8

Clearing a Mountain

While we had been busy clearing Phuoc Tuy of Viet Cong forces, American planning for the co-ordinated clearance of the entire Third Corps area had progressed to the stage at which a major influx of troops was due to arrive. These men comprised the Third Brigade of the Fourth Infantry Division and they were to land at Vung Tau in the first days of October 1966. Their initial task was to secure the northern sector of Route 15 which lay in Bien Hoa province. They were to operate from a base fifteen miles to the south-east of Bien Hoa city, Bear Cat. This effort was aimed at making Route 15 a 'green' route, one over which Allied traffic could move at will without a heavy armed escort. Once this had been achieved it would be possible to use the developing harbour facilities of Vung Tau to a much greater extent. Large numbers of men and huge amounts of additional material were scheduled to come into the country during the following few months and these would have congested the port of Saigon unduly. Moreover, the Americans were increasing the size of their installations at Bien Hoa and at Long Binh nearby and both of these places were served by the direct connection of Route 15 to Vung Tau.

However, to make these plans possible the hold of the Viet Cong over Route 15 had to be broken. Taxation activities had been very lucrative because of all the wealthy Saigon businessmen who drove down Route 15 to spend weekends and holidays at Vung Tau. Viet Cong attacks on the scattered Government posts along the road had increased during 1966 and it was apparent that the Viet Cong were making a major effort to continue and extend the interdiction of the road. A special point of interest was the village of Phu My, which lay just to the south of the Phuoc Tuy-Bien Hoa boundary. This village was close to the centre of the Viet

Cong controlled sector and was an obvious point for the Viet Cong to concentrate against. Phu My had been occupied by the Japanese during World War II, and they had built an airstrip at the rear of the battalion-sized fort on the northern edge of the settlement. The airstrip had fallen into disuse, but the fort had been well maintained as a matter of necessity. The Viet Cong were able to move forces against the Phu My garrison from either side of the road. On the south-western side lay the Rung Sat with its countless creeks, footpaths and hiding places amongst the mangroves. On the north-eastern side was a thick jungle which covered a network of tracks leading down to Phu My from the Hat Dich base area.

During August 1966, 274 Regiment had made attacks on Phu My, harassing the post with mortar fire and ambushing reinforcement and supply convoys on their way to the fort. We knew that the commander of 274 Regiment intended to wipe out the Government force at Phu My as soon as he could and so there was some urgency in dealing with the Viet Cong along Route 15. The Americans had stationed a brigade of the First Division at Bear Cat to begin domination of the northern sector and to pave the way for the Third Brigade of the Fourth Division.

The safe passage of this brigade from Vung Tau to Bear Cat required the establishment of temporary control over the whole length of the road for several days. The convoys were a tempting target to the Viet Cong, so the force protecting the road had to be strong enough to counter a Viet Cong attack of battalion strength at any point and also had to be capable of rapid redeployment to meet a regimental attack. Of course the Viet Cong did not have to elect to take massive action, for they could have cut the road and done considerable damage by the use of mines and booby traps, perhaps covered by a few snipers hidden in the jungle nearby.

Four battalions were provided to secure the road—three from the 173rd Airborne Brigade and one from the Australian Task Force. Because the Sixth Battalion had just completed an arduous sweep through the Dinh hills, the Fifth Battalion was assigned the task and Colonel Warr was warned for the operation in early October. The battalion was to be responsible for the southern sector from Ba Ria to Phu My while the 173rd Airborne Brigade took the sector to the north of Phu My.

The southern sector was threatened from two areas in differing ways. Bordering the road on both sides were strips of coastal plain from one to several miles wide, linking the mangroves of the Rung Sat on the

south-west with the hills on the north-east. These flat areas were covered mostly with a low scrub which gave protection to any ambushing party. The scrub terminated within a hundred yards of the road for much of its length, and was sufficiently thick to give cover from air observation so that withdrawal routes for the ambush party would be difficult to locate. Hence it was important that these areas were regularly patrolled to a distance of several hundred yards back from the road.

The second area from which the road was threatened was the long spine of hills on the north-eastern side. These consisted of the Dinh hills which ran for six miles along the road, and Nui Thi Vai and Nui Toc Tien. This latter pair were joined by a pass which climbed to five hundred feet about the plain which lay close to sea level. The Dinh hills had just been cleared by the Sixth Battalion and close surveillance had been kept over the access routes which led into them from the Viet Cong base areas. Hence we could be fairly certain that danger would not come from the Dinh hills. However, the northern pair of hills, Nui Thi Vai on the north-west and Nui Toc Tien on the south-east, presented a more difficult problem because neither had been cleared before.

