

OTHER OPERATIONS

Vietnam 1969-1970

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. The first of these for the Battalion was the very testing Mundingburra operation. during which the enemy, with the experience gained from operating for twelve weeks against the other two battalions of the Task Force in the area of the Minh Dam Secret Zone, set out to fight a mine battle against 6RAR/NZ They set deliberate mine ambushes against the Battalion, generally operating in an entirely different style than previously experienced. The Science Advisor to the ComdAFV, after a detailed study at the time, considered it to be a very difficult operation and, in the end, among the most successful the Task Force had conducted and won. The clearing of the Dinh Co Monastery and its reopening to the devout local people has already been mentioned –a triumph in the pacification battle Of special memory was the great daring and brilliant execution of the company silent attack on those arrogant bullies HQ D445 Bn and their HQ Company. For all involved in the operation it was a cruel time in the mines.

Towards the end of our tour the Battalion had the honour to be chosen to invest the Nui May Tao and attack the logistic units located there. We had been given the opportunity to destroy the base from which the enemy mounted Long Tan and the haven to which he returned after the battle. It was the opportunity to settle some old scores for the Battalion.. Lest we were too eager, our hospital was emptied of patients prior to the beginning of the operation. Nonetheless there was a sinister prospect .The May Tao had cruel reputation .As far as could be ascertained no allied units had ever set foot on its slopes let alone stand on its summit Even the SAS were quickly bundled out whenever they had gone there.. It was not expected to be an easy operation

The country was the most trying we had experienced in the whole tour. Very broken and intersected by precipitous slopes, the re-entrants were so narrow and steep as to be almost impassable .The very sharp, narrow and easily defended ridges often offered the only going. The prospect of engaging a fanatical and well- prepared enemy on this battlefield was daunting. Nonetheless 6RAR/NZ had been chosen to conclude the journey begun at Long Tan. Every Australian and New Zealand soldier who had served in SVN had been involved over the years it had taken to reduce the enemy to this stage. It was not a battle we could walk away from.

The long climb up narrow constrained ridges to the very peak and the series of actions once there were very demanding. The detailed search of the area became a saga of its own as every unit known to have existed in the vast logistic enterprise was slowly revealed. The 200 bed K76A hospital, its operating theatres, pharmacy and dental post. Xuyen Moc Workshop Unit, Xuan Loc District Unit and the Zuan Loc Workshop. The haul of weapons, munitions and ammunition was bigger than anything previously found by an Australian unit .In the caches , workshops and the hospitals 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. They represented the largest medical cache ever received by the Combined Material Exploitation Centre.

While there had been evidence to indicate the enemy was in increasing administrative and logistic difficulty in 1969, it did not suggest the force in the May Tao would be critically short of manpower and supplies. But that is what we found. They were in a parlous state, starving and without adequate medical care. The constant battering from IATF over six years had a more serious effect than we had realized. With our approach most of the hospitals were abandoned by the enemy. The wounded least able to fend for themselves were left behind. Most were in frightful condition, many were amputees, gangrenous and filthy, all starving. They had fled but not very far and were attempting to fight on. Though they were armed and continued to fire on our patrols, they were hunted down and forced to surrender. In a superb display of courage and discipline, not one of the enemy wounded was killed in what must have been very challenging circumstances. 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 to touch down. With superb skill the RAAF pilot rested one skid on the rock over the yawning gap until the patients were loaded and taken away. It was all very inspiring.

The capture of the May Tao 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 stocks removed or destroyed and all his logistic units shattered. Furthermore, the magnitude of this defeat must have become widely known to the population of the affected provinces. In every way it had to be a fitting culmination to the efforts of every Australian and New Zealander who had served in Phuoc Tuy Province. The journey which began at Long Tan had now concluded.