6

INTO THE HILLS: OPERATIONS CANBERRA AND ROBIN – OCTOBER 1966

Max Carroll and Peter Isaacs

Editors' introduction

The operational narrative resumes, following on from Chapter 4. In October 1966, 5th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR), was to embark on operations which entailed a host of new challenges involving an incursion into the jungle-clad, rocky and cave-riddled Viet Cong (VC) stronghold of the Nui Thi Vai hills. The enemy had been unmolested in this established sanctuary area for long periods before the arrival of 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF). Clearing of the Nui Thi Vai hills was a necessary precursor to a forthcoming US Army operation code-named Robin in which 1 ATF was to participate.

Max Carroll

In the bigger picture, the war was escalating, and a major build-up of US forces was taking place. To ease the congestion at the up-river port of Saigon, newly arrived troops and stores were to disembark at Vung Tau, then move through Phuoc Tuy by road to bases at Bear Cat, Long Binh and Bien Hoa. These installations were serviced by Route 15, which was regularly interdicted by the VC. 1 ATF was to have the task of securing the road within Phuoc Tuy Province from Ba Ria to a hamlet named Phu My,

about 22 kilometres distant to the north-west, where there was also an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) post. Our old comrades, the US 173 Airborne Brigade, would then take over the task north of Phu My, through Bien Hoa Province to Bear Cat, some 26 kilometres further up the road, which was also the destination of the first formation we were providing cover for, the 3 Brigade of the 4 US Infantry Division.

In the 1 ATF sector, Route 15 was dominated by the hill massifs of Nui Dinh and Nui Thi Vai, which also had a subsidiary feature – Nui Ong Trinh – running south-west towards the road. There was yet a fourth peak, Nui Toc Tien, but this was further to the east and not considered to be a direct source of VC threat. The route clearance was a 1 ATF operation; and the road allotted to 5 RAR was about 15 kilometres in length, while 6 RAR's A Company covered the shorter section nearest to Ba Ria. 6 RAR had been successful in their recent Operation Vacluse in the Nui Dinh hills, and D Company, 6 RAR, were to patrol that hill area again, as added security, while the road convoys were passing.

The task given to 5 RAR was a big one. We had to secure the road between 0900 hours and 1600 hours, from 11 to 16 October, during which period two 50-truck convoys would pass daily. This was Operation Robin, and the timings were inflexible. The 15-kilometre sector of Route 15 for which we were responsible dictated that our fire support base would have to be located about midway along the road, so we could provide artillery coverage for all our dispersed companies. The nature of the vegetation along the verges was such that we had to patrol a zone several hundred metres wide on either side of the highway. The dominating hill features of Nui Thi Vai and Nui Ong Trinh were within VC mortar range of the road, which meant these would have to be cleared beforehand. We were given five days, 6 to 10 October, to check out the summits and the western slopes. This was to be Operation Canberra, which would then flow on immediately into Operation Robin. Having returned from Operation Crow's Nest as late as 3 October, our preparations were in overdrive again.

For both Operations, Canberra and Robin, we established our fire support base close to the road near a hamlet named Ap Ong Trinh Dp. In addition to our normal direct support battery, 103 Field Battery, we had two 155 mm self-propelled guns from Battery A of 2/35 Artillery Regiment in support. This latter unit was part of the US artillery allotted to 1 ATF and

they were normally deployed in the Task Force base area. Because 6 RAR was fully committed to other activities, for Operation Canberra we had to use our own troops to protect the guns. 11 Platoon from D Company and the Anti-Tank Platoon were given this task under the command of Captain Ron Boxall, the second in command (2IC) of D Company. The remainder of D Company accompanied Battalion Headquarters (BHQ) as 'Palace Guard'. This deployment left us three companies for searching, and we also took two of the three sections of our Mortar Platoon with us into the hills. These were to be flown in on 7 October once the BHQ objective had been secured.

