



Raising the Australian and 6RAR
flags on Nui May Tao, Dec 1969

Nui May Tao

....battle honour for a fine feat of arms

by Phil Buttigieg and John Neervoort

Imposing heavy losses on an enemy when faced with overwhelmingly odds is usually what it takes to attract deep analysis of any battle or campaign. And, if the victory happens to mark a turning point during some campaign or war, the victorious unit or formation is often awarded a battle honour. On the other hand, units involved in actions that do not produce somewhat 'eye catching' statistics may fail to receive due recognition and a proper place in military history. A great feat of arms may simply go unnoticed in the big scheme of things. Such is the subject of this article.

During the Vietnam War campaigns (operations) against the enemy were planned and conducted continuously. It may be that some Australian military operations there were the best planned and executed in our history to that time? Operation Marsden is a case in point. It was planned and conducted by 6 RAR in late 1969. Analysis of this operation reveals meticulous planning and execution, and beckons more recognition for the participants. Involved was the capture of a feared enemy mountain complex of logistic units and a regional hospital. What exactly would be encountered by the 'invading' Australian troops was never certain beforehand, for the enemy had denied access to the complex since the first French Indo-China war some 25 years earlier.

6 RAR Association members are proud of Operation Marsden and believe it was so successful the feat should be afforded permanent recognition in the form of a regimental battle honour. Supporting this request and incorporated into this article, is a comprehensive written account entitled 'Long Tan to the Nui May Tao' which provides a most informative insight into the operation. It was written by Major General David M Butler, AO, DSO who was the officer commanding the battalion at the time of Marsden.

Marsden did not result in large numbers of enemy dead however body counts are not a prerequisite. History shows that battle honours have been awarded for fine feats of battle planning and execution alone, without the stark evidence of many dead foe. An article by historian John Howells published in the Hunter River Lancer's website indicates why that regiment was awarded the honour 'Sari Bair' for its actions during the Gallipoli campaign when heavy fighting was not a feature:

"The effectiveness of the ANZAC withdrawal from the Gallipoli Peninsular was a stark contrast to the remainder of the campaign. There were only two Allied successes during the campaign, the battle of Lone Pine, and the Withdrawal. Both were well planned (Brudenell White, an Australian staff officer planned the withdrawal) in contrast to almost all of the other battles

where the generals thought it would be possible to muddle through. Lone Pine gained ground that stayed in Australian hands. The withdrawal saved lives’.

(Source: http://www.lancers.org.au/site/Defence_of_Anzac.asp . Date accessed 9/12/2006)

The point is more specifically made in a Wikipedia web site:

‘A unit need not have defeated an adversary in order to earn a battle honour. For instance, although the [Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps](#) were unable to stop the invading [Japanese army](#) from capturing [Hong Kong](#) in [1941](#) (also see the [Battle of Hong Kong](#)), the unit was nevertheless awarded the battle honour "Hong Kong" for its actions’.

(Source: <http://www.answers.com/topic/battle-honour> Date accessed 9/12/06)

The award of battle honours for the occasions in the sources referred to above shows there is the scope to also grant such honour for Marsden. Major-General Butler’s account follows:

LONG TAN TO THE NUI MAY TAO

Any outsider would have to ask why it has taken thirty-five years to recognise the special merit of Operation Marsden. Surely, it should have been immediately apparent at the time if it was demanding of particular attention. The answer lies in three factors, the really fearsome reputation the Nui May Tao enjoyed for so long, the anti-climactic nature of Operation Marsden and hindsight. The writing of the formal history of the 6 RAR/NZ (ANZAC) Battalion’s 1969/70 tour of South Vietnam in 2004 encouraged reflection and a re-examination of much that occurred all those years ago. The battalion returned from the May Tao totally exhausted, more so than any other operation experienced in country. The post operational wash up and consequent after action reports dealt solely with the tactical issues and did not address the broader significance of what the operation had achieved. This 2004 report is the result of the re-examination of the operation, with the benefit of hindsight, and attempts to redress the incomplete earlier accounts.

