

OPERATION BRIBIE - 17/18 FEB 1967
FROM PERSPECTIVE OF COMMANDER 9 PLATOON C COMPANY

C Coy (Charlie Company) was scheduled to be the ready reaction company on 17th Feb 1967, so the Coy was kept at a state of preparation called '15 min reaction time', which meant the coy was to be prepared to move at 15 minutes notice.

At 1100hrs the notice came for C Coy to move and the rest of the Bn to go to 15 min notice. Advice given was that we were required to assist a force from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) which was in the area between Dat Do and the Long Hai Mountains.

At 1200hrs C Coy left the Task Force (ATF) mounted on Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) from A Squadron 3rd Cavalry (A Sqn 3 Cav).

The overall plan was for 6 Battalion (6 Bn) to provide a cut off of any enemy who may withdraw towards the North from the ARVN action occurring somewhere down near Lang Phuoc Hai. Basically, the plan was for a helicopter assault into a Landing Zone (LZ) centre of which was Grid Reference (GR) 542572 and from here the Bn would set up a blocking formation. C Coy and the Sqn of APCs were to secure the LZ. There was no intelligence about possible enemy in the vicinity of the LZ and no operations had been conducted in the area but undoubtedly SAS patrols would have been active through the area at some time.

The chosen LZ was between 'The Light Green' and 'The Long Green', so named from the image on the 'Picto' Maps provided through American sources. These maps were composite maps of overlapping coloured photographs and the thicker foliage showed up as a darker green colour.

In the area of interest for Op Bribie there were two patches of forest extending like 'fingers' down towards the south west from a heavily forested area in the north. The 'finger' to the west was called 'The Light Green' as it was a lighter shade of green, and the larger mass of forest to the east was called 'The Long Green' as it presented a darker shade of green, indicating heavier forestation and it was 'longer' than the 'Light Green'. Average distances between the two 'Greens' was about 250 yards. The area was not jungle but in places it was thick and difficult to move through. For the most part, infantry would have little trouble moving through the area. The soil was sandy. Both 'The Long Green' and 'The Light Green' were slightly higher (by only about one or two yards) than the surrounding country and there had been no attempt by the locals to use them for anything other than timber collecting, though the land around them and between them had at some stage been under cultivation.

The Bn LZ was in the clearing, to the north between the 'two greens' where they were about 400 yards apart. C Coy with A Sqn 3 Cav was to get to and secure the LZ for the air insertion of the rest of the Bn. The insertion would be in four waves. Leading wave was to be A Coy, then B Coy, then Bn HQ and then D Coy was to come in on the last wave. D Coy had suffered considerable losses on 6 Feb due to 'friendly arty fire' so D Coy was to be the reserve Coy for the day. There were not enough helicopters for the whole Bn to be lifted in to the LZ at the same time so the helicopters had to return to Nui Dat to pick up each wave and, if necessary, to refuel.

In advance of the planned air assault, C Coy mounted in APCs moved from the TF, down the road through Baria (Xa Phuoc Le), through Xa Lang Dien, then parallel to and to the north of route 326 through the dry paddies to Xa Hoi My. All the time in full view of the local population who if any were enemy then they would not have known of our intentions at that stage.

This trip across the dry paddies was probably the worst 'ride' I have ever had. The pace we were travelling indicated there was a sense of urgency to get to the LZ so we motored at high speed across the paddies in an open formation.

This large expanse of dry paddy fields was divided into smaller fields by paddy bunds, these bunds were small walls of earth, about 18 inches high and about 2-3 feet across. The bunds ran in straight lines dividing the large fields into smaller areas. In 'the wet' the fields filled with water and the local people planted their rice in these individual 'lots'. It was now the dry season so the whole area was dry ground with just dry stubble of the rice stalks and visibility was clear for hundreds of yards.

