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THE CHALLENGE

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What were the challenges we would be facing in Vietnam and how should we meet them? These were the dominant thoughts in the minds of most members of the 5th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR), in early 1966. The battalion was raised for service in Vietnam on 1 March 1965 at Holsworthy, south of Sydney. Nothing firm was said publicly about its mission until January 1966, and its destination was not revealed until April 1966. However, word had been spreading since August 1965, from discreet but reliable sources within the army, that we were destined for Vietnam. The government wanted to send a two-battalion task force to support the Americans. We all knew from one source or another that we had to be ready for operational service by early 1966. New members of the battalion came in through 1965, and by the beginning of 1966, we were clearly entering the final phases of training. We expected to be in Vietnam in May.

What were we heading for? How did we feel about it? Nobody in 5 RAR believed that this commitment was going to be a relatively short one—all over in two or three years—for Australia. We were about to enter a long struggle between communist and anti-communist forces in Vietnam, a conflict which had flowed naturally out of the defeat of the French in Indo-China in 1954. This struggle had been going on for a long time before 1954, when the Viet Minh inflicted their decisive defeat on the French at Dien Bien Phu. Nationalists, including communists, had been in action against the French since the 1920s and '30s. The outside world looked on but then became embroiled in the Second World War.

For a brief time at the end of this war, some younger Americans in the US State Department looked favourably on the Viet Minh, the nationalist–communist force which intended to step in to govern their own country once the Japanese had left. Things did not work out that way. The great powers became caught up in the Cold War, in which it was natural for the Americans to want to resist all communist encroachments around the world, despite the differing causes and consequences of the many regional security problems that the United States faced. By 1964 the balance of power in East and South-East Asia looked to some, particularly the governing parties in Washington and Canberra, to be sliding into a crisis. The danger was summed up by the ‘Domino Theory’. If Vietnam went communist, Laos and Cambodia would follow. The threats to the anti-communist government in Thailand would then intensify and bifurcate, flowing on to Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia. Then communists would be on Australia’s doorstep.

As history has shown, there were many weaknesses in this theory but that was the prevailing wisdom in 1964–65. Official adherence to it as a basis for policy had been strengthened by the forthright way in which the Americans had entered the war in Vietnam with their own forces. We, as soldiers, were aware that our government was strongly committed to this point of view, so we took our final phase of preparation for combat very seriously. From our perspective, the Vietnam War was one of counter-insurgency. Many of the senior members of the battalion, both by rank and by length of service, had taken part in controlling the Malayan Emergency and in resisting Indonesian Confrontation of Malaysia in Borneo. They knew that the essence of success in counter-insurgency was to win the political and social support of the civilian population, both in the major cities and in the rural areas. There was a key military dimension to the war, but without the support of the local people, any success in the military dimension would not translate into a lasting victory. In Malaya, our major allies, the British, understood this well and had been successful. In Vietnam, we had to hope that our major allies there also understood this basic truth of counter-insurgency. We were optimistic that the Americans would apply a ‘hearts and minds’ approach – it was their term after all – and that success would follow. It might take a long time but it would come – or so we thought in early 1966.

Against this backdrop of strategic purpose the battalion began a demanding program of acquiring skills in training and then applying them in tactical exercises in distant training areas. In the four months before we departed for Vietnam, we spent around seven weeks in testing exercises, including two or three weeks at the army's rigorous Jungle Training Centre at Canungra, Queensland. We also spent a fortnight in the Gaspers Mountain training area, in rugged sandstone country, essentially a continuation of the Blue Mountains. However, the trees were sparse and the weather turned cold. We were soon carrying out what we nicknamed 'jungle exercises in the snow'. By late April we were all slimmed down, physically fit and keen to do our job. 5 RAR was made up of both regular (volunteer) soldiers and national servicemen, in roughly equal proportions. The national servicemen were in the army for two years, which allowed for a year's training and then another year's active service. Although the average age of the national servicemen in the battalion was around 20 – a year or more older than many of our regular infantrymen – the two types of soldier melded very smoothly. The national servicemen performed as well as the regulars of similar experience. There were some national servicemen who would rather not have been in the army at that time of their lives, and they made their thoughts known occasionally. But they all accepted military service as a legitimate obligation, and we were spared most of the problems which ate at the structure of authority in the US Army during the Vietnam War.

