



THE BATTLE OF LONG TAN

18 AUGUST 1966

Fred Fairhead



**For those that were there -
be they Infantrymen, Artillerymen or
Cavalrymen**

Front Cover

Long Tan Cross 18 August 1969. Original members of D Company form a Guard of Honour – from L to R: Cpl RD Brown, LCpl MG Campbell, Cpl BR Reilly, Sgt JE Beere, Cpl WJ O'Rourke (3 APC Troop), Sgt NJ Rankin, Cpl GR Richardson, Cpl WA Akell, Cpl B Halls and Cpl WA Roche. Another veteran, Cpl ID Munro, was absent because he had been seriously wounded by an M16 mine a few days earlier. The Pipers are Cpl DG Newland (left) and Cpl GJ Black (right).

Back Cover

The Long Tan Cross and the Honour Roll of those who died.

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The Battle of Long Tan

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Also by the Author:

- Old Guildfordians who served in the Korean War 1950-1956 (July 2010).
- A Potted History of The Royal Australian Regiment in the Korean War 1950-1953 (2011).
- Old Guildfordians who served in the Vietnam War 1962-1972 (June 2011).
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Preface

This booklet is an extract from: *The History of the Sixth Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment – Volume I (1965 – 1970)*, sponsored by the 6RAR Association. Its purpose is to use contemporaneous information, including from Brig Ernie Chamberlain's (Retd) scholarly translation and critical analysis of 'enemy' historical histories such as *5VC Division* and *D445 VC Battalion* and from de-classified Signals Intelligence sources to provide an updated description, not only of the battle but also the events that occurred before and after the battle. This material has also allowed some conclusions regarding what the probable enemy's intentions were at the time and are described at **End Note 3**.

I am particularly grateful for the help Bill Roche gave me in preparing the booklet. Bill was in 10 Platoon at the battle and I was privileged to serve with him, together with many other veterans of the battle when I was commanding D Company at the Jungle Training Centre Canungra in 1967/68.

Most of the source material for this work was taken from the digitised War Diaries online at the Australian War Memorial. In addition I acknowledge material provided by Ernie Chamberlain and those veterans of the battle who provided useful information on the battle, ie: Frank Alcorta, Bob Buick, Brian McFarlane, John O'Halloran, David Sabben and Harry Smith. It enabled me to prepare a more accurate description of the battle, ie more like how it actually evolved which is not always possible to do from official documents such as Operation Logs etc which don't tell you the why and the wherefore.

I also wanted to emphasise the critical role artillery support had in the battle and to that end I would like to thank Brig Kevin O'Brien (Retd) for his help in clarifying how it all happened including coordinating advice from a number of old gunners such as Jim Townley, Ian Darlington, Greg Gilbert and especially John Jansen who provided invaluable material from the Forward Observer (the late Maurie Stanley) and from a 105 Field Battery Gun Sergeant – Jim King. Ubique.

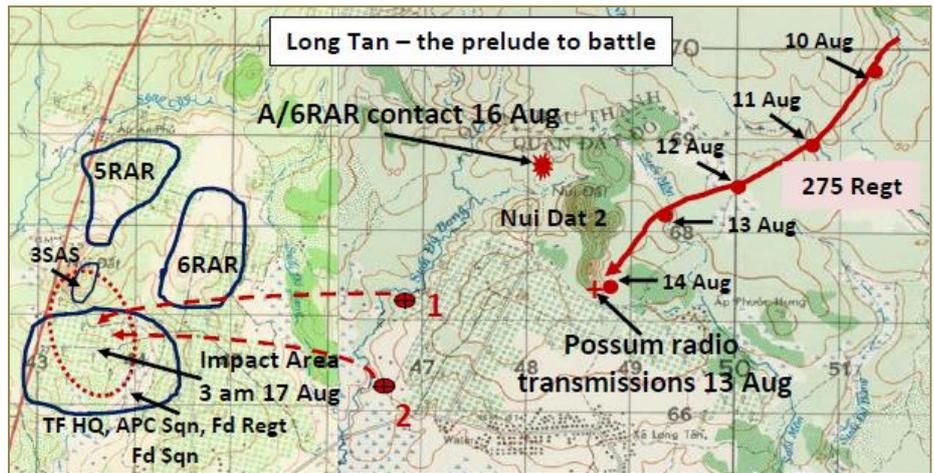
Fred Fairhead
Erindale, South Australia
March 2019

Battle of Long Tan

Prelude to Battle: 13-17 August

The encounter battle between an Australian Infantry Company and 275 VC Main Force Regiment (which included an NVA battalion that had become the Regiment's 3rd Battalion in April 1966, ie D605 NVA Battalion), supported by D445 VC Battalion, was preceded by some poor decision making at Headquarters 1 Australian Task Force (HQ 1ATF). While acknowledging the enormous pressure on the Task Force at the time, it needs to be noted there were at least three events not given the importance they deserved.

- The first was information being provided by Signals Intelligence to HQ 1ATF was not properly interpreted except by a junior Intelligence Officer (*Capt RM Keep*) who had been medevaced due to illness on 10 August 1966. He and the Officer Commanding the Detachment 547 Signals Troop (*Capt TJ Richards*) both held the strong view a Main Force formation, specifically 275 Regt, was gradually moving on Nui Dat from the east and had been tracked by US airborne direction-finding aircraft—see [timelines on the map for 10 to 14 August](#). Also, about midday on 13 August, a 161 Recce Flt 'Possum' helicopter while flying over Long Tan had detected radio transmissions from the base of Nui Dat 2 (see [map](#)). 6RAR reported this to HQ 1ATF and that the area had been engaged by artillery.



Signals Intelligence from the US 173rd Airborne Brigade on *Operation Toledo* in the south-east of Long Khanh Province had also advised that on 14 August the Headquarters of 5 VC Division was located north of Xuyen Moc about 20 kilometres east of the Task Force Base. This advice was known to Detachment 547 Signals Troop which provided further evidence to HQ1ATF when on the night of 15/16 August an Intercept Operator (*LCpl KL Lever*) had monitored a heavy increase in radio traffic from 275 Regt's Headquarters.

All of this was essentially ignored by HQ 1ATF or, at best, ineptly managed. (See also [End Note 1 regarding the use of Signals Intelligence](#)).

- The second event was a contact by A Company 6RAR on 16 August near Nui Dat 2 (see [map](#)) which was stated to have been with "Main Force wearing green uniforms" and at the same time reported 'radio jamming'; a report which combined with the earlier Signals Intelligence should have set off alarm bells, which it didn't.
- The third occurred in the early hours of 17 August when the south and south-east of the Task Force Base was shelled by 82mm mortars (65+ rounds), 75mm recoilless rifles (23 rounds) and a 70mm Japanese Mountain Gun. Again, this should have alerted HQ 1ATF to the strong likelihood Main Force and possibly NVA were dangerously close to the Task Force Base. At the time, 5RAR was some 5 kilometres north on *Operation Holsworthy*, a Cordon and Search of Binh Ba and 6RAR had several company patrols and ambushes in the field (See also [End Note 2 regarding additional notes on the assessment of the enemy threat in August 1966](#)).