Encountering these bunds can be a nasty experience for troops mounted in the APCs while motoring at anything but a walking pace. The front drive sprockets on each side of the APC is fixed, that is they do not have shock absorbers, so when the front of the APC hits these bunds at speed the shock which goes through the vehicle can be uncomfortable to the mounted troops. Inside the vehicle the mounted troops cannot see the approaching bund so are unable to know when to brace for the shock. The only indication may be the driver slowing the speed in the few moments before the vehicle hits the bund. After the initial shock of hitting the bund, the tracked APC then climbs up and over the bund and when the vehicle has advanced to where the major mass of the APC is over the bund, gravity takes over and the front of the vehicle crashes down on the front of the tracks, then moves forward until the rear drive sprockets hit the bund. The rear sprocket is also fixed so another jolt is received when that hits what remains of the bund. At least, after the first shock the mounted troops could brace themselves for the next two.

This process of crashing through the bunds caused a lot of damage to the bunds and no doubt when the local villages had to repair their bunds before the next wet season (rice planting time) they would not have thought much of the Australians who did the damage. Crashing through the bunds gave the occupants of the vehicle a very uncomfortable ride.

The APC Sqn was in very open formation so each APC caused its individual damage to the paddy bunds. I asked the commander of the vehicle I was travelling in, - why didn't the APC Sqn travel in single file so each vehicle would cross the bund at the same place as the vehicle or vehicles ahead? I said that after about two or three vehicles had crossed at the same place the bund would have almost been destroyed resulting in a 'smoother' ride for the troops on board and less damage to the locals' paddy bunds.

His reply was that they were in a tactical formation to reduce probability of mines or an attack from the enemy. As we were travelling through wide open flat fields with visibility for hundreds of yards I couldn't quite see the reasoning so we continued to bash our way through the paddy bunds. It was one of those times when I would rather have walked than be on board those bone crunching machines.

At Xa Hoi My we turned to the north and travelled along the western side of the 'Long Green'. On the western side of the Long Green, inside the tree line there was a sandy track which probably had been made by locals collecting fire wood, charcoal burners, and very probably it was a main supply route for enemy moving North/South (or South/North). This sandy track can be seen on the picto map.

9 Platoon C Coy was mounted on the leading APCs, heading roughly north east following this track. Orders were given by radio to halt when the APC in which I was travelling was at about GR 533562 (the remainder of the Coy/APCs were spread out behind me for about 300 yards). The reason given for this stop was that one of the APCs further back had 'thrown a track' which would take about half an hour to repair.

*Note: After reading the article about Op Bribie printed in the Feb 2012 edition of 'Stand To', I spoke with Brian McFarlane about that incident and asked him if he could remember exactly why we stopped. He said he couldn't remember but thought it may have been necessary for us to wait for our supporting artillery to be moved forward to ensure we were in range for supporting fire should we need it. I thought that explanation a bit unlikely as when we stopped we were at that time only a few hundred yards from the LZ. If we hadn't stopped we would have been at the LZ only a few minutes later and the important point is that very soon after we were due to arrive at the LZ we could expect the first wave from A Coy to arrive by helicopter. One would therefore presume that planning for the operation would have included movement of the guns to ensure that support would have been available at any time, should it be needed. Whatever the cause, we stopped for about half an hour and this time, as will be seen, was critical to the operation.

Whilst we were stopped we dismounted from the APCs and adopted a defensive layout and waited. The Second in Command (2IC) of C Coy, Capt Les Peters came forward and checked out that we had assumed defensive positions and when he came up to me he asked whether I had checked the western fringe of the Long Green. I told him I hadn't so he and I walked about 100yds to the edge of the forest and I was amazed to find that all along the fringe of the clearing, just inside the vegetation there were well prepared weapon pits which gave any one in them a clear view of the open area between 'The Light Green' and 'The Long Green'. The condition of the pits showed that they had been there for some time. Obviously the enemy had prepared these positions to be used if a helicopter air assault was ever made into the area. The number of weapon pits indicated that a large enemy force could be in those pits and any air assault into that open space would have been disastrous. Of course the enemy would have had to have prior knowledge of a planned Air Assault. We suspected that the ARVN contained many informants and it was for that reason we Australians rarely gave any indication of our Operational Plans to ARVN in advance of the Op commencing.