This paper sets out to:

- a. describe the physical difficulty and the technical complexity of operations in the Nui May Tao and the demands placed on every man involved.
- b. draw attention to the decline of the enemy’s condition as a result of IATF operations 1966-69.
- c. place a measure on the physical and material damage, which a defeat of this scale inflicted on the enemy.
- d. draw attention to the symbolic nature of capturing the last enemy secret base in Phuoc Tuy. A worthy culmination to the efforts of those thousands of young Australians who had served so selflessly in the province.
- e. request, in retrospect, that a battle honour for the Nui May Tao be awarded for the military strategic victory won by the actions of 6RAR/NZ (ANZAC) in December 1969. In view of the magnitude of the victory and the symbolism it attracts, it will be further requested the honour be emblazoned on the Regimental Colour.

The Nui May Tao is a sullen massif in Phuoc Tuy, over 700 metres high, some 50 kilometres north-east from Nui Dat and was clearly visible from the Task Force base. Always known as an important enemy base, there would not have been one Australian soldier who served in the Task Force in all those years, who had not looked across often to the hill mass and wondered what went on there. It was from that vast base from which the enemy sallied forth to first challenge the Task Force at Long Tan and the haven to which it returned after the battle.

There had been a number of forays over the years into the area, including one at divisional strength in 1967. All had been unsuccessful. The May Tao had never been penetrated. From 1965 to 1969 it was the home of 84 Rear Services Group, responsible for providing logistical support and the administrative control of the Viet Cong Area E. Area E encompassed Bien Hoa, Long Khanh, Phuoc Tuy and the western half of Binh Tuy Provinces. 84 Rear Services Group undertook the procurement, storage, transit, co-ordination and distribution of food, weapons, and ammunition and supplies for the region. They also provided medical and dental support, which involved two hospitals, K76A and K1500, with 200-500 bed capacity, the responsibility for evacuation and convalescence, and the provision of medical and pharmaceutical stores.

In mid 1969, 84 Rear Services Group moved from the May Tao to War Zone D and was replaced by the Ba Long Province Unit. Ba Long took over the responsibility for the entire logistic complex in co-ordination with the Xuan Loc Workshop. They also assumed control of the local Viet Cong forces in the districts of Ba Long, Xuan Loc, Dinh Quan, Xuyen Moc, Long Dat and Chau Duc with the attendant operational control of the two Local Force battalions, D440 and D445. The two hospitals, C125 Transport Company and Z300 complex was vital to the enemy logistic function along much of the east coast of the country. All evidence was that it remained heavily defended.

From the Australian perspective operational, elements of the Task Force returned to the province and commenced operations against the enemy who had re-established there in the Task Force's absence in late 1968. In mid 1969, the Task Force commenced pacification operations concentrating on the Minh Dam Secret Zone and enjoyed considerable success, seriously weakening the enemy. The Task Force was able to gradually move the weight of its operations steadily eastwards and by November, was approaching the May Tao.

The May Tao was the last enemy secret base remaining in the province. It was not a battle we could walk away from. Nonetheless, all the evidence pointed to a long and costly operation. Indeed, the cruel experience of the enemy's heavy use of mines in the Minh Dam Secret Zone suggested that the pattern would continue and supplement his already strong defensive positions in the May Tao. In previous operations, the enemy had fiercely defended even the approaches to the mountain. The attackers would need to be prepared to employ a balanced tactical force from the outset against the expectation of an enemy in well-prepared defensive positions. Armour and engineers would have to be available to supplement the infantry/artillery balance wherever the country allowed it. The mountain itself represented and presented an awesome challenge. The steep narrow ridges offered the only access to the top. The re-entrants were precipitous and very broken and presented no usable routes to the

summit. On the other hand, they provided the refuges for the enemy and the ideal sites for their logistic units and associated stores areas. Even after the higher ground was secured and the tactical advantage guaranteed, the subsequent search and destruction of the logistic facilities was obviously going to prove very difficult and manpower intensive. 6 RAR/NZ (ANZAC) were put to the task.