An infantry battalion is not simply a military organisation. It is also a linkage of many families. Soldiers, when they are abroad on active service, think of their families and loved ones a lot. It therefore matters to the harmony and confidence of the battalion abroad that their family members at home should be in touch with each other and offer support when it was needed. Thus, in the first few months of 1966, some of us devoted a significant part of our off-duty time to getting to know each other's families, particularly the wives, girlfriends and children of the people that we would be working most closely with. It made a great difference, when we had been on operations for a few months, to be able to circulate family news and photos to others with whom we were working. And when the sad news of a soldier's death or severe wounding came through to his family in Australia, there were other friends ready at hand to give practical help and emotional support to those who were grieving.

As our preparation time moved on, there were indications that we might not have the full and active support of the Australian people in this war. The principal issue which brought dissent to the surface was conscription for overseas service – hardly surprising given the intense political confrontations which had taken place on this issue during the two world wars. By the middle of 1965 an organisation of dissenting mothers had been founded called ‘Save our Sons’. By the time of our departure for Vietnam they were still a relatively small force in Australian politics, but we were aware of their protest meetings and occasional picketing of barracks where national servicemen were being trained. While Australia was still two or three years away from the massive moratorium assemblies and marches that took place in the major cities, there was something here to keep a weather eye upon. In 1966, through personal contacts, I became more aware of dissent in our universities. But at that point, Australian public opinion overall was strongly supportive of Australia’s commitment in Vietnam, and the opposition that was expressed did not weigh on our morale or undercut our belief that we were doing the right thing in Vietnam. Little did I know that I would be dealing with this opposition for many years to come once I had entered into the academic world professionally.

Another index of public attitudes to Australian participation in the Vietnam War was the nature of the questions that journalists put when visiting our barracks on the outskirts of Sydney, or when accompanying us on exercises. Overall, the media were supportive of the government’s policy to accept commitment with the United States, but some of our leading writers such as Denis Warner could see problems ahead and wanted to test our own thinking on what we expected from the Americans, given their own unfamiliarity with this kind of conflict. Did we believe that American prospects of success were as great as those of the British in the 1950s in Malaya? Such questions gave us pause for thought.

As the opening months of 1966 passed by, we all became sharply focused on the nature of the dangers and difficulties we would soon be facing on the ground in Vietnam. Our commanding officer (CO), Lieutenant Colonel John Warr, saw the conflict in historical depth and wanted the battalion to have some understanding of the social and political complexities of what we were embarking upon, as well as the military problems that we would face. I, by then a captain and second in command of B Company, had recently returned from studying international relations at Oxford, so the CO detailed me to give a series

of lectures to the companies on the course and nature of the conflict since 1945. We were also receiving current intelligence information via army channels, and some of this was passed on to us directly by the battalion intelligence officer, Captain Don Willcox.

By April 1966 we knew exactly where we would be stationed in Vietnam – in the central part of Phuoc Tuy Province, around the hill Nui Dat. This was an area which included only a few hamlets, but which had several large villages around the edge, and included the province capital of Ba Ria, whose population exceeded 10,000. Ba Ria was some 60 kilometres south-east of Saigon and 25 kilometres north of the port of Vung Tau, which was about to become our logistical support area. The population of the province plus Vung Tau was approximately 150,000 people, and they were occupying a key strategic area for whoever happened to be the governing power in Saigon. The National Liberation Front, or Viet Cong as we knew them, had strong base areas to the east and north-east of Saigon. Saigon itself had the Saigon River to connect it with the sea, but this route was vulnerable to intercepting attacks, leaving the main road from Saigon to Vung Tau, Route 15, as one of the principal logistical links between the capital and the ships of distant allies. Making Route 15 secure for the passage of reinforcing American soldiers and their supplies was the first major task of the Australian battalions coming into the area around Nui Dat.

The economy of Phuoc Tuy was made up of peasant agriculture, market gardening, rubber plantations, timber-getting, charcoal production and fishing. Phuoc Tuy fed some of its produce into the markets of Saigon and Vung Tau. There was a poor road network to carry all the produce and people necessary to move goods to market. Route 15 to Saigon had a bitumen surface with two traffic lanes, but for the most part when we arrived, the other roads were earth-surfaced and usually single lane, augmented by passing places. Because of the climate, there were many streams and rivers dissecting the road network, therefore there were many small bridges which were relatively easy for the Viet Cong to cut and inflict additional costs on the people whose livelihoods were thereby placed at risk. Some of the roads were well suited to the placing of temporary Viet Cong tax-gathering points. The Viet Cong also exercised direct control in some of the villages by demanding a substantial portion of their agricultural production or some of their young men, to serve as conscript soldiers or porters for their comprehensive supply system.