Eventually the order came for us to resume the move to the LZ. We had barely gone about 20 yards before we heard the helicopters approaching the LZ coming from South East to North East. They were flying up the clearing between 'The Long Green' and 'The Light Green'. Thanks to the time we lost during our stop, the air assault would get to the LZ before we had secured it. The noise of the helicopters would have masked the noise made by the APCs as we moved up to cover the assaulting coy (A Coy). By the time troops had dismounted and the helicopters from first wave started to move off we were almost to the LZ and most likely any enemy would have been unaware of our presence.

A Coy dismounted from the helicopters using normal drills, the helicopters moved on to go and collect the next wave. A Coy moved into the wooded 'Long Green' to the South of the LZ and at about the same time C Coy began arriving in the area. Since A Coy had not received any fire during the insertion it was obvious that the LZ was 'clear' and did not require C Coy and the APC Sqn to secure it.

The map shows a light green area which runs roughly SW/NE from about GR 548572 to about GR 555567. The lighter colour shows it is not wooded and in fact it was a small swamp. The water was only about ½ to 1 ½ feet deep and contained reeds growing about a foot above the water. The bottom of the swamp was sandy and firm. C Coy and the APC Sqn moved into this area and lined up facing towards the area which A Coy had headed towards.

Looking at the map shown on Page 8 of the Feb 2012 issue of 'Stand To' one can see that this placed C Coy and the APC Sqn in extended line on an almost perfect start line from which to assault the enemy position to the NE, with A Coy giving fire support on our left flank. However we waited, no orders had been given for this contingency (and no one on the ground was prepared to make a decision). By this time A Coy had made contact and obviously from the volume of fire, A Coy was in what we called a 'real shit fight'.

Sitting line abreast in the swamp C Coy and 3 Sqn were receiving quite a volume of 'overs' from the fire fight. "Overs" is the term used for bullets fired at someone else but which then carry on into someone who was not the intended target. The bullets can be in normal flight, or they can be ricochets or deflected rounds, all noisy and all potentially dangerous.

The APC vehicles carry two radios, one is used for internal Sqn communications and the other is usually set to the frequency of the troops who the APCs are supporting. In this case, that second radio on the APCs was set to the 6 Bn command frequency. My company commander, Maj Brian McFarlane was on the APC to my immediate right, no more than 20 yards away and as I could hear him quite clearly I had my radio operator switch my platoon radio to the frequency used by either A Coy or B Coy. That way I could hear what was going on with A Coy or B Coy alternatively, Bn HQ, A Sqn Net and my company commander. Capt Les Peters came up to me, we discussed the situation and my final assessment to him was 'we have got to get in there, we are in formation, with supporting APCs ready to go into the attack and we were wasting time and possibly lives'. Capt Peters agreed with me, but the decision was not ours so we sat and listened to the fight.

More of the Bn continued to arrive in helicopters. With the arrival of Bn HQ, the CO and his Ops Offr began planning what course to take. B Coy arrived and was committed to assault from the NE with A Coy providing fire support on their left flank. B Coy ran into very heavily defended enemy positions and was forced to halt. I heard the Pl Comds desperately seeking a decision on whether or not they were to try and fight through the enemy or whether they should withdraw but as no direction was forthcoming I couldn't listen in on that Coy anymore so switched back to A Coy. Still, while all this battle was going on, C Coy and the APC Sqn sat in the swamp. One discussion which supposedly went on which I did not hear was firstly from the Bn Comd (Lt Col Colin 'Mousey' Townsend) to OC A Coy (Maj 'Obie' O'Brien) about whether or not APCs could assault through the area nor did I hear OC A Coy ask one of his Pl Comds (2Lt G Ackland) whether the country was suitable for APCs to assault through. Apparently 2Lt Ackland replied that the vegetation was too thick for APCs to pass through and presumably the Bn Comd therefore ruled out the option of an assault by C Coy supported by 3 Sqn.

