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## A PLATOON COMMANDER'S WAR – PART 1

Roger Wainwright and Terry O'Hanlon

### **Editors' introduction**

The saying that the Vietnam War was 'a platoon commander's war' derives, in part from the fact that our infantry platoon commanders were the peripheral nodes in a radio communication web which extended from the action happening at the point of battle, upwards and sideways, throughout a widespread network. Thus, command and support hierarchies were kept instantly informed of events and conditions faced by the soldiers entrusted with implementing their orders. In addition, the platoon commander's radio link and his professional knowledge, skills and cool-headed judgement enabled the risks of employing close artillery and air support to be accepted, as well as the rapid calling of life-saving aeromedical evacuation whenever his platoon suffered a casualty.

At the same time, platoon commanders were the infantry officers most personally enmeshed with their battalion's fighting soldiers – the diggers for whom they had the responsibilities of training, guiding and care. They were simultaneously boss, teacher and counsellor to their diggers. They were also their soldiers' champion, who maintained a close interest in their backgrounds, interests, talents and personalities. This relationship between the junior officer and his men was the lynchpin of success in Vietnam, as it has always been throughout Australia's lengthening military history. These things are evident throughout this book. Our Vietnam

platoon commanders ranged in age from their early to mid-20s. Only in the warrior's field of life-and-death toil are such weighty expectations confidently heaped upon such young shoulders.

## Roger Wainwright

As Field Marshal Viscount Slim of Yarralumla and Bishopston observed in the first paragraph of *Defeat into Victory*, his account of the Burma Campaign of World War II:

the four best commands in the Service are a platoon, a battalion, a division and an army ... A platoon, because it is your first command, because you are young, and because, if you are any good, you know the men in it better than their mothers do and love them as much.<sup>1</sup>

I had a military career spanning more than 35 years including service in four infantry battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) and holding key roles in army training establishments and appointments in Defence operational and intelligence communities. The most satisfying and rewarding of these postings was the privilege of commanding a platoon of the Tiger Battalion on active service. Lamentably, the subsequent commands enjoyed by Viscount Slim passed me by!

I trust my recollections will give a reasonably clear description of the challenges facing the platoons of the 5th Battalion (5 RAR) in 1966. All 12 rifle platoons and the four platoons of Support Company had different experiences, but there was a common base for us all, including a depth of camaraderie that embodied strong support for each other. We were all required to work to the same standard operating procedures (SOP) of the battalion but there was still scope through our individual command and leadership traits to help each platoon to develop its own identity and character.

After graduating from the Royal Military College (RMC) Duntroon on 14 December 1965, I joined 5 RAR on 5 January 1966. I was allocated to command 8 Platoon, a position I proudly held for the next 17 months. Five infantry graduates of our RMC class had spent a two-week attachment with 5 RAR in August 1965 as part of our corps familiarisation training

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<sup>1</sup> Viscount Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, Cassell, London, 1956, p 3.

prior to graduation. The founding commanding officer (CO), Lieutenant Colonel Peter Oxley, gave us a warm welcome with a few appreciated fatherly pearls of wisdom and we were then placed under the guidance of the 'in place' platoon commanders. I recall that the battalion second in command (2IC), Major John Warr, was soon to assume command and the more junior company commanders were already calling him 'Sir'. At that stage in 1965 there was little talk that the battalion would soon have a pivotal role in the establishment of the 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) in Phuoc Tuy Province, Vietnam. John Warr assumed command of 5 RAR on promotion to lieutenant colonel on 1 September.

The very early days of 1966 were spent getting to know my platoon, receiving reinforcements, both regular and national service, supervising individual and section-level training, and assembling my platoon commander's notebook. This, after a time, seemed to be of limited value; although it was held to be a mandatory measure of a platoon commander's knowledge of his soldiers' qualifications, capabilities and personal details. We faced a very steep learning curve because we platoon commanders were recent graduates of RMC, the Officer Cadet School Portsea or the Officer Training Unit (OTU) Scheyville. Our OTU colleagues comprised five of the first class of national service officers to graduate from Scheyville. Two of them, John Deane-Butcher and Harry Neesham, joined C Company as my fellow platoon commanders.

The rumours of 5 RAR being sent to Vietnam were now rife but until we received formal notice, we were instructed to say in outside conversation '*If* we go to Vietnam', not '*when* we go to Vietnam'. During February and early March, all companies had rotated through the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra for some harsh but extremely valuable training. We also undertook mine warfare training at the School of Military Engineering at Casula. This involved daily forced marches in battle order from Holsworthy to Casula (7 km) to keep our fitness at a high level. By this time the platoons were generally settled and up to full strength, although I had two new section commanders join my platoon about this time to replace two who were just not up to the mark.

There is no doubt that junior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) are the backbone of a battalion, particularly in counter-insurgency operations. I was fortunate to have excellent stability with my section commanders, and we were together for almost our entire tour of duty in Vietnam. Whenever hard yards had to be covered, I had no hesitation in putting

any of them forward as my point section. They were Corporals Russell Quinn of 4 Section, Leslie 'Doc' Urquhart of 5 Section and Holger 'Curly' Koblitz of 6 Section. Doc has since died but I am still in contact with Russ and Curly.

I had two platoon sergeants over this period: Keith 'Shorty' Mavin and, from September 1966, Ralph 'Rowdy' Hindmarsh. They were different personalities and both very good at their job. Shorty did not endear himself to some members of the platoon, but a platoon sergeant is not required to win in any popularity contest. Rowdy was a strong and supportive sergeant who went on to be a company sergeant major (CSM) on the battalion's second tour of Vietnam and later became a regimental sergeant major (RSM).

