of charades'. The last few lines of the diary were:

*Arrived at Province [HQ] on 15 June 1970, waited for a task.*

*19 June 1970, Tu Lai assigned me to D1 [D445] as Chief of Staff of D1.*

*Arrived D [D445] 1 July 1970.*

*Stayed in Region 1 for 15 days. During this period the enemy conducted many sweeps through the area. Tanks swept the area three times.*

*On 6th and 10th July I went to D2 [possibly D440] to study.*

*On 15th Thu defected to the enemy.*

*During an operation moving back into the Province, it took three days to arrive at a spot predetermined by U4 [a regional headquarters].*

*Prepared an anti-sweep plan. Prepared to fight for one day.*

*20 July 1970, Battalion stayed in the Bao Non area. Here food was insufficient. This is the second time I have known hunger.*

*On 5 September went to Area 2, where we lived and ate like rats.*

*On 13 September Bo, the District Security Cadre, defected. While staying here I am very tired and forced to work hard. Enemy artillery is firing all the time. I can't sleep. The days spent here seem to be without reason.*

*[Diary ends.]*

Nam Vu's diary gave a clear indication of the degree of harassment that the Australian tactics of operations in depth were imposing on the enemy.

The operation ended on 22 September when the battalion (other than Support Company which remained at the Horseshoe) concentrated at Nui Dat. The fifth birthday celebrations were belatedly held on 29 September when a dawn Church Parade celebrated by Padre Keith Teefey was attended by all ranks in the company of Brigadier Henderson (the Task Force Commander). The celebrations continued with a day of inter-company sport, company barbecues and a battalion concert with comic and musical acts provided by each company.

### OPERATION CUNG CHUNG III (PHASES 3 AND 4)

On 3 October the battalion resumed responsibility for Area of Operations NAOMI from 8 RAR. Operation CUNG CHUNG III (Phases 3 and 4) ran until 1 February 1971—122 days of continual operations for the unit. The initial deployments from Nui Dat were made by trucks, other than for A Company which moved by armoured personnel carriers to the Tan Ru area, midway between Xuyen Moc and Nui Dat 2. B Company was deployed to BRIGID and C, D and Support Companies to the Horseshoe with Battalion Headquarters.

2 Platoon was searching on the western bank of the Song Rai. The Platoon Commander, Second Lieutenant Ian Dunn, wrote:

*The only interesting thing we have found so far was a VC graveyard at [grid reference] 547677 [6 km east of Nui Dat 2]. It consisted of seven neatly dug graves, two of which were occupied, one since 1964 and the other 1965. Both had concrete headstones bearing the names of the occupants and one had a small NLF flag painted on the headstone. Charlie must have felt pretty secure in those days. Today his dead get a very quick burial in an unmarked grave.*

On 6 October a Vietnamese military vehicle was ambushed by CI and C3 of D445 about 3 km south of Xuyen Moc on Route 23. Some documents left in the ambush site by the enemy caused the Commanding Officer to move Support Company to the area of Phuoc Buu, and to readjust A Company areas to cover the ambushing areas vacated by Support Company.

Elements of B Company had been located at Night Defensive Position ISA since 3 October. On 8 October, Private Bruce Ravenscroft emphasised the closeness of the mine threat by recording: '1020, and bang, 100m outside of the gate, an ARVN soldier has stepped on a mine. No more worries for him. Moving out tonight at 1800. A joint patrol with ARVN'.

On 14 October, 7 Platoon C Company was involved with the remainder of the company in an interdiction operation around Xuyen Moc. The company task was to 'closely ambush' the routes in and out of the village in an area of operations called RANDY. The platoon had split into two ambush patrols and both were moving west towards their planned night locations at 1910 hours, when 8 Platoon sighted movement towards 7 Platoon. The other half of 7 Platoon then saw that the enemy were attempting to move to Second Lieutenant Terry McGovern's half platoon's ambush position. The platoon commander moved carefully through his position to check the ambush layout. While he was doing this, he saw three enemy 15 m away and fired on them. He described the action:

*Four enemy almost walked into our triangle from the flank. The lead enemy looked like a Local Force soldier from Xuyen Moc and I challenged him. I was*

*quite angry when the immediate response was a long burst of AK47 fire. I was so angry that I followed my burst of M16 fire by two grenades into the thick scrub where the enemy had come from.*

A combined sweep was made by both halves of the platoon after the fire fight. The next morning, two enemy bodies were found. A further dead enemy was found on 19 October. Two AK47s, an M16 rifle and an RPG2 were captured. The enemy was from C70, the Xuyen Moc District Company.

On 27 October there was a tragic clash between patrols from 2 and 3 Platoons of A Company. The clash resulted in the death of Lieutenant Rex Davies, and the wounding of Private Arthur Holzhauser and Sapper P. Piromanski (a member of the attached engineer mini team). The incident was promptly subjected to a formal investigation which was carried out by the battalion Second-in-Command. He concluded that the clash had occurred as a result of a navigational error by Lieutenant Davies.

A 12 man patrol of 4 Platoon B Company had been set up to ambush an enemy track on 27 October in a valley in the foothills north of Hon Vung mountain. A good deal of care had been taken in the setting up of the ambush, as another platoon had been in this position four days previously without encountering any enemy. The ambush was initially occupied at night so that it would be fully set up by the next morning. On the morning of the second day, a group of four enemy were seen 400 m from the ambush. They were not fired on because of the range. That afternoon, another group of three enemy moved 50 m away from the ambush. Again they were not fired on. Lieutenant Karl Metcalf described what happened on the third day of the ambush, 30 October:

*I was on the gun piquet and was watching the track to my front and well below me on the side of a hill. I could observe parts of the track including a portion directly in front of me about 30 metres away, and another portion about 100 metres away where it dipped out of sight into a deep creek. I had obviously not been watching the creek section continuously because suddenly I noticed a group of four unarmed VC women carrying large packs entering the far side of the creek and disappearing from view as they crossed the creek bottom. Almost at the same time I saw the armed VC forward scout, some 50 metres in front of the group in the creek, move into the killing ground directly to my front. I had obviously not seen him on the creek section of the track. He was moving swiftly and I had about 10 seconds to make a decision as to whether to kill him or let him pass and fire on the pack carriers. I took the first option because I knew the others were unarmed and I didn't want the armed forward scout, who would have then passed our position, being able to circle to our rear and fire on us.*

*(Later the OC was quite cranky with my decision as he strongly believed that I should have waited for the pack carriers. My view was that we got the armed VC and his weapon as well as the abandoned packs, which was better than*

*letting the armed soldier go and killing four unarmed pack carriers.) So I fired the claymore mines, which killed the forward scout, and then we fired everything we could into the creek bed. (The OC was also angry that I'd used so much ammunition in firing into the creek bed. However, in my view, that is what made the enemy decide to abandon their packs.)*

The dead enemy was identified as a section commander in the *Long Dat District Company* Orderly Room. His AK47 was recovered.

The Task Force's third infantry battalion, 8 RAR, departed on 1 November as part of the Australian Government's policy to conduct a phased withdrawal. This caused an extra load on the remaining battalions. The burden was lessened because of Brigadier Henderson's earlier decision to divide the responsibility for the province between 2 RAR and 7 RAR since Operation BIRDWOOD.

In the early evening of 4 November, an eight man patrol from the Assault Pioneer Platoon of Support Company (commanded by Sergeant Trevor Bourke) was moving on a bearing as part of a night patrol route and was near the end of a navigational leg when its scout spotted three enemy 30 m away. The scout opened fire and the enemy fled. The patrol chased the enemy group for about 350 m and fired at it again at about 60 m range before contact was broken. Although it was a moonlit night, this experienced patrol found the task quite difficult. Captain Thompson (the Officer Commanding Support Company) agreed, stating that the planned distance to be covered by such patrols at night should not exceed 4 km. Nevertheless, this was a good example of how experienced soldiers could move and fight successfully at night rather than allowing night movement to be the exclusive right of the Viet Cong.

A ten man patrol from 3 Platoon A Company, commanded by Corporal George Rousell, was ambushing a small bridge (nicknamed the Nuc Nam bridge) on Route 326 midway between Phuoc Loi and Tam Phuoc before dawn on 6 November. A six man group of Viet Cong approached the bridge by walking carefully up the stream. The moon had set and visibility was limited. They were seen at a range of 5 m. They fired on the patrol, wounding Private Steve Prestwidge and Private John Catton with M16 fire. Private Catton's leg had to be amputated as a result of the wound and he was later evacuated to Australia. Sixty rounds of 105 mm illumination were fired at 30 second intervals to assist the engagement. Two Viet Cong were found to be killed and their weapons captured.

The Company Sergeant Major of A Company, Warrant Officer Class Two Jim Husband, had the chance to visit Privates Prestwidge and Catton in 1st Field Hospital at Vung Tau. He firstly noted that both soldiers were very ill and that Private Catton was particularly depressed. He also noticed that some of the Viet Cong who had been wounded in the same incident were also being treated in the same ward – he had no difficulty with them receiving the best treatment possible, just their proximity to his soldiers – and appeared to be getting more attention than the two Australians.

This annoyed Warrant Officer Husband intensely and he asked that the Medical Officer in charge move the enemy soldiers to another ward. The Medical Officer refused the request and likened the contact to a football match when all men are friends after the game. He dismissed the Company Sergeant Major. The Commanding Officer was informed, and after he made further representations the rather insensitive practice of treating both sides in the same ward in such cases was discontinued.

A fifteen man patrol of Second Lieutenant McGovern's 7 Platoon C Company had been lying in an ambush position for three days, inside the tree line near the edge of a land-cleared fire trail between Nui Dien Ba and Nui Hon Thung before midday on 6 November. The sentry heard the noise of an approaching enemy soldier and fired a claymore and then the M60 at him. The sweep found the wounded Viet Cong. His AK47 was captured and he was evacuated by Dustoff helicopter. He was a soldier from C25, the *Long Dat District Company* and had been involved in the contact with A Company earlier that day.

At 1535 hours that day, the same patrol was moving to a new location when some fresh tracks were sighted about 1 km east of the last contact. An immediate ambush was in the process of being set up when the platoon commander saw one enemy approaching the site about 35 m away. He was engaged by one of the riflemen in the ambush when he was 10 m away. The enemy soldier, who was also from C25, was killed.

On the morning of 8 November, a patrol from the Assault Pioneer Platoon in the area 14 km east-north-east of Xuyen Moc contacted a group of about ten enemy. They were well dressed and equipped and very well camouflaged. Bushranger helicopters were called in to suppress the enemy small arms and RPG fire in the area of the contact. The helicopters had small arms fired at them. No casualties were suffered by either side.

9 November was a fortunate day for a soldier of 6 Platoon B Company. He was crossing a track before dawn 1 km east of Lo Gom and trod on an M16 mine which jumped but did not explode. The metal outer case of the mine had corroded, allowing dampness into its main charge. A careful search of the area revealed that there were Viet Cong mine warnings (in the form of crossed sticks on either side of the mine) on the track.

On 10 November, Major Geoff Skardon tasked Lieutenant Dave Kibbey and his platoon to clean out about 200 m of the trenches at the Horseshoe. As the group were just back from an ambush, they were not really enthused by the task, especially as another ambush was planned for that night. Major Skardon recalled:

*All soldiers like an enterprising officer, especially if he is going to ease their work load. David grabbed a couple of jerry cans of petrol and ran down the trench leaving a petrol trail behind him with the intention of cleaning it out by fire. Just before he got to the end of the trench, you can guess what happened. There is some doubt whether the digger was aware of what the plan was – in any event,*



*he threw his cigarette butt into the trench. David (and two others) became instant Roman candles requiring immediate evacuation to Vung Tau. One of his soldiers was heard to say on the helipad, 'I know what some officers will do to get out of ambushing, but this is ridiculous!'*

The ambush position of half of 9 Platoon C Company, in the eastern foothills of Nui Da Dung at 0205 hours on 13 November, was nearly hit by three 81 mm mortar rounds. It was thought that they had been fired by Mike Special Force, a training camp for Cambodian soldiers, without proper fire clearances. Fortunately, no casualties resulted.

On the morning of 18 November, A Company Headquarters was returning from a joint night ambush with Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldiers north-east of night defensive position BRIGID. An M16 mine was stepped on and jumped but did not explode. Private Bob Brett described what happened:

*I was almost the tail-end charlie and it was a guy in front of me who stood on the mine. The ARVN soldiers quickly disappeared but we automatically froze in our tracks and then made a track to safe ground probing all the time for more mines with bayonets.*

The soldier behind Bob Brett, Private 'Doggy' Gogoll, saw a puff of sand that he thought at the time had been caused by a rifle shot.

2 Platoon was once again at BRIGID on 20 November. Lieutenant Dunn wrote:

*It's midday now. We're waiting for APCs to take us to the area of [grid reference] 534566. Earlier this morning an Army chopper saw two VC with a couple of civilians at this point. The VC were armed with AK47s. They ducked into some scrub before a patrol from 3 Platoon could reach the area in APCs. If it were not for the jealousy of the RAAF we would have been able to arm our choppers and would have in all probability killed the VC. We kill an average of one VC a month and we have done better than most. In effect we have missed the opportunity to achieve the results which it will take a platoon two months to achieve. I'm not impressed.*

Amenities available for the troops improved early in November. A telephone line for calls to Australia was opened at Nui Dat. Soldiers could call home for three minutes at a cost of \$10.60. The system was one-way – incoming calls were not allowed.

On 27 November a fourteen man group of 12 Platoon D Company with two M60 machine guns, was moving to a lay up position at the foot of the Long Hais north of Nui Dien Ba in the early morning. The patrol had moved all night to get towards its position. The patrol was halted and the platoon commander had moved forward to check his navigation when he heard an enemy soldier approach. He let the Viet Cong

get past him and then opened fire. The enemy fired back with M16 and AK47 bursts and an RPG2. The RPG hit a tree and although it landed 5 m away, only slightly wounded Private Ted 'Scruff' Hall with shrapnel in his forehead. He returned to duty after being treated at 8th Field Ambulance at Nui Dat. Lance Corporal Jim Hardie had been leaning against the same tree but was not hurt. Two enemy bodies were found in the subsequent sweep as well as an M16 rifle and the RPG2. As the patrol returned to the Horseshoe, several of its members were stung by wasps. One of the enemy killed was identified as Nguyen Dung, the Mortar Platoon Commander of C25, the *Long Dat District Company*. By this stage of the tour, 12 Platoon was led by its third platoon commander, Lieutenant Bob Wood – just one example of the high turnover of personnel at platoon level.

As part of the enemy dry season offensive, D445 mounted an attack with small arms, mortars and rockets on the Regional Force compound in Xuyen Moc at 2135 hours on 29 November. C2, C3 and C4 were in the attack and they were reinforced by K8 (the *Heavy Weapons Company*) of D440. The Task Force Ready Reaction Force, including some Centurion tanks, was sent to the area, together with a group of armoured personnel carriers from those supporting 7 RAR at the Horseshoe led by the Squadron Commander, Major John Coates. The carriers took a road which had not been cleared of mines. It was a very effective reaction but somewhat of a cure for constipation for those in the lead vehicle.

Half of 11 Platoon D Company, commanded by Second Lieutenant John Heydon, had been tasked to do a seven day ambush at the base of the Long Hais in the eastern foothills of Nui Da Dung from 1 December. The patrol had a two man splinter team of engineers from 1st Field Squadron attached to it. The group was dropped off by armoured personnel carriers about 2 km from its intended position in the late afternoon. Corporal Graham Nix described the patrol:

*The first evening we mounted an ambush on a small track and, just prior to daylight, moved into a harbour position which had previously been used to spend the day. That night, just prior to nightfall, we moved back to the ambush position. During that move, the Number 2 from the splinter team, Sapper Bruce Fenwick, stepped on what was apparently an M16 mine. He was located in approximately the centre of the single file group. The mine must have detonated at ground level. The thing that surprised me most about the detonation was that the noise was not as loud as I might have expected. Bruce Fenwick, who I think had not been in Vietnam long, lost a leg, his No 1, Sapper Reidlinger, who was next in front of the detonation, suffered numerous shrapnel wounds to his back. Private Merv Hains, the platoon signaller, who was in front of Sapper Reidlinger, suffered shrapnel wounds to the back of his head and neck. The fact that he was carrying the radio*

*probably saved him from further injury. Walking behind Sapper Reidlinger was Corporal Key Pattie who suffered shrapnel wounds to the mouth and neck. It was necessary to probe a track using bayonets to get to the wounded. I can recall asking if anyone had a can of shaving cream to mark either side of the probed safe track, and this worked reasonably well in the dark. Fortunately, we were in reasonably open country, enabling the Casevac helicopter to land virtually on top of us. The sandy soil in the area also helped with the probing.*

Private Hains had called in the Dustoff, saw to the treatment of the wounded and only then calmly revealed his wound by notifying company headquarters. Private Bob 'Chad' Hendry was also wounded by shrapnel in his head, but was able to walk out. He returned to duty five days later. Corporal Pattle was evacuated to Australia on 15 January. Sapper Reidlinger's courageous actions were described by Private Merv Hains as: 'He got to Sapper Fenwick, stayed calm and directed the chopper in by standing with his arms raised. He was that peppered with shrapnel that he couldn't walk for three to four weeks'.

