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INTELLIGENCE WORK IN PHUOC TUY AFTER LONG TAN

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As Brigadier Chamberlain has written in Appendix D, the Viet Cong and their predecessors, the Viet Minh, had long had a substantial presence in Phuoc Tuy. In May 1966, when 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) began to arrive and build a substantial and defensible base at Nui Dat, we were at a serious disadvantage in terms of local knowledge. The Viet Cong knew the country and people of Phuoc Tuy well, they had some political leverage over the local people, and they were indigenous. We were newcomers to the country and people. Very few of us spoke Vietnamese. And at some point we would be withdrawing. The big question was who would we be leaving in charge – the Viet Cong or the Saigon-based Government of the Republic of Vietnam?

We all thought that to be successful, Australia would have to make a long-term military commitment to Vietnam. Therefore, its costs had to be acceptable to the Australian public for whatever time it took for this effort to become effective. We needed early successes that were judged to be significant by the Australian Government and people, and we had to complete the process of settling into Phuoc Tuy without suffering heavy casualties. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese leadership, having been through a long war with the French, ending only 12 years before our arrival in Phuoc Tuy, had drawn their own lessons from costly experience. They had to deny any appearance of early victory to their enemies and inflict heavy casualties on them, even at the cost of suffering a commensurate number themselves.

The first priority for the Viet Cong forces in Phuoc Tuy after our arrival was to reconnoitre our positions. How strong were we at Nui Dat and in Vung Tau? How well equipped were we? How well were our defences laid out and built? How reliant were we on the Americans? How capable were we in operational terms? How well did we understand counter-insurgency warfare in South-East Asia? How effective were we in more conventional operations? Were we likely to collapse when under direct attack? Could we be ambushed and kept confined and ineffective by relatively moderate, province-based forces, such as the district companies and D445 Battalion?

These were all compelling questions to which the Viet Cong had to have answers fairly quickly. So, we were in for a period of being reconnoitred, inspected, tested and assessed by our enemy, beginning on day one of our arrival in Phuoc Tuy. We were fortunate in being accompanied by the US 173 Airborne Brigade, but we saw that local Viet Cong forces were out and about, probing and searching from the commencement of Operation Hardihood on 24 May 1966. We could tell from their numbers, weapons and uniforms that these local units were only light forces. But we also knew that heavier forces were available, especially 274 and 275 Regiments, over 3,000 troops in all, who were capable of inflicting heavy blows on us. Once 173 Airborne Brigade had departed from Phuoc Tuy, the real testing would come. As Brigadier Chamberlain has recorded, in June 274 Regiment, the stronger of the two Main Force Viet Cong regiments that we faced, came in close to check us out. They probably would have made an attack if they had thought the chances of inflicting a heavy blow on us were good. However, perhaps over-cautiously, they chose not to make a major attack in June or July but to set an ambush for us, around a recently crashed US aircraft. Our perimeter at Nui Dat was tested by small Viet Cong patrols at night during June and July, and when they felt that they had our measure, they came in on 17 August with a large attacking force: 275 Regiment assisted by D445 Provincial Mobile Battalion. We were fortunate that the Viet Cong revealed their presence by rather premature mortar, light artillery and recoilless rifle fire against the Task Force base on 17 August. Next day, 275 Regiment encountered a relatively strong Australian reaction force, D Company of 6th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (6 RAR), our sister battalion. In a determined action fought out on the afternoon of 18 August, just north of the village of Long Tan, the Viet Cong attack was contained, D Company of 6 RAR was reinforced late in the day, and held its ground and inflicted heavy losses on 275 Regiment, 245 confirmed dead and an estimated several hundred wounded.

These losses led their commander to break off the action and withdraw his force from the battlefield. Follow-up patrolling by a joint Australian–US force discovered that the Viet Cong had fully withdrawn from the eastern approaches to Nui Dat. 5 RAR took part in this phase of the clearance of eastern Phuoc Tuy, sweeping 8 kilometres east of Binh Ba, then 8 kilometres south, before returning to Nui Dat, another 8 kilometres to the north-west. In five days, the battalion patrolled over 40 kilometres on foot, carefully searching the jungle we were passing through, digging defences to hold off any night attack by the Viet Cong, and sending out small reconnaissance patrols to check whether there was continuing enemy movement close to the base. The searching was made more difficult because we were still in the wet season. At around 2 pm on most afternoons a mass of dark grey clouds would build up overhead, soon to send down heavy rain showers, which saturated our clothing and equipment and turned the ground into muddy porridge. Several days and nights of those conditions created muscular, skin and accumulated fatigue problems.