The battalion was formally warned for service in Vietnam on 9 March 1966. This was the official commencement of our involvement in Operation Hardihood, the deployment of 1 ATF to Vietnam and the establishment of the base at Nui Dat. Many people think that Operation Hardihood started on 24 May 1966 when the battalion deployed from Vung Tau into landing zone (LZ) Hudson to secure the area surrounding the nearby Nui Dat, but that was just the initial tactical phase. Hardihood was a sequential operation comprising the deployment of 1 ATF from Australia through to seizing and securing the site of the intended base at Nui Dat.

The very first entry in the 5 RAR Commander's Diary, the official record that all units are required to maintain after being warned for active service, states: '0900 hrs. CO (Lieutenant Colonel Warr) attended conference at 1TF. Unit warned for service in South Vietnam as part of 1ATF. Operation codenamed Hardihood'. Although our early training had been very busy it certainly picked up in intensity, with greater priority now being given to both our operational and administrative readiness.

On 11 March the battalion departed by air from the Holsworthy 'aero paddock' by Caribou aircraft for Exercises Ben Tiger and Iron Lady, to be held at Gaspers Mountain in the Colo-Putty Field Training Area. These exercises provided the final opportunity for platoons to put the finishing touches on teamwork and tactics including an introduction to helicopter operations. The battalion returned to Gallipoli Barracks on 24 March and commenced pre-embarkation leave on 7 April.

The deployment to Vietnam began on 19 April with the departure of the advance party commanded by Major John Miller. Every platoon was represented on the advance party by either the platoon commander or the platoon sergeant so that they could feed off the experiences of their 1 RAR counterparts who were the third battalion of the US 173 Airborne Brigade at Bien Hoa. There were still formalities to complete at home and on 20 April a battalion ceremonial parade, including a traditional 'Beating the Retreat' ceremony, was held at Holsworthy and reviewed by the Minister for the Army, Malcolm Fraser. The following day the battalion marched through Sydney in a ticker tape farewell with the salute being taken by the Governor of NSW, Sir Roden Cutler VC, KCMG, CBE.

Lieutenant Colonel Warr and his party departed the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Base Richmond by Qantas charter on 28 April. He was accompanied by elements of Battalion Headquarters (BHQ) and 36 members of 8 Platoon. We travelled via Townsville and Manila to Saigon. HMAS *Sydney* had departed on 22 April with 130 men of 5 RAR, comprising C Company less 8 Platoon, the Transport Platoon with their vehicles, and unit stores. HMAS *Sydney* anchored off Vung Tau on 4 May. The remaining subunits departed by air on alternate days from 30 April with the whole battalion being complete at Vung Tau on 13 May.

Our knowledge of the situation on arrival was tenuous and we had little awareness of the enemy's strength, locations or activities. The arrival of C Company became folklore as its officer commanding, Major Noel Granter, ordered all members to disembark from the landing craft at Vung Tau port with bayonets fixed, although the area was designated as secure. This event caused much merriment to the bystanders at the wharf, particularly the Americans, and became the subject of a cartoon in an Australian newspaper. Our company quartermaster sergeant, Staff Sergeant Bob Trenear, could not join the 'assault' as his bayonet was safely buried at the bottom of his kit bag.

Having travelled by air with my platoon and the CO's party to Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport, John Warr took the opportunity to talk to me about the battalion's dearth of knowledge about our new situation. Before he went to visit the battalion's advance party, who were attached to 1 RAR at Bien Hoa, he reminded me that I was commanding the first platoon of the battalion to arrive in Vietnam and to ensure that, on arrival at Vung Tau, I took all security precautions including mounting clearing patrols at

first and last light. Yes sir! My platoon flew to Vung Tau in a US Air Force C123 Provider and were then piled into a large US Army truck – a cattle truck. The route from Vung Tau airfield to our staging area at ‘Back Beach’ took us through sand dunes and scrub which to me seemed a likely place to be ambushed. Not being certain of the enemy situation, I ordered my machine gunners to load their weapons and mount positions on the corners of the truck.

As we moved into a clear area near the beach, I saw a makeshift camp comprising a large tent, some one-man shelters (hutchies) and some very basic facilities. I had my machine gunners unload and we were welcomed by a happy assistant adjutant, Lieutenant Ralph Thompson, who was clad only in shorts, boots and a hat and wearing a holstered pistol. He pointed us in the direction of some cold ‘goffas’ (canned soft drink) and showed us where we could pitch our hutchies. No clearing patrols were deployed although we did mount a sentry post. Over the next few days in the heat and humidity, with the sun beating down and reflecting off the white sand, 8 Platoon erected steel pickets and ridge wires for the following companies to erect their hutchies. On 1 May we also helped to develop four key sentry and observation posts that were being established on the outer perimeter of the ‘Tigers’ temporary home. It was a quick acclimatisation.

5 RAR Training Directive of 2 May 1966 aimed at finalising the training of the battalion in readiness for operations. Ralph Thompson had been given responsibility for coordinating this training with each company as they progressively arrived at Vung Tau. The program included helicopter operations, clearing operations, armoured personnel carrier training, small arms training including weapon live-firing out to sea, vehicle counter-ambush drills and house clearing. A communications exercise was also conducted for all officers which was aimed at overcoming the difficulties arising from differences between Australian and US radio voice procedures.

