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The Vietnam Chapter

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Between 1966 and 1967, Bob O'Neill saw 12 months of combat duty with an Australian army infantry battalion in Vietnam. It is not widely known that Australia was one of a number of countries — including Thailand, the Philippines, the Republics of China (Taiwan) and Korea, Spain, and New Zealand — which, alongside the US, constituted the so-called Free World Military Forces in the Second Indochina War (1961–1975). These allies supported the Government of the Republic of (South) Vietnam against insurgents of the National Liberation Front (NLF), which, in turn, was sustained by the communist regime of North Vietnam. As in the United States, in Australia there would later be bitter opposition to involvement in the Vietnam War. However, what is less well known is that, at the outset, the war had widespread popular support. The domino theory, whereby Southeast Asian countries would — one after another — fall to the southern thrust of communism, was entirely credible in this era of Cold War.

In 1962, Australia made a modest contribution to the Saigon-based anti-communist alliance by dispatching 30 military advisers to bolster South Vietnamese army units in the field. In a major escalation, combat troops from the US and Australia arrived in 1965, with an Australian battalion under US command. The following year, the Australian Government decided to send an expanded and autonomous task force under Australian command and operating in its own area.

In January 1966, Captain Robert J. O'Neill of the Royal Australian Corps of Signals joined the 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (5RAR) at its Holsworthy base on the outskirts of Sydney. 5RAR and a second battalion and supporting arms (artillery, armour, etc.) would constitute the task force. Bob's initial posting was as regimental signals officer commanding the signals platoon, but he was almost immediately transferred to the infantry corps and appointed second-in-command (2IC) in the battalion's B Company. Here his immediate superior was Major Bruce McQualter. Bruce had been a year ahead of Bob at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, and they knew each other well. Bruce was delighted to know that Bob would be joining the battalion, particularly as his 2IC. The job of a company 2IC is to understudy his commander. He is to be fully prepared to step into the role should the situation demand it, whether this be due to the absence, death, or disablement of his commander. In the meantime, the 2IC relieves his commander of many of the routine administrative and house-keeping chores associated with the lives of the 100 or so troops under their control.

The rationale behind the posting of a high-flying academic into such a prosaic job was undoubtedly to bring him down to earth and reacquaint him with the nuts and bolts of soldiering. Bob was soon to be seen involved in such tasks as overseeing the pouring of concrete slabs, and discussing soldiers' equipment and rations.

5RAR was a brand new battalion, founded on 1 March 1965, only 14 months before its deployment to Vietnam. Preparing a military unit for war is a considerable undertaking, involving prolonged, arduous training, and the development of leadership and teamwork at all levels to produce an effective fighting force. This preparation was complicated by the fact the battalion was the first to be made up of both conscripts and career soldiers — roughly 50 per cent of each. There was a degree of apprehension as to how the conscripts would adjust to the constraints of army life, but this soon proved groundless. Although there was always a widespread assumption that — sooner or later — the battalion would be sent to Vietnam, a formal order was not issued until less than three months before its departure to the war zone. This lack of certainty was something of an additional encumbrance to the preparations. Fresh reinforcements were still arriving in the final weeks and there was an atmosphere of haste and improvisation just short of chaos.

Bob did not slip into the battalion unnoticed. Here was a newcomer not only with an engineering degree from Melbourne University, but a Rhodes Scholarship and an Oxford doctorate. It was known that his doctoral thesis was shortly to be published as *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933–1939*. Such a stellar academic record certainly attracted widespread and intense interest in the battalion. Within military culture, however, deeds are generally valued more highly than words, and such a background could well have invited comments about ivory towers and detachment from reality. It was soon evident that Bob had his feet well and truly on the ground, and would be readily and warmly accepted by all ranks. He was, from the start, friendly and approachable. In conversation, it was apparent that he had an unfeigned interest in the other person's views. Bob's affability and early identification with the battalion contributed in no small way to the development of *esprit de corps* in this new unit. It also stood him in good stead when, a few months later, he was appointed to the post of the battalion's intelligence officer, where informal contacts are invaluable. Time was found for Bob to deliver a series of pre-departure presentations to the troops on the history and culture of Vietnam as well as the strategic situation, a task for which he was well equipped.

The battalion left Sydney for Vietnam in late May 1966. Vehicles and equipment sailed together with one company to the Vietnam port of Vung Tau aboard an aircraft carrier converted to a troopship. The rest of the troops flew into Saigon in a series of civilian flights.

Their first home in Vietnam was in tents on sand dunes above a beach on the South China Sea, close to Vung Tau and some 130 kilometres from Saigon. Here, in the relentless sweltering heat, the battalion sorted itself out, preparing for its first operation.

