

## **LAST OPERATION – VIETNAM 6RAR 1970**

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#### Introduction.

Nearly thirty years ago, in April 1970, sixth Battalion of the Australian Regiment/New Zealand (ANZAC), hereafter 6RAR, on its last operation in South Vietnam hunted down HQ Ba Long Province, and in the subsequent action captured operational wireless codes, the One Time Pads. Though aware the exceedingly rare capture was one of importance, the Battalion did not know it had triggered one of the most significant coups of the entire war.

Written stories about the event, the Battalion history guardedly recorded the triumph, "the documents and equipment recovered from the B Coy contact were one of the most significant of the Australian operations in the Phuoc Tuy". At the time that report was accepted within the battalion all were aware the matter carried security classification and though no more about it. The action had been very challenging and the feat in actually brining the enemy to a battle, which concluded successfully, was held to be the real achievement. More often than not, operations mounted by the Task Force in reaction to information of surprise changes to the enemy locations failed, because the information proved to be inaccurate in time or location. Not only had success been realised this time but it had also been achieved against an enemy who, throughout the entire engagement, proved to be of the highest quality. The action sustained over several days, was fiercely contested at every stage. The searching Coy had to move carefully forward, stalking against the waiting enemy. Targets were presented as only fleeting glimpses. Where there was shooting the resultant deployment was immediately countered. The combatants were also only yards apart, which meant that heavy supporting weapons could not be used with safety. The action pitted man against man, leader against leader. The soldiers on both sides had to employ all their individual skills of soldering; their bushcraft, skill at arms, trust in their comrades and most of all their sustained bravery to survive the savage, dramatic battlefield. The penalty of a tactical misstep, sloppy or delayed reaction or any overexposure would have been very costly to either side. In the end success was gained by sustained pressure in an absolute feat of arms.

This simple story formed the base of an address given

in November 1998 to the dinner of the Victorian Branch of the Royal Australian Regiment Association. Subsequently, Peter Cook the editor of the magazine of the organisation heard of the address and asked if it could be printed in the magazine. Research to tidy up some loose ends revealed the staggering news that the HQ Australian Task Force Vietnam (HQ AFV) had been complimented after the operation by the senior officer at the highest level in the United States Military Assistance Commander Vietnam (USMACV) Or (WACV) for their contribution to one of the intelligence coups of the war. For security reasons the message was not passed on to the Battalion until its tour of duty had finished and it was in the process of returning to Australia. Fortunately the Battalion Intelligence Officer (Fred Fairhead) had remained in Nui Dat in charge of the rear details and received the congratulatory letter from Brigadier general Potts, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence USMACV. Fred had the goog sense to preserve the document in his personal papers.

Thereafter the story was easier to piece together. Whereas One Time Pads had been captured on several occasions in the past; this time MACV had computers and, importantly, the Pads were sent immediately to MACV without any publicity. The enemy continued to use the compromised codes for some time. MACV had readouts on all the traffic sent by the upper echelons of the enemy through the currency of the Pads. Understandably MACV were ecstatic. Knowledge of the enemy intentions and accurate measures of their leadership organisation, operations and supply capabilities would have been invaluable. It was even suggested that the information so gained would have contributed to the MACV decision to go to Cambodia in strength a short while later. One-way or other that is some story and a long way from the struggle, which began it all.

#### Operation Townsville.

Operation Townsville began quietly on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1970. The Battalion was put to an area of operation stretching from the Song Rai in the west to Nui May Tao in the east. The enemy was working feverishly to re-establish their rear service units in the Nui May Tao again, following the Battalions very successful operation against them in January. During the resurrection of the logistic system it was expected

the Battalion would contact the enemy forward supply elements moving through the region. So it proved, there were a number of contacts in and around some large bunker areas, which evidenced signs of recent refurbishment. The phrase culminated with fairly heavy contact with VC whose documents revealed association with the VC K76C hospital. On 1<sup>st</sup> April, on the basis of some positive information, the area of operation was extended to the north and the Battalion was directed specifically against HQ Ba Long Province, now definitely located in the north of Phuoc Tuy Province in thick jungle between the Suoi Loc and the Suoi Sap, two streams that fed into the Province's main river, the Song Rai.

Significantly 2/52 (ARVN) Battalion and 3/7 Battalion were placed under operational control and moved to the location to block the north of the search area. 7RAR closed up to the Suoi Loc to block the north and west.

The stage was set.

The protagonists.