To relieve the intense activity and to reinforce bonding with our American allies, preparations were made in the form of an officers’ formal dining-in night, with appropriate security. It was held at the Pacific Hotel, Vung Tau, on 20 May. Officers of the US Army’s 68 Assault Helicopter Company, which was to support us during Operation Hardihood, were invited to attend. I had fallen foul of my company commander for some obscure reason so was appointed as duty officer and remained at Back Beach. It

was an interesting sight to see my fellow officers return well lubricated from the dinner to the battalion's secure area. Several had a last swim in the balmy waters of the South China Sea, resplendent in their summer formal mess dress. It was the 'last supper' before insertion into operations.

5 RAR Operation Order Number 4 was issued on 22 May with the mission '5RAR is to destroy the enemy in the Tactical Area of Responsibility allotted as a preliminary to the establishment of 1ATF in the area'. Orders were passed down the command chain to platoon and section level and, while there was a nervous expectation in the air, there prevailed a quiet confidence that our training would hold us in good stead in the days to come. To give us a spiritual boost, a battalion church parade was held, the service being conducted by Father John Williams and Chaplain Ed Bennett.

My notes of the orders I gave to 8 Platoon for 24 May, the day the operation began, show reveille was at 0400 hours and, following breakfast and other final administrative preparations, we departed at 0610 hours for LZ Snakepit (Vung Tau airfield). Our company lift-off was scheduled for 0703 hours with an 0718 insertion into LZ Hudson which was secured by elements of the US 173 Airborne Brigade. The order of fly-in was: A Company, C Company with the CO and his tactical party, B Company and D Company. Seven hundred and seventy troops were airlifted using 30 UH-1D Iroquois helicopters, comprising four lifts of these aircraft with each chalk (passenger load) comprising either six or seven men. The men of both A Company and C Company carried a 5-kilogram 81-millimetre mortar bomb in addition to their normal combat load as the initial ammunition supply for the mortar platoon.

After the manoeuvre, with elements of the battalion deployed to LZ Hudson, the rifle companies commenced deployment into their designated areas of operations from 1200 hours. It was a day that I will always remember. At 1400 hours 8 Platoon had the first enemy contact of 5 RAR, when we were fired upon by one or two enemy who then fled. A short while later we again sighted two VC but, on both occasions despite having employed our well-rehearsed contact drills, we had no results.

The location of these two contacts was the small ground rise that became the home for 5 RAR's BHQ and those of subsequent battalions located on the northern side of the Nui Dat base during the next six years. C Company harboured a few hundred metres to the east of this location

and commenced digging shell scrapes (shallow protective fighting pits for each soldier). Late that afternoon we heard small arms fire from about 500 metres away followed later by the sad news that Private Errol Noack of B Company's 5 Platoon had become the battalion's first casualty. This was sad news for several members of my platoon as they knew Errol well, having undergone recruit and early infantry training with him. Although he was a member of another company, such a loss hit hard particularly on our first day in operations. After two contacts and the loss of a mate the reality had well and truly sunk in that we were at war.

We stood-to (armed, fully equipped and alert) and sentries were posted for the night hoping that a night's rest would prepare us for the second day. This was not to be. The wet season was in full swing and we were drenched, with our shell scrapes becoming small swimming pools. At about 2150 hours we heard artillery rounds land close to our position, so close that shrapnel whipped through the trees above us. Regardless of discomfort, our water-filled shell scrapes were then a welcome refuge. It appeared that this fire came from US artillery, located near the province capital Ba Ria, as part of an H&I (harassing and interdiction) fire program about which we were not aware. At 2226 hours 5 RAR BHQ sent the following terse message to 173 Airborne Brigade: 'Please ensure no further unrequested H&I fire is put into my area without reference to this HQ. Fire received approximately 2150 was uncomfortable'. Our operations officer, Max Carroll, assured us later that the remonstrations over the radio was far more explicit than that recorded in the battalion's operations log.

So ended our first day of operations. I recall thinking that we will need to get used to such activity and briefed my platoon accordingly the following morning – only '363 days and a wakey!' (363 days and one night's sleep to go before we can go home). I was a little more than 21 years and marginally older than the men of my platoon who were a mix of regular soldiers and national servicemen who were mostly from the first call-up. The only platoon members older than me were my three section commanders and my platoon sergeant.

When service in Vietnam was looming, I started to think about how I would perform as a young platoon commander with direct responsibility for training, commanding and leading my men and attending to their ongoing training and welfare. I still have some self-analysis notes that I wrote at the time and they address three fundamental questions. First, how would I react when giving orders to kill enemy soldiers?

Second, how would I react when members of my own platoon were killed or wounded in action? Third, how well would I react when we were in a particularly dire situation? There was to be only one way I would find the answers.

The construction of the base at Nui Dat while maintaining security was extremely difficult. Digging-in and coordinating defensive positions at section, platoon and company level was frustrating as it had to be combined with ongoing operations including some village cordon and search activities. In between the battalion's operations, all platoons undertook fighting and ambush patrols in our tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) as well as manning sentry positions on a 24-hour daily basis, along with the digging of bunkers with overhead protection and erecting defensive barbed wire obstacles. All these activities were conducted at the height of the wet season and there was no escape from the red mud churned up by vehicles and the digging-in process.

My platoon, where it was sited in C Company's area, occupied the most northern platoon position in the Task Force base. It felt like being the proverbial pimple on the pumpkin as the most likely enemy assaults were anticipated to come from the north. Our defences were boosted with the allocation of a .50 calibre heavy machine gun located in my platoon area, primarily to provide mutual support between us and B Company who were on our right flank. We constructed a fortified bunker for this gun. It became the major strong point for our position and continuously manned, 24 hours per day. It also housed the control mechanism for banks of M18A1 Claymore mines (aimed mines, each of which projected 700 steel balls in a 60° arc in front of the device at an initial velocity of 1,218 metres per second) which we laid in front of our perimeter.

