

One Man's War Viet Nam

Presented by

Gary McKay, MC, OAM

I was conscripted in May 1968 and after a sort of fortnight a Puckapunyal spent mostly peeling potatoes I was selected for officer training at the Officer Training Unit (OTU) Scheyville. This 6-month course was a pressure cooker and had a very narrow exit point where graduates had to be capable of leading an infantry platoon on operations against the Viet Cong in South Viet Nam. It was as concentrated as that.

After graduating as second lieutenant (probationary) I was posted to the 3rd Training Battalion at Singleton where we trained recruits and infantry Corps trainees. I should have been there for a few months before deploying to Viet Nam but I was the captain of the Singleton Army rugby team and was held there until a few weeks after we won the Hunter Valley rugby union championship.

I was then posted to the 9th Battalion RAR who were returning from their tour of duty in South Viet Nam and with only six months to go in my National Service obligation I volunteered to sign on to deploy to the war zone. This was a decision based purely on the fact that I wanted to see if I could 'cut the mustard' as my Uncle Bob – a WW2 commando – suggested to me when he heard I was joining 4 RAR in Townsville.

I joined 4 RAR at the JTC Canungra for the 4-week Battle Efficiency Course. This was like a 'Finishing school' for those about to deploy. We were assessed on battlecraft. Undertook very realistic battle inoculation, with a heavy emphasis on fitness for battle. On being sent to Townsville where 4 RAR was then based we undertook several major exercises in the local region with deployment to the High Range training area involving exercises with live 'enemy' and other activities by day and by night with live ammunition. Everything was heavily assessed, monitored and umpired.

Off to War

The Menzies Government wanted Australia to be involved in Vietnam's war to ensure alliance with the USA. In my opinion the government wanted an 'insurance policy' and a strong ally in the region after the Brits pulled out East of Suez. There was a hole that needed to be filled and we needed a Big Brother.

One of the great shining lies was how we became involved. The fact was that Australia 'asked' the US government to 'invite' Australia to be involved. Many thought that communism was on the rise in the region and the Korean War and *Konfrontasi* supported those beliefs. The Domino Theory was espoused and many believed that even Mao Tse Tung subscribed to the theory.

Deployment

HMAS *Sydney* a former RN aircraft carrier had been converted into a troopship and was probably the world's slowest ship. We embarked in Townsville and ferried out to the ship on LCH driven by trainee midshipmen who sometimes drove like Italian manned torpedo drivers. The battalion minus the advance party of about 108 flew by Qantas out of RAAF Garbutt whilst the Main Body paraded through town without incident and then sailed for Vung Tau in South Viet Nam.

We spent 10 days at sea accompanied by destroyer escorts and also had a refuelling activity somewhere close to half way through the voyage. On board it was training every day from about 0800hrs until an hour before sunset every day. Soldiers had PT, lectures on what was happening in Phuoc Tuy Province and the latest Intelligence and Situation reports. They did shooting, first aid refreshers, Rules of Engagement and every day undertook Immediate Action drills on their personal weapons.

As the battalion shooting coach, I oversaw rifle and machine gun shooting from the aft flight deck of the *Sydney*. The targets were water-filled balloons that were dropped over the back of the ship. Soldiers fired in squads of 10 and fired when their number was called to create instinctive shooting at moving targets. It was all training as we had Tug of War against the ship's stokers who were seriously large sailors that nearly pulled us through the pulleys that the ropes were connected to on the flight deck.

Inter-company volleyball was played in the plane hangar lift with interesting results when the seas got lumpy and people jumping for high shot found themselves even higher than they thought they would be over the deck. The Crossing the Line ceremony was conducted by the ship's crew and gave everyone a lot of laughter and many of the 4 RAR junior officers suitably humiliated in the process wearing mermaid outfits and the like.

Every night in the soldiers mess they were issued 1 large (26 oz) can of Fosters per day per man (perhaps).

PHUOC TUY PROVINCE

Most of the province is relatively flat terrain with primary and secondary jungle predominant in areas where we operated. The 1st Australian task Force area of operations was roughly 60km x 60km. This area was chosen for Australian discrete ops because it was close to air/sea ports and was large enough for the Task Force to do its job regarding Counter Insurgency Operations. It has to be understood that the threat was much less intense than I and II Corps to our north.

The Nui Dat base was centrally located and was previously a working rubber plantation that gave welcome shade to the Diggers living there. Soldiers lived in tent lines with duck boards connecting the tents owing to seriously muddy conditions when it rained.

