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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RECONNAISSANCE PLATOON

Michael Deak (Michael von Berg)

Editors' introduction

In Chapter 5 it was noted that the conversion of the Anti-Tank Platoon to the Reconnaissance Platoon was a way of finding more useful employment for the platoon in the absence of a role for its anti-armour capabilities (the enemy having no armoured elements in Phuoc Tuy Province). The Australian Army had reorganised in 1965 to structure units for their roles in the Vietnam War and reformed its infantry battalions along the lines of those it had deployed during the Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Confrontation of Malaysia. However, an Anti-Tank Platoon was added, probably because of the availability of large anti-armour weapons as hand-me-down items from the previous Pentropic organisation. This encompassed large, infantry-based, so-called 'Battle Groups' which could be brigaded to form a 'Task Force'. For obscure reasons, this was modelled on a US Army five-sided Pentomic organisational structure for Cold War scenarios. By 1964 the Australian Army had deemed its Pentropic battle groups to be unsuited to operations in South-East Asia; and, with the advent of Australia's new commitment to Vietnam, the concept was promptly abandoned. But, in brigading combat and combat support elements, the designation 'Task Force' was retained in preference to 'Brigade Group' which had previously been used for many years.

Thus, the Anti-Tank Platoon was armed with large US M40 106 mm recoilless rifles (RCL) which were vehicle-mounted or could be fired on the ground, but only from a solid footing. Their use in a perimeter defence role at the Nui Dat base or at fire support bases, employing canister (grapeshot) ammunition, seems never to have been considered. They were not readily man-portable and their unwieldy weight of 210 kilograms and length of 3.4 metres rendered these RCL of no use against enemy bunkers in close jungle or cave systems in the mountains. A lightweight substitute for such purposes, the US M72 66 mm LAW (light anti-armour weapon), a telescoping rocket launcher of 2.5 kilograms and 0.63/0.88 metres long when folded/extended, were later carried in each rifle section. Consequently, the M40 RCLs remained in storage at Nui Dat, with two being deployed as decorative 'sentries' in front of the Battalion Headquarters (BHQ) facilities, and their crews and their cut-down transport vehicles put to other uses.

Michael Deak

My conversation with Lieutenant Colonel Warr took place a few days after Second Lieutenant Dennis Rainer, a handful of soldiers and I arrived back after marching as a part of the Australian contingent through Saigon on Vietnam's National Day, 1966. We'd gone because after Operation Queanbeyan our commanding officer (CO) thought we deserved a break in Saigon. The march through Saigon, though, was anything but peaceful with the Viet Cong dropping mortar bombs on the forward elements of the marchers. While a little disconcerting, we completed the march without any further disruptions. On returning to Nui Dat I was summoned to see our CO. I was worried that he may have heard of some of the escapades that Dennis and I had got up to in Saigon after the parade and that mortar attack, when some soothing and relaxing elixir was in order. When I reached BHQ and saw the CO, our intelligence officer Captain Bob O'Neill, our operations officer Major Max Carroll and others, my mind went into overdrive and I thought, 'This might not be good'. It wasn't the first time I had fronted the CO for some social infraction or other misdemeanour. When it was explained to me that the battalion was keen to establish its own Reconnaissance Platoon and that I had been selected to form and command this new entity, a wave of relief swept over me.

A detailed briefing followed, in the style of a fireside chat about the new platoon's role, the selection and training of its personnel, its operational support requirements and administrative and logistics issues. I was given instructions to plan and conduct a selection process and training program to be held over a two-week period in the Vung Tau sand hills and the surrounding area. It was envisaged that the Anti-Tank Platoon, which had fought so valiantly up in the Nui Thi Vai hills, would take on the role of the battalion's Reconnaissance Platoon. This would avoid disruption to any of the rifle companies. Because the enemy did not have tanks in our area of operations, the CO decided the employment of the Anti-Tank Platoon should be changed to something more needed. The originator of the idea, I discovered later, was Major Stan Maizey, our battalion's second in command (2IC). 'Stan the Man', as he was affectionately called, was a keen punter like me, and on more than one occasion we tried our luck on a race at Rosehill or a game of seven-card stud.

