

9

CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY – THROUGH SOLDIERS' EYES

Bob Kearney, Ted Harrison, Dan Riley
and John O'Callaghan

Introduction by Ron Boxall

The Nui Dinh hills and the adjacent Nui Thi Vai hills soon acquired the nickname of 'the Warburton mountains', then 'the Warbies', when spoken of by soldiers of 5 RAR (5th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment). A popular American song of the day told of the dangers of venturing into wild country, its first line being, 'They say don't go on Wolverton Mountain'. A soldier of D Company, Private Colin Illman, teased his mate Private Graham 'Nugget' Warburton with the amended line, 'They say don't go on *Warburton* Mountain'. The Australian diggers' liking for diminutives soon saw 'the Warbies' routinely applied to the looming hill complexes to the west of Nui Dat. This nickname quickly became widespread throughout the battalion and beyond. Its origins were later authenticated by D Company's commander Major Paul Greenhalgh and Second Lieutenant Dennis Rainer, the two soldiers' platoon commander. Alas, Graham Warburton was killed in action a few days before the battalion first set foot into 'the Warbies' to conduct Operation Canberra.

The Nui Thi Vai hills were the battleground for our three major operations in October 1966, and two of our junior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and two privates have contributed vignettes of what it was like for them as individuals to engage in combat with the Viet Cong (VC) in our first six months in Vietnam. They are but four of the hundreds of

5 RAR's rank and file who thus shouldered the Australian infantryman's eternal burden of adding to the enviable reputation of the long line of those who had gone before them. Earlier generations had subscribed to that ancient military mantra, learned at Mother Army's knee:

The role of the infantry is to seek out and close with the enemy, to kill or capture him, to seize and hold ground and to repel attack, by day or night, regardless of season, weather or terrain.¹

It was now their turn.

Corporal Bob Kearney, section commander

Now, more than 50 years after returning from my tour of duty in South Vietnam with 5 RAR (1966–67), some of my memories of the war have been distorted or forgotten. The moments I would like to remember are now hazy and yet those I would like to forget are crystal clear. Among those I recall vividly are the tired young faces of the men I served alongside and the officers and senior NCOs who trained and led us into and out of situations on the dark foreboding range of steep hills later collectively referred to as the 'Warburton mountains'. On 24 May 1966 during the battalion's helicopter lift from Back Beach at Vung Tau to landing zone (LZ) Hudson, near the remains of a village named Ap An Phu in Phuoc Tuy Province, I saw the 'Warbies' for the first time and somehow knew the day would come when we would have to go there.

With increased enemy operations occurring in and around the villages along the road between Vung Tau, Bien Hoa, Long Binh and Saigon (Route 15), as well as charging a tax on all who dared use the road, a combined American and Australian operation was planned to make the road safe for the coming transportation of troops, materiel and equipment. In early October, our young national service platoon commander, Second Lieutenant John Deane-Butcher, informed us that on 6 October we were to climb up and clear the western edge of the range that dominated Route 15. As a corporal, I was only interested in what part our company (C Company) and platoon (9 Platoon) would play in this massive

¹ Australian Military Board, *The division in battle*, nos 1–11, Pamphlet No 1: *Organisation and tactics*, Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1966, p 14.

operation. Soon after our briefing I thought of the words to a song that had been sung or hummed in the lines after the completion of our first operation (Hardihood): ‘They say don’t go on Wolverton Mountain ...’.

Knowing we now had to climb part of the steep black range of hills to the west of Nui Dat reminded me of an earlier operation during which we climbed a much smaller hill, Nui Nghe, and my section second in command (2IC) ‘Titch’ Tomas was fatally wounded. We had learned from Operation Hardihood – and all the operations since – to lighten our load so now, for the hard slog up and into the ‘Warbies’, the bins in the tents were full of discarded ration packaging and other items deemed too heavy for the work ahead.

