17

CONCLUSION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A 5 RAR APPROACH

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By November 1966, 5th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR), had developed its own approach to the conflict and the battalion's role in it. We could see that the Viet Cong, while powerful, did not yet fully control the civil population of South Vietnam: it was for the people's support that the war was being waged by both sides. Despite the importance of the psychological battle for hearts and minds, military operations were still critical. The Viet Minh had achieved success against the French by meeting them in major engagements such as the battles in the highlands of 1951–53, and at Dien Bien Phu in the north in 1953–54. While the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong did not have forces powerful enough to defeat the Americans in the Tet Offensive in 1968, they soon realised that the American position depended on the willingness of the American people to keep their forces engaged and well supplied with men and materiel. Eventually this realisation became the key to the North Vietnamese successful strategy of protracting the war until well into the 1970s, by which time they had well and truly undermined American public willingness to continue the conflict.

While we, and particularly our commanding officer John Warr, were aware of the sensitivity of Australian public and political opinion to casualties, our soldiers continued to operate with high morale and plenty of spirit, despite the significant risks of losses that they faced. There was no way of

wholly avoiding these risks. However, the dangers could be managed by being on the alert ourselves and clearly able to win engagements with the Viet Cong, despite our relatively small forces. Had the Viet Cong come to believe that we were averse to fighting, or unable to fight well, they would have constantly harassed us. Our main objective in tactical engagements was to avoid having the battalion, or even a company, cut to ribbons. Offensive action, such as our operations in the Nui Thi Vai hills, had an important role to play. But we had to keep casualties within strict limits to remain effective over the long haul in this kind of war.

To this end, the battalion was helped greatly by the quality and training levels of our soldiers. It was gratifying to see how quickly and effectively our national servicemen had made the transition from their civilian occupations to become effective infantrymen over a period of less than a year. In February 1966, while watching some of our men shoot on a field firing range near our barracks at Holsworthy in western Sydney, I remarked to our company sergeant major, John Bates, on the skill of their shooting. He replied, 'Just wait until they are on the two-way range. In Vietnam, the target fires back at you!' It was a salutary thought and I never forgot it. Hence, I was profoundly relieved at seeing how quickly and effectively our soldiers swung into action from the outset in May 1966 when the Viet Cong first opened fire on them. Men who a year previously had been automechanics, hairdressers, clerks and shop assistants had become very proficient infantry soldiers. They showed that they could hold their own with confidence, and they achieved a high rate of success against experienced guerrillas, fighting on their own soil and not willing to give way.

During 1966–67 we worked and fought hard, hoping that our actions would contribute in the long term to a successful outcome to the war. For those who followed us, that prospect changed after the Tet Offensive of 1968. Thereafter, public confidence in eventual victory progressively declined, as it became apparent that the Americans, and hence the South Vietnamese, were not going to prevail. The Royal Australian Regiment battalions who followed us ruminated little on such matters. In the immutable tradition of their forebears they applied their Regiment's motto, 'duty first', in fine spirit until the day in 1972 when the last RAR company was withdrawn. However, this is not a book about our postwar experience and concerns. Suffice to say that after our return to Australia, the problem of readjustment in a world which did not value our efforts and sacrifices in Vietnam was formidable for all of us. However, it has had the long-term effect of promoting unity and comradeship among former 5 RAR members.

There was no feeling within 5 RAR in 1966–67 that we were going to have an easy year. We were aware of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese superiority in numbers, and their long, successful record in warfare since 1946. They had a capacity to do us real harm in ambushes and raids, and by continually laying mines and setting booby traps in areas through which we had to move. They also fought well in defence of their own forward positions and base camps. They had their own political system which was partially in effect in much of Phuoc Tuy at the time of our arrival. They had access to local people who could provide reinforcements, food, money and intelligence when called upon to do so. They knew our movements because their supporters saw us coming to and going from Nui Dat and other places that we held, especially when we used helicopters or surface vehicles.

The one form of movement that our enemies could not always detect was when we went on foot, especially during hours of darkness. So we became accustomed to peering into the darkness, operating off tracks and footpaths, or through jungle and rubber plantations, moving our feet slowly and carefully, preventing metal items of equipment from clanging, and speaking to each other in whispers or by hand signal when there was some light. Our soldiers had to get used to operating without much sleep at night, and to the tensions which built up naturally as we strove to be stealthy. We never could be entirely sure that there was not an armed enemy crouching in the darkness behind the base of a tree or behind a rock, lining us up in his weapon sights or preparing to detonate a mine or bomb. The Viet Cong soon learned that we could be equally or more adept at their tactics. Our companies set ambushes and sent out clearing patrols around their positions at every morning and evening stand-to. Moving silently at night became a very familiar experience to most 5 RAR soldiers.