I don't know what the battalion would have done without Stan the Man's industrious, far-reaching and occasionally questionable procurement methods in those early days of inadequate equipment and supplies. Supply in those first three months in Vietnam was a nightmare, and there were those who referred to 5 RAR as the 'Hydraulic Battalion – will lift anything'. Maizey, although a senior major, was very much our own 'Sergeant Bilko', who believed very little was unprocurable. He was an amazing man who served us extremely well before his talents were identified and he was poached by the Task Force HQ.

After the briefing I went back to the tent I shared with my platoon sergeant, Ray 'Skinny' Calvert. Despite details of the proposal being restricted to a 'need-to-know' basis, I told him much of what was said in the briefing. The CO still had to gain the support and approval of the task force commander, but I knew I could rely on Skinny and wanted his views and recommendations about which of the men in the current Anti-Tank Platoon might be suitable, and his thoughts on how we might carry out our new role. Skinny was an excellent senior non-commissioned officer (NCO), but, unfortunately, he developed a major medical condition which resulted in his return to Australia shortly after the completion of the platoon's training course for its new role. I was sorry to lose him at that stage because I liked and trusted him. I had also served with him before I was commissioned. Clearly, he was disappointed at having to return to Australia but his well-being and ultimately that of the platoon came first. I was pleased I was able to get his thoughts about the proposed changes as his input and suggestions proved invaluable.

To enable me to look at a suitable structure for our new Reconnaissance Platoon it was arranged that I should spend some time with our 3 Squadron, Special Air Service (SAS). Thankfully I knew many of the NCO patrol commanders but was still a little apprehensive about meeting them on their turf. I assumed there might be some suspicion or resentment of a young, recently graduated platoon commander having the temerity to consider conducting small-manned reconnaissance patrols using conventionally trained diggers from an infantry battalion. How wrong I was! Major John Murphy, the officer commanding 3 SAS Squadron, and his officers and some of his hardened and experienced NCO patrol commanders could not have been more relaxed and helpful in supporting what we were trying to achieve. I think they were relieved that, with the advent of reconnaissance platoons which were organic to infantry battalions, they would be able to concentrate more on the stealthy, long-range patrols deep into enemy sanctuaries, which was their primary role in Vietnam. Unlike them, we would operate much closer to our own forces (within 10,000 metres) and never out of artillery range. After these discussions I was heartened by John Murphy and his team's encouragement and knew that with the right training and equipment, we could fulfil the role that our battalion had in mind. These discussions also enabled me to decide on our patrol composition, command structure, weapons, communications systems and the numbers of NCOs and soldiers required in the platoon.

I was very happy with the advice that I had been given and the support 3 SAS Squadron was going to provide in conducting the personnel selection course and training. I felt that although we would operate in a different way to the SAS patrols, we needed their advice and support before we embarked on selection and training. In a two-week training period it could not be an SAS selection course, which would have entailed far too much for us to absorb. We needed a course suited to our competence levels and our small talent pool, half of whom would be national servicemen with barely 18 months of service under their belts. This is not meant to be derogatory in any way because our 'nashos' throughout the battalion were outstanding; but there is a thing called training overload which can do more harm than good, and all we needed were the basic reconnaissance patrol skills and specialist SAS contact drills which were not practised in the battalion. Thankfully, our SAS advisers agreed with my rationale. My proposed platoon structure and outline operating procedures were then discussed with our CO and his HQ team, and they agreed with my suggestions. I was then left to my own devices to

prepare the training syllabus, selection process, equipment and weapons lists, communications arrangements and the platoon's modus operandi. For a recently graduated officer this task was daunting, but having the trust of the CO, the operations officer and the intelligence officer gave me tremendous confidence, a clear sense of purpose and a determination not to let the battalion down. To establish and operate a platoon in a totally new and demanding role in war is difficult, but we were helped by having the advantage of selecting NCOs and soldiers from within the battalion, who were battle-hardened and experienced through six months of patrolling, ambushing, cordon and searches of villages and contact with the enemy. Some had lost mates so there really wasn't much for me to do in scene-setting or preparing them for what they could expect. They had all been living with these realities since the battalion was inserted into Phuoc Tuy. With this experience behind them, I knew there was not much the men needed in the way of telling them what to expect. This meant the SAS instructors and I could concentrate on specialist reconnaissance tactics and techniques and on operating in small self-sufficient groups capable of gaining information and, importantly, staying alive to bring it back.

