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5 RAR ON OPERATIONS, MAY–SEPTEMBER 1966

Max Carroll, Peter Isaacs, Roger Wainwright
and Robert O'Neill

Editors' introduction

The Battalion Headquarters (BHQ) staff officers principally responsible for operational planning and assisting the commanding officer (CO) in all aspects of 5th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR), battlefield activity were the operations officer, Major Max Carroll, and his deputy, Captain Peter Isaacs, who was also the battalion's adjutant. In this chapter they describe how 5 RAR entered the fray and embarked on the steep learning curve which confronted all members of the battalion.

Max Carroll

5 RAR was complete on the ground at Vung Tau by 13 May 1966. The Battalion Advance Party, of which I, as officer commanding (OC) Support Company and battalion operations officer, was a member, had arrived on 20 April 1966. We were fostered by our sister battalion 1 RAR, which was part of the US 173 Airborne Brigade based at Bien Hoa, where we dispersed to learn the ropes. This attachment was invaluable for all of us. It enabled me to meet the brigade headquarters staff with whom I would be working, and to accompany the 2nd Battalion, 503 Airborne Infantry Regiment (2/503), on a helicopter-mounted assault and subsequent ground sweep through War Zone D, north of Phuoc Tuy.

By giving us this firsthand knowledge of how they conducted battalion level operations, our American hosts were very generous and assisted us in every way they could. Operationally our styles differed, but they respected the professionalism of the Australian Army; both through their association with 1 RAR and from the high reputation of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV).

US Army assistance continued at Vung Tau where the US Army's 68 Assault Helicopter Company provided us with excellent training in essential techniques for infantry helicopter-mounted insertions and assaults, resupply by helicopter and the rapid aeromedical evacuation of casualties. They also flew several of our officers on reconnaissance sweeps over Phuoc Tuy Province, the area with which we were soon to become intensely familiar. Additionally, 173 Airborne Brigade invited Captains Peter Isaacs and Brian Le Dan to accompany the HQ of 1st Battalion, 503 Airborne Infantry Regiment (1/503), on their forthcoming operation.

Peter Isaacs

The last group of 5 RAR troops to deploy to South Vietnam arrived at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport aboard a Qantas charter flight in the middle of May 1966. The battalion second in command (2IC), Major Stan Maizey, and I were part of that final group. Several hours later I was sitting on a box in the tent I was to share with my assistant adjutant, Lieutenant Ralph Thompson. He briefed me on happenings over the past month as the battalion had arrived by air and sea. Having been the battalion's adjutant for the preceding 16 months and usually at the centre of everything, I was a touch bewildered! This lasted no more than 24 hours as there was a tremendous amount of work to be accomplished before the battalion deployed to its operational area in Phuoc Tuy province. This included our 'baptism of fire' during an air reconnaissance, when all four helicopters in which our four-man reconnaissance party flew were fired on. The fire was returned with much enthusiasm!

Ever since being appointed adjutant, I had been determined that my role would be predominantly operational and not chiefly concerned with personnel management and administration, for which adjutants within the army's former Pentropic infantry battalions had been primarily responsible. In this I was helped in having a reliable assistant adjutant, an exceptionally capable chief clerk in Staff Sergeant Merv Fridolf,

and an experienced orderly room sergeant, Sergeant John Leaman. My principal role therefore was assistant operations officer and deputy to the operations officer who was also the OC Support Company. My job entailed responsibility for running the battalion command post (CP) and the organisation of all the battalion's air support activities, including helicopter movements and offensive air support.

In preparation for our roles I and the signals officer, Brian Le Dan, who was to be commander of the deployed BHQ Group, were both attached to the 173 Airborne Brigade for a two-battalion air assault into the area of Phuoc Tuy Province. 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) was to establish itself here about a week later. We joined the 1/503 at Bien Hoa airbase shortly before dawn, having spent the night before the operation with 1 RAR, which was soon to return home after its 12-month tour of duty as part of 173 Airborne Brigade.

The three-day operation was exhilarating. We flew south in an armada of helicopters, landed in an assembly area close to our supporting artillery battalion, and then flew with an assaulting rifle company into the objective landing zone (LZ), preceded by air strikes, artillery fire and, finally, by the machine guns and rockets of our accompanying helicopter gunship heavy fire teams. There was no opposition! This was the second time that 173 Airborne Brigade had carried out 'search and destroy' operations in the province to prepare for the arrival of 1 ATF; and on this occasion, during a series of heavy engagements, had inflicted considerable casualties on the Viet Cong (VC). By the time this operation had concluded, our friends had incurred a further eight dead and 23 wounded. Brian and I spent the whole time at the BHQ of 1/503, and watched closely how Lieutenant Colonel Coad and his immediate staff handled operations during the several contacts with VC. During one heavy contact, about four rounds of friendly artillery fire somehow dropped onto a platoon of their B Company, killing and wounding several American soldiers. At no time was there any panicky reaction to whatever was happening, especially when, during our first night, VC were reported as being within the BHQ perimeter. The next morning, a large Chinese-made, command-detonated, directional mine was found just outside the perimeter, which fortunately for us had failed to detonate. On return to Vung Tau, we continued preparations for our own airborne assault into LZ Hudson.