The area where Australians fought was predominantly flat. Most fighting took place in jungle or dense vegetation. The Wet / dry seasons had a profound impact on how you went about war fighting and how you could deploy and resupply the people in the field.

A War In The Shadows

To borrow a title from a WW2 book about jungle fighting on Bougainville our operations were about stealth, silence. looking, listening and smelling. Communications was through field signals and a stage whisper when not in contact. Navigation in the jungle was all about paces and bearings. The majority of the contacts and firefights were small unit actions that often lasted only a few minutes. If the enemy thought they were outnumbered they would withdraw into the jungle and live to fight another day.

Most foot patrols averaged about 10 km a day. Soldiers were awake half an hour before first light and went to sleep (if you could call it that) half an hour after last light. Machine gun picquets at night meant interrupted sleep for several hours while on picquet.

Patrols varied between two and six weeks duration. Resupply was usually by RAAF Iroquois chopper. Every five days there would be a resupply of food and other essentials and every 10 days fresh greens and socks were flown in with the mail. The backload meant very smelly clothes and letters home going back out. Light infantry carries their house on their back including rations, water, bedding, ammo.

Most back packs weighed between 25 and 30 kgs. Each rifleman carried between 120 and 200 rounds of ammunition depending on the weapon (usually SLR or Armalite M16 rifle). Machine gunners often carried 800 to 1000 rounds of belt ammo.

The enemy were everywhere and anywhere. There was no front line.

The role of the infantry is very basic: it is to close with and kill the enemy. It goes on about by day or night, regardless of season weather or terrain. But it is basic as it gets. Kill the enemy. It is the pointy end of the spear and requires high degrees of battlecraft, teamwork and personal courage.

Contacts/firefights

The vast majority of contacts were usually between 10 – 15 metres distant. Often less than a cricket pitch. The engagements were often short, sharp and violent. The contact drills we practised were always aggressive with infantryman running forward to the sound of battle and closing the distance to the foe. We were always going forward.

Fighting in the jungle is the toughest form of combat. Contacts are at close range and it is often a case of the quick or the dead. Personal camouflage and good battle craft are vital skills and essential if one is to survive in jungle warfare. The Australian Modus operandi was totally different to other allies. The Australians used stealth as their basic technique for approaching the enemy. Field signals were used to maintain silence.

We did not have the numbers to go in like the Americans and use firepower and mass to overwhelm the enemy. We had to find them, fix them and then destroy them. It was not as depicted in most movies. It was a war in the shadows with fleeting glimpses of an elusive and cunning foe.

The Viet Cong/Enemy

The enemy were resourceful, highly motivated, tough, and capable of living in the field for extended periods of time. To disrespect the enemy was to invite failure. Many of the enemy were local guerilla, while others were North Vietnamese Army (NVA) who were highly trained and well equipped. Local guerilla squads were people who often worked in the fields by day and assisted the Main Force and NVA units on a part-time basis. They were easy pickings if out by themselves owing to their lack of training. Their bravery at whatever level was never brought into question.

Enemy view of Australians

I asked a former VC Main Force officer why Australians had the respect of the Viet Cong and he replied: we buried their dead; we took care of their wounded; we did things to improve the life of those in the province (WHAM), and most importantly, we did not commit atrocities.

Search and Clear/Destroy operations

Most deployments were by Huey (Iroquois) chopper. Mainly foot patrols with companies and then platoons given discrete areas into which they operated. Most helicopter re/deployments were by 9 Sqn RAAF and US Army Iroquois choppers. Armoured Personnel Carrier moves were sometimes undertaken for operations in the west of the province that suited the style for mounted warfare.

The beauty of helicopter operations was that it gave the commander rapid reaction to what the enemy were doing and created what became known as the 'vertical flank'. It allowed the Australians to out-manoeuve the opponent.

Fire support

Fire support bases were established away from Nui Dat to extend the range of Australian patrols under the cover of artillery fire. Each infantry battalion had a Direct Support field battery (6 x 105 mm howitzers). Australians were always under the umbrella of arty fire support (except the SAS who operated in five-man patrols deep into enemy territory).

The one thing to remember is that the Australians were never defeated on the field of battle and never had a soldier taken POW.

Firepower

The Americans had the bulk of the aerial combat power. Fighter ground attack aircraft like the F4 Phantom fighter-bomber could deliver rockets, cannon fire, bombs and napalm in close proximity to ground troops. The enormous firepower of the Americans meant that the enemy were forced underground and developed extensive bunker systems. Off shore naval gunfire was capable of delivering accurate heavy artillery 25 kilometres inland. Ships like the USS *Missouri* and USS *New Jersey* were recommissioned to support the ground troops.