Other challenges our men had to contend with were fatigue, the weather and shortages in some important items of weaponry and equipment. When we were out on operations, a normal carrying load was around 30 kilograms. This included a lightweight, foldable shelter, water, food for up to five days, a weapon, claymore mines for ambushing, grenades and, heaviest of all, ammunition both for one's own weapon and for the heavy consumers such as our general purpose machine guns. Often there were additional heavy items to be portered such as bombs for our mortars. Patrols and platoons had to carry radios (for tactical communications, not entertainment) and their heavy batteries to be shared around whatever

group needed them. The prevailing heat and humidity caused copious sweating, and the pressure of pack straps gave us sore shoulders as a constant accompaniment to patrolling.

Our infantrymen had to be young and fit to cope with these pressures, and they stood the test well. Commanders had to take all these factors into account and seek to mitigate them by practical measures such as establishing a pack-dump where soldiers' heaviest loads could be kept secure while their owners moved to get to grips with the enemy. For our first few months in Phuoc Tuy we had to contend with the wet season, when on most afternoons, and frequently at night, we were subjected to heavy rain. Had the weather been cold, the rain would have been a health hazard, but in the warmth of the tropics it was more of an inconvenience than a danger. The climate did, however, lead to the added problem of skin complaints of various kinds, creating a major challenge for Tony White and his medical team in keeping us all fit for operations.

While learning to live with these various problems and pressures, we felt a special confidence in the leadership of John Warr. I shall not repeat what has been conveyed in Chapter 16, but simply observe that, having studied battalion commanders of the wars of the 20th century, he is in the upper bracket. By the time that he had appointed me to work with him directly as intelligence officer, I knew that he was thinking hard about how to use our capacities most effectively throughout the following nine months. In November 1966, when the pressure of operating in the hills had eased, John gave me the task of making a detailed analysis of the results of all our operations in Vietnam to that date. He particularly wanted a balance of results – of gains versus costs. The gains were to be measured in terms of our effectiveness in weakening the Viet Cong, while the costs were to be assessed in terms of our own casualties and time taken to achieve results.

My analysis first focused on eight conventional operations, in which we were opposing Viet Cong main force and provincial mobile units. We had suffered six killed and 31 wounded, while the Viet Cong had lost 33 killed, an unknown number of wounded and two captured. The analysis then moved to our five cordon and search operations, in which we had suffered one killed in action and none wounded, while the Viet Cong had lost 16 killed, 47 captured and 112 suspects apprehended. Clearly, the cordon and search method was the more effective way of operating. This conclusion was reinforced when the amount of time that had been spent on operations was taken into account. We could spend days patrolling in the jungle with only occasional contact with the enemy, whereas in a well-planned and prepared

cordon and search operation, the numbers of Viet Cong apprehended per day of operational time were several times greater. And, more importantly, the weakening of Viet Cong political authority in the villages that we searched and then developed friendly contact with was far greater than would have been achieved by battles deep in the jungle between opposing forces.

After discussion with Max Carroll, Peter Isaacs and myself, John put his thoughts onto paper, and proceeded to develop them for publication in the *Australian Army Journal* when we returned to Australia. It appeared in No. 222 of the *Journal*, published in November 1967, under the title 'Cordon and Search Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province'. It is included in this volume as Appendix C. The article was essentially an argument for greater use of these operations, based on a careful appraisal of all the various types of operations that we had undertaken. John stressed the point that the essential nature of the war was the competition to win the lasting support of the Vietnamese civilian population. Therefore, it was of paramount importance to help the local people and not to add to their burdens by destroying what little they had by way of houses and means of food production. John much preferred to offer help with activities such as the building of dispensaries and school rooms, and to provide support for visits to the villages by our medical specialists. Our regimental medical officer, Tony White, had a very full agenda in looking after the health of some 800 young Australians and then trying to give medical assistance to the local population, many of whom had rarely seen a doctor in their lifetimes.

John's article received a wide circulation, not only though the Australian Army, but also through other armies who exchanged their journals with us, especially the Americans, the British, the Canadians, the Irish and the New Zealanders. As well as identifying 5 RAR with a preferred modus operandi, he raised our army's reputation for taking a thoughtful, committed approach to a difficult set of military problems. It was very fitting that his contribution to the improvement of methods of counter-insurgency was recognised by his receipt of the Distinguished Service Order. His citation referred particularly to his development of the cordon and search method:

> The techniques for these later operations were developed so successfully by Lieutenant Colonel Warr that they have been accepted as standard procedures in the First Australian Task Force.[1]

1 See 5th Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment Association website, *Citation accompanying the award of the Distinguished Service Order to Lt-Col. Warr*, www.5rar.asn.au/history/cite_warr.htm.