The Nui Dat facilities for ablutions, messing (meals) and recreation were very basic until hard-standing (solid flooring) was provided as the tour progressed. Black-out conditions were in place but there was no electric lighting until much later. For months, the only light available was from flashlights, locally sourced candles or by wiring small fluorescent tubes to the part-expired batteries of our ANPRC 25 radio sets.

I will always admire the persistence of our soldiers and NCOs, who faced these circumstances with determination, humour and resilience. We were pioneers who, together with 6 RAR, established bases for follow-on battalions who would inherit a defensible base and facilities with reasonable amenities.

The pressure on platoons was great and after returning from Operation Sydney Two, the cordon and search of Duc My, and a quick shower my platoon was ordered out on a 48-hour patrol. On return to Nui Dat and before I went to BHQ for a debrief, I directed my platoon to rest, have a clean-up, write a letter home and, apart from the sentries on our .50 calibre machine gun, to generally unwind. On return from being debriefed I found about eight members of my platoon had been diverted to digging the large underground command post for Company HQ. I ordered them back to our platoon lines which led to a confrontation with our CSM, Warrant Officer Ross Wormald, about who was commanding 8 Platoon. I stood up for my men and won the point.

The second member of 5 RAR killed in action was Private John Sweetnam, a 19-year-old regular soldier of my 8 Platoon. Sadly, John died on 9 June when he moved while in an ambush position and was mistakenly shot by a member who had not long joined the platoon. He fired at unexpected movement within the ambush area. This incident also occurred during Operation Hardihood. It was the first occasion that a US Army helicopter had conducted a night *Dustoff* of an Australian soldier of 1 ATF. We used hexamine tablet (field cooking fuel) fires to illuminate the boundaries of a rice paddy field for an LZ with Corporal Russ Quinn guiding the helicopter in by torch and being fully illuminated by the landing-lights of the aircraft. A few hours later we received the news by radio that John had not survived. This incident hit the platoon hard as John was well respected, a fine soldier and a good mate of all in his section and 8 Platoon. I still have a copy of the letter I wrote to his mother at the time and tried to contact her when we returned home. The circuit road in C Company's area in Nui Dat base was named 'Sweetnam Crescent' in his memory and the name was retained by all following battalions that occupied the position.

Years later when I was an instructor at various army schools and had the benefit of hindsight, I concluded that the defences at Nui Dat were lacking, particularly in relation to those vital principles of defence – mutual support, depth, all-round defence and interlocking arcs of fire. This was exacerbated by the fact that 1 ATF had only two infantry battalions throughout 1966–67 instead of the three that were needed. Nor were the mobility and firepower of tanks available in the early and most vulnerable days of 1 ATF's seizure and occupation of its Nui Dat base.

The early difficulties in protecting the Nui Dat base can be illustrated by the dearth of defensive capability during the Battle of Long Tan. On 17 and 18 August all 5 RAR rifle companies were deployed to the north or north-east of Nui Dat. The SITREP (situation report) for the period 1600–2000 hours on 18 August, at the time when the battle was at its most intense, lists the locations assigned to 5 RAR elements after most were quickly ordered back to Nui Dat. This was a very sparse, skeletal manning of those 1 ATF unit areas that had been denuded of men and weapons used to mount a reaction force to support 6 RAR's D Company at Long Tan. To make it worse, C Company was still deployed to the north at Binh Ba following the battalion's cordon and search of that village.

5 RAR's platoons were defending unfamiliar company positions. They were a thin red line with virtually nothing in reserve. No doubt this became an urgent consideration in 1 ATF eventually being bolstered by an additional infantry battalion and a squadron of tanks. These were considered necessary from the outset; but the third battalion was not added until December 1967 and the tank squadron did not arrive until early 1968. Questions remain in many minds about the likely outcome of the threat to 1 ATF in the early days if D Company of 6 RAR had not encountered the large enemy force at Long Tan on 18 August.

The constantly high tempo of our operations – patrolling, ambushing and building defences – during the early months led to the refinement of many of our procedures. We had also absorbed and proved many of the lessons learnt by 1 RAR, which had been a permanent part of the US 173 Airborne Brigade throughout 1965–66. These factors led to a major revision of our SOPs, which were reissued in early October 1966 prior to deployment on Operation Canberra.

It became common, particularly in very thick vegetation, for sections to use just one scout. This facilitated navigation by allowing closer communication between the leading section commander and his scout. It also became necessary when our sections were often reduced from 10 men to about seven or eight, and sometimes even fewer. Otherwise, there was no effective rifle group in each section. Eventually, I gave up employing a batman (orderly) as I felt he would be better used in one of the sections as a rifleman.

Harbour drills (moving into a stationary, defensive posture for an extended halt) at platoon level were automatic, ordered by hand signals alone and the layout quickly coordinated after all sections were in position. Similarly, drills for deploying a *reactive* quick ambush were refined so that the position could be rapidly and quietly occupied after a quick reconnaissance by myself. Conversely, a *deliberate* ambush was pre-planned and deployed in response to intelligence about known, anticipated or suspected enemy activity. Ambushing was a key tactic in maintaining the initiative in our TAOR. While deliberate ambushes were laid at selected locations based on intelligence and map reconnaissance, the final siting of any ambush was the prerogative of the ambush commander who assessed the site's features, likely enemy approaches and the ability to concentrate maximum fire into a selected killing ground.