At first light on 17 August, B Company 6RAR (*Maj NE Ford*) commenced to patrol to locate the enemy's firing positions and by 8 am had located the mortar firing position for 5 mortars (1). Patrolling by elements of all 6RAR companies (except D Company) continued into 18 August and at about 10 am a B

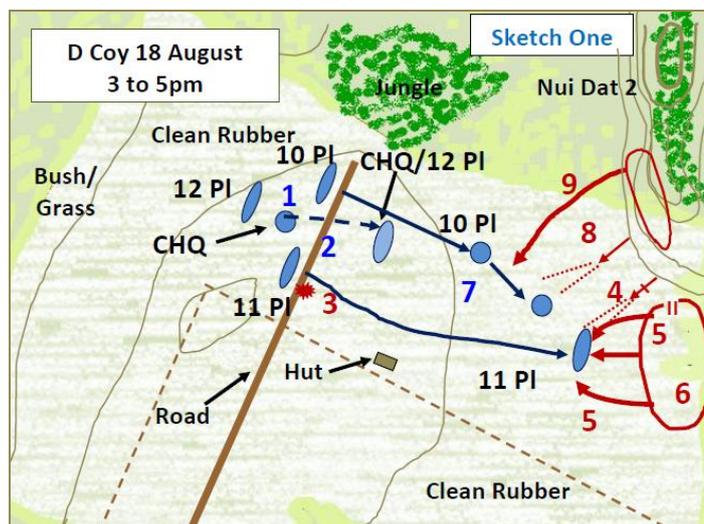
Company section strength patrol (*Cpl RW Jones*) located the 75mm recoilless rifle firing position for three weapons (2). D Company (*Maj HA Smith*) was then tasked to replace B Company in the hunt for the mortar and recoilless rifle crews on what was called *Operation Vendetta*. By this time the B Company patrol had been reduced to the Company Headquarters and a single platoon (*2Lt JP O'Halloran*) after some 50 men returned to Nui Dat for Rest and Convalescence (R&C) leave at Vung Tau and a Concert Party was scheduled that afternoon at Nui Dat. (See End Note 4).

At about 1 pm on 18 August, D Company rendezvoused with the B Company patrol which then left for Nui Dat. After examining the information provided by earlier patrols on enemy tracks, at 3 pm D Company began a cautious advance, initially in 'arrowhead formation' with 10 Platoon (*2Lt GM Kendall*) leading, 12 Platoon (*2Lt DR Sabben*) left rear and 11 Platoon (*2Lt GC Sharp*) right rear. After about 300 metres the formation was changed to two platoons up as shown on See Sketch One (1). The company was then advancing on a wide front (about 500 metres) which, as the battle unfolded, was a distinct advantage because the enemy would not have been able to engage the company as a whole and indeed as it turned out was to have difficulty in locating the whole company during its assaults.

The Company Commander's aim was to reach the jungle on the east of the rubber by nightfall as he preferred the better security provided by close country over rubber. D Company was familiar with the ground to be crossed to Nui Dat 2 because it had moved over it three weeks earlier on its way to the Battalion assembly area on Operation Hobart and on 15 August had patrolled to the base of Nui Dat 2.

But of course the company had no inkling a reinforced VC Main Force Regiment was already there. Thus the scene was set for what was undoubtedly the fiercest company action of the war, starting late in the afternoon, reaching its peak at the darkest period of the month and in the middle of the heaviest rainstorm for months. (See also End Note 3 regarding probable enemy intentions at Long Tan).

The Battle Commences: 18 August



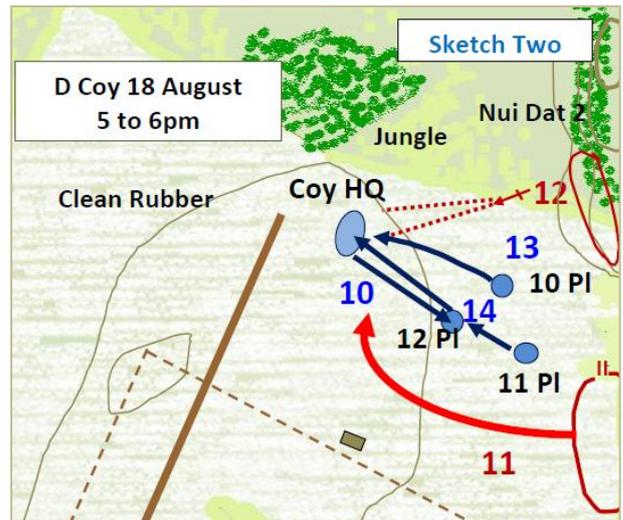
At about 3.30 pm, the forward platoons were carrying out an obstacle crossing drill over a 25 metre wide road gap - Sketch One (2) when 11 Platoon contacted what was probably an enemy patrol or screen (3). 11 Platoon swept through the contact area and passed a hut thought to have been occupied; at about 4 pm as 11 Platoon continued to advance on a broad front to the east, the left forward section came under fire including from a heavy machine gun (4), killing and wounding several men. The Platoon Commander (*2Lt GC Sharp*) strove to deploy the platoon in a defensive position and called and directed artillery onto the enemy which were now attacking on the platoon's front and both flanks. The enemy,

assault was by three platoon size groups (5) using fire and movement from probably two enemy companies which, it turned out, had been located in an enemy battalion size defensive position (6). These attacks caused heavy casualties, including the Platoon Commander and most, if not all, of the men in the left forward section. One of the wounded, a machine-gunner (*Pte RM Eglinton*), remained at his post and engaged attack after attack until his gun stopped, choked with mud. In the centre of the platoon, the 2iC of 4 Section (*LCpl BE Magnussen*) courageously, directed the fire of the machine gun (*Pte ID Munro*), carried a wounded man to safety (*Pte BC Meller*) and retrieved machine gun ammunition; his command of the situation helped prevent the Platoon from being overrun.