Max Carroll

5 RAR's shooting war started when we were placed under command of 173 Airborne Brigade on 24 May 1966. The Brigade was involved in Operation Hardihood, which was intended to insert 1 ATF into Phuoc Tuy Province. The first phase of the operation involved the Vietnamese authorities removing all inhabitants from within a 4,000-metre radius of Nui Dat, 1 ATF's selected base area, and resettling them elsewhere in the province. This was only partially achieved. The second phase, involving 173 Airborne Brigade, including us, was to clear the area surrounding 1 ATF's proposed base of any enemy forces. The brigade, less 5 RAR, conducted a helicopter assault onto LZ Hudson, which was a couple of thousand metres north of the Nui Dat hill feature. This took place on 17 May 1966, so we, 5 RAR, had a secure LZ for our insertion by helicopter. Our American colleagues had not had an easy time before our arrival. On the first day of their insertion, 1/503 had a heavy engagement and lost 12 killed in action (KIA) and 35 wounded in action (WIA). By 21 May 1966 the brigade had sustained a total of 19 KIA and 75 WIA. The attrition continued. As we were flying in, while clearing the bitterly fought-over village of Long Phuoc, the 2/503 had lost another 19 KIA and 90 WIA. It is not widely known what total casualties 173 Airborne Brigade sustained to get us lodged; and all before we had fired a shot! This was the seldom acknowledged background to 1 ATF's insertion into Phuoc Tuy Province.

At this point in my narrative, I should acknowledge that 5 RAR operations from May to August 1966 are already well documented in Bob O'Neill's *Vietnam Task*; as are those of both 5 RAR and 6 RAR in Ian McNeill's official history volume 1, *To Long Tan*. Therefore, I have no intention of reprising their excellent coverage, but I hope to provide material from a personal experience viewpoint, which will put additional flesh onto the bones of their histories of this period.

Our arrival at LZ Hudson went smoothly and our companies rapidly deployed into their assigned areas of search. We did not want our people tarrying at LZ Hudson as it was congested with the Brigade Headquarters and their protective elements, and the operation's fire support base. By early afternoon our Battalion Command Group also moved off to a preselected location, from where we could better control our mobile companies. During that first day, several fleeting, indecisive contacts with VC occurred so all were on full alert. On the evening of 24 May 1966, our

first day in operations, we lost our first fatal battle casualty, Private Errol Noack. For the next 10 days or so we probed further to the east, with all our companies having contacts and killing VC without further loss to ourselves. The enemy we encountered were what we termed ‘Local Forces’ (district companies); and it appeared that the D445 Provincial Mobile Battalion, with which 1/503 and 2/503 had been heavily engaged, had withdrawn to sanctuary areas to regroup. Our American colleagues may have taken casualties, but they had badly mauled the VC, particularly at the villages of Long Tan, which they had levelled to the ground, and Long Phuoc.

A further recollection by Peter Isaacs of an incident in this period is of interest. Peter recalls that, while we were still with 173 Airborne Brigade, one of our companies had a contact shortly before last light and captured two badly wounded VC. The company commander decided not to call for them to be evacuated, as to do so would compromise his company’s night position. Both died during the night. The following day the 173 Brigade commander, Brigadier General Smith, visited our BHQ. He took our CO Lieutenant Colonel John Warr aside and said that while 5 RAR was under his command, we would treat VC wounded in exactly the same way we would treat our own wounded. It was an unexpected rebuke by a general from an army frequently described as being ruthless in pursuit of body count. I must amplify Peter’s account at this point by continuing the story and setting the record straight. I made the decision not to evacuate the VC casualties. After closely questioning the OC A Company, Major Bert Cassidy, I was told the VC were mortally wounded, unconscious and close to death. At the time it was dark, so I refused to risk a *Dustoff* (medical evacuation) helicopter and crew with a hazardous night extraction for dying VC, although I would have done it for our own people. Another important consideration was that the VC did not recognise the sanctity of the Red Cross and fired at all low-flying aircraft. A further factor to be weighed was that of revealing A Company’s location, where some lights would have to have been displayed to bring in the *Dustoff*. I told Bert to keep the casualties comfortable with morphine until they died. I later informed John Warr of what I had done and he reluctantly agreed with my decision. He accepted General Smith’s rebuke for my decision! I respected General Smith very much and he was a good commander; but I still think, in view of the circumstances at the time, my decision was correct. The safety and security of our people and those of our allies came first.

Map 3: Operation Hardihood – Phase 1: 24–31 May 1966.

Source: Designed by Ron Boxall and produced by Alan Mayne from circa 1966 US military maps provided by Bruce Davies.

Peter Isaacs

After his remonstrance about enemy casualties, General Smith then referred to his map and said, ‘Colonel, there is a VC battalion there! Go get ‘em!’ The commander of 1 ATF, Brigadier David Jackson, was standing nearby listening. He took John Warr aside and said, ‘On no account are you to tangle with a VC battalion’. Our A Company was close to the position indicated by the 173 Brigade commander. Max Carroll swiftly gave instructions to OC A Company, Bert Cassidy, to move – rapidly! Bert was apparently eating at the time, having just completed a resupply. His lunch was abandoned as A Company took off at high speed.