For the first time on this tour, 161st Battery, Royal New Zealand Artillery, was allocated in direct support of the battalion from 9 to 13 December. It was located in fire support base FEATHERS, 6 km east of Xuyen Moc, and gave considerable fire support to B and Support Companies.

In the early morning of 9 December, a patrol from 3 Platoon A Company (commanded by Sergeant Henry King) suffered mine casualties as a result of a mine incident. An M16 mine, apparently laid 3 km east of Hoi My by the Viet Cong just a few weeks before, was stepped on by a member of the patrol. Because the patrol was well spaced out, only two casualties were suffered. Private John Boundy suffered fragment wounds to his back and legs and Private Tony Blake received fragment wounds to his nose.

There was an unusually aggressive enemy incident on the evening of 21 December in Dat Do. A little after midnight, the District Headquarters reported receiving mortar and small arms fire. Illumination rounds were fired and some fire missions tasked to pound possible enemy withdrawal routes. The battle fizzled out in about twenty minutes. Some explosions were then heard from the village office of Phuoc Thanh, some 600 m along Route 23 to the east. The village office was surrounded by dead and wounded. Included among the three dead was the village chief. Nine soldiers were wounded. There were seven Peoples' Self Defence Force soldiers missing. Three of them were former Viet Cong. It was felt that one or more of these former enemy soldiers had initiated this raid inside the compound and kidnapped some of the soldiers there. This action was a blow to the South Vietnamese forces in the area and boosted the Viet Cong capability in the eyes of the local population.

## THE B COMPANY ACTIONS IN DECEMBER

At about 0400 hours on 31 December a group of enemy (with strength of over twenty) approached an ambush position 5 km south-east of Xuyen Moc. The ambush consisted of troopers and armoured personnel carriers commanded by Sergeant Ed Levy from B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment and soldiers from the headquarters of B Company and 6 Platoon. The build-up to this ambush is well worth examining because it is a good example of the worth of the detailed terrain and pattern of enemy activity knowledge built up by the battalion and its supporting arms.

During late November and early December, significant track activity was detected by aerial reconnaissance by the Commanding Officer and Intelligence Officer in the area to the south of the May Tao hills and east of Xuyen Moc. The well used footpads were traced southwards to the north-west of the Binh Chau area. Support Company deployed by foot into the Binh Chau in late November and, as has been noted, on 8 November a patrol from the company contacted a well armed and carefully camouflaged squad of enemy.

The enemy reaction had been vigorously aggressive – their movement, camouflage and reaction were all typical of main force units. *D445* was known to have been undergoing an intensive retraining and re-indoctrination program in the Nui May Tao and Nui Be areas, and suspicions were aroused that the enemy battalion was beginning its long-awaited reoccupation of the traditional *D445* area of operations in the Viet Cong *Long Dat District*. This was confirmed on 29 November when a mortar barrage preceded a well coordinated ground assault on a Regional Force post at Xuyen Moc. The enemy had announced their return!

In an effort to locate the enemy, B Company was deployed to the south and east of Xuyen Moc, where it began the tedious process of detailed tracking, searching and ambushing. On 9 December contact was made. Early that morning, a nine man patrol from 4 Platoon (commanded by Second Lieutenant Karl Metcalf) was mortared in its night ambush location from a baseplate position barely 300 m away. As the 82 and 60 mm rounds were adjusted towards the ambush site, approximately 25 to 30 enemy formed up in extended line for an assault. The enemy movement was controlled, quick and aggressive; the enemy commander moved his groups forward by voice commands. His fire control was excellent but fortunately his sense of direction was not! The patrol watched as an almost perfectly executed assault passed 30 m to its northern flank. Once the assault group came into enfilade to the patrol, contact was initiated. The Operations Officer, Major Kevin Cole, described the action:

*The patrol displayed excellent fire control and self-discipline and withheld their fire. As soon as the VC realised that they had failed to hit their objective they immediately reorganised and commenced to sweep back. The standard of infantry training and professionalism on both sides really has to be admired.*

*The patrol engaged the enemy and quickly the enemy force commenced to probe the position on all sides. RPG2 rockets were fired into the patrol area as well as grenades being thrown. One soldier, showing complete disregard for his own safety, picked up an enemy grenade and threw it out of the position.*

4 Platoon suffered two casualties in this engagement. Corporal Ken Weightman suffered a gunshot wound to his scalp. Lieutenant Karl Metcalf was wounded by a bullet through the sole of his left foot. He was particularly lucky – he was not wearing his boots at the time of the engagement because he had a boil on his big toe. If he had been, his foot would probably have been blown off because his General Purpose Boot, the boot issued to Australian soldiers, had a metal plate in it to protect against panji stakes. Lieutenant Metcalf recalled the action:

*On hearing the enemy mortars being fired very close to our ambush position I am still surprised that we all lived to tell the tale! When the contact started I felt absolute panic in the first few seconds then constant fear as the enemy sweep (assault) neared. An enemy hand grenade landed between myself and my signaller, Private Dick Aly. I couldn't reach it (even though it was touching my thigh) and I ordered him to grab it and throw it away. He did so. It was a very brave act. (Unfortunately he threw it so hard that it hit the tree on the other side of me and bounced back – luckily it didn't explode!) I was shocked at being wounded; angry at the (no names!) member in the platoon who couldn't do up the winch safety strap (I was worried I would be killed falling off!) and a sense of relief on arriving at hospital.*

As the remainder of B Company moved towards the area, gunships called to support the patrol in contact received ground fire from two 12.7 mm machine guns fired from well built and effectively camouflaged anti-aircraft emplacements. These machine guns were first seen from a Possum during a low level reconnaissance. After the sighting, the escape speed of the Sioux seemed to exceed its manufacturer's wildest expectations. Two gunships were hit by the intense defensive fire, causing one of the aircraft to make a forced landing on Route 23 to the south. It was later lifted out by a CH-47 Chinook after having been protected by a section of armoured personnel carriers deployed to the area. The follow-up revealed a newly constructed battalion-sized base camp 1 km to the north-east of the contact which had been evacuated within the hour. Documents in the system, including a diagram of its layout, identified major sub-units of *D445* as well as confirming reports that *K8*, the heavy weapons company of *D440*, had been attached to *D445 Battalion*.

Despite the immediate air deployment of Support Company as a cut-off, the enemy managed to make good their escape and the task of tracking and searching

began again for B Company. The company continued its search, following the tracks away from the large battalion bunker complex which ran west towards Xuyen Moc and south towards the Tam Bo Mountains. As well as confirming that a group from *D445* had launched the attack on Xuyen Moc, the search resulted in the location of a blood trail which curved south–west, leading B Company to the area of the Nui Kho, and further west of the Phuoc Buu.

Thorough searching of the area gained B Company an even more detailed knowledge of track systems in the area west of Nui Kho. It was this familiarity with tracks and terrain which led to the selection of a path running from the area of Lake Bau Ngam to the Nui Kho, through what became known as the 'Waterfall Clearing' (located 6 km south–east of Xuyen Moc) as a most likely route for enemy movement to and from the traditional rice bowl area of Phuoc Buu. This track ended abruptly at a dispersion point where the enemy fragmented into small groups to infiltrate the dense jungle, leaving no telltale tracks which could lead pursuers to their bunkers and camps in the Nui Kho area.

Several caches were unearthed during a detailed search by the company in this area. On 14 December Private Tony Pout stepped on an M16 mine that did not jump but went off in the ground. Although he was wounded in the backside and legs, his injuries were much less severe than those normally caused by these mines.

Despite careful searching by the company and a fleeting and inconclusive contact with two enemy on 16 December, no significant sign of the enemy was found. Once again the enemy main party had eluded the pursuing company. B Company wheeled and carefully searched as it made back towards Binh Chau. Despite meticulous searching by platoons and detailed aerial reconnaissance, two weeks were to pass before any signs of the enemy were located.

The break came on Christmas Eve. During a visual reconnaissance flight over the Nui Kho, the Commanding Officer noted a newly constructed bunker in an area scattered with old and abandoned camps. A 'Bushranger' gunship strike was directed to the area and controlled by the battalion commander from the direct support Sioux. The strike was accurate and bomb damage assessment revealed two new bunkers uncovered and destroyed. On Christmas Day, further reconnaissance in the area located more new bunkers.

Fresh tracks were sighted from the air in the Nui Kho area on 28 December. Since it appeared that at least some of the enemy group had reoccupied the area, a platoon of B Company was deployed by armoured personnel carriers from the Horseshoe to search the Ong To jungle, a known and regularly used enemy base camp area. The platoon was to move further east to the Nui Kho if no sign was found. As 6 Platoon approached the Ong To and dismounted to release the armoured personnel carriers, signal shots were heard to the south. On searching through the thick timber, 6 Platoon found fresh signs, but contacted no enemy. They remained that

night in ambush and moved the following day east towards Route 328 where fresh heavy tracks of about twenty enemy had been sighted.

It was planned that after searching the area of the Song Hoa and Route 328 crossing, 6 Platoon was to meet with a section of armoured personnel carriers from 2 Troop B Squadron at midday on 30 December and return to the Horseshoe. By mid-morning the armoured personnel carrier section was waiting at the rendezvous site.

By that time, 6 Platoon had found a heavy and fresh track and was following it north. After a quick search through an abandoned system the platoon pressed on along the axis of the track towards the Nui Kho. At 1030 hours they located a 155 mm unexploded artillery shell which had been tampered with by the enemy to try to remove the explosive. The sapper mini team with the platoon attached charges to destroy the round, and the platoon moved off out of the danger area. After listening for the demolition the platoon moved on, following the track which had turned to the east.

From the Viet Cong viewpoint, an hour before midday the loud demolition explosion some 500 m to the south of their occupied bunker system had alerted their local protection elements in the camp. Shortly after, the sentry post on the main entry track had reported a group of fifteen Australians cautiously paralleling the heavy footpad. None of the 26 bunkers, well camouflaged and in dense undergrowth, had been sighted by the approaching patrol. The sentries had withdrawn undetected. When it appeared inevitable that the Australians would find the camp they were engaged with heavy defensive fire.

At 1113 hours the platoon came under heavy and accurate machine gun fire from enemy fighting in well constructed and camouflaged bunkers. The lead section commander, Corporal John Lawson, wrote:

*As the enemy gun was concentrating its efforts on Platoon HQ and the lead sections, Alan Lloyd ran ten to twenty metres just forward of those wounded and Bob ('the Wog') Cusack leaped between the wounded and myself. Allan immediately brought fire to bear and suppressed their ambitions to attack. Lloydie was totally determined to deflect the enemies' attention from his mates and they were now going to tangle with him and his gun. His ruthless effectiveness now brought the attention of the enemy lead elements. The AKs now found one of their targets. Lloydie had kept his gun firing in too long bursts. He was on my right and mentioned that he had burnt his hand on the hot gun barrel. This statement puzzled me and I looked at his hand. One of his fingers had the first and second joints shot away. I told him to move from the gun and we would swap weapons. As he rolled away he was shot again, this time in the leg above the knee. His single action forced a well prepared enemy to redirect its firepower, allowing the balance of us to regain our composure, to force the issue and to exploit the opportunity he created.*

At one stage the platoon commander had one of his soldiers wounded in front of

him and two behind. He dragged Private Allan Lloyd back and staunched the flow of blood from a severed artery. The other wounded were Privates Les Myers, Lloyd Harmsworth and Darrel Lockley. Australian Dustoff was requested but, because of the danger involved, would not come in. US Army Dustoff, however, accepted the risk and started to evacuate the wounded. Sadly, Allan Lloyd died on the Dustoff helicopter. Ninety minutes elapsed before it was possible for them to break contact and completely evacuate the camp. The platoon did not withdraw in order to extract casualties and bring in close fire support as the enemy perhaps expected. Instead, armoured personnel carriers appeared surprisingly quickly. Their heavy and accurate fire and the well aimed rockets and mini guns of the gunships, which had materialised within minutes of the initial firing, had made orderly evacuation of the camp difficult.

The Viet Cong rear party broke contact an hour after midday and by late afternoon all elements had regrouped and lay waiting for darkness and the order to move further to the north and east. Later, in darkness, the 70 soldiers filed along a well worn path which wove its way through thick vegetation towards Lake Bau Ngam, 8 km to the north-east.

Reaction to the contact was quick. As 6 Platoon moved forward to suppress the enemy fire and allow evacuation of those wounded in the initial firing, the section of armoured personnel carriers waiting at the rendezvous 1 km to the west moved rapidly towards the contact area under direction of the battalion commander flying above in 'Possum'. At the same time B Company Headquarters and 4 Platoon were reacted in armoured personnel carriers to the Song Hoa crossing.

Soon afterwards, Bushrangers arrived in the area and began suppressive rocket and machine gun fire. The armoured personnel carrier section pushed its way through the thick scrub and eventually reached the platoon, still in contact, to evacuate the wounded. It had not been feasible to break contact earlier to use helicopters for casualty evacuation. By this time B Company Headquarters and 4 Platoon had reached the Song Hoa crossing and were awaiting orders for deployment.

6 Platoon broke contact with the enemy and joined up with Company Headquarters and 4 Platoon. 4 Platoon was ordered to follow up on foot in order to track where the enemy had moved and to apply pressure if the enemy was again contacted. The more important task, however, fell to 6 Platoon and the Company Headquarters. They were to rush well to the east of the Nui Kho in order to ambush the enemy escape routes.

Here B Company was in familiar territory. Five thousand metres northeast of the site of the 6 Platoon contact, the company commander halted the armoured personnel carriers carrying his headquarters and 6 Platoon. They were less than 0.5 km from the well used northern track which led through the 'Waterfall Clearing' towards the battalion base discovered three weeks earlier. The group proceeded on foot to the northern edge of the clearing which had been previously selected as a favourable ambush site.



6 Platoon moved off to ambush another well used path 1600 m to the south, leaving a small group to act as flank and rear protection elements for the armoured personnel carrier ambush the company commander had planned.

It had taken the dispersed squads of *D445's C2 Company* and the *Sapper Reconnaissance Platoon* all afternoon to regroup with the headquarters element of *D445*. The insistent presence of a light observation helicopter had hampered their movement to the reorganisation point. Shortly before sunset however, all had reached the familiar track which led to the northeast, away from the Nui Kho feature and the bunker system they had been forced to abandon.

The dividends of four weeks of patient searching, tracking and ambushing were shortly to be realised by the group of Australians who lay waiting some 5000 m north-east of the abandoned bunkers.

At 0357 hours on 31 December, sentries of Sergeant Levy's combined Headquarters B Company and 1 Troop B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment ambush listened to the enemy group as it moved into the killing ground. After careful reconnaissance by the company commander, Major Greg Warland, the armoured personnel carriers were called forward and sited in ambush, pushing into the thick scrub until positioned close to the track at the northern end of the clearing. By 1700 that evening the ambush site was fully prepared. Three armoured personnel carriers covered the killing ground, and the eight soldiers of B Company and the remaining armoured personnel carrier were sited in depth to provide protection to both flanks and the rear. Thirty-two claymores covered 40 m of the path. It was by no means a matter of chance that the ambush lay waiting on that specific track. Their presence was the direct result of painstakingly accumulated knowledge of local terrain and enemy tactics gained during a series of events which had begun one month earlier.

Shortly before 0400 hours the next morning, the ambush sentries allowed one enemy to pass through the killing ground and waited for the large party which could be heard following him. At 0715 hours 6 Platoon arrived in the area to secure and sweep it. Twenty-one enemy bodies littered the killing ground and the immediate area to the south, and until the arrival of 6 Platoon there was still some movement on the western flank. Throughout the two and a half hour battle, the enemy had fought determinedly, repeatedly regrouping and moving into the ambush killing ground to remove their wounded and dead. Despite almost constant illumination from hand held flares and Pilatus Porter flareships, elements of the enemy remained in the contact area until dawn, attempting twice during the night to flank the ambush position. Continuous suppressive fire from .30 and .50 calibre machine guns mounted on the armoured personnel carriers and from the GPMGs fired by the flank groups prevented the enemy from removing their dead from the killing ground and from executing any successful flanking manoeuvre.

The numerous attempts by the surviving enemy to remove bodies and equipment

from the killing ground, and their reluctance to leave the area until forced to do so by imminent daylight, indicated that the ambushed party included some important personnel. Soon after first light, as 4 Platoon moved in armoured personnel carriers to the area, 6 Platoon and the company headquarters cleared from the battlefield 29 packs, thirteen individual and four crew-served weapons, 34 hand grenades, 22 claymore mines and a quantity of ammunition including twenty-five 60 mm mortar bombs.