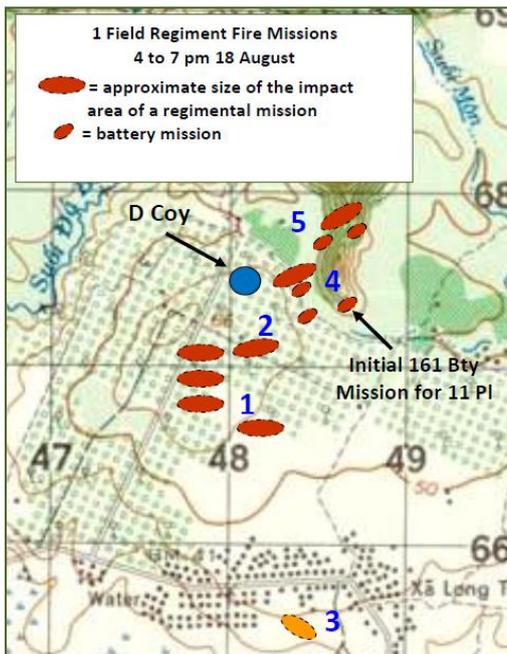
10 Platoon was ordered to move south to assist 11 Platoon (7), now commanded by the Platoon Sergeant (*Sgt RS Buick*) but ran into heavy small arms fire (8) and was attacked from the north-east (9). The 10 Platoon radio operator (*Pte BG Hornung*) was wounded and his radio destroyed; a replacement

was taken from Company Headquarters by a company signaller (*Pte WA Akell*) who moved to 10 Platoon under heavy fire, killing two enemy soldiers on the way.

12 Platoon (*2Lt DR Sabben*) less one section was ordered to move south-east to assist 11 Platoon and ran into enemy trying to outflank 11 Platoon - (See **Sketch Two**) (10). By now (about 5 pm) the enemy was threatening the right flank of 12 Platoon and moving toward the Company from the south (11); Company Headquarters was also receiving heavy machine gun fire from the north-east (12) and 10 Platoon had withdrawn to the company position with its wounded under skilful and courageous covering fire by one of its machine-gunners (*Pte IM Campbell*) (13). Artillery support had been called from the outset and 11 Platoon, having held off the enemy attacks with a combination of its own weapons skills, the artillery support and strong leadership, now fought its way back through and then with 12 Platoon, into the company defensive position (14). This was without the 38 years old 12 Platoon Sergeant (*Sgt J Todd*) however, who being wounded in both ankles and believing he might hinder the Platoon's withdrawal had, without telling anyone, commenced to crawl back, arriving just after the platoons. During this time the leadership by an 11 Platoon Section Commander (*Cpl WR Moore*) was instrumental in repulsing enemy attacks against the beleaguered platoon and by the leadership of the 11 Platoon Sergeant (*Sgt RS Buick*) in fighting the withdrawal of the remaining men through the enemy and into 12 Platoon.



Artillery



6RAR's Direct Support Battery was 161 Battery Royal New Zealand Artillery (RNZA) and the Forward Observer Party attached to D Company comprised *Captain MD Stanley RNZA*, *LBdr MN Broomhall RNZA* and *LCpl WG Walker RNZAC*. From the outset this well drilled team, together with the Battery Commander (*Maj HB Honnor*), were instrumental in calling in concentrated, intense and accurate artillery fire over the three-hour period the main battle was fought.

After the initial battery fire mission called by the 11 Platoon Commander, who as mentioned earlier was killed while adjusting the fire, the Platoon Sergeant and the Forward Observer then coordinated artillery support. A short time later the battery fire mission was upgraded by the Forward Observer to make use of all available artillery, ie all three field batteries of 1 Field Regiment. Over the next three hours the company received a series of 'Fire Mission Regiment' ie, combined barrages from 1 Field Regiment's 161, 103 and 105 Field Batteries. This was the first time in Vietnam that supporting artillery had been required to provide this level of

fire support at such a high rate of fire to troops in contact with the enemy. Indeed it was probably the first time this level of fire support from Australian artillery had occurred since World War Two.

The map describes most of the 'Fire Mission Regiment' which in many cases involved 10 rounds fire for effect (FFE) which meant about 200 rounds impacting in the area shown in just a few minutes eg (1) and (2) fired to fend off the enemy attacks against the company position. Some of the battery fire missions are also shown, eg (4) when the Forward Observer shifted one of the batteries onto the heavy

machine guns engaging D Company from the left flank. These missions resulted in massive enemy casualties, had helped prevent 11 Platoon from being overrun and then provided D Company with the defensive edge to hold its ground against determined enemy attacks.

Because of quality assurance concerns with the US manufactured ammunition, rounds were selected from the same batch for what were 'close target missions'. In addition the guns fired only *HE fuze quick* which in passing over the top of D Company and through the rubber trees caused tree bursts, a nightmare for the enemy infantry as the momentum of the rounds meant the shrapnel fell into the waves of the advancing enemy. Only one D Company soldier was wounded by artillery (*Pte JC Cash*).

Several counter mortar fire (3) and depth missions were also fired by the six 155mm howitzers of Battery A, 2/35 Battalion US Artillery (*Capt GT Eure*) located with 1 Field Regiment at Nui Dat.

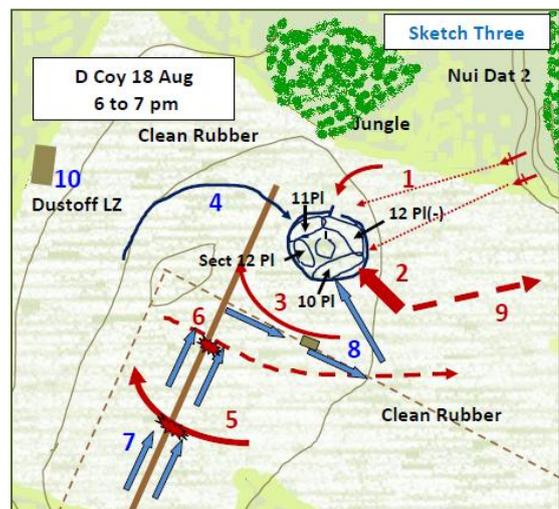
At about 6 pm, during a lull in the fighting, D Company received a much-needed resupply of ammunition by RAAF Iroquois (*Flt Lt FP Riley and Flt Lt CM Dohle*), skillfully flown in very poor flying conditions. OC Administrative Company (*Maj OJ O'Brien*) and the RSM (*WO1 GE Chinn*) in one chopper and two Administrative Company soldiers in the other (*Cpl WR McCutchen and Cfn R Service*) pushed out ammunition boxes wrapped in blankets which landed next to the CSM (*WO2 JW Kirby*). The coloured smoke used for the resupply also helped guide 12 Platoon into the company position which in turn had thrown smoke for 11 Platoon to help guide it back through 12 Platoon.

The company position was then as shown on **Sketch Three**, ie with 10 and 12 Platoons facing the main enemy attacks which recommenced a short time later in the form of heavy machine gun fire and assaults from the north-east (1) and major assaults from the south-east (2).