Of course the Viet Cong also had to deal with these challenges. Local resources and knowledge may have eased their discomfort relative to ours, but nonetheless, everybody, on both sides in this war, had to learn to cope with the effects of heavy rain, physical exhaustion and mental stress. While 275 Regiment had been concentrating for its mission against Nui Dat in mid-August, 274 Regiment had been active in western Phuoc Tuy, attempting to deny the use of Route 15 to the Americans by taking over some of the defended villages along the highway. Phu My was attacked several times in August 1966, and signals intelligence indicated that the commander of 274 Regiment, assisted by local Viet Cong companies and D445 Battalion, was determined to close the road to South Vietnamese Government and allied use.

This knowledge was particularly worrying for General Westmoreland and his senior intelligence and operations advisers. To reinforce the US position around the major US bases at Bear Cat, Bien Hoa, Long Binh and Saigon, they needed to move troops along Route 15. How much the Viet Cong knew about this American plan is difficult to say, but their increased level of activity in western Phuoc Tuy, especially on and close to Route 15, suggests that the Viet Cong had gained relevant intelligence, studied Westmoreland's priorities and were ready to take serious action to thwart him.

Certainly, Westmoreland knew that the Viet Cong had a heightened interest in controlling Route 15, and one of the main purposes in deploying 1 ATF into Phuoc Tuy was to be able to prevent the Viet Cong from dominating the road. For much of September, the Task Force was divided, with 6 RAR conducting clearing operations in the Nui Dinh hills, and 5 RAR conducting more clearing and defensive operations around and to the north of Binh Ba, including the district headquarters at Duc Thanh.

The American reinforcement of their position around Bien Hoa and Saigon in early October was planned to commence with the movement of a brigade of troops, by road, from Vung Tau to Bear Cat. Therefore, General Westmoreland left no doubt in the mind of Brigadier Jackson that the Viet Cong had to be driven off the high ground along Route 15. Given the Viet Cong strengths and dispositions and General Westmoreland's plans, I, as battalion intelligence officer, had my work well cut out for the next three months. Originally, I had been the second in command (2IC) of B Company, but on 6 August our intelligence officer, Captain Don Willcox, was moved to fill a vacant position on the Task Force headquarters. Colonel Warr then tapped me to take over from Don – a major new challenge, but a position which gave me an extremely interesting view of the war, of our enemies and allies, and particularly of the Vietnamese people for whose support the war was being waged.

The most important source of intelligence for the 'big picture' was the American corps-sized headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam (II FFV), located at Long Binh, not far from Bien Hoa. They were able to tell us, even before we had left Australia, who our principal military opponents were and what their record had been. American intelligence staffs were also able to provide some information on the level of political support that the Viet Cong had built up in the various villages and towns of Phuoc Tuy. There were two problems with this information. First, it tended to lag well behind events: each week an impressive-looking Intsum (intelligence summary), the size of a telephone directory, hit my in-box at Nui Dat, but it tended to be one or two weeks out of date by the time it came to me. Therefore, it was often not of great use for planning future operations. Second, the American-supplied information and analysis was better when focused at the higher Viet Cong levels than on the lower ones. They could discuss Viet Cong Main Force command issues and personalities, but they did not reach down very far into the kinds of forces we faced on most occasions, the provincial mobile battalion and district guerrilla

companies. This pattern of strengths and deficiencies was dictated in part by the heavy dependence of the Americans on signals intelligence. It was up to us, away in Phuoc Tuy, to fill in the gaps, particularly to gain some insights into the political battlefield in the populated areas.

Nonetheless, the framework provided to us by II FFV was extremely valuable. I could circumvent the problem of slowness in transmission by making my own personal visits to HQ II FFV, assisted by the Australian liaison officer there, Major Bert Cassidy, formerly commander of A Company, 5 RAR. Normally a US battalion intelligence officer would not have been allowed inside the building, but because I was Australian, the Americans were curious, and in return for my appearance at their door, they would tell me things that I would otherwise not have known for a week or two, when the official papers reached me at Nui Dat. One early lesson I learned in the craft of intelligence was that people will share information with you if they like you. A second lesson was that what they told you, with the best of intentions, was not always correct: it was a *caveat emptor* situation – let the buyer beware.