4 Platoon arrived to continue the collection of foodstuffs, a large quantity of medical supplies and an ANPRC radio set, while 6 Platoon moved off to follow nine blood trails and the track of about twenty enemy which led towards the west. Soon afterwards, in an attempt to intercept those enemy who had escaped the ambush, company headquarters moved south-east with a section of armoured personnel carriers towards the battalion-sized enemy camp to which the ambushed trail led. However, time had run out for B Company. The 24 hour New Year truce came into force at 1600 hours that afternoon and the company, limited to defensive patrolling only, was unable to follow the enemy because of truce restrictions. The enemy in the province generally honoured these restrictions.

The company spent the day of truce in their new ambush positions, listening as the Intelligence Officer gave the results of the ambush. Those he identified as being killed were:

Nguyen Thanh Tam	Second-in-Command, <i>D445</i>
Nguyen Than Long	Company Commander, <i>C2 D445</i>
Tranh Van Tho	Second-in-Command, <i>C2 D445</i>
Trinh Van Liem	Political Officer, <i>C2 D455</i>
Phanh Thanh Chien	Secretary, <i>Long Dien District Party Chapter</i>
Nguyen Van Minh	Reconnaissance Platoon Commander, <i>C5 D445</i>
Muoi Chien	Commander, <i>Long Dat Forward Supply Council</i>
Two Squad Commanders and four soldiers of <i>C2 D445</i>	
Six soldiers of <i>C5 D445</i>	
Two soldiers remained unidentified.	

Several days after the truce, a patrol from C Company 7 RAR found two bodies which had been abandoned by the fleeing enemy in a camp to the north of the ambush site.

This action was one particularly remembered by the former commander of *D445* when he was interviewed in 1994. It had dealt his battalion a telling blow. Through Armoured – Infantry teamwork and excellent battle discipline in the ambushes, good results for perseverance had been gained. The bunker system was destroyed by elements of 1 Troop B Squadron 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment, assisted by elements of 1st Field Squadron on 1 January.

As a further element of the enemy dry season offensive, and as part of their build-up to Tet, *C1* of *D445* (with elements of the *Long Dat District Company*) attacked the

Phuoc Thanh District office in the early morning of 22 December. Three allied soldiers were killed and ten wounded. Five enemy bodies were found, together with an RPG2 and some rockets for it, a D10 mine and thirteen Chinese grenades. There were a number of body drag marks leading away from the area.

Captain John Press was the battalion's liaison officer at Dat Do. He attended Mass on most Sundays at the village Catholic Church. He let it be known that he would attend Midnight Mass at Christmas, accompanied by one of the Americans from the Dat Do District Headquarters. The locals suggested most politely that it would not be a good idea. The previous year's Midnight Mass had been interrupted by the Viet Cong, whose political officer substituted a 30 minute propaganda address for the expected sermon. The locals were worried that a repeat performance would be more dangerous for the Australian and the American!

In anticipation of the worst period for malaria in November and December, the drug Dapsone was prescribed for daily use by all troops in 1st Australian Task Force from 30 August 1970. Dapsone had also been used after 1967. The drug was very successful. By the end of December only one soldier in the Task Force had contracted malaria, and he had missed his Dapsone because of severe gastric attacks.

In the early morning of 5 January, 2 Section of 1 Troop of A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment located a bunker 1 km east of Phuoc Loi on the western extremity of the Long Green. They were being directed to it by Major Chris Thomson (the Officer Commanding A Company) who was in the direct support Possum. Five surprised enemy, one of whom was a woman, emerged from the bunker. They were identified as members of the *Phuoc Loi Guerilla Unit*, together with Nguyen Van Hien, the Secretary of the *Phuoc Loi Party Chapter*, and one member of the *Ba Long Province Headquarters* staff. Also captured were an M16 rifle, a sub-machine gun, documents, medical supplies, food and ammunition.

Later that morning a soldier from 12 Platoon D Company stepped on an M16 mine 2 km south-east of Nui Kho. Private Bob 'Willie' Wilson of 10 Platoon described the incident:

*We secured the LZ and took the resupp[ly] for OA [company headquarters] and 43 [12 Platoon] also. 43, while moving to the LZ, were crossing a track and an M16 mine was stood on. The first charge went off, lifting it out of the ground but the second didn't go off, so luckily no casualties.*

It was found that the flash cap for initiating the main charge of the M16 mine had failed to function.

At midday on 6 January, a Hoi Chanh rallied to an engineer detachment working on the bridge over the Suoi Tre, 8 km south-west of Xuyen Moc. He was found on questioning to be a member of *C4 D445* on a resupply mission to the Phuoc Buu area, 1 km west of Nui Kho. He gave a great deal of information about enemy plans.

In the early part of that evening, ten to twelve rounds of enemy mortar fire fell 300 m

west of a 5 Platoon B Company ambush position which was 1 km south–west of the edge of Dat Do, but no casualties were caused. Although the suspected baseplate position was hit with 105 mm artillery, no results were evident.

Early the next evening, an armoured personnel carrier ambush commanded by Sergeant Levy from 1 Troop contacted an enemy force of twenty 1 km north–west of the Horseshoe. The group was challenged (it was two hours after curfew) and the enemy reply was to cock their weapons. The ambush opened fire. A sweep of the area was conducted by the troopers and by a patrol from 6 Platoon B Company. Two killed Viet Cong were found as well as one who was wounded. The wounded female Viet Cong was evacuated by Dustoff. Those killed were identified as Le Thi Diep (also known as Hai Loan), the Secretary of *Hoa Long Party Chapter*, and the Commander of the *Women's Association of the Viet Cong Chau Duc District*. She was the wife of Nam Kiem, the Commander of the *Chau Duc District Company*. Other documents captured identified C41, the *Chau Duc District Company*. It was revealed that this unit had needed to move continuously to evade the allied operations and to re–equip and recuperate.

For this action and the part he played in the ambush on 31 December, together with a further action in Long Khanh Province in June 1971, Sergeant Levy was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. His citation said that he showed calmness, resolution and sound judgment and that these qualities enabled his section to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy. He had shown exemplary conduct and leadership. His actions were an excellent example of the close cooperation that existed between 7 RAR and its supporting arms.

On the morning of 10 January a further incident with a jumping M16 mine, involving a group from A Company Headquarters, occurred 2 km north of Phuoc Hai. Once again the mine did not explode. This luck was attributable to the aging of the mine's flash caps. Private Bob Brett, who had been one man away from a similar incident on 18 November, described what happened:

*. . . on the morning of 10–1–71 we were doing a sweep through a bit of J [jungle] on the side of a slope when the 2IC of our section, Bob Ford, stood on the mine. He was up the hill to my left. Because of the position of the mine and the slant of the hill, instead of jumping straight up in the air, it flew down the hill straight past me. I can still hear the rustle of the leaves.*

Bob Ford was a lucky soldier. During his tour, he trod on two M 16s and one butterfly bomb that did not explode. His Company Commander nicknamed him Bigfoot. Both Bob Ford and Bob Brett have good reason to believe that they are among the luckiest men alive.

After a long period, lie–up ambushes on the northern and eastern sides of the Long Hais were re–commenced on 12 January. On 13 January 1 platoon A Company was

conducting a lie-up ambush with half the platoon in the eastern foothills of the Long Hais, 4 km west of Phuoc Hai. An enemy approached the position while fire lanes were still being cut. 1 Platoon engaged the enemy with claymores and small arms. The fleeing enemy soldier fired a fifteen-round burst from his AK47, wounding Private Jeff Kirkup who was able to remain on duty.

At last light on 15 January a lie-up ambush of 5 Platoon B Company, led by Corporal 'Rusty' Hollings, situated 1 km south-east of the Dinh Co monastery at the base of Nui Da Dung, ambushed a group of twenty enemy. The enemy group approached from the south and were very well camouflaged. Two enemy were killed and six wounded. In the vigorous exchange of fire, Private Milton Dufty died of a gunshot wound he received to his chest. Corporal Hollings received fragment wounds to his left shoulder and Corporal Graham Roberts sustained fragment wounds to his left arm and the bridge of his nose. Lance Corporal John Costello sustained a minor wound to his buttocks. Corporal Hollings commended the bravery of Private Tony Krantis, the platoon medic who, exposing himself to fire, worked desperately to save Private Dufty. As the casualties were being Dusted-off, the enemy rejoined battle. This was short lived as the Commanding Officer flew over the contact in the direct support Possum. Since the lie-up position was compromised, armoured personnel carriers were used to extract the patrol and to return the two wounded soldiers for treatment. One of the enemy killed was identified as the commander of the *Long Dat District Proselytising Section*.

In the early morning of 16 January, a half platoon lay-up patrol from 6 Platoon B Company, led by Second Lieutenant George Wenhlowskyj, at a position on the northern edge of Nui Dien Ba, had heard noises and movement to their south. A little later a group of enemy, later estimated to be about fifteen strong, passed 30–40 m from the patrol but the ambush was unable to effectively engage them because of the very thick vegetation. The next morning a group of twenty enemy passed the same location. The ambush was sprung when there were seven enemy in its killing ground, only 5 m in front of the patrol. Corporal John Lawson described its springing:

*It seemed wrong if not unfair that the enemy were so unsuspecting. They entered the killing ground (what a cruel name). They were just having a stroll in each other's company. I detonated the claymores, bodies went flying in a hideous fashion throughout the air. Bob Cusack's machine gun opened up and then it jammed. Christ, why now? There was a loud explosion and then silence. I quickly moved around the other pits. Eric was obviously dead and Buck had been wounded. The enemy who had not been caught commenced to remove the dead and wounded. We now had two machine guns out of action, one dead, one wounded, and for all we knew there was some evidence of a*

*superior force to our rear who could now be starting to feel most angry. George in brilliant fashion was organising support. While it was arriving in the form of gunships and artillery, he handed me the M79 with orders to keep the enemy occupied. A casevac helicopter arrived for Buck and the body of Eric. A sweep was ordered through the killing ground. Another helicopter arrived for the enemy dead. Support artillery came whistling in, fascinating to feel its arrival.*

Five enemy bodies were found and there were at least seven wounded. Unfortunately, one wounded enemy had thrown a grenade into a machine gun pit just before he died, killing Lance Corporal Eric Halkyard and wounding Lance Corporal Bill Rogers. Armoured personnel carriers were reacted to assist the contact but they were unable to penetrate the dense vegetation. From the large quantity of supplies being carried and the captured documents, it was deduced that this was a group of Viet Cong from the Long Dat District forces returning from a resupply mission. One enemy was identified as Tran Van Khoa, the Commander of the *Military Proselytising Section* of the *Long Dat District Company*, who was also on the *Long Dat District Party Committee*. He was a former secretary of the *An Ngai Party Chapter*.

Eric Halkyard had served in the British Army in 2nd Battalion, the Grenadier Guards for six years including service in the British Army of the Rhine and South America. His father and both his brothers had also served in the British Army.

On 17 January, the populated areas of Dat Do and Long Dien Districts were made part of a South Vietnamese Army territorial force area of operations. This significant change was both an effort to have South Vietnamese Government forces participate more in province security and a recognition of the success of the tactics of isolating the Viet Cong from their sources of support in the villages.

Later that same morning, the Mortar Platoon Commander of *D445 Battalion* surrendered to the Dat Do District Headquarters. The battalion cooperated with the District Chief, loaning him the use of a section of armoured personnel carriers so that the Hoi Chanh's information could be exploited. He then led the group to an area 6 km north-east of the Horseshoe where one of *D445's* 82 mm mortars was hidden. The next day he showed where 27 mortar rounds had been hidden a few hundred metres away. This was a serious blow to *D445's* capability and morale as it will be recalled that the enemy battalion had only one 82 mm mortar in July. The Hoi Chanh led 8 Platoon C Company to a recently used bunker system 6 km north-east of Xuyen Moc on 18 January. The next day this platoon found two enemy bodies 200 m from the bunkers which had been hastily concealed. They were probably killed in B Company's contact on 31 December. 8 Platoon remained to ambush this bunker system for several days.

The Mortar Platoon Commander was an interesting Hoi Chanh. He told how he had mortared Dat Do earlier in the year. His rounds had landed in a string that stretched

across both sides of the District Headquarters to the hospital, causing damage only to the hospital roof. He had carried the tube and his few soldiers carried the baseplate and the mortar rounds. No tripod was needed. At a given point he stood, legs apart, behind the baseplate, held the tube in his hands and raised his thumbs to be used as sights. The fire was inaccurate as the baseplate bedded-in but was sufficiently effective. The South Vietnamese soldiers in Dat Do, many of whom were recipients of his professionalism, gave him a respectful welcome.

At dusk on 23 January Sergeant Savage's half of 7 Platoon had set up an ambush in thick undergrowth 5 km north of Xuyen Moc. Two enemy approached the patrol and one of them saw the Bushman Scout. He called out to him, but the Bushman Scout immediately fired on the Viet Cong at 30 m range. The enemy soldier was wounded.

It was expected that there would be some Viet Cong effort during Tet, celebrated that year from 24 to 30 January. Even though a truce was scheduled from 1600 hours on 26 January to 1800 hours on 27 January, some precautions were taken. One section of armoured personnel carriers was deployed to Dat Do District Headquarters to help the District Chief's protection plan for the whole period of Tet celebrations. Each night (other than during the truce) just prior to last light, the carriers would move to the headquarters to provide the Chief with the capability to react to any enemy incidents.

## **OPERATION PHOI HOP**

Operation PHOI HOP (Vietnamese for cooperation) was 7 RAR's final operation in South Vietnam. Like the preceding operations, its aims were to search and ambush. It took place from 1 to 21 February in Area of Operations KIM, which equated in broad terms with the eastern half of Phuoc Tuy Province. The aim of the operation was to destroy the enemy within the area of operations. Battalion Headquarters was located at the Horseshoe and companies operated from there, from the night defensive positions at BRIGID or ISA, or in operations in depth. A roster for this rotation of companies was drawn up in the Operation Order.

The battalion was supported by 4 Troop C Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment's Centurion tanks, M113 armoured personnel carriers from 1 Troop and elements of 3 Troop of A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment and an armoured command vehicle from Headquarters A Squadron. 106th Field Battery was in direct support on 1 February but handed this task over to 161st Field Battery, Royal New Zealand Artillery, commanded by Major J. Masters, the next day. Although the battery had supported the battalion before, this was the first time it had supplied the Battery Commander's and Forward Observers' Parties. Its support was provided from Fire Support Base LYNX, 16 km north-east of Xuyen Moc. As usual, a Sioux helicopter from 161st Independent Reconnaissance Flight also provided direct support.

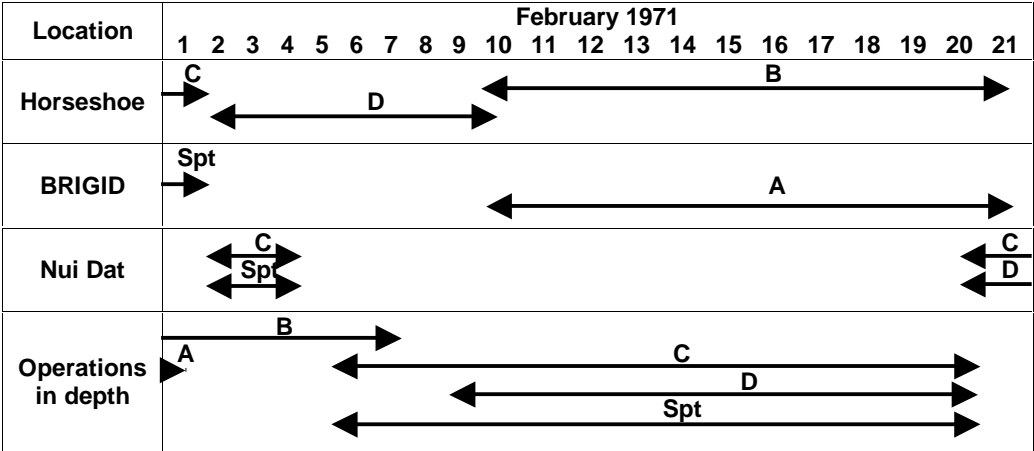


Figure 12.1 Rotation of companies on Operation PHOI HOP

2 Troop of 1st Field Squadron provided combat engineer support. Iroquois helicopter support was provided when needed by 9 Squadron RAAF. A detachment of ANKPQ1 mortar locating radars (able to locate mortar firing positions reliably out to a range of 8 km) from 131st Divisional Locating Battery provided support from the Horseshoe throughout.

