

THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1962-1972

TRAINING FOR SERVICE IN SOUTH VIETNAM 1966-1967: 2nd BATTALION, THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN REGIMENT Noel Charlesworth

The training of an infantry battalion for active service operations may seem mundane but a successful commitment to a cause and the military operations that follow depend on the lowest common denominator of the equation, that is, the degree and quality of training the infantry soldier is given and the professionalism of those members of a force to support him. The training of a combat soldier never ceases. He/she can be brought to the required standard of readiness to go on active service, but on arriving in theatre, the training remains an ongoing responsibility. Active service has been quoted in various campaigns as being five per cent excitement and 95 per cent boredom; the excitement periods may well be less. South Vietnam was a typical example. Second Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (2RAR), spent more rounds fired on company ranges inside the base than was ever spent on operations. I think all battalions would have had the same experience. Skills taught must be maintained throughout a full operational deployment, otherwise we are wasting our time and not supporting our soldiers.

Because the infantry battalions for 1957 onwards had served in Malaya and/or Borneo, the switch from Pentropic organisation to the Tropical Warfare organisation in 1965 did not cause major problems. 2RAR had fostered the raising of 6RAR and then proceeded to reorganise itself. The introduction of National Service was integral to any long time commitment to service in South Vietnam and also raised new problems in relation to manning the battalions. Initially the School of Infantry was unable to carry out the three months corps training required to bring a soldier to Draft Priority 2 (DP2) standard.¹ 2RAR was one of the units tasked with that training and in April 1966 received about 160 National Servicemen from Intake 1/66.

The program of which battalion would serve, and when, became the lynch-pin for allocation of National Service intakes to bring a battalion to establishment. This sounds easy in theory, but not in practice. As the prescribed tour was one year and reinforcement was made at the end of a battalion's tour this had both positive and negative effects. For example, on relieving 6RAR in situ on 30 May 1967, we took over 67 Regular (ARA) and 119 National Service (NS) soldiers. This had to be allowed for in each company's strength and was a bit tricky when other than a rifleman was involved. In addition the first 'V' Company of 1 RNZIR² joined the battalion Advance Party on 13 May and was under command of 6RAR until the arrival of 2RAR. This company was made up of volunteers who had extended their two year tour of duty in Malaya for another six months to serve in Vietnam. This addition to the unit would provide me the bonus of a company of well trained troops and the experience of commanding five rifle companies.

At that time, Army Headquarters policy was for commanders of major units to have about 10 days with the Unit they were to relieve—in our case 6RAR. Discussions included:

- lessons from the Long Tan engagement in August 1966,
- weapon replacement,
- the integration of the 2RAR Advance party,
- changes to our organisation such as the need for a designated Operations Officer,
- the change of the primary role of the Anti-Tank Platoon from heavy weapons to 'tracking',
- variations required for SOPs from the 6RAR experience,
- problems associated with Nui Dat base facilities,
- requirements for revetting tent accommodation,
- the importance of the ability to call for supporting fire down to platoon level, and
- battle inoculation.

These items would be on any shopping list of things to do.

Individual Training

As I indicated before, reinforcements to a battalion should arrive at DP2 standard. In the battalion it then became necessary to ensure those standards were maintained. This was possible in all aspects of fieldcraft, weapon handling etc. but not in respect of live firing. The absence of ranges close to the battalion barracks at Enoggera made this an important matter to be addressed. It is and has been a well known fact that from a statistical point of view many, many rounds of ammunition are fired to get an enemy casualty.

I think it is also worth noting that all the Company commanders had served in Malaya and/or Borneo as had all Company Sergeants Major and Sergeants. Furthermore, many of the section commanders had been diggers in Malaya; so there was a base of experience from which to start the next phase, Sub-Unit Training.