We built up our current intelligence picture largely through our own activities: patrolling, village searches, my own frequent visits to villages of interest, and the stationing of small numbers of our own soldiers in villages for a few days at a time, on an occasional basis. One of our best assets in this regard was the Anti-Tank Platoon, soon to become the Reconnaissance Platoon, led by Second Lieutenant Michael von Berg (then known as Mick Deak). Mick had all the right qualities for leading this platoon. He was bright, intellectually curious and brave. He won a Military Cross in the coming actions on Nui Thi Vai in October 1966, and he had a great capacity to relate warmly and good-humouredly with others, including Vietnamese villagers, sometimes with and sometimes without an interpreter. He was in many ways the ideal counter-insurgent, and much of my effectiveness as intelligence officer was based on the information he continually brought me from his platoon's activities.

As Chapter 15 describes, the Reconnaissance Platoon was a 5 RAR innovation, introduced by our commanding officer, Colonel Warr, as a way of finding more useful employment for our Cold War-derived Anti-Tank Platoon. The Viet Cong did not have any tanks in our province, so we had a small force available for special tasks, such as intelligence gathering and ambushing Viet Cong patrols deep in the jungle. The members of this platoon were carefully selected and given specialised training. In fact,

all of our platoons and companies, when they were out on patrol, were carrying out intelligence-gathering tasks. They relied on stealth and their own powers of observation to work effectively.

Another very important source for us was the local people. We had to feel our way carefully into developing reliable, secure contacts with the Vietnamese villagers. Initially we had little idea as to how strong their support was for the Viet Cong. We had to take personal risks in opening contact in a friendly, non-threatening way. We had to be careful not to identify Viet Cong opponents publicly through paying too much observable attention to them. This concern applied particularly to the village priests and anyone in the employ of local government agencies. They often preferred to come to visit us at Nui Dat – where we were accepting another risk, namely that they might be carrying out an intelligence mission inside our perimeter for the Viet Cong.

We offset the risks by beginning slowly and testing the quality and reliability of what we learned. We soon discovered that many villages were divided in their loyalties: some people favoured the Viet Cong, others preferred a more liberal regime. Not many were supporters of the Saigon government, which they saw as too remote, often corrupt, and not concerned with the big issues which affected every peasant farmer, such as the reform of land ownership laws. The Saigon government seemed to have too many people who were poorly trained and prepared for their tasks. The local Vietnamese wanted political leaders who were in touch with their supporters, not a group of generals who were more used to governing by giving orders than by gaining popular consent. This division within local public opinion raised special problems for information gathering. We got nothing from the Viet Cong supporters except misinformation. And some of the others told us things which, if we believed them, were flattering to our egos but misleading, and potentially dangerous to act on.

Eventually, by trial and error, we discovered whom to listen to and whom to trust. But we kept talking with everyone who was willing to talk in order to protect the security of our most valuable sources. We also took note of the willingness of people to talk with us and, as time went by, we had a better understanding of where truth lay. There was some advantage in being Australian in this process. Many villagers were afraid of the Americans because they had heard that they drove tanks across the village rice fields and even destroyed houses, storages and other

facilities. They knew we were not American because of our uniforms and equipment. Some initially thought that we were French, returning to re-establish a colonial regime. They were soon disabused of that thought when they heard the way we spoke!

We were lucky in establishing good relations with many villages because our soldiers were open and friendly, and they exercised their powerful sense of humour, which proved able to cross international barriers with ease. Most importantly of all, we were fortunate that our company commanders and our operations officer, Major Max Carroll, had all served in the Malayan Emergency, where they had successfully applied the more nuanced approach of the British to a situation which, in its early years, had been deteriorating rapidly. They knew how a South-East Asian village worked, what the local people's concerns and desires were, and how crucial were their slender resources such as rice fields and fruit trees. The adjutant, Captain Peter Isaacs, formerly of the British Army, was another key contributor to our planning discussions. A further key supporter of our local relations program was our medical officer, Captain Tony White, who, with his very small staff, would put in many hours of consultation time, trying to help local people with their various illnesses and other health issues. And after searching a village, we would offer the inhabitants some compensation for the trouble we had caused by distributing clothing, sometimes with bizarre results as old men struggled into bright floral dresses supplied by donors in Australia, and intended for female recipients.

