

THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1962-1972

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUSTRALIAN ARMY TACTICAL DOCTRINE DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

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Military doctrine provides one of the essential touchstones in the functioning of any military organisation. Alongside tradition and history, doctrine provides one of the most concrete expressions of an army's *raison d'être*, and thus defines many of the organisation's professional characteristics. Major General J.F.C. Fuller observed that 'the central idea of an army is regarded as its doctrine, which to be sound must be based upon the principles of war, and to be effective must be elastic enough to admit of mutation in accordance with circumstance'.¹

This essay is concerned with the Australian Army's tactical doctrine during the Vietnam War, the published expression of which was the Division in Battle series of pamphlets issued in 1965.² Because the body of doctrine with which the war was fought was written prior to the Army's commitment to Vietnam, it was designed to cover a range of scenarios, locations and types of operations, and not just, or even primarily, those conditions found in Vietnam. However, as a result of six and a half years of continuous military involvement in Vietnam, much of the army came to equate doctrine with the methods of operation employed in Vietnam. What they in fact had seen was the evolution of doctrine into tactics and techniques specifically adapted for the local conditions they faced.

The widely varying nature of operations conducted by the Australian Army during its six and a half year presence in Vietnam provided some inherently contradictory experiences. Indeed, former commanding officers of Vietnam War era battalions drawn together at the Infantry Centre in 1972 commented that:

The Australian war in Vietnam was unusual in that it gave us five periods of 12 months in which the nature and pattern of operations was so varied that it is difficult to produce lessons with broad application to either counter revolutionary warfare or limited war.³

As a consequence of this there are many contradictions in operational methods, experiences and lessons learnt. Resolution of these contradictions and thus the ability to make sense of doctrinal development requires an understanding of the relationship between the Army's doctrine and the following three points: first, the legacy of the Malayan Emergency, an influence that had a profound shaping effect on army doctrine; second, the influence of American commanders whose view of the war sometimes differed significantly from that of the Australians, and third, the role of changing and differing perceptions of Australia's role on the part of our own national commanders. Some of these factors shaped the operational methods and employment of the Task Force while others produced purely technical difficulties to be overcome. Critically, this also demonstrates the cascading influence that a nation's higher strategy has upon minor level operations on the ground. This essay aims to chart some of the shaping forces on the Army's doctrine during the war and describe how the operations of the Task Force's units reflected the influences of these competing focuses.

While this essay deals specifically with the Vietnam War, Vietnam provides only an overarching framework and some historical examples. In a broader sense it is also about the process of tactical dynamism and evolution that occurs in units at war and it demonstrates the importance of context and analysis in the process of doctrinal development. It is this application of context and the intellectual rigour it requires that makes this process very different from simple observation and comment. More importantly though, once this process is understood it permits application irrespective of nationality, time, theatre of operation or mode of conflict.

When the Korean War broke out in 1950 Australia was one of the first nations to pledge its support to the fledgling United Nations' effort to defend the Republic of Korea. Doctrinally, the Australian Army was engaged in a conventional conflict in rugged, mountainous terrain that contributed little to the subsequent development of small unit operations and counter revolutionary warfare concepts that would begin to dominate the Army's thinking in the late 1950s and 1960s.⁴ Despite this, the Korean War served as the first real operational experience for many of the commanders who would later lead battalions in the Vietnam War and gave this generation of commanders their first experience in the application and adaptation of tactical doctrine.⁵ They gained first hand experience of the changes to tactics, staff procedures, unit establishments and sub-unit employment that characterised the dynamic process of tactical development by units at war.⁶

The decision to send troops to Malaya in 1955 reinvigorated interest in jungle warfare in Australia and placed jungle fighting back at the forefront of Australian doctrinal thinking. Again, the Australian Army had no specific body of doctrine to apply to the situation found in Malaya, and Australians were forced to rely upon the British pamphlet, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations In Malaya (ATOM)*.⁷

The ATOM pamphlet recognised the need for an essentially new type of warfare. In addition to recognising the long known effect of jungle conditions on troop mobility, weapon effect, ranges etc, it also outlined the requirements to defeat an insurgent enemy rather than a conventional one.⁸ At the level of small unit tactical doctrine it was a very frustrating period for troops involved in the procedures and drills of deep jungle patrolling, but searches of villages, jungle navigation, contact and counter ambush drills, harbour routines and employment of jungle bases all introduced the army to valuable skills that were to be adapted later in Vietnam.⁹

While operations in Malaya provided a valuable basis for the development of Australian doctrine, they also provided several misleading experiences that confounded the development of Australian tactics for some time, for many of the techniques employed there were relevant only to that theatre and were based upon a specific level of operational intensity that did not necessarily apply elsewhere. For example, little emphasis was placed on the employment of fire support to support infantry operations. For example such fire support as was available was frequently limited to those areas served by roads or motorable tracks, or was so inaccurate that it could not be employed closer than 500m from friendly troops.¹⁰ In a theatre where visibility was frequently measured in yards and where contact occurred at similar ranges Malaya provided few worthwhile lessons on the integrated and co-ordinated employment of fire support that would later become so necessary in Vietnam.