HQ Ba Province

HQ Ba Long Province, a senior HQ subordinate to military Region 7, controlled Long Khanh and Phuoc Tuy Provinces for the VC. While its functions were predominately political, it had responsibility for logistic support in the area. It maintained D440 and D445 the two well known "Viet Cong" provincial battalions in Phuoc Tuy, which seemed to spend their lives avoiding the Australian Battalions.

After twenty years of war, HQ Ba Long had evolved into a well-tested, skilful organisation. The members of it came from the corps of determined, arrogant men, absolutely inured to hardship, who dominated the army hierarchy. Their protection party was soon of immediate interest to the battalion. All wore tiger (camouflage) suits, were probably North Vietnamese and were undoubtedly very experienced. They quickly proved to be brave, quiet, agile and spontaneous in the contact area. Their operational style would be immediately recognised by those Battalions of the Regiment, which were given Bushman's Scouts later in the war. In the manner of the best of those scouts they had all the tricks; for example they held their AK47's on the side when they fired, to use the "Jump" to laterally increase their killing zone. They were aggressive, always moving in the contact. Against inexperienced people they could give the impression of greater strength while drawing fire to calculate what opposed them. When opposed to experienced people,

who were not drawn in to fire at fleeting targets, they would manoeuvre against the flank of the friendly position and alter their planes of fire by sniping from trees in an attempt to unsettle their opposition. All in all, they were a formidable foe, quite brave and very confident.

Only several weeks previously, a company of 6RAR, operating some way south to another enemy unit, had come to the flank of what appeared to be a bunker position. While they were in the process of moving forward to mount a detailed reconnaissance; one enemy soldier, in the style of those described, appeared suddenly on the flank of one of the leading sections and shot the M60 gunner, Hen Duffy. Just as quickly he disappeared under cover. No 2 on the M60, Ray Clark, moved promptly to take over the gun and was shot in the same way. The section 2ic, Bob Power, moved without hesitation to the gun, and he to, was killed instantly. In less than a couple of minutes three brave, experienced men were dead, caught in the cunningly prepared fire lanes visible only at ground level. The enemy had selectively cleared a field of fire no higher than 18 inches from the ground. The situation was retrieved immediately by a young section commander Peter Ashton, who moved straight across to pick up the M60, with it, he stood courageously in the contact area and drove the enemy from the scene. Immediately the support platoon came in hard on the left, attacking with the support of the first platoon. The platoons continued on and fought their way through the bunker complex, but that particular enemy soldier escaped them. Peter Ashton was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) for his and his section's gallant action.

6RAR/NZ (ANZAC)

After a year of operations 6RAR was battle hardened. All, the rifle Companies, the victors of many fierce contacts, had proved calm and sure-footed in every situation and did not frighten easily. Accepting the companies had endured the discontinuous nature of the National Service programme with an intake changing over every three-months, there had been a very minimum change to the leadership. As such the companies were stable and so were realistic, assured and accustomed to working with one and other.

They were also capitalising on the splendid training environment in Townsville before departure; where shooting weapon handling, control of fire and navigation had been taken to the advanced levels of individual training. As well each of the sub units has

an element, which had completed training in close reconnaissance techniques. Though the shooting skills had fallen off somewhat because of obvious lack of practice for long periods on operations and endless spells of walking under heavy loads, practice between operations held the unit to an adequate standard, on the other hand the field craft skills were high in the unit, the sub units were quiet in the bush, and importantly, when deploying for battle. Perhaps the best example of the skills level attained is demonstrated by the silent attack mounted by B Company in July, on this occasion the Company closed on the usually very skittish HQ D445 Battalion and their HQ Company undetected. A cool, highly trained sergeant Buts Buttery undertook a brilliant close reconnaissance of the enemy position lasting several hours. In a number of penetrations, each to within ten metres, he produced an accurate sketch of the enemy position, detailing the location of each man and the weapons deployed. With that information the company commander Michael Harris, sent two platoons carefully around to block the rear approaches and launched a surprised attack. His aim, successfully achieved, was to drive the enemy from their bunkers and into the ambush set on their exit routes. It is believed that this is the only silent attack launched by an Australian unit in the war.