I did hear the Bn Comd ask OC A Coy about the enemy fire he was receiving and OC A Coy replied that he was 'receiving heavy machine gun fire'. The Bn Comd then asked OC A Coy whether he was receiving fire from heavy machine guns or heavy fire from normal section type machine guns. OC A Coy's reply was 'they are only small bullets but there is a f....g lot of them'. That semi-humorous reply made me laugh so hard I nearly fell off the APC I was sitting on.

*Years later I asked 'Obie' O'Brien about his reply, he denied that it was him who said it but he did admit that he had heard somebody say it.

Eventually C Coy was ordered to dismount from the APCs (most of the soldiers already had dismounted despite the 'overs') and the order was for C Coy to move down the swamp on the NE side to about GR 533566 then head SE to get on the SE side behind the enemy then dig in and be in position to cut off any enemy attempting to withdraw from the position under assault by A & B Coys.

C Coy set out on the given task with 9 Platoon leading. As we moved towards the area where we were to set up the block on the possible enemy withdrawal route the volume of 'overs' increased. About half way towards the nominated blocking area, the OC (Maj Brian McFarlane) gave instructions over the company radio net that 7 Pl was to take over the role of point platoon. I gave orders for 9 Pl to stop and wait for 7 Pl to move through and take up the lead. At that time the Platoon Commander of 7 Pl was Lt Paul Mench and as he passed me he asked if I thought that some of the 'overs' were coming just a bit too close. I said that I doubted that the enemy had any snipers elevated enough to see us but just in case there were snipers I suggested he should have his radio operator change to the 'combat aerial' on his radio as he could be identifying himself and thus drawing fire if the enemy could see us.

The 77 radio set came with two aerials, one of short lengths that fitted together to provide an aerial about 10 feet long which was annoying in close vegetation as it caught on overhead foliage and caused the radio operator unnecessary annoyance. The other aerial was short and more flexible, about 3 feet long, and in the 'combat role' the operator bent the aerial down the side of his pack and fixed it into this position. The range of the radio was probably reduced with the aerial in this position, however in combat the required range is quite short. The advantage of the radio in 'combat role' was that the radio operator looked just like any other soldier with a pack on his back, thus not letting the enemy know he was the radio operator and therefore the other man closest to him was probably the platoon commander. If snipers are in the equation then they would look for clues to identify the most suitable targets ie Pl Comds and Radio Ops.

Lt Mench told his radio operator to adjust his aerial and 7 Pl took up the lead. C Coy reached the position where we were to deploy, behind the enemy, mainly to his south and with 9 Pl across the sandy track which can be seen on the picto map. 9 Pl was given the role of taking the left flank of the position and we were told to dig in. At this time 9 Pl was directly to the south of the enemy position and we were receiving quite a lot of the 'overs' from the fight going on to our north and north east. I deployed the platoon and began going from man to man and explaining to each one where the enemy were, where other members of 9 Pl were and where the rest of C Coy were located. I gave arcs of fire and where we expected the enemy might appear if he attempted to withdraw through us.

My men had not begun to dig in at this stage as I was adjusting positions to achieve the best deployment to meet the expected enemy reaction. One of my men, Eddy Williams, a TSI National Serviceman, was an excellent machine gunner. Eddy had a position where he could provide enfilade fire from his M60 machine gun straight across in front of another section. I was particularly detailed to Eddy as I didn't want him to fire into the position of that section and we were thinking that the enemy might try to hold out until dark and then withdraw, thus making things a bit more difficult for us. I can recall that Eddy was lying down behind his gun while I knelt beside him and explained his role, responsibilities and his arcs of fire. He looked up at me and said, 'Geese you're brave skipper' and I asked him why, then he said 'they're shooting at us' so I said 'no they're not Eddy, those are just 'overs''. At which stage one of those 'overs' passed just over my left shoulder, I actually saw it hit the sandy ground further up the track. My reaction was automatic and in about one thousandths of a second I was down on the ground with Eddy eye ball to eye ball. I probably totally destroyed any thoughts Eddy may have had about my level of bravery.

