

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

***AUSTRALIAN TASK FORCE OPERATIONS IN SOUTH VIETNAM
1966-1971***

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On 8 March 1966 the Australian Government announced that 1RAR Battalion Group serving with the US Army 173rd Airborne Brigade at Bien Hoa would be replaced at the end of its tour of duty by an independent Australian Army Task Force. The Australian Task Force would have its own area of operations and be under the operational control of the American 2nd Field Force Vietnam. The area selected for the deployment of the Task Force was Phuoc Tuy Province, located southeast of Saigon.

The 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF)

The 1st Australian Task Force started arriving in South Vietnam during May 1966 and by mid-June had commenced the establishment of its base at Nui Dat (Vietnamese for 'small hill') in the middle of Phuoc Tuy Province. The Task Force was structured around two infantry battalions. Each battalion had four rifle companies, an administration company and a support company that included a mortar platoon of six 81mm mortars.

An operational limitation for the Task Force was that with only two infantry battalions, one battalion carried out operations while the other had to provide a ready reaction force and security for the base. This limitation was not resolved until the arrival of a third infantry battalion in December 1967. Unfortunately at the end of 1970, the third infantry battalion was not replaced at the end of its twelve month rotation and the Task Force was again limited to operating with only two infantry battalions.

The other combat elements of the Task Force included: an artillery field regiment with three batteries, each with six 105mm howitzers (two Australian batteries and one New Zealand battery); an armoured personnel carrier squadron, equipped with M113 light armoured vehicles, which when not carrying infantry was employed on armoured cavalry tasks; a field engineer squadron and engineer support troop; an aviation reconnaissance flight equipped with unarmed light reconnaissance aircraft and helicopters; and a Special Air Service squadron.

A Royal Australian Air Force utility helicopter squadron equipped with eight UH-1B Iroquois helicopters based at Vung Tau provided the Task Force with helicopter support for a variety of tasks, including troop lift, resupply and casualty evacuation. The strength of this helicopter squadron was doubled in 1968 when it was re-equipped with sixteen larger and more powerful UH-1D/H model Iroquois helicopters, and a helicopter gunship capability was added during 1969.

Although the Task Force was considered to be an independent Australian force, the Americans provided it with medium and heavy artillery support, offensive air support, medium and heavy lift helicopter support and gunship helicopter support. When large scale airmobile operations were carried out, the Americans provided additional utility helicopters to assist the Task Force.

The 1st Australian Logistic Support Group based at Vung Tau on the southern tip of Phuoc Tuy Province provided logistic support for the Task Force.

Security of the Task Force Base

The Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat was large, and had a perimeter of approximately twelve kilometres. For the duration of its deployment to Phuoc Tuy Province, the Task Force secured the approaches to the Nui Dat Base through a sustained daily program of patrolling and ambush operations. These patrols and ambushes were usually mounted by platoons and were initially carried out to enemy 82mm mortar range of four kilometres, and later extended to field artillery planning range of ten kilometres.

Other security measures included not having Vietnamese living in close proximity to the base and not allowing Vietnamese to work at the base. The few Vietnamese villages located close to the base perimeter were destroyed and the occupants moved and resettled in other villages.

The Enemy

Prior to the arrival of the Australians, the security of Phuoc Tuy Province depended on local South Vietnamese Regional and Popular Force units, and occasional search and destroy operations mounted by Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and United States Army units.

The Viet Cong and their predecessors the Viet Minh had dominated Phuoc Tuy Province since 1945. Viet Cong guerrilla groups operated in most towns and villages, and main force units operated from bases in the hill, jungle and forest areas of the province. In mid-1966, the strength of the Viet Cong in Phuoc Tuy Province was estimated at around 5000 personnel and included two Viet Cong Main Force infantry regiments (274 and 275, each based on three battalions) and D445 Local Force battalion.

The main areas for enemy bases, camps and movement were in the Nui May Tao Hills, the Long Hai Hills, Nui Thi Vai and Nui Dinh Hills, and along the northern border of the province from the Hat Dich area in the north-west of the province through Slope 30, the Courtenay Rubber Plantation and Thua Tich, to the May Tao Hills in the north-east of the province. The enemy also used the bush areas east of Nui Dat and Long Tan and to the east of Xuyen Moc.