Despite a long hard grind of battalion operations east of route 2, lasting four months with out interruption and culmination in the demanding challenge of clearing the long established enemy base from the May Tao, the companies had each been rested in turn and were in fine fettle for the final operation. Two companies, which would be engaged, one Australian and one New Zealand, were similar in many ways. Both were representatives of the very best of their systems. Aggressively and imaginatively led by Michael Harris and Larry Lynch, both companies were very professional: quiet, relentless, both quick to dominate the contact situation and close with the enemy. They were very tough adversaries, not easily dissuaded. HQ Ba Long would need to keep their wits about them.

#### The Action.

With the blocking units in position, A and D Companies air assaulted into an area west of the suspected target area, B and V Companies set to approach the area from the east. With a small tactical HQ and a section of mortars, protected by the tracker Platoon, I had slipped into an area close to the target and to its south, near Route 330. This became known as Fire Support Base (FSPB) Tiger.

As the noose closed, a very careful search located signs of considerable enemy activity. The enemy continued to operate their wireless set and an accurate location fixed them in an area of dense jungle on which B and V Companies were targeted. The routine was that one company would establish a block with a line of ambushes against which the company would drive. The area was now very confined and the companies faced the very real risk of running into another. Both navigated at every level and the company commanders, accustomed to working together, stayed in continuous communications. Nevertheless the high level of risk remained throughout the entire operation.

There was a contact almost as soon as the searching company started to move and the pattern continued through the day, deployment after deployment, nothing conclusive but very testing, and exasperating, it the company commander's voice on the radio was gauge. Nor was the content to charge only the companies. Shortly after this first contact, a party turned up to have a look around the FSPB, which stirred the trackers into a prompt reply. Each story was the same, the tiger suit would make an aggressive, albeit fleeting, appearance, attempt to draw fire or force a redeployment, then redraw. Inconclusive it may have been, but while the slow inexorable search continued. The expectation in the beginning was that the protective group was creating a delay for HQ Ba Long to get clear. But there was no action in the blocking company. The report to the Task Force at the end of the first day was subdued. Surely they must have got clean away. There really seemed no other rational explanation for the events of the day. The answer from Task Force was mind-boggling. Keep at it, the enemy wireless set was still there and kept working through the day!

That was it. The companies reversed their roles and went about their business for several days thereafter. All the while, with extraordinary confidence or was it arrogance? The wireless continued to work. The companies must have been almost stumbling on the set, the tiger suits kept at them constantly; but, to their great credit, the companies stayed focused and were not pushed about. Then it came that B Company had to take a resupply. This was arranged to take place while B Company was blocking, it was expected that the ambush suffice on a skeleton staff for a short period.

In the best tradition the contact happened in the middle of the resupply on the 8<sup>th</sup> April. The V Company forward

scout missed it, but the big Maori lad, carrying the M60 behind him, did not, just one fleeting glimpse through the bush was enough. He put his foot literally into the back of the scout and ran over the top of him firing as he went. His momentum carried him into the position where the areal leads were still swinging. The operators had gone with the wireless sets and the codes, only the mores key remained. That key now occupies a place of honour with the Australian Signal Squadron that did such good work locating it all those years ago.

B Company were in the middle of their resupply when the contact broke out to their south east. The practice was that combat rations and replacement ammunition would be flown in every three or four days. While the packs were broken down into individual loads and distributed, the soldiers enjoyed their great treat, cold milk chocolate and a fresh bread roll. Michael Harris, a great battle leader, realised from the direction of the contact that the enemy would be moving towards his location but from a slightly different direction than expected. From the map he appreciated that he had less than fifteen minutes to effect a re-location. At once he asked his platoon commanders if they had identified potential ambush sites in the area during their early phases of the operation. With that information he promptly dispatched two platoons to their new areas and used his other platoon to secure the re-supply area.

The commander of 6 Platoon, Lochie MacLean, a veritable lion of a man, need no second warning. He had his platoon drop their packs where they were and led them at a run to an area he remembered where a track led from the bush into savannah country. (One track led out of the bush and broke into several lesser tracks in the open area.) Cleverly he sighted his ambush in the open area to cover movement out of the bush. Claymore mines were used to cover as much of the tracks as possible. The platoon was split into two groups, offset on the opposite side of the tracks, generally with cover from view and not from fire. There arcs of fire were complementary and this reduced the risk of firing onto one another. The plan was to initiate the ambush with claymores, which would conceal the platoon's real; and somewhat precarious, position and enable them to engage the targets that remained after the confusion of the contact. The platoon had barley settled in when the enemy appeared in the shade of the trees. They spent what seemed an interminable time reading their maps

and pointing, as if choosing the route they should follow out of the jungle. As luck would have it, they choose to move parallel to the track and some distance from it. They were out side the claymore killing area and were soon to be on top of the men in ambush.

