

***THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR  
1962-1972***

***THE TRAINING OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY UNITS  
FOR SERVICE IN VIETNAM:  
7th BATTALION, THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN REGIMENT  
Michael O'Brien***

This essay discusses the efficacy of the training of a particular Australian infantry battalion, 7th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (7RAR), for the war in South Vietnam. It takes a broad view of the term training, not only including the preparation of soldiers and the unit for war, but also the sustaining of the unit in battle, unit replacement, individual reinforcement and the care of its soldiers after they had returned. There are many opinions on training: while the author's subjective conclusions are listed here, it needs to be remembered that the personal experience of each soldier differed and that there are valid lessons to be drawn from the experience of each of them.

The battalion had two tours of duty in that conflict: from April 1967 to April 1968 and from February 1970 to February 1971.<sup>1</sup> The experiences of these two tours have much in common with other infantry battalions, but there are probably also some significant differences. Infantry was the predominant Australian Army corps in Vietnam: its predominant method of rotating troops, unlike most other corps, was by unit replacement.<sup>2</sup> The training experience of the other corps that used individual replacement for troop rotation was in many important respects fundamentally different and is not dealt with in this essay.

In both instances, the training of 7RAR was in an Army that had been altered substantially to accommodate the second National Service scheme. It was clear that the Army had insufficient strength to sustain its effort in Vietnam at the level the government desired without the contribution made by National Servicemen. In each case these men made up half the battalion strength. Two comments are worth making. The National Servicemen were indistinguishable from their regular Army counterparts in Vietnam. They changed the Army: being a far more representative slice of the community, they brought skills and intelligence to the Army that had not been present in the junior ranks. Private soldiers employed as Army drivers occasionally had law degrees (an interesting misuse of talent). There was challenge to the Army way of doing things: they were, in one observer's view, 'a little more inquisitive and less accepting of some more traditional aspects of military life'. Nevertheless, the Army also brought out the potential in many of these individuals. In 7RAR's case, one can find National Service private soldiers who are now professors of physiology and PhDs.

What makes up the training of an infantry battalion? The approach taken to this question in this essay is the sum of many parts. It includes an underlying system of training in the Army as a whole. It also consists of the stages of training individuals in a unit to do their job. These individuals are not just infantry riflemen: they are the specialists like mortar-men, assault pioneers, signallers, drivers and the junior and senior non-commissioned officers and the officers right up to the commanding officer. It also includes the elements of the collective training of a unit: of building these individuals into the various teams that comprise the greater team that is a battalion. There is an important dimension of leadership at several levels, because training can be lax or rigorous. These levels of leadership exist throughout the battalion, its supporting arms, its higher formation and lead to the very top of the Army. And in common with all training, there are dimensions of both education and experience, of the theory and the ability to practise it instinctively. This essay tries to deal with all these issues but does not attempt to do so evenly.

What was the Army training system at this time? The system had existed and evolved since the Second World War. It consisted of two major stages, individual and collective training. In the first stage, individuals were inducted into the Army and brought to a stage where they were capable and competent of performing the individual skills required of their job. Soldiers'

initial training was conducted at a twelve-week course at a recruit training battalion. This course trained all new soldiers with the all-corps (general basic) skills needed for any job in the Army. A second part of individual training, corps training (sometimes called initial employment training) of about ten weeks followed. It sought to bring a soldier's skills to the basic level he needed for his corps, in the infantry case to that of a trained rifleman. There were other layers of the individual training system to train specialist soldiers, to qualify non-commissioned officers (NCOs) for promotion and to train officers. Each of these supplementary courses had been developed from long experience and all produced trainees well suited to their employments. The standard of junior and senior NCOs training was particularly high, reflecting the Australian Army's continuing emphasis on the importance of junior leadership for battle. Indeed, prior to the first tour there were many battle-experienced NCOs who were felt by most to have a steadying influence on the unit. The Australian Army Staff College achieved very good results from its training of officers for jobs at the rank of major and above, particularly on the staff of the First Australian Task Force (1ATF). The possible exception, a new school to train National Service officers,<sup>3</sup> achieved very good results from the outset. This individual training base was the firm foundation for Army capability. Some less well informed critics, often those in the Defence Department, questioned the size of this training base and the number of units involved. Its effectiveness was well proved by the excellence of its product. Its efficiency could be measured in many ways: perhaps the most telling was the rate of effort put in by the instructional staff. Their work was unceasing and intense: the task was achieved by hard work and professionalism.