A triangular ambush concept was developed which was not in accordance with current operational doctrine. A harbour is not an ambush nor is an ambush a harbour. This combination of a night-time ambush and a harbour was brought about by increasing fatigue caused both by constant daytime patrolling and diminishing platoon strengths. Platoons had to release men to attend courses, contribute to essential non-combat manpower needs, for rest and leave, illness or injury and numerous other reasons. In retrospect, we can only envy the rotational reinforcement concept that enables platoons deployed in present-day operations to be maintained at optimal strength during operations.

A strong relationship with my radio operator was paramount. A signaller with long whip-like aerials showing above him was a sure sign to the enemy that a 'boss' was nearby, so there prevailed a firm arrangement between us that he was far enough away so as not to attract unwanted attention, but near enough to provide me with quick access to the radio when needed. My first signaller was Private Ian Foran, a very capable first-intake national serviceman whom I had trained in Australia. Ian was a reluctant soldier who did not want to be in Vietnam but nevertheless did his duty. After a few months in Vietnam, Ian was poached by my company commander who had recognised his skills and made him his own signaller on the company command net. Rank hath its privileges! Private David Sharp then volunteered to become my signaller. He was another first-intake national serviceman who had been the forward scout for 4 Section. He learnt quickly and was an excellent signaller.

In training my NCOs, I placed a lot of emphasis on indirect fire support from artillery and mortars and made sure that their supporting fire was always available. I did this by showing them how artillery or mortar defensive fire tasks could be planned on the four key points of the compass at a safe distance from our location, so fire could be called for and adjusted at night without reference to maps, which needed the use of torchlight. It was a bit like an insurance policy – in place but, hopefully, not needed. By day, I would sometimes call for unplanned fire support during independent platoon TAOR patrols, when not in contact with the enemy. I knew it was a confidence booster to the platoon to know that this vital support was on hand if needed, and to see that all members of our leadership group were competent in its use.

After several months on operations, it was fair to say that we were at the top of our game. Confidence was high, our teamwork was excellent and we were winning in our contacts with the enemy.

And now to Operations Canberra, Robin and Queanbeyan. The background and effect of these operations have been covered in other chapters, so I will confine myself to some incidents involving my platoon. On the morning of 8 October, 8 Platoon was leading C Company up a steep ridgeline covered in very thick vegetation which afforded limited observation. The only option was to move carefully in single file. Doc Urquhart's 5 Section was leading, with his scout Terry 'Harry' Harris in front. In making his way through undergrowth, he badly cut his wrist, which later required stitches. I moved the other two sections forward with Curly Koblitz's 6 Section now in the lead, followed by me and Dave Sharp, then Russ Quinn's 4 Section with my platoon sergeant Rowdy Hindmarsh and Doc's section in the rear. At about 1030 hours we came across a recently used track and heard voices. I told C Company headquarters that I would investigate. Artillery fire was laid to the north and placed on call, ready to be fired at my request.

**Private Daryl McCombe, forward scout, recalls this episode:**

On 8 October our platoon was leading C Company in single file. 'Doc's' section was leading with 'Harry' Harris as the forward scout. Our section followed with Russ Quinn's section last with Bobby Box the scout. Word came back up the line that Harry had cut his hand badly and that our section was to move up front and take the lead. This placed Russ Quinn's section next after platoon headquarters and Doc's section, with the injured man, in the rear.

I led the company down on to relatively level ground but still patrolling through thick jungle. I walked into a slightly cleared area and saw a freshly dug trench with some digging implements strewn about it. This was directly in front of me and about 10 metres away. I turned to signal to 'Curly' Koblitz but he was out of sight. I had developed a bad habit of getting too far out in front of the man behind me. I turned my back on the trench and took a couple of steps back from where I had paused when 'Curly' came in to view. I gave him the hand signal to indicate enemy up ahead and then went down on one knee facing the trench to wait for him to come up to me. Before he got to me a voice called out '*Uc Dai Loi*' [Vietnamese for Australian] and so they knew we were there. The voice came from my front but to my right at about the 2 o'clock direction. This was followed immediately by a couple of rifle shots. I believe it was the same person who yelled out, '*Uc Dai Loi!*' who fired the two shots.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Daryl McCombe, email correspondence with the author, 30 May 2017.

Several more shots were fired from another direction. I radioed this information back to my company commander, Major John Miller, who told me to clear the area. Curly's section was already positioned to provide fire support, so I moved forward and did a quick reconnaissance to the right flank which fell away steeply and was thickly covered by vegetation. The left was a better option, so I decided to take the other two sections with me on this flank and assault downhill through the position with Curly's section providing fire support. After we moved past the fire support section a booby trap exploded, which we later discovered was initiated by a tripwire.

We suffered seven casualties, two of which were serious. The immediate area was made secure and we started the difficult task of withdrawing the casualties about 300 metres back to C Company headquarters where there was a potential LZ. This took considerable time to clear of tall vegetation and was still a tight LZ, but large enough for a *Dustoff* helicopter to land. It was still relatively tight because of a large tree stump in the landing area. The evacuation involved two lifts by US Army Iroquois *Dustoff* helicopters and was not complete until after 1300 hours.

The two serious casualties were Private Bobby Box and Private David Riik, respectively the forward scout and a rifleman with Russ Quinn's section. Both were returned to Australia because of the seriousness of their wounds. Private Doug Bishop had also received leg wounds but returned to the platoon after 29 days convalescence at the US 36 Evacuation Hospital, Vung Tau. The policy was that any casualty requiring 30 days or more to recover would be returned to Australia. Doug was delighted to make it back to the platoon with a day to spare so he could participate in more adventures. Dave Sharp was not wounded but shrapnel did hit his radio which remained operable. I also received some minor shrapnel wounds to my left side which I didn't report until later, with John Miller insisting that I be evacuated to have the shrapnel plucked out. The main impact was worn by my ammunition pouch with shrapnel penetrating my M16 rifle's spare magazines.