Nui Thi Vai rose to over fifteen hundred feet and commanded a particularly long section of Route 15 because the road swung around the base of Nui Thi Vai to change its direction from north-west to north as one proceeded towards Phu My. Nui Toc Tien was fourteen hundred feet high, but its position to the east of the taller Nui Thi Vai robbed it of much of its view over the road. Nui Thi Vai was a rectangular mountain with straight, steep faces to the north, east and west and a long ridge running out in a series of lesser peaks to the south. Because of this rectangular configuration, the easiest lines of ascent lay up the spurs on the north-west, the north-east, the south-west and the ridge from the south. Therefore these points were likely places for finding any Viet Cong who happened to be on the mountain. The southern ridge included two peaks of five hundred feet, separated by low saddles. The more southerly of the two was crowned by twin peaks separated by three hundred yards and a drop of sixty feet in between. From here, the ridge ran down steeply to sea level at the foot of another hill, Nui Ong Trinh, 750 feet high. Nui Ong Trinh approached to within a mile of the road while most of Nui Thi Vai was within 81 mm. mortar range of the road. Mortaring was the chief method of attack which the Viet Cong could use with relative impunity against the road. From positions up on Nui Thi Vai they could correct their fire by direct observation of the bomb bursts. They could then retreat from our counter

bombardment in an instant into caves or tunnels and be ready to emerge again when the next likely target appeared on the road. Not only could a Viet Cong force with mortars on Nui Thi Vai have damaged road traffic but they could have seriously threatened any troops down on the plain who were patrolling near the road.

Nui Toc Tien did not present such danger because it did not command very much of the road. Not only was it masked by Nui Thi Vai, but its configuration, a long ridge with five main peaks, ran parallel to the road and none of the high ground was sufficiently close to the road to be within mortar range. Of course it was possible for the Viet Cong to set mortars up anywhere on the flat country along the road, but it would have been much more difficult for them to have achieved accurate fire than on the hills and their positions would have been less secure than in the rocky caves which the hills offered.

Several Viet Cong track systems ran through the area, and these were important because of the possibility of finding some base camps which formed part of their supply channel between the Rung Sat and the Hat Dich area. A broad track, the size of a two lane highway ran through the main pass, between the Dinh hills and Nui Toc Tien. Another track, although for foot use only, ran up over the pass between Nui Toc Tien and Nui Thi Vai, and then for several miles through jungle to intercept the main track which ran between the Hat Dich area and the Dinh hills to Ba Ria. Several tracks ran around the western side of Nui Thi Vai from different points on Route 15 between Phu My to the north-west and the village of Ong Trinh to the south-west.

The jungle-clad slopes of Nui Thi Vai rose steeply from the plain with an average gradient of one in three. From the relatively bare summit one could see individual vehicles moving along Route 15 for ten miles. From this vantage point the Viet Cong could learn the composition of military and civilian traffic using the road, taxation points could be controlled and, in the particular cases of bridges and culverts which had been mined by the Viet Cong, the right instant for detonation could be seen. Increasing Allied pressure on the Viet Cong in September had prevented them from making extensive use of the hills during the weeks before our operation, and we did not expect to find more than a company of Viet Cong on Nui Thi Vai, although it was always possible that the security of the American intentions to send a brigade along Route 15 had not been perfect and that a main force regiment would be tempted to strike at such a prize.

The area was mostly uninhabited. The people who lived in the roadside villages on the plain were forbidden by the Government to move more than one thousand metres to the north-east of the road. On the north-western side of Nui Thi Vai, a few hundred feet below the summit was a Buddhist pagoda, a red-tiled building of grey granite sited on a wide ledge which afforded a magnificent view over miles of jungle, the wide loops of the estuaries in the Rung Sat and the plains beyond which stretched to Saigon. It was a splendid reward to those who had made the steep climb for the sake of contemplation. A number of houses ran up the western face, lining a rough track which led to the pagoda. At the foot of this track was a large rectangular clearing through which the main track to Phu My ran. Several more houses were gathered at the eastern edge of this clearing. Intelligence reports indicated that the Viet Cong had been making use of these houses and that they also had a camp on the south-western spur of Nui Thi Vai.

An important complication with this operation, Operation Canberra, was the time limit imposed by the requirement to be stationed along the road when the American troops drove through, commencing on October 11th. We returned from Operation Crowsnest on the evening of October 3rd and to have launched the battalion into another operation without two days of preparation was undesirable. The most important piece of ground to be searched was Nui Thi Vai. The companies could search their area of plain alongside the road in a day's work so there were five days available for clearing Nui Thi Vai.

The area which had to be examined was one and a half miles from east to west and three miles from north to south. Obviously the battalion would be much better balanced by advancing on the narrower front and this would also enable a closer search to be made. The choice of movement was thus reduced to sweeping to the south from the north or vice versa.