The end of the Malayan Emergency in 1960 marked a watershed for the Australian Army. With no war to fight, but with the prospect of further regional conflict probable, commanders were forced to determine a new set of priorities and situations upon which to base training and doctrine.¹¹

Within the army several different, often contradictory, sources were providing tactical doctrine for counter revolutionary warfare. These included 28th Commonwealth Brigade, DMO&P, HQ Eastern Command and the Infantry Centre, and this explains much of the apparent confusion and contradiction apparent in Australian interpretations of doctrine.¹²

The consequences of this were that while some elements of the army were formulating a concept of operations for counter revolutionary warfare, knowledge of developments in doctrinal concepts was limited to a small circle of officers involved intimately with the production of such doctrine. This explains part of the apparent contradiction between the seemingly high levels of understanding of the requirements of counter revolutionary warfare displayed by the organisations mentioned above, and those sections of the army not connected with doctrinal development.

The dalliance with Pentropic ended in January 1965,¹³ and the army was again faced with the necessity of redrafting its doctrine. *The Pentropic Division in Battle* was replaced with the *Division in Battle*, while the former's *Counter Insurgency* pamphlet was replaced with the latter's *Counter Revolutionary Warfare*. Published along side the new doctrine were *Patrolling and Tracking* (1965) and *Ambush and Counter Ambush* (1965) written to provide doctrine on the core sub-unit skills common to either counter revolutionary warfare or limited war.¹⁴

Within the army's field force units, exercises and training, especially for the infantry battalions, had embraced counter revolutionary warfare concepts and practices with growing enthusiasm. Despite this, several factors which influenced the conduct of training would have consequences on operations in Vietnam. In November 1963 the 1st Task Force, comprising the 1RAR (Pentropic) battle group, exercised in a counter revolutionary warfare environment for the first time. The exercise followed the basic tactical concept for deployment of Australian forces to Southeast Asia, revealing much about the way in which army planners envisaged forces being committed to that theatre. The task force was required to establish a forward base on a high plateau and to patrol outward to form a controlled area, precisely the concept that would be employed by the 1st Australian Task Force during Operation HARDIHOOD three years later.¹⁵ While Exercise SKY HIGH was a success, it revealed a preoccupation with the role of the infantry and a limited ability to manage the dispersed combined arms aspects of counter revolutionary warfare operations that would become so important in Vietnam. For example, artillery units were not practised at deploying and re-deploying in and out of fire support bases, nor were engineers exercised in operating as splinter teams or mini teams.¹⁶

Many of the reasons for this lack of combined arms training can be traced to SEATO and Commonwealth Brigade assumptions about the terrain over which a future war would be fought. The similarities between SEATO exercise scenarios and exercises such as SKY HIGH indicate that the field force in Australia was drawing much of its guidance on the planning of exercises from the type of scenarios played out in SEATO and British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve training. The situation anticipated by the army saw Australian forces deployed to a highland plateau region within Southeast Asia.¹⁷ The perceived implications of this were a requirement to operate on the lightest possible scales of equipment and support, relying almost totally on re-supply by air. The implications of this fed a belief that artillery would be cut to between 25 and 50 per cent of establishment and that offensive air support would have to make up the difference, and that air portability, mountainous terrain and the tropical monsoon would preclude the employment of armour.¹⁸

If any criticism can be made of any of the doctrinal products of this period it is that they did not bring out fully the subtle changes which had occurred in doctrinal thinking. The army had become comfortable with a number of concepts and phrases as a result of its recent counter revolutionary warfare experience. Thinking about the issues involved in deep patrolling, cordon and search and framework operations can all be traced back to ATOM, yet by 1965 the terms, although still in general use, had developed significantly different meanings.