Despite all these gaffes, minor mishaps and sometimes downright inconveniences that the village people suffered at our hands, most of them could tell that on the whole we meant them well, wanted to be friendly and, like them, hoped for a better life for everyone in Phuoc Tuy after we had left the scene. From my perspective as the battalion's intelligence officer, it was a significant challenge to sift through all the often contradictory information that the villagers provided. Sometimes the information we gained was deliberately distorted by Viet Cong supporters, and on other occasions it would be out of date or just based on gossip. I had to assess what was wrong and what was solid and useful. Again, it helped to be able to debate findings with those of our officers and non-commissioned officers who had Malayan Emergency experience. They could sometimes sort the chaff from the grain better than I could.

Another major factor in building up our intelligence network was the personal interest of our commanding officer, Colonel Warr. He had not served in Malaya, but had been badly wounded in the Korean War, which had given him other insights into modern warfare. He was highly intelligent, liberal in relating to his subordinates, and for me he was like a good doctoral supervisor in a university graduate school. He would ask to see me on most days for a discussion on the Viet Cong: what they were doing, how strong they were, where they were and what their commanders might be intending to do over the next week or two. 'Bob, what have you got for me?' was usually his opening question. I would respond with a résumé of my views on the above topics. 'Yes, you might say that but what about ...?', he would often reply, and the serious discussion would begin. My ideas and theses would be tested and pulled apart where they lacked strength. He would sometimes send me back to obtain more information on this or that topic, and occasionally to do a serious detailed analysis of a particular problem relating to our methods of operation and their effectiveness. Without his keen personal interest in and understanding of intelligence issues in that war, we would probably have suffered heavier casualties and achieved less impact on the Viet Cong than we did in 1966–67. It was not surprising when the University of New South Wales appointed him as deputy registrar a few years later.

Reinforcing my own capacities were the members of the battalion Intelligence Section – some five or six soldiers, led by Sergeant Ernie Madden, who systematically gathered, recorded and organised all the intelligence flowing in from our many sources. They kept me up to date with that material, producing marked-up maps showing enemy activity which we used for briefing platoons and companies going out on patrol. They built accurate three-dimensional models of the terrain that the battalion would cover in each future operation, from which I was able to brief the company commanders as part of the CO's orders before we set out. When we were out on operations, and I was walking along close to the CO and the operations officer, my section back at Nui Dat would keep me up to date on any new information that had come in, especially from signals analysis, and then devise a way to get it to me securely. The Viet Cong listened in to our radio traffic too, so delivery by hand copy on foot was usually the best method.

As one of the two battalions making up 1 ATF, 5 RAR's operations were part of a wider operational scheme. The task force commander, Brigadier David Jackson, allowed his two battalion commanders a great deal of

initiative in planning and conducting their operations. Nonetheless they were planned jointly with the Task Force headquarters, and they were supported by the full resources of the Task Force, including those of its small intelligence staff, under the direction of Major Alex Piper. While this group was not able to mount its own intelligence-gathering operations, it was an important hub in the system because it received the results of analysis of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese radio traffic. My own contacts with Alex Piper and his assistant (and my predecessor as intelligence officer of 5 RAR), Captain Don Willcox, were particularly important, and I was in touch with them nearly every day, both to receive and to pass on intelligence information.

Let me give an example from one operation in the Nui Dinh hills in October 1966 of how our entire intelligence system worked: Operation Queanbeyan, from 17 to 26 October 1966.

First, we had to establish the size and locations of the Viet Cong forces in the hills. Our patrols soon encountered groups of up to 40 men, well equipped and probably Main Force soldiers, on the slopes of Nui Thi Vai. On 8 October Alex Piper flew in by helicopter to brief us. He had just learned that an enemy group higher up on Nui Thi Vai was led by the deputy commander of 274 Regiment, the better of the two Main Force regiments that we faced. They had a strong defensive position in rocks and caves above our level, and if we attacked without due preparation, the result could have been heavy Australian casualties. We had not expected to find as large a Viet Cong force as this, together with all the supporting and base facilities which went with a regimental presence in the area. After engaging a large number of enemy with airstrikes, helicopter gunships and artillery and mortar fire, we were ordered to withdraw closer to Route 15 to prevent the Viet Cong from setting up any ambush positions along the road.