A sweep to the south had the advantage of interposing a blocking force between any Viet Cong on the mountain and their main base positions to the north. The Viet Cong would then be driven towards the road and their escape from the area could be made extremely difficult. The chief disadvantage with this direction of sweep was the inaccessibility of the area to the north of the hills. This area could be entered only on foot or by helicopter. The approach by foot was very long and exhausting and would

require some days to complete. To land by helicopter at the foot of Nui Thi Vai would have made it perfectly obvious to every Viet Cong soldier in the area that we were looking for them.

The approach from the south presented most of these points in converse. Any Viet Cong on the mountain would be driven back onto their well-known routes to their base areas, but troops could be introduced into the area from many points along Route 15 without making it obvious that our intention was to move on Nui Thi Vai.

The shortage of time and the importance of keeping the Viet Cong guessing led Colonel Warr to adopt the latter course and forced us to accept the possibility that we might not cut off any Viet Cong who were still active on the mountain.

Provision of fire support to cover the area of Nui Thi Vai was a problem. The gun area had to be established near a road for ease of access and for ammunition resupply, and the area had to be secure. Because the companies would later be deployed along Route 15, this gun area had to be located close to the centre of the length of road for which the battalion was responsible. However, adoption of a gun area on Route 15 compelled us to take the battalion mortars up into the hills with us because they could not cover enough of the hills from the road to effectively support the searching companies.

The normal security demands of protection of Battalion Headquarters and the gun area cut the number of companies who could operate forward to three. It was the turn of D Company to act as palace guards, and one platoon was detached from this company to protect the gun area with the Anti-Tank Platoon. The routes of A, B and C Companies were then planned to bring these companies around to the north side of Nui Thi Vai by the afternoon of October 10th, ensuring that the most obvious re-entrants and slopes were examined. I spent much of the 4th and 5th of October making aerial reconnaissances of the area from a light helicopter. Unfortunately I was compelled to observe the area from a considerable height so that our intentions were not made obvious to the Viet Cong. The main air lane from Vung Tau to Saigon ran to the south of the hills and an auxiliary lane used by helicopters flying between Nui Dat and Saigon ran to the north of the hills so there was a reasonable chance of concealing the purpose of these flights.

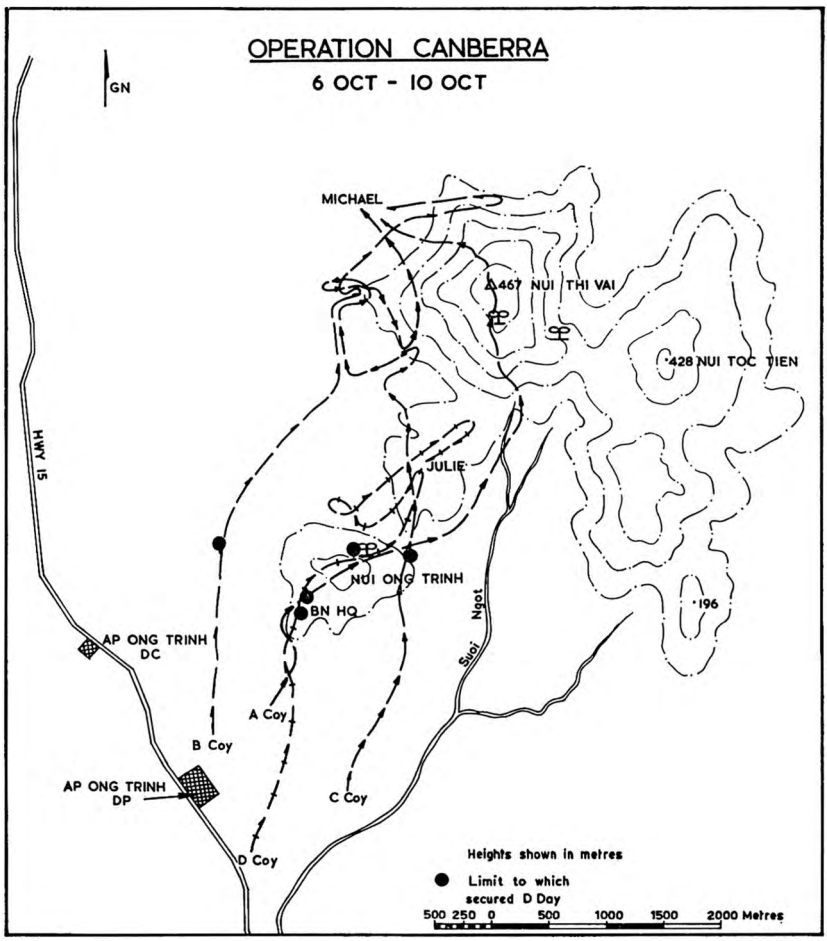

Fig. 14. The company movements during the preliminary clearance of Nui Thi Vai to secure Route 15, Operation Canberra, 6–10 October 1966.