Battle on the Song Ca

31 July 1971

The enemy were 274 VC Main Force Regiment. Three smaller battalions made up the main infantry element. They were equipped with heavy machine guns, rockets and mortars. In this battle they were dug in alongside the river. We had 50-tonne Centurion tanks in close support. The fighting was at close quarters and painfully slow owing to well organised enemy supporting fires between bunkers. It took four hours to advance 250 metres. The bunkers were built in an X-shaped formation that meant that every approach angle had us in between supporting bunkers. The bunker system was very heavily defended and the camouflaged earthen bunkers were almost impossible to detect. The enemy communicated with signal wires between bunkers and to make matters even more confusing were firing captured US weapons.

The Australians had firepower in the form of armoured vehicles such as the 50-tonne Centurion tanks but they still had to be winkled out of their fighting positions. The enemy would not surrender and many died in their bunkers even after being offered a chance to surrender. The tanks crushed most of the bunkers with the enemy inside.

Principal Stressors for the Infantryman

The principal stressors for the grunt – the man fighting on the battlefield - are fear, shock, horror and finally grief. War fighting at close quarters is a grisly business.

Noise

One of the biggest factors soldiers have to deal with is the noise on the field of battle. From personal weapons (no ear protection) to artillery, mortars, rocket propelled grenades, hand grenades, and anything dropped or fired from an aeroplane. The need for immediate action drills is essential to allow the soldier to operate on the battlefield. Noise creates rapid disorientation and makes command and control extremely difficult.

Battle of Nui Le, 21 September 1971

This was the last the last major battle by Australians in South Viet Nam. It was as a result of the Australian government announcing the withdrawal of our forces from Phuoc Tuy Province. It became 33 NVA Regiment versus Delta Company 4RAR. I was commanding 11 Platoon and in this last day of battle my platoon lost 4 KIA and 2 WIA. We had no tanks to support us like on the Song Ca as they had been shipped down to Vung Tau for return to Australia. The fighting was again at very close quarters and in thick jungle.

In essence Delta Company was probably outnumbered by a force of about 10:1. The enemy numbered at least 1000 and we had just over 100 men in the field. The battle that day started around 8 am and finished close to 9 pm. What was interesting about this battle was that we were forced into a fighting withdrawal by a force that was superior in numbers – despite us having the firepower advantage. The enemy would not withdraw.

The bulk of the air support was from RAAF, USMC, USAAF helicopter gunships and fighter bomber aircraft. The amount of ordnance dropped in front of Delta Company speaks volumes for the intensity of the fighting. The ordnance delivered included: 967 HE rockets, 120 flechette rockets, 5300 40-mm HE rounds, 143,500 7.62-mm minigun rounds, 28 pods of napalm and 4 x 500 lb bombs (from F-4 Phantoms).

In all Delta Company lost 5 killed and a total of 28 wounded. In our company my platoon sergeant and I were both wounded and another two platoon commanders were wounded during this day. Another action was fought by Bravo Company further west near Route 2 where one platoon alone had 19 WIA and thankfully no one killed.

As a result of being hit by two AK-47 bullets in my left shoulder I was medevaced back to Australia with the distinction of being the last Australian wounded in action in South Viet Nam. An honour I could do without. Back home the road to recovery was slow. It took four operations including an arthrodesis of my left shoulder requiring 12 months in hospital. I spent six months in 17kgs of plaster. But the upside was that a young Digger and I became the world's best 500 players.

The Bitter End

The Task Force was now down to one infantry battalion and supporting arms. It was pulled back down from Nui Dat south to the port at Vung Tau. The withdrawal from the war left a bad taste in most Australian soldier's mouths and we felt like we were abandoning the South Vietnamese.

Return to Australia

Back home it was also tough on those returning from the war zone. I believe it was harder on the Nashos who were literally thrust back into their civilian environment with very little support.

The atmosphere that I encountered was one of apathy or animosity. The major thing that I saw was the nation was divided. I just wish the demonstrators against the war in Viet Nam had thrown their hatred and vile comments at the politicians and not against the men who were doing their duty, many of them conscripts. Of the 521 killed in Viet Nam, 200 were Nashos.

An unbreakable bond.

My experience as a leader and commander of men in the jungles of South Viet Nam has created an unbreakable bond with my men. We meet every couple of years to remember, reflect, tell lies and share the joy of being alive.