The Australian Task Force, of which 5RAR formed a part, had been allocated its own area of operations, the province of Phuoc Tuy, which lay on the coast to the east of Saigon. With a population of 103,000, the main industries of Phuoc Tuy were rice-growing, fishing, and charcoal burning. There were also extensive French owned and operated plantations of rubber trees. These had been established by the French colonists after World War I, and were still operating to a limited extent despite their situation in the midst of the communist insurgency. It was understood that there was a mutually beneficial financial arrangement in place between the French owners and the

NLF that enabled production to continue despite the war. Another main feature of Phuoc Tuy Province was the port of Vung Tau, through which passed a considerable volume of supplies for Saigon and beyond, thereby taking the pressure off Saigon's river port. With the exception of the port, the province capital (Baria) and scattered outposts, Phuoc Tuy was entirely in enemy hands at the time of the Australian Task Force's arrival in 1966. Road traffic, even in convoys, was subject to attack, road blocks, and NLF tax collectors. Movement at night was impossible.

On 24 May 1966, the battalion left the temporary beach camp and set forth on its first operation. Bob was one of 800 soldiers aboard an armada of four flights of 30 helicopters, clattering 30 kilometres inland over jungle and rice paddies, to land close to an abandoned rubber plantation. Their mission was to establish a permanent base (Nui Dat) from which the task force would operate. This would be their home for the next 12 months. No time was lost in erecting defences. Noise was minimised and no lights were to be seen after sundown. A program of active patrolling and ambushing commenced immediately.

The wet season in South Vietnam runs from May to October. The heat and humidity were oppressive and the common daily pattern was for torrential rain to fall for an hour or two each afternoon. Clothing and equipment would be saturated. The rich red soil soon turned to deep mud. Latrines in the early weeks were simply shallow trenches which would be progressively covered up by successive users. Anyone who has experienced camping in the rain would understand the practical difficulties of daily life, quite apart from the threat of enemy attack. Mosquitos, scorpions and snakes abounded, and chomper ants could eat their way through the soldiers' webbing and nylon ground sheets. For the first two months, the troops slept on the ground in bivouacs. Later, tents were erected, with a floor of sand trucked up from the beach, and life in the base area improved.

It was on day one of this first operation that Bob O'Neill began writing a journal. He used a small, loose leaf pocket book, and every few days for the next 12 months would mail the completed, often mud-stained pages to his wife, Sally, back in Sydney. Sally — herself a historian — typed up and edited these notes, which provided the material that Bob would use on his return to Australia to write an account of 5RAR's experience in Vietnam. This was published as *Vietnam Task*

in 1968, and constitutes the battalion's official history. Being the first such account in Australia's 10 year involvement in the Vietnam War, the book attracted considerable attention and has remained a valuable reference.

During the year, 5RAR carried out a total of 17 operations in the province. Each lasted between two days and two weeks, after which the troops — tired, ragged, and filthy — would return to the Nui Dat base for a week or two to debrief, re-equip, and prepare for the next excursion. Many of the tasks consisted of cordon and search operations. Under cover of darkness, the battalion would creep up on a village overnight, to have it surrounded by first light, thus preventing the escape of potential enemy. During the following day, South Vietnamese army personnel would search the village and interrogate the inhabitants. While this was proceeding, the battalion conducted a medical clinic, food was distributed, and, on occasion, the battalion band entertained the villagers. These operations proved to be very cost effective at recovering weapons and documents, as well as apprehending Viet Cong suspects.

Bob was tasked with conducting the reconnaissance of the village of Duc My as preparation for the battalion's first such cordon and search operation. Moving hundreds of troops at night through enemy territory, silently and without lights, was highly hazardous, and a sound knowledge of the terrain on the approaches was essential to lessen the chance of disaster. Bob led his patrol of 30 men out of the base in the late afternoon. Monsoonal downpours and the need to skirt impenetrable clumps of bamboo and swampy terrain made navigation extremely difficult. His plan to use a creek leading to the village as a reliable guide proved impracticable — even for this small patrol — owing to the tangled undergrowth. To attempt to move the whole battalion along this route could have been calamitous. The patrol was nevertheless able to probe the perimeter of the village closely, to the extent of being able to hear a snoring sleeper, and returned safely to the base by sunrise. The information gained from this night reconnaissance was invaluable. The approach route was changed and the operation was carried out successfully shortly afterwards.

Illness resulted in the loss of 5RAR's Intelligence Officer and led to Bob's appointment to this position three months into his Vietnam tour of duty. This involved a move to battalion headquarters and brought

him into close association with the senior officers, in particular Lieutenant Colonel John Warr, the Commanding Officer. Warr had seen service as a platoon commander in Korea and had been wounded. He was a perceptive leader who had a sound grasp of the nature of counter-insurgency warfare. This understanding was shared by the battalion's company commanders, most of whom had seen service in the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s, combatting communist guerrillas. The principles of this type of warfare were to separate the insurgents from the support of the civilian population, and to win the hearts and minds of the latter. This 'softly, softly' approach was backed by a program of quiet but relentless patrolling and ambush. This strategy was at variance with the US military higher command, who favoured search and destroy sweeps conducted by large forces, set-piece battles, and who attached greater importance to body counts. Bob was firmly in the Warr camp.