Because it was only a matter of weeks since one of my section commanders, Norm Womal, had been killed during a contact in the Nui Thi Vai hills, I was still feeling his loss and made a commitment I would do everything possible to ensure that all members of the Reconnaissance Platoon came home. Notwithstanding my determination, I knew that, even with the best intentions, there was only so much I could do and I resolved to select the best available men for the role. I was seeking men who could be moulded into a tight, efficient, fighting platoon; who shared the values of caring, supporting, helping and respecting one another; but who also had the determination and ruthlessness needed to close with and kill the enemy. This embodied the ethos that we would never leave anyone, wounded or dead, behind. Although many who had applied to join the platoon were former rugby and beer-drinking friends of my soldiering days before being commissioned, there is a big difference between protecting a mate's back in a rugby ruck and protecting a mate in a firefight. A friend protects his mate's back in a rugby ruck; a brother protects his mate's back in a firefight. There is a big difference between friendship and brotherhood, which is not understood by many except those who have served in war and have experienced the death or wounding of men to whom they have grown so close. I was determined to instil strong notions of leadership throughout the platoon and a sense of 'brotherhood'. We would not only be protecting each other's backs, but looking after each other mentally

and spiritually as well. If a brother was feeling down, we could all pitch in to make a difference. This was generally done through some wicked prank or black humour which created lighter moments to help lift the spirits of any individual who was feeling below par. This approach was applied in abundance and I still laugh when recalling some of the antics.

Captain Peter Isaacs, the adjutant, promulgated a message throughout the battalion seeking volunteers for the new platoon while I canvassed the soldiers of the Anti-Tank Platoon and was delighted that many chose to try for selection. After interviewing volunteers, 40 soldiers and NCOs were named to attend the selection course. When told the course was to be conducted at Back Beach near Vung Tau, many thought that the course was going to be a beach holiday with barbecues, and would be a bit of a junket. How wrong were they!

I was absolutely delighted with the NCOs who had volunteered because I had served with many of them as a soldier, played rugby with them and engaged in the frivolities and mischief that young soldiers get up to. I considered them to be my mates. Of course, this can work for you or against you and, during the selection process, I marked my NCO mates very hard, for they would determine the success or otherwise of the platoon. Corporal Bernard 'Bernie' Smith was a very experienced NCO who had previously served in Malaya and possessed solid leadership skills. Corporal Bob 'Dogs' Kearney, the youngest section commander in the battalion at 20 years of age, had been in my section in 1 RAR. Corporal John 'Blue' Mulby was an outstanding soldier, hard as nails, with an infectious black sense of humour. Lance Corporal William, or Bill, 'Suave Harve' Harvey was another great soldier, who could make masterful sidesteps on both the rugby field and the dance floor. Platoon Sergeant John Lea-Smith, who was relatively new to the battalion, very quickly became my trusted 2IC, confidante and friend and, like Blue Mulby, also possessed a warped sense of humour. All the men who applied were characters, and all good blokes. Many I knew well, so it was a challenge to ensure I assessed everyone fairly based on the standards that the SAS instructors and I wanted them to achieve. I professed an attitude of transparency and inclusiveness, which embraces all fairly and equally, and has no hidden agenda. Not being honest with soldiers is the quickest way to lose their respect and so I led with an approach of 'what you see is what you get', not asking anyone to do anything I was not prepared to do myself. During the selection course I occasionally thought this was not such a good policy.