What followed is best described by Lochie MacLean,

*"Within minutes of settling in I saw a shadow flit across my view. I was about to rise and blast the fool for moving around after we had said the ambush was set when I realised it was not one of ours. I remember being amazed that he could not see me. I wondered why the ambush had not been sprung. Another shape walked past. I realised that their path was taking them between the claymores and us luckily they had not seen the cable, which they must be stepping over.*

*At this stage I did not know what was happening at the other end of the ambush, on the other side of the killing ground. My rifle was lying on the ground beside me. I had been checking the map. I was sure that any movement by me to take up my rifle and fire would almost certainly be noticed. I tried to get my signaller to initiate the contact, thinking our other side had frozen.*

*As I made to move to pick up my rifle and take action, all hell broke loose. When the fog of war had cleared, we had three enemy dead and some important papers. (A haversack containing the One Time Pad and a lot of documents were found. We quickly secured the area.*

*The other half of the ambush had observed the enemy come to the edge of the timber and consult their maps. Scouts went across the open area, through the ambush, whilst what appeared to be the leaders took stock. (Others fanned along the side of the bush a short way.) Our section commander had been waiting to get more in the killing area and a better idea of what was back in the bush. After all these years I am not at all that clear of the other elements. I think our section commander had assessed it was a command group he was observing, with their protection almost independently going about their business. But I am not sure if I gained that impression at the initial debrief, or back at company where more information was available.*

*As in these actions, it is put together from a series of individual impressions rarely does one person see or know the full story. One gun group of the exiting side of the ambush told of how they had seen the enemy walk past them and opened fire with the rest, and at*

*last one of the chape in their sights was still probably still running, they had been unable to stop him.*

*After our initial securing of the area, reclaimed our unchallenged claymores, we made it quickly back to our resupply: chocolate milk and fresh buns. After debriefing by the CO, we returned with a burial party to bury the dead. A Chaplain had come in on the resupply, so we took him out to assist with the detail.*

*On reflection, while we were vulnerable to fire we had the important element of surprise. It was not a conventional ambush. Had we been totally back in the timber, I doubt whether we would have seen much, and certainly would not have been able to observe the command group for such a long time. Once they had reached the bush they thought they were safe to plane their next move, not realising that in the foreground was their enemy. As the platoon had been taking the fight to the enemy and knew the more aggressive our response was the better our chances of quickly establishing and maintaining the upper hand. Few in the platoon felt comfortable of being in such an aggressive platoon, but each knew their team worked, and had not lost one of their members, that was their strength.*

#### The Claymore Mine

The claymore mine is an anti-personnel mine. This mine is command detonated, fixed directional, fragmentation mine. In plain words, the mine consists of an explosive charge (700g) that sends about 700 steel balls in a set direction, an arc of about 600 mils, which is sighted towards the enemy. The mine is initiated generally by an electric firing device, which is connected to the mine by thirty meters of cable. The claymore mine sits on small legs a few inches from the ground where it must be sighted towards the intended killing zone then camouflaged. The mine can be set up in banks so the one initiation sets off all the mines. (During the Vietnam conflict it was on occasions initiated using a trip wire and initiator, this is no longer allowed in the Australian Defence Force as part of the signatory agreement with the United Nations). Whilst there is a danger in being exposed within 100m of the mine if standing, the teaching was to stay outside the 16m radius. In practice this was lessened through placing the mines at right angles to the friendly troops.

The claymore was an excellent for initiating an ambush. The enemy would be in shock, hopefully incapacitated in some way, and the exact location of the friendly troops would still be unknown to the enemy

until the friendly troops commenced firing. The use of shock and surprise were devastating. There were drawbacks. Once fired the area needed to be covered by fire or there was then a hole in the defence perimeter of the friendly position. With the mine weighing 1.5 kg there was a limit to the number that would be carried.

#### Notes re Ambush Diagrams

At this distant time there is much forgotten. The position of mines or even how many we had laid is not clear. What I do remember is that it did not make sense to use them to initiate the contact, because the enemy was walking between the claymores and were we were lying.

There were three types of vegetation.

- The thick bush to the East and South where visibility was down to a few feet. It was from this direction from which we were expecting to see the enemy, because that was the direction in which V Company had their contact.
- Open savannah in which we had set the ambush. This consisted of grass and scattered saplings.
- Clear area devoid of grass or cover.