Next day at about 1400 hours in the same area, 7 Platoon encountered more booby traps, suffering four casualties. It was clear that the area was laced with booby traps, many of which had been attached to vines and sited to create a channelling affect. The same LZ was used to evacuate these casualties.

During the next 24 hours C Company located some of the enemy's prepared but unoccupied positions within what appeared to be a large base camp area. It included training facilities, a hospital, ammunition, medical stores, a workplace for making booby traps, items of personal equipment, weapons registers, written reports of vehicle movement along Route 15 and an important map of foot track systems in the western part of Phuoc Tuy province.

On the early morning of 9 October with a few stitches inserted, I flew into an LZ being secured by B Company to await the arrival of C Company and rejoin my platoon. After a resupply of ammunition, explosives and rations, we continued the search of the western slopes of Nui Thi Vai, finding more enemy facilities, tunnels, ammunition and surgical equipment. The sappers (combat engineers) were kept very busy, destroying as many of these as they could and undertook the onerous task of delousing many of the booby traps and mines that were discovered. In addition to these enemy munitions, we also encountered very touchy unexploded US BLU3 cluster bomblets, many caught by their fins in the thick vegetation.

The Combat Engineer Teams of 1 Field Squadron that joined us were all extremely brave and skilful and a very welcome addition to any infantry company. We can only admire the skills and tenacity they showed in climbing into tunnels, searching for and delousing mines and booby traps, and using high explosives to destroy enemy facilities. They were a vital part of our operations and held in very high regard.

This pattern of searching continued into the next day but could not be completed as we had to move quickly to the north-western edge of Nui Thi Vai to LZ Michael for extraction by helicopter to Route 15 for the commencement of Operation Robin. We knew we were to return to Nui Thi Vai several days later, to continue with the clearing of enemy from it in another operation.

Details of Operation Robin to secure Route 15 for the arrival of 3 Brigade of 4 Infantry Division (US) have been recounted in Chapter 6. This operation passed relatively routinely for C Company except for the crash of a Sioux helicopter flying south along Route 15 as it approached C Company. We witnessed the helicopter's destruction as it bounced down the road before coming to stop about 30 metres from our perimeter.

Orders for Operation Queanbeyan, our return to Nui Thi Vai, were issued during Operation Robin and, to gain surprise, we departed from the roadside of Route 15 on foot at 0300 hours on 17 October. We harboured in the thick undergrowth to avoid detection prior to moving into our designated area of operations at first light. Essentially, this was the same area where we had suffered casualties and discovered numerous enemy facilities in the preceding week. Expectations were quite high that the battalion would be in for an interesting time.

It was hard going in the thick vegetation and steep rocky slopes and, in the afternoon, we heard continual gunfire and fire support from a US helicopter light fire team. We found out later this came from a major contact involving the Anti-Tank Platoon. The following morning, we reached the area where we'd had the enemy contact 10 days before and, after searching the area, we realised that we needed far more explosives to destroy the enemy facilities than we were carrying. Consequently, these were flown into us, along with two additional combat engineers.

The LZ to be used was the one that had been used to evacuate our earlier casualties. We were watching the approaching RAAF Iroquois when it appeared that the rear rotor clipped a tree during its descent. The helicopter

then crashed nearby but just outside the area we had secured. It lost power, its nose collided with a tree and it slid down the tree crunching heavily onto the ground.

My platoon was closest to the crash, so I moved a section to the far side of the wreckage to provide additional security. Two members of 5 Section, Private Syd Shore and Private Bill Cavanagh, ran forward to assist. At this stage a small fire was burning inside the aircraft, on the right-hand side.

**Syd Shore describes the incident:**

Just as the helicopter was arriving, we had noticed another booby trap near the track we were on. I ran towards the helicopter just as it hit the ground after sliding down a tree. Some crew and passengers who were able were exiting the fuselage and I told them to move down the track but not to move off it. There was small fire which I would have been able to put out but couldn't work the fire extinguisher. Bill Cavanagh had now arrived. We noticed that one of the pilots could not get out as his right foot was pinned by the tree. Bill and I then worked together with a RAAF crewman, who was on the inside, to pull away the Perspex under the damaged nose of the chopper to free the trapped right foot of the unconscious co-pilot. We eventually got him free but by this time the chopper was well and truly alight. Thankfully everyone was clear from the site before its machine gun ammunition started to explode.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Syd Shore, email correspondence with the author, 16 August 2017.

The TNT on board burned fiercely and destroyed the helicopter. Syd and Bill were both recommended for awards and some months later we were advised that they were Mentioned in Dispatches for their prompt and courageous actions. If they had not intervened, as their citations state, the crash 'would most certainly have resulted in the incineration of the helpless second pilot in the ensuing fire in the nose section of the aircraft'.<sup>2</sup> Years later while researching this operation, I came across the official 'Recommendation for an Honour or Award' for Syd and Bill. Both Lieutenant Colonel Warr and Brigadier Jackson, the task force commander, had recommended them for the George Medal. The subsequent reduction in their awards occurred higher up the approval chain. The RAAF helicopter crewman involved in the incident was subsequently awarded the George Medal.

<sup>2</sup> See 5th Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment Association website, *Citation accompanying the award of Mentioned in Dispatches to Pte. Shore*, [www.5rar.asn.au/history/cite\\_shore.htm](http://www.5rar.asn.au/history/cite_shore.htm).