The second stage of training was collective training, the welding together of trained individuals into an effective fighting unit. This took place successively at section, platoon, company, battalion and sometimes task force levels. Most collective training was done within the battalion's resources, though external units provided supplements when specialised training was undertaken. Earlier stages of collective training were supervised and assessed by the unit's chain of command. Formation commanders assessed the overall training of the unit. Two of the later stages were formally externally assessed. All personnel of the battalion were required to take part in a company-level assessment period at the Jungle Training Centre (JTC), Canungra, in Queensland. Successive companies of the battalion undertook this demanding course of four weeks' duration. The battalion supported the small Jungle Training Centre staff with its own training cadre. The whole process took about three months to complete. Few soldiers forgot this intensive training, particularly the demanding exercises in the last half of the JTC course that were held in the rugged Wiangarie State Forest. The live firing exercises provided valuable battle inoculation. Many lives were saved by its approach to subjects like jungle fighting and weapon safety. Canungra epitomised a philosophy of 'train hard and fight easy': soldiers often felt Vietnam was an easier place than JTC. Canungra weeded out the weak leaders, particularly at the junior level. The philosophy of one Chief Instructor, later to command 7RAR's second tour, was 'the soldiers deserved the benefit of any [leadership] doubt'.

The culmination of collective training was a battalion group (that is the battalion together with its normal allocation of armour, artillery, and engineers) exercise, often held at the Shoalwater Bay Training Area, with control exercised by a task force headquarters, external umpires and an 'enemy' group of experienced soldiers to oppose the battalion. The exercise was designed to test the unit's training prior to its operational deployment and to assess the performance of individuals and sub-units in a demanding environment. There was particular scrutiny of the performance of leaders in the battalion at all levels. For some units, the results of this exercise were that many of their leaders were replaced. This exercise was run at a demanding pace in an environment that closely matched the area in Phuoc Tuy Province to which the battalion would be deployed. In its realism, it lacked only the levels of helicopter, artillery and offensive air support available in Vietnam.

This succession of collective training, from section to battalion level, took place over about a twelve-month period between the formation of 7RAR (first tour) or its reformation (for the second tour) and its deployment on operations.

What were the particular strengths of this training system? It was an evolved system, backed by an Army with a continuity of operational service experience in conflict, from the Second World War, Korea, Malaya and Borneo. Senior leaders in the battalion (and even some private soldiers) could apply and pass on their experience of all these conflicts. The combat experience levels in JTC and on the test exercise staffs were also very good. All the training was aligned to the Australian method of waging war: one based on a high standard of fitness and skills, an encouragement of individual initiative, of the importance of junior leadership, of battle discipline more than parade-ground discipline, of preservation of soldier's lives and one firmly based on ensuring the high quality of its non-commissioned officers. The system had been developed and applied by the Directorate of Military Training (DMT) at Army Headquarters: its Director of Military Training (a brigadier) filled a particularly important role in the Army. All units conducting individual training such as the recruit training battalions and the officer schools reported to Army Headquarters and effectively to DMT. The Infantry Centre reported to the Directorate of Infantry, but its approaches were scrutinised by DMT. The absence of a Training Command to overview individual training (the task Headquarters Training Command now performs) did not seem to diminish training effectiveness. DMTs were well-chosen and influential officers who deserve to be given the credit for the particular successes this system achieved.