Task Force Operations

The infantry battalions supported by artillery, armour, field engineers, helicopters and close air support were the basis of all major Australian Task Force combat operations in South Vietnam.

Australian infantry operations were based on light infantry skills and techniques related to small unit operations, in the tropical and jungle environment, with emphasis on patrolling and ambush. The Australian Army was well prepared for this, having placed emphasis on training to fight Communist guerrillas in the jungles of Southeast Asia from the mid-1950s.

Mobility

Helicopters and armoured personnel carriers were usually used to transport infantrymen and their combat support into and out of areas of operations. This meant that infantry and their combat support could be deployed over long distances into an area of operations, with the added operational advantage that the force could be quickly redeployed to another area to meet a changed situation. For the infantry based Australian Army this was a revolutionary development that greatly increased the operational capability of each infantry battalion.

Other methods of deployment into and out of an area of operations included movement on foot, on the backs of trucks, watercraft and by short takeoff and landing transport aircraft (such as the RAAF Caribou).

During an operation the infantry patrolled on foot, loaded down by weapons, ammunition, combat equipment, rations and water. The weights carried by individual infantrymen were usually in the vicinity of 30-45 kilograms.

Battle of Long Tan

It did not take long for the Viet Cong to find out that the Australian infantry operated in a different manner from that of the American and South Vietnamese infantry units. On 18 August 1966, 108 men of 'D' Company, 6RAR, supported by superb artillery fire and a relief force of armoured personnel carriers carrying 'A' Company, 6RAR, defeated a force of at least 1500 Viet Cong in the Battle of Long Tan. Australian casualties from the battle were eighteen killed and 24 wounded, with known enemy casualties of 245 dead.

The Viet Cong withdrew from Long Tan believing that they had fought with an Australian battalion. Whether this was due to the amount of ground covered by 'D' Company at Long Tan in comparison with the tactical movement of American and South Vietnamese infantry units, or a piece of face saving enemy propaganda is a point of interest.

The importance of the Battle of Long Tan was that the newly-arrived Australian Task Force had been tested in a major battle and the era of Viet Cong domination in Phuoc Tuy Province was being challenged. Unfortunately the Task Force lacked the resources to mount an immediate operation to trap and destroy the enemy force during its withdrawal.

Counter Revolutionary Warfare Operations

In line with Australian Army doctrine for counter revolutionary warfare, most operations carried out by the Task Force were search and clear, cordon and search, and operations related to the protective security of base areas and roads. Most Australian combat operations were carried out within range of artillery fire.

Cordon and search operations were earned out to isolate and search a town or village; with the aim of separating the Viet Cong from any support they received from the population. A cordon was placed around the village to provide security and prevent movement in and out of the village while it was being searched. These operations were usually of a day's duration, with the cordon inserted during the night and the search commencing just after first light. Local government officials and police were usually used to carry out detailed administrative checks on the people and to deal with those that were apprehended during these operations. The civil affairs unit usually provided medical and dental aid to the villagers as well. During the systematic and detailed search of buildings and surrounding ground, the search teams of soldiers were likely to locate the entrances to underground storage tunnels and hides. These had to be searched in detail by small teams of field engineers and infantry assault pioneers known as 'tunnel rats' and if being used to support Viet Cong activities, cleared of their contents and destroyed. This was a difficult and dangerous task carried out in narrow tunnels and hides constructed by small in stature Asians, with the additional risk of booby traps.

In Vietnam, the search and clear operations of Australian Army counter revolutionary warfare doctrine were called 'search and destroy' operations until mid-1968, when the terminology changed to 'reconnaissance in force'. These operations were carried out in the bush, forest, jungle and hill areas where the Viet Cong Local and Main Force and North Vietnamese Army units lived, trained and moved while preparing for their next operational activity. Australian search and clear operations involved the detailed and systematic search of ground by infantry patrols to locate the enemy and either bring him to battle or disrupt his activities by forcing him to move and then destroy his camps and storage areas. Once the enemy was located in a camp or bunker system, it usually became necessary for infantry and armour to be redeployed to reinforce the unit in contact with the enemy and for blocking forces and fire support to be employed on likely withdrawal routes, in a hammer and anvil concept trap. As the need to increase Australian military influence in Phuoc Tuy Province became necessary, fire support bases were established, so that combat operations to be carried out well away from Nui Dat could still remain within range of supporting artillery fire.

