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A PLATOON COMMANDER'S WAR – PART 2

John Hartley and Harry Neesham

Editors' introduction

Two further narratives by platoon commanders continue after Chapter 9's interlude of recollections by a few of the diggers, who were typical of the hundreds who made up the men who served with the battalion's young officers.

John Hartley

I graduated from the Royal Military College (RMC) at Duntroon in December 1965. Australia's contribution to the war in Vietnam had increased significantly with the deployment of 1 RAR (1st Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment) earlier that year. I think most of us hoped to see active service; I certainly did. At least half of the infantrymen in my class were off to the exotic Pacific Islands Regiment while the rest of us were rationed out to our nine infantry battalions.

Some weeks before graduation, I was summoned to see Captain Paul Greenhalgh, the adjutant. I think I enjoyed his confidence but, as the senior cadet of Sovereign's Company, most of our discussions had revolved around my company's and my own inability to satisfy his high expectations of us. I therefore approached his office with some trepidation. His first words were: 'What can I tell you that would make you happiest?' Without

consideration, I immediately replied, 'You could tell me that I am going to Vietnam'. 'Congratulations', he said, 'you are posted to 5 RAR'. 5 RAR was to go to Vietnam in April to replace 1 RAR. Paul also told me that he, too, was posted to 5 RAR as a company commander.

I knew of no one who had been to Vietnam. We had, of course, studied the origins of conflict and our understanding of revolutionary warfare was, I think, quite comprehensive. Many of our instructors had served in the Malayan Emergency. We certainly understood the military/political nature of revolutionary warfare, the stages of a communist insurgency, Maoist doctrine and the concept of People's War. We had also studied the French experience in Indo-China. I received some prizes on graduation which included Bernard Fall's *Street Without Joy* and Jean Larteguy's *Yellow Fever*. So, I guess, at least psychologically, I was ready and most desirous of a posting to Vietnam.

In early January, after three weeks leave, I marched into 5 RAR. I was posted to A Company and, to my delight, appointed to command 1 Platoon. I went through the rare but memorable baptism of meeting my first platoon. My platoon sergeant, John Healy, was an experienced soldier who was the quintessential senior non-commissioned officer (NCO): demanding of standards, intolerant of any form of slackness, exemplary in his own personal performance, firm but extremely fair; he was also highly respected. To me he was a marvellous blend of coach, confidante and critic. I learnt from him every day. The company sergeant major (CSM), Warrant Officer Jock Stewart, was another old soldier and a rarity – he had seen service in the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam. Indeed, at that time he was the only man in the battalion who had seen service in Vietnam. I enjoyed his company immensely. He would regale us endlessly with stories of punji stakes (for more explanation about punji stakes, see Chapter 7). The CSM also talked about booby traps, mines and the cunning Viet Cong (VC) who appeared to have suborned most of the population. It was a land of snakes, aggressive ants, scorpions and bar girls who charged much, promised more but gave little. To me it all seemed remarkably exciting and extraordinarily exotic. And much of it was.

The soldiers were first rate. Three quarters of my platoon of about 35 were national servicemen – men of the first intake. They had been in the army for about nine months. All were about 21, they appeared to accept their lot as national servicemen, had shared recruit and early infantry training and, generally, were great friends. None were married; few had girlfriends.

They largely came from Victoria and Tasmania. I believe their age (about two to three years older than many of their Australian Regular Army colleagues who had to be 19 years old to be sent on operational service) was a telling factor; the difference made by this couple of years was quite remarkable. They were generally well educated; with most appearing to have completed Year 12. My three section commanders were an interesting mix. The oldest was 38 and the other two also had long service, much of it in a peacetime, garrison environment.

For the next four months training was intense. About half the time was spent at Holsworthy where we were based. Typically, we trained from six in the morning until six at night. Many evenings were taken up with administration: drafting wills, inoculations, receiving new dog tags (identity discs) and so on. Training involved much field-craft and shooting. Physical training was an everyday feature. We received lectures on the origin of the war, the history and customs of the people of Vietnam, the Geneva Convention and a lengthy session from a group of chaplains on character guidance. Soldiers were required to attend but not the officers. I thought this odd. I attended throughout not because I was particularly convinced of much of what I heard, but because I wanted to share my troops' experiences.

New weapons were introduced. The American M16 ArmaLite – lightweight, firing 5.56 mm ammunition and a vast improvement on the Second World War Owen gun, which I carried for the first few months in Vietnam. The M79 grenade launcher also made its appearance. We were intrigued by this weapon which looked a bit like a very large-bore shotgun and fired a 40 mm grenade to ranges up to 400 metres with little recoil. For those of us who had fired the much heavier Energa grenade from a projector fitted to the L1A1 self-loading rifle, the M79 was indeed a revelation. We were also introduced to the M18 Claymore anti-personnel mine and a new type of trip flare, the proper combination of which would prove highly lethal and effective when used in ambushes. The American VHF ANPRC 25 radio set made its appearance and replaced the cantankerous Korean War-era 9 and 9A sets which seemed forever to require tuning. We trained with M113 armoured personnel carriers (APCs), did much first aid work and, for a week, jogged to the School of Military Engineering and back where we were introduced to the vagaries of mines and booby traps. And all this time, I learnt more about my NCOs and soldiers.

We went to the Jungle Training Centre, which had a reputation for us to live up to. I had been there before as an RMC cadet and jungle-clad country held little in the way of surprises. But many soldiers had no experience of such tropical places and the sound and smell, the rain and heat, and the constant proximity to trees and scrub, frequently dense and almost impenetrable, needed to be mastered. Here we learned that the jungle was not a threat; it was at least neutral and, ideally, an ally.

Our last exercise at Canungra was held at Wiangaree State Forest in northern NSW. This was tropical rainforest at its best. We entered the long valley with dozens of ridge lines and smaller re-entrants running off them. Company headquarters and two of the platoons moved along the northern edge; my platoon was about 500 metres south and we moved along the southern side. For the next five days, I was seldom confident about where I was, and it was only when we finally emerged at the top of the valley to be met by our transport that I recognised my location.

