

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

***DOCTRINE, TRAINING AND COMBAT WITH 1st BATTALION,
THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN REGIMENT, 1965-1966***
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What was it like to be a Platoon Commander in 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), during 1965-1966? I joined 1RAR at Holsworthy as a brand new Second Lieutenant in January 1965, fresh out of Officer Cadet School, Portsea. Portsea was a significant factor in the junior command structure of 1RAR as most of the Platoon Commanders were Portsea graduates. It is important therefore to say a little about the qualities emphasised at Portsea in 1964.

OCS Portsea was a 12 months' course, beginning either in January or July, whose main aim was to turn out well-rounded infantry Platoon Commanders. Those graduating to other arms or services would normally go to their own corps school on graduation to gain further knowledge of their specialisation. In my case, I graduated to the Australian Intelligence Corps. For us, the normal first posting was two years with an arm, normally infantry, before taking up an appointment with the Corps.

Portsea, in those days, under Colonel Stan 'the man' Coleman and Chief Instructor Major Phil Bennett, valued youth, leadership, fitness and sport, being a team player, and perhaps, above all else, honesty and integrity. Most of the cadets were selected from the junior ranks of the army. In my intake the oldest cadet was 27, and the youngest cadets, including myself, were 18. To my surprise, having been to a British boarding school, there was no bullying or bastardisation. The instructors were all very capable Captains and senior NCOs, most with experience of having served in the Malayan Emergency, which ended in 1960. The Korean War 1950-53 was the last conventional war in which Australia had been involved.

Let me now give you some background on 1RAR. 1RAR in January 1965 was a Pentropic battalion based on a 'four structure', ie, four sections to a platoon and four platoons to a company. (There were however five rifle companies!) It was also the army's 'Ambrose' battalion—in other words it was on stand-by for deployment overseas if needed. This was belied, though, by its logistic deficiencies. The army had long depended on the United Kingdom or the United States to provide much of the equipment needed for operations overseas, despite the rhetoric about self-sufficiency. Diggers often went off to the disposals stores to buy the bits of kit that they needed that were not available through the supply system.

I was made the commander of 3 Platoon in 'A' Company. The platoon size initially was 45 but became 34 when we changed to a tropical warfare establishment in March 1965. Major John Healy, a very well respected and capable officer, commanded the company. He had already served one tour in Vietnam, with the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV). Before I arrived, 3 Platoon had been commanded by Sergeant Col Fawcett, a nuggety individual with a great sense of humour and an instinctive feel for getting the best from his men. He extended a helping hand to me, and we got on very well. This was not true of all of the Sergeant/Second Lieutenant relationships; a bad one was a recipe for getting one's career off to a rocky start. Fortunately this was not the case with any of the 'A' Company platoons.

The other key figures in the Company were CSM Jack Cramp and CQMS Dinky Dean. They were both experienced Malaya hands, with considerable experience of how to get the system to work for their areas of responsibility. All of the diggers were regulars and many had had Malaya experience.

Most of the social life occurred in the battalion lines. It was difficult for 'singlies' to get approval to live out, and few diggers owned their own cars. Nevertheless, morale was high and there was a strong sense of community within the battalion.

The first few months of 1965 were momentous for 1RAR. February 1965 saw the arrival of the new CO, Lieutenant Colonel 'Lou' Brumfield, and in March 1965 the battalion split to form 1RAR and 5RAR. Both occurrences were precursors to deployment to Vietnam, although we did not know it at the time.

Throughout this period, the training emphasis was on platoon training. This included allowing the 'A' Company Platoon Commanders to take their platoons to the state forest for a week at a time to practise against each other. Because of our Portsea experience, all of the Portsea Platoon Commanders placed a high emphasis on physical fitness, taking our platoons for runs and assault course training every day, and finishing each week with a nine mile run in full kit. The diggers were required to complete the run within two hours. What was most lacking in our training was regular range practice, said to be due to a shortage of ammunition.

In April 1965, we had a full battalion exercise in the Gospers area, north of Sydney. At the end of the exercise, the RAAF made themselves unpopular by being unprepared to fly us out as originally planned, due to adverse weather conditions, necessitating an overnight march through hilly terrain in the rain.