Maintaining alertness, efficiency and ongoing battle hardness was a challenge for all platoon and section commanders, particularly as our tour of duty progressed. My platoon was most proficient when it was in regular contact with the enemy or there was convincing intelligence to suggest that enemy were nearby. We went through some extended periods of little contact with the enemy. Slackness could creep in with inattention on sentry duty, laxity on patrol, weapon cleanliness dropping off and an element of boredom creeping in along with repetitive routines. All this was nipped in the bud by section and platoon commanders. Doug Bishop remembers, 'the mind-deadening tedium and discomfort of click-after-click [kilometre-after-kilometre] of patrolling the TAOR, and the ever-present tiredness'. On the positive side, it was strongly evident that we were gaining control of Phuoc Tuy Province and that the enemy was now very much on the back foot.

A small historical note associated with 5 RAR's Operation Queanbeyan is that it was possibly the last time that Australia's famous Second World War weapon, the Owen machine carbine (OMC), was used on active service by the rifle companies of an Australian infantry battalion. Many members had already transitioned to the US M16 5.56 mm rifle with very basic familiarisation lessons in the days prior to these operations. The OMC had little hitting power mainly due to old ammunition being fired from a weapon which used low velocity pistol ammunition.

The typical digger of the Tiger Battalion showed all the traits we have come to expect since the original Anzacs. He was brave, loyal and innovative. He could be outspoken and a straight shooter, but tolerant with a sense of humour. He was reliable on operations and always watched his mate's back. He would wind down and play hard whenever he could. He expected his leaders to face the same hardships as he did and respected them for doing so.

While I have focused on aspects encountered by the platoons of the rifle companies and Support Company, we were totally reliant on the timely support and commitment of the often-unheralded platoons of Administration Company. They provided the rations, both at Nui Dat and by putting together some nice surprises to send into the field via resupply helicopters. Our company cook, Sergeant 'Paddy' Cahill, and his small team were unstinting in providing the best culinary offerings they could, and he was famous for his bread rolls. Sergeant Mick Henrys and his armourers kept our weapons in a healthy state. The Medical Platoon

gave us our devoted stretcher bearers who were infantrymen first but also had medical skills training. They were also morale-lifters as members of the Battalion Band. The Transport Platoon reliably maintained the battalion's fleet of vehicles under very difficult and rudimentary conditions. Successful operations would have been much more difficult to mount without the indefatigable support of the seldom-applauded men of Administration Company.

## **Terry O'Hanlon**

In 1964 I was working for Australian Mercantile Land & Finance, a rural stock and station agency in the town of Charleville in south-western Queensland, when I was called up for two years of national service. I had no interest in joining the army. I thought it was a bloody nuisance, completely upsetting what I wanted to do with my life. Cattle and horse work, rodeo and camp-drafting, and life in the bush was where I was going. Work, parties and rugby league football were the go at Charleville in south-western Queensland and I was enjoying them all.

Upon being called up I was sent to 1 Recruit Training Battalion at Kapooka, near Wagga Wagga in south-central NSW. I arrived in the middle of winter still very unimpressed with the whole army thing. After a short time, national servicemen were asked if they wanted to apply for entry to an officer training course at the newly established OTU at Scheyville, just west of Sydney. I applied thinking that, as an officer, I would have at least some say in my destiny. This also gave me a goal, something to aim for and I really enjoyed what faced me in the next hectic, pressurised six months – the mates I made, the discipline, the personal standards demanded, the sense of challenge and achievement, the burgeoning self-confidence and the spirit of the first, ground-breaking class of OTU officer cadets – the whole tightly compressed challenge which was so different from the comfortable pace of my former life. On occasions I captained the OTU Rugby Team; I graduated third in my class and was awarded the Staff Prize for Tactics.

Five of our first OTU class were posted to 5 RAR which was a great honour, and I was one of them; posted to the first Australian Army unit chosen to take national servicemen into war operations. My fellow OTU graduates posted to 5 RAR were Melford Roe, Harry Neesham, John Deane-Butcher and Ted Pott. I had played rugby union at school and,

interestingly, two fellows I played against and who became my friends when I played with them in a Combined Schools First Fifteen in 1962, were John Deane-Butcher and John Fraser. As mentioned, John Deane-Butcher and I became fellow platoon commanders in 5 RAR. John Fraser was a member of the second OTU class to graduate and he had nearly completed his two years of compulsory national service when he extended his service on learning that his battalion, 3 RAR, was to go to Vietnam. He died leading his platoon in the Long Hai Hills on 28 March 1968, when he stepped on an enemy mine.

On joining the battalion, I was assigned to 5 Platoon, B Company. This was a fortunate development for many reasons. Our CO, Lieutenant Colonel John Warr, was a man who cared deeply for his men and he had a band of very experienced company commanders and senior NCOs in his battalion. Most importantly for me, I had an outstanding platoon sergeant as my deputy, Sergeant Sam Hassall; and a great group of junior NCOs and soldiers. Sam's guidance and support were invaluable to a new and very raw second lieutenant given his first command in a battalion that had been warned for active service.

The officer commanding (OC) B Company, Major Bruce McQualter, was a very good leader in operations and was supported by his calm and thoughtful 2IC, Captain Bob O'Neill, who was a source of sage advice to us. Bruce and I didn't really hit it off, which was irrelevant as I respected his ability and authority. Bruce died of wounds late in the tour and Bob left B Company early in the tour, transferred to BHQ as the intelligence officer.