We moved to our start point by road and, leaving the armoured personnel carriers (APCs) on Route 15 south of Ap Ong Trinh Dp, we rapidly deployed to move to our target area to the north. This approach was not ideal, but the time available for the operation made it the best option. We proceeded for several thousand metres through thick scrub before reaching the foot of the hills, with B Company moving around the western side and C Company on the eastern flank of Nui Ong Trinh. A Company led the column, followed by BHQ and D Company, up towards the summit of Nui Ong Trinh. We did not reach the top on day one but did so on the morning of the second day, 7 October, with the search so far being uneventful. An unnecessary drama then occurred when I received a radio call from Captain Ron Boxall advising that the commanding officer (CO) of 1 Field Regiment had arrived at our fire support base (FSB), didn't like the location, and was moving the guns; and what should he, Boxall, do as he was responsible for protecting them? This was the first we knew of this nonsense. Neither John Warr nor Neville Gair, the battery commander, had been consulted. This was inexcusable because the guns could not adequately support us while they were moving. Some rather heated exchanges with HQ 1 ATF followed. Our CO ordered Ron's gun protection group to remain where they were, the Commander 1 ATF countermanded the CO 1 Field Regiment's illogical order; and we duly got our FSB back and continued with our task.

Map 8: Operation Canberra – Phase 1: 6–8 October 1966.

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

The selected objective for BHQ on 7 October was a twin-peaked feature which was about 1,500 metres, as the crow flies, north-east from Nui Ong Trinh. I had code-named the twin peaks Julie and Jan after two young teenaged friends of my family. C Company had crossed from the eastern flank of Nui Ong Trinh and had checked out the two peaks while moving to their day three search area, which was the southern slope of Nui Thi Vai. A Company initially led off from Nui Ong Trinh, descending into a steeply sloping, jungle-clad valley. On reaching the valley floor, A Company then left us, branching off further to the north-east and skirting Hill Julie, before they commenced their ascent of Nui Thi Vai. It had taken A Company some time to pick their way down the slope; and we were concerned that the BHQ Group and D Company would be hard-pressed to reach our objective before dark. We asked for Iroquois helicopter support to be on standby, should we find an extraction landing zone (LZ) on Nui Ong Trinh, to fly us to the LZ we knew was in the small saddle between the twin peaks. In any event, D Company found a suitable LZ on Nui Ong Trinh from which they flew to our destination. However, the lead scouts of the BHQ Group missed the track made by D Company where they turned off to the LZ from A Company's path, and we went the whole way on foot, cursing the hapless scouts and the hellish slopes and vegetation! At least the objective area was secure when we eventually arrived. We intended to stay there, so D Company occupied Hill Jan and the BHQ Group Hill Julie, while the pioneers enlarged the LZ, on the edges of which our two sections of mortars were located once they were flown in. We had a strong defensive position from which we could control our searching companies with good radio communications and provide mortar fire support.

The third day of our search, Saturday 8 October, started quietly; our command team was joined by the deputy operations officer, Captain Peter Isaacs, who had been on duty at Nui Dat.

Peter Isaacs

By the time I reached BHQ atop Hill Julie, Operation Canberra had been underway for 48 hours. I therefore avoided the long haul on foot from the flat plain beside Route 15 and the arguments about the FSB being moved on the orders of 1 Field Regiment's CO without prior consultation with CO 5 RAR. Captain Bob Supple, who was 2IC Support Company, stood in during my absence. I arrived by helicopter on the morning of 8 October. Early that morning we had received unconfirmed reports of a VC mobile battalion near our area of operations. At 1000 hours C Company became involved in a contact in which 8 Platoon was fired on from several different directions. Initially, Major John Miller, the officer commanding C Company, reported being in contact with a possible company-sized force. The VC withdrew but C Company sustained seven casualties from booby traps and an eighth man injured with a twisted ankle. All were evacuated by *Dustoff*, which took about an hour. At around 1400 hours, C Company reported that the rudimentary houses and livestock enclosures they were among were heavily booby-trapped. They had sustained another five wounded and requested further *Dustoff*. C Company was therefore engaged in difficult casualty evacuations from their jungle-clad mountainside location for several hours, and their strength was depleted by 13 men.

