

THE SIXTH BATTALION

Extract from the Commemorative address given by MajGen David Butler AO, DSO on the 6th June 2006, at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra)

“The situation for the first operation (Lavarack) was that the Task Force had spent the previous year outside the province engaged in the Tet offensive and the battles which followed. In re-establishing themselves in Phuoc Tuy, the Task Force concentrated their operations in and around the Minh Dam secret zone and the long established enemy base areas in the Long Hai Mountains in the South. The North and North East of the province was empty and quiet and this was where 6RAR/NZ was to be sent for its first operation. If the enemy were to move into positions just North of the Task Force base along Route 2 they would be in position to embarrass the Task Force so obviously committed to the southern area. Additionally there was a well established enemy supply route from the Bien Hoa area to the vast depots and the hospitals in the Nui May Tao transiting through the Courteney Rubber Plantation in the North of Phuoc Tuy. The new battalion chose to operate on the premise that if the enemy were moving it would most likely be in this general area and deployed centrally there.. Guided by a captured enemy track going map 6RAR deployed its 5 companies widely so as to ambush the major junction points. Ideally it would more advantageous, on our first operation, if we had the enemy coming at us in prepared positions. This rather caught the enemy out. When the allies had gone into this area in the past they had only moved through and never stayed.

Within a few days all 5 companies were heavily involved. One company was in contact with 274 Regt on Slope 30, just to the North of the Battalion FSPB. As a result of the battles in Bien Hoa, numerous enemy and their wounded were coming through the Courteney on their way to the hospitals in the May Tao. The companies there were flat out.. As if that was not enough, early one morning in the first week of the operation, a replacement tank coming up Route 2 was fired upon from Binh Ba village. A battalion of 33 Regt had been delayed by our activities in the area and were still in Binh Ba in day light. 6RAR/ NZ was totally committed, all 5 companies were engaged; to disengage a company and move it to Binh Ba would be difficult and time consuming. The release of the company on ready reaction in the Task Force was sought and very promptly D Coy of 5RAR arrived.. There was a delay while the District Chief cleared the village of local people as best he could, which allowed the attacking company to marry up with the tanks and APC. Well deployed and with tanks leading, the reaction coy was committed to the assault. Despite spirited opposition, they fought their way through the village from east to west and prepared to turn round and repeat their assault back towards Route 2. The size and intensity of the opposition made it clear additional troops would be required and a further coy from 5RAR came forward. The growth in the scale and complexity of the Binh Ba operation, at this point, was such that a battalion HQ would have to take over. Command of Binh Ba separately shifted to HQ 5RAR and Lt Col Khan took over in the afternoon. Throughout that whole morning, the Command Post of 6RAR/NZ with 6 companies, separately in contact or with contact imminent, had to manage a complex operation with a demanding, changing fire-plan and then a change of command in mid battle. For all of this to happen in its first week of operations, the Command Post

performed incredibly well. Calmly, quietly and professionally they produced a truly magnificent result, as they continued to do for the rest of the tour and proved one of the great assets of the Battalion.

Subsequently the other bn of 33 Regt was contacted to the NW of Binh Ba several days later. After a fierce engagement the enemy broke and ran from the battlefield in the face of the heavy artillery fire directed against it. They fled North into another 6RAR /NZ coy in ambush and were driven off in disarray. Our signals intercept unit later intercepted a message which censured the CO of this unfortunate bn for his lack of battlefield discipline in breaking and running in daylight. Since the other bn of 33Regt had been smashed by the combined efforts of 5RAR and 6RAR/NZ only days before in Binh Ba, perhaps the regimental commander of 33Regt also received a sharp message. The pity was we didn't intercept it.

The enemy continued to transit our operational area for the rest of the operation. One of our platoons in the Courteney executed the biggest Australian ambush of the war. An extraordinary first operation, coincidentally it was the first time the enemy had returned in strength to the province since Long Tan.. I was to write for the Battalion history: *I do remember very clearly the absolute exhilaration of the whole Battalion when we returned from Lavarack. Every one was happy, we had passed the test, We had faced the best that two enemy regiments could put at us and we had seen them off. More than that, we had driven them out of the province in disarray. We had preserved the hard won reputation gained on the first tour. Maybe we had added a few runs of our own.*

Lavarack was the last of the main force operations and thereafter the Task Force, inline with the change of theatre policy, was committed to Pacification operations.”