The affiliation between 7 RAR and 161st Battery did not start well. The historian of the New Zealand Battery wrote:

*The 7 RAR CO remonstrated with Masters about Battery dress and Forward Observer [FO] Party composition. Masters let the criticism about dress pass, knowing that the gunners, although informally dressed in the field, were more than capable of immaculate turnout when required. Grey wanted the FO's Observation Party Assistants to be separated from the FO and given a signaller, thus creating another FO Party which could be used to provide more intimate artillery support to his platoons. Masters advised Grey as to the time-tested composition of the FO Party, also that although his OP Assistants were capable of acting as Assistant FOs, they were not trained for the responsibility of the FO role and he would not permit them to be used like that. The Artillery way prevailed. After this spirited exchange, the two commanders were soon on excellent terms.*

Dress was more important than Major Masters perhaps realised. It was vital that members of Forward Observer Parties not be mistaken for enemy because of their dress. Colonel Grey had sought the capability for splitting Forward Observer Parties into two (as 106th Field Battery had been able to do) because of the number of ambushes requiring support. Splitting had been very successfully used throughout 1970 and was indicative of the close relationship and trust between '7 RAR's own battery' (106th Field Battery) and the battalion.

The concept of the operation flowed from that used in CUNG CHUNG. Because of the successes in CUNG CHUNG it was possible to reduce the number of ambushes



needed to deny enemy access to the populated areas around Dat Do, releasing more companies for operations in depth. Because of this shift in emphasis, companies were deployed well to the north and north-east of the province. This enabled the battalion to interdict Viet Cong movement between their sanctuary areas in the May Tao and Nui Be mountains and their areas of support in the villages, such as Xuyen Moc and Dat Do. Tactics were also modified. With the reduced enemy threat it was feasible for companies to operate outside artillery support range. Lieutenant Colonel Grey had been pushing for this change with Brigadier Henderson for some time. If fire support was required, gunships could provide it at short notice. Indeed, if it felt that an area needed to be closely searched with a minimum of enemy interference, the deployment of an artillery fire support base would achieve this. As soon as the enemy became aware of a fire base, most enemy units moved out of its range. This change to Australian tactics marked a significant transition between the chance of enemy ascendancy and the dominance of Phouc Tuy by the Australians.

On 1 February the Reconnaissance Platoon had been deployed to an ambush position in an area 2 km south-east of Phuoc Buu on Route 328. An M16 mine was tripped by the patrol. It resulted in the tragic death of Private Alan Talbot and Private Raymond Patten and it also wounded Lance Corporal Noel Gobold, Sergeant Dick Williams and Private Phil Ryan. It was a sad fact that these last casualties were caused by mines of probably Australian origin.

The Assault Pioneer Platoon, under Sergeant Trevor Bourke's command, was also patrolling in this area. In the late afternoon of 9 February the forward scout saw an armed Viet Cong 6 m away from him approaching on a track. He fired and the enemy dropped but then ran. He was found in the subsequent sweep, but died of his wounds. A weapon and two packs were recovered.

The final action for the battalion occurred on 19 February. B Company had seen a number of fresh tracks in the Binh Chau area in the vicinity of an abandoned (but fruitful) coconut plantation. Corporal Brian 'Snoopy' DeFreitas, a Trinidadian, was in some demand there because of his skill at climbing the palms! At about 1400 hours the company had grouped when the sentry saw two male Viet Cong approaching his position. One was shot and killed instantly: the other crawled 200 m away and died from a chest wound. An AK47 and an SKS rifle were recovered. After the contact, Private Bruce Ravenscroft wrote: 'Now moving off for a couple of clicks. 1700 and in new position and everybody digging shellscrapes without having to be told'.

The battalion Farewell Parade at Nui Dat on 24 February was reviewed by the Task Force Commander, Brigadier Henderson. He led a Commemorative Service which included the reading of the names of those killed in the battalion. A Vietnamese general, General Tre, was to have accompanied the Task Force Commander, but he

had been killed when his helicopter had been shot down the previous day. Another South Vietnamese general substituted for him and presented national decorations to selected soldiers and officers.

During this tour, the Army Public Relations service issued all official Press Releases. Those at home in Australia had other sources of news. Television coverage, photographs from official and non-official sources, news and television reports by non-official reporters and 'home boy' releases (giving publicity to soldiers designed to be used in local newspapers) all provided information to the public. However, the official Press Releases to the Australian media were designed to be the most authentic and representative source of information on operations. Fifty-five of these releases were directly related to the battalion and its supporting arms. Forty-seven performed the sad and necessary task of notifying the press of casualties. Only seven contained what could be called positive public relations information. There was much that was positive that could and should have been officially reported in this way. The negative slant of the Army's own publicity apparatus served the battalion and the Australian public very poorly during this period. It was a notable contrast to the positive Press Releases issued in 1967-68 dealing with 7 RAR's first tour. It is fair to conclude that the Army Public Relations service in 1970 and 1971 was either of poor quality or was poorly supervised or both.

There were 64 mine incidents on this tour of the battalion. The contrast with the first tour, where there were no mine casualties suffered, is stark. Seven soldiers were killed in action or died of wounds caused by mines, 30 were wounded. Forty-eight of the mine incidents involved M16 mines and it is highly probable that all these mines came from the barrier minefield laid by the Task Force. The minefield had become subject to infiltration and the mines dug up and used all over the province. There were at least five instances where soldiers stepped on M16 mines, in some cases causing them to jump (up to a metre into the air) but their main charge failed to explode, allowing the lucky soldiers to escape without physical injury.

More than 1180 soldiers served in the battalion during the tour of Vietnam in order to maintain its strength as close as practicable to the established strength of 793. It is particularly important to record that, by the end of the tour, three-quarters of the corporal's positions in the battalion were filled with singular success by National Servicemen.

At least 89 soldiers were wounded in action (some minor wounds were never officially reported) and 44 of them were evacuated to Australia to recover from their wounds. At least fourteen of the wounded did not need to receive treatment (or chose not to be evacuated) and remained on duty. In many cases, particularly those where psychiatric effects resulted from wounds, recovery was never completely achieved. Thirty-five soldiers were evacuated from the battalion and returned to Australia for medical (non-battle) reasons as diverse as epilepsy, scrub typhus, hepatitis, fractures, back disorders and a very few self-inflicted gunshot wounds.

At the Commanding Officer's insistence, training was conducted continuously during the tour rather than relying on soldiers learning solely from their operational experience. Such training occurred at all levels. Companies did refresher training in the gaps between operations. Newly arrived reinforcements did a three day induction course run by battalion headquarters. Replacements for battalion specialists were continually being trained. And, to take training to an extreme, one major, not yet fully qualified for his rank, took military history textbooks in his pack on operations in the field to study for his Military History promotion exam.

The battalion had a clear intention to publish a book about its second tour. Before deployment to Vietnam, the book had been planned in outline and discussions had been held with its intended publisher, Mr Bill Crooks of Printcraft Press, Brookvale, NSW, who had published several pictorial histories of other battalions' tours of Vietnam. The purpose of the book had also been decided in advance. It was to be in essence a pictorial reminder rather than a history and it was to be available before the majority of the soldiers dispersed to leave, or go to other postings at the end of the tour. The plan was quite closely adhered to. Major Andy Mattay and others provided the photographs throughout the tour. Major Bob O'Brien returned to Australia so that the book could be prepared by Printcraft Press from the photographs and text prepared in Vietnam. Sufficient copies were ordered so that each soldier could purchase one at a cost of \$5 in Military Payment Certificates (MPC) (the equivalent of US \$5). The copies were distributed early in 1971. Because its printing was restricted to 1000 copies, *Seven in Seventy* has become one of the rarest of Australian battalion history books, although one of the most sought after because of the quality of its photography. In hindsight, the book's presentation would have been better if the photographs had been captioned with the names of the soldiers and a list of those who had served.

While the battalion book was seen by the Commanding Officer as having the highest priority, he saw a need for two other publications. *Notes on Operations, Vietnam, 1970–71* recorded the lessons of the tour. It was written and collated in Vietnam and distributed to most officers and senior non-commissioned officers. A few dozen copies were also sent to other battalions, the Infantry Centre and Army Headquarters. Like its predecessor volume for the first tour, it contained the operational lessons that might save the lives of others. The Commanding Officer also ensured that a limited number of copies of the official After Action Reports were assembled, published and distributed to the senior officers of the battalion and to the Australian War Memorial.

The unit also carefully kept its Commander's Diary. As Army instructions directed, this diary consisted of a descriptive narrative, logs of the battalion command and administration—air radio nets and copies of orders and instructions issued by the unit. It was written by the Intelligence Officer so that it formed a chronological and complete account of the unit from the time of its warning for active service until its

tour finished. Two copies were made and separately sent to the Australian War Memorial. They are deposited and cared for there, along with the diaries for Australian units in other conflicts. These diaries formed the primary source of information for this book and are a detailed and valuable record of this critical period in the life of the battalion.

During the tour, Battalion Headquarters and Administration Company provided the housekeeping and domestic services that were needed to keep the battalion going. These services, needed by any community – dental and medical surgeries, groceries, butchers, post office, taxis, water supply, garbage, service stations and many others – were often taken for granted but always ran efficiently and with a minimum of fuss. In Battalion Headquarters, the rear element clerks, directed by the Assistant Adjutant, Second Lieutenant Gus Pauza, and the Chief Clerk, Staff Sergeant Alan McGuinness, with his experienced assistant, Sergeant Max Hemmens, processed what seemed to be an endless stream of paper. This paper ensured that soldiers were paid, their rest and recreation was booked, their welfare was attended to, their promotions processed, their mail sent and received, and the battalion newspaper (*Grey's Gazette*) printed and distributed.

Mail was a vital service to the battalion and a great boost to morale. Two hundred and sixty-five tons of mail passed through Corporal Dave Duckworth's post office during the tour. Many helped the flow of mail in extraordinary ways. For example, Father Teefey received a free one day old newspaper from Australia every day by courtesy of Mick, Jack, Ted and Burt, unsung heroes from the Redfern Mail Exchange. He met them and had a great night out when he returned to Australia.

Just as *Smith's Weekly* had provided a good service during the battalion's first tour, *Grey's Gazette* was a boost to morale for the second. It was issued at about monthly intervals, providing news, articles and a forum for the occasional letting-off of steam.

The Medical Platoon was first commanded by Captain Bob Porter. He had the unusual distinction of making the jump from recruit to captain in 24 hours. He had started his basic training at Kapooka when the 'system' realised that he was a qualified doctor and commissioned him. From late October 1970 it was led by Captain Dave Ulyatt. The platoon provided medical assistants for each company to tend to minor sicknesses and to injuries and wounds prior to the arrival of Dustoff helicopters. The platoon also set up a Regimental Aid Post (RAP) near Battalion Headquarters in fire bases or at the Horseshoe. The platoon also provided a Regimental Aid Post at Nui Dat, run by Sergeant Reg Harvey. Their task was to treat the minor illnesses at the base and to keep the battalion medical records up to date.

The battalion cooks – although members of the Australian Army Catering Corps (AACC), they were always seen as an integral part of the unit – were led by the Caterer Warrant Officer Class Two George Grant who was succeeded by Warrant Officer

Class Two Fred Weinman. They processed 270 000 fresh and combat rations in the year. They also sent out 820 000 pounds of ice and made at least 40 000 bread rolls. Soldiers appreciated their care and professionalism. They also remembered that the cooks, like everyone in the unit, went on patrol constantly. Private Bob Wilson of 10 Platoon wrote:

*Sgt Claydon D Coy cook provided good cooking and occasionally turned on beautiful meals of seafood. And he left the fridge unlocked in the kitchen after the boozier closed!*

The Commanding Officer clearly believed that the cooks had served the battalion well. Two (Sergeant Gilbert Manson, Support Company, and Sergeant John Saxby, C Company) received a formal Commendation from the Commander Australian Forces Vietnam.

The routine defence of the Nui Dat base was an important function controlled by the Base Commander, Major Bob O'Brien, and coordinated by the Second-in-Command of Administration Company, Captain Brian Hicks. He controlled the tactical area of operational responsibility patrols in the battalion's area and directed the manning of fire trenches on stand to in mornings and evenings. The Quartermaster, Captain Cliff Nord, led one ad hoc patrol when Viet Cong movement was reported outside the wire. Major Smethurst recalled:

*Cliff grabbed a bedraggled group and swept the particular thicket. 'No result', Cliff said to me, 'Thank god, I only had my pistol'. I looked at his pistol in his hand and said nothing. He had forgotten to put a magazine in anyway.*

The administrative command post was a key station on the battalion administration and air net, arranging the movement of stores, meals and troops to the deployed companies and ensuring that such vital matters as the notification of casualties (NOTICAS) were done promptly and accurately.

Soldiers who expected to complete a twelve month tour were normally entitled to a six day period of rest and recreation. They had to take it after they had been in Vietnam for three months and before the last month of their tour. The leave was taken so that all sub-units were ready for operations at all times. This meant, for example, that a platoon commander was not absent at the same time as his platoon sergeant, and so on. Officers, warrant officers and senior non-commissioned officers were allocated vacancies after soldiers. The centres for rest and recreation were Australia, Hong Kong, Taipei, Bangkok and Manila. In each case, a soldier was flown to his destination by a chartered jet, accompanied by servicemen from other countries fighting in Vietnam, particularly from the US.

All those proceeding on rest and recreation were given a severe warning about venereal disease. It read:

#### FACTS ON VENEREAL DISEASE

- 1 A number of soldiers in SVN [South Vietnam] get VD.
- 2 Half of them get it whilst on R and R outside SVN.
- 3 Prostitutes and enthusiastic amateurs almost always have VD.
- 4 Preventative measures are available at the RAP [Regimental Aid Post].
- 5 VD is not easily cured. Go to your own Australian Medical Officer for treatment, which is given in confidence.
- 6 Some cases take two weeks to cure and patients under treatment cannot enter Australia. Having your RTA [return to Australia] date deferred can be embarrassing to you and your family.

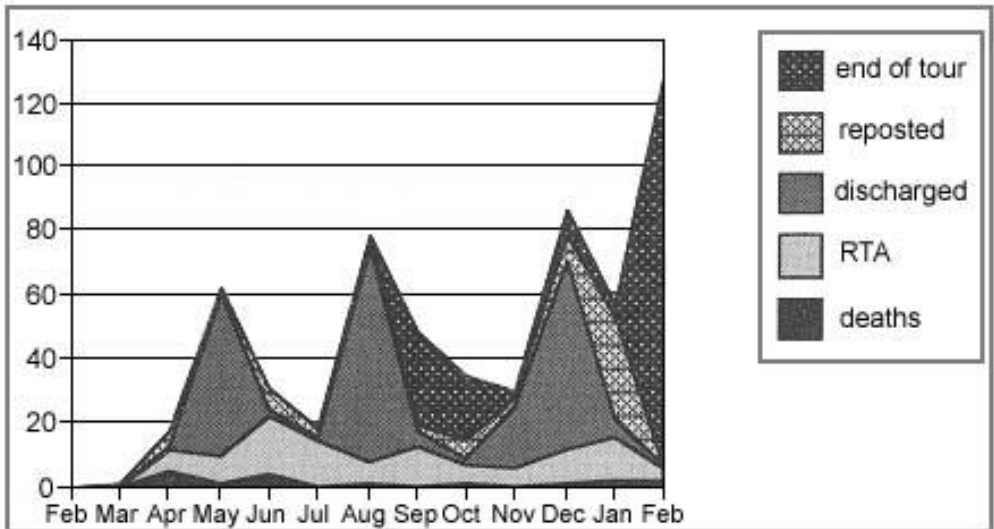
All members of the battalion needed to be certified free from infectious disease by the Regimental Medical Officer within seven days prior to their return to Australia.

Rest and convalescence leave, essentially a two day break from the field, was taken by company groups in Vung Tau. The Beach Annex (The Badcoe Club), close to the 1st Australian Logistic Support Group several km east of Vung Tau, had accommodation for 147 all ranks, while there was further space arranged from time to time in the Rest and Convalescence Centre in Vung Tau city. The Badcoe Club had many advantages. It was next to a sandy and pleasant beach and had an Olympic-sized swimming pool donated by the Returned Services League. The Club was well equipped, although this did not always benefit the soldiers using it. For example, there were several small yachts, but very few soldiers were allowed to sail them as the time taken to gain the necessary licence was much greater than the period on leave!

Soldiers changed a limited amount of their Military Payment Certificates into Vietnamese piastres for use in the town. Expenditure included money spent in bars, where 'hostesses' demanded Saigon Tea (reputedly non-alcoholic but nevertheless relatively expensive). While movement to Vung Tau was in uniform with weapons and ammunition, rest and convalescence was taken in civilian clothes, but identity cards had to be carried. The number of times rest and convalescence was taken was a matter of luck, but most had two or more rest and convalescence leaves during the year. Each company returned to Nui Dat the morning before rest and convalescence started and had two clear days for its leave. It returned to the field on the afternoon of their return from rest and convalescence. While in Nui Dat, training and essential administration was carried out, covering such matters as next of kin checks, heat illness precautions and ammunition and weapon safety.

The turnover during the tour was 264 Regular Army and 329 National Servicemen. These totals included, fifteen officers, sixteen warrant officers and sergeants, 129 corporals and lance corporals, together with 430 privates and three Vietnamese Bushmen Scouts.