In a field where it is hard to be original, he fostered a fresh approach which was both more effective as a means of limiting the influence of the Viet Cong and more economical in terms of the casualties suffered by our own soldiers. It also demonstrated to villagers that Australians were firm, fair and determined in rooting out our enemy, and careful of the local people's welfare and property in doing so.

When I became intelligence officer John also appointed me to be the battalion's civil affairs officer. The two jobs went well together because I could often gather some useful intelligence while visiting a village for civil affairs purposes, and I could give better advice on the civil affairs program based on what I had learned through intelligence gathering and analysis. The first stage in establishing a civil affairs program was to gain the trust and cooperation of the villagers. This took time, but John gave it high priority. Individual platoons, especially the Anti-Tank Platoon under Mick Deak (von Berg), were stationed in villages for several days at a time. There were some villages where the Viet Cong influence was high, and others where government policies had not helped them as much as they might have. But there were yet others where the people were keen to make friendly contact with us, and accept assistance, offering information on local Viet Cong activities in return. Mick's platoon combined the essential skills required for counter-insurgency because they had much more to offer than simply intruding on the villagers and applying restrictions to their way of life.

In conducting cordon and search operations, the local police sometimes caused problems for us. We were dependent on them doing their job of identifying known Viet Cong supporters fairly and accurately, and we had to face the possibilities that justice could be dispensed on an arbitrary basis, or sometimes abused to settle old scores. We tried to limit these problems by following up with visits to those who had been arrested, to see how they were being treated and what was happening to them in terms of legal process. The fact that local officials knew that we would take an interest in whatever action followed our apprehension of a Viet Cong suspect made a difference to the way they were treated, but it was far from perfect in ensuring that justice was meted out evenly to everyone.

The Viet Cong, for their part, had to accept that in late 1966 they lost substantial control over western Phuoc Tuy, thereby enabling South Vietnamese and allied forces to pass freely between Vung Tau, Ba Ria and the base complexes around Bien Hoa. The Viet Cong could still take

offensive action by raiding villages and South Vietnamese military posts along Route 15, but they could not stay in the area for any lengthy period. Government and allied forces, especially the 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF), were now able to respond quickly and powerfully. The Viet Cong therefore had to turn their attention elsewhere in the province to be able to strike effectively, and at a reasonable cost in terms of their own lives and resources.

From late 1966, the Viet Cong focused on strengthening their presence in the eastern part of Phuoc Tuy, and this resulted in an increasing number of Australian operations there, especially in the Long Hai Hills in the south-eastern corner. The Viet Cong had positions of real strength in this part of the province, and they remained able tacticians. We suffered nine deaths in a 19-day period in February and early March 1967, chiefly due to mines and booby traps. By the time we had completed our operational tour in Vietnam on 26 April, the Viet Cong had lost military control in central and western Phuoc Tuy, but they had retained and probably increased control in the east. Our replacement battalion, 7 RAR, and its successors still had formidable challenges ahead of them, both in Phuoc Tuy and beyond, as the Americans drew more on our resources to resist a growing North Vietnamese and Viet Cong military presence in the crucially important area east of Bien Hoa and Saigon.

The Viet Cong retained and reconstructed their political network in the central part of Phuoc Tuy. It may not have been as strong as it had been before we began our cordon and search operations, but nonetheless it remained a formidable asset to them. In February and March 1968, when the Tet Offensive burst into the media headlines around the world, it became obvious that the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese had retained a substantial degree of control in South Vietnam, and it would take a major and prolonged effort to break that grip. Public opinion in the United States and other allied countries turned against making this kind of commitment, and so the war ground on for seven more years before ending in defeat for the United States and its allies.

One of the key challenges of the war was the development of smooth and effective inter-allied relations. For us in Phuoc Tuy, that meant essentially our cooperation with the Americans and the South Vietnamese Army. Although other nations were taking part in the conflict, we had little to do with the South Koreans, Filipinos and Thais. We also worked closely with the New Zealand gunners, but we never felt that they were foreigners.