Before going to Vietnam, we had a week's pre-embarkation leave. It was a time for some personal assessments. National service was a new reality and Australia had yet to suffer a national service battle casualty. Street marches were unknown. The Vietnam Moratorium protests had yet to emerge but the mother and girlfriend of one of my soldiers were part of the 'Save Our Sons' protest movement. I liked the soldier, but I thought he was being overly influenced by his mother and girlfriend. To keep an eye on him, I made him my batman; he was competent and cheerful from Tuesday to Friday. On Monday he appeared somewhat confused and concerned. I remember parading on the A Company parade ground on a Friday evening after a week's exercise, prior to going on weekend leave. I heard a shrill female voice shouting, 'Hey Batman, it's Robin here, I hope you poisoned the bastard!'. A day before we embarked, my batman declared himself a conscientious objector and was taken off the draft for Vietnam. We followed his court case with interest. He subsequently was declared not to be a conscientious objector, ordered to Vietnam but went AWOL (absent without leave), served a prison sentence and had not completed his national service until some 18 months after the soldiers in his intake had finished theirs.

It is difficult to describe our arrival in Vietnam. We flew via Manila on a Qantas charter flight. From the air, Saigon looked tropical and exotic. I noted, however, the numerous small waterholes which seemed to be

everywhere. Subsequently, I recognised these were shell craters. We arrived at Tan Son Nhut airport, spent about two hours there and then flew by US Air Force transport aircraft to Vung Tau.

Vung Tau had been a seaside resort for wealthy French and Vietnamese families. Any sense of insecurity was more than compensated for by the sun, the beach and the very fine sand. We were introduced to the UH-1H, a larger version of the Iroquois helicopter than the UH-1B used by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF): the Huey, the mighty sky workhorse, and surely one of the icons of the Vietnam War. We did some short training operations. Platoons vied with each other to be the quickest at deplaning from helicopters. This resulted in our standing on the skids prior to landing and even jumping off before the helicopter had touched down. Battalion Headquarters (BHQ) soon put a stop to this unsafe practice.

Our time next to the South China Sea in Vung Tau was short. We rapidly acclimatised and gained some sense of the terrain – wading through delta mangroves in water up to the waist and clinging mud, open paddy fields with only low bunds for cover, bamboo scrub with thorns which gripped equipment and clothing, and flat, featureless scrub where navigation could only be conducted by ‘dead reckoning’; sticking closely to a compass bearing and using cumbersome pace-counting to estimate distance travelled. With practice, experience and proficient map reading, the system proved surprisingly accurate. We also worked in sand dunes and quickly appreciated the importance of keeping our weapons clean.

There was little likelihood of contact with the VC in this area, but we saw signs of war all around us. Shortly, we were to be launched on a real operation. We worked with keen anticipation and listened with increasing focus to the lengthy artillery and air bombardment to our north in the general direction of our impending air assault. The night sky was lit with flashes, not dissimilar to a tropical storm, with a rumble of explosions which has long been the hallmark of armies on the eve of battle. Next morning, after repeatedly checking our webbing and weapons, we emplaned in about 40 helicopters and flew in tight formation to Landing Zone (LZ) Hudson, beside a rubber plantation which was secured by American soldiers of 173 Airborne Brigade. Although we had practised with helicopters, we had never experienced such a concentrated landing with so many at once. We moved off the helicopters, lay on the ground

until they had flown off and then moved to our allotted position in the battalion assembly area near the edge of the LZ in anticipation of the remainder of the battalion arriving.

As I recall, 24 May 1966 was a stifflingly hot day. The wet season, with its monsoonal rain and soaring humidity, had started. We were constantly in a lather of sweat, and low scrub and tall grass added to our discomfort. My platoon led the move to the east along the small Song Cau River. The plan was for us to cross two re-entrants, move north along the second re-entrant and then lay a series of ambushes. The battalion's mission was to secure a small hill called Nui Dat and the surrounding countryside, ideally out to about 5 kilometres, to enable the establishment of the 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) base. I do not think anyone in my platoon knew this – it may have been kept from us because of operational security. We thought that Operation Hardihood was to be a five-day operation – it turned out to be nearly three times that long.

Some 20 minutes into the move, the forward scout of my forward section sighted and fired at an armed man. 'Contact front!' was shouted. I dashed forward while the forward section deployed with the machine gun group to the right and the rifle group to the left. It was as if we had done it a thousand times before: Canungra, Holsworthy, Wiangaree and Colo-Putty training areas all revisited. We were to have several more fleeting contacts with one or two armed men; I doubt that more than one or two of us caught a glimpse of any enemy, but they were there, and we saw enough evidence of their presence to be extremely alert.

We eventually reached the second re-entrant. 3 Platoon passed through us and headed north. The A Company platoon commanders gathered with our company commander to decide our next move. We were to do a series of ambushes. We were to return to the junction of the river and the re-entrant and to ambush the track we had made moving into the area. This was always a problem for us: wherever we moved, we left tracks.

Suddenly, some shots were fired. 3 Platoon was in contact. The volume of fire rapidly increased; heavy automatic fire started; bullets zipped through the trees overhead. We quickly dispersed. I ran back to my platoon. Without orders, or letting anyone know, I moved my platoon up to the firefight. We deployed into an extended formation, fixed bayonets and approached one flank of the firing. Some 10 metres from the flank, I heard Australian voices shouting to each other and I realised that the

contact was between two groups of Australians. Just as I was to radio this information, the word came through the A Company radio net: 'Cease fire, cease fire, in contact with friendlies'. I backed off my platoon quietly and returned to our start point some 150 metres away.

Much controversy surrounded this incident which resulted in the death of Private Errol Noack, a South Australian and the first national serviceman to be killed in Vietnam. Some of us believe he was killed by friendly fire. The official version is that he was probably shot by a VC group which had interposed itself between A Company's 3 Platoon and B Company's 5 Platoon. The whole incident gave me much to think about. I believe that B Company, which was to come down the first re-entrant after my company had cleared the area, missed the first re-entrant and mistook the second re-entrant for the first. Certainly, navigation was difficult. What appeared on a map as a re-entrant very often was a very small depression. If you did not pace the distance accurately, then there was little confidence in knowing where you were with certainty.

I also thought seriously about my independent action. Had I been 30 seconds sooner, I should have opened fire from a few metres onto 5 Platoon with the likelihood that many casualties would have ensued. Clearly, I was too aggressive and was prone to act independently. I determined not to do this again. Decisive action was fine; but the consequences needed to be considered, and I thought how lucky I was to learn this lesson so early in the tour.

Operation Hardihood was a fascinating start to our Vietnam experience. The battalion quickly became frustrated. Small groups of VC were everywhere. We had numerous contacts with the enemy, but it was not until the third day that my platoon killed and recovered the first VC in the 1 ATF area of operations.