The period encompassing the operational deployment of the 1RAR Battalion Group in 1965-66 highlighted both strengths and weaknesses in the army's preparation for the Vietnam War. While Australia and the United States had been allies since the Second World War, Australian military thinking on counter revolutionary warfare was based firmly upon British lessons and experience, and upon Australian experience within a British framework. 1RAR's deployment was within the American 173rd Airborne Brigade,¹⁹ necessitating the assumption of roles and tasks commensurate with its position as an integral element of an American brigade.²⁰

The American forces operational concept presupposed numerous operations of short duration over a large area to find the enemy and bring them to battle.²¹ The slow, deliberate patrolling operations and painstaking searching of ground learnt in the Malayan Emergency were foreign to US methods of operation and US forces viewed the pacification operations that had been so vital in Malaya as of secondary importance to finding the enemy main force units. The pace and scale of US operations precluded the employment of many of the Australian battalion's greatest strengths, namely silent patrolling, ambushing and searching. The aggressive American methods were perhaps not unreasonable given the precarious military

situation within South Vietnam at that time, but they certainly unsettled Australian commanders and placed them on notice that they were now part of a very different kind of war from that for which they had prepared.²²

An analysis of the changes to tactics and techniques within the battalion was made by its officers upon return to Australia and highlighted four main areas that underwent change or required new methods to be developed: airmobile planning; patrolling; employment of fire support; and low level tactics.²³

Helicopters provided the primary form of mobility for the brigade's operations. While not new to the Australian Army, the employment of helicopters in Vietnam was on a scale never before witnessed in Australia. The battalion had to learn to cope with the increases in air mobility that allowed large numbers of troops to be airborne at any one time, with the capacity to land in sizeable elements within minutes of one another. The 1RAR notes on operations were intended to enable officers to benefit from recent operational experience when interpreting existing doctrine.²⁴ The development of emplaning and deplaning drills, LZ (Landing Zone) rally procedures, the refinement of the use of indirect fire support and offensive air support in LZ preparation and the development of effective command, control and liaison procedures all allowed commanders to make best use of the flexibility inherent in airmobile operations.²⁵ This was not such a problem for soldiers at the junior level on the ground but it proved to be a major consideration for staff planners, becoming a contributing factor in the introduction of the battalion operations officer to replace the adjutant as the commanding officer's principal staff officer in the headquarters.

On arrival in Vietnam 1RAR was not fully prepared for the techniques of planning air support and had only limited knowledge of the use of artillery.²⁶ This gave rise to several changes in techniques and methods both within the battalion's headquarters and on the ground with the rifle companies. The legacy of Pentropic, SEATO-based concepts on pre-deployment combined arms training has been noted earlier, and it was this, combined with the speed and secrecy that surrounded 1RAR's deployment that contributed to the generally low standard of preparation evident in fire control procedures.²⁷ In addition, the amount of fire support available to 1RAR from US sources was on a scale never before experienced in Australia. The combined use of the battalion's mortars, the direct support field battery, US medium guns, helicopter gunships and offensive air support by tactical fighters required a level of co-ordination and orchestration never before experienced in Australia even on recent overseas deployments. The solution lay in the development of the Fire Planning Group consisting of the key staff of the headquarters.²⁸ These individuals worked in concert to solve the significant problems inherent in the provision of fire support, intelligence and air clearance.²⁹ While on operations the resolution of these problems was the responsibility of the newly created fire control centre (FCC), run primarily by the direct support battery commander and the mortar platoon commander. While the FCC was co-located with the battalion command post and provided communication, liaison and control for all the battalion's supporting fire it was not yet incorporated as an integral component of the headquarters and required either field telephone or radio communications to pass information.³⁰ Refinements of this system would come later in the army's commitment to Vietnam.

On the ground, the provision of fire support also caused some particular problems which training in Australia had not been able to simulate adequately. There had been little realistic demonstration of the effect that types of fire actually produced on differing targets on the ground, nor had the importance of ranging artillery by sound rather than by sight in the close confines of the jungle been demonstrated adequately.³¹ Additionally, some minor differences in artillery signal and technical gunnery procedures unsettled some Australian commanders. Such differences in operating methods and aspects of tactics as existed, were simply concrete expressions of a much higher-level divergence of perspective on how the war should be conducted.³² While minor problems in tactical methods were usually able to be reconciled sufficiently to permit effective operational performance, general Australian principles on the conduct of a counter revolutionary warfare campaign—such as population control and civic action—were not easily adapted to fit in with American higher strategy for the prosecution of the war.

From a national perspective the success with which 1RAR integrated into a larger national force so quickly and effectively was a credit to the unit, but despite this the experience of working alongside the Americans during 1965-66 had profound effects upon the development of Australian tactical methods in subsequent years. The resolution of some of these problems through, for example, the creation of the fire co-ordination centre and some others, remained with the army for the whole of its commitment to Vietnam while others, such as coping with American artillery procedures and patrol methods diminished in importance with the deployment of an independent task force.