At 1400 hours B Company reported sighting a group of VC on the lower western slopes of Nui Thi Vai. 5 Platoon's forward scout, Private Colin Cogswell (aged 19) and his second scout, Private Doug Hillier, had located a booby trap, deloused it and a few minutes later heard voices of enemy close by. Covered by Hillier who remained stationary, Cogswell moved forward to investigate. He initially sighted 15 VC and, a short time later, even more close by. He remained in these positions for nearly an hour after Hillier had cautiously withdrawn to report the enemy presence. Cogswell moved to within five metres of the enemy, but he was not seen as he continued to observe. His performance entailed magnificent use of the cover offered by rocks and heavy vegetation and his highly developed movement and concealment skills; to say nothing of his coolness under pressure.

Colin Cogswell recalls this episode

I thought I might have trouble remembering everything about what happened on 8 October 1966 during Operation Canberra. When I started writing I was surprised how clearly memories flooded back. Of course, I have read the citation that accompanied the award of my Military Medal and have always felt surprised that I was rewarded for just doing my job as a forward scout and that my recollections don't precisely match that of the citation.¹

B Company was moving up an east-to-west major ridgeline of Nui Thi Vai mountain. My platoon, 5 Platoon, was in the lead with me as first scout and Doug Hillier as second. As we got near the top of this ridgeline we crossed over a re-entrant. We were about 50 to 60 metres in front of the rest of 5 Platoon when we came across two huts about 25 metres to our front. What then attracted our attention was a group of 12 to 15 Vietnamese in well-fitting green uniforms who seemed to be holding an O Group. [Editor's note: a meeting where orders are distributed and coordinated by officers. The Conclusion to this chapter gives more details.]

We had moved too far forward and had lost sight of the rest of our section who were following us. We decided that I should remain where I was, and Doug would go back and let our section commander, Corporal Jim Hall, know what we had found so he could pass the information up the chain of command. My first instinct was to find better cover, so I moved very carefully about 10 metres away and behind some large rocks among foliage. In doing so I lost sight of the enemy group we had first seen. After about a minute I heard Vietnamese voices very close nearby.

I slowly looked over the rock and through the bushes and saw a Vietnamese, well dressed in a green uniform and wearing a cap with a red star on its front. I remember thinking his shoulder-slung AK47 looked immaculate. Fortunately, he was looking down and talking to someone I couldn't see. He didn't know that my M16 was pointed at the side of his head and I was about to squeeze the trigger.

One part of me wanted to shoot him and another thought that the shot would draw attention to the nearby presence of B Company who were probably planning some action to get me out and deal with the enemy. So, I slowly got back behind my rock and waited for something to happen. The enemy were so close that I could smell them and was concerned that they might smell me – or hear my thumping heart. They were only 4 or 5 metres from me. I guess they had their slack moments too.

I seemed to be there for ages waiting for the Company to do an attack or something. I knew that they were aware that I was still in position close to the enemy. By now I had pulled out my two M26 grenades and removed the striker lever safety tapes so that when something happened, I could throw one just over my covering rock and the other one as hard as I could towards where I'd seen the larger group. I hoped that my mates didn't brass me up – being a forward scout I'd had a few times when I was more worried about my mates behind me than any enemy in front of me.

As I waited, I got an uneasy feeling and looked up to my right where the boulders were about 6 metres high. I saw another neatly uniformed soldier standing there and looking straight out into a clearing in front of my rock. If he had looked down and to his left, he would have seen me, but he turned around and disappeared into what we found later was a cave in which a radio setup was housed. The same man came out again briefly, but still did not see me.

I don't know how much time had passed before I realised I couldn't hear any more talking and was no longer sure where the enemy were. I felt it was time to get back to 5 Platoon one way or the other. I put my grenades back into their pouches and slowly backed out around another massive boulder hoping I would not be seen. At the same time, I'm looking for my section on the other side of the re-entrant. I saw Jim Hall waving me to come back and Joe Devlin, our M60 machine gunner, ready to give me covering fire.