The attacks were repulsed by: the steadfastness of the soldiers, several showing extraordinary leadership and courage such as *Ptes GM Peters and WA Roche* in 10 Platoon and *Ptes NR Bextrum and NJ Grimes* in 12 Platoon; from inspired leadership by the Company Commander (*Maj HA Smith*), the Commanders of 10 and 12 Platoons (*2Lts GM Kendall and DR Sabben*); and, the continuous, heavy and accurate artillery fire. That the gunners were able to sustain their support was in itself a tremendous effort. The weather at the gun lines in Nui Dat was appalling with lightning strikes cutting communications, heavy rain obscuring gun aiming points and causing cordite fumes to concentrate at toxic levels that affected individual soldiers. Because of the intense rate of fire there were also problems with maintaining the supply of ammunition to the guns and administrative personnel were needed to carry rounds from the Regiment's ammunition dump to the Gun Line.

The CSM (*WO2 JW Kirby*) was also courageously distributing ammunition, supervising the collection and treatment of casualties and carrying wounded to the Company Aid Post. At Company Headquarters the Company Medic (*Cpl PN Dobson*) also moved fearlessly among the wounded treating many under fire and saving their lives. The company was deployed on a slight reverse slope which meant much of the enemy fire passed overhead and, in attempting to close with the forward platoons, the enemy assault waves were decimated by the artillery barrages; those who got through were destroyed by the forward sections.

The enemy tried unsuccessfully to encircle D Company (3) and at about that time (7 pm) the B Company patrol which had been waiting (under orders) to the south-west since the original contact moved into the company position (4). Elements of *D445 VC Battalion* were in the rubber plantation about a kilometre south of D Company (5) and a second company was withdrawing east (6). Fortuitously, the reinforcement group from Nui Dat, ie 3 Troop, 1 APC Squadron (*Lt FA Roberts*) which, after being delayed waiting for the 6RAR Tactical Headquarters to join it, had finally made it to the



battlefield with A Company 6RAR (*Capt CS Mollison*) embarked (7). The group ran into the enemy companies and under the leadership of the Troop Commander destroyed much of them with .50cal heavy machine guns. Just after contact was made with the enemy an APC commanded by *Cpl JA Carter* was engaged by a 57mm Recoilless Rifle. *Cpl Carter* returned fire with his .50cal machine gun and when the weapon jammed he grabbed the Driver's Owen Machine Carbine and killed the recoilless rifle crew plus another five enemy soldiers. On the right flank, one of the 2 Platoon (*Lt PM Dinham*) APCs came across some enemy in long grass who fired at them and threw grenades. The Platoon Sergeant (*Sgt FX Alcorta*) and a machine-gunner (*Pte RH Brett*) left the APC and charged at the enemy causing them to flee. One of the APC crew commanders (*Cpl PE Clements*) was wounded in the attack and died a week later (See also End Note 5). The APC Troop chased the enemy withdrawing east before turning back into D Company's position (8) at about 7.10 pm.

In hindsight, it is reasonable to presume the main enemy group had already had enough pain from the stubborn defence by D Company, the heroics of several individuals and especially the devastating artillery barrages and was already in the process of withdrawing from the field of battle (9) (some 3,500 rounds of 105mm HE had been fired by 1 Field Regiment's batteries and 10,000 rounds of small arms ammunition by D Company). Clearly, however, the arrival of the APC Troop with A Company gave urgency to that withdrawal.

The company regrouped and made arrangements to move its casualties in APCs to a Landing Zone (LZ) (10). The LZ was secured by about 11 pm and ringed by APCs with their internal lights showing through the cargo hatch to mark the LZ area. Seven Dustoff helicopters arrived in quick succession from about midnight evacuating 17 wounded (5 seriously) and four dead who had been killed during the attacks on the Company position (*Pte RA Aldersea, LCpl J Jewry and Pte MR Wales from 10 Platoon and Pte PA Large from 12 Platoon*). Fifteen men from 11 Platoon also remained missing in action.

Under covering artillery fire the remainder of the group (A and B Companies) moved to join D Company arriving about 1.30 am on 19 August. The battle had ended but the threat of further enemy action was on the minds of all including those manning the defences at the Task Force Base. 5RAR less C Company had returned to Nui Dat from Binh Ba on 18 August just prior to the departure of D Company 6RAR on *Operation Vendetta*. It was now spread thinly with only two rifle companies (six platoons) because D Company (*Maj PN Greenhalgh*) was on standby as a reaction force to support 6RAR at Long Tan. Three of 5RAR's platoons were deployed to defend other unit areas thus only three platoons were now defending about a kilometre of the battalion's perimeter. In 6RAR's area there was only C Company (*Maj BW McFarlane*) plus two 5RAR platoons attempting to defend about one and half kilometres of perimeter. If ever Army Headquarters needed convincing that a third battalion for 1 ATF was needed as soon as one became available, this surely was the moment!

Operation Smithfield: 19-21 August

At 11 pm on the 18 August, while casualties were still being evacuated the action was designated as *Operation Smithfield*. Orders for the operation were issued by CO 6RAR at 3.15 am on 19 August as a search and destroy operation to the east of the Task Force area. The APC Squadron and a company of 5RAR were placed under operational command of 6RAR for the task.

The operation commenced at first light on 19 August with C Company (*Maj BW McFarlane*) moving by APC and D Company 5RAR (*Maj PN Greenhalgh*) flown by helicopter to the Battalion concentration area (see map page 8) – that was completed by about 8 am. D Company 5RAR then mounted in APCs and deployed to secure the eastern flank where the main enemy position had been.

Before then, D Company had been anxious to move out to 11 Platoon's position to recover the missing men but had been delayed because the Task Force Commander insisted on visiting first!

Eventually D Company followed by C Company commenced a cautious advance back into the battlefield where it was to discover a scene of complete horror. The extent of the massive casualties inflicted by artillery and the small arms of D Company was evident immediately - hundreds of enemy dead lay where they had fallen on the battlefield and signs that many more had been killed or seriously

wounded. The scene was that of a charnel house and to their credit the men of D Company pressed on with the task of examining enemy bodies – yesterday they had all faced death in the face – today they were faced with the horrors of the real images of death on the battlefield.

A short time later D Company discovered the missing men from 11 Platoon; 13 were dead lying in a straight line behind their weapons—a situation Laurence Binyon wrote in 'For the Fallen' *"they fell with their faces to the foe"*. Those who died in the initial contact and during subsequent enemy attacks against 11 Platoon were: *Pte GA Drabble, Pte KH Gant, Pte EF Grant, Pte VR Grice, Pte JM Houston, Pte AF McCormack, Pte DJ McCormack, Pte WD Mitchell, Pte DJ Salveron, 2Lt GC Sharp, Pte DJ Thomas, Pte FB Topp and Pte CJ Whiston*. Incredibly two wounded men were also found (*Pte BC Meller and Pte JP Richmond*) who were subsequently medevaced to Australia together with another eleven men who had been seriously wounded that day (*Pte JC Cash, Pte RC Carne, Pte GR Davis, Pte BD Firth, Pte BJ Hornung, Cpl TH Lea, Pte BC Meller, LCpl JC Robbins, Pte JP Richmond, LCpl DA Spencer, Sgt J Todd and Pte HP Webb*).