Infantry Firepower and Close Combat

The popular perception of the Vietnam War is that the Allied forces always had an overwhelming superiority in firepower. When considering the war from a broad perspective this is true, however what is usually overlooked is that when an Australian infantry platoon and a Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army (NVA) platoon made contact with each other in an encounter battle, they were on most occasions roughly equal in firepower. Without going into the characteristics of individual weapons, the infantrymen of both sides employed automatic and semi-automatic rifles, machine guns, grenade and rocket launchers that fired high explosive projectiles, hand grenades and command detonated, directional anti-personnel mines. The great advantage for the Australian platoon was that it carried a radio which could be used to request a variety of quick response fire support to assist the immediate battle, followed up by reinforcement, medical evacuation and resupply. In almost all cases, the enemy did not have this advantage.

During 1967 there were occasions where Australian infantrymen, well supported by accurate artillery fire, fought intense battles with determined Viet Cong units, but were unable to develop sufficient combat power to overcome them or to prevent their eventual withdrawal from the area.

In the middle of February 1967, during Operation BRIBIE, 6RAR, supported by armoured personnel carriers, artillery and close air support, spent an afternoon and evening fighting a battle with a dug-in, reinforced company from D445 battalion east of Long Phuoc Hai. 6RAR was unable to defeat the Viet Cong defensive position or to prevent the occupants from withdrawing during the night.

On 5 August 1967, during Operation BALLARAT, a search and destroy operation to the north-west of Nui Dat, 'A' Company 7RAR, supported by artillery fire, fought a battle with a reinforced company from 274 Main Force Regiment. The Viet Cong attempted to nullify the artillery fire support called in by the Australians by maintaining very close contact with them throughout the fighting. Later in the operation, 7RAR discovered a recently evacuated Viet Cong camp about a kilometre from where the battle had taken place. The Viet Cong company had been fighting to cover the withdrawal of a Viet Cong battalion from the camp. In 7RAR this was known as the Battle of Suoi Chau Pha.

The Long Hai Hills

The Long Hai Hills were a rugged set of hills in the south of Phuoc Tuy Province, in close proximity to heavily populated areas that included the large towns of Dat Do and Long Dien. The Viet Cong had established living and logistic storage areas there, many utilising caves in the hills and covered the approaches with defended positions and booby traps and mines.

The Task Force mounted three major operations into the Long Hai Hills and while destroying Viet Cong camps and storage areas, including installations in caves, was never successful in denying the Viet Cong use of the area. Each of the three operations resulted in large numbers of Australian casualties from mines and booby traps. As the Allied forces did not have the resources to establish bases in the Long Hai Hills, Allied artillery fire, strike aircraft and naval gunfire regularly bombarded selected areas there.

The first Australian search and destroy operation into the Long Hai Hills was Operation RENMARK which took place during 18-22 February 1967. While enemy camps and storage areas were destroyed the infantrymen from 5RAR suffered heavy casualties (seven killed and 22 wounded) from mines and booby traps, without the satisfaction of having fought any battles with the enemy.

The second major Australian search and destroy operation into the Long Hai Hills was carried out during March-April 1968 and involved a combined arms force based on 3RAR, supported by five B52 strikes. Again camps and storage areas in caves and installations were discovered and destroyed. Australian casualties during Operation PINNAROO were five killed and 40 wounded, with known Viet Cong casualties of 40 killed.

In February 1970, 8RAR supported by tanks carried out the last major Australian operation into the Long Hai Hills. A successful ambush and battle with a bunker system had to be balanced with Australian casualties of nine killed and fifteen wounded from two mine incidents and the withdrawal of the enemy battalion from the area as the Australian forces repositioned for a B52 bombing strike to take place. While 42 enemy were confirmed killed, intelligence information later indicated that over 100 enemy had been killed during Operation HAMMERSLEY.