I thought 'it's now or never' and ran 30 metres down into the re-entrant and scrambled up the other side expecting to be shot at any stage. The moment I got back I realised that only my section was there, and Jim had them on their feet and moving as fast as they could back down the hill to where B Company had been ordered to pull back out of the way of an air strike. I don't know how Joe held onto that M60 while scrambling down that steep and rocky jungle slope.

We didn't seem to have moved far when the first jet came screaming in with its Gatling cannon roaring and dropping two canisters of cluster bombs right where I had been not very long before. By the time we got back to B Company our artillery was getting in on the act. The daylight was fading, and B Company harboured for the night. All I wanted was to make a hot brew, but not before Doug and I had to go and see Major McQualter for a debrief. When we got back to our section, we were told that we were going out for the night to set up a listening post. There was no rest for the wicked – nor even for the lucky!

After returning to Australia I was surprised to learn that I had been awarded a Military Medal for doing what I thought was my job of detecting the enemy and getting the information back. It was presented on my 21st birthday, at Government House in Sydney, by Sir Roden Cutler VC.

¹ Colin Cogswell's citation for the Military Medal can be viewed at the 5th Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment Association website, *Citation accompanying the award of the Military Medal to Pre. Cogswell*, www.5rar.asn.au/history/cite_cogswell.htm.

Major Bruce McQualter had begun quietly to position B Company for an attack. While he was doing so, we were advised by 1 ATF that the HQ of VC 274 Regiment was believed to be in our vicinity and that a task force intelligence officer was on his way to brief us on the situation. B Company was warned to be extremely careful in its movements and that if help was needed, A Company would provide it. C Company was closer to B Company but still engaged in casualty evacuation.

Major Alex Piper from HQ 1 ATF arrived shortly afterwards and confirmed that HQ 274 Regiment was indeed believed to be nearby. John Warr stepped away from the command group and considered what action to take. Allow the B Company attack to proceed, or order B and C Companies to move away and call in artillery and air strikes? Nobody knows what thoughts John Warr had in the short time he took to decide to order B Company to cancel their impending attack. Maybe he

was remembering some advice that he had been given shortly before the battalion had commenced deployment for Vietnam. During his final inspection visit, the highly regarded General Officer Commanding Eastern Command, Major General Tom Daly, had told John that if ever he found himself in a position where he felt that by delaying an action he could achieve a similar result but would probably save soldiers' lives, then he should delay, as those lives were of paramount importance.

I must admit that, personally, I was disappointed that B Company was ordered to abandon its attack plan, but I have no doubt that had it proceeded some members of B Company would have died, and others could have sustained life-changing injuries. John Warr was correct – his soldiers' lives were of paramount importance in a conflict that was not concerned with Australia's national survival. The chief reason why John was held in such high esteem by all ranks of the battalion was because all knew of his concerns for us.

Max Carroll

B Company were chagrined at being ordered back to a safe distance to the west and C Company were also moved out of the way before both VC areas were subjected to heavy artillery fire from our FSB. Our four mortars also joined the attack and the clearly identified target areas must have been most uncomfortable for the VC. We had a US Army helicopter light fire team, consisting of two heavily armed Iroquois, code-named *Derringer*, available to support us, and they were called in during short breaks in the artillery and mortar fire to deliver high explosive (HE) rockets and high-volume fire from their multi-barrelled machine guns at opportunity targets. As they made their low-level passes they drew heavy ground fire, which was returned with effect by their side-door gunners. Obviously, the target areas were well defended, and it looked as though we were in for a long engagement. We requested an air strike to handle any hardened targets and in a short time a US forward air controller (FAC), code-named *Bird dog*, was overhead in his small Cessna. He was briefed on the situation as he circled us, familiarising himself with our locations and the targets to be hit. His lazy drawl belied his professionalism for he obviously knew his trade. Soon a flight of four F100 Super Sabre fighter-bombers came screaming onto the scene and orbited while the FAC briefed them. Then the FAC went in low, marking the target area with his white phosphorous

smoke rockets, before getting out of the way of the jets who followed him in. The first passes were from the west across our front and we had a good view from Hill Julie. The target was plastered with both 500-pound HE bombs and cluster bomb units. These were thin-cased canisters which burst above the ground, widely scattering many smaller fragmentation bomblets, which, in turn, exploded on impact or lay dormant, to explode when disturbed.