We'd had three contacts that morning; all were at long range. By now we were extremely alert and tense. We moved very quietly. Suddenly the forward section stopped. As always, when this happened I moved forward, trailed by my radio operator. The section commander and forward scout said they had heard voices to our front. We moved forward very cautiously to the edge of a small clearing. About 20 metres ahead, on the other side of the clearing, were four armed men in black, pyjama-type clothes. They were urgently packing and clearly about to move. I immediately opened fire and shouted to those around me to do the same. The VC disappeared,

we quickly deployed into an extended line and swept the area. One body was recovered with a handful of ammunition, a Chinese grenade and some webbing.

We searched the body; he had an ID card. He was about 35 and clearly was a local VC. We buried him in situ. We were elated. 1 Platoon had done it. We were the envy of the battalion, or so we thought. I am now much older and have seen too much not to recognise that we were equally happy because we had survived. It is also a contemplative business to recognise that you have taken a life – an enemy, certainly, and someone who would have no compunction about killing us – but another human being, a friend or relative to someone, perhaps a father or husband.

We found a large rice cache (several tonnes I should think, bagged and stacked under a black tarpaulin); it was rice donated by the United States, as was identified by the branding on the bags. We were ordered to destroy it, and we simply split the bags and tipped their contents into a nearby river. It was hard work in the humid, overcast day. I fired my first artillery mission and called down mortar fire, both against fleeing groups of VCs who were some distance off.

Operation Hardihood was our baptism. There would be many similar operations – large, multi-unit sweeps, with a mix of supporting arms. But much of our time was spent on endless platoon-sized patrols, usually within 10 kilometres of the Task Force base. This was where platoon commanders learnt their trade – days on end of independent action, moving silently and alertly, constantly listening and watching, evaluating signs – all done patiently, but employing great speed and aggression when required.

There were several types of operation. The large-scale search and destroy operations I have partly described – in many ways, these were the most interesting. We invariably moved into new territory, usually in the areas where the VC was well established. Sometimes we even clashed with North Vietnamese Army Main Force or regular units. I recall very clearly our first contact with the latter. They were clearly several degrees better than the VC and prepared to stand and fight far more aggressively.

Another type of operation was the cordon and search. We would surround a village or hamlet, at night, isolating it before dawn, and searching it for arms, or caches of food or any signs of VC presence. These operations required great coordination, involvement of Vietnamese authorities,

psychological operations (psyops) and civil affairs support. There is an apocryphal story of the psyops loud-speaker aircraft flying overhead and telling the people they are about to have their village searched. People were to report to the village square with their ID cards. They were to take food and water, as they may need to be there for some hours. The only problem was that the aircraft was a day early. I wonder how long the people might have waited patiently in the square.

An often-used tactic was ambushing, which could be employed as part of any of the operations. Ambushes could be quick, simply by moving off to the side of a track, or deliberate. The latter could involve extensive use of mines and flares, registration of artillery fire and even digging into defensive positions. As the year moved on, we found ourselves increasingly conducting ambushes. Some were overnight; others for several days. Soldiers would be sited in the ambush in groups of three with one fully alert the whole time. When we first went to Vietnam we tended to deploy in pairs, but as the year wore on and people became continually fatigued, we found that we needed to use groups of three to ensure that one person was fully alert the whole time, thus allowing the overall rest time for each soldier to be increased. Sometimes we would even relieve soldiers in an ambush site.

One of my platoon's notable incidents was at night, sitting on our packs while waiting to cross a wide paddy field. We were just inside the treeline which was parallel to a path. A group of about 20 VC, with weapons slung, making no attempt to be quiet or secure, walked past at about 4 metres distance. We could hardly believe what was happening. A wild firefight ensued. While we suffered no casualties, next morning while searching the area, we noted numerous blood trails. Major Max Carroll, our company commander, directed the company into several ambush positions, which resulted in some contacts and further VC casualties. On another occasion, the VC were obviously aware of our presence and initiated the contact by firing into the rear of the ambush position. We could clearly smell VC camps, particularly if they had been occupied for more than a couple of days. I dare say they could do the same with us. On the other hand, we were never ambushed. It was a golden rule never to move along tracks.

We flew initially with the US Army who impressed us as they were quite prepared to accept all manner of risks to evacuate casualties. They were also quite prepared to press home their fire support. Occasionally we had US Air Force strike aircraft in support and their forward air controllers in

light aircraft were clearly very skilled. We also deployed on occasion, using their large twin-rotor Chinook helicopters. In hindsight, I suspect we equated their risk-taking and daring with professionalism. I am not nearly so sure that was always the case. I do not think they achieved quite the level of combined skill and professionalism that our Australian helicopter crews did in later years.

So, we quickly grew to admire and like our US Army helicopter people. On Operation Hardihood, for instance, it was not unusual in late afternoon to have a helicopter deliver our mail, another to bring us cold, chocolate-flavoured milk, another to deliver a hot box dinner and still another to take away the empty hot boxes. Of course, there were attendant security problems with all this air traffic. We wanted to find the VC and not frighten them off. When our own air force commenced helicopter operations we were disappointed. In our ignorance, we thought the RAAF pilots were extraordinarily cautious. They even wanted us to fly with closed doors. No self-respecting fighting soldier ever wants to fly in a helicopter with closed doors. On one occasion a door gunner carelessly discharged a belt of ammunition just as we were to be lifted from an LZ. Of course, we conveniently forgot the dozen or so similar incidents that we had had in our first three months. We never quite developed the same rapport with the RAAF as we did with the US Army aviation units, but later battalions certainly did. Our reluctance was something of a pity because I saw the RAAF in action some years later, during my second tour in Vietnam, and they were a very professional, fighting organisation. Indeed, after receiving a serious gunshot wound, I would not have survived if they had not successfully medically evacuated me.

I remember one incident which did not end happily, and which could have completely soured relations between our battalion and 9 Squadron RAAF. For nearly 40 days we had been in the field during the dry season, so we were not constantly wet. But we slept on the ground, never fully washed, ate hard rations the whole time, lost several kilograms in the process and had some casualties resulting from numerous contacts. We had been combing booby-trapped tunnels and it was all extraordinarily tiring and intense.

The operation finished on the top of Nui Thi Vai, a mountain 470 metres in height, with a pagoda on a ridgeline slightly below the summit. Most of the battalion were airlifted from the only available pad which could accommodate just one Iroquois at a time. The helicopters lined up, one

behind the other, way off into the distance; each to land, load and depart in turn. This part of the operation required several hours. We were the last platoon to depart. Our job just before we were to be extracted was to protect a small combat engineer party which was to detonate some charges to release large amounts of CS (tear gas) powder in the caves near the top of the mountain. I had carefully rehearsed this with the engineer officer. I deployed my platoon to cover the area. The sapper would enter the cave, shout 'fire on' and come out through the entrance where I stood. We would then move smartly to an area some distance from the cave in case the CS powder spread out of the caves.