A further strength of the training system was the doctrine that underpinned it. The Army had used doctrine adapted for Australian jungle (and later counter-revolutionary) warfare since the Second World War. It had begun to publish this doctrine soon after it had begun to fight the Japanese.<sup>4</sup> Though its British origins were obvious, its promulgation marked a distinct move to an Australian way of waging this type of war. By the time of the Vietnam conflict, doctrine was contained in several principal references: at unit level the publications on counter-revolutionary warfare and the battalion, and at lower levels those on the platoon, patrolling and tracking and ambushing.<sup>5</sup> These 'pamphlets' were well written. They strongly reinforced the Australian approach to this type of warfare and reflected the lessons learned by British and Australian experience against the Japanese and the communist insurgents in Malaya.<sup>6</sup> They were the result of the good work done in DMT. Some of these publications, particularly those on patrolling and ambushing, have become minor military classics. It is also worth noting that the Australian Army was very receptive to the particular doctrine for Vietnam that was published as the result of United States operational experience. This had also been true during the Second World War. Particular use was made of the US pamphlets on mines and booby traps. The mode of illustration in these pamphlets occasionally approached that of comics: sadly, few Australian instructional pamphlets were as effectively illustrated.

Australian doctrine was kept up-to-date by several methods. First, the particular circumstances of warfare in Phuoc Tuy Province and the support available from Australian and Allied units were outlined in *1st Australian Task Force Standing Operating Procedures (1ATF SOPs)*. These procedures were used for training and suitably translated for use by the battalion in *7RAR Standing Operating Procedures*. Army Headquarters supplemented training material available by issuing periodical *Training Information Bulletins* and more immediate information in *Training Information Letters*, reflecting the experience of earlier battalions in Vietnam. These SOPs, particularly those for higher levels, had been examined critically by the Army's senior leaders during the Chief of the General Staffs Exercises. These publications continued a long Australian Army tradition. High quality Australian SOPs had been produced since the First World War;<sup>7</sup> lessons learned had been promulgated in training bulletins since the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> In addition, commanding officers communicated frequently with their Australian counterparts in Vietnam, giving a strong sense of immediacy to lessons learned and a clear relevance to the operations being conducted in Vietnam. Some operational analysis was also conducted in Vietnam and in Army Headquarters: it may be fair to say that the application of scientific method to doctrine was only in its formative stages.

The system of training formed a sound and workable approach to bringing a unit to a state in which it could effectively engage in battle. There is no doubt that, however sound this theory, the training of a unit remains a function of its leadership, particularly that of the commanding officer. The training of a battalion is at least as much a function of leadership as it is of doctrine. The battalion had two commanding officers for these tours of duty:<sup>9</sup> both were strong leaders and therefore effective trainers. There are many good examples of this influence: one

is the concentration of each commanding officer on the particular training of his officers and senior NCOs for this conflict, using the experience of those who had fought there, lessons derived from operations within the last several weeks and frequent communication with their counterparts serving in Vietnam at the time.

What were some of the challenges facing a battalion being trained for war in this situation? First, units were never at their full strength during training, and, of course, this situation worsened on operational service. Soldiers at all levels just worked harder to compensate for these shortages. The military system imposed its habits of a past era: few soldiers could understand the use of a unit being trained for war for ceremonial guard duties at a capital city barracks. There was not a sensible understanding of the internal support needed to feed a unit. Soldiers, a company at a time, were 'duty company' for a week at a time and performed housekeeping tasks like washing-up, to the detriment of training while adjacent training units had civilian staff to perform the same task.