The F100s then varied their line of attack and came in low, above Hills Jan and Julie, and we were startled by the screaming roar as they passed. When they had expended all their heavy ordnance, they again went in low, strafing with their 20 mm cannon and firing salvos of HE 70 mm Mighty Mouse rockets. It was a most impressive use of ground attack air power. I had never seen such an amount of effective destruction in such a short time; and when the FAC offered us a second wave, of course we accepted. During the short break between sorties, our artillery and mortars kept up the bombardment so there was no break for the VC. The second wave continued the destruction but added napalm to the mix, which was quite sobering to watch as the burning petroleum jelly agent penetrated caves and any other apertures it hit or burst over. We thanked the FAC for the valuable assistance he and his colleagues had given us as he signed off and went home, by which time it was dusk. Regrettably, any VC survivors now had darkness to assist their escape.

Earlier in the afternoon the CO had been prescient in ordering 1,000 81 mm mortar bombs to be flown forward to our mortar line on Julie; these fortunately had been delivered. It appeared that this had caused some unhappiness along the supply line. These bombs had come from Task Force holdings at Nui Dat which, in turn, had to be replaced. Noting that most of his mortar bomb holdings at Nui Dat was being flown out to us, our brigadier called replacement stocks forward from 1st Australian Logistic Support Group (1 ALSG) at Vung Tau. We soon heard that some 1 ALSG pogos (an informal nickname applied by combat troops to others who work in safe billets behind them) were upset because they had to work their butts off getting the replacement ammunition forward in a hurry; and it was on a Saturday – a weekend! We weren't worried about what day of the week it was, or the preferred working arrangements in base areas – we demanded the bombs we needed and were soon to use them.

Map 9: Operation Canberra – Phase 2: 8–10 October 1966.

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

Editors' Note

Inevitably, differences in outlook arose when supporting troops were distinctly separated from combat troops both by distance and in terms of relative comfort and safety. In Chapter 2 the pros and cons of separating 1 ATF from its dedicated logistic support agency were discussed. Inevitably, the exigencies and tempo of operations lacked immediacy for many members of 1 ALSG, which primarily operated on a workaday routine and in much better-developed facilities. These were permanently ensconced beside a beach in Vung Tau; a large and quite safe urban area which was both remote from 1 ATF operations and protected from major enemy ground attack by its location at the end of a long, narrow peninsular. Combat soldiers who got to spend infrequent two-day breaks from operations at Vung Tau considered the atmosphere there to be akin to a seaside holiday resort; this was a bit harsh, but the perceived differences were telling and lasting. They felt a strong need to clearly distinguish themselves from their counterparts who worked in such a setting. Hence, an old British Army tag 'pogos' (standing for 'personnel on garrison operations') re-emerged to be applied routinely, and sometimes disdainfully when it was deemed deserving. Infantrymen laughingly accepted the inevitable comeback, 'grunts', which was copied from the Americans. Pogo was a far less derogatory term than its expletive US equivalent, which Australian combat soldiers peremptorily declined to adopt as descriptor for our base soldiers.

Max Carroll

The harassing fire we used to interdict likely VC withdrawal routes throughout the night had to be provided by our mortars, as it was not logistically possible to get large amounts of heavy artillery ammunition forward to our FSB in time. The four mortars we had with us fired about 960 rounds throughout the night and no one got much sleep. Early next morning B and C Companies moved back into the areas they had vacated on the previous afternoon and continued their search. The VC had gone and taken their casualties with them.