I cannot remember if we had three or two M60's with us in the ambush. I cannot remember where the gun in "A" Section but I think its field of fire included the gap where the track came out of the thick bush. I know the other gun in "B" Section was roughly where I have placed it on the diagram because it was in action firing at those that had walked through the ambush to the other side. Although I have depicted one track leading down then branching, in practice there were many small tracks once it left the thick bush. with the predominant one roughly following the line indicated. What had caught us was they didn't follow any of these, but cut others parallel and behind the claymores.

There were several reasons why I split the platoon as I did.

- I was wanting, a greater purchase from any ensuring fire and movement.
- We could not cover the ground from the one position.
- I wanted to maximise surprise.
- I wanted to be able to get better fire support between sections than we would have in one big blob. "A" had arcs of fire that went either side of "B"
- I was also nervous that they might come from the south up the other track, and needed to have some force covering it as well. The thick bush to the south

of "B" did not go on for- ever, but receded back towards the east further south.

Distance is likewise unclear, but probably not all that far out. The enemy bounced off the contact to move in a new direction, which took them towards the resupply area. Among the others on alert, was a young soldier on his first operation. He was manning a claymore, when four men in green moved into the killing area. Confused by the rapid redeployment and the recent movement around him, he was not sure that they were enemy. Quite rightly he did not fire. In the subsequent reconstruction of contact it seemed that was the Command Group of HQ Ba Long Province and indeed, one of the enemy killed in the 6 Platoon ambush was the Assistant Chief of Staff of HQ Ba Long. There were other contacts, but it was soon apparent that the enemy had gone; ostensibly scattered to the four winds.

The Company got on with their chores, buried the enemy dead and preparing to redeploy. Fred Fairhead, ever alert, had arrived quickly to the scene and realised immediately the importance of the documents. He contacted Task Force Intelligence with great dispatch an intelligence officer from Task Force flew in to the scene to receive the One Time Pads and the documents and flew the straight to MACV Intelligence authorities in Siagon. The operation, or at last that part of it, was over. We were free to return to the job at hand.

#### Conclusion

With the arrangements for leaving the area, there was the prospect that a stay behind party could return a good reward. A Special Air Service (SAS) patrol came in under cover in Armoured Personnel Carriers, which arrived to extract the FSPB. Quietly the patrol joined the Tracker Platoon and took up position. The Headquarter Group departed the FSPB Tiger and had not even left the long clearing en route to route 330 when a contact commenced behind them. They turned back and arrived to extract the SAS patrol, which was under heavy pressure. Despite the savaging they had received over the past few days the Tiger suits remained defiant.

This extraordinary operation concluded on a very successful note. It is believed One Time Pads were only captured on four occasions during the whole war. On the previous occasions the capture by US Marine and Airborne units were widely publicised. This time there was no fanfare and the results advanced the course of the war. In the end, sheer persistence over

come as good as the enemy was likely to field, but not before an enthralling struggle brought the absolute best out of the protagonists. One is left to wonder about the attitude of the enemy and their determination to keep their wireless working when we were so close. Were they sublimely confident in their concealment skills or were they, as the result of experience, disdainful of the skills and the persistence of Allied Units? Could it of been that the wireless was kept working as a ruse to draw us away from their Command Group? Perhaps after all it is not a matter for our concern, maybe HQ Ba Long are still trying to work out how they allowed themselves to be drawn into such an unequal struggle.

#### Acknowledgement

Brigadier Bill Weir has really been the catalyst in this story. As our Task Force Commanded he was the one who kept us at it all those years ago and it was he who quietly insisted this story should be told. David Chinn, now of the official History Unit provided valuable advice as to the sources and to the background of this story. Ty Ball offered fascinating insights to the receipt and processing of the capture of Siagon. To my comrades and some of the main players in the story, Michael Harris, Jock Stewart, Fred Fairhaed, Lochie MacLean, John Neervoort, Allen Valentine and Paul Jackson, I can only proffer my thanks. You won my admiration many years ago. Finally my particular thanks go to Lieutenant General William E Potts and Edmund R Thompson, both US Army retired, pre-eminent in the field of Military Intelligence, who so graciously fielded my questions and so patiently took me through the process in Vietnam.

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David took part in the early battles of 3RAR 1950 and the last Korean battle, with 2 RAR on the Hook July 1953.

Thanks Boss. Ed.