On 29 April 1965, Prime Minister Menzies announced that 1RAR would be going to Vietnam in June, much to the dismay of the 5RAR Platoon Commanders, most of whom wanted to go. (Their expectation was that the war would be over within twelve months and they would not get the opportunity to go.) I was pressured by some of my 5RAR friends to let them go instead of me, since I was not a 'real' infantryman and they needed the experience. Needless to say, I resisted their entreaties!

Visiting Intelligence Corps personnel, including WO Bob Rooney, who had served with AATTV in Vietnam, soon provided useful intelligence briefings. We also gained some limited experience with a RAAF Iroquois helicopter; the pilot insisted, though, on having the doors closed and us having our seat belts fastened before he would take off!

On 1 June 1965, 'A' Company was trucked to RAAF Richmond, where we boarded QANTAS flights and were flown to Vietnam via Manila. We stacked our weapons at the back of the aircraft and had drunk all of the beer on the plane before we had departed Australian airspace. We arrived the next morning at Ton Sa Nhut Airbase, Saigon, and were bussed in dark blue US Air Force buses, with mesh over the windows (to prevent grenades being thrown in), to our new 'home' at Bien Hoa Airbase. Although our deployment was supposed to be a secret, there were large banners at Bien Hoa township welcoming us to Vietnam. We entered the base area, were shown a large grassy reverse slope and told that we would have to dig in between the markers placed by the advance party. That was our acclimatisation from winter in Australia to the heat of Vietnam!

Within a few days, we received Malaya-issue four-man tents. They were much admired by the Americans, because of the air gap between the inner and outer sleeves that kept them cool. But the Americans could not understand why we did not put them up in neat rows, as theirs were! They also could not understand why we did not dig our trenches with backhoes, which was their approach. Even though they had backhoes, to our surprise most of their Command Posts were built above ground with sandbag protection. We had been taught that this was risky as rockets are able to blast through sandbag fortifications.

We had become the third battalion of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade, the other battalions being 1/503 and 2/503. We soon had large numbers of US visitors and 'trainers'. The Americans had clearly received little prior training for this type of counter insurgency conflict, their focus having been on NATO Europe- or Korea-style conventional conflicts.

We were allocated the area to our front, to the Dong Nai River, as our Tactical Area of Operational Responsibility (TAOR). We soon had patrols out in the area and were to continue to maintain security for the base in our sector for the next twelve months. The VC regularly mounted mortar attacks against the base, but never in our sector. Similarly we were never attacked in the TAOR, the VC preferring to go instead for those GIs whose idea of providing base security was dozing in a shady spot near the river and listening to Armed Forces Radio Station (AFRS) Saigon.

Our first operation away from Bien Hoa started on 28 June. I do not intend to provide an account of each operation; instead I will adopt a generic approach. For those interested in a more detailed account of 1RAR operations 1965-66, I recommend *First to Fight* by Bob Breen.¹

Deployment to operations was by way of a variety of means of transport: 'deuce and a half's' (two and a half ton trucks), US semi-trailer 'cattle trucks', M-113 APCs, Iroquois helicopters, ARVN helicopters (only once), Chinook helicopters, and fixed wing STOL aircraft. The diggers annoyed some of the senior US officers with their 'mooring' or 'baaing' when in the cattle trucks but it was always difficult to locate the culprits!

The platoon's weapons in Australia had been three GPMG M-60s, ten Owen SMGs, with the remaining weapons being 7.62 SLRs. In Vietnam, some of the riflemen converted their SLRs to automatic fire by inserting a matchstick in the firing mechanism. The Owens were replaced after a couple of months in Vietnam by American Armalite M-16s (except for the Platoon Commander's), and we were issued with three M-79 grenade launchers and three disposable M-72 rocket launchers. I put my Owen (which was heavy and prone to rust) in an oil bath under my tent and replaced it with an M-16 from the brigade aid station. (US medical corpsmen there had a lucrative sideline selling dead GIs' weapons to the Australians.) On operations, we also carried about twenty M-26 grenades, plus one white phosphorus WP-80 grenade and coloured smoke grenades.

There were some early morale issues. The mail took a while to sort out, which was hard for the married men and for diggers' families in Australia. The 173rd Airborne Brigade Commander, Brigadier General Williamson, had said there would be no beer for members of his brigade. This was said to be due to concerns that it might exacerbate existing tensions between black and white soldiers in some of the Brigade units.