Before we could tackle the long-term problem of gaining support for the Saigon government from the people of Phuoc Tuy, we needed to establish security for our bases and ourselves against the military threat posed by the Viet Cong. We were therefore particularly keen in early 1966 to be briefed on our direct opposition and what they had been doing in recent times. We learned that we, a two-battalion task force, would be opposed by a division consisting of two regiments of what we termed 'Main Force' Viet Cong. These regiments, 274 and 275, had three battalions each and had been built up over the past two years from smaller Viet Cong units – platoons and companies of village-based guerrillas – which had then expanded into full-sized regiments of 2,000 men or more, who served on a full-time basis. A key enabling factor in this growth of Main Force regiments was the increasing availability of equipment from the North, especially machine guns, mortars, artillery and radios. It had taken some time for the two major supply routes from North Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the 'sea channel' via the coast of Phuoc Tuy, to become effective. But by 1966 the military strength of the Viet Cong in the south-eastern sector of South Vietnam had to be taken seriously by an intervening force of two Australian infantry battalions plus supporting arms (See Figure A.2 in Appendix D).

The Viet Cong combined their two regiments to form the Fifth Infantry Division of around 4,500 men in 1965, so that by the time of our arrival in Phuoc Tuy they could pack a powerful punch, and we needed to take that into account, particularly in the early months of our operations in Phuoc Tuy. We knew that it would take time to build secure fixed defences around Nui Dat, and until we had, we would be vulnerable to testing attacks. If our enemy was willing to take a major risk with his own forces in an all-out battle with a couple of thousand of his own men against a few hundred of ours, we could have been in a serious predicament. What seemed more likely was that the Viet Cong would seek to attack one of our companies when it was on patrol outside of our base area, as happened to D Company of 6 RAR at Long Tan in August 1966.

The Viet Cong relied on three major base areas in Phuoc Tuy. The largest of these was the May Tao Secret Zone, in north-eastern Phuoc Tuy. It was spread around Nui May Tao (*nui* means hill or mountain), and it could normally support a Main Force regiment. By 1966 the base could take the whole Viet Cong Fifth Infantry Division when there was need to concentrate it. Viet Cong jungle bases were not like those of their opponents. They were much less visible from the air, and their sheds were built of materials ready to hand in the jungle. The second Viet Cong base, in north-west Phuoc Tuy, was the Hat Dich area, built near a small village of that name. The third was in the Long Hai hills in south-eastern Phuoc Tuy, extending northwards into the Minh Dam area. This base was more of a resting and replenishing point for the Viet Cong battalions than a major supply source. However, as it was close to the coast, some supplies could be brought in by sea. The other two bases were supplied from the north by the Ho Chi Minh Trail directly from North Vietnam, or by the 'sea trail' direct from North Vietnam or from the more northerly coastal areas of South Vietnam, which were themselves supplied by the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Although the Main Force Viet Cong forces were reasonably well equipped for fighting under the protection of jungle-clad mountains and hills, they were not well suited for fighting in the more open areas. Here they had to divide into small groups which lacked the firepower and support that we could rely on in the event of a major engagement. Where they were strongest was in the jungles to the east and north-east of Nui Dat, closer to the Nui May Tao base area. However, as the Battle of Long Tan was to show, even in that relatively favourable situation, 275 Regiment suffered heavy casualties while trying to overwhelm one company of 6 RAR. The weight of supporting artillery, airpower and armoured personnel carriers from other elements of the Task Force was telling.

We knew from the operations conducted by the US 173 Airborne Brigade (including 1 RAR) earlier in 1966 that the Main Force Viet Cong soldiers were brave and able fighters. Their marksmanship with rifles and machine guns was good, and they could usually rely on mortar support. They thickened their defences by copious use of minefields and booby traps, often using ammunition they had obtained from South Vietnamese sources. They were also supported effectively by their own locally recruited and supplied platoons and companies. Several of these local companies had been combined to form D445 Provincial Mobile Battalion, a force of some 400–450 men, whom we constantly had to take into account

in our operational planning. D445 Battalion published its own history, *The Heroic 445 Battalion: Its History and Tradition*, in 2004, and it has been translated and republished by Brigadier Ernie Chamberlain, a senior Australian intelligence officer, and one of the contributors to this volume. This history of D445 Battalion is one of the major sources for Brigadier Chamberlain's contribution to this volume (Appendix D).

The Viet Cong could also draw on the people of the areas under their control (fully or in part), for recruits, supplies, porters and medical assistance. The contest for the hearts and minds of the people of Phuoc Tuy had been in progress for several years before our arrival. Initially the Viet Cong were able to work out informal 'coexistence' arrangements with several of the smaller, local subunits (companies or platoons) of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) that were stationed nearby. The province remained nominally under the control of the Saigon government, but we knew that its writ did not run far from the province capital, Ba Ria, or the several district administrative centres of Phuoc Tuy. ARVN forces and vehicles could move around by day, although they were occasionally attacked or ambushed. The Viet Cong had a fairly free rein at night but kept out of sight of the ARVN forces by day. Provincial administration was controlled largely by the ARVN, which provided the province chief and his staff, and the district chiefs and their small headquarters.