There were several 'doubles' completed on this tour of the battalion.



**Figure 12.2** Personnel losses February 1970 – February 1971

Private Paul Ryan served in 6 Platoon B Company on the first tour; his brother Private Brian Ryan served in the same platoon on the second tour. A sadder coincidence involved the small town of Uralla in the New England district of NSW. Lance Corporal Ross McMillan was killed in action serving with D Company on the first tour; Private Trevor Attwood, who had served with 2 Platoon A Company on the second tour, was also killed in action when he completed his tour with Defence and Employment Platoon, Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force. Both attended the same school (Uralla Central) and both their mothers had worked in its canteen. They were the only two servicemen from the district who were killed in Vietnam. The battalion association has presented books to their former school in memory of these soldiers.

The return to Australia (called Exercise ROUND BARREL) had been planned for several months. A group left by air on 26 February. On 25 February the battalion Main Body was transported from Nui Dat by three Chinooks to HMAS *Sydney*. The group embarked consisted of 506 all ranks with the containers and pallets of unit stores needed in Australia. RAAF Iroquois helicopters flew past, trailing maroon smoke (the battalion's colour) in salute. HMAS *Sydney* left Vung Tau harbour that day accompanied by HMAS *Yarra*. During the voyage, an Australian Army Certificate of Education course was conducted by an Education Corps officer for those soldiers needing promotion qualifications.

A ship's concert party on 2 March provided entertainment on the voyage. As the route home was via Fremantle, plans were made for a day's leave there for most soldiers. Fifty-one Western Australians and 24 South Australians left the ship there on 4 March. The remainder were given lunch at Western Command Personnel Depot, a bus tour of Perth, a barbecue at the Special Air Service Regiment and a dance sponsored by the Returned Services League. The ship left Fremantle but an

outbreak of dysentery spoiled the rest of the voyage for some 313 personnel. It was diagnosed as *Shingella Sonnei* and the Captain found it necessary to segregate 'heads and cafeterias' to moderate its spread. HMAS *Sydney* needed to obtain extra supplies of an antidote from Adelaide to control the illness. Although the outbreak was traced to one of the ship's cooks, the ship's Captain, Captain R.J. Scrivenor, RAN, remarked in his Report of Proceedings which was forwarded to the Naval Board: 'The outbreak of bacterial dysentery was attributed to the embarkation of 7 RAR in Vung Tau: the disease is endemic in South Vietnam'.

The Captain also noted that large Army boots were detrimental to tiled decks and paintwork! It would be fair to say that, while this captain showed little empathy or interest in transporting soldiers after their tour of duty, his officers and crew did everything they could to make the voyage pleasant and painless.

HMAS *Sydney* entered Port Jackson on 10 March and troops were able to disembark at 0820 hours.

The padre reflected:

*Ten days and nights of sleep on the 'Vung Tau Ferry' and only then feeling ready to go. How fortunate we were—unlike the majority [of those who served in Vietnam] who returned to Australia by plane in 10 hours and were expected by family and friends to be normal. Nature's rest is the best cure for anything. Also a big help to give up the fags!*

The battalion was greeted at Garden Island by an enthusiastic crowd of relations and friends. It was joined by soldiers from the Advance Party and formed up to march through the city. In direct contrast to the reception afforded to smaller groups returning by air, the march was very well received by the people of Sydney, with large, cheering crowds. There were no visible protest groups.

Three soldiers from 7 RAR served with other units in Vietnam and were killed in action. Corporal Tom 'Blacky' Blackhurst of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) was an adviser with a South Vietnamese Regional Force unit. He was guiding down a Dustoff helicopter in the Long Hai Mountains of Phuoc Tuy Province on 17 April 1971 when it was hit by machine gun fire and crashed. He died of burns sustained from the crash. He was the last member (and the only corporal) in the training team to be killed in action. Private Trevor Attwood, Private Peter Tebb and Private Michael Towler were posted as riflemen with Defence and Employment Platoon Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force. They died when a group of six Australians were ambushed by the Viet Cong and their armoured personnel carrier was destroyed on 12 June 1971.

At the completion of the battalion's second tour of duty, decorations were awarded to key members of the battalion.



The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Grey, was made a Companion of the Distinguished Service Order. The citation recorded:

*. . . that his skilful and tenacious handling of the force of all arms allotted to him caused the enemy to lose control of the population centres in the 7th Battalion area . . . His tireless energy, devotion to duty, personal courage and tactical skill have shown him to be an outstanding commander and his leadership of the battalion has been in the highest tradition of his regiment and the Australian Army.*

The Second-in-Command, Major Smethurst, was awarded Membership of the Order of the British Empire for:

*. . . example and devotion to duty throughout the whole of his tour in South Vietnam [which] reflect great credit on himself, his battalion and the Australian Army.*

The Regimental Sergeant Major, Warrant Officer Class One Bandy, was also awarded Membership of the Order of the British Empire for:

*. . . personal leadership, high standard of conduct in action and devotion to duty . . . [which] have been an inspiration to all ranks of his battalion.*

What lessons were learnt on this tour of duty? The Commanding Officer assembled the lessons learnt from the tour of duty. A typical set came from Major Chris 'Father' Thomson who was able to present them with characteristic humour. Some of his lessons were:

*It's a tragic fact, and one that we should not conceal: that on average we couldn't hit the side of a barn at ten metres with a shot gun. The only sure result comes from placing the muzzle against an enemy navel and firing. Accordingly we do not like to fire at a target, by night, that is beyond 50 metres. Sometimes one has to have a go – but the tactic of letting them pass and then redeploying to catch them on the return journey has been successful.*

And his views on attacking enemy bunkers:

*Bunkers. The big controversy – which is not simplified by naive exhortations to 'cover the exits and knock the s . . . t out of it with artillery' or 'bounce it' [attack it vigorously and speedily].*

*The facts are these:*

- *No matter how much 'sign' you notice beforehand, you'll still be surprised when you stumble on it.*
- *Currently the VC are avoiding contact and will hope that you'll pass by. So, if they do make up their minds to shoot, it will be at about five metres range.*
- *If the system accommodates VIPs, the resistance will be strong.*
- *Assessment of its contents is very difficult, its flanks or limits equally so. (They're sometimes round and often horseshoe shaped so they don't HAVE any flanks.)*

- If you trust the statistics, you will suffer some casualties on the initial contact; like as not from RPG2. Each bunker contact is different.
- The initial situation is normally the problem of a platoon – at the most.
- You have probably listened to some imbecile and his bigoted, emphatic assertion that there is only one way to deal with an occupied bunker system.

If I had another bunker system to tackle I would seek to:

- Remove my casualties and evacuate them while, at the same time, exerting pressure without foolhardiness.
- Engage the enemy withdrawal routes with artillery.
- Get a light fire team (Bushranger) to hold the enemy while I gather as many of my sub-units about me as I can.
- Hope that my sunray would get me some APCs and tanks.
- If I had all this I would go in mounted and at full firepower; tanks firing canister to the flanks and everything else going as well. The approach to the position I would make under a dummy run by Bushrangers.
- When in position, we would dismount and, with the support of the armour, proceed to take out each bunker that we could see. My 90 mm would be going ten to the dozen using flechette and all the tracked vehicles would waggle their behinds – to cave-in bunkers and prevent a moving target at all times.
- Meanwhile our Bushrangers would be dispatched on aerial reconnaissance to intercept any withdrawing enemy.
- Besides being an infallible cure for enemy constipation, the canister fire does much to alter the geography of the place. Undergrowth is smashed away; trees are felled and a general improvement in going and visibility achieved.
- Much will have already been done in this regard by the mini-gun fire of the Bushrangers.
- Having been so fortunate as to suppress all enemy activity in the position itself, I would scout the perimeter for withdrawal signs and dispatch a follow-up. Too much time is spent in savouring accomplishments. This type of reflection can easily be done by the commander concerned – alone.
- Otherwise, keep it simple. Block the exits and knock the s . . . t out of it with artillery or bounce it.

Just as had occurred after the first tour, a volume of these lessons, called *Notes on Operations, Vietnam 1970–71* was printed and widely distributed throughout the Army.

The high standard of the Australian soldier, maintained by the leadership of his junior

non-commissioned officers, was a product of continual attention to battle discipline. Regular Army and National Service soldiers were bonded together into an indivisible team, with no differences evident between them. Many National Servicemen became section commanders and served with distinction. The Australian propensity to harass the enemy by saturation patrolling was shown both by the operations in depth and the constant ambushing near the villages. By the latter half of the tour, 7 RAR knew its area of operations almost as well as the enemy. The need to separate the guerilla from his sources of support and food in villages was amply demonstrated. Some skills, such as rifle shooting and the effective siting and use of claymores, were clearly not as well practised or applied as they should have been.

The endurance and fortitude of the Australian soldier were once again well demonstrated by this tour. A few examples of both Regular and National Service soldiers may show this but there were many others. Soldiers like Lance Corporal Barry Gissell were in over 100 ambushes. Private Peter Hemsworth was involved in more than 200 as well as three separate mine incidents. Private Schofield was a machine gunner involved in four close contacts with the enemy between April and July 1970. In one, he kept his M60 in action for more than four hours in an assault on a bunker system. Corporal McNeilly was involved in more than 150 ambushes and was only absent when he was sent on rest and recreation and rest and convalescence leaves. Corporal Ken Page consistently set a very high standard of junior leadership throughout the tour with an infectious cheerfulness. Corporal John Lawson was involved in a number of heavy contacts and gave very strong leadership and confidence to his section. These soldiers, like their predecessors on the first tour, were worthy successors to their forebears of Anzac.

How did the soldier and the Army perform in Vietnam? An officer who had served in the British Army (and who had closely observed others) said:

*The Digger was magnificent – regular or national serviceman. He endured hardship, stress and physical danger with good-natured humour. When he did have to fight he fought hard, with a fierce loyalty to his mates. His humour was often pretty black, even charnel-house at times, but it kept him going and more importantly, kept some of the lesser brethren going too. The Australian soldier was second to none. There are others who might be just as good (the best of the Americans are all right, the Brits are not bad, the Gordons are bloody good!) but I don't think there are any better.*

*I would rate the Australian Army (and the Kiwis) as probably the most efficient in Vietnam. It understood the tactical problem and tackled it the only way that gave any hope of success. That this meant week after week of slow, conscientious patrolling, often with no sight of the enemy, made no difference – patience was the byword. The Americans never understood that;*

*the Koreans, although devastatingly effective in action, did not understand the civil affairs and 'Hearts and Minds' side of operations; the Thais were excellent defensive troops, but only so good when they had to go out and look for the enemy. Only the Australians came close to achieving their aim, pacifying most of Phuoc Tuy in the process. Their failure to take on the political advisory role, however, meant that the local government infrastructure was still striving towards American-oriented goals, with its emphasis on positive and quick results.*

Perhaps the padre should be allowed a final word:

*It was easy and a privilege to be Chaplain to as fine a body of men as one could wish to meet – well led, highly professional in their work, successful in their undertakings, with a high morale and justly proud – officers and men of 7th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment.*

# 13

## The Battalion in Peace-time

*During peace the Army's primary mission is deterrence – being so well trained, equipped and led so that no potential adversary would mistake our nation's ability and resolve to defend our interests.*

John O. Marsh Jr  
Confirmation Statement  
Washington, 1981

THE PROCESS OF RE-FORMING the battalion commenced with the formation of its Australian Component under the command of Major Bob O'Brien and subsequently Major Jim Farry until the new Commanding Officer was due to arrive. Once again the battalion was placed under the command of the 10th Task Force at Holsworthy, commanded by Brigadier Hartridge. The Brigadier briefed Major Farry and the then only other member of the Australian Component (the Assistant Quartermaster, Second Lieutenant Bill Nagy) to set up the administration of the unit. This job consisted of sorting out a large container load of the unit files.

The Australian Component then arranged the reception of the Advance Party and Main Body of the unit, helping with arrangements for leave and in some cases re-postings or discharge. The battalion then slowly started to build up towards its normal strength. The first social event in the Sergeants' Mess on 7 May 1971 was to thank the crew of HMAS Sydney. The chief petty officers and petty officers were hosted at the Mess together with members of the 2/7th Battalion AIF Association.

The new Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ian Mackay, had graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in December 1955. He was first posted to 4 RAR where he was a platoon commander. He was selected for 1 SAS Company in 1958. He was then posted to 11/44th Battalion, Citizen Military Forces and was later appointed Adjutant

of 2 RAR. He became the Australian Instructor at the UK Far Eastern Land Force Jungle Warfare School at Kota Tinggi, Malaya. He was then appointed as a Company Commander at Duntroon before becoming a Company Commander in 6 RAR in Vietnam. He was posted as the Liaison Officer at Headquarters Australian Force Vietnam in Saigon. He was next selected to attend Staff College in Quetta, India. On return to Australia he was posted to the Directorate of Infantry prior to his appointment as Commanding Officer of the battalion.

The Regimental Sergeant Major was Warrant Officer Class One Don 'Blue' Muir, who was experienced, conscientious and industrious. He found that the unit was of a very high standard in every respect. His first impression was that the soldiers and non-commissioned officers who had returned from Vietnam were 'battle weary', particularly those who had completed two tours of duty. Some were looking forward to a period of peace-time service and all that goes with it. The Regimental Sergeant Major ensured that as many soldiers as possible were sent on courses to gain them qualifications, particularly those enabling promotion. He ensured that pre-course training was done in the battalion. The standard of results these soldiers gained was always high and a reflection of their preparation, experience and enthusiasm.

The re-establishment of the Battalion Pipes and Drums under the direction of the new Pipe Major, Warrant Officer Class One Jamie Whitecross, was of great value to the unit. The Regimental Sergeant Major recalled an early incident with the Pipe Major:

*I remember saying to Jamie Whitecross a couple of weeks before the first battalion parade was to be held that I expected the Pipes and Drums to be on parade. He replied that he would not be ready. I insisted that if we didn't use them from day one they would never be ready. They were on parade, however, as they led the battalion on, the bass drummer lost his grip on one of the drumsticks and it just missed my head by a few inches. Jamie Whitecross assured me after the parade that it was an accident!*

The initial challenge facing the unit was to re-form and to prepare for expected service in South Vietnam in mid-1972. A series of exercises were conducted which moved from section to battalion level. The battalion provided the enemy for Exercise CAMPUS FROLIC, an exercise for 1 RAR which was warned for service in Vietnam. As the year progressed, deployment to Vietnam became less likely and was permanently changed by the election of the Labor Government on 4 December. The battalion nevertheless built up its strength and commenced the training of its sections, platoons and companies.

During the year, the Minister for Army, Mr Bob Katter Sr, visited. He was driven out of the unit in a Landrover between ranks of 'adoring' soldiers. The Regimental Sergeant Major recalled:

*At the end of his inspection of the battalion area, at Battalion Headquarters he turned to me and thanked me for allowing him to inspect the battalion. He apparently was confused and impressed by my Sam Browne and pace stick. Lt Col Mackay was furious.*

On 19 March 1973 Lieutenant Colonel Paul Greenhalgh assumed command of the battalion. He had graduated from Duntroon in 1957 and had been posted as a platoon commander to the 20th National Service Training Battalion. He served in 1 RAR as a platoon commander in Malaysia and was selected for the SAS Company. He served as Adjutant of the SAS Company and then became Adjutant of the Corps of Staff Cadets at Duntroon. He served as a company commander with 5 RAR in Vietnam where he was Mentioned in Despatches. He was later posted as a member of the Australian Army Staff in London. He attended the Staff College, Queenscliff, in 1970.

From 19 to 23 March, Headquarters 1st Division conducted a training systems course at 7 RAR aimed at training twenty officers and senior non-commissioned officers to be able to write training objectives for the conduct of non-commissioned officer qualifying courses. On 19 April the battalion came under the direct command of the 1st Division for the task of conducting non-commissioned officer qualifying courses, until November when it reverted to its original role.

There is no doubt that the strength of an army, and particularly the Australian Army, is built on the ability of its non-commissioned officers. It is therefore of singular importance that the training these non-commissioned officers receive is of the highest standard. Although the job had to be done, it should have been assigned to a training unit. The non-commissioned officer training role was a mistake. Perhaps this became evident when the role was taken over by the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra.

Nevertheless, the officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the battalion had tackled the task they had been given with enthusiasm. They conducted the training well. Lieutenant Colonel Greenhalgh, although frustrated by the task, was very successful at leading the effort and ensuring that a truly professional job was done.

During this period, the battalion was used to host a wide variety of groups in its barracks. They included Inter-Service sporting teams, officer courses, NSW Police Qualifying Course and cadets from the Royal Military College Duntroon. The Inter-Service teams, with both male and female members, were a novelty for the battalion, particularly as they were accommodated in the men's barrack area. The Commanding Officer asked the Regimental Sergeant Major whether there had been any trouble or complaints. He was told that the only complaint was from his soldiers – the women had been allocated the top floor of the barracks and the soldiers were tired of climbing the stairs!