My section was made up of young regular and national service soldiers, all of whom were good at their jobs. Each man was a character in his own right and, even now, I can see their faces as if it were only yesterday. Second Lieutenant John Deane-Butcher, our platoon commander, and Harry Neesham, the commander of 7 Platoon, and many of the NCOs and men they led, were ‘nashos’, whose lives had been put on hold or in some cases ended in Vietnam. Lieutenant Roger Wainwright, the only regular army platoon commander in the company, was their mentor and his leadership style and advice had a huge influence on both John and Harry. Whereas the platoon commanders were all about the same age, the standout among our officers was the company commander, Major John Miller. John, although older and far more experienced than his platoon commanders and anyone else in the company, was a calm, kind man who took every opportunity to improve the conditions of his men. John, our company sergeant major (CSM), senior NCOs and two of the corporals had previously served in Malaya and their knowledge and experience of living and patrolling in jungle was of great benefit to all.

Our intelligence officer, Captain (now Professor) Robert O’Neill, has covered the major contacts and incidents that occurred during Operation Canberra in his book *Vietnam Task*, written during the battalion’s tour of duty. It was from *Vietnam Task* that I learned much about the detail of why each of our major operations was conducted and the parts the other platoons and companies played in them. Junior NCOs and soldiers have a very small circle of influence and if they, like me, concerned themselves only with what involved their section, platoon and company directly, they would have little understanding of the purposes of each operation. Notwithstanding the ‘big picture’ briefings before, during and after an

operation, all these years later the incidents in which I had no direct involvement have been almost erased from my memory. It is only the events in which I was directly involved and the little things of which one takes mental snapshots that remain as clear in my mind today as they would be if they had happened last week.

During Operation Queanbeyan, one such mental snapshot I clearly recall is that of our CSM, Warrant Officer Ross Wormald, and myself standing together on 18 October as we watched a Royal Australian Air Force resupply helicopter steadily approach the LZ that had earlier been cut out of the jungle to evacuate the wounded men of 8 Platoon on 8 October during Operation Canberra. Of necessity, the LZ had been hastily cut and, in addition to being strewn with felled trees and foliage, still had, on the upper side, some tall trees which looked more like poles. The problem, as I recall it, was that the chopper carrying two combat engineers and loaded with their explosives had to approach the LZ from the lower end, meaning that all the pilots could see in front of them was the jungle-covered face of the mountain.

As the chopper hovered over the LZ, I asked the CSM and the others nearby 'do you reckon his blades are a bit too close to that large tree?' They all agreed and suddenly the chopper lifted and flew forward towards the face of the mountain, banking away to the right in what appeared to be an attempt to go around and come in again. Suddenly the helicopter appeared to lose power and, in what seemed like slow motion, it dropped into the trees where it immediately began tearing itself apart. The noise it made as it smashed through the heavy jungle sounded like that which I imagine would have been made by a wounded and dying dinosaur. The CSM yelled 'get back to your platoons!' Upon reaching my section area, I could see the flames and shortly thereafter, when I heard exploding ammunition, I imagined the crew and all aboard the chopper had been killed. Miraculously, as I learned later, none of the men were killed, however they were all badly injured and one of the pilots was trapped in the burning chopper. Had it not been for the courage and determination of the 9 Squadron crewman, Sergeant Gordon Buttriss, and Privates Bill Cavanagh and Syd Shore of 8 Platoon, the copilot would have undoubtedly suffered an excruciating death. For their actions during this perilous rescue, Sergeant Buttriss was later awarded the George Medal and both 8 Platoon diggers were Mentioned in Dispatches (MID).

Clearly, the next problem for Major Miller was the extraction of the injured men, so he quickly implemented a plan to get them out as soon as possible. It was not long before I saw above us an American army *Dustoff* chopper, marked on both doors with a red cross on a white background. The pilots who flew these specialist medical evacuation choppers and their crewmen were renowned for their skills and courage, and the crew of this chopper demonstrated the reasons behind their legendary status. As the chopper approached the LZ, the pilot was obviously not pleased by the tight, rough area he had to put his aircraft down onto, so he simply turned his chopper around and, guided by his crewman, slowly backed it safely onto a rocky outcrop not far from the original LZ. Once the patients were on board, the pilot lifted the chopper a few feet and flew off the mountainside towards the hospital at Vung Tau. That crew could not have known it, but that day they received a standing ovation from the diggers of C Company, 5 RAR.

The ‘silence of soldiers’

Over the 50 years since we left Vietnam in 1967, I have been frequently asked ‘what was it like in Vietnam?’ For most of that half-century I lacked a suitable answer so would simply say something like ‘not good’ or ‘sometimes boring, sometimes too exciting’, or just change the subject. After seeing the film *Forrest Gump* starring Tom Hanks, I finally had the answer and now say as Forrest Gump did, ‘well we walked a lot and it rained a lot’.