October 6th was a fine sunny day of the period which begins the transition from the monsoon to the dry season. The long rambling ride around to our starting point south of the hills was rather pleasant. At intervals of one or two miles along Route 15 were small villages of brick houses with cream plastered walls and red-tiled roofs. Around the outskirts of several of these villages were grass huts, some of which were inhabited by refugees who had come from Viet Cong controlled territory further to the north along the coast. Some villages supported the Viet Cong, some were neutral and others were opposed to them, but these complications made no difference to the children who ran to the road in crowds to dance up and down and wave at the passing soldiers.

During the year the provincial police had been making progress in weeding Viet Cong out of these villages and a great deal was known about enemy activities along the road. The greater availability of Vietnamese manpower conferred by the rising tide of American support had enabled the stationing of some regional force companies along Route 15. Once these companies had established control over the few miles around each of their posts the task of the Viet Cong in attempting to oust them would be greatly complicated.

We left the APCs at Route 15 because it was difficult to move them off the road over the marshy ground on the north side. Captain Brian Ledan lightened the atmosphere by measuring his length in the first inundated area we had to cross. We had not gone more than ten paces when we had to commence wading—a bad omen for the operation. Brian tripped and went straight into a foot of water. The weight of his equipment prevented him from struggling to his feet for several seconds and he was thoroughly saturated. Our hilarity was sobered by the thought that within a few hours we would all be saturated if the climate lived up to its usual record.

The battalion fanned out and pushed through some miles of thick scrub in marshy ground to reach the foot of the hills. B Company went around to the western side of Nui Ong Trinh, C Company went to the east, and A Company followed by D Company and Battalion Headquarters began to climb the southern slope of Nui Ong Trinh. The day was uneventful as far as contact with the Viet Cong was concerned and we camped amidst rocks on a steep ridge leading to the summit of Nui Ong Trinh.

On the morning of October 7th the central group completed the ascent of Nui Ong Trinh. From the summit Battalion Headquarters had excellent radio communications with the forward companies and we could obtain a fine view over the country to be searched later that day. The final objective of Battalion Headquarters was the next hill which had been nicknamed Julie for want of a better name. The valley we had to cross was extremely steep so we surveyed the top of Nui Ong Trinh anxiously to see if a helicopter landing pad could be found. Alas, it was a fruitless search. A Company took a long time to find a way down into the valley from the summit and time threatened to defeat our efforts to gain the next summit before nightfall. Just as we were starting on the descent, Major Paul Greenhalgh appeared to say that he had found a landing pad a little further down the hillside. Greatly cheered, Battalion Headquarters set off after D Company. However in the thickness of the bush the forward scout

of the headquarters party did not notice where D Company had diverged from the track made by A Company as they made their way to the bottom of the hill, with the result that we found ourselves in the midst of thick jungle at the bottom of the valley watching D Company fly out to the top of Julie several hundred feet above us with the greatest of ease.

Swearing terrible revenge, the headquarters plunged off through the bamboo and lantanas to begin the next ascent. Julie was a much easier proposition than Ong Trinh and within an hour we were at the top. D Company occupied one of the twin peaks and the pioneers cut a landing pad which fitted the Iroquois machines like a glove in the saddle which led to the other peak. Battalion Headquarters went on to this second peak to make a balanced defensive position. We all dug in vigorously for we knew that the Viet Cong could not only mortar us from nearby but they could easily observe us from the summit of Nui Thi Vai which dominated the northern horizon.

Late on the morning of October 8th the peaceful atmosphere of the tree covered hilltop was shattered by the rattle of firing followed by the reverberations of explosions. C Company had swung around to the north-west, crossing the summit of Julie the evening before and were now searching the southern slope of Nui Thi Vai. The forward platoon had found a track which it was climbing when it encountered two Viet Cong trail watchers. The platoon was fired upon and the men leaped off the track to take cover. However, the Viet Cong had booby trapped the likely areas of cover and several of our soldiers were wounded by explosions as two of the traps were sprung. The Viet Cong made their escape while our men were attending to their own wounded. Mortar fire from the helicopter pad on Julie and artillery fire from Route 15 was brought swiftly onto the likely Viet Cong withdrawal routes while C Company prepared a landing zone for the Dust Off aircraft.