On 2 December 1969, A and B Companies, each with a troop of tanks, moving east and north-east and making the best time, made for the foothills. The going soon worsened and two hours after departure, the tanks had to return. So began a very long and difficult operation. Within the next few days the battalion, supplemented by 4/52 ARVN Battalion, completing a training programme with the battalion, had eight companies operating in and around the May Tao. Initially, the contacts were light and the results were satisfactory.

Many caches of weapons, ammunition and food were found, confirming the purpose and location of the operation. The enemy were from logistic units. The heavy enemy resistance, which had been expected, fortunately did not materialise. While there had been increasing evidence to indicate a worsening of administrative and logistic difficulties for the enemy in 1969 in Phuoc Tuy, the scale did not suggest the force in the May Tao would be critically short of manpower and supplies, including food. In hindsight it is now obvious the constant battering over the years from 1 ATF had much more seriously weakened the enemy capability than had been realised at the time. They were in a serious plight in every respect, short of manpower, close to starvation and certainly were unable to rapidly react to frequent changes of thrust. There was no change required in the 6 RAR/NZ plan as the emphasis shifted to the detailed search of the massif.

All the while, A Company moved steadily up the ridge. The enemy were heavily dependent on the very big Chinese claymore directional mines to cover the route up the narrow ridge. While they had initiated, several, fortunately failed to detonate. On another occasion, the company discovered a mass of hundreds of bomblets from a USAF cluster bomb across their path. While some had detonated, they faced a precarious journey through the remainder of those little green monsters. Since the field proved to be nearly 200 metres wide, it was a long and harrowing time for the company as they worked their way through.

On 8 December, D Company air-assaulted into the south of the mountain and next day located the first major stores dump. One of the largest yet found by 1 ATF, it contained mainly munitions, about 2500 anti-personnel grenades, 22 anti-tank mines, 22 boxes of anti-watercraft mines and a large quantity of weapons, equipment and explosives. The huge store proved to be too big to move and was destroyed by demolishing the whole cave.

At the same time, B Company, on the north side of the mountain, found the first signs of the hospitals. In a massive bunker system they found a large supply of drugs and medical equipment, including 100 single-dose phials of penicillin. The next day they found a system of 12 bunkers, each 4 x 2 metres and 2.5 metres deep, and identified as part of K76A Hospital. Later, to the south-west, V Company located another hospital with 17 large bunkers, 6 x 6 metres, large enough to take up to 100 patients and identified as part of K76A Hospital. Meanwhile, W Company located a large

enemy camp, thoroughly reconnoitred it and, at first light successfully attacked the group identified as belonging to Ba Long Rear Services Group and the Ba Long Procurement Section.

Meanwhile, A Company, with great skill and considerable determination, has scaled the western slope to the summit and established a fire support base, literally on the peak. It was a task many said was impossible. Using bunker timber, mortar base plate positions were constructed right to the very edge of the precipitous slope. Fire task tables had to be amended so they could fire from an altitude of 600 metres into the re-entrants at ground level. The artillery battery commander, who had maintained a very close technical association with the mortar platoon during the tour and was greatly respected, was able to solve the problem. For the remainder of the operation, the mortar section at FSPB Castle was to fire in excess of 2000 rounds in 21 urgent contact missions. Their targets were in the deep re-entrants otherwise inaccessible to weapons not actually located on the mountain. It was a remarkable technical achievement. With the assistance of the Tracker Platoon, who had joined them on the mountain, A Company mounted a series of very effective patrols using the height of their location to great advantage.

The rifle companies by mid-December, were all engaged in detailed searches of the huge complex. In the deep ravines, the very well concealed logistic units were hard to locate. Even with information garnered from prisoners as they went along, it was a very taxing job. For example, at 1600 hours on 19 December, V Company located the major part of K76A Hospital, over 30 huts. A huge find, there were wards, orderly rooms, administrative buildings, storehouses and operating theatres. Yet the company had spent four days in the target area searching for it, cross-graining, back-tracking, all the while in the precipitous re-entrants. For over three weeks, the rifle companies operated in this most demanding and exhausting work. With enemy present in the broken country, every man had to remain in a continual state of high alert. Often there would be occasions in the very close areas where individuals would have to operate aggressively, for quite long periods out of sight, sometimes, out of earshot of his comrades. Tracking, stalking, silently searching for well-concealed enemy or stores caches is the hardest job to impose on infantrymen. For them to do it for over three weeks without respite was an extraordinary performance.