He immediately took to his intelligence officer duties with relish. To quote Major Max Carroll, 5RAR's Chief Staff Officer and Battle Second-in-Command:

[H]e assumed the position the day before we commenced a major operation, the cordon and search of Binh Ba on 7/8 August 1966, for which all of the planning and orders had been completed. On his first day, on his own initiative, he produced an operational contingency plan, from the enemy Viet Cong viewpoint, to counter our actions against Binh Ba. His assessment was so accurate that it was taken to be a captured plan, which initially caused considerable alarm amongst some of our US allies! There is no doubt in my mind that as Intelligence Officer Bob found his true military metier. With his keen, analytical mind he was a natural; and his assessments were always well found, accurate and invariably accepted.¹

Xuyen Moc, an isolated government outpost and district headquarters in the east of the province, attracted Bob's attention. The village had been cut off for five years. Farmers wanting to sell their produce in the province capital had to travel on a road dominated by the Viet Cong, who extorted a heavy burden of tax. Bob devised a risky plan to drop in on the village compound by helicopter to meet the district commander and gain an appreciation of the tactical situation. Communications were poor, and there was no way of knowing how secure the landing

1 O.M. Carroll, 5RAR S3 (Battle Second-in-Command), personal communication.

zone was. Accompanied only by his Vietnamese interpreter and his batman (a commissioned officer's personal assistant/bodyguard/general gopher), Bob was dropped into the compound by a helicopter which immediately departed to avoid presenting an attractive target to the enemy. It was a fruitful visit, and Bob was able to pass on valuable intelligence to the Australian Task Force commander, resulting in an expansion of government control in this part of the province and a reopening of the road.

On several occasions, Bob managed to inveigle his way into the US headquarters known as HQ 2 Field Force Vietnam at Long Binh to find out what was in the big picture. This was an act involving a high level of chutzpah. As a rule, these mid-level American staff officers would never have allowed a humble captain from one of their own battalions to walk into their headquarters asking all kinds of probing questions about what they knew about Viet Cong strengths and intentions. As it happened, they were intrigued by the irregular approach from this representative of their unfamiliar ally, and they opened up and gave him serious answers. Bob was able to pass the gist of it to the Australian Task Force intelligence people, which kept them tolerant of his unusual initiatives.

Bob was a strong supporter of the battalion's civil action program. This included the provision — whenever practicable — of medical care to Vietnamese civilians by the battalion doctor, performances by the brass band, and football matches and combined church services attended by villagers and soldiers. He would always make an effort to engage the locals in friendly conversation. A pleasant break from army rations — accompanied by the commanding officer and medical officer — was an occasional lunch in the colonial splendour of the residence of the French manager of the nearby rubber plantation.

Throughout the year, Bob continued to re-evaluate strategy in the light of the battalion's experience and intelligence gathered. He paid particular attention to the views of junior commanders and ordinary soldiers. Michael von Berg, who was decorated for his actions as commander of the reconnaissance platoon (the brainchild of the commanding officer and Bob), observed that Bob's debriefing sessions were always searching and thorough, but also helpful and encouraging: 'Bob's knowledge of the enemy and potential movements was pretty accurate and this helped me enormously as to what type

of enemy you were likely to engage ... When talking to Bob it's like you are the only person in the world because he is giving you his total attention.'²

Twelve months of dangerous living in spartan conditions in the oppressive tropical climate of Vietnam placed huge demands on everyone's mental and physical resources. However, Bob never seemed to flag, and maintained his cheerful and professional demeanour throughout. It was not unknown for him to be seen up on a table in the officers' mess, singing German beer-hall songs. In the half century since that year, he has continued to keep up with his former comrades in arms and participate fully in the 5RAR Association. He made a return visit to Vietnam in 1971 — which included visits to Laos and Cambodia — towards the end of Australia's military involvement, in order to compile a survey of the war as a whole and collect material as a first step towards the writing of the eventual official history of Australia's part in the war in Vietnam.

For his services in Vietnam, Bob received the award of a mention in despatches. The citation for this award reads as follows:

Captain R. J. O'Neill was the Intelligence Officer of the 5th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment during the greater part of the tour of duty of the unit in South Vietnam. His skill and industry in collecting and interpreting available information regarding the enemy enabled the Battalion to undertake operations with the greatest possible knowledge of the Viet Cong. On numerous occasions Captain O'Neill displayed high personal courage in seeking out and confirming information both by ground and air reconnaissance. His conduct was at all times an inspiration to those who worked with him and the leadership displayed by him was of the highest possible order.

2 Michael von Berg, 5RAR Reconnaissance Platoon Commander, personal communication.

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