We now had to reassess the situation as we were on the fourth day of our five-day operation and had been engaged in a major encounter. This indicated a reasonably strong VC presence in the area and there was still a lot of ground to cover. It was obvious to us that we would have to

return to Nui Thi Vai when we had completed Operation Robin, but in the meantime, we had to search and clear the slopes and crest to our immediate front.

The search by A Company of the Nui Thi Vai crest, and then down to the pagoda on the north-western spur, was uneventful, except they captured a suspect Buddhist monk, whom they passed on to Captain Bob O'Neill, our intelligence officer, for interrogation. B Company's search was gratifying. They were continuing carefully to cover the area of the airstrikes when they found a large VC camp, spread over several hundred metres including 15 huts, caves, a tunnel system, a water supply system, a quantity of medical supplies, ammunition, grenades, mines, rockets and clothing and equipment. They also recovered a quantity of valuable documents, which, among other things, gave details of the company which had administered the installation and listed the VC units and numbers which had passed through recently. This was a major VC base area. The discovery of this installation and its contents no doubt helped ease any disappointments that lingered in the company from earlier contacts. C Company's search was also most productive and revealed why the area where they had taken casualties had been covered by trail watchers and booby traps. They found two company-sized bases, containing a hospital and a quantity of medical stores, a booby trap factory, explosives, ammunition, general stores and equipment, many valuable documents and a large quantity of rice. Probably the most important item found was a 1:50,000-scale map, which showed the VC track system for western Phuoc Tuy and other bases and fortified areas.

Both companies reported that the airstrikes had been most effective with many direct hits making it difficult to count weapon pits and other defensive locations. We sent all the documents found and some of the medical stores back to Task Force for analysis. All other stores, ammunition, equipment and the rice were destroyed as they were too difficult to remove. Time was pressing, the destruction work took time and we could not complete destroying all installations we had found before moving on to meet our deadline for commencing our part in Operation Robin.

The final day was uneventful as the search companies moved to their extraction point, LZ Michael, at the north-western end of Nui Thi Vai. B Company then moved by APCs to their allotted position on Route 15 in readiness for Operation Robin, due to commence next day, while A,

C and D Companies were airlifted to theirs. BHQ, the mortars and pioneers were also airlifted back to the FSB. We were all repositioned on the afternoon of 10 October and Operation Canberra was concluded. We left Nui Thi Vai with mixed feelings. We had killed VC and wounded others during contacts, but C Company had suffered 12 wounded plus another man injured; and D Company had also had a man injured. However, the operation was considered highly successful as we had seriously disrupted major VC elements, forcing them to rapidly vacate a long-occupied sanctuary, as well as finding and destroying three large installations and associated stores and equipment. Also, the intelligence value of the documents captured was incalculable. The casualties suffered by the VC due to the airstrikes and our artillery and mortar fire, all of which were highly accurate, must have hurt them but to what degree we would never know. We knew we would be going back to Nui Thi Vai; and we also knew we would be expected! For the present, Operation Robin was about to begin.

The official history volume, *To Long Tan*, covers Operation Robin in just two sentences, which I will quote here:

The clearance of the western side of the Nui Thi Vais ensured the smooth conduct of Operation Robin. One security patrol received ineffective sniper fire and several mines were detonated harmlessly while checking the roadway, but the US troop convoys went through unmolested.¹

For those of us on the ground there was far more to it.

Our subunits were dispersed over the 15 kilometres of our assigned sector, from Phu My in the north, southwards in the order shown at Map 10: B Company, C Company, BHQ and Support Company (co-located with the FSB), then D Company and A Company, whose southern boundary linked with 6 RAR. Each rifle company had a section of APCs to assist with rapid redeployments, as well as their attached engineer combat teams to clear the road of mines and booby traps each morning. In the event, we started work as soon as we moved in on the afternoon of 10 October, and the first mines were found. We also lost a sapper wounded by a booby trap and an APC had a track blown off by a mine on the road verge. The same afternoon there was a further incident when the Sioux helicopter that

1 McNeill, Ian, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950–1966*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993, p 391.