Max Carroll

To add to Peter’s account of this incident, I think it is a good example of the chain of command problem for John Warr, which was always in the background at that time. While we were part of 173 Airborne Brigade, General Smith was our operational commander. However, national interests were very much the concern of Brigadier Jackson, the commander of 1 ATF, to whose command we were to revert a few days later. The recent political concerns following our first fatal battle casualty, Private Errol Noack, a national serviceman, would also have been fresh in Brigadier Jackson’s mind when he spoke to John Warr.

On 2 June 1966, 5 RAR began to concentrate on what was to be the 1 ATF Base Area at Nui Dat. On 3 June 1966, the next operational phase of Operation Hardihood commenced and we occupied a temporary defensive position around Nui Dat. By 5 June we had provided a patrol screen to cover the arrival of the remainder of 1 ATF from Vung Tau. On 5 June 1966, HQ 1 ATF assumed command of the area from HQ 173 Airborne Brigade. We, 5 RAR, were the only Australian infantry battalion on the ground as 6 RAR was still assembling at Vung Tau after arriving from Australia and, consequently, our companies were rather widely spread. Then, on 8 June 1966, 173 Airborne Brigade moved on to conduct Operation Hollandia in the Long Hai hills, which stretch from 10 kilometres south of Nui Dat to the southernmost coast of Phuoc Tuy. This meant that we were on our own.

Map 4: Operation Hardihood – Phase 2: 1–3 June 1966.

Source: Designed by Ron Boxall and produced by Alan Mayne from circa 1966 US military maps provided by Bruce Davies.

We continued with a heavy program of aggressive patrolling and night ambushing in order to dominate our thinly held area. It was a very tense time. The departure of 173 Airborne Brigade had been noted by the VC and consequently, for several nights, our various dispersed company perimeters were probed by their reconnaissance patrols, who tried to establish our general dispositions and especially the locations of our machine guns. These patrols were very professional in their conduct and were obviously carried out by an enemy of higher calibre than we had encountered to date. We expected to be hit heavily as allied intelligence sources had warned HQ 1 ATF of this VC intention but, for reasons unknown to us at that time, the attack did not eventuate.

On a later operation in October 1966, we captured documents which confirmed that the VC Main Force 274 Regiment had in fact intended to attack us in June. They had moved to a position near the large hill Nui Nghe, about 6 kilometres north-west of Nui Dat, while their patrols reconnoitred our positions. However, on 9 June 1966, a US light observation aircraft which had been supporting us had disappeared on its return flight to Bien Hoa. We were tasked to provide a company on standby to go to the assistance of the crew, but aerial searches along their flight path found no trace of the missing *Bird dog* and our company was not deployed. The captured documents also revealed that the VC 274 Regiment had shot down this aircraft and the enemy commander decided that there would be more advantage in placing an ambush around the wreck and destroying the rescue force than in attacking our rapidly developing base. Perhaps we were lucky not to locate the crash location until six months later when A Company, which I was then commanding, found the missing aircraft and the remains of the crew. In the light of a strengthening enemy presence in Phuoc Tuy, which became evident in early June, 6 RAR were hastened forward to join us on 14 June, a week earlier than intended. With their arrival, Operation Hardihood concluded.

We were glad to see 6 RAR arrive so that we could regroup our companies into our final battalion defensive position in the now-established 1 ATF Base, and have them share the patrolling load. Our people were getting rather tired from three weeks of constant, hard operations with no respite. When they were not out on patrol or ambushing by night, the digging-in and construction of our base was a high priority for their labours. This work had to be done by hand with the field tools we carried, as no engineer earth-moving plant support was available at that time. Throughout this period the incessant, heavy monsoon rain turned the

area into a quagmire of deep, sticky red mud. Everyone was constantly wet from rain or sweat, and clothing and boots soon began to rot. The hoochies (one-man shelters), which each man carried, provided barely adequate protection from rain when trying to sleep. These conditions, coupled with monotonous US combat rations, started to take their toll and we all became rather lean and mean.

We welcomed the arrival of our administrative echelon from Vung Tau. They completed our unit on the ground, and brought a lot of the gear we needed to establish ourselves. Essential barbed wire, steel pickets, sandbags and other defence stores were followed by marquee tentage to protect kitchens and QM (quartermaster) Stores and, later, accommodation tentage followed. To our annoyance, the latter arrived without their wooden poles. The army's initial logistic support for our deployment had acute problems which were exacerbated by contemptible trade union sabotage on the wharves in Australia.

For the rest of June, 5 RAR clashed with VC and sustained casualties as we patrolled the approaches to the Task Force base; but the casualty ratio was heavily in our favour. We also continued the development of the defences of our own base area. In addition, we had to provide a company on standby as 1 ATF's immediate reserve and another company to secure 6 RAR's base area while they were deployed on their Operation Enoggera. This task required them to search Long Phuoc village and destroy an extensive tunnel system. It was a dangerous village and 6 RAR razed it to the ground. Throughout our year of operations there was no respite for either of the two battalions. When one was on a battalion operation, the other had to remain at Nui Dat in the base protection and construction role. A third battalion was obviously needed for 1 ATF, but none was available. It was not until December 1967 that a third battalion was provided, together with a squadron of Centurion tanks. In the meantime, we got on with the job despite being continually stretched.