We had men from every part of the battalion and many did not know one another. A good way to get to know each other quickly is over a beer or something stronger; and that we did whenever we had no night training. Bonding and camaraderie was established within a short period of time and, in part, this was the making of the new platoon. To make sure the bonding sessions did not get out of hand, I would wake the whole team every morning at about 0500 hours and run through the beaches and sand hills of Vung Tau until all dropped – myself included. After a night of 'bonding', this was almost torture. It took me back to my early days of rugby and water polo where I had coaches who instilled in me an almost masochistic bent to drive my body until I was able to push through pain barriers and actually enjoy it. There wasn't a lot of joy in this exercise but we pushed on and the men did extremely well, helped by the fact that all were already extremely fit through time already spent 'in country', where there were very few fat infantrymen. Our normal regimen was light rations, long periods on operations in sauna-like conditions, patrolling while heavily laden, going over and under natural obstacles, all with adrenaline pumping while being hyper-alert. These ensured an inability to accumulate fat or lose physical fitness. There were a few early drop-outs and they were sent back to where they came from in the battalion. As the numbers declined and the remaining individuals got to know each other better, I could see and feel the pride, confidence and cohesive spirit this group of individuals was developing. Over the period of the course this grew stronger and stronger so that, towards the end, they were champing at the bit to get out on operations in their new role.

My hardest task was to select the final members of the platoon, which I did in consultation with the SAS instructors. Those who were not selected were counselled about why they were not successful. In all cases the unsuccessful were good soldiers but not selected because of some characteristic which made them unsuitable for working as a member of a small reconnaissance patrol. All of these men did an amazing job and went back to their platoons and companies as better soldiers; which was of benefit both to them and the battalion. Not being suited for the reconnaissance role in no way diminished them as soldiers and valued members of the battalion. Importantly, getting a pat on the back for having a crack at something different was some compensation for not being selected.

We needed to adopt many specialist skills of the SAS and some of their standard operating procedures. Achieving this in a two-week course was very demanding, but by adapting we adopted! Many of these changes centred on navigation, night movement, communications, observation and deduction skills, breaking-contact drills, medical support, demolitions, calling in supporting fire, bushcraft and survival. Only so much could be achieved in two weeks and, although the SAS instructors were very generous in sharing their knowledge and experience, there was a lot to learn and, in retrospect, our real learning was gained 'on the job', in operations. This on-the-job training aspect became a very important part of our post-operations debrief procedure, where lessons learned or mistakes made were shared, as a reinforcing part of our learning process.

The structure of the Reconnaissance Platoon was three five-man patrols, each commanded by a corporal and one six-man HQ patrol, commanded by me as platoon commander. The equipment carried by each patrol was a PRC-25 VHF radio and an M60 7.62 mm machine gun. Each soldier carried a personal weapon of choice, either a 5.56 mm M16 or 7.62 mm self-loading rifle. Each patrol also carried an M79 40 mm grenade launcher, M26 hand grenades, smoke grenades, ammunition, a medical kit and food, water, maps and compass. The patrol would consist of a forward scout (a duty shared by rotation), the corporal patrol commander, a radio operator, a machine gunner and a 'tail-end-charlie', who was also the patrol medic. My HQ patrol would consist of a forward scout, myself, two radio operators, my platoon sergeant and the tail-end-charlie who was also the platoon medic. The two radios of my HQ patrol were to provide control of the three five-man patrols and a separate radio to link with BHQ and to call for artillery or close air support. Because my HQ patrol had the additional weight of an extra radio and batteries, a machine gun was not carried, but we had everything else when it came to small arms, grenade launchers and ammunition. This platoon structure required a full complement of 26 individuals to be available for putting all patrols into the field at once. To allow for absences due to illness or leave, a total of 28 personnel were selected for the newly established platoon.

My reasoning for the patrols to be armed with the heavy M60 general purpose machine gun, at a small cost to mobility in fluid situations, was both tactical and psychological. When a small reconnaissance patrol contacted the enemy, the M60's ability to put down fire at a cyclic rate of 550 rounds per minute would keep the enemy occupied and their heads down, while the patrol extricated itself and rapidly departed the scene to

report on the enemy's presence. Encountering machine gun fire could cause the enemy to think that the small five-man information-gathering patrol was actually a much larger unit, such as a platoon or company, which always employed M60s. This rationale proved to be sound, for it certainly worked for us.