One amazed witness to the morning's events was a young Viet Cong prisoner who had belonged to one of the units which had been stationed on Nui Thi Vai. He had been captured by Vietnamese troops and taken to Ba Ria and thence to Bien Hoa some months previously. He had told his captors that he knew where a large cache of rice was hidden near the foot of Nui Thi Vai and had offered to guide us to it. My expectations had fallen somewhat when I had met him on his arrival by helicopter at our

pad. He looked rather dazed and bewildered and was clearly a very simple peasant lad. With my interpreter I took him back up the hill and we sat on a group of rocks.

One of our chaps heated up a tin of food and made a brew of coffee for him. His dazed state was complicated by his lack of any notion of his location. He had not been on the southern part of the mountain before and the helicopter flight had thoroughly confused him. Like so many Viet Cong soldiers he could not read a map. All he could do was to guide us from the camp he had lived in to the cache and until we reached the site of his camp he was of no help. We were not due to cover this ground for another two days so the practical side of our conversation came to an abrupt halt.

However, an opportunity to talk with a Viet Cong prisoner was a rare one and so I turned my questioning to wider matters, such as why he had joined the Viet Cong, how he had joined, how he had been treated, what he thought of us, and so on. He was aged 19 and had lived near Ba Ria. One day two years before he had gone into the jungle to attend a Viet Cong political rally. He, together with the other young men at this meeting, had not been allowed to return to their homes and had been enlisted as soldiers in the Viet Cong. He had not wanted to join the Viet Cong although he had felt that they were rather exciting as a band of Robin Hood types. But once he was in the Viet Cong forces, political surveillance was so intense that he had no choice but to try to be a good soldier. Treatment had been rough and he had had an unhappy and arduous time. The conflicts between his desires to return to normal living and the impossibility of doing this had induced in him a state of acute depression and all he wanted to do was to withdraw from conflict. He had no idea of whom we were—he said he thought we were French.

I persevered in trying to get through to him, to see if there were some sort of spark which could be struck out of his sagging personality, and to give him some inkling that we were interested in his personal well-being for his own sake. Evidently the political angle was not going too well so I tried to be a little more basic. He replied that he liked drinking beer so we dug around everyone's packs and turned up a can of Fosters. I then left Xuan and Bic, the two interpreters, with our guest to give him the first informal companionship with his own nationals that he had had during the previous weeks. When I returned half an hour later he was smoking a cigarette and had taken his shoes off. He seemed less bewildered but by

no means fully alert. The required therapy seemed too deep for my means. We put him back onto a helicopter and this strange sad product of the war flew out of our presence but not out of our minds for he was the essence of our problem.

While Major John Miller was organising the extraction of C Company's wounded by helicopter, the platoons of B Company were swinging around the base of the south-western spur of Nui Thi Vai. Their route lay eastwards across the crest of the spur. By early afternoon they had begun the ascent when the forward platoon came on a group of forty Viet Cong. The forward scout of the platoon concealed himself within feet of the Viet Cong and counted them. Major McQualter immediately sent out reconnaissance groups and ascertained the locations of the flanks and rear of the enemy. The Viet Cong were grouped around some huts and were preparing to make their departure, thus speed was vital if they were to be prevented from escaping. Colonel Warr gave Bruce approval to deal with them himself and he then arrayed his platoons around the Viet Cong position with particular attention to the high ground so that one platoon was looking right down onto the enemy position and could deliver decisive small arms fire onto them while the others blocked the escape routes.

Yet this apparently perfect plan for overcoming the most significant Viet Cong force which the battalion had encountered never went into effect. While B Company were creeping into position around the Viet Cong, a fascinating drama was taking place in the battalion command post, two parallel slit trenches dug amongst the granite rocks which covered the summit of Julie.

As we were debating the enemy situation and means of obtaining more information, Major Alex Piper, the senior intelligence staff officer on Task Force Headquarters, arrived by helicopter to say that he had reliable information which indicated that a considerable number of Viet Cong were on Nui Thi Vai and that they were commanded by the deputy commander of 274 Regiment. This news seemed to be decisive. If B Company became involved in heavy fighting only C Company could assist them and C Company had been depleted by the casualties of that morning. Both A and D Companies were too far away from B Company to move to their support quickly. Any aggressive move by B Company could be very dangerous and contact with the Viet Cong should not be

opened until some new factor appeared or until the information brought by Major Piper could be shown to be a pessimistic assessment of the enemy situation.

Just at this moment Bruce McQualter called on the battalion command net to announce that he had the group of forty well covered and that he was about to move in on them. Colonel Warr was faced with the classic dilemma of command. He had to decide within seconds whether to let B Company go ahead with their attack or to pull them back. Was it worth the risk? Forty Viet Cong eliminated from the war would be a most successful afternoon's work and would offset the losses suffered in the morning. The mettle of our men was roused and they were not in a mood for caution. Yet this could be the beginning of a heavy reverse for us. We knew not what lay beyond this group and we had been told that they were not alone. All these thoughts were flashing through Colonel Warr's mind—to seize the opportunity and risk the losses or to be cautious and perhaps lose the opportunity forever. Fractions of seconds dragged by as we waited for his decision.