The Australian Minefield and Viet Cong Mine Warfare

During March-April 1967 the Task Force established a permanent fire support base for a rifle company and section of artillery on the Horseshoe feature, located on the northern outskirts of the town of Dat Do. This enabled the Australians to extend their operational influence into a heavily populated area that was sympathetic to the Viet Cong and to provide fire support for operations in the southern parts of the province from Dat Do to the South China Sea and the Long Hai Hills and to the east of the province toward Xuyen Moc.

However the Task Force made a big mistake when it constructed a twelve kilometre barrier minefield, enclosed by barbed wire fences that ran from the Horseshoe feature past Dat Do to the village of Long Phuoc Hai on the coast. The aim of the minefield was to create an obstacle to Viet Cong movement between their base areas in the east of the province and the populated areas in the central southern area of the province, as well as their bases in the Long Hai Hills. As the Australians were stretched for manpower, security of the minefield was left to the local South Vietnamese territorial force units manning compounds and outposts in the area. Very soon, the mines were being skilfully removed by the Viet Cong and used offensively by them with great success to cause casualties to Allied forces personnel in Phuoc Tuy Province.

The Viet Cong were also adept at manufacturing their own mines and explosive devices from explosive taken from unexploded Allied artillery shells and aerial bombs. The Viet Cong anti-tank mines had spectacularly disastrous and lethal effects against armoured personnel carriers and light vehicles.

The Australian Army had gone into the Vietnam War knowing that the Viet Cong employed mines and booby traps as a normal part of their operations, and Australian soldiers were trained accordingly. However the prolific use of mines by the Viet Cong in the southern areas of Phuoc Tuy Province and the high number of battle casualties caused by them (approximately 50 per cent of Australian battle casualties), led to the employment of field engineer splinter teams with infantry and armour sub-units on operations. Sadly, Australian senior commanders had been responsible for the decision to employ the barrier minefield, which provided the Viet Cong with a ready supply of mines. Australian Army engineers eventually completed the removal of the minefield during early 1970, but the mines continued to cause Allied casualties.

Out of Province and Main Force Operations, January 1968-June 1969

In December 1967, the Task Force was reinforced with a third infantry battalion, and during early 1968 its strength was further boosted by the arrival of a squadron of Centurion tanks and additional Iroquois helicopters for the RAAF helicopter squadron.

The increase in strength effectively doubled the combat power and operational flexibility of the Task Force. Large-scale operations based on the employment of two infantry battalions could be conducted away from Nui Dat, while the third infantry battalion looked after the security of Nui Dat and the Horseshoe and provided a ready reaction force. The conduct of operations well away from Nui Dat also meant that fire support bases had to be established to provide command facilities and fire support for battalion operations.

During the period January 1968 to June 1969 the Task Force was involved in search and destroy operations against Local and Main Force Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army units not only throughout the more remote areas of Phuoc Tuy Province, but also in Bien Hoa and Long Khanh Provinces to provide security on the approaches to Saigon and the American base areas at Long Binh and Bien Hoa.

In January-February 1968 the Viet Cong mounted a massive offensive throughout South Vietnam during the traditional Tet festivities. The Task Force found itself simultaneously protecting the approaches to the American bases at Long Binh and Bien Hoa as well as fighting the Viet Cong in Phuoc Tuy Province. Operation COBURG, involving 2RAR, and 7RAR, was carried out in the border area between Bien Hoa and Long Khanh Provinces, while companies from 3RAR were involved in fighting in Phuoc Tuy Province to remove the Viet Cong from Baria and Long Dien.

In May 1968 the Task Force was again involved in operations to protect the approaches to the American bases at Long Binh and Bien Hoa when it was redeployed to carry out operations on enemy withdrawal routes north of Saigon. The Australians became involved in intense battles with North Vietnamese units, where for the first time they were confronted with enemy soldiers who came looking for them during 1RAR's battles at Fire Support Base Coral and 3RAR's battles at Fire Support Base Balmoral. During the first night at Fire Support Base Coral, part of the Australian defensive perimeter was penetrated and the Australians were forced to fight to retake artillery pieces and mortars that had been captured by the enemy. As a result of the initial Fighting at Coral, the Centurion tanks were deployed to the area from Nui Dat, a distance of approximately 100 kilometres.