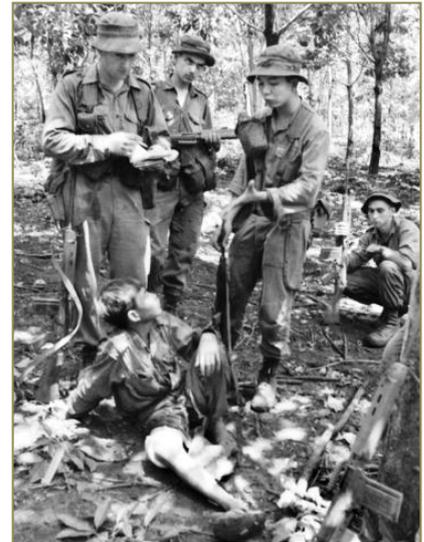
Left: One of the missing 11 Platoon soldiers, Pte JP (Jimmy) Richmond being treated by LCpl GR (Geordie) Richardson with Sgt RS (Bob) Buick looking on. Cpl Richardson served in Admin Company on the Second Tour.

AWM FOR/66/0664/VN

Among the many enemy dead were three wounded enemy who were taken prisoner, two from 275 VC Regiment and one from D445 VC Battalion. **See also End Note 6 regarding the fate of 275 VC Regiment)**

Right: A prisoner being questioned by the 6RAR Intelligence Officer – Capt BH (Bryan) Wickens (left) with Pte S (Stan) Hodder, a Vietnamese Interpreter and Pte DJ (David) Collins kneeling.

AWM FOR/66/0661/66



Left: Like ghosts in the rubber – this damaged photo has L-R: WO2 JW (Jack) Kirby, 2Lt GM (Geoff) Kendall and Pte WA (Bill) Akell, surveying the field of battle on 19 August 66.

Photograph courtesy of Bill (Yank) Akell

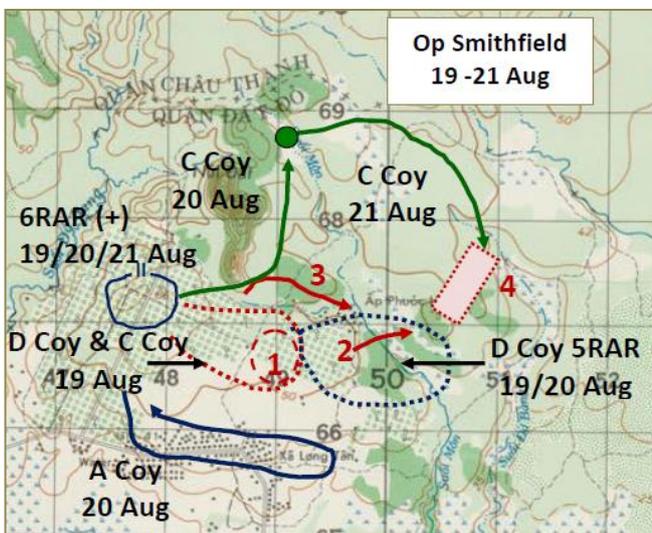
Right: 2Lt DR (David) Sabben OC 12 Platoon, looking over the battlefield - a captured heavy machine gun in the foreground. AWM FOR/66/0658/VN.



Left: Men from D Company resting in the Long Tan rubber with in the foreground Pte NR (Neil) Bextrum from 12 Platoon. AWM FOR/66/0670/66

Throughout 19 August, the companies continued to search and conduct battlefield clearance which as the day got hotter so did the stench of dead bodies. This was a most unpleasant job especially for C and D Companies. Large numbers of weapon pits and abandoned weapons were also discovered especially from where the enemy had launched its attacks – [see map \(1\)](#).

One of the weapons captured was a 57mm Recoilless Rifle which the prisoner from *D445 VC Battalion*



stated had been one from the Battalion's Heavy Weapons Platoon. Years later, in 1969 during Operation Mundingburra, a *D445 VC Battalion* Company Commander (*Nguyen Van Nhuong*) surrendered to the 6RAR Intelligence Officer (*Capt MF Fairhead*). During his interrogation he revealed he had been the Platoon Sergeant of the Platoon that had lost the weapon!

At about 8.30 pm on 19 August CO 6RAR issued new orders for 20 August, with [\(see map\)](#): A Company in APCs searching through Long Tan Village; B Company remaining at the Battalion base; C Company searching east of Nui Dat Two; while D Company 5RAR continued with its current task searching to the east. During the day D Company 5RAR and C Company located tracks

that had been heavily used during the enemy's withdrawal from the battlefield on the night of 18 August – see [\(2\)](#) and [\(3\)](#).

On 21 August, C Company moved farther east and was following a heavily used track when it discovered an enemy base camp [\(4\)](#). It contained about 200 weapon pits each with corrugated iron supporting Overhead Protection and was on the route taken by *275 VC Regiment* on 12 August [\(See map page 3\)](#). It had been occupied within the last few days and at the time it was thought the enemy withdrew north from it on the night of 20/21 August possibly because of a Dustoff for a sick C Company soldier that occurred at its night location some two kilometres to the north-east. The camp included 14 fresh graves and presumably they held the remains of enemy soldiers who had died from their wounds after withdrawing from Long Tan.

Later that afternoon the Battalion returned to Nui Dat and Operation Smithfield concluded. However, that wasn't to be the end of the hunt for *HQ 5 VC Division* and its two regiments (*274 and 275 VC Regiments*) because on 22 August the *173rd Airborne Brigade* area of operations for Operation Toledo

switched to the May Tao Base area and extending south into eastern Phuoc Tuy Province. Contact with the withdrawing enemy was however, fleeting though several headquarters base camps were destroyed and large numbers of weapons, equipment and rations were captured.

Having suffered hundreds of casualties, clearly the battle was a major defeat for the enemy Main Force elements in Phuoc Tuy Province at the time. This outcome allowed the Task Force to consolidate its defences at the Nui Dat Base, which was never again threatened by Main Force regimental size forces and the Australian presence in Phuoc Tuy Province would not be seriously challenged.

In a war where engagement with the enemy was mainly at company level, this battle stands out as the greatest challenge a Rifle Company of the Royal Australian Regiment faced during The Regiment's seven year involvement in the Vietnam War. The men of D Company had set a high standard for battlefield skills, leadership and courage.