Major Bob O'Brien left 7 RAR on 24 August 1973. He had been almost an essential

part of the battalion. He was the longest serving officer in 7 RAR. The Regimental Sergeant Major stated:

*He was the strength of the unit in every way, and was held in the greatest respect by every member of the battalion, especially those who were unlucky enough to face him over the table when he had acted as Commanding Officer. Major Bob was one of the best officers I had the pleasure to serve with.*

As a result of the withdrawal from Vietnam and the cessation of National Service, it was necessary to lessen the number of Regular Army battalions to six, a number that could be manned by an all-volunteer Army. 7 RAR, as a relatively new unit, was chosen to be one of the units to be removed. Its name was to be preserved by linking it with 5 RAR as 5th/7th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment. Accordingly, the last parade of 7 RAR was held on 24 November. It was appropriately reviewed by Colonel Eric Smith.

On 30 November 1973, Lieutenant Colonel Greenhalgh issued the following Order of the Day (which was the last Routine Order issued by 7 RAR):

#### *ROUTINE ORDER 478*

*3 December 1973 marks the closing down of the Seventh Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment. The battalion will be removed from the Orbat [order of battle] of the Australian Army for a period which we all hope will not be too long.*

*Since 1 September 1965, the battalion has served with distinction and considerable honour, both on active service in Vietnam and at home in Victoria and New South Wales. As the last serving members of the Seventh, in this, the first period of its history, we can be extremely proud of the battalion's record. The standards, and in particular the bonds of friendship and comradeship, will be our memories and it is the duty of all of us to ensure that these qualities go with us, to whatever job we do in the future.*

*The history of the Fifth/Seventh Battalion will be part of the history of the Seventh, so we must all ensure that we take to the new battalion the strengths of the Seventh.*

*Remember the past with pride and of equal importance, ensure that the past is applied to the future.*

*It has been a privilege for all of us to serve in the Seventh.*

There was an unplanned echo in this linking. The 7th Battalion AIF had been linked with the 5th Battalion AIF and others in 1919.

The final day of the battalion's existence was 3 December when the formal linking with 5 RAR occurred. Lieutenant Colonel Greenhalgh became the first Commanding Officer of the 5th/7th Battalion.



For some years the battalion had sought an affiliation with an appropriate British regiment. Major Derek Napier described how this took place:

*We had discussed in the Mess, in pretty general, if not vague, terms an affiliation. I was the Adjutant at the time, and I raised the subject with Ron Grey, unashamedly suggesting that an affiliation with a Highland Regiment would be a good move, as none of the other RAR Battalions had such a connection. If he found that agreeable, then could I suggest the Gordon Highlanders? If he wanted, I would write to General Sir George Gordon–Lennox. Ron Grey, who knew the British Army well, agreed, and I accordingly started the ball rolling with a letter to General Geordie. Geordie Gordon–Lennox wrote back indicating that he was very impressed with 7 RAR's record on its first tour, and thought that an affiliation between the two Regiments was a good idea. From then on, the correspondence was between the CO and General Geordie.*

The formal process, which included action by the Directorate of Infantry and approval by the Chief of the General Staff, took until 1976 to complete. By then, Brigadier Grey was the Australian Army Representative in London. He and Warrant Officer Class One Bandy (then Regimental Sergeant Major of Australian Army Staff, London) were invited to attend the Regimental Headquarters of the Gordons at Aberdeen. Their visit on 24 November was a memorable occasion starting with a 'wee dram' off the overnight train from London early in the morning and culminating in a formal dinner hosted by the Colonel of the Gordons, Lieutenant General Sir George Gordon–Lennox, with a special program of pipe music.

The affiliation ceremony was held at the Regimental Headquarters of the Gordons in Aberdeen on 3 December 1976. The representatives of 5/7 RAR who attended were Major John James, Lieutenant Peter Funnell and Warrant Officer Class Two Jack Ezzy (who was the only one of the group to have served with 7 RAR). Although Brigadier Grey was precluded by duty from attending, Major Mike O'Brien, another former 7 RAR officer, was able to attend because he was posted in the UK at the time. Major Napier's presence at the ceremony, as an officer who had rejoined the Gordons, emphasised the strength of the link. Also present was Private Nigel Burnett, son of Colonel Mowbray Burnett, late of the Gordons. Nigel had served with 7 RAR after it had returned from the second tour.

As is the custom, the battalions exchanged gifts. The battalion, by now 5/7 RAR, and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Jake O'Donnell (who had commanded A Company 7 RAR on the first tour), presented a bronze statuette of an Australian soldier to the Gordons on 31 May 1977 at a ceremony in Aberdeen. The Gordons reciprocated with a fine thistle-shaped cabinet containing a valuable formal set of regimental regalia. The cabinet and its contents now grace the office of the Commanding Officer of 5/7 RAR. This ceremony was attended by Major Napier (who

had returned from duty in Northern Ireland). Major Napier has the unique distinction of having served with all three units involved – 5RAR, 7 RAR and the Gordons.

Never forget: the Regiment is the foundation of everything

Field Marshall Wavell

# 14

## Legacies of Service

*So we have traced the glorious story of our dear old Battalion. After years of strife and buffeting, changing from day to day as old identities passed away and new arrivals came, the Seventh held on its path. We who were privileged to serve with it know what a famous regiment it was.*

The Seventh Battalion AIF, 1933

### THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE AND NATIONAL SERVICE

The National Service scheme that sent many soldiers to Vietnam will leave a legacy that will endure for many years. For many of the young men who were inducted, the experiences of their National Service and combat are the dominating events in their lives. Conscripts were removed from their home environment very quickly indeed and transported to a harsh training regime. They became fitter than they had ever been. They were given good leadership, a strong sense of soldierly mateship and a well-judged sense of purpose. After they completed their training, the battalion became their home, honing their skills and fostering their group identity. Vietnam was, for many, an adventure. It placed them in a situation that few would have otherwise undergone and very few repeated. A large number of soldiers experienced the particular trauma of battle and many the wounding or loss of their mates. While most were sufficiently robust to overcome this shock, this was not an era of professional counselling and some carried psychological wounds with them.

At the end of their two year stint, National Servicemen were sent back to Australia. It was a harsh adjustment for them to make. Many felt they were almost 'smuggled in' at night with little or no reception. In short order, they returned home to a public lacking understanding and, in many cases, overtly hostile to them. Gone were the supports of the Army, the leadership, the peculiar and enduring mateship, the sense of identity and purpose. The strong withstood these losses; those less strong

suffered. Many still suffer. The Regular soldiers of the unit had several advantages over most of their National Service comrades. They mostly returned home on HMAS *Sydney* and had two weeks to adjust to the different realities of home. They were accorded the honour of a march through Sydney and a welcome by its citizens. This 'rite of passage' could be viewed as a significant 'closure ceremony'. Only a small proportion of National Servicemen had this privilege – they returned to little if any fanfare, separated from their unit. An insensitive Army thought it unnecessary to invite them to march with their unit. Many resented this treatment and felt unthanked until the 1987 Sydney 'Welcome Home' parade.

### **AGENT ORANGE AND COMBAT STRESS SYNDROME**

Of the several hundred soldiers of the battalion who responded to the battalion questionnaire that provided information for this book, 31% felt that they had been affected by Agent Orange and a further 9% were uncertain. There was little difference between the perception of this effect by National Servicemen and Regulars. This high proportion is surprising: even if it represents a feeling that is not correct, it is much higher than many would expect.

The questionnaire responses from most soldiers indicated that the majority spoke to no one (other than their former battalion mates) about Vietnam. There was a small proportion of respondents who had difficulty relating in any fashion with the community or even their families. Typical of this minority was a response that said: 'I have no patience with anyone, I can't stand Asians, I have no family life, and, what's worse, I now don't want to try'.

Apart from questionnaire responses, a large number of soldiers from the battalion have experienced significant psychiatric difficulties. At the extreme, the number of soldiers who have suicided is large and it includes several who had been particularly traumatised by their wounds. A soldier from the first tour wrote:

*Serving personnel should have been given help immediately after any contact with the enemy especially if KIAs were involved. Some sort of counselling should have been available. Maybe some of us would not be as bad off today if that was the case.*

No doubt other wars have produced such grim statistics. While these matters have been studied by the Department of Veterans' Affairs and others, it is fair to say that many of the battalion's soldiers feel that Vietnam produced too many such casualties and that their effects are poorly understood by the community at large.

## THE WAR AND THE ENEMY

The infantry soldier does not hate his enemy after the battle. One wrote:

*There was a natural competitive instinct not to be beaten by them, but when viewed at close quarters, they weren't a lot different from us. They were doing a job, they had photographs of their families in their top pockets, they played cards and kept pocket radios to hear the news. Sure, they smelled different, but then so did we.*

A soldier from the second tour wrote his view of the enemy as:

*The enemy were probably most different to us in that they must have had more commitment to the war, in terms of a vision for the future of their country than we did . . . I hope that the post-1975 Vietnam lives up to the hopes and visions of our former enemies, although I suspect it doesn't. I don't feel a hatred towards them for our KIAs [killed in action] and WIAs [wounded]. I feel more bitter towards the politicians who were responsible for our being in SVN [South Vietnam]. The lack of support for us from these politicians, and that segment of the Australian population who put them in power, was and remains hard to take.<sup>1</sup>*

## MATESHIP

The bond between soldiers in a battalion was well described by Private Al Couper who wrote:

*Their lives were partly in my hands. My life was partly in theirs. A trust and faith, a bond of mateship, had been built up, and upon, during our training together in Australia. I knew they wouldn't let me down, as I knew I wouldn't let them down. I think the same applies now 20 years later.*

## VIEWS ON THE ARMY

A very small number of respondents clearly hated their military service. It was clear that most soldiers enjoyed it and this was just as true for National Servicemen as it was for Regulars. One ex-National Service soldier wrote in 1991:

*Upon looking back on my time in the Army, it seems that everything I learned about life goes back to those years. I learned about myself and other men, I learned about true courage. There is quiet contentment about it all. I have two great mates from those years and many other good mates. It is fantastic on Anzac Day to be a man among men. I have no allegiance to the Army or what it stands for. However I have a deep and profound respect for those men with whom I had the privilege to serve in 7 RAR and in particular those men in Training Company (1966) who were thrown in the deep end.*

Major Chris Thomson wrote:

*I do not wish to flatter the Australian ego. Flattery is lies – and I would not lie about something to which my sensitivities have been so finely tuned.*

*When I left the Brigade of Gurkhas in 1968, I was resigned to the inevitability of a future without the deep, almost spiritual professionalism with which I had become accustomed by service for and with the little men from Nepal.*

*My predictions proved to be both arrogant and false. Arrogant because there has always been, in The Royal Australian Regiment, a benchmark of military excellence. False – because I saw this for myself. I must hasten to add that my perspective of excellence as a soldier also embraces the civic and moral competence of the good man. So when I say that I was honoured and privileged by association with such excellent soldiers as I encountered in 7 RAR, I also mean that they were a bunch of good Australians too.*

*If there had been no National Service and therefore no microcosm of Australian society, perhaps my perspective would have been less clear. Who knows?*

## THE BATTALION ASSOCIATION

It took quite some time for a battalion association to be formed, perhaps because of the lack of community support for the Vietnam War and its veterans. The Association was born out of a reunion of D Company from the second tour which was held in Sydney from 25–26 April 1985. This reunion had been organised by Richard Kenny and Merv Hains, who had written to every major newspaper in Australia seeking those who were interested in joining. After this reunion, Merv and Richard decided to try to form a battalion-wide association. They started with a few addresses they had prior to 1985 and by 1985 had a list of about 65. A newsletter, *Seven News* was first issued in December 1985 as the organ of the D Company 7 RAR Association. The D Company group was later absorbed into the Battalion Association. Don Cruden then made a particular effort to form an association of past 7 RAR members in Western Australia. The first Annual General Meeting was held in 1988, and Colonel Smith, Major General Grey and the current Commanding Officer of 5/7 RAR (*ex-officio*) were appointed patrons of the 7 RAR Association. A national secretary and treasurer were appointed (appropriately Richard Kenny and Merv Hains) as well as conveners in each state and territory. After Richard Kenny stepped down because of pressure of his work, Jim Husband became the new secretary of the Association. He became known as 'HS' or 'Jimmy the Sec', and has been the driving force and the soul of an extremely successful Association. In 1992 the patrons were appropriately joined by Colonel Henry Guinn, DSO, ED, a former Commanding Officer of the 2/7th Battalion, AIF. The

Association was formally incorporated in October 1992 and the patrons transformed into president and vice-presidents.

The 'Welcome Home' parade held in Sydney from 2 to 6 October 1987 was the occasion of a special gathering of the Battalion Association and the catalyst for its expansion. After this gathering and the work of Jim Husband, the Association has grown to over 1000 strong.

## **LATER CAREERS**

Many of the members of the unit have had successful military and civilian careers. The battalion has had three generals (David Drabsch, Ron Grey and Neville Smethurst) and many brigadiers and colonels. It has produced senior police officers and a commissioner of the Australian Federal Police. At least one National Serviceman is in the Defence Department at a senior executive level. There are at least two PhDs from the one company on the second tour. One platoon medic has become a Professor of Physiology in Canada. Many soldiers who served in 7 RAR have reached the appointment of regimental sergeant major. The list of successes is long: it includes chief executive officers, National President of the RSL, an Australian Football League coach and a Secretary of the Australian Jockey Club.

While there have been many success stories, there are those that are a great deal sadder. Michael Berrigan, a promising law student, was called up for National Service and wounded on 30 November 1967. He was still in hospital in 1995 and will never fully recover. There are many others with severe physical injuries from which they will never fully recuperate.

## **THE SURFERS PARADISE ROTARY PATRIOTIC FUND**

One of the greatest supports that the Australian community provided for its soldiers in Vietnam was that provided by the Surfers Paradise Rotary Patriotic Fund and its associated Wounded Servicemen's Convalescent Scheme, run by the 50-odd members of the Rotary Club of Surfers Paradise. This fund supported any wounded serviceman who was evacuated to Australia. When a soldier was wounded he received a letter within a fortnight, notifying him that, should he have to return to Australia, he would be eligible for a fortnight's expenses-paid convalescence in a first class hotel or equivalent on the Gold Coast. Ansett Airlines provided first class return air passages from capital cities to Coolangatta. Married soldiers had their wives paid for as well. The Returned Services League at Surfers Paradise shared the expenses for providing midday meals – other meals were paid for by the Fund or by the individual owner of the accommodation. All entertainment, trips and tours were also paid for. This generous scheme was also applied to any wounded New Zealander under similar conditions. The architects of the scheme were Mr Ken Bromley (an honorary member of the Rotary Club), and Mr Griff Mackay (who had the Scheme accepted by the Club) assisted by Colonel Henry Guinn (a former Commanding Officer

of the 2/7th Battalion, AIF) together with Mr Charles Smith (former head of Ford in Australia and the Scheme's primary fund raiser) and Mr Roy Kennedy (its travel coordinator).

The initiative and drive of those behind the Scheme provided perhaps the most visible of the very few support schemes that helped soldiers who served in Vietnam. As a commanding officer of another battalion that served in Vietnam said, 'Your help and kindness over the years has been quite outstanding and I hope that you realise just how much it has been appreciated by us all'. The presence of this Rotary Club was seen when any battalion returned from Vietnam. When it marched through its home city, a banner was always present announcing 'Surfers Paradise Rotary Welcomes the [say] 7th Battalion'. Ken Bromley's influence on the Gold Coast community was strong and was always supportive of soldiers serving in Vietnam. He contributed a weekly column to the *Gold Coast Bulletin* which followed the recovery of wounded soldiers from week to week. Other Australian newspapers saw fit to record only when a man was wounded (and most listed only the wounded from their state), but Ken saw to it that one community at least monitored the progress of *all* wounded sympathetically.

The Scheme received support from some segments of the Australian public who donated funds. Servicemen supported it enthusiastically. In July 1970, Colonel Guinn presented a cheque for \$3600 which was one of 7 RAR's contributions to the Scheme. It was a good example of the bond that had been forged between the 2/7th Battalion AIF and 7 RAR.

Towards the end of the second tour, Major Chris Thomson, the Officer Commanding A Company, wrote:

*I have read and displayed every one of your news bulletins and we have seen mention of a succession of our comrades, for whom you have all taken so much trouble. My company's unanimous thanks go to you and all of your association for all you have done.*

Throughout 1970 and 1971 the battalion was referred to in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* as 'Lt Col Ron Grey's superb 7th Battalion RAR'. The battalion's support for the Scheme was tangibly shown towards the end of the second tour when Support Company decided to donate the balance of its company funds. The Company Sergeant Major, Warrant Officer Class Two Ron Sigg, travelled to the Gold Coast when he had returned to Australia to present the company's cheque.