Once the American reinforcement convoys had passed through, we were able to turn our efforts fully to driving 274 Regiment off the hills. Frequent visits by Brigadier Jackson and Major Piper kept us up to date with the signals intelligence picture of the Viet Cong activities on and around the hills. Over the 10 days from 17 to 26 October, we fought our way back up the steep slopes, encountering several Viet Cong delaying parties inside caves and tunnels, and among rocks. We discovered extensive base facilities and equipment, including a recently made Chinese radio transmitter and receiver and the diary of the deputy commander himself,

Nguyen Nam Hung. This diary was probably the most important single intelligence discovery we made during the whole year. He began each day's entry with his current location, so we could piece together the pattern of his movements during the first 10 months of 1966. After translation of the diary, it took much of my time over the following three months to extract all the available intelligence. The utility of the diary was reinforced by another discovery – a marked 1:50,000-scale map of western Phuoc Tuy which showed the complete Viet Cong track system and the location of base camps and fortified areas. From this map, we could plan reconnaissance and ambush missions over the next several months.

In essence this operation had succeeded because we had been able to build up a detailed picture of Viet Cong activities on either side of Route 15 before we began. We had not known the full size of the enemy group on Nui Thi Vai, but US and Australian signals intelligence soon gave us the essential information. Pressing on with the final wave of clearing attacks on the Viet Cong positions yielded further useful discoveries which strengthened our intelligence framework for our remaining time in Vietnam.

One problem that most intelligence officers must face when dealing with operational commanders is that the latter can often have in their minds a preferred tactical method of operating, and they look for intelligence to justify the use of that method. I learned about this issue in depth through a lucky personal coincidence. Not long after 5 RAR's arrival in Vietnam my first book, *The German Army and the Nazi Party*, was published in London by Cassells. Soon afterwards I received a letter from my production manager at Cassells, Ken Parker, to say that they were also publishing a book on the German bombing offensive against Britain in the First World War, *The First Battle of Britain*, by Raymond Fredette. Fredette, Parker wrote, was a major in the US Air Force, and was currently serving in Saigon in the headquarters of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, better known as MACV, the headquarters of General Westmoreland. Fredette soon invited me to visit him in Saigon. We had a lot of common interests and a friendship developed, leading to further visits. This friendship has deepened and Ray and I are still in touch by telephone and email – he at the age of 95 and myself at 82. Of particular relevance to this chapter was what I learned from Ray about the functioning of the highest US headquarters in Vietnam. There was a broad spectrum of views among the senior commanders and staff on how to win the war, ranging from turning South Vietnam into a car park

by physical destruction through to a huge civic action program which put public education ahead of military action. Each school of thought looked for intelligence information to prove that its approach was the most effective, and they suppressed information which favoured the advocates of other approaches. This influenced the intelligence staff, the J2 division of MACV, who also had their own theories on how to win the war, and these ideas could influence what they chose to pass on to their counterparts in the J3 (Operations) division. This J2/J3 rivalry did not end at the level of MACV, Ray told me. It existed at lower levels throughout the US forces in Vietnam. Once Ray had taken me through this analysis, I could see that it also had applicability to our much smaller Australian forces in Vietnam. Commanders could selectively use intelligence to justify a hasty choice of their favourite strategic or tactical idea, rather than making a conscious choice among all the available alternative approaches.

These were useful lessons, both for the shaping of our operations in Vietnam and for my own understanding of why various notable commanders of the past had stuck to unsuccessful strategies, despite intelligence available at the time which undermined the logic of their grand design. Fortunately, at the level of 5 RAR Battalion Headquarters, we had a commander and a group of principal officers who could see the dangers of a rigid strategic approach, and they were rigorous in their demands for full intelligence briefings rather than brief resumes of what I personally thought was important. It was, above all, that expert debating circle which set and maintained the standards of our intelligence gathering and analysis system during our year in Vietnam. The operations of October 1966 were a great schooling experience in how to combine intelligence and operational planning. These lessons have continued to be relevant and to shape the development of methods that are still in use today.

This text is taken from *Vietnam Vanguard: The 5th Battalion's Approach to Counter-Insurgency, 1966*, edited by Ron Boxall and Robert O'Neill, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/VV.2019.05