The engineer officer entered and a few minutes later I heard an explosion. My first thought was that he had prematurely set off the charge. I turned to move into the cave only to be overwhelmed by a cloud of CS powder. I could not breathe; my lungs were on fire. I fell to the ground and slowly the CS lifted. My radio operator was equally affected. My platoon sergeant, 'Shorty' Mavin, dragged us clear. The engineer officer and his offsider then appeared; they had become confused and exited safely by another tunnel. We then moved to the LZ and were extracted from the 470-metre high hill. The RAAF pilot complained of being gassed at an altitude of 500 metres! Instead of flying to Nui Dat, we flew to Vung Tau.

I asked why this was so and was told that the crew was going to afternoon tea and would return us to Nui Dat in 30 minutes. I protested with some passion. It was just as well I did because my six soldiers were furious. We duly flew on to Nui Dat in a very sombre mood. As we left the helicopter, I did not thank them or wave as I would usually do. Instead I walked away only to hear the noise of the rotor change dramatically. I looked back and saw a plume of purple smoke billowing from the helicopter. I knew who had discharged the smoke grenade as he exited the aircraft and grabbed the culprit. 'Why did you do that?' 'Because I had no bloody CS grenades left!' was the answer. It was something that all of us needed to forget. There is much more I could say about Vietnam. It was the high adventure of my youth. I am conscious of the aphorism that says we all refight the wars of our youth and that no two wars are ever the same.

A third of my platoon became casualties and about half did not finish their tour. Many suffered for years after with poor health and emotional discomfort. It was a long year. Of the first 100 days, we spent 92 on hard rations, we all lost considerable body weight and we were constantly wet. We had limited opportunity to develop an affinity with the local people

and were intolerant of anybody else's war. I developed an enormous respect for the Vietnamese people, but it required another tour of duty in a different setting for it to happen.

I was very fortunate; I stayed on as a full-time soldier. The experience certainly coloured my attitudes to soldiering. Overwhelmingly, I was imbued with a sense of responsibility towards my soldiers; this required me to be fair and compassionate but also to demand high standards. I also respected the enemy. His was a very difficult life. For him there was no respite, no rest and recreation leave, no close air support or rapid evacuation of casualties to sophisticated medical facilities; he was a proficient, skilled, patient and committed foe.

It was a hard year. But I would not have missed it for anything. It was certainly the greatest privilege I have had – to command Australian infantrymen in war.

Harry Neesham

My journey to Vietnam began when prime minister Robert Menzies announced in November 1964 the introduction of national service for 20-year-old men, commencing on 1 July 1965. At the time, the announcement caused barely a ripple in my life. I was a Western Australian government auditor, had just completed the first year of my Diploma in Accountancy and had been voted the best first-year footballer in the Western Australian Football League (WAFL). It could not happen to me!

A letter from the Department of Labour and National Service in March 1965 advising of my call-up dramatically changed my circumstances. I was directed to present for a medical examination and then report to Irwin Barracks in Perth on 30 June for transfer to Puckapunyal in Victoria to commence my service. My first thoughts were not of my impending military training. This was a unique opportunity to further my football career in Victoria during my two years of army service. I contacted a few Victorian Football League clubs before signing a contract to play for the Geelong club.

Along with about 240 other Western Australians, I was transported by air and bus to Puckapunyal, arriving at 0700 hours on 1 July 1965. We were immediately introduced to army routine. Uniforms and weapons were

issued, followed by inoculations and then a haircut, whether it was needed or not. While I had not experienced army cadet training at school, being the second eldest of 12 children, the concept of structure and discipline came naturally to me. I fell quite easily into army routine and enjoyed the following days that were filled with drill and sport. My first week in the army passed quickly.

At the end of the week, our platoon sergeant advised us that the army was seeking volunteers for officer training. He pointed out it would be a real challenge, but those chosen would be paid at corporal's rate during the officer training. Influenced both by the challenge and financial incentive, I applied, was subjected to a rigorous assessment process and accepted as one of the 97 national servicemen and eight army aviation cadets who comprised the first course at the newly raised Officer Training Unit (OTU) at Scheyville in NSW. The course began on 18 July 1965.

The army assembled its most experienced instructors, all with extensive active overseas service, to transform civilians into infantry platoon commanders in an intense 22 weeks of unrelenting activity. The training was both physically and mentally demanding and the attrition rate was high. I thrived on the physical challenges but found military history classes at the end of a 14-hour day very challenging. Few concessions were afforded to officer cadets; however, I was fortunate to be granted leave on three occasions to fly back to Perth on a Saturday morning to participate in the WAFL final series and helped to achieve a premiership for my club East Fremantle.

On 18 December 1965, 76 of the 107 officer cadets who began the course graduated as second lieutenants. I ranked sixth in graduation order and received the OTU Athletics Prize. Five members of this inaugural class, Melford Roe, Terry O'Hanlon, Ted Pott, John Deane-Butcher and myself were posted to 5 RAR. We became members of the first fully integrated unit of regular army and national service soldiers to undertake active service overseas and so became part of Australian military history.

I assumed my posting as the commander of 7 Platoon, C Company, in early January 1966 and immediately experienced a situation not covered in my training. Three members of my platoon were Western Australian national servicemen who had shared a hut with me at Puckapunyal before I was selected for officer training. One of these, Private John McShane, had worked with me in the Western Australia Department of Lands and

we had spent the previous two years doing mid-week fitness training together. The potential for this familiarity to impact on discipline was real, but the situation was adroitly addressed by my deputy, Sergeant Ralph 'Rowdy' Hindmarsh. He called the men to attention, announced with a salute, 'The platoon is ready for inspection Sir!' By this simple action he firmly implanted in the minds of all platoon members the burden of authority which had been heaped upon me and signalled the need for them to respect it or, at least, to give me a fair go to show my wares.

Training at section, platoon and company level was intense and exhausting over the next three months. The men were subjected to regular rifle range practice, route marches and battle-runs to the School of Military Engineers to be trained in mine warfare. Pleasingly, all members of the platoon soon met the required battle-readiness fitness standard. Our training at the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra in south-east Queensland was challenging, as its tropical jungle conditions were like those we could expect in Vietnam. Competition between the 5 RAR rifle companies was fierce and a race over the notorious obstacle course was organised. I won the event for C Company and in the process set a course record which, I'm told, stood for quite a long time. At the completion of this closely assessed training, C Company was deemed to be fully prepared for overseas service.