Another problem, which had not been resolved before we left Australia, now arose. This was a shortage of M60 general purpose machine guns. The number of guns was adequate when the unit was together as in our defensive role in base. However, when we left the base and went on battalion-sized operations, the bulk of the M60s went with the combat troops, leaving the base denuded of machine guns. A theatre increment of additional weapons was needed for base defence and, for some months, we had been pressing for this to no avail. Survival demanded that we help

ourselves. Our inimitable battalion 2IC, Major Stan Maizey, entrepreneur and trader extraordinaire, and his personally selected and talented team, designated the 'Scrounger Platoon', duly 'acquired' a number of .30 calibre Browning light machine guns (LMGs) and .50 calibre Browning heavy machine guns (HMG) and about 50,000 rounds of ammunition from an American source. We sited the latter in key bunkers on our perimeter and the smaller weapons were mounted on vehicles. Their significant additional firepower made the people who remained in base during operations a lot happier and more secure. The theatre increment was eventually approved and we received more M60s; but we kept the .50 calibre HMGs and passed them on to 7 RAR who relieved us in May 1967. While the army's inadequately prepared logistics system was sorting itself out, Stan and his team also 'found' many of the items essential for our base security, such as telephones, switchboards, radios, and even a US 2.5-ton, 6-wheel-drive truck. We left these items for 7 RAR as well.

The remainder of the month was busy for me as I was coordinating our patrol and ambushing activities, developing my own Support Company base area and working with the CO on plans for our next operation. This was to follow 6 RAR's scheduled return to Nui Dat on 5 July 1966, after completing their Operation Enoggera. There was no let-up in the tempo of Task Force operations as we departed the base on 6 July to mount our Operation Sydney until 17 July 1966. We were tasked to clear and extend the 1 ATF-controlled area to the north and north-west, including Nui Nghe. This feature, located about 6 kilometres north-west of Nui Dat, was a prominent jungle-clad hill with numerous radiating ridges, rising about 160 metres above the surrounding flat terrain and covering about 1.5 square kilometres. It dominated the surrounding country out to several kilometres in all directions but had not been cleared of VC during Operation Hardihood. We were going into unknown enemy territory, so were prepared for trouble.

Our planning for Operation Sydney had been thorough, as the area we had to cover was large and included a variety of terrain, and tracks which had to be checked for signs of enemy activity. Although the enemy we anticipated encountering were local and district VC units, the appearance of the Main Force battalions of 274 and 275 Regiments could not be discounted. It was desirable, indeed essential, that our companies could assist each other if one struck trouble, but the formidable obstacle of Nui Nghe could prevent this. Also, some distances to which we proposed to penetrate were at extreme range for our supporting artillery. The CO

and I spent a lot of time examining the problems, first by personal aerial reconnaissance, followed by tasking ground patrols to reconnoitre the areas to be covered. We were looking for possible artillery fire support bases, and suitable ground routes for the passage of armoured personnel carriers (APC). We then conducted the time-honoured military assessment known as 'an appreciation of the situation'. I found John Warr to be a good and easy man to work for. He had a keen intellect and a good tactical brain which quickly assessed the value of views and ideas I put to him, before he gave me his outline plan.

My job was then to get down to the detail and produce a draft operation order, which Warr then cleared. In this instance, we established our BHQ with a fire support base (FSB) code-named Tennis. FSB Tennis was located a few kilometres north-west of the Task Force base to provide artillery fire support to our northernmost elements, who might need to move out of range of the 1 ATF guns at Nui Dat. From FSB Tennis our direct support artillery, 105 Field Battery, could easily support our companies when they were at the planned limits of their assigned search areas. We also had one company held in reserve at FSB Tennis, together with the APC troop of 12 tracked armoured fighting vehicles which was allotted to us, to rapidly react should any of the searching companies get into trouble. The Anti-Tank Platoon and Pioneer Platoon were also at FSB Tennis to protect the guns and BHQ, should our reserve company have to be deployed in support of the searching companies.

Bob O'Neill gave a good account of this successful operation in his book *Vietnam Task*. There is little to add, except to record the loss of a good soldier to friendly fire. Our supporting gunners were excellent; and their control and accuracy had always been spot on. On this occasion, the target was on the summit of Nui Nghe; and for reasons which can only be explained by artillerymen, three rounds in a salvo of six went high, just cleared the crest of Nui Nghe, and unfortunately landed among C Company's 9 Platoon who were operating on the north-western side of the hill and killed one of their soldiers.

**Map 5: Operation Sydney:
6–17 July 1966.**

Source: Designed by Ron Boxall and produced by Alan Mayne from circa 1966 US military maps provided by Bruce Davies.

LEGEND Operation SYDNEY	
Rifle Company search axis (with directions)	A Company B Company C Company D Company
Start of operation	
Artillery Incident 8 July	
Artillery Target 8 July	
Gun / Target line	
Enemy Contacts / Incidents	
Terminology:	Appendix E
Symbols:	Appendix F

Map 5A: Nui Nghe artillery incident: 8 July 1966.

Source: Designed by Ron Boxall and produced by Alan Mayne from circa 1966 US military maps provided by Bruce Davies.

