INTRODUCTION: THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

Robert O'Neill

This book focuses on a series of operations carried out by the 5th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR), during the Vietnam War in 1966. They were challenging and keenly fought by both sides. They were also productive because we developed careful new methods – hence the title of this book, *Vietnam Vanguard*. These operations had the strategic purpose of making a major road and its surrounding countryside secure for allied troop and supply movements. The Viet Cong had exerted control over this region, western Phuoc Tuy Province, for many years.

The country north of the road was mountainous, and several villages were situated along the road itself. It was a real test of our abilities to drive the Viet Cong off the mountains while avoiding damage to the villages and loss of life to the local people. In April and May 1966, some 800 young Australians arrived in South Vietnam for a year of war service. I was one of them, a captain, then second in command of B Company of 5 RAR. Half of the battalion were national servicemen, conscripted by the government. The other half was made up of regulars who, for the most part, were pleased to be doing the job that they had enlisted for – sustaining the defence of our nation. I think it is fair to say that we all felt that Australia was in greater peril than it actually was at that time. We certainly applied our best efforts, and we all put our lives on the line.

We were a year or two in advance of the wave of dissent which drove Australian public opinion on the war. All members of 5 RAR thought that we had an important job to do, and we pressed ahead with it. We were not riven by internal debates over the morality of the whole undertaking. Those debates impacted on us all once we returned to Australia, but more in the context of our civil social life than our work in the army or our

comradeship with former members of our battalion once they had been discharged. Ex-members of 5 RAR have remained reasonably united in believing that what we did in Vietnam was honourable. Had the wider war gone successfully for the South Vietnamese Government and the United States, good would have come out of our actions in 1966–67. But that was not the case, and we have all had to struggle with the fact that we fought in a war which was ultimately very unpopular and largely disowned by the Australian people, and many of our national governments since the early 1970s.

Because of the war's unpopularity, public interest in what Australian servicemen and servicewomen did in Vietnam has been low, and focused largely on a few short, spectacular events such as the battles of Long Tan, Binh Ba and Fire Support Bases Balmoral and Coral. While these were well-fought, successful actions by Australian soldiers, they were of brief duration and did not typify the careful, continuing tussle which went on throughout Phuoc Tuy Province, the Australian area of responsibility, for over five years. This contest, for control of territory and for Vietnamese public support, was conducted by both sides, on a continuous basis. This book attempts to shed light on an Australian battalion's engagement in that kind of war, over a period of several months, to give Australian readers who were not directly involved in the war a fuller understanding of what we did, why we did it and what we felt about all that we had to endure.

That this book is being published in 2020, 54 years after the events it describes, is due largely to the recent occurrence of the 50th anniversaries of these events. From mid-2016 onwards I found myself receiving many letters, personal accounts and diary entries from former 5 RAR members, asking me to check them for accuracy. This awoke in me a feeling of regret that we did not already have all this material available in some enduring and publicly accessible form. I had written a book on the battalion's year in Vietnam, 1966–67, *Vietnam Task*, while out on operations or back at our Nui Dat base while we were in Vietnam. However, it was relatively brief, covering our year in 256 pages; it was written over 50 years ago and it was the work of a single author (assisted by the editorial skills of his wife). The interesting nature of the evidence from the 1960s that I was reading 50 years later made me think that we ought to publish it soon. There was clearly a strong desire on the parts of surviving ex-5 RAR members to have their memories restocked with fuller, up-to-date descriptions of what we had been doing for that year in Vietnam.