was supporting us crashed. The aircraft was flying at low altitude along the road between companies, when the rotor blade appeared to strike a roadside telegraph pole and disintegrate. A metal fragment struck the pilot, Second Lieutenant Bill Davies, in the head, seriously wounding him. Fortunately, both Davies and his passenger, the company quartermaster sergeant of B Company, Staff Sergeant 'Sailor' Mealing, survived, mainly because the crash occurred close to C Company where our regimental medical officer, Captain Tony White, was waiting to be picked up by the aircraft. As related by Bill Davies in Chapter 14, his immediate presence on the scene saved Davies' life, as Tony recognised the seriousness of his condition and directed the *Dustoff* to take him straight to a specialist hospital in Saigon for surgery. Mealing's injuries were less serious, but he still had to return to Australia. I knew him well, having served with him in 3 RAR in Malaya. All of this happened on the afternoon before Operation Robin officially started!

The danger of sniper fire was ever-present, and our patrols had to clear well back from the road, constantly, throughout each day. Map 10 shows helicopter pilot reports of locations from which they received enemy small arms fire as they flew over Route 15 and the areas to either side, before and during the operation. The road and its verges and culverts within each sector were checked daily for mines and booby traps before 0900 hours, then APC-mounted infantry road patrols throughout the day, between convoys, ensured there would be no interference by enemy activities.

There was considerable civilian activity in our area as there were several villages and hamlets along the road, together with numerous charcoal-producing ovens, which were a main source of income for local peasants. We took no chances and all movement and activity was carefully watched. Most of the locals were Buddhists and there were two villages inhabited by Catholic refugees from North Vietnam, Ap Ong Trinh Dp and Long Cat, which were well maintained and defended. We took the opportunity to establish good relationships with these people as they were anti-VC. We also assisted them with the provision of some barbed wire to strengthen their defences, and Tony White and one of the dentists from the Task Force Dental Unit spent a day providing much welcomed treatment.

Map 10: Operation Robin:
11-16 October 1966.

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

LEGEND
Operation ROBIN

Inter-brigade boundary

Inter-battalion boundary

Inter-company boundary

Armoured Personnel Carrier

Site of Sioux helicopter crash

Perimeter enclosing 5 RAR HQ, 103 Field Battery gun position and Support Company platoons

Enemy incidents:

1. Sightings
2. Mines
3. Small arms fire
4. Small arms AA fire
5. Anti-armour fire

Notes:

1. Each company had a section of three APCs under its command.
2. Terminology: Appendix E
3. Symbols: Appendix F

The passage of the convoys was a sight to behold. The nominated limit of 50 vehicles at a time was often exceeded; and the stream seemed endless. I believe something like 1,200 men a day passed up the road during the operation. Each convoy was escorted by US Army APCs, while overhead was a command and control helicopter with fire teams of helicopter gunships constantly prowling the flanks. It was a most impressive display of American strength and we hoped that any VC observers who had returned to the hills behind us were duly impressed.

Editors' conclusion

The official history's passing reference clearly doesn't do justice to this period of intense activity, with many important facets of inter-allied cooperation and interaction with the civilian population living along the vital, inter-provincial Route 15. During Operation Robin, 5 RAR commenced planning a return to Nui Thi Vai and was able to clear a proposed plan with Brigadier Jackson, the task force commander. During one of his regular visits he granted John Warr's request that no time limit be imposed for completion of the operation. It was obvious from earlier experience that there was still a lot to be discovered on Nui Thi Vai, and flexibility to react to developing situations without time constraints was needed. Brigadier David Jackson had an excellent grasp of 5 RAR's approach to operations and, once he had approved a plan, he let the battalion get on with the job in hand. Orders for a new operation code-named Queanbeyan were prepared and the CO held his Orders Group (the assembly of subordinates to receive verbal orders, with hard copy confirmation, and to provide any needed clarification of details). On 17 October the battalion was ready to launch a much-desired return to the Nui Thi Vai hills, to follow up its successes during Operation Canberra.

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