The Americans were our closest partners from the day of our arrival. As Max Carroll and Peter Isaacs have related, they accepted us as valued allies and immediately invited some of our key people to directly observe their operations. They helped us to settle in and gave us a quick feel for what it was like to work in the Vietnamese environment. They supported us closely with helicopters and ground attack aircraft when we needed them. They based heavy artillery elements right alongside us at Nui Dat. They were particularly good to work with because they respected our national sovereignty. Occasionally, when supporting their operations, we were placed under their command, but they did not give us unusually dangerous or difficult missions. Nor did they relegate us to a safe corner because they did not think we could handle the more challenging assignments. It was a good working relationship, based on close cooperation and mutual respect formed in the two World Wars and the Korean War.

During our first few months in Vietnam, and before our supply system was functioning properly, the Americans were very helpful in meeting some of our needs. Soon various members of our battalion, from the second in command downwards, knew where the main American stores in our vicinity were located, and they bargained and traded for badly needed items ranging from tents and furniture to heavy machine guns. Another area in which the Americans were willing to be particularly helpful was that of intelligence cooperation. Given their excellent signals interception capability, we always felt confident that if the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese were planning a major operation against us, such as their attack at Long Tan, we would receive warning from the Americans. However, the major American headquarters, such as that of II Field Force Vietnam (II FFV) near Bien Hoa, were vast and the routine passage of intelligence down to our level could be slow. Fortunately, American common sense enabled less formal ways of communicating to develop, enabling me to have some very fruitful visits to II FFV for direct personal briefing on the latest intelligence available. As Max Carroll has said, generally we found the Americans to be good working partners and they had our respect. We did not always agree with their methods. There was a need, we felt, for a little more understanding of the fragility of Vietnamese rural communities. But our allies were learning as they went along, as we also had to do in different fields.

Our contact with the armed forces of South Vietnam was not as close as it was with the Americans. The principal South Vietnamese forces in Phuoc Tuy were the Regional Force and Popular Force companies. They were scattered widely but thinly across the province. They varied considerably in effectiveness. They sometimes had to fend off strong Viet Cong attacks on their remote compounds, and the outcomes of such clashes showed that some of the South Vietnamese were brave and would fight hard. But sometimes we also saw that such performance by the South Vietnamese could not be relied on, and we suspected that there was sometimes outright collusion between the two opposing sides. This possibility gave us a security problem in that we had to judge very carefully how far we disclosed our own intentions to South Vietnamese military personnel, and how fully we shared our intelligence information with them. Similarly, we had to be careful about how much credence we gave their reports on their own and Viet Cong activities, especially in the northern and eastern parts of Phuoc Tuy.

This is not to say that we did not receive any worthwhile help from the South Vietnamese military or their local civilian administration. Our working relations with them, which began in the area around Binh Ba and Duc My, developed considerably in following months while we were securing the area around Route 15. Nonetheless, the South Vietnamese military effectiveness in Phuoc Tuy was on the low side, and for most of the operations described in this book, we did not factor the Army of the Republic of Vietnam into our planning as a major asset.

Just as the South Vietnamese had problems in maintaining morale and commitment among their soldiers, so also did the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese Chieu Hoi (or returnee) program encouraged some of their enemies to come forward and surrender in return for cash, resettlement opportunities and, hopefully, ending up on the winning side in the war. This program caused the Viet Cong leaders real problems. As they admitted themselves, in the period from January to October 1966 they lost 66 cadre personnel and soldiers to the Chieu Hoi program in Phuoc Tuy. The actual number of returnees was probably greater. However, this program was badly resourced and often given low priority by the South Vietnamese authorities.

Another scheme developed by the South Vietnamese Government was the Revolutionary Development Cadre Program. These cadres were trained groups of young men who were sent out to help individual villages with development and local defence projects. We called them the 'Rev Devvers' and often they appeared to us as the gilded youth of Saigon, sent out on relatively safe assignments to the countryside for periods of a few weeks at a time. Some of them appeared on their own smart motorcycles, with guitars slung across their shoulders. During 1966 they were not so noticeable, although we did work with them occasionally. On one fence-building project, when the Rev Devvers were not making rapid progress, we were able to have a platoon of Viet Cong returnees sent in to help. The comparison between the effectiveness of the two groups was not a bad indicator of the final result of the war!

During the period focused on in this book, September–November 1966, we were too busy up in the hills and along Route 15 to have had much contact with these activities of the South Vietnamese. We needed, however, to keep them in mind because they did show that the Saigon government recognised the political nature of the war. But for us on Nui Thi Vai and the Nui Dinh hills, the war still posed strong military demands because that was the way in which the Viet Cong had come to control western Phuoc Tuy. We had to clear the enemy off the dominating high ground or they could frustrate everything we attempted.