I departed Australia by Qantas Boeing 707 from RAAF Base Richmond on 19 April 1966 as part of the 5 RAR advance party, which also included two other national service platoon commanders, John Deane-Butcher and Melford Roe. We arrived at the Bien Hoa US military base on 20 April and were attached to our 1 RAR counterparts. I joined Second Lieutenant John Dwyer on three 48-hour tactical area of responsibility patrols around the base area. The casual efficiency of his men in preparation for and execution of these patrols greatly impressed me. I wondered whether my platoon would develop this confidence and was subsequently delighted at the completion of our first combat experience, during Operation Hardihood, to see it on display so soon.

While most of the advance party returned by air to Vung Tau as their companies arrived in country, John Deane-Butcher and I were afforded additional time at Bien Hoa while our C Company mates travelled to Vietnam aboard HMAS *Sydney* and were the last 5 RAR troops to arrive. We were scheduled to fly on an American army UH-1D Iroquois helicopter to Vung Tau on 4 May. The helicopter was clearly overloaded

at take-off and struggled to gain altitude. As we were approaching the Bear Cat US Army base, we lost power and altitude and the pilot made a forced landing, fortunately in a new base being constructed for a US Army infantry brigade. This event could well have prematurely ended our Vietnam tour. The pilot stated that two people would have to remain with the construction engineers until another chopper could pick them up. Being the most junior officers on board we were certain we would have to deplane. I can only assume our brass shoulder pips inferred a higher rank than second lieutenant because a US Army major and captain were directed to stay.

On rejoining my platoon, I was advised my platoon sergeant, Rowdy Hindmarsh, had contracted glandular fever just prior to the departure of HMAS *Sydney*. He had not made the trip and it was six weeks before I received a replacement platoon sergeant. As a result, I carried out the additional responsibilities of platoon sergeant during this period, with the help of my three section commanders. This added to the load on me and my men as we commenced operations.

Preparation for Operation Hardihood occurred from 5 May, with all troops warned about security and the need for vigilance. Amazingly, prior to the operation commencing, a photo of the 5 RAR camp on 'Back Beach' at Vung Tau, including the sentry post showing Corporal Leslie 'Doc' Urquhart of 8 Platoon, appeared in the Australian magazine *Pix*. Many diggers received copies from home requesting advice as to which was their tent.

During our time at Back Beach I was approached by an American who wore US Army greens but without insignia of any kind. He said he was part of a training team for Nungs, who were Chinese/Vietnamese operatives, but not of the South Vietnamese Army. He asked if I would like to see their training camp which was situated a few kilometres from Vung Tau. I sought and received permission to accompany him. The camp had two Nissen igloo huts that were chock-full of weapons from every part of the world and I suspected it might have been part of a CIA operation. The facility was impressive and as we were leaving he asked if there was any weapon I would particularly like to have. I indicated that the US .30 calibre M1 carbine had always impressed me. He laughed, saying he would bring a real weapon for me the next day. When he arrived next morning, he handed me a brand-new Armalite rifle and 5,000 rounds of ammunition for it. I thanked him and proceeded to advise my company

commander. He said I should keep it and when we were established at Nui Dat the platoon could practice with it in anticipation of our Second World War-era Owen machine carbines possibly being replaced by similar weapons. The weapon was an early AR15 version of the lightweight US 5.56 mm M16 rifle, which was less unwieldy than our log 7.62 mm L1A1 rifle and could be fired as a fully automatic weapon. About 10 weeks later, during weapons test firing, I tried the weapon and allowed my sergeant and corporals to fire it. The weapon had good hitting power and was light and compact, but the gas cylinder caked with carbon and seized up due to excessive oil in the working parts of the weapon. I had my sergeant take it to the battalion's armourer and leave it with him. Sometime later we were issued with a newer, more effective version of this rifle which we soon learned not to over-lubricate.

The battalion commenced Operation Hardihood on the 24 May and C Company was airlifted to LZ Hudson. We were greeted by members of the US 173 Airborne Brigade who, despite their significant casualties in the weeks prior to our arrival, claimed there were no VC within miles. As we proceeded over the Song Cau River, we heard rifle fire from a contact involving B Company and proceeded cautiously into the rubber plantation surrounding Nui Dat. We travelled for about 2 kilometres as a company, with two platoons forward in a reverse-arrowhead formation, before harbouring and having an early meal.

My 7 Platoon was tasked that night with setting a half-platoon ambush on a track junction at the edge of the rubber plantation, about 1 kilometre from the rest of C Company. After a night lying in soaking rain, adjusting to the noises of the jungle, with no sleep and not seeing any VC, I sent out clearing patrols at first light and then set out to rejoin C Company after advising by radio that we were returning to their position. This was acknowledged by company headquarters, and 8 and 9 Platoons who then alerted their troops. We proceeded in staggered file towards our platoon position and what followed could have been disastrous. As we approached our position with 3 Section leading, we were fired on. We hit the ground with Corporal Ray Orchard yelling out 'contact front!' A couple of seconds later someone called out, 'It's Orch', and both groups called urgently for firing to stop. This incident highlighted a problem when a platoon was split for either patrolling or ambushing and the platoon radio was with the patrol or ambush group. As no provision had been made for a radio for the other element of my platoon, its members were unaware of our approach. In the early morning light our wet jungle green clothes appeared

black. It being our second day on operations, it was only reasonable the uninformed sentry would expect the worst and open fire. The positive outcome from this experience was the immediate requirement for an extra radio to be provided in any situation where one element of a platoon was on patrol while the other element remained with the company main body.

My platoon suffered its first casualties on 17 June when Corporal Graham McCray and Private Uri Wolk were wounded by a booby trap. We were on the first day of a three-day patrol west of Nui Dat. Conditions were very hot, and we were travelling in tall, thick grass without shade. We were on a tight schedule to clear this area and didn't pause until 1330 hours. I tried to radio our location to Company HQ but was unable to make contact, so advised BHQ instead. We recommenced the patrol and discovered a VC camp comprising a series of weapon pits camouflaged with overhead protection from artillery fire. These showed no evidence of being recently used so we destroyed them and recorded the site as a future artillery fire task; then we commenced the 4-kilometre trek to our night harbour position. We were travelling in 150-centimetre-high kunai grass when the forward scout struck a tripwire, detonating a grenade.