In some respects the sharply differing nature of American and Australian tactics served to focus and clarify counter revolutionary warfare doctrine within Australia. Even though American big-unit warfare surprised and unsettled the Australians at the time, with the benefit of hindsight some officers are more sanguine about the battalion's experiences.³³ The style of war with which the Australians were presented forced them to confront weaknesses in their training and organisation far more quickly than might have been necessary had Australian methods alone been employed. Critically, after several years of reliance upon theory, the Australian Army's enemy now had concrete form and substance. Various papers written by the officers of the battalion were disseminated around the army and served to inform and interpret existing doctrine, while other procedures which had no existing parallel, such as the battalion's techniques of airmobile command and control, were adopted in their entirety to form the basis of the fledgling task force's standing operating procedures.

The decision to increase the Australian presence in Vietnam to an independent Task Force would allow Australia to make a significant and identifiable contribution to the war, and adopt roles and tasks more suited to the employment of Australian doctrine.³⁴ While this did occur, it became quickly apparent that again, Australian operations were to reflect the changing priorities and focus of both national and US commanders.

In broad terms the Task Force had two main tasks, the first being to conduct operations to destroy or at least neutralise the enemy main and regional forces, and the second to dismantle the Viet Cong infrastructure within the villages.³⁵ These tasks required considerably different approaches, and as a result, the army would face a situation in which its operational methods were hamstrung by the pressure of operational necessity and by an unrealistic assignment of roles.³⁶

It quickly became apparent that within these roles the Task Force would be called upon to perform four main tasks, all different. First, the Task Force would be responsible for maintaining the security of its base area through intensive patrolling. Second, it had within its assigned role the dominance of its Tactical Area of Responsibility within the province; this included a requirement to conduct highway security operations on Route 15 within the boundaries of the province. Third, it was to assist with pacification operations within Phuoc Tuy as required. Finally, it was to be available to conduct operations anywhere within III CTZ.³⁷ The Task Force faced enormous difficulty in attempting to meet these varied tasks. In response, the commanders of the units within 1ATF refined and developed tactical methods in the conduct of search and destroy operations and cordon and search tasks as well as base security.

Initial clearing operations around Nui Dat out to Line Alpha, Operation HARDIHOOD,³⁸ owed much of their conception to the pre-war Exercise SKY HIGH conducted in 1963, hardly surprising given that the initial Task Force Commander, Brigadier OD Jackson, had been Director of Infantry at the time.³⁹ Furthermore this operation reflected general army planning for the introduction of a task force sized group to counter an insurgency in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰

This plan had never envisaged a task force having to simultaneously hold a land base and conduct operations in depth. Consequently initial holdings of defensive stores, communications equipment and machine guns were strained severely and battalions were forced to leave machine guns behind when on patrol to protect the task force base.⁴¹

The limited resources of the Task Force meant that only one battalion could be deployed away from the base on extended operations at any one time, while the other was tied down on close protection patrols and manning the defensive positions of the base area.⁴² When deployed away from the Task Force base, the tactics developed reflect much of the uncertainty and hesitancy which characterised this period. Unlike later periods of operations, search and destroy tasks were conducted at battalion level, with units assigned relatively small areas in which to search, precluding free ranging, dispersed operations. During this period artillery support was mandatory for all operations, due to an understandable unwillingness to be left without fire support if a large encounter with a still relatively unknown enemy occurred,⁴³ and calling for artillery became a standard procedure within the task force as soon as contact with an enemy was made.⁴⁴

The pattern of searching resembled that developed by 1RAR during 1965-1966, with companies employing either a patrol base from which platoon patrols could be sent, or a patrol route which allowed a whole company to search across a wide frontage. Patrol bases were not occupied for more than six to eight hours which was a significant departure from past Australian experience and doctrine and serves to highlight the caution that limited intelligence forced upon the battalion sub-unit tactics.⁴⁵

During the latter part of 1966 the pressure on the Task Force of maintaining search and destroy operations lessened, as the Task Force grew more confident in its ability to ensure the security of the base area and to deal effectively with the threat posed by the main force units. This convinced the task force commander to allow the Commanding Officer of 5RAR, Lieutenant Colonel John Warr, to begin a campaign targeting the Viet Cong infrastructure within the villages.⁴⁶

Several operations conducted during this period developed skills relating to night movement prior to the closing of the cordon, population control, command and control within the battalion and the development of a considerably more complex and effective screening and interrogation facility.⁴⁷ Much of the success of later operations in identifying enemy cadres was owed in part to these refinements and many were later incorporated into standing operating procedures.⁴⁸

Similar advances were made in the searching of villages and the clearing of fortified positions. 1RAR's commanding officer noted after Operation CRIMP in January 1966 that improved methods of tunnel search and clearance and demolition of bunkers and caches were required from the engineers supporting battalion operations, and by June 1966 Operation ENOGGERA demonstrated that such developments had taken place. This operation was aimed at destroying the tunnels and fortifications beneath the now deserted village of Long Phuoc, and to achieve this 6RAR was allocated the whole of 1 Field Squadron RAE in support.⁴⁹ While engineer support was lavish, it had not yet perfected the techniques of employing sappers in small, dispersed groups.