Once the high ground had been taken and the Viet Cong driven away, we had some resources free with which to establish a friendly and helpful presence in and around the villages. It was a good opportunity to enjoy some more relaxed operations in which we were not carrying 30-kilogram loads several hundred feet up steep slopes, while under fire from enemy in well-chosen positions. Our platoons sometimes deployed alongside several of the larger villages. Their inhabitants were friendly and seemed good-humoured towards us, and our soldiers reciprocated. We set about getting to know those in the leading positions in the villages, explaining what we were trying to do, asking how we could help them and gaining useful information in return.

We could not take for granted that the Viet Cong would stay away from the high ground. Reconnaissance and fighting patrols remained necessary, but they were lighter operations than the ones we had mounted to gain control of the heights. The continuing process of maintaining surveillance over the dominant ground was greatly helped by 3 SAS Squadron's regular patrol operations in the province's hill complexes.

We also had to think about the low ground between the hills and the Rung Sat, the extensive area of mangroves to the west and south-west of Phuoc Tuy, which the Viet Cong used to conceal their supply routes along which equipment, weapons, ammunition and other useful items were brought into the area east of Bien Hoa and south of War Zone D. In November 1966, we followed Operation Queanbeyan with two further operations in this area: Operation Yass, which was a cordon and search of the village of Phuoc Hoa; and Operation Hayman to clear the Viet Cong off Long Son Island. This sweep concluded a very intense period of 37 days of operations which changed the way in which Phuoc Tuy was shared between the Government of South Vietnam and the Viet Cong. Route 15 was now open as a secure road for reinforcements and supplies to use from Vung Tau to the crucial Saigon–Bien Hoa area. The important villages of western Phuoc Tuy were now able to receive medical and dental assistance, more schoolrooms and other community facilities, and to know thereby that their welfare was one of our major concerns.

This was a major transformation. The effectiveness of our drive against the Viet Cong was recognised by the awards of several decorations to 5 RAR members. These are listed in Appendix A. All of us had learned a lot about the complexities of counter-insurgency warfare. Given the changes that have taken place in warfare and conflict during the following 50 years, the year that we spent in Phuoc Tuy in 1966–67 gave us all a very relevant education, and a set of practical insights which still enlighten the Australian Army's operational methods.

Readers may decide whether and to what extent the lessons that we learned in Phuoc Tuy are relevant to the present and future problems of national and international security. Perhaps most will agree that Australia needs to take preparation for international military commitments much more seriously in times of peace than we have done in the past. In the cases of the two World Wars it took the best part of two years to raise, train and equip our forces for service abroad. We sent them off in less time than that, but they had to learn on the battlefield. Similarly, in the Korean War we were not able to field a second battalion of troops until mid-1952, two years after the war had begun, despite having a large number of veterans of the Second World War on which to draw. To raise a force of two battalions for service in Vietnam, Australia had to introduce a very controversial national service scheme in 1965. It was not until late 1967 that a third battalion could be provided to make up a full, brigade-sized force. And regarding essential equipment, as Stan Maizey has stated in

Chapter 3, the two battalions sent to Vietnam in 1966 went without some of their key items, and we had to beg or borrow what we needed from our allies in the field.

Numbers of troops available were not the only manpower problem confronting 1 ATF. To fight wars successfully, much depends on the quality of tactical leadership available on the battlefield. Company commanders and platoon commanders do not grow on trees. The latter take about a year to train properly, and company commanders take much longer. Shortage of trained company commanders is probably the key bottleneck in mobilising our army for operations. Similarly, non-commissioned officers take a year to train at the junior levels, and several years at the most senior. Given the normal size of Australia's army in time of peace, these are powerful limitations on our ability to raise and deploy other than token forces for service with allies. One can imagine the reaction of a long-term major ally, upon whose power our national security was predicated, being told by a present or future Australian prime minister, 'Sorry, one battalion is all we can field initially; 12 months later we can make it two battalions and after another year we can add a third'. This was the prevailing scenario when an expanded Australian Army involvement in Vietnam was implemented in 1965. Starting in 1945, 20 years of governmental lip service to military defence was its progenitor.

This history of the operations of a single Australian battalion in the Vietnam War offers food for further thought on how we might fight another war, either abroad or in Australia, and how we ought to approach this possibility in terms of anticipation, preparation, training, operational methods and equipment. This book also stands as a memorial to the service of several hundred young Australians, volunteers and national servicemen, who, in 5 RAR, showed the bravery and commitment to have done as well as they did in Vietnam. They established a strong mateship in battle which has endured over the past 54 years. We are not about to forget those who paid with their lives, or endured severe incapacity, as a result of their service in Vietnam! Nor shall we forget the love and support of our wives, families, fiancées and other close friends during our year in Vietnam. It was a very big team effort!

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