This caused severe shrapnel wounds to Graham McCray's torso and Uri Wolk's legs. The platoon reacted in practised fashion, adopting an all-round defence stance. We were fortunate to have our stretcher bearer Private Ron Shoebridge with us and he immediately attended to the wounded. This incident occurred at 1430 hours and I tried to radio for a *Dustoff* helicopter, but the ANPRC 25 radio set, as we had experienced earlier on the patrol, was unreliable in thick country and contact could not be established with either C Company or BHQ. A rudimentary stretcher and a relay system were used to carry Graham while Uri walked assisted by Ron Shoebridge. We could only proceed at a rate that the forward scout determined was safe, and that the bearer party could manage.

It took three hours in stifling heat to reach the edge of LZ Hudson. We finally established radio communications at 1740 hours with BHQ and arranged a *Dustoff* chopper. When the chopper arrived at 1757 hours the pilot asked us to indicate our position with a coloured smoke grenade. We activated yellow smoke but again our radio failed and the pilot, unable to verify with us the colour used, requested we throw smoke again. This time we threw red smoke, the radio came good, we were able to confirm the smoke was ours and the chopper landed and took the wounded to the US Army 36 Evacuation Hospital in Vung Tau, a flight of 20 minutes.

Graham McCray's injuries were so severe he had to return to Australia. Uri Wolk rejoined the platoon after three weeks of recovering from his wounds.

After the *Dustoff*, we headed back into the jungle and harboured for the night, as we had insufficient daylight to rejoin the company position until next morning. I realised as we settled into night routine that my platoon had displayed, over the preceding five hours, a level of calmness and confidence that spoke well of their training and confidence in one another. We had experienced the shock of a booby trap exploding in our midst. The platoon had reacted well, going immediately into all-round defence. The men had then carried and assisted two injured mates and their weapons, ammunition and equipment for three hours in blistering heat through thick vegetation, with very little water, to place them on a *Dustoff* chopper. We were all aware Graham McCray's injuries were severe and hoped and prayed he would be OK. He had led 2 Section for our first month on operations as we continuously patrolled our designated search areas. He, like us, had grown used to living in wet clothes, spending hours staring into the black nothingness of the jungle while in ambush or on sentry picquet and dealing with mosquitoes, leeches and scorpions, but his short tour of duty was over.

We returned to base next morning where I was debriefed on the incident. I then received a briefing on my next patrol mission, was told to replenish rations and ammunition and ordered to move out after 8 and 9 Platoons returned from similar 48-hour patrols. We left base two days later, to return to the area where we had encountered the booby trap, with Private Don 'Tubby' Treloar stepping up from rifleman to machine gunner and Corporal Ted West becoming the commander of 2 Section. We were back to full fighting strength.

On 22 June we had covered over 8 kilometres within our designated search area before harbouring for an early evening meal at 1730 hours. This was to allow ample time for moving into an ambush position for the night. As we settled in, three VC moved across the front of 1 Section, about 200 metres away. Shots were exchanged before the VC escaped into the jungle. 1 Section moved out to sweep the area where the VC had been sighted but found no sign of casualties. A quantity of small arms ammunition was located during the sweep. Next morning, I was directed by company headquarters to provide an accurate grid reference for our contact to facilitate future artillery fire missions. This was done by taking

compass bearings on two clearly identifiable geographic features. Where the reciprocal bearings from the two features intersected on the map would be an accurate indication of our location. (Oh, how we could have used a modern hand-held GPS!) The area we were in was covered in thick foliage, so I took my radio operator, Private Bill Parkes, and proceeded to a point 100 metres to the north of the platoon position where I was able to observe two peaks of the Nui Thi Via mountains. I stood on a rice paddy bund to take the compass bearings and, as I did, four shots rang out. I heard the first crack over my head as I dropped to the ground, rolled into a firing position and bumped into Bill Parkes who had the same immediate reaction to the shots. The shooter was in a creek bed and I believe this accounted for the shots going high. I learnt some lessons from this encounter, like the effectiveness of hours of training leading to an instant response to being shot at and, more importantly, the perils of standing in the open engrossed in a navigation problem with my platoon some distance away with the platoon's radio.

In early July the battalion commenced Operation Sydney to search the area around Nui Nghe, a prominent feature a few kilometres north-west of Nui Dat. C Company was tasked with searching the area north of this feature before sweeping over the hill to deal with any VC on the hill. During two days of patrolling in very thick jungle, many enemy camps and facilities were found and destroyed. The company was to move into position on the north-west slopes to advance on the hill summit, with 8 and 9 Platoons to lead, and my platoon to move behind them in reserve. We were returning at about 1700 hours from a patrol prior to moving my platoon into position when an artillery barrage was called onto the top of the hill from where shots were being fired at our spotter plane. Three rounds overshot the hill and one exploded in the tree canopy near my platoon.

Lance Corporal Marinko 'Titch' Tomas received severe shrapnel wounds to his back from the tree burst. An urgent *Dustoff* was called and, as I had identified a suitable LZ about 150 metres from our position, I was directed to escort the stretcher party and secure the LZ with my platoon. As Titch was being placed on the chopper I patted his shoulder and told him he would be OK, but he died shortly after arriving at the hospital. He was the first Western Australian national serviceman killed in Vietnam. I knew him well, as we usually assisted Father John Williams, our battalion's chaplain, when he said mass prior to us going out on operations. Titch was a good bloke and his death deeply affected me. On my return to

Australia, I visited his family who had been targeted with hate mail. They were relieved I was with him when he was wounded, and the family and I have remained friends.

The battalion continued saturation patrolling of all areas adjacent to Nui Dat and conducted cordon and search operations on some villages throughout July. These resulted in regular contacts with the VC and finding and destroying their installations. As August approached, I considered how we had measured up to the challenges that had confronted us to date, and appreciated the human endeavour involved in carrying out infantry operations in jungle terrain with the physical and mental strain involved.

Soon after we first arrived at Nui Dat, stress and fatigue became our constant companions. C Company had lost men killed and wounded but, throughout these early months, I witnessed a subtle change in my men's demeanour. Every patrol deepened their solidarity. The skill of the forward scout or the alertness of the night picquet could mean the difference between life and death. My men uncomplainingly carried a 30-kilogram backpack plus a rifle, machine gun or radio set for kilometres in tropical heat, pressing quietly through thorny 'wait-a-while' vines and bamboo thickets with two-inch thorns, wading through streams, swamps and mud, all while staying alert and ready to react instantly; and then, at night, sat in inky blackness staring at nothingness during a tropical downpour while taking their turn at manning a machine gun. Such daily routines are but a few of the many parts of each man's slice of a shared burden. His mates know they can rely on him and he gains their total trust. Mutual trust and dependence increased as the process was repeated day after day; and the resulting deep bonds were evident in the cohesion, confidence and easy camaraderie that pervaded the whole platoon.