Sub-Unit Training

By January 1966 Officer, NCO and other reinforcements were in place. Sub-unit training could now start in earnest. Leave was completed and in mid-January a training cadre was sent to the Jungle Training Centre (JTC), Canungra, to prepare the course for companies. Each company would attend this course for three weeks. It provided for training in basic jungle warfare techniques, weapon handling and marksmanship, physical fitness, enemy weapons and proven Viet Cong methods of operation. Lectures and discussions at night included Vietnamese history, culture and the conflict since the end of the Second World War. It concluded with a hard two day march over the McPherson Ranges. The 2RAR cadre was directed and supervised by the Battle Wing of JTC. All companies had completed this course by 12 March. While not at Canungra, Company Commanders ran their own programs to test standards and fitness of the individual leaders at platoon and section level. Battalion Headquarters and Administration Company ran their own series of deployments exercising Tactical Headquarters, the Command Post element, and 'A' Echelon to establish workable tactical loads for movement in an airmobile environment. There was little spare time and we worked a full six-day week.

Despite the fact that South Vietnam was a counter insurgency situation, it was obvious that it was very different from our experience in, and lessons learnt from, operations in Malaya. From a military history point of view, it was more akin to the situation in the Boer War, which was a situation of interface between a colonial ruler and a dissident colonial settler or indigene population.

In some ways this pointed to a different approach to training in that in Malaya, operations were really conducted at platoon level under broad company control, whereas early lessons from South Vietnam were that a company was the smallest sub-unit that could be deployed, and then only with guaranteed mortar, artillery and air and gun ship support. Battalion HQ had to be trained to provide that support quickly and accurately to ensure successful operations and also to ensure deployments were such that companies in an operation were able to support each other. This became the emphasis of the training and Command Post Exercises (CPX) of the HQ in conjunction with the companies. It was essential that the Battalion SOPs were understood, agreed with and used correctly right down to section level. This would always be a doubt in any commander's mind because of the turnover of our soldiers. It was known before and had to be kept in mind. Maybe this was perfection, but in preparing young soldiers to face the 'unknown' to them, it had to be a standard to achieve. I think with few exceptions the battalion did this.

Unit Training

Apart from CPXs with all companies, our first deployment was to Tin Can Bay. This was a small training area but did allow for live firing. After my visit to 6RAR in January 1967, there were areas that needed attention. Would you believe that the simple but forgotten process of sandbag revetting needed to be taught? This was essential because the life of a sandbag in the SVN climate required a continuing program of refurbishment around tented accommodation, the Regimental Aid Post, stores, weapon pits, etc.

A requirement also existed to prefabricate timbers for a CP which was within the lift capacity of a utility helicopter. Probably more important was the need to establish an easy procedure to pass orders to the companies by radio as they would not always be physically able to attend Orders Groups or react quickly to changes in the tactical situation.

I also felt that the troops should experience the sound of close small arms fire—both overhead and flanking. It was a pity we could not do the same with the Artillery, which had to wait until deployment in South Vietnam with the never ending 'discussion' between infantry and gunner officers about their map reading ability. The same applied to Air and Gunship support. In close jungle this was always a problem because of sound entrapment under the canopy, complicating how close supporting fire could be brought with safety to our own troops. All company officers and NCOs were trained as far as possible in calling for mortar and artillery fire in the event a Mobile Fire Controller or³ Forward Observer was not available. This had to be achieved in six days. On return to Enoggera the battalion started Easter leave and then went to the Shoal water Bay Training Area for Exercise GET SET, our final exercise. This was conducted by HQ Northern Command with observers from Army HQ. It was based on situations that had been experienced in South Vietnam such as Search and Destroy, Cordon and Search and airmobile assault procedures etc. An assessment of the readiness of the Battalion was made and any recommended changes were notified. The exercise lasted from 28 March to 11 April. On return to Enoggera, pre-embarkation leave started and on completion, final preparations for embarkation commenced.

A small advance party was dispatched on 2 May followed by the advance party of 207 all ranks on 7-10 May. On 19 May the main body sailed from Brisbane, arriving in Vung Tau on 30 May. I travelled separately arriving in SVN on 22 May. With the advance party settled and the NZ 'V' Coy attached, 6RAR was able to be relieved *in situ* the day the main body arrived. This was done by heavy lift Chinook helicopters from the strip in the battalion lines direct to the deck of HMAS *Sydney*. On arrival further training was required to train the new arrivals in the use of the M72 LAW, M79 and M203 grenade launcher, and the US M90 mm in lieu of the Carl Gustaf M80. (The ammunition for the US weapon had more variety and was a better weapon in that environment.)