In October 1966, our battalion conducted four operations: Operations Crow’s Nest, 1–3 October; Canberra, 6–10 October; Robin, 11–16 October; and Queanbeyan, 17–26 October. These were productive but costly and tiring operations, from which I, like all the blokes, retain numerous mental pictures of certain aspects; but others, like those of the diggers who, only 49 years before we left Vietnam in 1967, were fighting the Battle of Passchendaele, have faded over time. When asked by their children and grandchildren, ‘What was it like in the war?’, like all who have been to war since, they would find a way to change the subject. Recently when I was asked about the ‘silence of soldiers’ by some descendants of those heroes of the Great War and Second World War, I used the following analogy:

Trying to explain what it is like to be in a war is akin to a blind person trying to explain to a sighted person what it is like to be blind. Your relatives were not being secretive; they simply find it is just too hard.

Some of my many mental snapshots of sights, smells and sounds in the 'Warbies' include:

- A well-established and highly organised enemy camp, trenches and huts covered by hand-sewn quilts of leaves.
- Russian and VC flags, stick grenades, ammunition and weapons.
- Milky (soapy) water in the streams.
- The dank wet smell of rotting vegetation and the continually moving shadows created by speckled sunlight through the ever-shifting dense leaf canopy.
- Massive bald, bullet and shell-scarred granite boulders that offered the enemy complete protection from the air.
- Ancient moss-covered rocks, lichen-covered trees and vines of all descriptions, large and small, that sometimes acted like a tripwire.
- A tree in an enemy camp that was lit up at night by iridescent fungi or insects.
- Fireflies, pigs, monkeys and unexploded butterfly bombs.
- Small sharp punji stakes embedded in both sides of a track leading up to a rock sangar (firing position) overlooking Nui Dat. An enemy machine gunner in the sangar would have forced all who were not immediately killed on the track to jump onto the punjis.
- The observers on the rock could have used binoculars to observe our every move as we built Nui Dat base from day one.
- Dried napalm residue on the rocks that reminded me of honeycomb.
- Huge rice caches and how we and our attached combat engineers destroyed them.
- The roar of close air support jet aircraft, the crack of artillery shells and mortar bombs impacting and, at night, the sound of wind through bamboo.
- The distant sound of a contact with the enemy in which we knew our mates could either be killed or wounded.
- The sweat-drenched, tired and haggard red faces of the great men in my section.

- The sounds and sight of the Bell Sioux helicopter as it crashed and bounced along Route 15, right in front of our company during Operation Robin.

These are some of the sights and sounds that I cannot forget from just one month during our tour of duty.

Lance Corporal Ted Harrison, section commander, 1 Platoon, A Company

My 10-man section was a good mix of regulars and national servicemen. As I remember, there was some disgruntlement at being conscripted, but over time and with training the discontent faded as we developed into a tightly knit platoon. My role, initially, was second in command of 1 Section, 1 Platoon, A Company, in control of the M60 machine gun team. We were very fortunate to be led by Lieutenant John Hartley, in my view a natural leader of men and a bloody good map-reader, which was very important in navigating heavily forested and jungle environments where accurate navigation was vital. Our section commander was Corporal Jim Mavromatis, and Douglas 'Duggy' Moles was our forward scout. Doug, a national serviceman from Tasmania, was a natural bush scout and we relied on his keen senses on many occasions.

The vital role of machine gunner was given to 'the big bloke', Private Bill Winkel, a regular soldier and a timber cutter from Queensland. Bill had a sardonic sense of humour and could always be relied on. Of course, all roles needed to be interchangeable due to attrition caused by illness and casualties and made worse by an occasional shortage of reinforcements. On one operation our section was down to four men. At this time Jim Mavromatis had been struck down with a serious and mysterious illness and returned to Australia, and I was acting section commander and machine gunner rolled into one. But like many of the understrength platoons, after a day's patrolling, sometimes including enemy contacts, our platoon was often tasked with setting up night ambushes on rice paddies and trails, when we were very fatigued. In my view, sleep deprivation was a major problem during operations and patrols.