Although we now had the Reconnaissance Platoon, we did not have all the equipment necessary to fulfil our new role. I had learned a lot from our battalion 2IC Stan the Man, so what we didn't have we begged, borrowed, traded or found unattended until our requirements had been met. On our first operations we had to learn on the job, until we became comfortable with the standards achieved. Becoming familiar with the new platoon structure and the unusual benefit of having internal radio communications as well as direct contact with BHQ and fire support agencies for when we encountered serious trouble were significant changes for us. Of course, there was some concern about the risk of losing a patrol or even the entire platoon due to enemy action. It was not an unrealistic possibility and we needed to gain our 'reconnaissance legs' slowly, building up a record of competence and success.

The patrols would all be mobile, moving together on the one axis with HQ patrol in the centre, the best position for radio signals reception, with a patrol to the left, two to the right; or one on a piece of ground not necessarily on axis but of tactical importance. The key requirement was radio contact at all times, and although long periods of radio silence were encouraged, it was necessary that all were always on radio alert so that messages could be acknowledged by simply pressing the transmit switch using a simple, intermittent, on-off code without speaking; and the radio carrier wave could be silently detected by all radios operating on the frequency being used. If a patrol was in trouble, they could let it be known quickly so that assistance could be provided.

As we developed both skills and confidence, we were deployed further afield. Our tactics were determined by enemy activity, the terrain and the task in hand. After being silently inserted into the area of interest, slow movement of 400 to 1,000 metres maximum per day was involved. Where smaller enemy numbers were suspected or assumed, the platoon would be split into its small patrols to operate independently. If we were operating well away from the battalion and the likelihood of encountering a large enemy force was high, we would operate as a full platoon, concealing

indications that the enemy would associate with this size of group. Once we had perfected our methods, we were fully utilised by the battalion in a multitude of tasks which changed through necessity or innovation.

There was always the risk of death or wounding by booby traps or mines and, like the rest of the battalion, we did not wear or carry any personal protective equipment such as body armour or helmets. In our case, even if it had been available, it is questionable whether, loaded down by protective equipment, we could have operated effectively in a jungle environment. The heat, humidity, monsoonal rains and densely vegetated terrain would have made it almost impossible to move freely and quietly, or quickly when the need arose. We wore mostly US-style combat clothing (because it had more pockets and was more durable), bush hats and our personal webbing and backpacks which were made up of a mixture of Australian, UK, US and ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) gear. We went without underwear and socks. Being constantly wet through from sweat and rain, the less clothing worn the quicker a man would dry out. This also proved a good way of reducing our proneness to the ever-present skin problems of ringworm and tinea. We had a job to do and we needed to feel comfortable and able to move freely for long periods of time through different types of thick foliage and dense jungle, while remaining alert and effective. I remember one incident where a senior officer who had recently joined the battalion disapproved of the camouflage paint we had applied in irregular patterns to our weapons. I told him that on patrol the weapons' plastic furniture and metal surfaces, when covered with our sweat or rain, glistened and could reflect light to indicate our presence to the enemy – at which he laughed. I respectfully told him I would not be removing our camouflage paint from our weapons and if he had a problem with that he should take it up with the CO. I never heard more from him and we kept our camouflage paint. With our individual outfits and machine gun ammunition belts across each man's chest we looked not dissimilar to Pancho Villa's bandits.

Weapon cleanliness was not a problem because all took great pride in their weapons. Like every platoon in the battalion we test fired all weapons before operations to ensure they were in good working condition. Everyone in the Reconnaissance Platoon was permitted to carry as much ammunition as he wanted and all were well loaded-up in case we deliberately engaged an enemy force, as happened when we ambushed them.

Adequate water supply was always at the top of our minds. Without it, soldiers soon become less effective and at risk of becoming heat casualties, jeopardising both their security and the mission. Personally, I carried seven water bottles and most others did the same. Some dumped certain large cans of food, especially the despised US ham and lima beans, to make room for a water bladder inside their pack. It is possible to operate in hot tropical environments without surplus food but not without adequate water. One of the major benefits of having the Reconnaissance Platoon was that it enabled the battalion to deploy us to the high ground of the Nui Dinh hills, west of Nui Dat, and the steep Long Hai range to the south-east where we were the first Australians to patrol there. We could scale these features quicker than a company, and it enabled the CO to fully utilise his rifle companies on other major operational tasks. Because many of our platoon tasks were on high ground in the dry season, the only water resupply we could expect was by helicopter at a tactically suitable time. Hence the need to carry as much as we could in case opportunities for resupply proved scarce.