He reached for the microphone and ordered Bruce to halt his action and to move out of the area to the west. The course for the next twenty-four hours was set.

B and C Companies pulled back to safe distances from the Viet Cong location and artillery fire began to pour in. Our own mortars which were right alongside Battalion Headquarters opened up and the re-entrant between the south-western spur of Nui Thi Vai and ourselves resounded with the thunderous roars and crashes of the bombardment. Then came the gun ships of the American light fire team which was in support of us. They wheeled slowly and deliberately over the target area to familiarise themselves with the exact locations which were to be hit. Minutes later they were loosing volleys of rockets on their unerringly straight paths into the hillside. Heavy ground fire hit back at them from the Viet Cong as they followed through over the target, with their door gunners spraying bullets at the black-clad figures running about on the ground.

In the meantime an air strike was being called in to take care of any Viet Cong who were still in bunkers. First came the light Cessna aircraft of the forward air controller which buzzed slowly over the target area looking for points to be hit, while Captain Bob Supple, the Assistant Adjutant, briefed him from the ground. Then a high pitched scream announced the

arrival of the F100s overhead. They began their terrifying ritual of circling the target for several minutes while the forward air controller explained the details of the targets and the exact locations of our troops to them. All attention was focused on the howl of their engines as they swooped and soared on their path around the hill with intense purposefulness. Their sharp, pointed noses were complemented by the needle points of the bomb pods held under their steeply raked wings. Once they were thoroughly familiar with the target they commenced making trial bombing runs across the hill, diving in at a furious speed in a straight line towards the hillside, then climbing swiftly to avoid collision with the slope. These approaches were made from the west and lay right across our field of vision as we stood on a vantage point just by our helicopter pad. The re-entrant in which C Company had struck the booby trapped area was directly in front of us, its far side only a thousand yards away.

On the first runs the jets loosed two five-hundred-pound bombs each. We watched the bombs drop away from the aircraft in pairs and dive on their long parabolic trajectories into the target area and we felt the shockwave of their explosion crack through the air around us. The next weapon to be loosed into the enemy position was CBU—a large bomb which exploded above the ground to scatter a large number of smaller canisters widely through the surrounding jungle to detonate on impact. We saw the long CBU pods loosed, guided into the target by the path of the F100s and by their own aerodynamic shape and tail fins. There was a dull thud as the outer case exploded and then we saw the bursting flashes of hundreds of small explosions scattered in a long swathe across the steep slope, sending a polyphony of crunching cracks reverberating around the rocks and through our heads.

The aircraft then began to alternate their lines of attack, swooping in from the east through the low saddle between Julie and Nui Thi Vai to let a burst of destruction fall in a horizontal path across the slope. The dramatic effect of the strike was greatly heightened by the wave of sound emerging from the jet as it hurtled before our eyes at our own height and only a few hundred yards away. After their heavy ordnance had been expended the jets then dived low over the target area strafing it with bursts of machine gun fire whose sound ripped through the air like the tearing of a giant cloth as dozens of rounds left the guns every second.

The first strike wave pulled off and the Americans had offered us a second. Our mortars continued the bombardment in the meantime so that there would be no respite which would allow the enemy to escape. The second wave came overhead at 6.30 pm, just as the sun was setting and light was beginning to fail. The first stages of this strike were similar to the previous one—the soaring, plunging encirclement of the target with the ominous punitive wails of the engines, followed by the shattering explosions racing across the valley. But in the climax there were two variations on the first strike. In the growing dusk the F100s swooped in on a southerly approach path directly above our heads and about one hundred feet above the top of the hill on which we were standing, their exhausts glowing and spurting flame against the dull background of the darkening sky, their shrieking rising in an ear splitting crescendo. Then there was the napalm. From where we were on the hilltop, directly behind the line of flight, we watched the aircraft streaking towards the hillside at a speed which seemed to make it inevitable that they should spear straight into the rocky slope, yet at the last instant they were saved by a sharp banking swerve to the left which brought them just clear of the south-western spur of Nui Thi Vai. We could see the direct line of the napalm pods as they dropped on their long glide to the target. A brightly glowing orange and crimson ball appeared at the point of explosion, puffing up rapidly to tear apart into a hundred flaming drops of heavy jelly which hurled across the darkening slope with menacing brilliance and a dull whoomp as the furious combustion sucked all the oxygen out of the surrounding air to leave a great cloud of suffocating vapour.

