

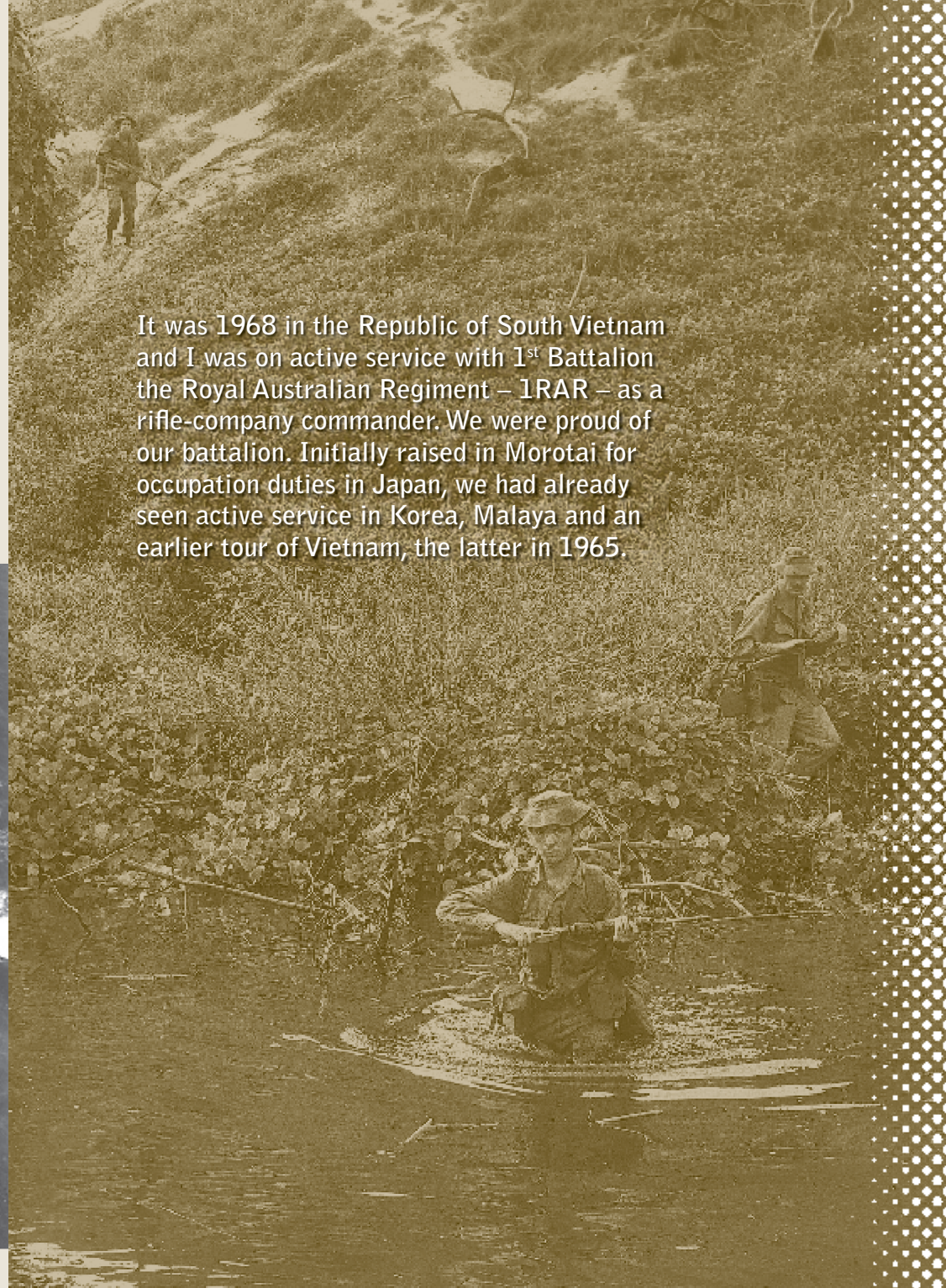
A DIFFERENT TIME DIFFERENT PLACE

WORDS COLIN ADAMSON PICS AWM AND ADF

It was 1968 in the Republic of South Vietnam and I was on active service with 1st Battalion the Royal Australian Regiment – 1RAR – as a rifle-company commander. We were proud of our battalion. Initially raised in Morotai for occupation duties in Japan, we had already seen active service in Korea, Malaya and an earlier tour of Vietnam, the latter in 1965.