Usually, the platoon managed to get on to high ground without being detected by the enemy or the local civilians, and water rationing needed to be strictly applied. In the dry season, if we were operating a platoon-sized fighting patrol to seek deliberate contact with the enemy, we would move parallel to creek lines (but not in them because the enemy were usually then located close to water). Here we had fewer problems in keeping up with our water requirements. But at night, if not ambushing, we would head back up to the high ground to harbour securely.

Our combat rations consisted of a mixture of dehydrated and canned US or Australian rations. Many carried an onion or fresh chillies to spice up a good curry mixed with rice. However we could only make curry in a relatively safe area because of its strong cooking smells.

It is amazing how little food is needed to survive but, without tea or coffee, hunger pangs are accentuated. A good brew is a great morale booster and nerve calmer. The platoon was normally inserted into search areas by helicopter, armoured personnel carriers (APCs) or on foot. If on foot, insertion would normally be from a secure area like a fire support base in first or last light, into a jungle area that was well covered from view. If deploying by helicopter, either Royal Australian Air Force or US Army Aviation units were used. As a deception measure, several dummy runs were done in and out of areas so that the enemy had great difficulty

in knowing exactly where the helicopters had landed and whether any troops had alighted. Extractions were mostly done in a similar manner, after we had been able to secure an area for the helicopters to touch down.

Insertion by APCs, although noisy, was used as a tactic to confuse the enemy. The platoon would be inside the APCs and out of sight, with some other troops or some of our own who were not being deployed carried openly on top of the vehicles to give the impression that it was just a routine APC patrol with some infantry protection. At a predetermined alighting spot in a well concealed area, while the APCs were still moving, keeping their engine revolutions high, the loading ramps would slowly be lowered while still moving; the patrol would quickly alight without any changes to the sounds and movements of the APCs. This was a very successful insertion tactic from fire support bases, where the enemy thought these were the regular APC-mounted clearing patrols providing security to the fire support base. Because they saw soldiers on top of the carriers going out and going back, they were unaware we had dismounted while on the move.

While patrolling, no one spoke aloud and hand signals were used for communicating. When in close proximity to another man, whispers were used. This was the standard form of communications for all Australian platoons on operations and was very effective, both for security and in keeping everyone informed at all times. Breakfast was light, mostly a brew with a biscuit, lunch was eaten cold with water, and a late afternoon meal was a good, morale-boosting cook up. Although cooking created smells, it didn't matter much because we always moved away to another area just on last light.

Whether we were operating as a platoon or as small patrols, in any contact with the enemy we could call for artillery to drop initial rounds onto ground near the enemy's position from where the fire could be adjusted onto the enemy or his likely withdrawal routes. This could be executed in about five minutes because wherever we were, there was always an artillery battery allotted in direct support (DS) which meant that its fire was guaranteed to the battalion. Working in isolation, with perhaps a backup force being some two to three hours away, the possibility of encountering a larger, well-equipped enemy force was a reality. If such a situation occurred, having artillery support immediately available, and able to be quickly adjusted to suit the circumstances, was a tactical advantage and huge morale booster.

Both Australian and New Zealand artillery batteries were marvellous in these DS roles. Also readily available were the heavier guns of our US allies, whose 155 mm, 175 mm and 8 inch batteries could be called on through the battalion's DS battery commander. He was always located with BHQ and, when we requested them, these fire support assets came on line quickly.

Naval gunfire was used in one incident to silence an enemy mortar which was creating havoc in a major enemy attack on the defended ARVN village of Lo Gom, located east of the Long Hai hills near the larger coastal village of Lang Phuoc Hai. The Reconnaissance Platoon, in an ambush position some 5,000 metres away, had identified the mortar position and engaged it with Australian and US artillery without success. 1 ATF HQ, through C Company's artillery forward observer, offered US naval gunfire support from a vessel cruising on station in the South China Sea. Although we were about 5 kilometres from the target, the naval 5 inch shells sounded like freight trains passing our ambush position. The enemy mortar was silenced very effectively.