The theory of the training system has been outlined above. How did it work in practice for each tour? There were several governing factors in the training for 7RAR's first tour. The battalion was new: it was raised on 1 September 1965. The fact that it was formed from selected regular soldiers and officers from 3RAR (and particularly the unmarried ones) meant that there was a good depth of operational experience, particularly in the senior non-commissioned officers. The battalion's location in Puckapunyal was a pragmatic decision by Army Headquarters but not necessarily the optimal one for efficient training. Supporting arms like artillery and engineers were located remote from the battalion and made all-arms aspects of collective training difficult. Soldiers were far from convinced that their training in areas that could be described as sub-alpine woodland approximated to conditions in Vietnam. Some characteristics of the war in Vietnam, particularly the easy availability of helicopter and close air support, were infrequently and inadequately resourced. Soldiers' descriptions of 'heli-rover drill' when three-quarter ton vehicles were used to simulate Iroquois helicopters were reminiscent of a Second World War—'Dad's Army'-like experiences with broomsticks for rifles. The proximity of Melbourne, though not with today's four-lane freeway available, exposed those on leave to the hazards of road safety and the battalion suffered an alarming number of road injuries and fatalities during training. Unit collective training ideally needs a complete unit for a twelve-month period. The flow of National Servicemen continued intake by intake during the continuous training period and interrupted periods of collective training. This lessened the cohesiveness of the unit. Collective training is best done at full unit strength: that aspiration was never reached in practice. The individual training system, particularly the part that undertook corps training, became saturated. The unit became responsible for performing corps training for one intake's worth of soldiers. This was a strain on its leadership and resources, but it produced soldiers who were just that much more part of the unit team. The success of this venture, despite its disadvantages, was repeated for the second tour.

Training for the second tour was characterised by better availability of support arms resources and the better facilities closer to the unit's new home at Holsworthy on the outskirts of Sydney. For example, 106 Field Battery detachments took part in all-unit exercises and became an inseparable part of the unit team. The result was a unit command post that was a model of cooperation and effectiveness. RAAF and RAN helicopters were available in greater numbers with pilots more aligned to the needs of this campaign. Other differences emerged to follow developments in the war: for example, the need to be able to train Vietnamese Popular and Regional Force personnel by either supply NCOs or by attachment to companies. During the second tour of duty, training needed to take account of the technological changes that had occurred such as wider availability of night fighting equipment ('Sniperscopes'), secure radios at unit level, infra red and chemical helicopter-mounted detectors ('Red Haze' and 'people sniffers') and other devices. Rudimentary computers were enabling better use of previously collated information. Even though the effect of these devices was relatively small, their effective use required training. A further difference for the second tour was the usefulness of the directly relevant experience of those who had served previously in Vietnam. About one soldier in every sixteen had served on the previous tour of duty.

How should we assess the training of this battalion in retrospect? In each of the two tours the training was successful. The measure of this success is the performance of the unit in battle: 7RAR met this test well in each case. However, the system of training did not fully cope with the extent of individual replacement of riflemen and particularly NCOs and specialists. Some 1200 men passed through the 800-man battalion for each tour of duty. When a soldier needed replacement, whether because of a battle casualty or other reasons, the battalion had to make do with perhaps less than optimal solutions. A central unit, 1st Australian Reinforcement Holding Unit (1ARU) held trained soldiers at the Nui Dat base in Phuoc Tuy Province. Individual replacements joined 7RAR from the pool in 1ARU. They needed further training, often beyond just unit SOPs to be effective and safe members of the unit. Not all replacements were readily available from 1ARU. Perhaps the best example of this was the need for junior NCOs. The need was met within the battalion resources by the conduct of promotion courses during its operations. Results from this training, notably from National Servicemen, were very good indeed, but the training further stressed the over-used resources of senior NCOs. While the primary infantry replacement system, unit replacement, worked well in conjunction with the training system, it was sub-optimal for training of individuals outside this system such as those NCOs or any replacement specialists, for example assault pioneers or mortar numbers, who were rarely available from the reinforcement chain when needs arose.