Vietnam's wet season caused problems with feet and chafed skin, mould, rust and a level of weapon maintenance not experienced in training in Australia. The need to be able to move quickly at any time dictated

that you kept your socks and boots on for the duration of the patrol or operation. Once, during the wet season, my feet were continually wet for several days and soon developed an intense itch. During a rest break, I removed my boots to examine my feet and discovered my toenails had loosened and turned dark yellow with the skin peeling away from my soles and heels. Modifications were necessary and many in the platoon did away with socks and underpants and drilled holes in the back of the heels of their boots to allow the water to drain. Back at Nui Dat, the downpours would fill our weapon pits and deep drains had to be dug around tents to prevent flooding. The roads and tracks through the battalion area turned to slush.

Vietnam's fauna is quite diverse, and we dealt regularly with spiders, scorpions, snakes and monkeys. On one occasion I was tasked with conducting a reconnaissance forward of our position, and Doug Moles accompanied me. We came across a clearing approximately 150 metres wide by 60 metres long, covered with waist-high grass. Normally we would skirt around the clearing but, being behind time, I decided to cover Doug while he crossed and cleared the far treeline. I saw his 'all clear' sign and commenced to cross when I noticed something moving parallel to me and parting the grass at speed. Then it turned and came straight at me, slamming into my leg and turning me around through 180 degrees. I looked back to what seemed to be a huge pig. I limped over to Doug and examined my leg to find no real damage. On returning we skirted the clearing in a very proper tactical fashion.

Cordon and search operations were opportunities to witness village life, and for a naive 19-year-old it was a real experience. We found the villagers to be unassuming and compliant. The CO developed a code of conduct for dealing with the locals and a cornerstone of that policy was to treat the villagers with respect and courtesy. I felt a deep compassion for the villagers, and especially the children caught up in the turmoil of war. We found the amount of cruelty the VC were capable of inflicting upon their own people to be incredible. Once, A Company was stationed in the village of Binh Ba to protect the village from VC incursions and, when possible, we would play soccer with the kids. We made friends with many of the children and adults and we would be invited into their homes for tea. I found their friendship warm and genuine.

In early October, the battalion was to mount Operation Canberra. John Hartley called together his O Group (Orders Group) and announced that the battalion was required to protect a lengthy stretch of Route 15. It was explained that an American army infantry brigade would travel in truck convoys from Vung Tau along Route 15 to Bien Hoa. Sections of the highway were still under threat and the VC were able to attack or mine many sections of the road. Prior to the convoy, we were ordered to clear a high hill complex called Nui Thi Vai, including a foothill called Nui Ong Trinh, as this was one of the areas thought to be a possible firing point for enemy mortars to attack Route 15. During this period, we were witness to an air strike on the western face of Nui Thi Vai. I was later to learn that B Company had spotted a large group of VC and an air strike had been called in to attack them. C Company also had clashes with the VC and took some casualties. We of A Company finally crossed the summit of Nui Thi Vai and then commenced the steep descent of its north-western face. We were then positioned strategically along Route 15 for the next few days as the American convoys proceeded north to Bien Hoa with few incidents.

On 16 October, A Company mounted armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and moved north-west along Route 15 to an area opposite the western face of Nui Thi Vai. We dismounted from the APCs and moved west, across and away from Route 15, into the treeline where we set up our company harbour. No cooking was allowed. A final O Group was conducted, and we were informed that we would be commencing Operation Queanbeyan in the early hours of next morning. We were informed that the aim of this operation was to kill or capture any VC remaining on Nui Thi Vai, destroy their bases and seize any documents, equipment or supplies they had left behind after the airstrikes of Operation Canberra.

By this stage of our tour, we were heading into the dry season and the nights were often rain-free. Many of us, when not on gun piquet, would simply lay down on a ground sheet with our backpack for a pillow, our weapon next to us and sleep. When on operations or patrols you never allowed your weapon to be further than arm's reach away. The only time you were separated from your 'best mate' was when you went on rest and recreation leave outside of Vietnam.