Local recreation leave took a while to establish. It started after a while with day trips for the diggers to Saigon. The diggers seemed to compete with each other to spend the most or get the most drunk, but it was a good release valve and gave them something to look forward to. There was limited entertainment at Bien Hoa. We had some open-air movies and the occasional entertainment troupe, but these were mainly for the benefit of the base people since the infantry platoons were out in the field most of the time. We did, however, get to see the legendary Bob Hope Christmas Show because we happened to be back in base at the time.

Many of the platoon members suffered initially from tropical skin infections because we had arrived in the rainy season, when humidity and dampness levels were high. Most of these infections seemed to disappear with the end of the rainy season and the copious use of talcum powder and gentian violet. One of the less savoury duties of the Platoon Commander was to conduct regular foot inspections of smelly feet.

The high level of Australian media interest in 1RAR meant that politicians in Australia soon addressed the administrative and logistic deficiencies, while the visiting Army Minister managed to persuade Brigadier General Williamson to let the Australians have their culturally-important beer.

The main operational activities of 1RAR during 1965-66 were to provide base security at the Bien Hoa Air Base, undertake operations with 173rd Airborne Brigade as its third battalion, and conduct the occasional single battalion operation. Most of the operations were to 'search and destroy' in VC controlled areas and prepare the way for incoming US units. The high operational tempo meant that comparatively little time was spent in camp.

The field size of a platoon was normally around 21 soldiers, including a medic provided by Support Company, leaving five-six soldiers per section. This meant that sections could not afford to have two forward scouts, which in turn increased the vulnerability of the section Corporals.

Many of our contacts occurred as we approached well-worn tracks. This was because VC moving along a track could hear us approaching (despite our using only hand signals) and we could not hear them. Another danger area was concealed villages, camps and bunker systems. They would normally be defended by local VC and booby traps. The size of enemy groups varied from one or two up to company size. We also had the occasional contact with North Vietnamese elements.

The most important skill required of the Platoon Commander was accurate map reading—perhaps no longer relevant with GPS. In Vietnam, one square on the map was 1000 metres or one 'click'. This roughly equated to 2000 paces through jungle. Following a compass bearing and allowing for diversions, you could be reasonably accurate through featureless terrain. Accuracy was important as it guaranteed access to company backup, artillery fire and air support, casevac, and reaching RVs and LZs on time. Getting lost was also guaranteed to lose you points with your troops and the Company Commander.

Australian patrolling tactics worked well in Vietnam, but Brigade pressure to move quickly meant that there was little time for us to undertake effective ambushing or searching. Our 'softly softly' approach did not fit well with the US practice of drawing enemy attention by making a lot of noise, and then using firepower against the VC when they attacked. Unfortunately, the 173rd Battalion's exaggeration of their kill ratio to 10:1 made our tactics—and honest 4:1 ratio—look less successful.

The US platoons were led by 'Platoon Leaders', ours of course by 'Platoon Commanders'. This actually seemed to represent a different philosophical approach to command and control at the platoon level. For example, when there was an enemy contact, the 173rd's approach was for the Platoon Leader to lead his men into battle. This resulted in high casualties for their Second Lieutenants—the equivalent platoon to mine (3 Platoon of Company A) in 1/503 had four Platoon Leaders killed during our time in Vietnam.

The weather was a significant problem at first. We suffered from continual rain during the wet season, which ran from May to October. This meant that we were wet through at night and everything that could, rusted. The 9mm ammunition for the Owens was late 1940s vintage, and either became damp or was defective, and would sometimes literally travel only a few feet from the weapon when fired. Our clothing and boots were not able to cope with the wet conditions, and we soon traded our boots for the nylon US tropical combat boots—one of their best pieces of equipment.

US harassing and interdiction fire at night often did not take account of Australian positions. We had the occasional close call but we got used to it and it relieved the monotony of sentry duty, so its effect on the VC was probably questionable.

We also lacked experience in the early days in dealing with VC tunnel systems and, because we did not have pistols at platoon level, were obliged to search them armed only with bayonets—the tunnels were too restricted in diameter to allow for anything larger than a bayonet or a pistol to be taken into them. Tunnel searches often produced arms caches: on one occasion we unearthed more than 50 French weapons, many in their original grease packing. Each soldier was allowed to claim and tag a weapon, but not one of the weapons made it back to Bien Hoa. They were all souvenired by US helicopter crews.

US tactical intelligence clearly lacked quality control. We would receive a wad of papers containing intelligence material about the area we were going to next, which I, initially at least, diligently marked on to my maps. I soon discovered that most of the information was worthless and based on unevaluated humint (ie human intelligence).