Like the rifle companies we also had access to gunships, airstrikes, flare ships, 'Puff the Magic Dragon' (Dakota C47 cargo aircraft using the call sign *Spooky* and armed with several multi-barrelled machine guns with very high cyclic rates of fire), and *Dustoff* helicopters. I cannot speak highly enough of our operations team at BHQ and the rifle company commanders for the incredible support they provided us when in trouble. Their unfailing support gave us the confidence and encouragement to be more enterprising and daring, knowing when the 'proverbial' hit the fan, the battalion would look after us.

We soon noticed that many of us had started to develop a sixth sense. There was often a feeling of something being not quite right where the hair, for whatever reason, stood up at the back of the neck and, in many cases, these feelings proved to be correct. In situations of danger, isolation and highly elevated alertness with constant adrenaline rushes, survival instincts seemed to kick in, like some form of human radar, to warn of danger or hint that something wasn't quite right.

Another skill we developed was tracking. The entire platoon acquired this ability; some were better than others. Signs which others might not notice were quickly picked up and told a story – how many people had passed, how long ago, enemy or villager, what size loads were they

carrying, running or walking, travelling in which direction? These were all very important bits of information passed back for analysis. Dogs are great for detection and tracking, but they can't make assumptions or draw conclusions!

Although we were getting very good at our game and were used extensively by the battalion, having only a day or two in base every month, we had to recognise any signs of burnout. When we were in base we would play hard. What was wonderful when coming back into base was to be met by the CO and the Salvation Army's John Bentley, with a kind word from the CO and a hot cup of tea from John the 'Salvo'; although most of the blokes were looking forward to something a bit cooler. The CO knew all my NCOs and soldiers by name and nickname and greeted them in that way, which for us was quite special. They thought the world of 'Wingy' as the diggers affectionately called the CO, knowing how much he cared and what he stood for.

Our other tasks included assisting in the training of the ARVN Regional Force NCOs with Captain George Mansford at Binh Ba, leading the 5 RAR rifle companies into cordon positions on village cordon and search operations, surveillance cover for the rifle companies during minefield construction, riding on the splash boards of APCs while clearing roads, reinforcing D Company on the Horseshoe feature, and frequent patrolling and ambushing tasks throughout a large patch of jungle known as The Long Green. The lighter moments of the platoon and how this group of different personalities, backgrounds and experience became such a close-knit family are worthy of mention. When in base, where alcohol was permitted, we all defused, using the time-honoured Australian cure-all of a relaxing drink with close mates. After a quick shower and getting rid of a month's dirt I would go up to be debriefed by Captain Bob O'Neill, our intelligence officer, or sometimes the CO or operations officer. I would usually go to the diggers' boozer where my blokes had already started with a beer or two and have a very informal chat with them about the operation. What did we do well and not so well, and what we could do better in the future? Sometimes the best ideas and innovations come from an unlikely quarter and my diggers and NCOs were not backward in coming forward with a couple of beers under their belt. The ideas and suggestions were not all good but they were being heard; and that was vitally important to them. Once the boozer had closed we moved to my tent and the conversations would continue until the early hours of the

morning. No matter how loosened the tongues became there was never a harsh word or disagreement and, 50 years later, those who have not passed away keep in touch.

The day following an operation or task was always spent getting ready for the next time we were to leave the base. In preparation, before attending the battalion Orders Group to receive my orders, I would warn out the platoon to attend a later briefing and platoon Orders Group at the back of my tent where I would use a terrain mud map to assist me in giving orders. I wanted every member of the platoon to know as much as I did by providing a good overview of the enemy situation, the terrain and area where we were going to be operating. I did this by giving them a description of our mission, how I saw it developing and where we fitted into the battalion's overall scheme before assigning tasks to my patrol commanders. At the end of my briefing and orders, the patrol commanders went away with their patrols to conduct their own Orders Group, giving the detailed instructions on how each man in their patrol was to participate in the platoon's part in the operation. I did it this way to personally pass on as much information as I could to every soldier, and to encourage interaction and input from them. Our lives depended on each other and I wanted them to understand this reality and for each of them to foster it. I would say to the platoon that if anyone was hit we would aim to get him out and on his way to hospital in Vung Tau within 30 minutes. Whatever we were doing, our primary objective would instantly become getting our man out, the operation or patrol objectives becoming secondary. Many of my ex-soldiers at reunions have told me that this policy really resonated with them because they knew they would never be abandoned. The positive effect this had on platoon morale cannot be overstated.