The Scheme operated until at least 1972, giving the holidays to those wounded who had recovered. The sterling work of the Surfers Paradise Rotary Club continued to provide entertainment for soldiers after the Australians had been withdrawn from Vietnam. For example, in October 1972, B Company 7 RAR was entertained at dinner and lunch after it had finished training at the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra – this time greeted by the traditional banner from the balcony of the Surfers Paradise Hotel. The Scheme raised and disbursed \$330 000 throughout its



existence. It gained for its Club the award of 'International Rotary Project for the Year'. Although its committee members, other than Colonel Guinn, are now deceased, 'their footsteps remain in the sands of time'.

## SERVICE ORGANISATIONS

Community support for those who returned from Vietnam was not great. Small country towns were perhaps among the most supportive groups. For example, Orange and District Patriotic Comforts Fund organised a series of annual dinners for those who had returned from Vietnam, starting in 1965. This dinner was supported by the Shire Council and ex-Service organisations including the Returned Services League.

Ex-servicemen's support for veterans was not always consistent. The first tour Regimental Medical Officer, Captain Tony Williams, recalled how he attended a Dawn Service on an Anzac Day soon after his return to Australia. He was asked afterwards 'what Mickey Mouse things' he was wearing (his Vietnam medals) and by what right was he attending. His experience was far from unique.

There was also a strong feeling that the Returned Services League did not support Vietnam veterans as perhaps it should have. It was certainly true that League officials made the effort to visit men in the field in Vietnam. The League also had provided regular Christmas parcels of tinned fruit, cake and beer. The Australian Forces Overseas Fund, founded by the League in 1966, funded many of the concert parties that toured Vietnam, provided other amenities and gave financial support to military civic action projects in that country. Indeed, the League, particularly its sub-branches, treated those returning from Vietnam in exactly the same manner as those who had returned from previous wars. There were individuals and, particularly in NSW, some Returned Services clubs, that did not follow this policy in letter or spirit. But it needs to be stated that the League's NSW State President, Sir Colin Hines, gave untiring and generous support for the 'Welcome Home' parade in 1987 and played a key role in its success. It is a fair assessment to say that Sir Colin was largely responsible for the radical turn-around in the public perception of the Vietnam veteran which had the Welcome as its catalyst.

Early in the Vietnam conflict, Legacy considered whether Vietnam veterans should be considered eligible to join it. Subsequently, several states altered rules to allow them to join and soon all followed suit. Legacy was always prepared to support widows and their children. Towards the end of the conflict, Legacy felt that Vietnam veterans might save it from the problem of losing its older members. Later it came to realise that there were probably not going to be sufficient numbers from Vietnam to sustain it.

## COMMEMORATING THE 7<sup>TH</sup>

As part of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Australian War Memorial, Bill Fogarty, a Senior Curator and former Support Company soldier, gave an address on 9 November 1991 entitled 'A Letter from Vietnam' which outlined the experiences of A Company 7 RAR on 6 August 1967 in the Battle of Suoi Chau Pha. It was chosen as one of a very few topics to be presented that related to the war in Vietnam.

All the soldiers who died in Vietnam are commemorated by the Vietnam Memorial in Canberra and by trees planted for each of them at Bass Hill, Sydney, in August 1992. The Western Australian soldiers (Privates Alec Bell and Noel Crouch) are remembered by the Vietnam Memorial Pavilion in Kings Park opened in October 1989. A memorial in Newcastle's Civic Park to local soldiers killed in Vietnam includes the names of Corporal Tom Blackhurst, Private Stephen Dickson and Private 'Ziggy' Trzecinski.

Others have been remembered individually. On 17 September 1989, members of the Battalion Association were present when a new bridge was opened on Maitland's inner city bypass road. The bridge was called 'The P.Z. Trzecinski Bridge' in memory of Paul ('Ziggy'), who was the first Maitland man to enlist for the Vietnam War and the only resident of that city to be killed in that conflict. He is also remembered by a plaque in the Maitland Polish Association Hall. Private Peter Tebb's memory is perpetuated by a Rugby League trophy. Peter had been an A Grade player in Queensland. The annual Peter Tebb Memorial Trophy is presented to the district's best and fairest player. Lieutenant Rob Pothof, who attended Knox Grammar School, Sydney, is remembered by a commemorative sword (used by the school Cadet Unit). Private Allan Lloyd is remembered by Lloyd Park in Traralgon.

The Vietnam War Memorial in Anzac Parade, Canberra, was dedicated on 3 October 1992. A photograph is etched into the concrete surface of the monument. It is of a group of soldiers from 5 Platoon B Company 7 RAR with a US Huey helicopter. The photograph has become the icon of Australian involvement in the Vietnam War.

Private David Milford was killed in the battle at Suoi Chau Pha on 6 August 1967. His brother attended the dedication and parade in Canberra in 1992. He wrote:

*It was a great experience to march with David's flag in the Parade of 3rd October. I'd never had much contact with Vietnam Vets, apart from one or two who live nearby. But hearing from many that weekend of the conditions way back then, I've had another look at his letters, read a couple of books and can face up to the loss of David a lot more calmly than up till then. I reckon that the healing effect of the whole Memorial weekend was pretty good.*

**The Battalion Prayer**

O Lord God, we thank you for all the protection you have given to the Seventh Battalion. Help us to be men of humility, courage and love. We thank you that we are a united force. Keep us always so united that we may be worthy to advance and guard your Kingdom in justice, love and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

# *Appendix 1*

## Roll of Honour

### KILLED IN ACTION

*'Have you forgotten yet?  
Look down and swear by the slain of the War  
that you'll never forget.'*

Siegfried Sassoon

### **Vietnam**

#### ***7th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment***

*1967–68*

Private Norman George Allen  
Corporal Donald Raymond Aylett  
Private Marvin Walter Ayres  
Private Alec Ernest James Bell  
Private Edward Francis Brophy  
Private James George Cox  
Private Bryan Thomas Cullen  
Private Barry Edmond Fallon  
Private Barleif Alfred Harstad  
Private Norman Victor George Hawker  
Corporal James Francis Hayes  
Lance Corporal Ross Charles McMillan  
Private David Geoffrey Milford  
Private John Martin O'Connor  
Private Robert Graham Perrin  
Private Paul Zygmund Trzecinski

1970–71

Private Garry Owen Cashion  
 Private Noel Valentine Crouch  
 Lieutenant Rex William Davies  
 Private Stephen Warwick Dickson  
 Private Milton Raymond Dufty  
 Lance Corporal Eric Halkyard  
 Private Robert Edward Hughes  
 Private Graham Robert Kavanagh  
 Private Stanley Gordon Larsson  
 Private Allan Lloyd  
 Private Paul John Navarre  
 Private Raymond Brian Patten  
 Lieutenant Robin Christiaan Pothof  
 Lance Corporal Neil Thomas Richardson  
 Private Ronald Keith Smith  
 Private Henry Jan Stanczyk  
 Private Alan Talbot

### ***Supporting Arms***

1967–68

Sapper Terrence James Renshaw, 1st Field Squadron  
 Gunner Barry Tregear, 108th Field Battery

1970–71

Sapper Ian Neil Scott, 1st Field Squadron

### ***Former 7 RAR soldiers killed in action while serving with other units***

Corporal Frederick John Annesley (1968), 1 RAR  
 Private Trevor James Attwood (1971), Defence and Employment Platoon,  
 Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force  
 Corporal Thomas Douglas Blackhurst (1971), Australian Army Training Team  
 Vietnam  
 Private Donald Murray Clark (1966), 6 RAR  
 Private Anthony Purcell (1967), 5 RAR  
 Private Peter Tebb (1971), 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit  
 Private Michael Towler (1971), Defence and Employment Platoon,  
 Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force  
 Warrant Officer Class Two Brian Walsh, MM (1969), Australian Army  
 Training Team Vietnam

## Appendix 2

# Decorations and Awards

*The safest thing to be said is that nobody knew how much a decoration was worth except the man who received it.*

Siegfried Sassoon  
*Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*

### AWARDS TO MEMBERS OF THE BATTALION

#### British decorations and awards

##### ***Companion of the Distinguished Service Order (DSO)***

Lieutenant Colonel R.A. Grey

Lieutenant Colonel E.H. Smith

##### ***Military Cross (MC)***

Second Lieutenant G. Lindsay

Major E.J. O'Donnell

Second Lieutenant G.H. Ross

Lieutenant G.R. Wenhlowskyj

##### ***Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM)***

Sergeant R.D. Allan

Sergeant A.D. Sutherland

##### ***Military Medal (MM)***

Private K.R. Downward

Corporal G.L. Griffiths

Staff Sergeant C. Rowley

Sergeant R. Savage

Corporal H.C. Spradbrow

***Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE)***

Warrant Officer Class One R.A. Bandy	Major D.A. Drabsch
Warrant Officer Class One A.P. Thompson	Major N.R. Smethurst

***Mentioned in Despatches (MID)***

Private D.F. Bathersby	Sergeant T.S. Bourke
Staff Sergeant G.W. Brown	Captain B.J. Caligari
Major G.K. Chapman	Sergeant D. Edmonds
Second Lieutenant J.A. Fitzsimon	Major A.B. Garland
Sergeant H.A. King	Private K.B. Lang
Corporal J.W.W. Lawson	Major A.I.J.M. Mattay
Major D.J. Mealey	Second Lieutenant K. Metcalf
Lance Corporal R. Parker	Lance Corporal R.F. Richards
Warrant Officer Class One J.P.A. Sheddick	Major C.F. Thomson
Corporal G.D. Tredrea	

***Commander Australian Force Vietnam Commendations***

Sergeant T.M. Bourke	Lance Corporal R.H. Burton–Bradley
Sergeant F. Curphey	Lance Corporal B.J. Gissell
Private P.W. Hemsworth	Sergeant F.G. Henderson
Private H.J. Holden	Private J.P. Howard
Private P. Kielly	Corporal J.W.W. Lawson
Corporal A.W. Mackenzie	Sergeant F.V. MacLean
Corporal R.D. McNeilly	Sergeant G. Manson
Corporal K.M. Page	Corporal G. Roussell
Sergeant J.L. Saxby	Private R.K. Schofield
Corporal D.L. Willis	Corporal G.J. Window
Second Lieutenant P.J. Winter	

***United States decorations******Air Medal for Valor***

Warrant Officer Class One J.P.A. Sheddick

***Bronze Star for Meritorious Service***

Captain B.J. Caligari

***Army Commendation Medal for Service***

Corporal D.R. Aylett

**Republic of Vietnam awards*****Cross of Gallantry with Palm***

Lieutenant Colonel R.A. Grey

***Cross of Gallantry with Gold Star***

Major C.F. Thomson

Major G.P. Warland

***Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star***

Captain B.J. Caligari

Lieutenant C. Johnson

Second Lieutenant G. Lindsay

Second Lieutenant K. Metcalf

Staff Sergeant C. Rowley

Sergeant R. Savage

Second Lieutenant G.R. Wenhlowskyj

***Cross of Gallantry with Bronze Star***

Sergeant T.S. Bourke

Lance Corporal R.H. Burton–Bradley

Sergeant F.G. Henderson

Lance Corporal H.J. Holden

Private P. Kielly

Corporal J.E. McCabe

Sergeant R.D. McNeilly

Corporal K.M. Weightman

***Armed Forces Honor Medal***

Warrant Officer Class One R.A. Bandy

Major F.K. Cole

Captain C.J.R. Nord

Major N.R. Smethurst

***Training Service Medal***

Captain B.J. Caligari

**AWARDS TO MEMBERS OF OTHER UNITS FOR SERVICE WITH 7 RAR****British decorations*****Military Cross***

Lieutenant N.J. Clark, 106th Field Battery



***Distinguished Flying Cross***

Flying Officer C.A.Beatty,  
9 Squadron  
RAAF

Second Lieutenant P.A. Bysouth,  
161st Independent Reconnaissance Flight

Squadron Leader J.H. Cox,  
9 Squadron,  
RAAF

Flying Officer B.C. Townsend,  
9 Squadron  
RAAF

***Distinguished Conduct Medal***

Sergeant E.S. Levy,  
B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment

***Military Medal***

Gunner M.B. Williams,  
106th Field Battery

***Mentioned in Despatches***

Captain B.J. Campbell,  
106th Field Battery

Captain R.M. Earle,  
A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment

Major D.J. Gilroy,  
106th Field Battery

Sergeant G.M. Kemble,  
B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment

Captain P. Murphy,  
B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment

Sergeant M. O'Sullivan,  
106th Field Battery

Sergeant B.J. Ruddock,  
106th Field Battery

**Republic of Vietnam awards*****Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star***

Sergeant E. Levy,  
B Squadron 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment

***Cross of Gallantry with Bronze Star***

Sergeant B.J. Ruddock,  
106<sup>th</sup> Field Battery

## Appendix 3

# Weapons and Equipment

The purpose of this appendix is to give a brief indication of the characteristics of some of the more common types of weapons and equipment in use during both tours of Vietnam.

**Table A3.1 Australian small arms and pyrotechnics**

<i>AUSTRALIAN SMALL ARMS AND PYROTECHNICS</i>	<i>MASS</i>	<i>MAGAZINE OR BELT CAPACITY</i>	<i>TYPICAL FIRST LINE AMMO</i>	<i>RANGE</i>	<i>REMARKS</i>
7.62 mm L1A1 SLR	10 lb	20 rounds	150 per weapon	300 m	2 <sup>nd</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> last rd tracer
9 mm F1 SMG	7.2 lb	30 rounds	150 per weapon	100 m	First tour only
5.56 mm M16	7 lb	20 or 30 rounds	300 per weapon	300 m	2 <sup>nd</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> last rd tracer
40 mm M79	6 lb	1 round	36 per section	400 m	HE and illuminating rds
7.62 mm GPMG M60	23 lb	100 round belts	1200 per section	Up to 1100 m	1 in 4 tracer – 100 rd belt weighed 7 lb
M26 grenade	1 lb	—	1 per man	10 m lethal radius	Carried with striker lever taped
No. 83 smoke grenade	1.5 lb	—	18 per platoon	—	Several colours available
M49 trip flare	0.9 lb	—	10 per platoon	—	

**Table A3.2 Enemy small arms**

<i>ENEMY SMALL ARMS</i>	<i>MASS</i>	<i>MAGAZINE CAPACITY</i>	<i>TYPICAL FIRST LINE AMMO</i>	<i>RANGE</i>	<i>REMARKS</i>
7.62mm AK47 assault rifle	9.5 lb	30 rounds	60–100 rounds per weapon	300 m	Green tracer rounds used
7.62mm SKS rifle	8.8 lb	10 rounds	50 rounds per weapon	300 m	
7.62mm RPD machine gun	16 lb	100 rounds drum	100 rounds	800 m	

**Table A3.3 Allied indirect fire support**

<i>ALLIED INDIRECT FIRE SUPPORT</i>	<i>MAXIMUM RANGE</i>	<i>RATE OF FIRE</i>	<i>AMMUNITION TYPES</i>
81 mm mortar	4500 m (HE)		HE, WP, illuminating
105 mm L5 pack howitzer	10575 m	8 rounds per minute	HE, WP, illuminating, smoke
105 mm M2A1 howitzer	11000 m	8 rounds per minute	HE, WP, illuminating, smoke
US 155 mm (towed or SP gun)	14600 m	45 rounds per hour	HE, canister, smoke
US 175 mm SP gun	32700 m	1 round per 2 minutes	HE
US 8 inch SP gun	16800 m	1 round per 2 minutes	HE

**Table A3.4 Australian anti-armour weapons**

<i>AUSTRALIAN ANTI ARMOUR WEAPONS</i>	<i>EFFECTIVE RANGE</i>	<i>MASS</i>	<i>AMMUNITION TYPES</i>
M72 66 mm LAW	200 m	4.5 lbs	HEAT
84 mm L14A1 Carl Gustaf	550 m	35 lbs	HEAT
90 mm US M67 MAW	800 – 1200 m	35 lbs	HE and splintex
106 mm M40A1 RCL	700 – 3200 m	483 lbs	HE and splintex

**Table A3.5 Enemy anti-armour weapons**

<i>ENEMY ANTI-ARMOUR WEAPONS</i>	<i>EFFECTIVE RANGE</i>	<i>MASS</i>	<i>AMMUNITION TYPES</i>
RPG2 (B40)	150 m	6.2 lb	HEAT (5 rounds per weapon first line)
RPG7 (B41)	500m	18 lb	HEAT

**Table A3.6 Armoured vehicles**

<i>ARMoured VEHICLES</i>	<i>ARMAMENT</i>	<i>MASS</i>	<i>CAPACITY</i>
M113A1 APC	.3 in and .5 in MG	11 tons	2 crew, 11 passengers
Centurian Mk V tank	20 pdr, .3 in MG	50 tons	4 crew

**Table A3.7 Mines**

<i>MINES</i>	<i>MASS</i>	<i>LETHAL RANGE</i>	<i>QUANTITY CARRIED</i>
M18 claymore	3.5 lb	50 m	10 per section
M16 'Jumping Jack'	7.7 lb	30 m	Not carried

**Table A3.8 Helicopters**

<i>HELICOPTERS</i>	<i>CREW</i>	<i>PASSENGERS</i>	<i>ARMAMENT</i>
Army Bell OH-13 Sioux	1	1	None
RAAF or US Army Bell UH-1B or UH-1D Iroquois 'Huey'	4	5-7	Usually 2 GPMG M60. Light Fire Team had 2.75 inch rockets and 7.62 mm minigun options
US Army CH-47 Chinook	3	35 or 8000 lb stores	GPMG M60
US Army Bell AH-1G Cobra	2	Nil	7.62 mm miniguns, 2.75 inch rockets, 40 mm grenade launcher

**Table A3.9 Radio Set**

<i>RADIO SET</i>	<i>FREQUENCIES</i>	<i>MASS</i>	<i>REMARKS</i>
ANPRC25 (VHF manpack)	30-80 MHz	12.5 lb	Including battery, mass 2.5 lb

**Table A3.10 Ration Packs**

<i>RATION PACKS</i>	<i>NO. OF MEALS</i>	<i>MASS</i>	<i>CHOICE</i>
Australian Combat Ration Pack 1 man	3	3 lb	5 varieties
Australian Patrol Ration Pack	3	2 lb	5 varieties
US 'C' Rations	1	6 lb	5 varieties

## AN AUSTRALIAN SOLDIER'S DRESS AND EQUIPMENT

The typical dress of soldiers on operations was Australian jungle greens with sleeves rolled down, green cotton scarf (sweat rag), bush hat and black General Purpose Boots fitted with steel plates for protection against panji spikes. On some occasions such as when a mine or mortar threat was great, flak jackets and steel helmets were worn. Webbing was a mixture of US '56 pattern and UK '37 pattern basic webbing with an Australian pack or, particularly for signallers, a US Special Forces framed pack.