This was the situation that existed by the beginning of 1967, and January 1967 brought a number of changes within the task force. This period also saw the hand-over of command of the Task Force from Brigadier Jackson to Brigadier Graham, and the new commander would develop an operational plan which took advantage of the advances already made in province security and one based upon much greater levels of intelligence than had been available to his predecessor. The result of this was a renewed emphasis on specifically targeted search operations that applied pressure to the Viet Cong village infrastructure.⁵⁰

Despite the new direction which the Task Force commander was anxious to pursue, the Americans still believed that pacification was a task better left to the South Vietnamese. While the Australians may have wished to spend more time on pacification operations, in line with their doctrine and experience, the Task Force commander could hardly deny that conducting large scale operations alongside the Americans fell within the tasks assigned to the Australians. The problems faced when attempting to operate according to the tenets of national doctrine by a Task Force that was too small to encompass all the operational requirements of the force were well illustrated.⁵¹

Following the resumption of sweep operations, 7RAR—one of the two newly rotated battalions within the Task Force—was forced to develop several new techniques for the command and control of large-scale operations and the co-ordination of fire support. As a result of his experiences during the New Guinea campaign within the 2nd AIF the CO (Lieutenant Colonel EH Smith) held the effectiveness of supporting fires in high regard.⁵² In consequence 7RAR tended to employ fire support to a greater degree than other battalions, and developed some unusual SOPs and techniques to facilitate its use.⁵³

These developments, along with several others involving the employment of the battalion's mortar platoon, had been discussed in one of 6RAR's after action reports the previous year.⁵⁴ Smith had access to both 5RAR's and 6RAR's after action reports while preparing 7RAR for overseas service,⁵⁵ and had noted the utility of mortars at platoon and company level during the Korean War.

It is clear that the desire to employ Australian operational methods and doctrine was a prime factor in the decision to expand Australia's commitment in Vietnam to an independent task force. Despite this the first year and a half of operations in Phuoc Tuy province were a frustrating mix of successful pacification tasks and often fruitless operations in depth, many of which were instigated by the Americans. In response to these competing demands, the thinly-stretched and often over-worked units of the Task Force were compelled to adapt existing operational methods to fit the reality of the tasks assigned to them. What this period displays most clearly is the effect which a higher commander's intentions have upon tactics at even the most basic level. The Australians were never forced to abandon the central tenets of their doctrine, namely methodical searching and population control, but the ubiquitous influence of the Americans stretched Australian desires to maintain their own unique doctrine almost to breaking point on some occasions.

Between early 1968 and mid 1969 1ATF was involved in a range of operations that differed significantly from those that had gone before.⁵⁶ This period, in contrast to those before it, produced a situation where tactical development was driven now by purely technical factors.

The 'out of province' years provided two very different ranges of experience. On one hand, the increased intensity of the war forced onto commanders at all levels a requirement to develop a range of new measures in bunker tactics, improvements to armoured/infantry cooperation and the practice of defensive tactics, while on the other hand something very different occurred concurrently within the battalions. In addition to the major developments outlined above, minor yet continuous improvements and changes occurred in core counter revolutionary warfare skills such as cordon and search, reconnaissance in force, ambushing, and convoy protection. The development of the core skills in the first phase of the Task Force's operations represented a period during which the Army consolidated the lessons learnt from pre-deployment exercises and initial operations. The lessons learnt during the out of province years, on the other hand, forced the Task Force to relearn and reapply skills that had been outside the Army's range of experience and training for some time.