We had just reached the stage where I was satisfied with the deployment and was about to tell my platoon to dig in when the Coy Comd came up on the radio to all platoons telling them there had been a change of plan and the company was to move back via the route by which we had moved into the position and we would get new orders back at the LZ. I was thoroughly 'pissed off'. We were in position to destroy this enemy which we assumed to be about company strength. We had never had a better opportunity to destroy a large force with the whole of the Bn now deployed virtually surrounding the enemy and now, we were to open the back door so he could escape!

I was so annoyed that I could not remember the move back to the edge of the scrub just to the west of the LZ. Here we were told that the Task Force Comd had directed that the Bn was to return to Nui Dat. I couldn't believe it. We had at that stage two companies in contact with the enemy, they had wounded and possibly dead and we were just supposed to break contact, act as if nothing had happened and go home! C Coy (less the APCs) had the task of securing the LZ on the West & Northern side for the rest of the Bn to be lifted out by helicopters. C Coy would be last out.

We moved into positions from which we could secure the LZ and waited. We were still receiving some 'overs' but fortunately the area had at one time been cultivated and there were old paddy bunds so we used them for protection from the 'overs'. We waited, again. Apparently during this time the Bn Comd was in discussion with the Task Force Comd and successfully argued that withdrawal of the Bn was not possible at that stage.

There is one incident that occurred during this waiting which I must relate. Most of us had our heads down but we would occasionally look over the paddy to where the fighting was occurring. At one stage I heard one of my platoon call out that 'the Shark is under fire'. The 'Shark' was the nick-name the soldiers had for the Bn RSM – WO 1 George Chinn DCM. George was an excellent soldier; he had previously served in SAS and in South Vietnam on the Australian Army Training Team where he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM). The highest award any serviceman can receive is of course the Victoria Cross (VC) but for Other Ranks ie non officer rank, the highest award after the VC is the DCM. George did his job at all times at only one level – that was perfectly. (I later served with him at the Infantry Centre in 1969, but that is another story).

Back to the 'Shark' under fire. I looked up and saw that George was over near the edge of the clearing closest to the enemy position and apparently an enemy had decided to target him, he was running towards cover to gain protection from the enemy fire. At this stage all of my soldiers had their heads over the top of the bund watching, one of my soldiers said 'hope he doesn't make it', then others started giving odds on whether he would make it. This interlude lasted for only a short time as George successfully ran into cover. But still we waited.

Then orders were received that C Coy would move back into the area of scrub where we were when A Coy first came under enemy fire and establish a defensive position. We moved back. We began to establish a defensive Coy Position the centre of which was at GR 538574.

At this stage Les Peters came up to me and filled me in the current plan and on what had occurred. The current plan was that the APC Sqn would assault through B Coy to provide covering fire so B coy could withdraw, bringing their casualties back in the APCs. A Coy would provide covering fire then withdraw at the same time as the APCs. Also, Les Peters advised that at some stage the Task Force Commander received intelligence reports that the Task Force was about to be attacked, possibly that night, 17th Feb. The Task Force Commander (Brig S Graham) had a problem. Some of 5 RAR were deployed outside the Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) and with 6 RAR deployed he had very few combat soldiers to defend the TF.

The TF Comd wanted 6 RAR back in the TF Base before dark but the CO 6 RAR (Lt Col Townsend) apparently told the TF Comd that as he had two companies in close combat, with casualties, he was not about to just pull out and come home. Apparently the final decision was that steps would be taken to extract the companies in combat (A & B Coys), recover their casualties, establish a Bn defensive position in the close proximity to the enemy and plan to execute a battalion attack on the enemy the next day.

While Les and I were talking and he was briefing me on the current plan we watched the APCs line up and begin their assault. Within a minute or so after we lost sight of the APCs in the foliage there was the typical BANG, BANG of a recoilless rifle (RCL) firing a round. The first bang was the weapon being fired and the second BANG was the sound of the explosive round hitting the target. Les and I looked at each other in disbelief and both said "RCL". That changed the equation a bit. We now knew that we most likely were facing an enemy Support Company which normally had more than one RCL. The APCs were now in trouble.