The system also did not work well with the soldiers for whom the end of their term of engagement did not coincide with the unit's tour of duty. This affected some regular soldiers and a large proportion of National Servicemen. Some National Servicemen started with the unit that 7RAR relieved in South Vietnam and had to deal with the difficulty of joining a new and inevitably different team. Some left the unit as their service obligation approached expiry: they proceeded to discharge in Australia, in an environment of less than enthusiastic community support. This lack of consideration was reinforced both by a Returned and Services League not well aligned to welcoming returned Vietnam veterans and by an Army that can be said to have abandoned its former soldiers. Two examples of the latter may suffice. It was an exception for returned unit National Servicemen to be invited to join the battalion's march through Melbourne or Sydney on its return. Representatives of the Army, Corps or unit rarely visited wounded soldiers, some of whom were long-term patients, still in the care of Repatriation Hospitals.

While the lack of what was later called 'a systems approach to training' had minimal effect on what training was actually done, such an approach may have produced a better analysis of the need for post-tour training of soldiers discharged just after their tour, particularly National Servicemen.

Soldiers returning from their tour of duty in Vietnam for discharge (especially National Servicemen) received minimal training to readjust them to their new or resumed civil occupations. Formal post-trauma training (either just after trauma or on return to Australia or discharge) did not occur. Those soldiers fortunate enough to return to Australia on HMAS Sydney could be seen to have undertaken a fortuitous ten-day readjustment period after the stress of operational service. This mode of return was predominant for regular soldiers and the exception for National Servicemen.

What were the deficiencies in this training system? There is some good evidence that the standard of marksmanship was not good. Perhaps this can be traced to the lack of good firing ranges close to battalion bases in Australia: there was certainly an effort to have what is considered the ideal, that is weapons fired daily in training, at JTC. It was also difficult to sustain high standards in this area when on operation in Vietnam. A deficit of a different type was the lack of trained linguists. Vietnamese is a difficult language and competent language-trained soldiers took well over a year to produce. Their lack was only partially counteracted by the use of South Vietnamese Army interpreters, sometimes less trustworthy and almost always less forthcoming than well-trained Australian interpreters. Training in Australia with the full range of fire support available in Vietnam was necessarily rudimentary because of the lack of these resources: this shortcoming was remedied soon after arrival in Vietnam. Intelligence training was sparse and tended to be unsatisfactory for a war where intelligence was a key

factor. In many cases, this seemed to be caused by the habit of focussing the intelligence perspective upwards: a better perspective would have been one that concentrated appropriately on the 'battle intelligence' needed by the battalion to be more effective in its intimate contact with the populace and the enemy. While soldiers were trained in aspects of Vietnamese culture,<sup>10</sup> perhaps understandably, this instruction was poorly understood.

## Conclusions

7RAR's training for both its tours of Vietnam was well based on an Army system that had proven its worth. It was well executed by the unit's senior leaders and underpinned by the experience of many NCOs. This training was most successful. It enabled the battalion to dominate enemy forces in Phuoc Tuy and elsewhere and it achieved an overall neutralisation of enemy forces within its area of influence.

It was particularly evident that the high standard of NCO and junior officer training was a key to this success. National Servicemen made very good junior NCOs. While these training systems were good, a dilution of the complementing experience factor caused by either lack of leadership skills or of battle experience is likely to have a detrimental result on training for war. It may well be that peacekeeping experience is a sub-optimal substitute for battle experience.

There is little doubt that JTC's contribution to the work-up cycle of a battalion preparing for the war in Vietnam was vital. Units preparing for conflict of this intensity need the facility provided by an independent group of hardened and experienced trainers to ensure good team performance at section, platoon and company level. The importance of a JTC-like establishment, as well as its relative independence from a unit's chain of command, can hardly be over-emphasised.

Training in an environment of the future needs to have a foundation similar to the training of units for Vietnam but will be made more complicated by the availability of technology. At the level of each soldier, night fighting equipment and reliable navigation aids will revolutionise the way he fights: at unit level the flow of information from a variety of intelligence and situation awareness resources will test the ability of commanders to discern. It is too easy to view the individual training base as an unnecessary overhead rather than a vital necessity.