Most infantry battalions, with the notable exception of those deployed in 1966-67, accumulated a wide range of experience in attacking bunker systems in close country.⁵⁷ The bunker system was generally not well understood initially by most levels of command and was one aspect of operations in Vietnam on which no emphasis had been placed during training prior to deployment.⁵⁸ The concept of attacking a strong point or defended locality was described in the relevant training pamphlet,⁵⁹ but despite this practical experience of these skills had not been a feature of Australian counter revolutionary warfare experience. For this reason it was accorded no priority in training, and in this the Malayan Emergency was clearly important in shaping perceptions of how the enemy would behave when confronted in his base areas. *Counter Revolutionary Warfare* stated that 'the enemy is likely to disperse at the first threat', and used this assertion as a basis for employing encircling tactics when confronting the enemy in a static location such as a camp.⁶⁰

By contrast, confronting the enemy in his base areas in Vietnam was likely to provoke extremely heavy and aggressive defence that resulted in the fiercest of contacts, causing at least one officer to question the efficiency of their pre-deployment preparation.⁶¹ Attacks on defended strong points had been a tactical method employed by Australian troops in every war this century, and in an article published after the return of 1RAR from their second tour one of the company commanders pointed out correctly that in bunker fighting, 'hard won experiences gained in war are often forgotten in peace only to be relearned by bitter experience'.⁶² His assertion is particularly pointed when we consider that almost all the bunker fighting tactics that developed in Vietnam were broadly similar to those techniques developed in other theatres of other wars.

One of the disadvantages inherent in the basic tactical sub-unit, the rifle platoon, was that it lacked organic explosive firepower. The Viet Cong made effective use of RPGs and automatic weapons to produce an enormous volume of fire on contact; in contrast the Australian platoon, conditioned by the experiences of the Malayan Emergency, placed heavy emphasis on the use of single, well aimed shots or quick double taps.⁶³ This attitude proved to be an inadequate solution to bunkers where the attacking force was required to achieve superiority of fire very quickly. The weakness was particularly apparent to commanding officers who had seen service in the Korean War, where platoons had two light mortars and two 2.5 inch rocket launchers as an integral part of their headquarters.⁶⁴ This problem was not adequately solved until a number of weapons, notably the M79 Light Anti-Armoured Weapon and the rifle projected M26 Grenade, were introduced into service.⁶⁵ The introduction of these weapons caused an immediate increase in the success of bunker contacts to be noted.⁶⁶

In the assault itself, bunkers presented hitherto unknown complexities for rifle sections. In practice this meant that the combined resources of a whole section were required to destroy a single bunker.⁶⁷ The machine gun team, small arms and M79 grenadiers provided suppressing fire while one or two nominated members crawled forward with rifles and grenades. The importance of careful appreciation of ground and the ability to employ section fire and movement was highlighted during this period. While not new, the tactical lessons of the Malayan Emergency and the early experience of the Task Force's operations prepared soldiers for the fleeting patrol clash type of contact but had not prepared them for the complexities of bunker fighting. The techniques for employing fire and movement correctly were laid out in the relevant training syllabus but recent operational experience had not underpinned the importance of using them.⁶⁸

Undoubtedly the greatest weapon for defeating bunkers was the tank. Despite this, a significant divergence of armoured and infantry tactics had occurred. As an indication of just how much, the radio sets installed in tanks were not compatible with those operated by the infantry,⁶⁹ and this posed particular difficulties when directing fire against targets in bunker contacts. The implications of this for close co-operation were not realised prior to deployment to Vietnam because the infantry were not exposed to tanks as part of their pre-deployment training.⁷⁰ Solutions to the problem varied, and dismounted armoured liaison officers, use of radios when possible and employment of white phosphorous and tracer were all methods employed for indicating enemy locations to tanks.⁷¹ These techniques solved the problems of target indication, but could not be extended to more complex combined arms tasks. It remained difficult to give tanks orders or request advice without reliable radio communications.

As noted already, developments in core techniques of counter revolutionary warfare continued, driven by a combination of enemy action, higher commanders' directives and personal preference on the part of commanders. Patrolling continued to be a feature of operations, but the intent of these patrols changed. The enemy Tet Offensive of 1968 brought an increase in the intensity of the war and with it an increase in the intensity of patrol operations. As a result the Task Force spent large periods of time pursuing the enemy main force units into their base areas and the levels of contact experienced were much more intense, demonstrated by the frequency and intensity of bunker contacts.

In order to meet the demands of intensive patrolling 5RAR altered both its method of patrolling and the employment of its support platoons. In order to cover more ground when patrolling, companies were split in half, and where possible allocated either the anti-armour platoon, tracker platoon or the assault pioneer platoon to give each half company a strength of between two and two-and-a-half platoons.⁷² This type of patrolling was aggressive in the extreme, and on several occasions relatively small forces were able to defeat considerably larger enemy groups with the aid of heavy fire support.⁷³ The commanding officer of at least one battalion was happy to have patrols move out from under the protective umbrella of artillery fire, relying instead on tactical fighters and gunships. This gave him the ability to roam much more freely in pursuit of the enemy without being tied to a radius of a fire support base.