C rations, which were provided by the Brigade, were 'wet' rations in cans and, while quite tasty, were heavy to carry. Since we were trying to have as few helicopter resupplies as possible for security reasons, this meant heavy personal loads. The radio batteries were also heavy and did not last long, meaning that several had to be earned in-between resupplies.

Operational security was poor. As we travelled into areas we were to operate in, we usually encountered refugees fleeing towards us to avoid the fighting. Apparently all operations had to be cleared beforehand with the local Vietnamese authorities and the VC had infiltrated their organisations. This meant of course that we could usually count on a reception from the local VC who had had ample time to prepare for our arrival.

Our radio frequencies often did not match those of US or ARVN units, which meant that it was difficult for us to contact them if they were firing at us. We were mistaken for VC on several occasions because they wore similar floppy hats to us, or because when seen from the air we did not move like US units.

Radios were not provided below platoon level, which was a problem for Platoon Commanders when we deployed sections out for searches. If a section had a contact, it had no way of letting the Platoon Commander know what was happening. I bought walkie-talkies for my platoon but they did not last long in the wet conditions. Command and control was also difficult in secondary jungle because of the poor visibility.

Maintaining dry underwear was a problem, particularly in the rainy season or in wet areas. We were resupplied once a week during operations with shirts and trousers that we had packaged up beforehand, but we had to carry changes of socks and underwear. Socks and underwear took a long time to dry out and were causing skin infections so we just stopped wearing them. Carrying wet and dirty underwear around in our packs with our food was also unsavoury. By the time the rainy season had ended, not wearing socks and underwear had become a habit. Needless to say, I reverted back to underwear when I returned to Australia!

The heaviest items you carry as an infantryman are ammunition and explosive ordnance, water, and engineer stores. Diggers would usually try to take too much ammunition on operations, particularly after an action in November 1965 when we ran low during a protracted engagement with a VC company. The problem with carrying too much weight was that it reduced an individual's efficiency and increased fatigue levels.

Water is consumed heavily on patrol in the tropics but streams were frequent, so we would carry two water bottles (the larger British issue ones were preferred), one with stream water and one with drinking water. The stream water would be used for brews. We also carried purification tablets but treated water was not popular because of its taste. None of us ever became sick from drinking stream water. The main problem with the streams was the leaches, which latched on to you anywhere near a stream.

At the end of operations we would normally make for a designated LZ for helicopter extraction. We did not know how many helicopters would arrive so I usually held off assigning soldiers to helicopters until the last minute. The alternative was continually to change the arrangements, which I found led to confusion. On at least a couple of occasions, 1RAR soldiers were left behind at LZs because they were to be the last out, and there were not enough helicopters to take everyone. The loss was only discovered when we got back to Bien Hoa and did a head count, but in all cases the indignant diggers were retrieved successfully!

The daily routine on operations was to harbour overnight with the company or battalion, with two GPMGs on the perimeter. These were manned overnight. We stood to before dawn and, after first light, sent out clearing patrols and placed listening posts. We then breakfasted, cleaned weapons and had the platoon 'O' (Orders) Group to specify the day's activities.

We would then head off for the day as a platoon, or occasionally a company, to conduct search and destroy operations. At a platoon level, the lead section would be rotated every hour to maintain vigilance. We would stop for a 'smoko' every hour, and a brew about three times a day.

We would meet up again with the Company in the late afternoon and become part of a harbour position. We would establish the harbour, dig in, and meet with the Company Commander for an 'O' Group. We would then conduct a clearing patrol and pull in the listening posts, and stand-to until it was dark. These procedures ensured that we were never infiltrated at night.

By contrast, the US approach was to conduct reconnaissance by fire. This involved each soldier firing a few rounds to his front. This allowed the VC to do a cross section of the location from the enormous volume of noise. As a result, US troops were often mortared at night. We were only mortared once, but that was because we were protecting noisy brigade support elements that night. The attack lightly wounded my signaller, Private Peter Zerbes, and the Company Commander, Major John Healy.

Once a week on average, we would have a contact with the enemy. This usually involved one or two VC firing at us as we approached, and then taking off at a rapid rate, or disappearing down tunnels. To try to catch the former we would immediately fire about 200 rounds at the point from which the shots had come, and follow up with a contact drill. If we received continuing automatic fire we would call in artillery because we wanted to avoid suffering unnecessary casualties. If we initiated the contact, we would deploy forward immediately. Air strikes were spectacular, but highly dangerous unless there was a defining feature such as a road to guide the aircraft.