The high activity of the battalion produced quite a remarkable result. The list of logistic unit locations found and destroyed accounted for all known to have existed in the Ba Long complex. The actual sites identified were K76A Hospital, its operating theatres, pharmacy and dental post, Xuyen Moc Workshop unit, Xuan Loc District unit and the Xuan Loc Workshop. The enemy killed or captured in contacts within the complex came from the whole range of the units operating there, such as 33 Regiment and the protection parties of the logistic units.

The haul of weapons, munitions and ammunition found was bigger than anything ever found by an Australian unit. In the caches, workshops and hospital area, were stocks of food, tools, typewriters, sewing machines, cloth, communications equipment, motors and even three oxen. Of great significance were huge quantities of drugs, medical and dental supplies captured. The finds were of such significance that the receiving authority, the RVN-US Material Exploitation Centre, wrote the following special and complimentary letter to the battalion.

1. *Two large caches of captured enemy medical supplies were forwarded to the Combined Material Exploitation Centre during the period 12-15 January 1970. Their combined weight was 2400 pounds (1100 kilograms) and they represented the largest individual medical caches ever received by CMEC.*
2. *The cache contained many of the enemy's three most common pharmaceuticals; antimalarials, vitamins, antibiotics. These were of French origin, typical in III Corps, 260 bottles of intravenous fluids (predominately West German), 256 bottles of melange, 130 IV sets, 149 ampules of Thipental (a general anaesthetic ½ French, ½ Communist Chinese), and a large amount of novacaine (sic) all indicate that the caches came from a general hospital where a considerable amount of surgery took place. Of particular significance were the 78,000 dosage units of US manufacture. Although this is small compared to the total cache, only 18,766 dosage units were received by CMEC in the whole of 1969. Approximately one fifth of 78,600 were antimalarials; the rest were antibiotics. Several additions were made to our medical trademarks file when these were compared to our captured data files.*
3. *Please express our sincere gratitude to the units and individuals involved in the capturing, collecting and shipping of these medical supplies. The work is greatly appreciated and worthwhile as it helps to provide better and broader understanding of the enemy's medical supply sources, procurement capabilities, and an insight into the Viet Cong's practice of medicine.*

The battalion suffered four fatal casualties and a total of nine wounded, all Australian. The cost to the enemy was 22 killed, five wounded and one killed by mortar fire. Prisoners numbered 21, of whom 14 had previously been wounded patients of the K76A Hospital. Five civilians were detained, probably working for the VC in the area.

Most of the patients from the hospitals, in frightful condition, many amputees, gangrenous and filthy, all starving, fled and attempted to fight as individuals. Though these men were armed and continued to fire, they were hunted down by the patrols and forced to surrender. In a great display of courage and discipline, not one of the enemy wounded was killed in what must have been very challenging situations. If that was not enough, many of the wounded, smelling indescribably, with maggots dropping from their wounds, were carried to the helicopter pad in the arms of their recent adversaries. For some this meant a trip of several hundred feet up the nearly vertical side of the re-entrant to a large rock, the only relatively clear spot for the helicopter to touch down. With superb skill, the RAAF pilot rested one skid on the rock over the yawning gap while the patients were loaded and taken away. At another site, the scene was repeated as the RAAF pilots could only get down by resting one skid on a large log lying on the broken ground.

Operation Marsden visited a catastrophic defeat of strategic proportion on the enemy. His entire logistic base facility for a large and important area of the East coast of the country had been smashed, the carefully accumulated and valuable bulk stocks removed or destroyed, the logistic units shattered. Furthermore, the magnitude of this defeat must have soon become widely known to the population of the affected provinces. In every way, it had to be a fitting culmination to the Australian and New

Zealand efforts in Phuoc Tuy. The journey, which began at Long Tan, had now concluded. The sustained efforts of 6 RAR/NZ (ANZAC) and the RAAF in the physically demanding, often dangerous, terrain and the gallantry displayed throughout, brought great credit to their nations and their respective services and further lustre to the great ANZAC tradition. It is strongly recommended the battle Honour “*Nui May Tao*” be awarded for this action and that it be emblazoned on the Regimental Colours of the Royal Australian Regiment.

