

A GUN SERGEANTS RECOLLECTIONS OF LONG TAN - from the gun end.

by Jim King

At approximately 1330 hrs on the 18th August 1966, 105 Field Battery returned to their base camp from an alternative position within the task force area where they had been supporting an operation further north.

The previous night at about 0100hrs, 1 ATF was mortared and 105 BTY was involved in counter battery fire against the enemy for the remainder of the night

The gunners were looking forward to getting established in the main gun position so rest periods could be organised. This was not to occur.

At about 1530hrs we had just finished the normal routines such as bringing the guns back into action and replenishing the ammunition which had been fired the previous night when we heard the Kiwi Bty open up. We guessed from the rate of fire they were on to something and when "Fire mission Regiment" came over the Tannoy system we knew it was bigger than normal.

During the next three hours the battle raged and the gunners faced numerous problems on the gun line, problems which would be a real test of character and professionalism.

The first of these problems was torrential rain, the like of which we had never encountered before. It was soon after the engagement commenced that the sky just opened up and it poured rain with lightning flashing everywhere. A bolt of lightning cut the lines to a Tannoy system (where orders are passed from the Command Post to the guns), this resulted in orders having to be shouted in relays to the gun platforms until the damage was repaired.

Another bolt of lightning struck lines which caused the switch board operator to be thrown across the exchange and a member of a gun detachment was similarly stunned by yet another lightning bolt.

The combination of rain and lightning caused 105 Bty's Tannoy system to short circuit which resulted in an open line from the Command Post to the guns. The gun detachments could hear what was going on "up front" via an Angra 39 in the Command Post. I remember somebody saying "drop 50" and someone else saying that the rounds would be on their heads if this occurred. There were some choice words being said over the radio when I suddenly realised just how close we were firing in front of our own troops.

With that in mind I remember telling my detachment to make sure their laying and corrections were "spot on" as this was really close. For the rest of the battle, accuracy was paramount in our minds.

The second problem we faced was with gun aiming points (GAP's) and sights, made worse with the continuing rain.

The rain was so heavy that all guns lost their GAP's during the battle, This problem was compounded by a smoky haze caused by the cordite fumes not dispersing from the gun position. To keep firing my gun we finished up using a bicycle torch attached to a star picket as a GAP. I know the other guns used the same or similar GAP's.

In the 11 months 105 Bty had been in Vietnam the guns had continual problems with condensation fogging up their sights. Each gun had three sights, one in use, one as a spare while the other sight was in a local pattern humidity box to dry out. During the battle all sights were used on the gun position

including the spare sights, normally kept in the "Q" store. Small petrol stoves were used in metal ammunition boxes where the sights were placed to help dry them out quickly.

To compound the problem further the battery had received new Canadian sights two months before the battle which required different "drills" to the Italian sights we also used. Both types were in use during the battle and it was only through the experience and skill of the gunners that no mistakes were made.

Our third problem was ammunition. The ammunition issued by the US Army was unreliable. If firing different "lot numbers" at the same time, the fall of shot could have a depth in excess of 400 metres.

105 Bty had adopted the policy of having two different types of ammunition, "close target" where the one batch of a lot number was used by all guns when firing in support of our own troops and "H and I" which were small batches of lot numbers and different weighted projectiles, used to harass "Charlie" by firing at irregular intervals to keep him wondering where the next round was going to fall.

It was fortunate we had adhered to our routine of maintaining our stocks of ammunition on the gun line. We had replenished the ammunition used the previous night and each gun had 100 rounds of "close target" ammunition when "fire mission Regiment" was called.

It was soon realised that with the number of "ten rounds, fire for effect" and the periods of "continuous fire" which went for 10 to 12 minutes at a time, we would soon run out of ammunition. This was reported to the Command Post and a massive ammunition resupply from the ammunition dump to the guns was put into effect. Cooks, clerks, medics, Q staff, RAEME and members of 131 Div Locating bty assisted in resupplying the gun line.

Normally 105mm ammunition has the fuse attached when received. At that time the largest lot number which could be used for close target ammunition at the ammunition dump was "plugged". That is, ammunition without a fuse. This situation meant that the ammunition had to be unboxed, the projectiles removed from their canisters and have the plugs removed. At the same time, boxes of fuses had to be opened and the fuses screwed into the cavity of the projectile left by the removal of the plug. The "helpers" excelled themselves ensuring this was done as quickly as possible under the guidance of the BSM

Other volunteers were loaded with as many rounds as they could carry and raced to the guns in the teeming rain hoping to god they were not going to be struck by a bolt of lightning or slip in the red mud. Some members had to run 80 - 100 metres to reach different guns. This was a feat in itself.

At no time during the three hours did a gun have to stop firing because of a shortage of ammunition. Our ammunition supply was boosted by a Chinook arriving at approximately 0200hrs with a slung load which had to be manhandled from the helipad to the ammunition dump.

Fourthly, we had to contend with toxic gas. Although we had torrential rain there was no wind and the gases from the cordite took its toll on some members on the gun line. A clerk assisting in an ammunition bunker on one gun was overcome by the fumes and passed out. A gun sergeant had to hand over to his bombardier and others were just plain sick. The cordite fumes not dispersing developed a smoky haze around the gun position which made it difficult to breath and as already

stated, made it hard for the gun layers to find their gun aiming points.

Lastly, we had to contend with the problem of fatigue. A gun detachment comprises seven men, yet in all my time in Vietnam I cannot recall having a full detachment on my gun. General duties, strong points, standing patrols, escort duties etc had to be manned.

During the Battle of Long Tan, the Standing Patrol (section strength) had to move out, normally under the control of a Gun Sgt. The Strong Points also had to be manned which further reduced the numbers on the gun line.

Considering most of the members on the gun line had been awake since the mortar attack on the night of 16/17 August, by 0700 hrs the morning of the 19th, most were suffering extreme fatigue.

The ammunition expended during the three hour period was 3198 rounds of 105mm and 242 rounds of 155mm fired by the medium guns. The task of carrying as many rounds as possible to the guns which were dispersed over 100 metres from the ammunition dump in the pouring rain. the resupply by Chinook at 0200 hrs having to be unboxed and stacked, guns being brought back to full ammunition entitlement once again, tidying up the gun positions and removal of spent cartridges and cordite bags, left us, to put it quite bluntly, buggered.

A few days later, when D Coy 6 RAR returned to Nui Dat, Bob Buick, the Pl Sgt of 11 P,1 came over to our gun position and put his hand out to shake mine and said "Thanks mate." To me, that said it all. I was proud to be a gunner.

A great story Jim, thanks for sharing it with us and after 27 years may I also extend a heartfelt "thanks."

Graham Smith