## A TYPICAL AUSTRALIAN SOLDIER'S LOAD

A typical soldier's load consisted of his own personal equipment and a proportion of items shared by those in his section or platoon. Individual items included: his basic web

equipment, individual weapon and its first line of ammunition, a shell dressing, an M26 grenade (with striker lever taped), nine full water bottles containing one quart each (dry season) or five (wet), five days' rations, hexamine stove and hexamine tablets for cooking rations, shaving gear, steel mug (on water bottle), shelter, blanket inner ('silk'), hammock, spare socks and bayonet (for mine prodding).

Shared items could include: 100 round belts of link ammunition for GPMG M60, the GPMG M60 spare barrel, M49 trip flares, US or Australian smoke grenades, white phosphorus grenades, grenade spigots and ballastite cartridges, claymore mines, detonating cord, plastic explosive, M79 rounds, M72 light anti-tank weapon, spare radio batteries, torch, starlight scope, binoculars, compass, maps, protractor, pace counter, strobe light, entrenching tools, panel marker sets, secateurs, machetes, medical kit, watches, Standing Operating Procedures extracts in Nui Tui' books, notebooks, codes and writing material.

Signallers carried the ANPRC25 radio with its various antennas and (if available) a spare handset. Platoon medics carried a comprehensive first aid kit.

# *Appendix 4*

## Key Appointments

### COMMANDING OFFICERS

Lieutenant Colonel E.H. Smith, DSO	1 Sep '65–24 Nov '68
Lieutenant Colonel R.A. Grey, DSO	25 Nov '68–10 Mar '71
Major R.A. O'Brien	11 Mar '71–14 May '71 (Administering Command)
Major J.J. Farry	15 May '71–18 Jul '71 (Administering Command)
Lieutenant Colonel I.B. Mackay	19 Jul '71–18 Mar '73
Lieutenant Colonel P.N. Greenhalgh	19 Mar '73–3 Dec '73

### REGIMENTAL SERGEANT MAJORS

Warrant Officer Class One H.D. Clively	10 Sep '65–21 Aug '66
Warrant Officer Class One A.P. Thompson, MBE	22 Aug '66–8 Jan '68
Warrant Officer Class Two J.L. Mahoney	9 Jan '68 –21 Jul '68 (Acting)
Warrant Officer Class One R.A. Bandy, MBE	22 Jul '68–27 May '71
Warrant Officer Class One D.C. Muir	28 May '71–21 Sep '73
Warrant Officer Class One B.M. Cox	22 Sep '73–3 Dec '73

# *Notes*

## **Chapter 1**

1. Pulheems (an acronym for physical, upper limbs, lower limbs, hearing, eyes (right), eyes (left), mental and stability (emotional)) Employment Standard CZE (Communication Zone Everywhere), a lesser standard of overall medical fitness than the highest FE (Fit Everywhere).
2. The highest precedence for a military signal, 'reserved for initial enemy contact messages or operational combat messages of extreme urgency'.

## **Chapter 2**

1. Another account attributes the elephant bath to the Khymer empire which occupied this area prior to the seventeenth century. See Gration, p. 37.
2. I am indebted to Mr Colin Dengate and Mr Jack Thorpe for confirmation of this information.
3. Paludrine was the malarial suppressant taken twice daily by all Australian soldiers in Vietnam, until the final fortnight of their tour when 'happy pills' were taken.

## **Chapter 3**

1. 1 RAR, 2 RAR and 3 RAR had paraded together on 21 March 1953 in Korea at Camp Casey for the Commander of 28th Brigade, Brigadier T. J. Daly.
2. A search and destroy operation aimed to seek out and destroy enemy forces, their installations, resources and base areas.



## Chapter 4

1. Corporal Hayes died instantly after being shot in the forehead.
2. The machine gunner was Private Desmond Noel Burley,
3. As well as Corporal Hayes, Corporal Aylett, Private Harstad (died of wounds) and Private O'Connor previously mentioned, those who were killed in action were: Private Edward Francis Brophy and Private David Geoffrey Milford.
4. Those wounded were: Corporal Reginald Jason Atkin, RAAMC (the Dustoff medic), Private Denis Francis Bathersby, MID, Private Donald Richard Brown, Private Desmond Noel Burley, Private Anthony George Carr, Private Allan Edward Collins, Private George David Cossey, Squadron Leader James Henry Cox, DFC (the Dustoff pilot), Private Brian James Cruikshank, Private Keith Ronald Downward, MM, Lance Corporal Leigh James Fischer, Private Harold James Hayes, Private Lawrence Howard Hoppner, Private Jeffrey Colin Horwood, Private F.A. Matthews, Private Keith Leslie O'Neill, Private Christopher George Reinertsen, Second Lieutenant Graham Henry Ross, MC, Sergeant Alexander David Sutherland, DCM, Corporal Gordon Desmond Tredrea, MID, and Private William John Wellby.

## Chapter 5

1. Those wounded were: Private Kevin Harold Anderton, Private Neville William Brown, Private Robert John Craven, Private David George Cossey, Lance Corporal Richard Bruce Dando, RAAMC, Lieutenant Ian Maxwell Gay and Private Allan Arthur Herbert.
2. Those wounded were: Corporal Richard Frederick Bailey, Private Kenneth Douglas Braidwood, Private Leslie George Brown, Private Patrick William Caffery, Lance Corporal Wayne John Cooper, Private John Morton Cowan, Private Tony Maxwell Edwards, Private Gordon John 'Ned' Falconer, Private Bruce Colin Godfrey, Private Douglas Charles Harrison, Private Robert David McNeilly, Private Donald James Malam, Private Alan Lloyd Musicka, Private Robert Frank Richards, Private Robert Bruce Simpson, Second Lieutenant James Francis Slavin, Private Brian Ernest Tempest, Private Peter John Tucker and Lance Corporal Stanley Joseph Whitford.

## Chapter 6

1. Those wounded were: Corporal Innes Alexander Bessant, Private John Samuel Davies, Lance Corporal Paul John Deimos, Private Keith Edward Gent, Private Alfred N. Hawken, Private Clive Ronald Percival and Private Peter Paul Stromski.
2. Those wounded were: Private Philip James Brown, Private Leonard Gordon Buckley, Private Gordon Cameron,

Private Max Frederick Clothier, Corporal Allen Brian Clutterbuck, Private Malcolm Robert Merrick, Second Lieutenant Brendan Paul O'Brien, Corporal Richard Portlock, Corporal Glen Preston and Private Michael Francis Walsh.

3. The wounded were: Private John Hart, Private Kenneth Kelly, Corporal Barry Laurenceson, Private Warren George Madden, Private Donald Mantach, Private Robert Stoddart and Lieutenant Ivan (Neil) Turner.
4. Those wounded in this action were: Private Hilbertus Baayens, Lance Corporal Thomas John Clarke, Corporal Edwin Stanislaw Czezinski, Corporal Frederick Guyan Henderson, Private Anthony John Hughes, Lance Corporal Donald Flint Lamb, Warrant Officer Class Two Edwin Stephen Lewis, Lieutenant Mark Augustine Moloney, Lance Corporal Barry James O'Dea, Private John Patrick Sargent, Private Graham Michael Shephard, Private Alan John Smith, Private Graham Steele and Gunner Michael Bernard Williams.

## Chapter 9

1. Those wounded were: Private Kevin John Cuthbertson, Private Graham J. Edwards, Private Ronald Ian Howell, Lance Corporal Rodney Lance Mason, Private John Alexander Salmond and Private Leonard Arthur Schulz. Private Salmond was evacuated to Australia.

## Chapter 10

1. The wounded were: Private R. Bye, Private Allan Howarth, Corporal John Lawson, Second Lieutenant Karl Metcalf and Private Colin Tilmouth.
2. The others wounded were: Sergeant Peter Diamond, Private Dale Marshall, Private Bob Matulick and Private Frank Wood.
3. The wounded were: Private David Attwood (Support Company), Lance Corporal Leroy Collins, Private Geoff House, Private Bill Kennedy (Support Company), Private Dennis Knight, Private Barry Leesue, Corporal Mark Powell, Private John Truan and Private Dennis Warren (Support Company) and two members of A Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment and a trooper from B Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment.

## Chapter 14

1. Questionnaire reply from 4720463 Private Samuel Campbell Ward, PhD, born 19 December 1948, agriculturalist, National Service soldier and scientist, of Bicton WA.

# Glossary

The purpose of this glossary is to record some of the slang used by Australian soldiers in Vietnam and to list some of the more common military jargon. The slang terms and their meanings have been submitted by members of the battalion—there is often disagreement on spelling, sometimes on meaning.

The advice given by Dr Bruce Moore of the Australian Defence Force Academy is gratefully acknowledged.

**Albatross** the Australian callsign for the RAAF Bell Iroquois (Huey) helicopters that provided troop transport support; the helicopters themselves

**baggy or baggy arse** a private soldier, sometimes applied to subalterns

**brass up** to shoot or to pour unaimed fire into an area

**Bushranger** the Australian callsign for the RAAF Bell Iroquois (Huey) helicopters that provided gunship support; the helicopters themselves

**Charlie** the Viet Cong, from the military phonetic alphabet 'Victor Charlie'

**Chien Hoi** in Vietnamese 'open arms', and hence an enemy who has stopped fighting and has returned to live under South Vietnamese Government authority under the 'Open Arms' program. The first word is pronounced like 'chew', the second word rhymes with 'boy'

**Choges** Vietnamese people. Rhymes with rogues

**choofer** a small petrol-fuelled stove or the much larger improvised apparatus to heat water for showers

**ch crunchie** an infantryman

**clacker** the hand-held device that generated the electricity to detonate a claymore mine; named for the sound it made

**clanger** a soldier who had qualified for his second medal for service in Vietnam, generally having served more than six months 'in country'. The two medals 'clanged' together

**claymore in a tin** the contents of the can of ham and lima beans in the US 'C' rations, named for the digestive after-effect and its comparison with the explosive mine

**click** 1 km

**daisy cutter** a heavy bomb detonated above the ground to produce maximum over-pressure

**di di mau** to go away, from the Vietnamese

**duster** a US M42 tracked vehicle fitted with a turret with twin 40 mm guns

**Dustoff** helicopter evacuation of wounded

**feature** a hill or identifiable aid to navigation

**gat** a rifle: abbreviated from Gatling (gun). Rhymes with mat

**goffer** a can of soft drink

**gollick** a machete

**gonk** to doze off

**gunship** an armed helicopter and occasionally a Landrover mounted with a GPMG M60 machine gun

**hook in** to attack, to get really involved in a course of action. Derived from the perceived advantages of a flanking attack

**happy pills** the fortnight-long course of anti-malarial tablets (chloroquine and primaquine) taken just prior to return to Australia

**Hardrock** the radio appointment title used by the Commander, 1st Australian Task Force

**hepatitis roll** a locally baked bread roll with hard crust

**Hoi Chanh** a returnee under the Chieu Hoi program (the first word rhymes with 'boy', the second with 'khan')

**hutchie** the small tent-like shelter sometimes used by Australian soldiers. Probably from a Japanese word for my house (*utchi*) used by Australian soldiers in British Commonwealth Occupation Force Japan

**in country** in South Vietnam

**It's on the next Jeparit** We don't have one and it may never arrive. An excuse based on the fact that HMAS *Jeparit* was used to move many stores items to South Vietnam

**J** the jungle

**Maintdem** a routine Maintenance Demand for resupply

**Mousetrap** a request from one unit or sub-unit to cross or to move close to the boundary of another – a means of preventing friendly clashes

**munger** food

**Nasho** (in the battalion at least) an affectionate term for a National Serviceman

**Niner** the Commanding Officer, derived from his radio callsign

**nogs or noggies** somewhat derogatory terms for Vietnamese

**Noticas** a 'notifiable casualty' or the procedure used to officially inform a soldier's next of kin of the occurrence of such a casualty

**Opdem** an Operational Demand for urgent resupply, particularly for ammunition

- pit** a fighting trench or (by transference) a collective noun for the two soldiers who would occupy a fighting position
- poach** to seek permission to enter the area of operations of another unit or sub-unit
- pogo** a 'base wallah', particularly a non-infantry soldier or one stationed at Vung Tau. Perhaps related to the World War 1 term for an infantryman – 'pongo'
- Porky 7** the nickname used for the battalion helicopter landing zone within the lines at Nui Dat, derived from the battalion mascot
- Possum** the radio callsign assigned to the Australian Army Sioux OH-13 light observation helicopters used in direct support of the battalion and particularly by the Commanding Officers; the helicopter itself
- prop** to halt temporarily. perhaps derived from clothes prop
- Red Haze** an airborne infra-red sensor to detect men or equipment
- Reg** a Regular Army soldier (rhymes with leg)
- Reo** a reinforcement soldier or officer, most often from 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit
- Shadow** US Air Force AC-119 equipped with three miniguns, used primarily to provide fire support at night
- silk** the light nylon sleeping bag shaped 'Blanket Bed Inner', used as a hot weather sleeping bag
- Skipper** a respectful term for a platoon commander
- slopes** a derogatory term for Vietnamese
- Sniffer** a helicopter-mounted sensor designed to be able to detect human presence by chemical analysis of body odours
- Spooky** a US Air Force AC-47 (Dakota) equipped with multiple 7.62 mm mini (Gatling) guns and a searchlight providing a spectacular and awesome sight at night
- Sunray** the radio appointment title for a leader at any level, meant to provide low level cover for the actual level; often meaning the battalion Commanding Officer
- tail – end charlie** the last man in a patrol
- The Funny Farm** Vietnam – because it was not funny at all
- The Dat** the 1st Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat
- toggle rope** the rope with two looped ends issued to each soldier ('Rope Assembly General Purpose'). An earlier version used in Malaya had a wooden toggle – the nickname was continued
- Uc Dai Loi** A Vietnamese version of the Mandarin Chinese transliteration of the word 'Australia'
- ulu** the bush; Malay for upstream
- Vui Tui** the pocket-sized green plastic-covered Army issued 'Books Display General Purpose' of transparent plastic envelopes, used to store codes or Standing Operating Procedures extracts and keep them protected from the weather. Both syllables rhyme with Louie. Derived from a nickname for the model for this item, purchased by soldiers at Baria, called 'Views and Tours', from which photos were discarded and military contents substituted until the Army produced and issued the replacement item

**Vungers** the 1st Australian Logistic Support Group base at Vung Tau; Vung Tau itself

**wakey** the final night's sleep in a tour of duty, e.g. 'fifteen and a wakey' meant fifteen days to go plus the last night; rhymes with snaky

**Wallaby** a nickname for RAAF Caribou: 'Wallaby Airlines' – an affectionate name for the RAAF

**Warburtons** a nickname for the Nui Thi Vai and Nui Dinh hills south west of Nui Dat, probably derived from the early 1960s song which included the lines 'They say don't go on Warburton Mountain if you're looking for a fight'

**White Mice** South Vietnamese civilian police, who wore a white uniform

**Xin Loi** sorry about that, from the Vietnamese. Xin is pronounced 'sin' and Loi rhymes with 'boy'

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