Since the war in Vietnam, Army has adopted a 'systems approach to training'<sup>11</sup> for its individual training. It is based on a careful analysis of the essential elements of battle tasks and a tailoring of training to see that these tasks can be successfully accomplished. The system incorporates a feedback loop to test the success of this approach and to alter it if training has not produced the desired result. The effect of this approach has had several results. Individual training has been the subject of careful analysis, based on the needs of each particular combat task. Training prior to collective (unit) training has tended, as a result, to be shortened to remove 'non-essential' items. In some cases this judgement has been altered by feedback from units and particularly senior commanders. At best, an optimal use has been made of scarce and expensive training resources. At worst, risks have been taken in removing or abbreviating the training on some battle skills. On balance, the 'systems approach' is likely to have improved the result of individual training, but only if the feedback mechanism is frequently and carefully used. Further, the gains of this approach have not generally been applied to collective training (with the notable exception of some artillery training). It is clear that 'systems approaches' to collective training are likely to be more complex and subjective. The results of a systems approach would be most useful to assess training success at each level: they can too easily be applied to assess the efficacy of leadership. These disadvantages have prevented an application of the systems approach to collective training. A good case can be made for the re-examination of this approach.

Perhaps the most important lessons to be learned from the battalion's experience are those relating to the rotation of units and the handling of individual reinforcements. Unit replacement is the optimal method for the relief of troops in a conflict of sustained intensity. Such a system will also need individuals to replace casualties of all categories. Careful attention needs to be

paid to his supplementation. While a bulk reinforcement holding unit in Vietnam worked, a far better method would have been a regimentally based reinforcement pool, perhaps supported by an Army Reserve depot battalion. The key lesson of rotation is one that needs to be understood at political levels: three units of the same type are required to sustain one unit in continuous operations: one in the fight, one training to replace it and a further recovering from the operations and reconstituting.

### Endnotes

I am most grateful to those who have contributed to this paper. However, the opinions in it are solely the responsibility of the author.

1. An account of the battalion's tours in Vietnam is contained in Michael O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars: With the Seventh Battalion in Vietnam 1967-1968 & 1970-1971* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995).
2. There are broadly two ways of replacing units in sustained operations: unit replacement, where a unit is relieved by another entire unit, and trickle flow, when the one unit notionally remains in action but its personnel are gradually replaced. In the case of infantry battalions in Vietnam the former method predominated but it was supplemented by some of the latter, particularly caused by the turnover of National Servicemen whose engagements were due to expire.
3. The Officer Training Unit, Scheyville, NSW, described in Roger Donnelly, *The Officer Training Unit Scheyville* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001).
4. This doctrine was published in several Army training pamphlets, notably Australian Military Forces, *Infantry Minor Tactics* 1941 (Army Headquarters, 1941 (and Lieutenant General S G Savige, *Tactical and Administrative Doctrine for Jungle Warfare* (Headquarters 2 Aust Corps, 1945).
5. Australian Military Forces, *Ambush and Counter Ambush* (Canberra: Army Headquarters, 1965), and Australian Military Forces, *Patrolling and Tracking* (Canberra: Army Headquarters, 1965).
6. Particularly the British pamphlet called *Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya*, known by its nickname of ATOM.
7. For example, Sir John Monash's *Operation Standing Orders, New Zealand and Australian Division, Fourth Brigade* published in Cairo in 1915, which is held in the Australian War Memorial.
8. The Australian Army published selected extracts from the British *Army Training Memoranda* from 1937 and Australian versions from 1941.
9. The commanding officers were (with their highest rank later attained) Colonel E H Smith, DSO) and Major General R A Grey, AO, DSO.
10. Each soldier was issued with a *Pocketbook: South Vietnam* (Canberra: Army Headquarters, c 1965; rev edn 1967) which contained some information on this topic.
11. This approach is detailed in *The Systems Approach to Training* (Sydney: Headquarters Training Command, 1974).