Our main challenge, therefore, was to turn this situation around, so that the Viet Cong no longer had the necessary support from the civil population of the province to maintain the flow of recruits that they needed or to weaken the administrative grip of the South Vietnamese Government and drive out its administrators, military and police personnel. Before we could begin work on achieving this change, we had to ensure our own security in a military sense. We were vulnerable to attacks, raids and ambushes which could result in significant Australian casualties, and therefore undermine the Australian Government's ability to stay the course.

Obviously the quality and capacities of the South Vietnamese civil authorities and armed forces would have a substantial influence on our prospects for success. We knew very little about these issues until we had been active in Phuoc Tuy for several months. What we did hear, from our friends in 1 RAR and from others who had been members of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam during the past year, was disturbing. Corruption in the local administration was rife, justice

was often dispensed on a partial basis to favour those in authority, and it was very much a 'top-down' system of rule. The decrees came from on high, but not a lot of notice was taken of the complaints and wishes of Vietnamese civilians, particularly in the rural areas. Consequently, although there were some districts which were well governed, there were others in which the Viet Cong found it easy to gain a footing and to recruit supporters. As we had limited resources, one of our key tasks in the early stages of our deployment was to get to know the individual villages and districts, so that we could concentrate first on the ones in which we were likely to be more successful.

One of the most helpful groups of people in the province were the Catholic clergy in the villages. These were men who had to live without any guarantee of their own security. They were protected and helped by their parishioners because they exercised useful leadership, and often could get people to work effectively together when nobody else could. They were anti-communist but they could also be nationalist to the extent of wanting an open, honest, independent system of government which was rather different from what they had in 1966. Getting to know these men and establishing relationships, which were viable and useful in both directions, was one of the most interesting challenges of our time in Phuoc Tuy. It helped that they also spoke French or English.

The language barrier was another challenge we had to tackle. The process began with elementary classes in Vietnamese while we were still in Australia in early 1966. Of course in a brief instruction period of a few hours a week, not a lot could be accomplished. But for those who were minded to communicate directly with the local Vietnamese once we arrived in Phuoc Tuy, it made a difference to be able to offer basic greetings, using the masculine and feminine forms correctly as appropriate, and to be able to say please and thank you. Once that initial barrier had been surmounted, some of us were able to progress more deeply into the Vietnamese language. That step made a powerful psychological difference on both sides once we made progress in the language. It was very easy, in fact natural, for local people to be afraid of us and therefore unwilling to help in important ways, but breaking through the language barrier enabled them to see us in a very different light and our relations became much more productive for both sides.

When we set off for Vietnam in April and May 1966, some went via the 'grey funnel line' – that is, the former aircraft carrier HMAS *Sydney* – and others went via Qantas jet. By that stage, the challenge was looming, large and threatening, for most of us and our families, our nearest and dearest. We had those final intense hugs that departing soldiers and their families have been exchanging for hundreds of years. Then, alone with our thoughts, we began coming to terms with the fact that a year is a long time in warfare, and who knew what our fortunes, both individually and collectively as a battalion, would be? We had a certain amount of confidence as a result of our training and our faith in each other's natures and capacities. But there was no knowing who might be the target of a well-aimed enemy shot or who would be blown up by a mine whose activating trigger we had failed to see. And then there were the other risks – not so obviously fatal – that came with service in South-East Asia, such as insect-borne diseases and poisoning by Agent Orange. We did not know about post-traumatic stress disorder in those days, but it came to affect some of us in later years.

Fortunately, by the time we had reached deeply into that imagined trail of the personal dangers and challenges we had to face, we had arrived in Vietnam. We were then diverted by the demands of having to cope with our settling into the most basic of accommodation, tents on a sandhill near Vung Tau. Here we came to know one of our principal supporting units in coming months, the US Army 68 Assault Helicopter Company, our helicopter transport. They gave us a particularly warm welcome, because, in the words of their liaison officer, Lieutenant Charles Brinnon, 'You are not here just as advisers. You are here to *do* something about the situation!' As we spent many hours over the following week climbing into and out of the ubiquitous Iroquois helicopters, better known as Hueys, we seemed to enter a new world. Our recent anxieties fell away as we focused on meeting our most direct challenges in the very near future. Operation Hardihood was about to begin!

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