During August 1968 while the emphasis was on operations in the more remote areas of Phuoc Tuy Province, two companies from 1RAR supported by tanks were involved in intense fighting to clear a company group of Viet Cong from the town of Long Dien.

Bunker Fighting

During the Task Force's early search and destroy operations the enemy was usually discovered living in or having occupied camps without well developed field defences and bunker systems. From late-1967 this started to change, as the enemy was increasingly found to be occupying well-sited and well-concealed bunker systems. In many cases the bunkers were so well concealed that infantrymen were already within the bunker system when they discovered it. Enemy fighting from bunkers were difficult to overcome and it was found that infantry fire and movement, supported by artillery fire and air attack was not usually sufficient to remove them. The fight usually resulted in a stalemate as infantry casualties increased and movement was restricted by enemy fire. The best chances for success in bunker fighting were achieved when the tanks were brought forward to support the infantry with their firepower.

Unfortunately Australian preparation and training for bunker fighting in Vietnam was almost non-existent, and this also included infantry working with tanks. However, close combat with a determined Asian enemy fighting from bunker systems in jungle terrain should not have been a surprise for the Australian Army. The lessons of light infantry requiring the support of tanks to defeat an enemy fighting from bunkers had been learnt against the Japanese in New Guinea during the Second World War.

Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province, July 1969-October 1971

During July 1969 to October 1971 the Task Force continued to carry out reconnaissance in force and land clearing operations throughout Phuoc Tuy Province to keep the Local and Main Force Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army units off balance. Most of these operations were carried out in the northern border area of Phuoc Tuy Province stretching from Hat Dich in the west across to the May Tao Mountains in the east and the areas in the east around Xuyen Moc. These were interspersed with pacification operations carried out in and around the populated areas of the province in a continuing effort to disrupt the local Viet Cong guerrilla groups and the support they received from the population.

In June 1969, 6RAR/NZ was heavily involved with fighting NVA (North Vietnamese Army) and Main Force Viet Cong units in a series of battles across the north of Phuoc Tuy Province during Operation LAVARACK. During the same operation, 'D' Company, 5RAR, supported by tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and helicopter gunships, was deployed from Nui Dat to fight a three day battle to remove a reinforced NVA Company from the village of Binh Ba.

The announcement of Vietnamisation in mid-1969, led to the Task Force placing an increased emphasis on trying to improve the capabilities of the local Vietnamese regional and popular force units through joint training and joint operational activities. The Task Force did not have the resources or the expertise for this work and in the mid-1970s much of the responsibility for these activities was taken over by the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam.

From mid-1969, the effectiveness of the constant reconnaissance in force operations mounted by the Task Force in the remote areas of Phuoc Tuy Province and the success in battles such as at Binh Ba became apparent. Contacts with major Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units became increasingly rare, as their numbers had been eroded and by avoiding contact and withdrawing into safe areas they could rebuild and wait for the American and Australian forces to withdraw.

The Australians placed increasing emphasis on patrolling and ambushing on the approaches to the main towns and villages around the Province in an effort to restrict the movement of the Viet Cong guerilla groups, who were running short of supplies. The successful ambush by 8 Platoon, 8RAR outside of Hoa Long on the night of 11-12 August 1970 against a Viet Cong resupply party was an excellent example of these tactics.

The Australians rarely moved at night, preferring to ambush tracks and areas where Viet Cong movement was likely to take place. A feature of Australian ambushes in Vietnam was the employment of the command detonated, directional fire M18A1 Claymore mine and the boost it provided to the firepower of small units. The traditional linear ambush gave way to the employment of triangular shape ambushes sited to deal with enemy approaching from any direction.

When 8RAR was not replaced at the end of its tour of duty in November 1970, the strength of the Task Force was reduced to two infantry battalions. The withdrawal of the battalion immediately reduced the operational flexibility of the Task Force, and increased security and workload problems at all levels. The Task Force continued to operate with a battalion operating in the west of the Province using Nui Dat as its base and the other battalion operating in the east of the Province using the Horseshoe as its base. The Vietnamese Regional and Popular Force units were given increased responsibility for carrying out operations in southern areas of Phuoc Tuy Province, however there was only minimal acceptance of this operational responsibility by them.