We were angered and shocked, our gunners were mortified and an investigation followed. Enemy ground fire had been directed at a Sioux helicopter from the summit of Nui Nghe and clearance had been given for the target to be engaged by artillery located at the Task Force base at Nui Dat. One round 'fire for effect' from each of the tasked battery's six guns was fired simultaneously. Three of these rounds cleared the crest being targeted and landed in C Company's area. One of them struck a tree near 9 Platoon scattering lethal shrapnel and killing Lance Corporal Marinko 'Titch' Tomas.

Roger Wainwright

Artillery fire control procedures required that the locations of nearby friendly troops had to be confirmed before clearance to fire was given. The location of C Company had been incorrectly decoded at the battery headquarters due to misinterpretation of a signaller's handwriting in a log book. The error placed C Company 600 metres further to the east and well out of danger from the fire mission. If C Company's position had been accurately interpreted, clearance to fire would not have been given. The circumstances of this occurrence are shown in Maps 5 and 5A. In war,

such incidents can be the result of one or more of many variables or, as in this case, a momentary lapse in a team of highly dedicated professionals working under pressure. Fortunately, for 5 RAR these proved to be rare.

Max Carroll

During Operation Sydney it became clear that we would have to do something about the village of Duc My, which was on the north-eastern flank of our area of search. We knew that most of the village's inhabitants were forcibly resettled indigenes known as Montagnards, gathered together from throughout Phuoc Tuy several years earlier in a badly managed South Vietnamese Government attempt at population control. These people, originally hill tribes from Central Vietnam, did not like the government and were susceptible to VC influence. We also knew that there was a village squad of about 15 VC in Duc My to keep the population in line, and to extort taxes and food from the already impoverished people. A major tenet of counter-insurgency warfare is to separate the civilian population from enemy control and influence and open the way for re-establishment of government control. We now had a good opportunity to put this into practice and eliminate the village's VC squad. With this in mind, the CO gained approval from the Commander 1 ATF to extend our present operation by several days to conduct a cordon and search operation of Duc My on the night of 19/20 July 1966. This extension was named Operation Sydney Two.

At that time cordon and search operations had not been conducted at battalion level in Vietnam. Indeed, Allied forces of that size rarely moved operationally at night, but the VC did! What we were about to undertake would break new ground in Vietnam. I had limited knowledge of what was involved. When I was at Staff College in 1965, this subject had been considered briefly and its many problems discussed. Both directing staff and students agreed it was a difficult tactical exercise. John Warr had read widely on the subject and knew what his battalion had to do, so it was with keen interest we did the preliminary map study, aerial reconnaissance and the customary military appreciation of the situation. As a result, a ground reconnaissance was then deemed necessary to confirm the suitability of approach routes we had selected for the battalion to move in by night and establish the cordon before the village became aware of our intentions. This was a complex operation and we endeavoured to keep the

final plan as simple as possible. As always seems to happen when getting down to the fine detail, we found problems which meant compromises had to be made.

There was a stream running through the village from north-east to south-west, then on towards our location at FSB Tennis. This initially appealed as a good directional guide to assist our night approach to the south side of the village, and from there our companies could diverge to their assigned cordon positions. A night reconnaissance patrol, which included all four of the rifle company 2ICs, found this approach unsuitable so we had to think again. The village houses were widely scattered on the western side of Route 2 within an area about 600 metres square. The allocation of troops to each identified task then had to be carefully considered.

At that time 5 RAR could place about 550 men in the field. We decided each company forming a side of the cordon would have two platoons forward, in line, with men in pairs every 20 metres. The third platoon was to be positioned back in depth 70 metres or so for rear security. Each company cordon frontage could cover about 450 metres, and even if all four companies were placed in the cordon, we could not secure the whole village. We therefore decided we would have to exclude some of the outer houses. In broad outline, our final plan was that three of the companies would move at night to a position to the rear of their intended cordon positions, C Company from the west, while B and D Companies and the CO's party came in from the east, with all three companies to move forward into their final cordon positions and link with each other immediately after first light.

A Company, BHQ, two sections of mortars and the Anti-Tank Platoon, all mounted on APCs, were to close from the south at the last possible moment. A Company, while mounted on APCs, acted as the battalion reserve during the move-in. They then dismounted and rapidly moved to their cordon position on the south flank while the Anti-Tank Platoon also dismounted and took over the role of battalion reserve. We then had A Company closing off the south with B Company doing the same on the east, C Company was on the west and D Company temporarily on the north, in open young rubber trees, until relieved by the APC troop. D Company then became the search company for the village. In the event it worked well, with some exciting moments. During their night approach, the leading D Company soldier, Private Fred Clarke, in Stygian darkness, fell 10 metres down a disused well. After he was quietly and safely retrieved using toggle ropes, D Company's clandestine insertion resumed.

**Map 6: Operation Sydney Two:
19–20 July 1966.**

Source: Designed by Ron Boxall and produced by Alan Mayne from circa 1966 US military maps provided by Bruce Davies.