At 0300 hours, A Company broke harbour and we commenced the move east towards the western approaches of Nui Thi Vai. We were able to cross Route 15 and enter the treeline before first light. Just after dawn we harboured so that the company could bolt down a cold breakfast. We had climbed over the summit of Nui Thi Vai previously, so the thought of doing it again, humping a 30-kilogram load, caused me to shudder. 1 Platoon was given the task of leading the company with 1 Section in the lead. About mid-morning we were following a track when Doug, our forward scout, sighted a small concrete installation to the rear of what was first thought to be a disused garden. Our skipper, Lieutenant John Hartley, was called forward and he decided that 1 Section would cover both flanks while 2 Section would move forward and search the installation. After I had positioned the machine gun team, I turned to head back when almost immediately, there was a loud explosion. I felt a burning sensation down my left side as I was lifted off my feet and slammed into the ground. Lying on my side I began to pant like a dog, with a hole in my chest and with searing pain in my abdomen. The abdominal pain was so intense that all I could do was crawl into a foetal position to try to ease the pain. Big Bill Winkel and 'Nifty' Neville Thompson had also been wounded. Our attached combat engineers cleared a safe path to us and the battalion's medical officer, Captain Tony 'Doc' White arrived to ease the pain. Makeshift stretchers were made, and I was carried to a clearing, lifted into the bay of a *Dustoff* helicopter and flown to the American 36 Evacuation Hospital at Vung Tau. There I started to recover from a perforated oesophagus, multiple perforations of the left lung and multiple perforations of the small intestine. For me, the war against the VC was over. I returned to Australia in November 1966 but would have given my right arm to have seen it through and returned with the battalion in May 1967.

Dan Riley, machine gunner, Anti-Tank Platoon, Support Company

From 17 to 26 October 5 RAR was committed to Operation Queanbeyan. The CO had decided to move the battalion around the northern and western sides of Nui Thi Vai so that two companies could move up the western side. A third company could clear the ground immediately to the north of the hill and a fourth company could lie in ambush positions on the approach routes to the north of the hill, a little further out.

This company would hamper VC movement both towards and away from Nui Thi Vai by use of the track systems that had been shown on a captured enemy map. This task was assigned to D Company; B Company was to be its neighbour on the north, A Company was to search the central north section of the western slope, while Battalion Headquarters (BHQ), protected by the Assault Pioneer and Anti-Tank platoons, was to advance up the track to a pagoda and install itself in an area where good radio communications with the companies could be ensured. Our sister battalion, 6 RAR, assisted by providing its D Company to protect the gun position sited beside Route 15. We had no idea that the day would change us for the rest of our lives.

As the Anti-Tank Platoon moved up into position to begin the ascent, a message was passed that a booby trap had been tripped and the VC would know where we were or, at least, be aware of movement in the area. Our primary task was to move ahead of BHQ up a very steep and narrow track to a pagoda near the summit. The climb was exhausting, made worse by the heat and weight of the M60 machine gun, ammunition, equipment, rations and water. At one point when we paused for a breath, I took a salt tablet that stuck in my throat, but a quick drink cleared it and we continued to climb. It was obvious that all were feeling the physical stress. The probability that the VC were nearby heightened our alertness so there was no talking. Messages were passed by hand signals. The track was just wide enough for one man to walk along. Some boulders near the track were huge, well over 10 metres in length and several metres high. The vegetation was thick and provided shade from the hot sun and the rain, but it limited vision to a few metres. Our section finally reached the pagoda, checked for booby traps, cleared the immediate area and realised we were some distance from the top of Nui Thi Vai. However, the fellas were grateful to pause with the expectation that the worst was behind us. Then it all went sideways!

‘Contact!’ was shouted, and shots were fired at a VC soldier who disappeared behind one of the many rocks beside the track. Others were sighted higher up the slope. Messages followed in quick succession that BHQ, which was following us, had been ambushed, a captain was hit in the chest and the Anti-Tank Platoon was to move back down the track to clear out the VC. After a steep climb, the platoon was exhausted so the skipper, Second Lieutenant Mick Deak, ordered all backpacks to be dropped and the descent began with extreme vigilance. As we reached the ambush site, the realisation hit home that we had all walked through the enemy’s location only minutes before!