1RAR aboard HMAS Sydney enroute to Vietnam



ANZAC DAY

Our battalion was, in many respects, like a large family – I had known and served with my sergeant major on and off for 15 years and knew many others as well. Half of our soldiers were national servicemen – all of them good young men who came with us willingly, worked hard and bonded as mates as only infantry soldiers can. We were very pleased with them, and their grandfathers would have liked them for what they were too.

My advance party had arrived at Nui Dat around mid March, settled in and been on several interesting operations into Baria with 7RAR, who we were relieving. With the main body in place, we commenced zeroing our weapons, attended intelligence briefings and kept up a constant patrol programme outside the wire.

Our company lines were in the old rubber plantation of Ap An Phu, just beside the south-western tip of Luscombe Field. Not much to look at, the accommodation was pretty basic. Heavy green canvas tents raised on long poles surrounded by walls of head-high sandbags and floored with duckboards. There was also a cookhouse, canteen and Q store constructed of 6-ply on cement bases and my command post, which looked a bit like a communal grave. In the dry, the red dust permeated everything in the place and it was mostly a pleasure to get out on operations.

A week of this and then it was a 24-hour trip through rice paddies and low scrub to the west with a troop of APCs, to test our skills in navigation and to firm up our drills.

A few days later, the whole battalion assembled for a dry-run operation – a helicopter ride to the abandoned rubber plantation of Binh Ba, patrol through it (“we don’t think Charlie is there”) and then back to the Dat. Not quite the real thing, but exciting enough.

No side doors on the choppers, feet resting on the skids and the thwack thwack of the rotors at 4000 feet is a real adrenalin rush, and jumping out at the other end (have the pilots put me down in the right spot?) can be a questionable activity.

Several days later the orders came, the briefings swung into action, the maps were unrolled and the rations and ammunition we were to carry were topped up.



To me it seemed pretty straight forward, nothing difficult or complicated but something to be welcomed – at last we were to put into practice what we had been trained to do for years.

Very simply, this was the plan – to our west were two small mountain ranges separated by what was known as the Old French Road. They were not terribly high and generally ran north-south. There was good cover, some water and they were not all that far from a number of population centres.

We knew that Charlie was there, perhaps not permanently, but there was a chance we might just surprise him. It was the Chau Duc Company, C41 – old friends of the regiment you might say!

And then the reality sank in. The task force commander had decided we would move off at first light on 24 April. A minor blow, bordering on disbelief. No dawn service, no remembrance of our fallen comrades, no gunfire breakfast and no traditional activities.

Off we went, bouncing, skeetering, slewing and heaving. Hot, noisy and oily – stifling,

too – inside an APC with radios blaring. Cramped, too, with all spare space taken up by water, ammunition and food. And very little idea where I was!

But I did have faith in the cavalry and they dropped us off at a gravel pit at the southern end of the Nui Dinh, which, incidentally, was surmounted by a huge statue of Christ that could rival the one at Rio de Janeiro.

The going was difficult. We called it elephant grass – 3 to 4 metres high and closely packed, retaining the heat and humidity, and insect life of all descriptions. Visibility was down to a metre. The scouts were working with compass and machete, and I fear we were most un-military.

Quite clearly we had been set down at the correct place, easily recognisable and a good departure point for our main objective. Terrain difficulties, however, had been much underestimated and we probably made little more than 150 to 200 metres in the first hour.

For flank protection, I sent Bob Sutton’s 2 Platoon up on to the slopes 300 metres away where the grass wasn’t quite as high,

but the steepness did not make for easy going either.

But, move forward we did, and by late afternoon we were out of the elephant grass, where the going was easier and the air marginally cooler.

We located a fine defensive position and, quite nearby was an ideal spot for a helicopter landing point. This seemingly easy jaunt had not been achieved without cost. There were several soldiers suffering from heat exhaustion to be evacuated and we were already badly in need of water resupply.

Throughout this, Jack Cramp, my sergeant-major, was an absolute tower – cajoling, wheedling, pleading, demanding, he stirred life into all around him, and order prevailed.

The night passed uneventfully. We stood to the next morning before first light then moved on, with Sergeant Bob Moore’s 1 Platoon astride the Old French Road and the remainder of the company high up on the slopes – all moving slowly north, searching the watercourses and hoping to flush the



Chau Ducs down towards Bob, where he would gather them up.

Flush them out we did, but with little success. We saw them, exchanged shots and lost them again. All very disappointing to us who were looking for quick results. But in my mind, I knew we would eventually wear them down.