When the cordon was closed, several firefights erupted as VC attempted to escape. With the enemy who were killed, wounded and captured, we had cleaned out the place without loss to ourselves. Good fire discipline was essential to safeguard civilians, and our carefully thought-out rules of engagement, issued before the operation, were adhered to during its execution. After the village was cleared and the population screened, civil affairs aid in the form of medical and dental treatment was given to the villagers, which favourably impressed them. Our soldiers were firm but friendly and courteous, and they were well received. We withdrew from the village during the afternoon of 20 July 1966 to mount clearing operations in the surrounding areas, where we killed one VC and wounded another before harbouring (deploying defensively and adopting night routine) in separate company groups. We also set four overnight ambushes on likely approaches to the village to engage any VC who tried to re-enter it. During company sweeps on 21 and 22 July, we killed another VC and wounded two, one of whom escaped and the other was captured. The CO then got task force approval for C and D Companies to remain in the area for a further day, while the remainder of the battalion withdrew to Nui Dat to relieve 6 RAR for their Operation Hobart, due to commence on 24 July; there still being no let-up in the tempo of 1 ATF operations. We were well-satisfied with Operations Sydney and Sydney Two, both having been quite successful.

Operation Sydney Two was the first of nine cordon and search operations that 5 RAR conducted during our year in Vietnam. We learnt from each one and progressively refined our execution. Our methods were subsequently adopted as standard procedures in 1 ATF. John Warr wrote an excellent article for the *Australian Army Journal*, published in November 1967 in its Edition No 222, entitled 'Cordon and Search Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province'. It can be read in its entirety in Appendix C. His paper became a very significant input into the ongoing development of Australian Army doctrine on counter-revolutionary warfare.

After our success with Operation Sydney Two, the CO was keen to go again, with the much larger complex at Binh Ba as the target. The task force commander concurred, but 6 RAR's next operation had priority. From 24 July, we had to provide a company to protect their operational fire support base, as well as another to protect 6 RAR's base area at Nui Dat, plus another as 1 ATF's immediate reserve. We became used to this sort of situation. Then the picture changed when 6 RAR struck trouble, necessitating a second company of ours joining them. Our people

remained under command of 6 RAR until the whole force was recalled to base due to reports of a serious enemy threat unfolding to the west. Our B Company, with the Anti-Tank Platoon under command, was then dispatched to check out the report of a large enemy build-up. They returned late on 31 July having found a two-day-old, company-sized VC camp. D Company of 6 RAR conducted a similar patrol to the north-east, and returned on 2 August with nothing to report. Assessing the reliability of reports of VC movements from Vietnamese and other allies was a real problem for our intelligence people at that time. Nevertheless, we could not move until the situation clarified, so we did a lot of planning and were well prepared to commence our Operation Holsworthy, the cordon and search of Binh Ba.

With the lessons we learnt from our dress rehearsal at Duc My, we were far better equipped to handle the much larger complex of Binh Ba and the adjacent hamlet of Duc Trung, with an all-up population of about 2,000. We also were tasked to ‘revisit’ Duc My, so we were faced with a two-phased operation which went well with only a few minor hitches. We had two companies of 6 RAR under command, along with many others from various combat arms and combat support services units, both Australian and US. These latter included air support, interpreters and Vietnamese police. The operational functions of all elements had to be tied together and, as the operation’s success indicated, we achieved a satisfying level of combined professionalism. Our preliminary reconnaissance commenced on 5 August when C Company established a patrol base to the south-west of Binh Ba. On the night of 5/6 August, reconnaissance patrols checked the suitability of proposed assembly areas, routes and timings. The CO issued his orders on 7 August, and at 0800 hours on the following day, Captain Peter Isaacs departed with a patrol of company guides to lay out and secure the assembly area for the five rifle companies and BHQ who would be approaching the cordon area from the west. B Company was moving separately and approaching their cordon position from the east.

Peter Isaacs

I was responsible for laying out the battalion’s assembly area to the south-west of Binh Ba village. Comprised of platoon guides from each of the 5 RAR and 6 RAR cordon companies, this 15-man crew set off 90 minutes before the rest of the battalion and proceeded north towards

our objective. Feeling rather vulnerable, with only my trusty shepherd's crook and a 9 mm pistol, I was less than pleased to be handed an 81 mm mortar round to carry as my patrol left our base! Nothing occurred until we came to the edge of a track close to the assembly area. The lead scout indicated by silent hand signals the presence of what he thought were four VC approaching along the track. I gave the silent signal to establish an immediate ambush, drew my pistol and cocked it. The battalion was by now strung out in a long 'snake' not far behind us and contact with a small group of VC at this stage would compromise our cordoning and searching of the large village of Binh Ba. The VC turned out to be rubber tree tappers returning home. Fortunately, they gave no sign of having seen us.

Max Carroll

We applied the many lessons learnt from Duc My and had the cordon in position and closed by 0530 hours, which was 25 minutes before first light. In this we were assisted by having moonlight and a clean rubber plantation to move through. The result was that, without having to fire a shot, we apprehended and interrogated 169 males of military age, of whom 17 were confirmed VCs and 77 were suspects. Route 2 was opened to civilian traffic to Ba Ria and the province chief was eventually able to establish a Vietnamese military presence in Binh Ba. Until the so-called Provincial Reconnaissance Unit became available for this task, we left a company at Binh Ba. Subsequently, one of our officers, Captain Ron Boxall, acted as commander/adviser with this non-ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) unit. Its replacement, an ARVN unit, was then advised by another of our officers, Captain Ron Bade. Boxall's group were armed civilians, all either Montagnards or Nungs (Vietnamese Chinese), and were recruited, armed and paid by a CIA agency engaged in irregular military activities in Phuoc Tuy province. Their replacements, Bade's group, were an ARVN Regional Force company provided by the Duc Thanh district chief, Captain Be. Boxall and Bade relate their experiences in Chapter 11. Bade's functions were eventually taken over by AATTV members in late November.