Although problems relating to the role of 1ATF had been largely resolved by an increase to the task force's manning and by a change in operational concept, past experience, in particular the Malayan Emergency, had narrowed perceptions of what counter revolutionary war would involve and led to a serious decline in some basic military skills. The 'out of province' phase forced some dramatic developments in tactics and techniques which highlighted some of the army's most serious weaknesses and its greatest strengths. While many operations ran counter to the assumptions concerning Australian involvement in a counter revolutionary war, the speed with which solutions to tactical problems, such as bunker fighting and tank co-operation, were developed indicated that experienced commanders were able to draw on a huge range of personal experience once the essence of a tactical problem had been identified. What should have been more worrying for the army was that the importance of most of the skills that were relearned in Vietnam had already been demonstrated in past wars. It appeared that elements of the army were drawing far too heavily on the very recent past rather than on its longer-term institutional memory.

In mid-1969 1ATF's operational focus shifted for the fourth and final time. The change was heralded by a return to operations within the boundaries of Phuoc Tuy Province and the adoption of three types of tasks: first, pacification; second, to improve the quality and effectiveness of the Regional Force and Popular Force; and third, the continuation of other military operations within Phuoc Tuy Province. This new phase of the war was characterised by small scale ambushes and very small patrols fought in and around the population centres of the province.

In many respects the period between late 1969 and the middle of 1971 may be regarded as the halcyon days of the Task Force's involvement in Vietnam. By this time, operational requirements were matched by capabilities and training almost exactly. For these purposes the experiences of 5RAR, 7RAR and 3RAR demonstrate the significant progression in the development of operational experiences and tactics and techniques that had occurred. These battalions represent three generations of change in experience in Vietnam, for several reasons. First, a link had been established between their respective commanding officers prior to deployment to Vietnam. 5RAR's Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Colin Khan, was a classmate and friend of 7RAR's Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ron Grey.⁷⁴ Khan wrote extensively to Grey while 5RAR was in Vietnam detailing 5RAR's experiences while on operations and noting the developments the battalion had undergone while in theatre. Grey had found these letters so useful while preparing 7RAR that he insisted his officers write similar letters to 3RAR's officers as well. Second, the Task Force and the Army were badly surprised by the type of activities encountered during the 'out of province' phase. As a result the processes of tactical investigation and development appear to have been stimulated to a greater degree and the formation of the Army Headquarters Battle Analysis Team, in 1969 was a concrete expression of this new attitude.⁷⁵ As a result, the amount of tactical information published and disseminated regularly increased. Finally, when the above two points were combined the preparation of battalions for Vietnam service appears to have been much more closely adapted to meet the likely conditions on the ground in Vietnam than had been the lot of previous units.⁷⁶

A brief examination of 7RAR's preparations helps to illustrate this point. As noted, 7RAR had access to 5RAR's operational summaries and regular letters. The lessons contained within these letters and summaries were distilled and published in the form of a soldier's field

handbook and a commander's aide memoir. These documents conveniently summarised a huge quantity of information otherwise found in several different detailed pamphlets and focused specifically on the upcoming tour in Vietnam.⁷⁷

Tactical training demonstrated a much better understanding of the importance of integrated combined arms support to the infantry battalion than had been the case previously. The Battalion's Direct Support artillery battery was exercised more closely with the unit during its preparation than had previously been the case, and a number of demonstrations were organised to allow officers and NCOs to observe the effects of artillery of a comparable calibre to the US 155mm guns that would support the battalion in Vietnam.⁷⁸ The battalion's final exercise at Shoalwater Bay, COLD STEEL tested the battalion in a much more complete range of tasks in a combined arms environment than previous final exercises had done. COLD STEEL was supported by a complete range of tank, APC artillery, engineer and helicopter assets and included phases of Reconnaissance in Force, the insertion of a blocking force against an enemy attack on a fully developed fire support base, a bunker attack and a cordon and search. These tasks prepared the battalion for a hugely varied range of tasks incorporating all the skills learnt during four and a half years of service.⁷⁹ While some of these issues may seem insignificant, the attention to small details that they represent displays a level of understanding of the smallest technical details of the war in Vietnam which was previously lacking.

Ironically the situation envisaged by COLD STEEL bore little relationship to the type of operations that the battalion conducted during its twelve months in Vietnam. This is not to say that the training which had been conducted failed to prepare the battalion for service because the pattern of operations facing the task force upon 7RAR's arrival was one with which Australian battalions were both comfortable and familiar. Patrolling and ambushing had long been central themes of counter revolutionary warfare doctrine, and these core skills were now enhanced by the addition of skills such as fighting bunker systems and employing support arms, which had previously posed so many problems. Tactical development during this period centred on improving patrolling and ambushing and controlling a widely dispersed battalion conducting a diverse range of operations. While patrol tactics, employment of support arms at low level and command and control procedures provided many new lessons, they did not require whole scale reassessments of doctrine, and occurred within the framework of a higher operational concept with which the Australians were very familiar.