I was a volunteer for the battalion's advance party which preceded the main body into Vietnam. I volunteered because our adjutant, Captain Peter Isaacs, had awarded me 30 days as battalion duty officer and I wanted to escape the tedium of being virtually confined to barracks. Adjutants are the supervisors of the behavioural standards and social graces of junior officers; and Peter had taken a very dim view of my being late to our farewell, mixed (ladies attending), formal dining-in night. Volunteering was a clever move because it also gave me valuable experience of patrolling with 1 RAR who had preceded us to Vietnam and were part of the US Army's 173 Airborne Brigade, based in Bien Hoa Province.

The battalion was inserted, by air assault, into Phuoc Tuy Province and secured the area around the hill called Nui Dat, which was to become the 1 ATF base. Our war had begun with Operation Hardihood. Late on the first day B Company stopped for a water resupply from a stream. My 5 Platoon was in the lead on the eastern slope of a low rise just north of Nui Dat. Sam Hassall led our water party, which had just returned from a nearby stream in the fading light, when some shots rang out followed by a large volume of fire, both incoming and outgoing. One of our water party, Private Errol Noack, was hit in the first exchange of shots. Corporal George Gilbert was quick to realise that the incoming fire was from another company and was instrumental in stopping the firing from both sources. Errol, a national serviceman, was an exuberant soldier, keen and well-liked by his mates. I spoke with him before he was evacuated by *Dustoff* helicopter to a US Army hospital in Vung Tau, but he died on the way. Thus, as if underlining the perpetual controversy about sending conscripted men to war, the first national serviceman to be killed in action died on his first day in action.

The whole event had many parts. B Company was stationary. A Company was close by. One of the companies was not where it thought it was and there were VC between them. One of our machine gunners, Private Joe Devlin, who was positioned on our left, saw what he was sure were two VC moving from right to left across his front. He did not fire because he was unsure of where our water party was. I have always believed the VC were moving away from A Company after initiating the contact. The loss of Errol had a very profound effect on my men, but they soon rallied and pressed on with their tasks. The lessons from this incident resulted in the devising of procedures to be strictly followed when friendly elements were close to each other, or there was a danger of navigation errors in jungle which might lead to a clash between them.

For years, speculation endured about whether VC were involved at the scene or how difficulties of navigation in fading light and featureless, thickly wooded terrain might have combined to result in two companies being unaware of each other's proximity while on their first day in operations, and whether this might have triggered the incident. Such speculation conveniently ignores the overriding fact that war is a dangerous and unforgiving business in which innumerable factors are at play.

The men of 5 Platoon were smart, and it was my responsibility to keep them as fully informed as I could. I knew they would follow if I was straight with them. To us, our platoon was everything. Our first operation was difficult. We were inexperienced and had contacts with the enemy, including a platoon attack which is well described in Bob O'Neill's 1968 book *Vietnam Task*:

Five Platoon was separated from the remainder of the company ... They encountered a Viet Cong defensive position, which was occupied by five men. The platoon commander, Second Lieutenant O'Hanlon, ordered an attack which drove out the Viet Cong, who left a considerable trail of blood. On following this blood trail, voices were heard. One wounded Viet Cong attracted attention to himself and surrendered. Our chaps bandaged his wounded leg and splinted it in case it had been broken. He accepted a cigarette and a drink of water. Within twenty minutes of receiving his wound he was flying to the same hospital which we used at Vung Tau. Near the huts of the base Five Platoon discovered a cache containing 1,300 pounds [600 kg] of rice. Disposal of captured rice was always a problem when it is found in such large quantities as it was seldom possible to lift it out by helicopter or by road. Often the only expedient which could be used for denying the rice to the Viet Cong was to blow it up. Five Platoon were forced to do this because ... no more helicopters were available.<sup>3</sup>

All operations were important, but Operation Hardihood was our baptism of fire and it fixed in our minds a clear idea of what the following 12 months were likely to encompass, very likely at an increasing tempo. Its experiences were invaluable; we really got to know and value each other and developed faith in our systems and our ability to adapt our techniques and procedures to meet any situation that arose. Our bonding began a journey that is yet to end.

In the first week we had lost one of our own men, killed four VC, captured one and destroyed a large quantity of enemy rations. After about two weeks of the battalion's clearing of Nui Dat and its surrounding areas, 5 Platoon was relieved to move into what was to become 1 ATF's base.

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3 Robert J O'Neill, *Vietnam Task: The 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment*, Cassell Australia, Melbourne, 1968, p 41.

Although it was far from secure at that time, at least the whole battalion was concentrated to commence construction of our part of the Task Force base.

In this chapter and Chapters 10 and 15, fellow junior officers have described the tests which confronted platoon commanders during the earlier part of 5 RAR's first tour of war service. Their narratives describe the heavy responsibilities which we shouldered as young men and the accompanying pressures of leadership while in continual danger, a situation which faced the army's infantry platoon commanders throughout the Vietnam War and other earlier wars. I have confined my narrative to the very earliest of our experiences to avoid the unneeded repetitiveness of a blow-by-blow description of many more incidents, the types of which are clearly described elsewhere.

In action, and sometimes while waiting for action, I believe all men experience some sort of fear. This is where training, mateship and a determination not to let down one's comrades or oneself all come into play and bestow an ability to suppress fear. With Australians, humour and a communal sense of bravado and aggressiveness spread confidence. It was noticeable how many more men attended church parades before each operation – for some, the doubters, the prudent precaution of an 'each-way' bet might have been at play or, more likely, comfort derived from another reassuring gathering of mates was the spur.

It was my honour to have served with such men who became, and remain, my brothers. I never considered myself as a national service officer, rather, I thought of myself as just another platoon commander. When, later in the tour, I seriously injured my knee and was returned to Australia, it was one of the worst times in my life – I'd had to leave my men.

**Intermission: 'A Platoon Commander's War' continues in Chapter 10.**

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