**Map 7: Operation Holsworthy:
7–8 August 1966.**

Source: Designed by Ron Boxall and produced by Alan Mayne from circa 1966 US military maps provided by Bruce Davies.

5 RAR remained at Binh Ba for several days after the cordon and search, in which time we secured Route 2 for civilian traffic to Ba Ria and carried out civil affairs tasks helping the people. We established a good rapport with the local Vietnamese Catholic priest and the resident French rubber plantation estate managers, whose lives under the VC must have been very difficult; and a large stockpile of their treated rubber was able to be moved down the road to Ba Ria. We also established liaison with the isolated ARVN outpost at Duc Thanh to the north of Binh Ba; and made the acquaintance of the very lonely US Army adviser, Major Bill Prescott, who was stationed there. Then we visited the large Vietnamese Catholic village of Binh Gia further to the north-east of Duc Thanh and established valuable liaison with the village leaders. It was a busy, productive time.

Before we were to return to Nui Dat, we were tasked to investigate an intelligence report that a VC HQ was located to the east of Binh Ba. We subsequently searched the area for several days and found no trace of VC presence. During the search, I made a liaison flight to Duc Thanh to brief Bill Prescott on our activities so that he could keep his people out of the way. While in his office I saw his battle map on the wall showing a big sweeping red arrow, indicating VC troop movements, leading from the VC-held May Tao Mountains in the far north-east of the province, south then west to Nui Dat. I asked him where he had obtained the information and whether it was accurate. He replied that it had come from the provincial ARVN HQ in Ba Ria where 1 ATF had a liaison officer, and that he believed it to be accurate. I immediately returned to our BHQ and contacted 1 ATF. It transpired that they knew of the report but believed the source was questionable. In view of the numerous false alarms we had been subjected to, this approach is perhaps understandable. However, that very night, 16/17 August 1966, the 1 ATF base was subjected to substantial mortar, recoilless rifle and light artillery fire from the east, which caused 24 wounded casualties, of whom two were serious. 1 ATF artillery responded with counter-fire and the next morning, on 17 August, 6 RAR dispatched patrols to locate the enemy firing positions. 5 RAR less C Company, who remained at Binh Ba, were recalled to Nui Dat as soon as our search for a VC HQ east of Binh Ba was concluded. We arrived back at Nui Dat on the afternoon of 18 August at about the time D Company, 6 RAR, became heavily engaged at the start of the Battle of Long Tan.

I flew over the battlefield next day in a Sioux light observation helicopter, as our OC D Company, Major Paul Greenhalgh, and his men were under command of 6 RAR for the clearance of the battlefield. The scene was like France in the First World War, with smashed trees, churned-up earth and desolation surrounding the small area where D Company, 6 RAR, had made their stand. It was a sobering but exhilarating scene, as we knew that the VC had suffered a significant defeat despite their greatly superior strength at the point of battle.

After Long Tan, immediate pursuit of the retreating enemy was hampered by other credible VC Main Force threats to both Nui Dat and Binh Ba. We did not have the strength on the ground at that time to both pursue and defend, so the Americans mounted a long-running operation, code-named Toledo, in which 5 RAR later became involved. We named our initial involvement Operation Darlington and departed on 26 August

for five days of operations in conjunction with US forces who were operating to our north. We slowly and carefully searched areas to the north then east of the 1 ATF Base, then turned south to Long Tan, then home. We did not encounter any VC nor fire a shot, although some VC mass graves were discovered, and abandoned equipment and ammunition indicated an enemy in hasty withdrawal.

We departed again on 2 September, to continue in Operation Toledo as a blocking force to the west of Binh Ba, while US forces swept an area to our north. We patrolled extensively around Nui Nghe, an area familiar to us, where we killed two VC and captured another, all of whom were trying to escape the Americans. We considered this to be a poor result for the effort expended and we all were rather tired and frustrated when we returned to base on 8 September 1966.

Our return from Operation Toledo allowed 6 RAR to depart on their Operation Vacluse in the Nui Dinh hills; they were out from 8 to 24 September. We slipped back into the routine of one company on standby as task force immediate reserve, one company to secure 6 RAR's base area at Nui Dat, continual patrolling in the 1 ATF Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) and, of course, the ongoing development of our own base area. During these activities, we did several one-day company-sized 'County Fair' operations in which we provided cordons of selected areas while the ARVN searched. We also did a 'Road Runner' operation (APC-mounted infantry) along Route 44 down to Long Hai, to show the VC and the locals that we could still use the road when we wanted to.