The patrol and ambush tactics developed during this final period were based on the requirement to deploy as many sub-units in the field as possible. By this stage of the war the level of threat posed by the enemy was relatively low, in sharp contrast to the situation that existed during earlier phases. The enemy no longer had the ability to mount multiregimental attacks against the task force base or isolated sub-units within the province, and not surprisingly, this level of enemy threat was reflected in the battalion's sub-unit tactics. This was especially the case in the areas around the population centres where the bulk of patrol and ambush activity occurred until the early months of 1971.⁸⁰

The employment of platoons within the companies usually saw each platoon broken into two half-platoon patrols or ambushes, and manning was such that each patrol usually numbered between twelve and fifteen men. For protection patrols were allocated patrol routes that allowed the two halves to concentrate within no more than twenty minutes march of each other. By doing this more ground could be searched than by a single platoon, while safeguarding the security of the individual patrols.⁸¹ This policy was a natural extension of the earlier 5RAR policy of employing each company in two halves, now adapted to suit the lower level of enemy activity which permitted its application to platoons.⁸² The return to very small scale patrolling allowed many of the tactics developed during the earlier period of Australian counter revolutionary warfare experience in the 1950s such as the patrol base to be re-introduced.

Several interesting similarities between this period of the war and earlier periods can be noted with regard to the way Australian tactics developed in response to the intensity of enemy operations. As a general rule the enemy was now much reduced in numbers and abilities. As

a consequence the battalions during 1970 noted an enemy preference for withdrawing when engaged, particularly in bunker contacts, remaining rarely to stay and fight.⁸³ As a result, bunker tactics on the part of the Australian companies tended to revert to an earlier form, necessitating a reintroduction of the bounce or immediate attack, abandoned during the 'out of province' period.⁸⁴

The pacification phase of the war was in many ways the most productive period of operations in the Task Force's operational history in Vietnam. Most of the problems that service in Vietnam was likely to present had either been solved through tactical experience or development, or at least envisaged prior to deployment. Few surprises greeted the units during this period of operations, and for this reason it can not be considered to be a period of real doctrinal development. Unlike the 'out of province phase', for example, there were no significant issues that presented major problems of tactical employment for the battalions. This was due in part to the fact that the Task Force returned to basic operational concepts with which the Australian Army had been familiar for some time. In addition, the commanders responsible for training and preparing battalions during this phase of the war were afforded the benefit of five years' worth of previous operational experience. It would appear that tactics had come full circle. While partly true this view would not account for the significant advances discussed above that occurred during the intervening period.

Conclusion

Throughout the six and a half year involvement of operations in South Vietnam the Army was forced to adapt and redefine its tactics and techniques in a number of significant ways. That it was able to achieve these shifts in operational focus and their accompanying changes in tactics so often over such a short period of time is a significant tribute to the army and the men who comprised it. What permitted the army to demonstrate such elasticity in its doctrine was a combination of wide operational experience and rigorous professional training.

During the Vietnam War the Australian Army was presented with four varied periods of operational experience each coming close on the heels of the previous one. As a result tactics were forced to develop very quickly in response to given sets of circumstances which usually only persisted for a relatively short period of time.

It has been said that retrospectively one may deduce an army's implied doctrine from how it organises, trains and equips itself.⁸⁵ The style and concept of pre-war exercises and unit establishments provides an excellent picture of the type of war the army expected to fight, one drawing heavily on the experiences of the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s. While the army's past experiences and preconceptions had left it with some significant weaknesses, the basic tenets of Australian doctrine were sound. Reliance upon patrolling, small unit operations and population control left the army well placed to fight in Vietnam.

Whether this question is addressed from the perspectives of 1RAR's attempts to integrate its doctrine and training into an American brigade, the Task Force's attempts to reconcile divergent roles and tasks, or subsequent periods of the war, the principal themes of this paper remain extant. Army doctrine and operations were a direct reflection of the changing circumstances in which the Australians found themselves employed. While this may sound obvious in principle, the practicalities of how this manifested itself are less so.

This essay has aimed to give the Australian Army's Vietnam War experience a measure of context and in so doing provide a comment on how the organisation may come to better understand the nature and shaping forces of its history. The Army stands poised to embark on period of unparalleled variety and complexity of operational experience. Its ability to rapidly, accurately and effectively define the origins and context of its doctrine, analyse the nature of its operations and adapt these where appropriate will directly influence its success in future conflicts.

Endnotes

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