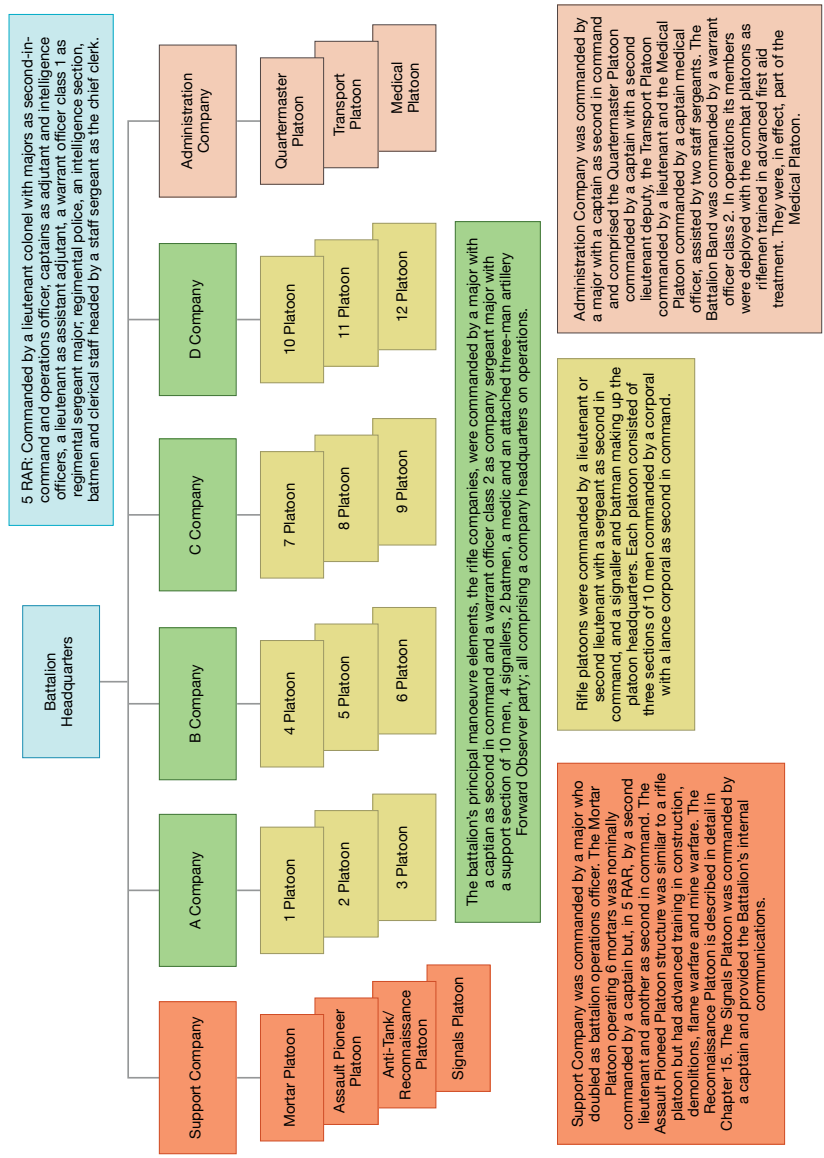

Figure 1: 5 RAR in Vietnam, 1966.

Source: Diagram designed and produced by Ron Boxall.

A second factor stimulated me further in this direction: the accuracy and scope of the memories of many of those who had been showing me material were quite remarkable. I soon came to believe that out of the surviving group of 5 RAR veterans, we could put together an interesting book, with chapters written by a team of some 30 authors. I wanted this team to include people who had held ranks from private to major, and others who, while not being members of the battalion, played vital roles in our operations, especially the gunners who supported us in heavy actions, and the helicopter pilots who had to take great risks in evacuating our wounded and supplying us in action. I was fortunate in being able to enlist the cooperation of Captain (later Brigadier) Ron Boxall as co-editor. He has been very busy helping with selection of authors, decisions on what to include in the book and editing the contributions that the individual authors delivered to us. It has been a great pleasure for me to have worked again with Ron. We found that we were 'on net' over many issues of historical fact and editorial policy that could have caused problems in the production of the book.

The book has been structured and written with three sets of readers in mind: the Australian public, readers elsewhere and the surviving members of the battalion's first tour of duty in Vietnam. We have been fortunate in being able to select a fine team of contributors from the ranks of surviving members of 5 RAR, and of other units who worked directly with us during 1966–67. Having edited several other multi-authored books during my professional life, I feel particularly blessed by this team who have been willing to accept guidance from Ron, myself and other editorial assistants who have worked on the text with us.