There was no let-up and, after 6 RAR returned to Nui Dat, we departed on Operation Crow's Nest on 1 October to follow up on information provided by a VC Main Force soldier of 274 Regiment, who had surrendered at Binh Gia on 28 September. We were out for three days to establish a small command element within the Duc Thanh compound, where we were hosted by Captain Be, the district chief, and his US Army adviser, Major Bill Prescott. At the same time, two of our companies and supporting APCs searched the areas to the north, up to and around a village called Ngai Giao. This was outside the northern extremity of the 1 ATF TAOR and had not been searched before. We did not strike any 274 Regiment elements, although D Company lost Private Graham Warburton to a sniper. We discovered a cache of over six tonnes of rice and a hoard of meat, which we confiscated. We gave the meat to Captain Be,

who distributed it to the needy in his area. We then had to withdraw due to our imminent involvement in a major US operation, code-named Robin, along Route 15, the main road between Vung Tau and Saigon.

Robert O'Neill and Peter Isaacs

War is one of those human activities which continue by day and night. We tend to remember those parts of wars that happen in daylight. Then they are so arresting, and often spectacular. Most war films are set in daytime. Books, newspapers and magazines also focus on the actions of the day rather than those of the night. Yet, warfare continues both by day and night. At night, when on operations, our troops left their defended positions to patrol intensively, either quietly to gain information, or more openly to dominate the battlefield, and push their opponents back and demoralise them.

During the Vietnam War, Australian night operations included patrolling, ambushing and tactical concealment manoeuvres such as setting cordons or moving covertly into a new area. As several of the chapters of this book show, physical and mental exhaustion were continuing problems that members of the battalion accepted as part of their daily burden. When not moving at night, whether in the field or in base, each section and platoon would have several men on sentry rotation around the clock. Platoons and companies on patrol at night rarely had an opportunity for adequate sleep. They were on the alert continuously. When patrolling at night, most stood, crouched or moved carefully, listening and peering to catch any available hint of enemy movement among trees, rocks or over open ground in front of them. When they identified possibly hostile movement, they had to choose between remaining concealed or moving carefully before taking offensive action against intruders in our area of operations. All had to be aware that a night encounter with ill-informed friendly forces or innocent civilians, as well as the enemy, was always a possibility.

For a small group of us, the three captains on BHQ – Peter Isaacs, the adjutant, Brian Le Dan, the signals officer, and myself, the intelligence officer – the nights brought another set of responsibilities: we were the available pool of BHQ command post (CP) duty officers. So that the CO and the operations officer could get some uninterrupted sleep when

BHQ was not on the move at night, we divided the period from stand-down after sunset (around 2030) to stand-to before dawn (around 0500) into three ‘watches’ of around three hours each. Any action occurring between those hours in the battalion’s area of responsibility was reported by radio to whoever of the three of us was on duty, and our first thought in response was whether to wake the CO or Max Carroll to take over conduct of the action. Most incidents reported to us were minor contacts or observation reports, and we could allow our seniors to continue sleeping. However, every now and then there were medium or higher-level clashes or ambushes in which our soldiers required artillery or mortar support. In response we would go first to Max, and he would make the decision on whether to handle the situation himself or awaken the CO.

When BHQ deployed on operations outside the Nui Dat base area, the actual CP usually occupied two parallel trenches dug into the earth, about two metres long and half a metre deep. The ground between the two provided a surface for maps, log books and radio sets. At night, a rudimentary and supposedly lightproof and waterproof shelter enclosed the duty officer and duty signallers. At stand-to periods, the CO and Max, plus the operator of the radio link to 1 ATF HQ, would cram into this restricted space too. Lighting was by hand torch – usually red-lensed to minimise the visibility of scattered light amid the green foliage that normally surrounded us. The commander of our direct support artillery battery, the mortar platoon commander and their signallers occupied a similar double trench close by. Occasionally, the CP was located within a deserted building or an armoured command vehicle and, on one occasion, a borrowed US Army air-conditioned caravan!

This system of night-time control worked well, but at the cost of constant tiredness during the day for each of the three of us, until we could get away for a couple days and catch up on lost sleep. Of course, we were not the only members of the battalion affected by daytime tiredness. It was a constant problem that all had to learn to manage, for we really needed to be sharp both by day and by night. Returning to peacetime routine in Australia was a great blessing in more ways than one.

Max Carroll

Peter Isaacs, who had come to the Australian Army from the British Army, observed that he considered himself fortunate in working in an outstanding battalion; a sentiment shared throughout the whole of 5 RAR. Despite the burdens of being in the 1 ATF vanguard from the outset, the shortages and oversights noted earlier and the need to conjure solutions to unforeseen operational problems, the morale of the battalion was holding up well following its first four months of hard service. Without doubt John Warr had forged a fine, aggressive fighting battalion of which we were all immensely proud.

Editors' conclusion

This chapter has described 5 RAR's early forays into the unique mix of military and civilian aspects of operations in Vietnam; and how, through necessity, this mixture settled quickly into differing types of operation and devised its own initiative-driven systems of problem-solving and improvisation. This approach inevitably became the dominant mode in 5 RAR's deployment in the first wave of 1 ATF's battalions in Phuoc Tuy. The next chapter describes the effects of the expanding presence of 1 ATF on the lives of both the VC and the province's civilian population, and the role of intelligence in shaping our relations with these two groups.

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