Honours and Awards

The Army's policy for dealing with identifying and processing citations for bravery awards in Vietnam was disgraceful as much as it was unfair. That bravery awards should be allocated on a 'quota system' had no intellectual credibility and indeed was basically stupid. With respect to the awards for the Battle of Long Tan, there was one voice that persisted in getting it right – Harry Smith. Because of antiquated rules regarding declassification of Secret documents Harry had to wait 30 years until 1996 before he could take up the cudgels to get justice for his men. Together with support from Dave Sabben, Bob Buick, Bill Roche, Adrian Roberts and Bill Akell, Harry worked tirelessly to overcome bureaucratic hurdles and indifference by senior military officers to prepare a case which the Defence Honour and Awards Appeals Tribunal would approve in August 2016. Previously, in 2008 Prime Minister Howard convened a review but it only upgraded awards to officers and not the soldiers. Thus it was not until 50 years after the event, in August 2016 the men of D Company, 2 Platoon A Company and 3 Troop 1 APC Squadron received the awards they deserved.

All men who served in D Company were awarded the US Presidential Citation (1968) and subsequently, the Australian Unit Citation for Gallantry (2010) and the Vietnamese Unit Citation. Individual awards were:

- Maj HA Smith a Military Cross which in 2008 was upgraded to a Star of Gallantry.
- WO2 JW Kirby a Distinguished Conduct Medal ([See also End Note 7](#));
- Cpl JA Carter (3 Troop), a Distinguished Conduct Medal.
- Sgt RS Buick and Pte RM Eglinton a Military Medal.
- 2Lts GM Kendall and DR Sabben, Mentioned In Despatches which were upgraded to Medal for Gallantry (MG) in 2008.
- Capt MD Stanley, RNZA, Forward Observer, a Member of the British Empire.
- Mentioned In Despatches: Pte WA Akell; Cpl PN Dobson, RAAMC; Cpl WR Moore; Capt FA Roberts, Comd 3 Troop; LCpl WG Walker, (RNZAC), Forward Observer Radio Operator.

In 2004 several D Company men, were given approval to wear South Vietnamese honours:

- National Order of Vietnam: Maj HA Smith.
- Cross of Gallantry with Palm: 2Lt GM Kendall and 2Lt DR Sabben.
- Cross of Gallantry with Gold Star: Sgt RS Buick; LCpl BE Magnussen, Cpl WR Moore and LCpl WA Roche.
- Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star: Pte WA Akell; Pte NR Bextrum; Pte IM Campbell; LBdr TA Graham RNZA; Pte NJ Grimes; Pte AJ May; Pte GM Peters.

In August 2016, the Defence Honours and Awards Appeal Tribunal recommended the following awards which were approved by the Minister:

- Medal For Gallantry: Sgt FX Alcorta; LCpl BE Magnussen; Capt FA Roberts
- Commendation for Gallantry (MID): Pte NR Bextrum; Pte RH Brett; Pte IM Campbell; Pte NJ Grimes; Pte GM Peters; Pte WA Roche; 2Lt GC Sharp (Posthumously).



Epilogue: Government House 8 November 2016.
Front Row L-R: Adrian Roberts, Lady Cosgrove, Sir Peter Cosgrove, Harry Smith, Frank Alcorta, Bill Roche.
Back Row L-R: Andrew Sharp (Gordon Sharp's nephew), Geoff Peters, Neil Bextrum, Samantha Hayes (Barry Magnussens's daughter), Ian Campbell, Noel Grimes, Christopher Brett (Ron Brett's son)



“These boots are made for walking”

D Company Unit Citations awarded for the Battle of Long Tan



**Left to Right: Australian Unit Citation for Gallantry
US Presidential Citation
Vietnamese Unit Citation**

End Notes

1. Signals Intelligence. Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) is intelligence gathering by the interception of signals, either as communications between people or from electronic signals not directly used in communication. In Vietnam, HQ 1ATF had a Detachment of a RA Signals Corps Troop in direct support to provide it with SIGINT, ie Detachment 547 Signals Troop.

Vietnam was the first time such a capability had directly supported an Australian Army field formation and one of the consequences of that was intelligence derived from SIGINT sources was passed only to people who had been cleared to receive such material. In August 1966 that group consisted only of the Commander 1ATF, the GSO2 (Ops), GSO2 (Int) and the GSO3 (Int). Furthermore, because of the intense secrecy surrounding SIGINT only some Intelligence Corps Officers had any real understanding of how to use it. From mid-1966 however, some SIGINT was "sanitized" as 'Special Agent Reports' (SPAR) which passed approximate enemy locations to 1ATF combat elements. Overtime, the problem of secrecy was also overcome to some extent by clearing a wider group to receive the material, eg by mid-1969 Battalion COs and later in 1969 Battalion Intelligence Officers were cleared. However, often that intelligence was withheld from those who needed it to make tactical decisions.

Very little of the enemy's communications could be deciphered especially as they used One Time Letter Pads which if used correctly are nigh impossible to crack.; but one of the intelligence products that came from SIGINT in varying degrees of accuracy was the location of enemy units. Airborne Direction Finding Aircraft such as the USAF's EC-47 were used in obtaining 'fixes' on enemy transmitters and in 1ATF much of that was done by 161 Recce Flt using Cessna and later Pilatus Porter fixed wing aircraft.

It must be recognised that SIGINT in this form does not provide the complete picture but it certainly provides a good start on which to build, eg by aerial and ground reconnaissance.

2. Assessment of the Threat at Long Tan.

The Commander US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (General WC Westmoreland) had stated that protecting Route 15 to the west which carried much of the US Army's early deployments to Vietnam was to be a high priority. Naturally then, HQ 1ATF's attention was directed more to the west than the east. However, and with the benefit of hindsight it is difficult to understand why the potential threat to the Task Force Base from the east which developed through August 1966 was apparently not factored into the planning for Task Force operations, eg the deployment of nine SAS Patrols from late July through to mid-August. These patrols were all either west of Nui Dat or well north of it with the exception of one patrol which was deployed from 17 to 19 August east of Binh Gia and south of Thua Tich in support of 173rd Airborne Brigade on Operation Toledo (Patrol 31, Sgt AG Urquhart). None were deployed to areas immediately east of Nui Dat 2.

The shelling of the Task Force on 17 August also raises interesting issues, especially regarding the calibre and the volume of fire of the enemy's mortars. The Task Force Commander (Brig OD Jackson), despite being given hard evidence they were 82mm mortars (tail fins found in craters), persisted with the view they were 60mm mortars and thus fired by a Local Force enemy unit such as *D445 VC Battalion*, ie vis a vis a Main Force unit equipped with the larger calibre mortars. In addition, while it is true *D445* was equipped with both 60mm and 82mm mortars, the volume fired would have been well above its capacity and therefore pointed to a Main Force unit being involved, either in conjunction with or separate to *D445*. This was but another warning that a serious force was just east of the Task Force.