In early August prior to a cordon and search of Binh Ba, most of the battalion were in base. Various games were organised between the companies, tug-of-war and volleyball being the easiest to organise. However, on this occasion as a follow-up to an earlier contest in Australia, C Company participated in a game of Australian rules football. The venue was the red, laterite clay of the under-construction airstrip on the northern side of Nui Dat hill, later to be known as Luscombe Field. The goal posts were two stacked aviation gasoline drums with single drums for the behind posts. The game was played in jungle greens and boots, with C Company shirtless. The competition was played in earnest with many a bump and spill, but in the end C Company prevailed comfortably. While Roger

Wainwright and I did well, the man of the match was C Company's centre half-back Private Syd Shore of 8 Platoon. This was possibly the first Aussie rules football game played in Vietnam and, sadly, not recorded in the official war history.

Binh Ba was the most significant village in our area of operations. On 7 August the battalion, reinforced by two companies from 6 RAR, commenced Operation Holsworthy to cordon and search the village. This was the most significant task undertaken by the battalion to date. Precise planning and efficient execution were essential to the success of this complex operation. After a long march to company assembly areas and a night insertion march through an old-growth rubber plantation, we waited in total darkness for the order to move into our respective blocking positions. There was no moon and inside the plantation was as black as pitch. To aid movement through the inky darkness we foraged in the leaf litter and found luminous lichen that we attached to each man's backpack. I moved forward to get the forward section to do this and while returning stepped into a depression and twisted my ankle. My concern was not for my ankle but for the noise I made when falling. As there was no reaction from the direction of the village, I quickly returned to my position.

The effectiveness of the tactical planning by the battalion and its precise implementation produced an outstanding result. Some VC village cadre and ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) draft dodgers were apprehended without casualties to the battalion, a most outstanding result for such a complex operation. However, a far greater victory was achieved by this operation. The local villagers were aware of our presence in Phuoc Tuy province but had no real understanding of us or our purpose. At various times individual villagers had been detained by platoon or company patrols as they tried to carry out their normal activities, which had in many instances been curtailed by our presence. The restriction on wood gathering and collection of fruit from gardens in some areas, along with the grazing of cattle, had all been a significant impost on the locals. We now had the village surrounded and the reaction we experienced as the people awoke was extraordinary. In our location an old woman came out of her house at daybreak to be confronted by four heavily armed Australians. She re-entered her house and reappeared 15 minutes later with a large kettle of lemongrass tea and proceeded to offer this to the men. I thought at the time, how would my or any Australian mother

have reacted to this situation. Clearly, we had made a good impression to reinforce a reputation which had probably preceded us; and our presence was welcomed by many of the villagers.

Our indication that the battalion would have an ongoing association with the village was also appreciated. I was impressed when, after searching the village and during our distributing of rice and spare rations, the large number of villagers who lined up to receive food did so in a polite manner with genuine appreciation for our kindness. An action that positively impacted our goal of winning the hearts and minds of these people, and those of the locally deployed Vietnamese 1 Commando Company, who were under the control of Captain Ron Boxall and his small team, was a game of soccer. We were much bigger and stronger than our opponents but were instructed to ensure the match ended in a draw. A few heated moments occurred during the game as enthusiastic players from both sides clashed vigorously in attacking the ball; however, all parties were happy with the result and our standing in the village was enhanced.

After the village search was completed, Captain Tony White, the battalion medical officer, provided a clinic service to locals during his regular visits to our troops. I took the opportunity on one of these visits to have my ankle examined as it was quite sore. My leg was black from the knee down and swollen. A severely sprained ankle was diagnosed, and Tony indicated he would arrange for me to be restricted to light duties when we returned to base. True to his word, when I returned to Nui Dat base three weeks later, I was appointed commander of a 12-man squad to provide security for the headquarters, Australian Force Vietnam, in Saigon. On my return to Australia, I was found to have snapped my lateral ligament in this incident. While much of our issued equipment was substandard, the fact that I was able to continue with operational duties in the jungle and mountains for a further eight months confirms this was not the case with our excellent calf-length boots, known as boots GP (general purpose).

The VC mortaring of the Task Force base on 17 August resulted in the whole battalion, except for C Company, returning to base next morning. We were to provide support for Binh Ba village as promised. When the Battle of Long Tan commenced early that afternoon, we followed its progress on the radio network, seriously concerned for the men of D Company, 6 RAR, who, just 10 days before, had assisted us in the cordon and search of Binh Ba. We could hear the continuous roar of the artillery supporting D Company, 6 RAR, and then, at about 1600 hours,

the APC troop supporting us was recalled to rejoin the relieving force. We were within artillery 105 mm gun range from Nui Dat and were directed to dig-in with overhead cover and expect an attack. We were on our own; however, I was proud of the quiet determination the men displayed as they set about preparing our defensive positions for an impending enemy attack. We spent a sleepless night on full alert, but no enemy came our way. I was pleased to greet the sun next day.

Following the Battle of Long Tan, all elements of the battalion were involved in intensive patrolling in the areas between Binh Ba and Nui Dat during the next four weeks to keep the VC off balance. As a result, we lived in filthy clothes for two weeks. This resulted in most of the men developing rashes and foot tinea due to the constant dampness. Our CO, John Warr, visited us regularly and introduced a rotation system for platoons to spend a day in Vung Tau swimming in the ocean. While the medical benefit may have been small, the impact on the men's morale was significant.