Fire support was available beyond anything we had imagined in Australia. As cadets, we had exercised at Puckapunyal with calling in artillery—but then it had been one gun for ranging, followed by battery fire. Now we often had a battalion of guns in support. However, we often did not know where the guns were located. This was a critical factor, since the beaten zone of impact is elliptical along the line of fire of the guns. If they are firing over you, it is therefore a lot more dangerous than if they are off to one side. We often needed the rounds to land within 100 metres of our position so accuracy was highly important. On one occasion, my platoon was bracketed by battery fire by the New Zealand battery and on another by fire from a US battery. Fortunately, the incidents did not result in any casualties to my platoon.

As my platoon had killed the most VC at one stage, we were granted the much sought after benefit of guarding the Bachelor Officers' Quarters (BOQ) in Saigon for a week. Half of the platoon had to remain on guard while half had the day off. The one moment of excitement occurred when a VC threw a satchel charge or grenade at the BOQ from the back of a motor scooter. One of my soldiers, Lance Corporal Mick Parkes, was lightly wounded in the leg. US MPs upstairs in the building opened fire on the street with automatic shotguns but surprisingly there were no casualties, other than my soldier, who went on light duties for a couple of weeks.

Casualties were an inescapable outcome of our being in Vietnam. While each platoon had a medic, they were in fact 1RAR bandsmen who had been given first aid training. They were simply not experienced in dealing with the major trauma of gunshot wounds to the chest, or serious mine injuries. Once we had taken a casualty, the dustoff helicopter would normally arrive within twenty minutes, depending on whether it was able to find you and whether there was any other major casualty-causing action taking place. We were accorded equal priority with US units, but ARVN casualties were not given a high priority, and the Brigade was certainly not prepared to risk dustoffs taking out wounded VC.

The casualty numbers of 3 Platoon were fairly typical of 1RAR. Each loss is a tragedy. I lost two very capable Corporals (Corporals 'Judo' Seipel and Frank Smith) and a private soldier (Private Peter Gillson), all killed by gunshot wounds. My medic on one operation (Private Chris Clarke) was killed while assisting another platoon whose medic had been killed. I also had twelve wounded, several by mines, and one nonbattle casualty.

Enemy casualties were twenty by body count, but would have been considerably more judging by blood trails. Fire support would have accounted for more again. This included a battalion of artillery fire that I called in on two occasions on VC companies, fire support called in on VC withdrawal routes and enemy positions, and the effects of our GPMG, M-79 and M-72 fire. There was no ground follow up to many of these incidents to assess casualties due to lack of time.

I believe there are some important basic qualities that a Platoon Commander needs to be effective. These are:

- Competence in the operational skills needed to do the job.
- Loyalty to the boss.
- Being a team player with people at your own level.
- Being honest with your men.
- Not expecting your men to take risks that you are not prepared to take yourself.
- Placing your men's welfare ahead of your own.

In my view, these were the qualities displayed by the more successful Platoon Commanders in 1RAR.

We finally came to the end of our tour with 173rd Airborne Brigade in June 1966, with the Australian Government deciding that we would not be replaced at Bien Hoa. Australia would instead deploy an Australian Task Force in Nui Dat Province.

My platoon had seen 49 soldiers fill the 34 platoon billets during the past year in Vietnam. Apart from losing those who were killed and some of the more badly wounded, there had been medical evacuees, compassionate RTAs (Return To Australia) and transfers to other units. Some of my more recent 'reos' (ie reinforcements) were transferred to the incoming battalions, while some of the 1RAR NCOs volunteered to stay to help 'bed in' the new battalions.

Most of us deployed back to Holsworthy. We found the sudden transition from war to peace to be quite unsettling. We also found to our concern that our unaccompanied kit had been searched and many of our treasured (and declared) Vietnam souvenirs had disappeared. In my case I lost a very nice 'demilled' Russian sniper rifle. Most of the soldiers found it very hard to adjust to peacetime soldiering in Australia after the adrenalin rush of Vietnam, and many opted to return to Vietnam for second tours in due course. For some, Vietnam was obviously very traumatising, but for many it was the ultimate mateship experience and one that forged lifetime bonds of friendship.

Endnotes

1. Bob Breen, *First to Fight* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988).