The preceding article by Major-General Butler accurately states the facts in his meticulous, measured tone. There are some points that could be added to place what he states in a slightly different perspective:

- Operation Ross (14 Oct 1969 – 30 Nov 1969) was immediately followed by Operation Marsden (29 Nov 1969 – 28 Dec 1969). This resulted in two and a half months of non-stop operations in the field without respite. The long time in the field was to allow the replacement of 9RAR with 8RAR.
- Operation Marsden effectively ceased on Christmas Eve, 1969. This time of the year alone goes some way to explain why the post operational reports were brief. The men were in a Christmas mood. The sheer exhaustion of the men after two and a half months of continuous operations and the increased heat of the coming dry season explains the rest.
- Figures in themselves do not necessarily paint a picture. True, in Operation Marsden, 6RAR/NZ (ANZAC) lost 4 KIA. However three of these were incurred by 3Pl A Coy in one incident on the 19th December 1969, where they lost the forward scout and section commander of the lead section, plus the platoon commander. This same platoon lost its first platoon commander and one of its NCOs, plus eighteen wounded, in a mine explosion on 21 July 1969. Yet, despite their misfortune, on the very next day (20th December 1969), the same platoon captured one enemy POW. On the following day (21st December 1969), this same platoon captured a further two enemy POWs. Operating effectively despite on-going adversities was indicative of the mettle of the Sixth Battalion soldier. The discipline, dedication, devotion to duty, doggedness and decency show how the *crème de la crème* act in battle. What restraint, and this just seven months after My Lai (another Army, different values, disastrous results).
- The figures on enemy casualties during Operation Marsden show that the 22 KIAs were evenly balanced by 21 POWs. Capturing so many prisoners in such an environment demanded great soldiering skills, indicative of the unit’s professionalism. Magnanimous in victory. Marsden marked the halfway point of

the unit's second tour of duty. Sound leadership had been complemented by thorough preparation and planning. Friend and foe alike saw they were beside what was later described by Brigadier SP Weir, DSO, MC as "..... the best battalion to ever serve in the Task Force" (Introduction to 'We Too Were ANZACS' by Lieutenant Colonel Brian Avery). It is interesting that the Long Tan Cross is one of only two foreign war memorials tolerated in Vietnam. More so in that it is the only one to remember a foreign victory (by 6RAR). It says something of the respect the former enemy has for the Australian soldiers, in particular 6RAR.

One final reason why Operation Marsden hasn't been better appreciated, is that it didn't particularly jump out and capture people's attention. Less than 5 Australian KIAs kept it off the front page of the newspapers. In the same way that Everest doesn't stand out when surrounded by peaks of similar heights, Operation Marsden suffers because of the successful operations preceding and following it:

- Operation Lavarack, the introductory operation that was meant to quietly introduce the battalion to the war zone, but ended up with the most intensive fighting as the enemy were mauled enroute to Binh Ba and decimated on their retreat from that action. The operation accounted for more than 100 enemy dead, 22 in the biggest ambush by Australian forces during the Vietnam War.
- The mine warfare during Operation Mundingburra failed to prevent 6RAR/NZ (ANZAC) from pushing the VC out of the civilian areas of the Minh Dam Secret Zone, and reopening the Dinh Co monastery for worshippers.
- Operation Townsville which resulted in one of the greatest intelligence coups of the war with the capture of the 'One Time Use' cipher pads. Just 20 days later, the decision was made to invade the Parrot's Beak area of Cambodia, helped by the ability to locate enemy units and intentions by deciphering their radio communications, unbeknown to them.

In the end, Nui May Tao deserves to become a Battle Honour, with its superb planning, execution and results; it is reminiscent of Monash at Hamel or Hassett at Maryang San.

The results of Operation Marsden were not a just a 'flash in the pan', rather they portrayed how 6RAR/NZ (ANZAC) conducted the business of war as "the best battalion to ever serve in the Task Force".