I need to pay a special tribute to Major (later Colonel) Max Carroll, our operations officer for the first six months in Phuoc Tuy, and then a rifle company commander for the remaining six months. He undertook to write three central chapters on how our operations were conducted in the period May to October 1966, and he achieved this goal splendidly. There was nothing wrong with his memory at the age of 87, or with his judgement in selecting events to write on!

The first issue that we have focused on is the nature of the challenge that we faced in Vietnam. Was it primarily a military challenge or was it more of a social and political one? How did we prepare ourselves to face both over the course of the year ahead of us? Next we consider why we were sent to Phuoc Tuy Province rather than other parts of Vietnam.

Who made the choice and for what reasons? How far was it an American decision and how far was it driven by Australian preferences? It is a large and complex topic, deserving a chapter on its own and calling for an accomplished historian to tackle. From Australia's perspective, the chief person involved in the selection of Phuoc Tuy as our area of responsibility was General Sir John Wilton. His distinguished biographer, Professor (Colonel) David Horner, was the obvious person to invite to write such a chapter: Chapter 2.

So that readers could have a more detailed picture of what the Viet Cong had been doing in Phuoc Tuy before we arrived, we invited former director of military intelligence Brigadier Ernest Chamberlain to contribute Appendix D. Ernie not only spent many years focusing on the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese from an intelligence perspective, but also is a Vietnamese linguist and historian, and has translated and published several histories originally produced by the Viet Cong regiments and battalions that we faced when on operations.

Chapters 3 to 17, except Chapters 12 and 14, are all written by former 5 RAR members. Chapter 12 is the work of our supporting gunners of 103 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, led by Captain George Bindley. Captain Jim Campbell, Second Lieutenant Bob Askew and Second Lieutenant Bill Davies of 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight helped Captain Bob Supple with Chapter 14, on the challenges of flying helicopters into enemy fire in all types of terrain.

One point on which we all agree is that we were very lucky to have faced the challenges of being at war for a year under the outstanding leadership of John Warr. It has not been difficult to find several authors capable of throwing light on why he was such a good commanding officer. I am particularly grateful also to members of the Warr family, John's widow Shirley, and their three children Anne, Mark and Peter, for their contributions to the words and the thoughts behind Chapter 16. John's thoughts on making counter-insurgency more effective, written soon after our return to Australia in 1967, are set out in Appendix A, which is a republication of an article he contributed to the *Australian Army Journal*, No. 222, November 1967.

As I try to make clear in Chapters 5 and 17, the war in Vietnam was partly an intellectual struggle. In some ways it was a continuation of the frequently occurring nationalist, anti-colonialist conflicts of the mid-

20th century. Yet in one key aspect it was different: it was conducted by the insurgent side with public opinion on the opposing, potentially dominant, side as their main target. General Vo Nguyen Giap, the former North Vietnamese commander, had learned during the early 1950s to attack the resolve of the French Government by shaping French public opinion to believe that their army was suffering heavy losses without making appropriately compensating gains.

By 1967–68, when the North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front leaders were planning their decisive Tet Offensive of 1968, Giap had lost much of his power, being displaced by Communist Party Secretary-General Le Duan and his assistant Le Duc Tho. They decided to hit hard, regardless of the damage this policy would do to the North Vietnamese economy and the casualties that their forces would suffer. Giap, Ho Chi Minh and several other leaders did not want to intensify the war to this extent. They could see that much of their work of the 1950s and '60s would be placed at risk by the weight of American counter-attacks in response to a major Viet Cong and North Vietnamese offensive. The spectacle of so much chaos in South Vietnam, and the loss of control by the South Vietnamese Government and American forces were a great stimulus to the anti-war movement throughout Western countries. Political turmoil resulted, forcing US and allied governments to review their policies in Vietnam and open negotiations, which led to allied, including Australian, withdrawal in the early 1970s.