The time taken to produce all this firepower had consumed the remaining hours of daylight and a rapid exploitation of the bombardment by our troops was out of the question. This break gave the enemy the hours of darkness in which to make their escape. We attempted to make this withdrawal as hazardous as possible by a continuous bombardment of the hill and of likely escape routes through the hours of darkness. For this bombardment we were forced to depend entirely upon our own 81 mm. mortars, for the field artillery could not obtain the tremendous amount of ammunition needed to sustain fire across Nui Thi Vai all night. Colonel Warr had ordered one thousand rounds of mortar ammunition to be flown in during the late afternoon and this amount was now waiting on the mortar line at the bottom of the landing pad. We then pored over the map, pinpointing known enemy positions and tracks and estimating where his withdrawal would take him during the night.

Colonel Warr passed these requirements over to Lieutenant Trevor Sheehan, the Mortar Platoon commander, who produced the fire plan. Only four of the battalion's six mortars were with us because we always had to leave two back in our base area with the skeleton defence force while the bulk of the battalion was out on an operation. These four tubes fired 960 rounds during the night. When we attempted to sleep however, we began to regret bitterly both the extensive fire plan and the proximity of the mortars as we were shattered every few minutes by the explosions of the bombs being fired from the tubes and the crashes when they hit their targets. After a few hours we became accustomed to the noise and slept fitfully, but it was an edgy group of men who sat around the pits of the battalion command post at stand-to on the following morning.

The companies moved back onto the slopes of Nui Thi Vai as soon as they could on the morning of October 9th, but the Viet Cong had disappeared and had taken with them any casualties they had suffered from the bombardment. By this stage the operation had developed into something different from the original intention. Instead of clearing through the area in a rapid sweep of five days, we had been held up by a sizeable encounter and had had to make a substantial enemy group move out of the area. There were only two days left for us to sweep the remainder of Nui Thi Vai and this would mean racing through many tempting Viet Cong installations, overlooking much of value which the Viet Cong would be able to recover after we had moved back to Route 15. However we were committed to support the American convoy and there was nothing else to be done but to find as much as we could as quickly as possible, go down to the road and return to Nui Thi Vai as soon as we were released from the road.

A Company had moved up under the eastern crest of Nui Thi Vai and were in a good position to sweep across the summit and dominate the feature. This they proceeded to do and they moved across the top and down to the pagoda on the north-western spur just a few hundred feet below the summit. On the evening of October 9th, some members of A Company discovered a strange individual lurking about the pagoda. He had the appearance of a hermit monk, but appearances were apt to be misleading where the Viet Cong were concerned and so he was captured as a suspect.

Early on the following morning he was sent to Battalion Headquarters so that I could question him. He stepped out of the helicopter looking just as puzzled as our previous Vietnamese visitor. Bic, the interpreter, brought him up the hill and sat him down on a rock. The monk was a frail little figure, wearing a long brown tunic and trousers and a plum coloured woollen skull cap pulled down over his ears. His feet were bare. In his hands he clutched a transistor radio and a small bag of medicaments. He told us that he was a Buddhist monk, his name was Nguyen Van Xe and he was thirty-seven years old. He had been a monk for eighteen years and had spent six years tending the pagoda on Nui Thi Vai. I told him that he might be able to help us and that he had nothing to fear provided that he did not try to escape or to mislead us. As events turned out these admonitions were quite unnecessary, and he must have thought that our outlook on life was rather serious.

The first questions which I put to him were purely military. He said he was not a member of the Viet Cong and denied having given them any assistance. He lived in a cave two hundred yards away from the pagoda. He had seen very little of the Viet Cong on Nui Thi Vai because they had told him not to wander more than two hundred yards from his cave except for use of the main track which led up to the pagoda from the foot of the hill. He frequently saw some five or six Viet Cong on the mountain. He obtained his food from people who came up to the pagoda from the villages along Route 15 and from Ba Ria, supplemented by fortnightly journeys to his monastery at Thu Duc, between Saigon and Bien Hoa. He added that two nuns also visited him once a fortnight. This was confirmed by the discovery of some nylon night attire in his cave. Very few people had come up to the pagoda during the previous two years because the Viet Cong were using it as a shelter. They had been based in the area of the pagoda for over three years. As far as he knew there were no Viet Cong still on the hill, for he had not seen any for ten or twelve days. He thought that they had all gone into the jungles on the plain to the north side of Nui Thi Vai.

This information was naturally of little value. It seemed to be a consistent and credible story and he had several photographs of himself in saffron robes, together with a number of certificates accrediting him with various monastic qualifications. As there seemed nothing more of immediate value to be gained from questioning him I retired to consider this negative information.

Pte Shoebridge and L/Cpl Bryan supporting Pte Riik after a booby trap explosion had wounded several members of C Company on Nui Thi Vai on 8 October 1966, during Operation Canberra (see Chapter 8).