To gain information we would spend time in Vietnamese villages mixing with the villagers, particularly with the children. For these tasks I had the services of an interpreter who did a terrific job for us in engaging with the locals. This was as much a hearts and minds exercise as an information-seeking operation, and although we never really knew who was friend or foe, I felt it best in these circumstances to look for the good, not the bad, and respect the villagers' customs, culture and hospitality. At times, the latter was unbelievable. A poor village chief's family offering you a Vietnamese delicacy of roasted pigs ears with '*nuoc mam*', a very pungent fermented fish sauce laced with sliced bullet chillies. With a swig or two of rice whisky this was not hard to accept, but when the chief was getting into his '*mot, hai, ba, yo*' mood (one, two, three, down!), it was time to bid

farewell. After all, we were on duty and I needed to debrief our interpreter and others in the platoon about what they had observed or heard. These things would not have been possible without the platoon being friendly and respectful of women and children. The lives of kids in the midst of a dirty war about which they understood little would have been made a lot worse if we, the foreign '*Uc Dai Loi* round-eyes' (Australian Caucasians), treated them badly. The Reconnaissance Platoon had a lot to do with locals and always treated them with compassion and respect.

The antics and sense of the ridiculous of everyone in the platoon were an immensely important relief valve. Some might say this bordered on being immature and irresponsible, and today I might agree, but at the time these lighter moments are what kept us sane. We worked hard and just loved each other's company and all that it provided during a dangerous period in our lives. By the end of our tour we all had that blank 'thousand-yard stare' and, although we had become very good at what we were doing, we were mentally exhausted. The intensity, anxiety, mental concentration and enemy contacts were telling; and the relief when we all boarded HMAS *Sydney* for our trip home was not only felt, it could be seen.

It's very difficult to touch on everything that the platoon went through from start to finish. The unique and gifted people with whom I served and who contributed enormously to our success made the platoon and its experiences very special to me. I was honoured to select, establish and lead a specialised infantry reconnaissance platoon and was humbled to have the privilege of leading an outstanding group of individuals who became brothers for life. In Vietnam they were ordinary young men doing extraordinary things. More than that cannot be asked.

Today, when I am asked to speak or give a presentation to a battalion's reconnaissance platoon or to the Advanced Reconnaissance Course at the Infantry Centre, I look with great pride at the young men who have decided to take on this role knowing we, of the first infantry battalion reconnaissance platoon, spawned a legacy which is being kept alive and built upon by the magnificent young soldiers who are serving today.

Editors' conclusion

The availability of the Anti-Tank Platoon's members as a basis for manning, equipping and training a desirable alternative capability was fortuitous. In the early days of 1 ATF in Phuoc Tuy Province, 3 SAS Squadron members were heavily committed to building up their knowledge of a new operational environment and honing their highly specialised tactics and techniques to suit any unfamiliar conditions which confronted them. Quite properly, they were not employed on reconnaissance tasks that were within the infantry battalions' capabilities. For a battalion CO to detach a platoon from a rifle company to undertake specific missions meant reducing the capability and flexibility of that company, which restricted its employability. In 5 RAR, having available an organic component which was selectively manned, equipped and trained for intelligence missions meant that the CO could separately task it for reconnaissance, surveillance, selective ambushing or civic action tasks without cannibalising one of his four manoeuvre companies. This was a great advantage. It made a huge difference to the amount of accurate short-term intelligence information available to the battalion, for which our intelligence officer was extremely grateful.

The Reconnaissance Platoon was a very successful development but, surprisingly, it was not followed up by the battalions which came after 5 RAR in Vietnam. Some retained the designated Anti-Tank Platoon and employed it as an extra rifle platoon, as 5 RAR had done initially. In others it was replaced by a Tracker Platoon which employed war dogs to detect enemy presence and to follow up their withdrawing elements. Perhaps the reconnaissance platoon idea required a particular combination of perceptive, adaptable people who could work well together, from CO to riflemen, in order for it to become feasible.

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