But, even without any proper prior reconnaissance to confirm information from Signals Intelligence or from other sources, is difficult to understand why on 18 August 1966, a single rifle company was tasked to search east through the Long Tan Rubber when it was more than likely there was a substantial enemy force out there somewhere. It would seem it was a task for

a whole battalion and if resources prevented that, then at least D Company should have been mounted in APCs. It is also not clear whether aerial reconnaissance in advance of D Company was even considered let alone implemented.

3. Probable Enemy Intentions at Long Tan. There are two main theories regarding what 275 VC Regiment, supported by D445 VC Battalion, was up to in the Long Tan Rubber on 18 August 1966, ie:

- One theory is that the enemy force was preparing to attack Nui Dat and was surprised by D Company. Interrogation of the D445 Battalion prisoner (*Lê Văn Trung*) captured on 19 August had also revealed that “275 Regt was on its way to attack the Task Force Base”, though as a private, he was unlikely to have had such knowledge. HQ 1ATF had already assessed an attack by 5 VC Division was possible which is why 6RAR joined 5RAR at Nui Dat earlier in June than planned during *Operation Hardihood*.

However, given the relative strengths of 1ATF and 275 VC Regiment, ie with 1ATF in a defensive position (albeit incomplete) but with armoured, artillery and close air support, none of which was available to the enemy, surely HQ 5VC Division would have also used its other regiment, in the attack plans ie 274 VC Regiment. But it is known that the time 274 VC Regiment was on a separate mission and nowhere near Nui Dat. In addition, it is difficult to understand if attacking Nui Dat was 275 VC Regiment’s mission why then did it make such a long deployment from the east while operating its radios almost daily. Surely it was aware it was being shadowed by US Electronic Warfare direction finding aircraft. In a sense, therefore, 275 Regt was telegraphing its presence - hardly good battle procedure for the lead up to a deliberate attack.

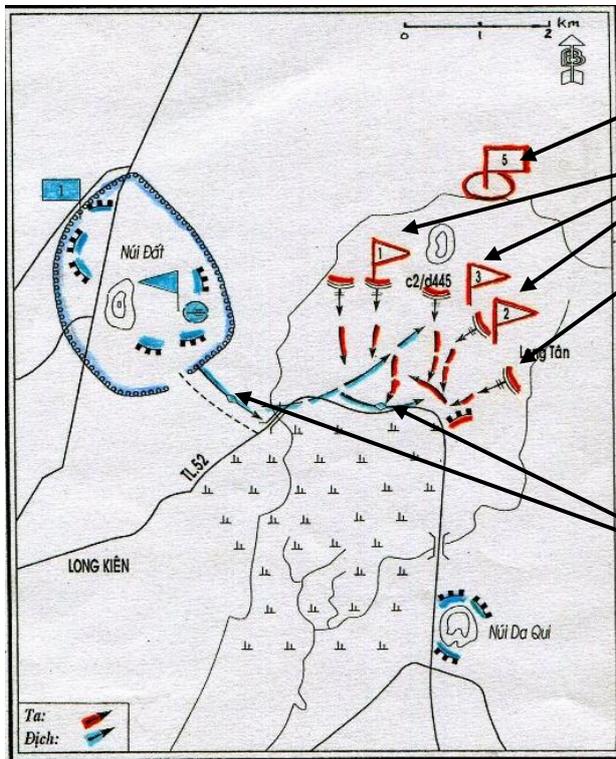
- This then suggests a second theory, ie to lure a substantial force out from Nui Dat and into an area ambush; called a mobile ambush by the enemy or in their colloquial speech “to lure the tiger from the mountain”. It was a tactic which had been successful on many previous occasions in both the Indo China Wars. There is also contemporary information from Vietnamese military histories, including those of 5VC Division and D445 VC Battalion, translated and analysed by Ernie Chamberlain, which gives strong support to this second theory. It is known for example that 275 VC Regiment had moved too close to Nui Dat than was tactically sound and that its security screens had been prematurely withdrawn most likely on the orders of the on-site HQ 5VC Division Chief of Staff (*Trần Minh Tâm*); thus 275 VC Regiment was indeed surprised by the advancing D Company.

There is also evidence from post-war interviews with former enemy commanders that the plan was to draw troops out from Nui Dat, “hug them”, ie moving so close as to restrain the use of support artillery and air strikes for fear of causing friendly casualties. Then when the Australians withdrew to allow better use of artillery, the plan was for the attackers to move with them in what was called “hanging on the belt”; probably also, the enemy intended that the action would be short and sharp and having inflicted serious casualties to then make a quick withdrawal. But the lax tactical moves described earlier would seriously prejudice those plans.

The layout of the enemy’s defensive positions prepared prior to the battle supports these tactics, ie in the sense the substantial defences found by C Company east of Nui Dat 2 on 21 August were most probably the base from which troops were then deployed forward into where temporary defences (weapon pits) were found in the contact area on 19 August. Also, on 15 August, D Company 6RAR had patrolled through the Long Tan Rubber to the bottom of Nui Dat 2 without finding anything suggesting deployment from the enemy base occurred at a later date. Presumably after the enemy forward troops had met and destroyed a force advancing east out of the 1ATF Base, they would have then transited back through the main position on their way to wherever, possibly the May Tao Base.

In addition, Ernie's 2016 book on *D445 VC Battalion* includes this sketch map taken from the Battalion's history together with some explanatory footnotes provided by Ernie. The heading of the sketch map (translated by Ernie) gives support to the second theory of a mobile ambush.

The Mobile Ambush at Long Tan (Châu Đức – Bà Rịa) by the 5th Infantry Regiment and a Company of 445 Infantry Battalion (18 August 1966)



Footnotes:

- I. The 5th Infantry Regiment was the enemy's name for 275 VC Regiment.
- II. The triangular flags 1, 3 and 2 represent the battalions of 275 VC Regiment.
- III. The symbols of an arrow and two 'cross-bars' represent a company assault

There are a number of anomalies with the sketch:

- At the bottom right hand corner, the occupied feature shown is the 'Horseshoe' which was not occupied by 1ATF until the year following Long Tan.
- The bypass road shown on the sketch to the west of the Task Force Base was not constructed until early 1967.
- The triangle shaped symbols are the Warsaw Pact symbols for medium tanks whereas only APC's were at Long Tan.

Whatever the enemy's tactical plan was on 18 August 1966, it was fatally flawed because in the end Long Tan was in gun range of a Field Regiment and a Battery of medium artillery.

This error was compounded by the fact the enemy had made no attempt to position mortars, recoilless rifles or RPGs to harass 1 Field Regiment's gun line as for example occurred, during the attacks on FSPBs Coral and Balmoral two years later.

Perhaps we will never know for certain the truth of what was planned by the enemy in August 1966.