Of course, this was not all obvious in 1966–67, but John Warr could see that we were in an unusual kind of conflict, and that we needed to keep two things in mind. First, heavy casualties on our side would be very counter-productive because they would turn Australian public sentiment more firmly against the war. Second, we needed to foster support among the Vietnamese people in our area of operations if we were to have any prospect of enduring success. He gave me his thoughts, both on the details of current operations and on the larger strategic issues, when we talked together every day during the nine months for which I was his intelligence officer. As a battalion commander, he had limited freedom in which to plan his operations, but he was careful throughout our time in Vietnam to pay due regard to the needs of the local people, and to engage the Viet Cong in such a way that we had a good chance of success without losing Australian soldiers. Soon every officer on Battalion Headquarters and all his company commanders came to know and understand the way that John Warr thought, and the finely balanced path that he trod.

His personality, his mind and his evident concern for the welfare of his soldiers played a great role in keeping the battalion together and in good spirits for this very testing year.

A final author that I will mention is our regimental medical officer, Captain Tony White. We are fortunate to have a chapter in which he describes the tough challenges he repeatedly had to face when we were operating in the Nui Dinh hills and along Route 15. These few months were typical of Tony's entire year. Whenever casualties occurred, Tony would be involved in treating them. Usually he was not far from the spot where the injuries were suffered, but sometimes they occurred simultaneously in multiple places. Then the company medics would come into their own, but usually with guidance from Tony by radio. Tony's courage must be mentioned. Time after time he had to expose himself to danger, from snipers, from Viet Cong soldiers manning prepared defences, and from concealed mines and booby traps. I have several memories of him moving through minefields to reach badly wounded soldiers before they bled to death. We were all so glad to have him as our doctor, and that he has recorded his experiences at war in his 2011 book *Starlight: An Australian Army Doctor in Vietnam*.

This book focuses on our operations in western Phuoc Tuy, conducted between August and November 1966. This was a crucial period for 5 RAR, as we sought to put into practice what we had learned in our training in Australia. These lessons were polished up by application in our opening few months of operations, described by Max Carroll and Peter Isaacs in Chapter 4. In September we began a series of operations with an important strategic purpose: to regain the use of Route 15 and enable incoming American formations to move large numbers of men and quantities of materiel through to their intended bases in the Bien Hoa area. For the following three months we operated in mountainous terrain which had been used by the Viet Cong for several years. It was a period in which many members of 5 RAR distinguished themselves both in battle and in relating to the local Vietnamese people.

In inviting authors to contribute to the volume, we have tried to make a balance between those who were in command of the major aspects of our operations and those who were at the sharp end, carrying out their orders. We have 30 authors, ranging in rank from private to brigadier, to give us their differing perspectives on what we were doing. We are particularly glad to have among them nine officers and one non-

commissioned officer from other units who were supporting 5 RAR operations, particularly the gunners and helicopter pilots. We also welcome the contributions of key persons on Battalion Headquarters, especially our operations officer, Max Carroll, and our adjutant, Captain Peter Isaacs. Captain Ron Bade, second in command of A Company, also contributed a half-chapter. I have already referred to Captain Tony White's contribution. Parts of the book have been written by my co-editor Ron Boxall and myself. We are particularly grateful for the foreword to Major General Steve Gower, former director general of the Australian War Memorial, and in 1966 a captain, forward observation officer with 101 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, who took part in several 5 RAR operations.

The 5 RAR Association warmly embraced the proposal to publish this book, and I am grateful to the Executive Committee and members of the association for their support and cooperation, particularly for the help of the president, Colonel Roger Wainwright, and also of the president of the Royal Australian Regiment Association, Mick von Berg. Both of them were distinguished platoon commanders in 1966–67.

I hope that the readers of this book will come to have a fuller understanding of what we were doing in Vietnam in 1966–67. We have the several large volumes of the official history of Australia's part in the Vietnam War for comprehensive reference, but, as with our involvement in the two world wars, it is now time for the publication of shorter books on how individual battalions fought and what their members thought about their part in the Vietnam War. The epithet 'Lest we forget' applies not only to our memories of our fallen comrades but also to our memories of events as they occurred in Vietnam and the reasons for their being undertaken.

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.