As contact with large groups of enemy became less frequent, the two Australian infantry battalions increasingly used dispersed rifle company patrols to search for the enemy, with reliance placed on armoured and air elements as well as artillery fire to provide responsive fire support and rapid reinforcement in the event of serious trouble. Elements of B Company, 7RAR and a troop of armoured personnel carriers ambushed a large party of Viet Cong, south-east of Xuyen Moc in the early hours of 31 December 1970. The battle lasted for two hours and enemy casualties were 21 confirmed dead, among them were senior members of the Viet Cong structure in Phuoc Tuy Province, including command elements from D445 Local Force Battalion. This ambush substantially disrupted the Viet Cong infrastructure in Phuoc Tuy Province.

From mid-1971 Main Force Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units started moving back into the northern border areas of Phuoc Tuy Province. On 7 June 1971, during Operation OVERLORD, 3RAR supported by tanks, artillery and aerial firepower fought a battle with a battalion from 33 NVA Regiment occupying a bunker system on the border of Phuoc Tuy Province and Long Khanh Province. When 3RAR attacked the enemy bunker system the next day, they found that the enemy had withdrawn during the night.

At the end of July 1971, during Operation IRON FOX, 'C' and 'D' Companies of 4RAR/NZ supported by tanks and artillery fire were involved in battles with two large bunker systems occupied by members of 274 Viet Cong Main Force Regiment. Australian casualties were one killed and seven wounded with known enemy casualties of at least twelve killed and an unknown number entombed in bunkers that had been crushed by the tanks.

During September 1971, 33 NVA Regiment moved back into the north of Phuoc Tuy Province in anticipation of the Australian withdrawal from Nui Dat. On 21 September, during Operation IVANHOE, 'B' Company 4RAR/NZ fought an encounter battle with a battalion from 33 NVA Regiment and 'D' Company 4RAR/NZ fought a battle with another battalion from 33 NVA Regiment in a bunker system. Australian casualties were five killed and thirty wounded. On this occasion the fighting was much tougher for the Australian infantrymen as the squadron of tanks had already been withdrawn to Vung Tau in preparation for its return to Australia. For this last Australian battle in Phuoc Tuy Province, the infantrymen of 4RAR/NZ had to rely on artillery fire and generous amounts of aerial fire support from fighter aircraft and gunship helicopters.

These final battles resulted in major enemy units being forced to withdraw from Phuoc Tuy Province, not long after having re-entered it. In September 1971, Viet Cong strength in Phuoc Tuy Province had been reduced to around 1400 personnel, roughly one third of what had been available in mid-1966. However enemy strength had been increased by the deployment of 33 NVA Regiment with approximately 1220 personnel.

The Australian Task Force ceased operations in Phuoc Tuy Province in October 1971 and 4RAR withdrew from Nui Dat on 7 November. While the Task Force had achieved success in most of its battles with Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army units in South Vietnam, it was unsuccessful in eliminating the Viet Cong infrastructure from Phuoc Tuy Province. When the Task Force ceased operations, the Viet Cong influence on the population had been greatly reduced and the people were able to go about their business in daylight without great risk. Unfortunately this situation did not last and during 1972 the Viet Cong started to regain control in most areas of Phuoc Tuy Province.

Conclusion

For the Australian Army its operational experience in South Vietnam could be described as a revolution in military affairs. It had improved the mobility, firepower, communications, combat clothing, footwear, and load carrying equipment used by its combat soldiers.

However, the problems of Australian combat units always having to operate under strength, and of heavily loaded infantrymen continually pushing the limits of their endurance in the extremes of terrain and climate for periods of four to six weeks at a time without a break were not solved.

The Australian Army established itself as one of the world's leading exponents of light infantry operations in counter revolutionary warfare and jungle terrain, and gained valuable experience in combined arms operations and some aspects of joint warfare. Its operational experience in Vietnam had highlighted the need to deploy a balanced and adequately equipped task force organisation for the duration of any future combat deployment.

While its expertise in counter revolutionary warfare and jungle operations were allowed to atrophy in the post-Vietnam era, the experience gained in combined arms and joint operations in South Vietnam has played an important part in the force development of today's Australian Army.