Mid afternoon and the slope became too steep for us to handle, so we moved down to join Bob and journey more tactically up the ‘road’. Again we exchanged fire without result, still learning I know, but most disappointing.

So, Anzac Day 1968 came to an end for us with little to report except mounting frustration. The following day was much the same. Slowly we moved north, searching as we went, treading softly and warily and exchanging the odd angry shot. We were still evacuating a few soldiers with heat exhaustion along the way, and this worried me quite badly.

Then, on 27 April, it was all vindicated. Neil Weekes’ 3 Platoon had a successful contact and we found two large camps. Almost at

WE SAW THEM, EXCHANGED SHOTS AND LOST THEM AGAIN. ALL VERY DISAPPOINTING TO US WHO WERE LOOKING FOR QUICK RESULTS

the same time, C Company found another camp and then D Company located an administrative centre large enough for 300 men.

Three weeks and two small but very successful operations later, our battalion was sitting astride the North Vietnamese Army’s main supply route into Saigon, pitted against the NVA 141 and 265 Regiments, together with the VC Dong Nai Regiment. Here, for more than three weeks, we fought them to a standstill and added ‘CORAL’ to our Regimental Battle Honours.



TO WATTLE AND BEYOND

It seemed that another offensive against Saigon was in the making. 3RAR was already in War Zone D, and it was fairly certain we were to join them.

As a preliminary move, my A Company was to protect the fire support base named Wattle, some 30km north of Nui Dat, while the other three companies were to carry out search operations under its protection.

We loaded up around 0500, moved to Kangaroo Pad and took off about 0615. Already the weather was on the sticky side so it was a mild pleasure to be floating along at 6000 or 7000 feet. I spent the journey checking progress against my map, which proved fairly simple at height, as the rubber plantations, roads and fire trails were well marked.

On this one occasion we had sufficient Hueys to move the whole company, and the platoons moved smoothly to their locations. I left Bill Raggatt, my 2IC, to tidy up and moved off into the rubber with my batman George Arncliffe for a pre-planned meeting with the SAS. In the event, they found me, advised all was well and vanished again into the shadows. I never saw them again.

By the time I was back with my HQ, the standing patrols were out, guides were positioned to direct the companies to their locations and the guns (102 Battery) were being dropped into place by the Chinooks.

We were there for barely three days and our searches failed to reveal much, although D Company was credited with discovering several sets of women's bras and knickers!

The battalion, minus my company, together with 102 Battery, flew out for FSB Anderson. My company was to follow in a troop of APCs, making an overnight stop at Blackhorse, a US base commanded by the son of General George S Patton.

Blackhorse was less than welcoming in appearance. It contained a large number of 4-ply prefab huts and smelt of burning toilet cans. A matter of greater concern to me was the huge radio mast in the centre with a blinking red light at the apex, presenting a wonderful aiming mark for Charlie's mortars.

The US troopers looked after us like lost brothers. They fed us, gave us beer and shared their uniforms. After that we forgave their sin of patrolling on top of APCs flying Confederate flags and banging away on guitars.

We got away first thing next morning and made good speed, until, out of the blue, three Hueys descended on us. Out jumped three or four MPs from each, armed to the very teeth, and all with a most disagreeable demeanour about them. It seemed a number of captured AK47s and a tool box were missing from Blackhorse.

I agreed our APCs could be searched and, in short order, the bits were uncovered. There was little doubt that the APC crews had had a busy night! I gave them all the edge of my tongue, starting with the troop commander before we saddled up.

I advised BHQ of the matter and copped a blast for my lack of troop control!

By about 1400 we were put down at the foot of a ridge leading uphill to the north-east. Movement here was reasonably easy. The scrub was fairly thick but had no bamboo or the local version of 'wait-a-while'. My main concern was to locate a bit of dirt to lay out my ambushes.

We struck pay dirt! We halted about 20m short of a well-worn track with apparently recent foot prints on it.

I decided 2 Platoon would move forward to the track and lay two ambushes, one towards the north-west, the other south-east. The remainder of the company would move forward with the two platoons to harbour in the rear, but constantly ready to assist with a section each.

ON THIS ONE OCCASION WE HAD SUFFICIENT HUEYS TO MOVE THE WHOLE COMPANY, AND THE PLATOONS MOVED SMOOTHLY TO THEIR LOCATIONS

I advised BHQ of my plan and went off around the traps to see how matters progressed. The troops were all keen to hear of the ambushes set, and we all crossed fingers. Another mild blast came over the radio. I was not on the winning side today!