Members of C Company after clearing a helicopter pad on the slopes of Nui Thi Vai to evacuate the men wounded by booby traps on 8 October. Major Miller is standing bottom centre without hat.

Second Lieutenant Deak MC, Reconnaissance Platoon commander, at Phuoc Hoa during Operation Hayman in November 1966 (see Chapter 11). The platoon soon established friendly relations with the people.

B Company after dismounting from APCs in the Binh Ba rubber plantation before patrolling an area crossed by tracks used by the Viet Cong. Pte. Barney Gee is the forward scout.

If it were true, it suggested that the information which we had received through Major Piper on the previous afternoon had been exaggerated. On the other hand, there were many parts of the hill which Nguyen Van Xe never visited and so his information counted for little. Had he been one of the Viet Cong then he could have been of tremendous value for most Viet Cong talked very freely once in our hands—something very surprising for a group of people supposedly so dedicated to their cause.

The pace of the operation was rather tedious during the morning of October 10th because the operation was being rounded off and the companies organised for extraction by helicopter and APC. Tony White and I spent a couple of hours therefore in talking with the monk and in trying to grasp some of the fundamentals of his thinking. Unfortunately this made for a one-sided conversation consisting of the monk's lengthy answers to our questions. Everything spoken had to go through our interpreter which slowed the monk's rate of delivery a great deal for he was rather expansive. He spoke in the peculiarly soft voice of educated Vietnamese, in a tone which conveyed a humanity quite inexpressible in English.

His basic philosophy was to help others to achieve happiness. The most important thing in life was self-purification which could be accomplished only with the assistance of much study and meditation. Politics was a field which could be left to others. He did not approve of the activities of Tich Tri Quang, the Buddhist extremist leader who had been causing much political trouble earlier in the year. As a contemplative rural monk he paid no attention to what happened in the outside world. He used to spend his time on the hill reading scripture, tending the pagoda gardens and listening to classical Vietnamese music on his radio. He did not particularly care who ruled Vietnam, as long as it was not the Viet Cong for that would mean the end of religion as he knew it. He told us that it was predicted in scripture that there would be a great battle between the Americans and the Communists in four years' time, that the Communists would win with Buddhist assistance and that the Americans would depart. The Vietnamese people would then absorb the Communists to decommunise them. Any Communists who would not change would be driven out of the country and in twenty years time Vietnam would be peaceful and free again.

Nguyen Van Xe had no idea of our nationality. He thought that we were either American or French, probably the latter because we were different from the Americans and he had seen others of our soldiers at Bien Hoa during the past year. He said he had heard of Australia but he did not know where it was. After we had talked for an hour we offered him some refreshment. He said that he could not eat anything with meat in it because it was wrong to kill anything living, but he would like some biscuits and some hot water with sugar added. These demands were easy to meet and we envied his appetite for army biscuits.

We could not release him for he had no idea of where he was and he might have been killed by a shell during the following two weeks, so we sent him back to Task Force Headquarters for transfer to the provincial authorities in Ba Ria. We dug up a few more packets of biscuits for him and some jam and sent him off, hoping that someone would be kind to this rather helpless unworldly soul. Two of his thoughts remained with us in crystal clear form. The first was that all religions are good and the second was that he could comment on the characters of only those men whom he knew personally.

During these two days, C Company had been making some very useful discoveries in the re-entrant in which they had suffered the casualties on October 8th. They had found a major Viet Cong base camp which consisted of a hospital, a training camp, and a booby trap factory. Other finds included Chinese Communist ammunition, tools, clothing, web equipment, several hundred tubes of penicillin and other drugs, surgical packs, beds, four anti-tank mines, nineteen anti-tank rockets, many grenades and ten tons of rice. Several sacks full of documents were also retrieved, which included reports of traffic movements on the road, tax collection records, weapons registers, roll books for the company which had administered the base, food issue registers which showed both the units and numbers which had passed through the Nui Thi Vai base in recent months, and a great number of training pamphlets, Viet Cong news sheets and local orders. The most important find was a Viet Cong map to the scale of 150,000 which showed the complete Viet Cong track system for western Phuoc Tuy. Also indicated were several base camps and fortified areas. This map provided us with the basis for several successful ambushes in the following months and was of great use to the gunners in planning their harassing fire programmes which went on day and night right through the year.

On the afternoon of October 10th we flew out of our hilltop position, one helicopter load at a time, soaring down in a smooth, swinging, curving path to our intended positions along Route 15. We left the hills with considerable regret, for the discovery of the base camp indicated that there were many other Viet Cong facilities within our grasp. We consoled ourselves with the hope that it would not be long before we were back on Nui Thi Vai to finish the job.

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