On 6 October, Operation Canberra was undertaken to commence securing Route 15 through Phuoc Tuy Province to allow newly arrived elements of the US 4 Infantry Division to move from their port of entry, Vung Tau, to their Bear Cat base in Bien Hoa Province to the north. To achieve this, we had to first clear the Nui Thi Vai hills which overlooked the road. My platoon led C Company from Route 15 for two days before 8 Platoon assumed the lead on the morning of 8 October. Just after 1030 hours, 8 Platoon was fired on and encountered booby traps. Eight men were wounded and because of the denseness of the jungle it took over two hours for us to hand-clear an LZ for the *Dustoff* chopper. Once the wounded were safely away, I was directed to clear an enemy installation 100 metres north of the LZ. This was a moment of truth. I was unsure of the extent of the installation to be cleared, the number of defenders, if any, and the layout of any fighting pits. It was my call, so I determined, after a brief reconnaissance, to have one section in a fire support position and to move through using one section up and the other behind in close support. 3 Section was to provide fire support and, as they moved into position, the section commander, Corporal Ray Orchard, screamed out, 'Stop' to Private Alex Bernotas, who was wriggling into place. Ray had seen the booby trap, but his warning was too late. Shrapnel struck Alex in the lower back and wounded another three men. I was standing next to Ray who was wounded with a piece of shrapnel the size of five cent coin embedded in his forehead. Ray was the first person in our company to

spot a booby trap before it was detonated. A *Dustoff* helicopter was called and my wounded were taken to hospital. Alex Bernotas's wounds were so severe he was returned to Australia. After this incident we were withdrawn 500 metres while an airstrike and an artillery bombardment were brought to bear on the area in response to B Company contacting a large VC force on the Nui Thi Vai feature, further to our north.

Ray Orchard's bushcraft was exceptional. Later in our tour of duty, when we were moving through very dense jungle with 1 Section leading, because of the thickness of the foliage, I was forward with the lead section check-navigating for Corporal Allan McNulty. Suddenly, shots were fired directly behind by Ray Orchard who shouted, 'Contact left!'. The platoon went into a counter-ambush drill and Sergeant John Lee-Smith swept through the VC camp with 2 Section. The camp comprised about 50 weapon pits, a sandal factory and a kitchen with rice cooking. The VC had bolted into the thick scrub and we were unable to locate any sign of their having taken casualties. I quizzed Ray on how he had seen the VC sentry. He said, 'I just looked through the leaves.' Given that 10 people had stared into that area, it was his observation skills which certainly saved our lives. Ray Orchard was a special soldier who inspired men by his actions and leadership, he was a natural leader and he was Aboriginal. His section comprised a blend of older regular soldiers and young national servicemen; but Ray saw no difference between them. They were his boys and they respected his authority. His bushcraft was without peer in the company and some of us owed their lives to his skills. Respect and admiration for Ray extended throughout the whole battalion. I kept contact with Ray after we returned to Australia and saw both his anger when refused entry to a Queensland RSL (Returned and Services League) club and his joy at the 1987 national Welcome Home march. I was honoured to present his eulogy when he died in February 2013. Ray was an Australian soldier, which says it all. He was a man of courage, honesty and integrity and we loved and respected him as a brother.

Later that day we moved towards B Company's position to harbour for the night. We were located on the side of a very steep hill with only a small area of flat ground, which company headquarters occupied. It was impossible to set a perimeter due to the terrain, so the men were grouped in proximity to the gun positions to enable the night picquet to operate. I slept that night with my feet against a tree almost in the vertical position due to the steepness of the hill. Next day my platoon was leading the company as we moved back to the VC base complex where we had taken

casualties. As we approached the installation, I observed a broken branch, a VC sign for a tripwire ahead. I called a halt just as my forward scout, Private Ken Warren, sent hand signals to indicate an obstacle and for me to come forward to see for myself. The tripwire was attached to a Chicom grenade and, as we looked for a place to get off the track, we realised both sides were heavily booby-trapped with vines attached to grenades. Our attached combat engineers were called forward. They disarmed a tripwire stretched across the track and we moved cautiously into the complex.

The enemy base contained a hospital, large quantities of drugs, 10 tonnes of rice and a booby trap workshop. With little time available we did our best to destroy the camp, but we were required to secure Route 15 the following day, so we left late in the afternoon for our new position along the road. It must have seemed strange to the incoming Americans to see us waving them on, in floppy bush hats and often shirtless. The American units moving along Route 15 wore flak jackets and steel helmets and the floors of their vehicles were sandbagged to protect against mines. A major general stopped his jeep and expressed his thanks to me, saying how happy he was to be working with professionals. I looked at my men and realised that, while they did not match the fresh look of the new-to-country Americans, I'm sure there was something about their easy confidence and the way they carried themselves which attracted the compliment.

We did not completely leave the Nui Thi Vai hills to the VC, for we returned to the area after securing the road as part of the US Army Operation Robin. This new thrust into the same hills was called Operation Queanbeyan. It involved a lot of scrub-bashing as we searched further into the hills without any contact with the enemy, although other companies and BHQ had significant enemy contacts which are described in Chapters 7 and 15.

November 1966 saw the battalion just halfway into our 12-month tour of duty in Vietnam. There was much more to follow but such events extend beyond the period covered by this book. To round out my narrative as one of the first five national service officers to lead Australian soldiers in combat operations I shall close my tale with a brief description of my departure from 5 RAR and the men who remain my brothers to this day.

My tour of Vietnam ended on 12 April 1967 and the manner of its occurring deserves mention. At 1000 hours on that day, our CO, John Warr, flew from Nui Dat to the Horseshoe Hill feature in a Sioux

helicopter and asked for me to join him. As kindly as it is possible, he told me my younger brother had been killed in a road accident and my parents had asked for my return to Australia. He said, 'Your tour here is completed, if you wish to go home I will make it happen.' He agreed that I should speak to my men as there was still one week of operations to go before our relief by 7 RAR. My men expressed sorrow at my losing a brother and told me to go.

I left the Horseshoe in the CO's Sioux at 1030 hours, returned to Nui Dat, changed into civilian clothes which had been 12 months in a tin trunk and was driven to the airstrip where I boarded an RAAF Caribou aircraft for Saigon. I was met at Tan Son Nhut airport by a consular official and handed a passport which included a signature copied from my pay book. I travelled by Air Vietnam to Singapore, boarded a BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation) aircraft and arrived in Perth at midnight. My total journey had taken 13 hours. To put this journey into perspective, John Warr, who at times had responsibility for almost 1,000 troops in combat, had taken the time to arrange my rapid return to Australia. He was compassionate and always showed empathy for his men. He was an outstanding CO and the results achieved by our battalion during its tour of duty attest to this.

Editors' conclusion

Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 15 provide comprehensive insights into the day-to-day experiences of 5 RAR's junior officers and their men in the operational environment which prevailed in the first six months of 1 ATF's deployment into Phuoc Tuy Province. Their narratives have been included in this book to convey an idea of the diverse hardships that confronted some of the nation's young men when they were among the first Australians to be committed into that challenging environment; and to show how they coped and settled into operations. For this reason, their stories have concentrated on the first six months of our battalion's first tour of duty in Vietnam. They are but a few of innumerable personal stories that can be drawn from within an infantry battalion at war.

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.2019.10