The skipper ordered Corporal Norm Womal's section to move from the track across a steep gully to where the VC were located, while the other sections were to provide fire support. I was located near a large rock on the topside of the ambush site and positioned the M60 ready to fire. As I did this, a shot rang out and Norm fell! He had been shot through the throat but managed to give directions to the skipper. The skipper called several of us to him to see if there was any way to reach Norm. His extraction to a safe area presented problems for the platoon and the battalion. The VC knew where Norm lay and could fire at anyone moving to his assistance. Although the platoon could neutralise the VC with covering fire for a short time, it was doubtful we could keep the fire up long enough to extract Norm. Despite the skipper's orders to the contrary, our medic, Private Peter 'Doc' Fraser, crawled under enemy fire to Norm. He reached him and proceeded to dress his wound, placing his own body between Norm and the enemy in order to shield him from further fire. The enemy continued firing, missing Fraser by inches. In the meantime, a stretcher party moved forward under the control of our platoon sergeant, Ray 'Skinny' Calvert, while protected by covering fire from the remainder of the platoon.

During this time, I had managed to return to my position, and prepared to provide fire support. Peering out from the rock it was obvious I could not clearly distinguish where Norm, Doc Fraser and the stretcher party were located. The last thing needed was for me to blaze away at a target I could not see and hit mates with friendly fire. This frustration continued until I decided to move to where I could have a clearer shot. As I moved forward, the barrel lock of my M60 machine gun was caught and disengaged by the vines. The result was sheer desperation because the M60 was temporarily out of action, I was exposed and there was incoming fire while I scrambled for cover.

Skinny called for covering fire and the stretcher party managed to cross the killing ground in both directions without being hit, although the volume of enemy fire made movement extremely slow. Despite the odds, the extraction was successful, and the stretcher party struggled back to the cover of the rocks behind the remainder of the platoon.

Captain Tony White, the battalion's medical officer, moved forward to our position and was waiting to dress Norm's wound when the stretcher party met him. A few moments later our highly respected Pacific Islander

mate died, and we had lost a very fine man and an outstanding section commander. The stretcher party clambered down the wet rocks to place Norm's body into a chopper.

The challenge was how to get a chopper into a very difficult area with limited places from which to extract Norm. Fortunately, efforts to extract the wounded captain from BHQ had earlier been successful and now the process was repeated. Despite the difficulties, the pilot managed to land the helicopter and collect Norm's body. Shrouded by a ground sheet, he was placed on the aircraft and flown out to Vung Tau. The impact of his death settled on those left behind on the hillside. The stretcher party laboured back over the rocks with tremendous weariness and dejection to rejoin the platoon.

After Norm had been extracted from where he was wounded, the skipper ordered the sections to move towards him and into a protected area. This was because helicopter gunships were to deliver suppressing rocket and gunfire onto the tunnel entrances where the VC were located. As I sat there with others, out of the line of fire, a crushing weight dropped onto my shoulders. We were not in the Land of Oz! These few hours had been lethal and there was no way to deflect the possibility that anyone in the platoon could have been killed. All the near misses, contacts or the loss of men in other parts of the battalion did not match the loss of our close mate.

The shock of these events was suppressed as the gunships blasted the tunnel system with rockets, followed by fire from their multi-barrelled machine guns, all within a stone's throw of our position. After the shooting had stopped and the dust settled, a section swept through the area and found that the VC were gone but had left booby traps. The thought that they could be waiting in deeper tunnels for nightfall to escape ensured that everyone's alertness remained on a razor edge.

Later that afternoon the Anti-Tank Platoon climbed back to the pagoda, checked for booby traps, picked up our packs and prepared to settle in for a disturbed night. One final task for the day was to escort, in the falling light, a section of combat engineers to the summit to record the location of the VC tunnel systems. It soon became impossible to see your hand in front of your face. When a soldier behind me slipped and became entangled in vines, I could hear him only a metre away. After a blunt exchange of suggestions on what to do, I tried to cut the vines

with my machete and narrowly missed slashing him. Again, a message was hammered home to me; it was not about what you want to do: rather, it is about what has to be done to solve the problem. Finally, with greater care, the vines were severed, and we moved forward to the summit and said 'goodbye' to the engineers. The section then moved silently back to the pagoda, careful not to startle the sentries lying in wait for our return. The sentries were also on a knife edge and they all had fingers on triggers. Through experience, or just dumb luck, no one started shooting as we re-entered the platoon's position within the perimeter. Later that night as I lay next to the M60, I gave thanks for being alive.