4. **Concert Party.** At the time, the men in the two Infantry Battalions (5RAR and 6RAR) were close to exhaustion. For the past 14 weeks for 5RAR and 10 weeks for 6RAR the troops had been seriously overworked in preparing defences whilst simultaneously patrolling 24 hours a day and were in desperate need of rest and convalescence at the logistics base at Vung Tau. Morale was also starting to wither and the troops needed some distractions such as a Concert Party, which would become a regular event during the war, just as had occurred in all other wars to that time.

5. **M113 Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC).** The American manufactured APCs had only been in service with the Australian Army for some 12 months and before Long Tan had not been on any mission, training or operational, with Infantry units. Furthermore the Task Force had not done any infantry/armoured cross training either in Australia or in-country – yet another example of how poorly prepared the initial Task Force deployment was; unlike 1RAR which conducted intensive in-country training with the APCs of 173rd Airborne Brigade.

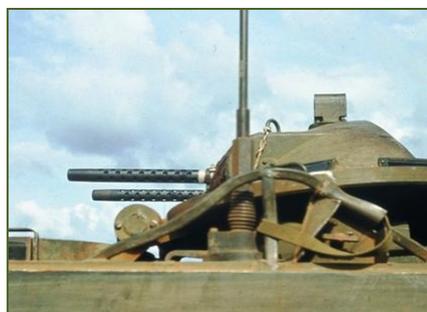
For the Cavalry Squadron it gets worse. On arrival in Vietnam, 3 Troop took over the vehicles of 1 Troop, 1 APC Squadron which had operated with 1RAR for 12 months; these vehicles had been retrofitted with a US protective shield for the .50 calibre machine gun mounted on top of the

carrier. Despite requests by the Squadron Commander (*Maj Bob Hagerty*) to have the new vehicles coming from Puckapunyal fitted with shields, Army Staff were unable to make a decision in time! These vehicles did not even have their 'harness' ie, the internal communications between the Vehicle Commander and Driver.

Until Long Tan, the Infantry generally viewed the APC as an armoured taxi for transporting troops into battle. What the battle did was to show just what a lethal weapons platform the vehicle was and over time that lethality would be substantially increased. The courageous men of 3 Troop and the three additional carriers from 2 Troop had demonstrated the battalions now had another close support capability which would be used on many times during the war.



Above: Carrier sans gun shield with .50 cal.
Top Right: Carrier with gun shield and .50 cal.
Right: Carrier with T50 Turret which could be either twin .30cal (pictured) or one .30cal and one .50cal machine guns.



6. **The fate of 275 VC Regiment (275 VC).** After Long Tan 275 VC probably moved north into Long Khanh Province to repair the damage done to it during the battle on 18 August. In March 1967, it reappeared in Phuoc Tuy Province and attacked a Regional Force Post at Lo Gom a couple of kilometres north of Lang Phuoc Hai. On 29 March, during Operation Leeton, 5RAR killed two soldiers from 275 VC and that was the last engagement 1ATF had with it though it is possible 2RAR and 7RAR might have contacted it during *Operation Coburg* in early 1968.

In 1967, US forces had several contacts with 275 VC in the Xuan Loc area and after that the regiment moved to War Zone D north of Saigon Bien Hoa and then further west to Tay Ninh near the Cambodian border.

275VC returned to Long Khanh Province in 1969 and on 8 to 10 May attempted to attack ARVN troops near Xuan Loc but was caught in the open by a B-52 strike and suffered heavy casualties. As an aside, the 6RAR Second Tour Advance Party had arrived and about 8 pm on 8 May the 4RAR Officers' Mess was rattled by sustained explosions that to the newcomers sounded like a heavy machine gun but were in fact the B-52 strike occurring some 40 kilometres away.

In 1970, 275VC moved to Cambodia and was redesignated as a new regiment directly subordinate to the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN).

7. **WO2 Jack Kirby DCM.** In a tragic sequel to his heroic efforts at Long Tan, Jack Kirby was killed on 6 February 1967 during the closing stages of *Operation Tamborine* in the eastern Long Green near the Song Rai. D Company Headquarters, with *Capt Mick Weaver* as acting OC, called for artillery fire on an area where the enemy was firing signal shots. 161 Battery RNZA responded to the FO's (*Lt Barrie Winsor*) call for fire and after ranging rounds he added 200 and called for "2 rounds fire for effect".

Because of a plotting error, the first six rounds fell short on top of D Company Headquarters and the Anti Tank Platoon (which had been placed under command of D Company after Long Tan). The Company Regimental Signaler (*LCpl Graham Smith*) immediately called "stop stop stop" over the Battalion Command Net, however, 12 rounds impacted around the terrified soldiers before the firing ceased.

Four men were fatally wounded: the CSM, Jack Kirby who, despite being attended to by first the 11 Platoon Sergeant (*Bob Buick*) and then the 6RAR RMO (*Capt John Taske*), succumbed to his dreadful wounds; the FO's Signaler, *Gnr Richard Cliff*; and two men from the Anti Tank Platoon (*Ptes Barry Kelly* and *Doug Powter*, who died the following day in hospital). The Company Commander was also seriously wounded, as was the other FO Signaler (*Gnr Greg Bentley*). The FO was also wounded and seven men from the Anti Tank Platoon were so badly wounded they were medevaced to Australia (*LCpl AJ Cosgrove, Pte AG Flack, Lt DR Keena, Pte RJ Keft, Pte RJ Littlefield, Pte KA McMahon and Pte RL Rencher*).

Another example of just how brutal war can be.

The Author



Fred Fairhead graduated from the Royal Military College Duntroon in December 1963 and because he had been in the Engineering Class was posted to RA Signals. In 1965, while serving with the 2nd Battalion, the Pacific Island Regiment he transferred to RA Infantry. In July 1967 he joined 6RAR and commanded D Company as the Demonstration Company at the Jungle Training Centre. When the company rejoined the Battalion in Townsville in March 1968 he became the Intelligence Officer, a position he kept until June 1970. During the 1969/70 tour by 6RAR/NZ (ANZAC) Battalion he also commanded all three of the Australian Rifle Companies when the Company Commanders were on leave. In the last few weeks of

the tour he was also the acting Operations Officer.

He is the author of *A Duty Done – A summary of operations by the Royal Australian Regiment in the Vietnam War 1965-1972 (2014)*. Edition Two is planned for publication in 2019.



18th AUGUST 1966

**Pte RA Aldersea
Cpl PE Clements
Pte GA Drabble
Pte KH Gant
Pte EF Grant
Pte VR Grice
Pte JM Houston
LCpl J Jewry
Pte PA Large**



**Pte AF McCormack
Pte DJ McCormack
Pte WD Mitchell
Pte DJ Salveron
2Lt GC Sharp
Pte DJ Thomas
Pte FB Topp
Pte MR Wales
Pte CJ Whiston**



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