From the end of GET SET to disembarkation, there were further briefings on the history of Vietnam, the war with the French, the culture of the country, what was known of the VC organisation in our Area of Operations and the way they operated. In addition, moral welfare discussions were conducted by the Chaplains Department. I might add, as an aside, that during this time all members of the Battalion were informed that no one was obliged to sail with the Battalion if they did not wish to. Some elected not to go; not a great number, but as soon as their wishes were known they were transferred to the Personnel Depot for reposting.

Personal Observations

The training methods used in the 1960s were based on our experience in Malaya and to some extent New Guinea during the Second World War. The experience of the more senior officers and NCOs from Korea was mainly that of having been in operations against the highly organised Chinese Army in a war of static positions after the retreat from North Korea in the period December 1950- January 1951. That experience was a baptism of fire quite unlike the operations in Malaya/Borneo. The use of 'panji pits', crude but effective booby traps, and tunnel systems was a new and unwelcome change. The training we undertook was based on irregular guerrilla-type war, not the same sort of war being fought in other parts of South Vietnam which was large scale and vicious. At the same time we had to be aware that that could change (as happened at Long Tan in August 1966), hence the priority of protection in the base.

The absence of a coordinated intelligence system and having to rely on local operations to define our enemy caused many wasted hours and days jungle bashing looking for clues, rather than set operations against an established enemy. However our method of having all Companies operating within artillery range did not present our adversaries with opportunities to strike us. One aspect of contact drills we did miss in our initial training was the VC/NVA use of rocket launchers into the canopy above our troops. This caused many casualties and was hard to counter.

One could also wonder whether our reinforcement and replacement system did not impinge on morale and efficiency. With a tour being defined as one year, the first month was generally quiet (with trepidation) as was the last month (with wind-up blues). Then of course, there was the three monthly changeover of NS intakes etc. There must be a better way of organising battalions who have to conduct operations in a hostile environment for protracted periods.

On the other hand, in the twenty-first century with the current size of the regular army, one could question the ability today to be able to meet a similar situation. The combat (or interface) capabilities are so different from those of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and it would be hard to define the exact nature of a threat in the next ten or twenty years. Few military experts would be prepared even to hazard a guess, that is if we have learnt anything of world events since the end of the Second World War.

Are we so sure that limited nuclear war by some countries is not a possibility? Where would we stand in such a situation? What could we do or even train for in such an eventuality? While we still rely on a Reserve Force to bolster current commitments, no government has supported, nor have the three services seriously implemented, the planning for any type of mobilisation and all that such a process requires in manpower requirements and facilities. Hopefully this would not be of the magnitude of either of the world wars. There are few existing Defence holdings that could even hope to cope with the problem. One could say that such considerations are old hat, old fashioned or old soldier talk, but even if that holds some water, such considerations must always be in the mind of the planner.

One final thought that was given to me when I was a young GSO2 (OPS) in AHQ in the mid-1960s when we had commitments in Malaysia/Borneo and increasingly in South Vietnam. It reads:

The planners are a funny lot, they have neither sword nor pistol.
That's why they stuff things up because their balls are crystal!

Endnotes

1. Draft Priority denotes the readiness of the individuals of a unit to deploy on operations. It is a function of pre-deployment training from individual through to collective (at unit level), equipment holdings from individual through to unit, and physical, medical and dental fitness. It also includes any administrative prerequisites including wills, financial provisions, next-of-kin nomination etc. The priorities range from 3 through to 1 which is fully deployable. It broadly equates to today's Draft Priority Deployment Status report.
2. 2RAR was the first of the so-called ANZAC Battalions established as a result of an agreement between The Australian and New Zealand governments. See below, 206-25.
3. Mobile Fire Controllers were integral to the Battalion's Mortar Platoon and were allocated to Rifle Companies to facilitate calling for mortar fire. They were also able to call for artillery fire, through the Fire Support Coordination Centre at Battalion Headquarters if there were no Artillery Forward Observers allocated to the Company .