We later learned that the round hit the front glacis plate of an APC; knocking it out with loss of mobility ie the engine was severely damaged.

The driver of the APC was killed instantly. Later advice was that he was driving with his seat 'up' and his head out of the driver's hatch no doubt so that he would have better visibility. When the RCL round exploded not far from his head the explosive shock wave severed his head from his body, killing him instantly and his headless body fell back into the now stationary APC.

A Coy, B Coy and the APCs continued with the withdrawal. The decision was made to leave the damaged APC. The driver's body, radios, weapons, ammo and anything that could be removed was extracted and fuel was thrown into the vehicle and it was set alight. C Coy continued to dig in. As the other companies arrived in the Bn defensive area they were allotted areas of responsibility, deployed and began to dig in. At this stage the APCs lined up facing in towards the enemy and fired a lot of 50 cal ammo into the area. Artillery fire was called in and this ceased to allow an airstrike to go in. C Coy had a 'ring side seat' as the C Coy area of responsibility was facing directly towards the enemy position. The airstrike came in and amongst the ordnance that was delivered into the enemy position was napalm. Then all went quiet except for the helicopters extracting the casualties back to 36th Evacuation hospital in Vung Tau.

I was standing at the edge of the vegetation facing towards the enemy position when I heard "What's up with you McQuire, are you chicken". I looked around and standing a few feet away was the Bn Comd (Lt Col Townsend). I acknowledged his presence and asked him what he meant, with which he smiled and thrust a shoulder towards me. I noticed he was wearing his brass rank on his shoulder boards, along with the nice shiny "AUSTRALIA" badges, all gleaming in the light. I on the other hand never wore my rank into the field, not even the slide on cloth badges of rank. We had a bit of a chuckle and he moved on, possibly having a good look at the defensive layout.

A & B Coys continued to deploy within the Bn defensive loc and we learnt via the 'grapevine' that there had been quite a few casualties, including many killed in action (KIA). But we did not know the exact details at this stage.

Just before last light OC C Coy (Maj Brian McFarlane) sent word for Pl Comds to be ready as he wanted to hold an Operations Group ('O Gp'). When the O Gp was held we were to learn that on the next day – 18 Feb, the Bn would assault the enemy position. Plan was to move via the route C Coy had taken on 17th to get behind the enemy position. When in position we would form up into assault formation, C Coy on the left, D coy on the right, A Coy in reserve with B Coy left out of battle (LOB) due to the mauling it had taken on 17th. My diary for that day states: "Moved to GR 537567 to start line, formed up, advanced on 870 mls. 9 Pl had left flank of the assault wave. Passed through en position, saw a few dead, many packs etc. 7 Pl on right flank of C Coy found B Coy's 'dead' which had been left behind when B Coy withdrew on 17th, one of whom was still alive* 9Pl secured area as 7 & 8 Pls did a search of the area. Then moved back to Bn position of night before and formed a perimeter. Extracted back to TF at 1730hrs. Final tally; Aust; 8 dead 24 WIA. VC; 6 dead. Of Aust casualties 2 KIA and 8 WIA were from our own Arty. Estimate at least 30 VC KIA".

*One of the supposedly dead B Coy members was L/Cpl Otway who was very much alive and very relieved. Apparently he was wounded in a thigh in the initial assault by B coy. When shot he had fallen and found he was within about 15-20 yards from the enemy bunker. During the fire fight bullets went over him in both directions. He realised that he could not reach any cover and if he moved the enemy machine gunner in the bunker would kill him before he could do anything. So he just lay 'dogo' while the fight went on. When the other members of B coy were withdrawn they tried to recover all their casualties but could not get to some, including L/Cpl Otway, as the 'bodies' were all in the enemy killing ground. The members of B coy called out to L/Cpl Otway but he knew if he moved or answered he would be dead so his mates assumed him to be dead. Even after the withdrawal of B Coy L/Cpl Otway lay dogo because the enemy were still active, he reported he heard them moving about but he pretended to be dead. Fortunately the enemy showed no interest in the bodies of the Australians which were lying in the enemy killing ground.

