



Memories of a Christmas a Long Time Ago

In 1969, during Operation Marsden, 6RAR/NZ(ANZAC) conquered the 700m massif called Nui May Tao on the border of Phuoc Tuy, Binh Tuy and Long Khanh provinces in South Vietnam. To cover the replacement of 9RAR with 8RAR, Operation Ross (14 Oct 1969 – 30 Nov 1969) rolled into Operation Marsden (29 Nov 1969 – 28 Dec 1969) resulting in two and a half months on operations with no respite.

The Tracker Platoon took the easy way in – helicoptered to the summit of Nui May Tao after it had been secured by A Company. Over the next three weeks we wandered down the mountain and then back up to the summit again. Down the bottom of the mountain, I decided to delay a resupply for a day as I didn't want a hovering helicopter, throwing down tins of one day ration packs through the tall jungle trees, to give our position away. We got the two Bushmen Scouts to forage and find us some bush tucker. I can see now why Vietnamese are short and thin. It is a credit to the discipline of the Tracker Platoon that their OC is still alive.

On the way back up, we were running very low on water. Walking up a creek line at the bottom of a re-entrant, we could hear the water under the cobblestones but couldn't get to it. I knew in the dry season, water came by helicopter. I knew the VC didn't have such a luxurious delivery service. The platoon had two pet VC. Binh was a local VC whereas Tinh was an ex NVA warrant officer platoon commander, with 6 years' experience fighting the war. I called Tinh over, held upside down an empty water bottle, cupped my ear, pointed to the cobblestones and made a hand gesture of running water, then threw up my palms asking how we get to it. Tinh, the wise, looked at me, the platoon commander with disdain, unsheathed his machete and cut a metre length of bamboo (taken between the nodes). One cut was at 45 degrees and he hammered that end into the cobblestones far enough so that water appeared coming out the other end. Just like a tap. He filled his water bottle and then everyone else took turns.

We reached the summit just before everyone else started to leave. It was Christmas Eve and the Battalion was returning to Nui Dat for a well-earned break for Christmas. Well, most of the Battalion. After A Company CHQ departed, the Tracker Platoon was left on top as a “stay behind” party to protect a Mortar section with its two tubes. You couldn’t fit much more on top of Nui May Tao.

Christmas Day 1969 and Santa was nowhere to be seen. It wasn’t lost on the blokes that there was no hot-box lunch for us either this Christmas. Bastards. The rest of 6RAR were scrubbed up, wearing clean clothes, well lubricated and were about to sit down and enjoy a Christmas Dinner. The “lost platoon” started to feel like Robinson Crusoe. I think we posted a helicopter sentry to keep watch for the missing dinner. Night fell and so did our spirits.

The next day, at around lunch time, a lone Huey approached with a Santa on its nose. After a sad and silent night, it was Jingle Bells time. The Huey landed, the hot-boxes were rolled out and a 40 ounce bottle of Bacardi was given to the “officer in charge” with the instruction that every man was to receive his nip of rum, administered by said officer.

A nip of rum doesn’t affect one’s composure, so led astray by my trusty Platoon Sergeant, he suggested that we give all the junior NCOs and prospective NCOs some live mortar fire missions. There were no friendlies for miles and we had plenty of faith that the mortar section could not bomb the summit even if they wanted too. What could go wrong? For once, nothing. A great time was had by all and the mortar section was happy to have a much reduced backload of mortar bombs to deal with.

I think we vacated Nui May Tao on the 28 December 1969. The last non Vietnamese to have ever been on the summit. To this day, the area around Nui May Tao is still a prohibited area.

John ‘Doggy’ Neervoort