PREFACE

Ron Boxall

Professor Robert O'Neill, the intelligence officer of the 5th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR) during its first tour of duty in South Vietnam in 1966–67, proposed this book. The battalion was the leading element of the 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) when it was inserted into Phuoc Tuy Province, the area which was to remain Australia's principal area of land operations for the next six years. His book, *Vietnam Task*, published in 1968, was the original firsthand account of an entire tour of operations by an Australian infantry battalion in Vietnam. It immediately became an important reference for those who were to follow 5 RAR. Some 50 years later, in retirement, he could see that there was more that should be told in detail about 5 RAR operations in the western mountains of Phuoc Tuy Province during late 1966.

Bob suggested that such details would best be revealed by a selection of willing contributors from among 5 RAR's participants, together with a few others; some who had been providers of close combat support and yet others who, while not directly involved, could provide expert overview material. Discussions inevitably questioned whether such a book was needed, what its purpose might be, who could best contribute to it and so on. Among many wise voices, one opined, 'Who would write about these finer details if we don't? It is *our* history!' And so, the die was cast. It is notable that the first national servicemen to be committed to combat in Vietnam made up half of the battalion's strength, so it was important that they should be represented among the contributors.

A collegial approach to solving operational problems pervaded the original 5 RAR. These traits again came into play 50 years later during the gestation of this book. The inward flow of discussion and contributions propounded the idea that the book should also give an account of the

battalion's preparations for deployment to Vietnam and how it settled into its initial operations in the vanguard of 1 ATF, before highlighting its pathfinding incursions into the Nui Thi Vai hills.

This book's contributors share the prized common thread of having been full-time soldiers at some time in their lives and are at ease about being veterans of Australia's most unpopular war, Vietnam. In canvassing potential contributors for each chapter, a formidable hurdle arose. Survivors of the battalion's first tour in Vietnam who might readily contribute were declining in number; a sobering reality which lent a touch of urgency to the project.

Accordingly, nearly every part of this book has been written by men ranging in age from their early 70s to their late 80s. They have all led happy and productive postwar lives and the keenness of their memories, undimmed by intervening years, is remarkable. Unsurprisingly, each of them has completed his task with a blend of discernment and sagacity acquired through 50 years of reflection. Their reflections, well-tempered by the time-bestowed benefits of detachment and perspective, are valuable insights. Their writings help to flesh out the necessarily broader approach of the official history which records that war.

The comprehensive article republished in Appendix C was written by the battalion's commanding officer, John Warr, in 1967, soon after the return of 5 RAR to Australia. John passed away in 1999. His account shows how cordon and search operations were rapidly developed in Vietnam by 5 RAR. It highlighted and temporarily filled a vacuum in Australian Army doctrine on tactics and techniques that needed to be employed in a much more virulent type of warfare than that experienced in the previous two decades. Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, the army's focus had been the low-level counterterrorist operations of the Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Confrontation of Malaysia. Thus, 1 ATF was the first Australian Army formation since the Second World War committed to operations in circumstances where it was largely free of allied tactical dictates. It fell to John Warr, as the commander of the first battalion to be inserted into 1 ATF's assigned area of operations, to interpret, adapt and invent the essence of his battalion's modus operandi. Contributors to Chapter 16 have provided a memoir that gives readers a revealing look at a well-respected Australian infantry battalion commanding officer.

Apart from its more prosaic purposes, a book of this kind is both a nod of acknowledgement to old mates and, especially, a respectful salute to those who left our sight on the battlefield over 50 years ago. It is to them that this book is dedicated. In crafting a tribute, we could not render a better summation than that given by the great Athenian warrior-statesman, Pericles. Around 430 BC he delivered a lengthy tribute to his dead soldiers. It included a peroration of a mere 50 words in which he neatly compressed the deepest of soldierly reflections. His few, plain words require no elaboration:

> They gave their bodies for the common good and received, each for his own memory, praise that will never die; and with it, the grandest of all sepulchres – not that in which their mortal bones are laid, but a home in the minds of men where their glory remains fresh.[1]

The writings of this book's contributors may well be their last hurrah in terms of adding detail to the proud history of 5th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment, widely known as the Tiger Battalion. Their hearty and indomitable camaraderie will be apparent to the reader. Their more elusive literary motives are suggested by lines adapted from Banjo Paterson's *The Daylight is Dying*:

> Now, we still half hearing
> An old-time refrain,
> With memory clearing
> To hear it again,
> Bring tales, roughly wrought of
> Young men and their ways,
> That call back much thought of
> Our soldiering days,
> And, blending with each
> In the mem'ries that throng,
> There haply shall reach
> You a clear-ringing song.

1 Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, II, 43.

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