In the following days, we learned a soldier of the Assault Pioneer Platoon had been killed and an officer wounded just 50 metres from our position. A few days later, D Company's 10 Platoon attacked 11 VC in a small, cleverly concealed installation and killed 10. Several weeks later many of us were to return as the newly formed Reconnaissance Platoon in another operation to check these same VC tunnel systems.

For their bravery and leadership in the operation, three members of the Anti-Tank Platoon were decorated. The Military Cross was awarded to Second Lieutenant Mick Deak, the Military Medal to Private Peter Fraser, and Corporal Norm Womal was posthumously MID. The national origins of these three soldiers were, respectively, German, Scottish and Pacific Islander.

John O'Callaghan, machine gunner, 5 Platoon

It was the beginning of Operation Holsworthy on 7 August 1966. Surrounding us was silence, except for the falling rain. It was hard to believe sometimes that there were many dozen riflemen, including myself, sliding through the jungle on the way to Binh Ba, a village we were to search the next day after surrounding it that night. This was a technique that 5 RAR helped to develop.

Since at this stage we were travelling in daylight, it was necessary to restrict any movement of villagers in the area, and various cover stories were used to accomplish this. If memory serves me, one was that our artillery would be firing into this area throughout the day and so it was declared a 'free fire zone' – that is, aside from ourselves, anyone out here would be assumed to be enemy. This had been widely notified to the surrounding population.

We were proceeding through low scrub with a thin forest of young rubber trees extending away to our left and hard on our right was thick, high grass between overgrown banana trees whose fronds drooped to the ground like green tattered curtains. The rain was near-torrential. I was the machine gunner in our section and during training it was impressed on us that 'the M60 is the life or death of the section' – very true, and I never forgot it.

Something in that green mess drew my attention, the tip of a conical bamboo hat and maybe something black. It was not one of us – and therefore, probably, enemy! I gave the hand signal for 'enemy' and we hit the ground, but the rest of the platoon being in front and in the downpour, didn't realise what was happening behind them. Things were developing in seconds, if not microseconds, and I feared they were walking into an ambush. 'The gun is the life or death ...' – I dared not wait longer and fired several bursts, the silence was shattered and then – nothing.

Our platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Terry O'Hanlon, took a party forward to investigate the results of our firing and returned to tell me there were two villagers, a young boy, dead, and a woman dying. So much for the effectiveness of the 'free fire zone' notification. I collapsed and cried to rival the rain and told the skipper I would never be able to use the gun again. Softly but firmly and with compassion he assured me that when the time came, I would do my duty.

So, the war dragged on and in November we came to Operation Hayman, one which saw us in the good old American Hueys (Iroquois helicopters) doing an airborne assault on to Long Son Island, a VC haven, training and rest area. The island was not far off the coast and was surrounded by swamps and vast areas of thick mangroves – nature's little fortress.

During the operation, we of B Company wound our way up to the top of a high ridge overlooking a village and a wide waterway opening out to the South China Sea through the mangroves. Suddenly, from the right-hand side and in the distance, a squad of about 10 enemy dashed from the mangroves and headed for the other side slowed by the height of the tide.

Our 5 Platoon, being best positioned, was given the 'go' to engage them and the other two gunners and myself did so. I was very fortunate to have a large flat rock nearby, which was handy to use as a gun platform, so I made full use of it. Although at long range, we brought effective fire to bear. Some of the enemy squad made it to the other side, some did not.

I recalled what Lieutenant O'Hanlon had said. You were right Terry, thank you. Sometimes the 'fog of war' becomes very foggy indeed.

Conclusion by Robert O'Neill

These accounts of what it was like for individual Australian soldiers to face a well-armed, skilful enemy, on ground over which they had operated for several years, show how serious the battle for 'the Warbies' was. Our men, the privates, NCOs and officers of the battalion, met their challenges well. However, in November everyone had to keep in mind that there was still a further six months of our commitment to run. The war was becoming a strain on all of us, physically and mentally. But at the same time, we were gaining in knowledge and confidence, and we knew from our first six months' experience that we would make the grade as a battalion at war. But all members still had their own individual challenges to face, stimulated by the awareness that death could come rapidly with a single bullet, a mine blast or a shrapnel fragment.

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.2019.09