It must have been terrifying for L/Cpl Otway to be in the position when the APCs fired 50 cal ammo into the enemy position, the artillery shelled the position and the airstrike delivered iron bombs and napalm. He survived all this and received only another wound through his other thigh.

Apparently the enemy did not evacuate their positions until after dark. The burnt out APC was recovered the next day and the enemy had written a few comments on the side of the APC. As the burnt out APC would have been hot for quite a while, this indicates the enemy wrote the comments after dark by which the APC would have cooled.

I did manage to get a look into a couple of the enemy bunkers and in addition to the fact that they were perfectly constructed, what astounded me was that I could not find even a brass cartridge case, even in the sand of the bunker floors. The enemy must have gone to great lengths to collect everything before they withdrew - but they left 6 bodies of their dead?

A few observations about the assault.

After the assault had started and we had advanced about 100 yards towards the enemy, OC C Coy (Maj Brian McFarlane) gave the order 'C Coy, fix bayonets'. I turned and looked at my Pl Sgt, who at that stage was Cpl Mal Black; he returned my questioning look and said "I think there is one in the Pl Sir". None of us who carried the SLR (including me) ever carried the bayonet which was considered a fairly useless bit of equipment. We all carried a good knife and a machete, but not the SLR Bayonet. I didn't ask Mal who it was he thought had the one bayonet. We ignored the Coy Comd's order to fix bayonets.

The second thing I noticed during the assault was that the foliage of the trees was dripping with unburnt napalm. We couldn't help but get it on our clothes so I hoped nothing would start a fire. I had only ever observed demonstration napalm strikes or seen it on film. On reflection I recall that demonstrations and films always had the target in open ground where the napalm fireball can ignite as it rolls over the target. Now I had learnt that the effect of napalm is limited in just close vegetation, so it would be less effective in jungle.

The third thing I noticed was that the vegetation was marginal in relation to whether or not the APCs could have advanced through it. In places it was thick. Tanks would have been able to penetrate without any problems. The APCs would have had problems, but determined crewmen undoubtedly could have found a way through remembering that they would be preceded by infantry moving at normal advance pace.

In summary, OP Bribie was a disaster which started long before 17 Feb 1967.

The First Australian Task Force (1 ATF) was deployed into Viet Nam to perform as a Brigade. A Brigade is a balanced force the organisation of which has been considered and planned and determined that it must consist of three Infantry battalions with all the required supporting elements. 1 ATF was deployed with only two infantry battalions and no heavy armour. For a brigade to be effective it must have three infantry battalions plus all required support. 1 ATF had only two infantry battalions and no heavy armour; therefore it could not be effective. But the argument is; it was a Task Force, not a Brigade. A Task Force is just that, a force arranged to complete a particular task.

The TF Comd would always face the problem of not enough infantry and no heavy armour. This was always a limiting factor in all planning.

In the time scale of Op Bribie, the TF Comd had been warned of a possible attack on the TF base on the night of 17th Feb. He deployed 6 Bn on what was thought to be a time limited task and he expected 6 Bn to be back within the TF by the end of the day. There was no intelligence concerning the possibility of enemy in the area. 6 Bn landed almost right on top of at least a company of enemy, possibly the support company and so became embroiled in a fight. Now Comd 6 Bn was torn in two directions, the TF Comd was telling him to pull out and he, the Bn Comd had A & B Coys of 6 Bn heavily committed in a fight. In theory he should commit one of his remaining companies C or D. But someone had to secure an LZ for the helicopter extraction to obey the TF Comd. Hence C Coy were never committed whilst the Bn Comd tried to obey his instructions to return to the TF Base and at the same time extricate A & B Coys from the situation. Result: the enemy escaped and that should not have happened. We had the opportunity to destroy them and that opportunity was denied by not enough Infantry in the Task Force and no heavy armour.

IF we had had heavy armour ie tanks, with us that day and **IF** the Bn Comd had not been trying to do two things at once and without a time restriction we would have sealed off and destroyed that enemy force most likely with less casualties than we suffered.