The night passed without event and I woke about 0530. The radio net was quiet. Dawn was showing and a few birds were around. There were minor shuffling sounds as the troops readied for stand-to.

Shortly before 0600 I ordered clearing patrols out, and not more than 60 seconds later, BANG BANG BANG came the sound of Claymores and an M60. I was sick at heart for I could only imagine that we had shot up our own

patrol. I kept on at Jack Cramp about how dreadful I felt.

Jack said, "have a brew and you'll feel better!"

Then came the calls – a small team of Charlie had sauntered down the track right into the teeth of the north-western ambush and it was all over. We could hear a few of them bashing about through the scrub and calling to each other, but I ordered all to sit fast until we had good light.

Eventually, a 1 Platoon section went off for 200m and came back with several bags of documents, cash, weapons and equipment items. All told, a most satisfactory few hours.

We cleaned up, ate, re-established the ambushes and I ordered a 25 per cent stand-to until further notice. Some time later, three

already-wounded fellows walked into our ambush again and were disposed of. This produced a Tokarev pistol, bags of documents, watches, gold teeth, cash and hammocks made from US parachute silk.

Then came a radio message for me. "Come and talk with the task-force commander and the battalion CO." I was not in the good books. I had not informed TFHQ as to my APC progress. I had abandoned my helipad. And, I had not gone to the nominated grid reference.

I offered the Tokarev but it was refused. The cash was requested but I had already spread it among my troops as souvenirs. My troops had the hammocks too, as well as a few cooking pots.

I was ordered back to the bush and instructed to keep the ambushes in place.

The following morning we were instructed to retrace our steps – APCs would meet me where we had been dropped off, to ferry us to Anderson. The battalion was fully concentrated by my arrival and CO's orders were set down for the next morning.

Essentially, we were to move again – this time to establish FSPB Coral some 15km north of the Dong Nai. From here, three companies were to establish ambushes to the north, while the other was to clear the road to the south. The enemy situation report led us to believe that Charlie was on the way out of Saigon and heavily demoralised.



AWM:THU_68_0419_VN



JOINING THE BIG LEAGUE

Our fly-in was delayed for hours because, unknown to us at the time, the US 1st Division was engaged in a massive fire-fight west of FSB Coral. We were held up until close to last light on 12 May. Other complications included landing at the wrong spot, 3RAR's security being out of position and Battalion HQ deciding to stay with the guns and mortars for the night.

So, off we set – about 1500 metres I recall, and roughly north, with D Company well to our west and B Company off to our east.

Then they struck! At 0200-0300 the next morning the sky was alight with flares and green tracer, with sundry loud noises from mortars, rockets and bugles. The battalion net was alive, supplemented by mortars and D Company. The arty net was calling for fire. Spooky was up there, and gunships were joining in as well.

B Company was taking fire – D Company was under RPG attack and accepting casualties – the mortars were being over-run – the guns were firing over open sights – the anti-tank platoon was firing splintex and its tracker dogs were cowering in their pits.

Sitting fat and happy, my company was on the qui vive and unnoticed as the NVA tried to slip around us, while we inflicted an unknown number of casualties on them.

They did not stay to continue the argument. Early in the morning we were all directed to return to Coral.

No sooner had my company commenced to move than we started taking overs from D Company as it went in with the bayonet on an entrenched enemy. We were stinking hot, hugging the dirt and praying that it would all soon end.

Fortunately, Mal Meadow's 1 Platoon was leading and managed to shake itself loose.

I directed Mal to continue at best speed, search out the OPSO for instructions and be ready to guide us in to a good position.

Too late! By the time we arrived, B Company had settled down to a nice and tidy closed-up defensive position, forcing me into a stretched-out three-up nightmare with company headquarters providing depth and my support section of three preparing for the counter-attack role!

The platoons themselves, of course, were three sections up with their headquarters also providing depth. Far to my left was C Company. Up on a small ridge and in the shade of rubber trees, its right hand flank could look down on me, 400 metres away.

Taking my sig, Bluey McIntyre, I went over to say hello, pointed out my positions and arranged for a couple of M60s to be placed on fixed lines to cover the gap.

On the way back, I dropped in on a troop of APCs stuck behind buns and sorted out the gap with them as well.

In the meantime, Bob Sutton, OC 2 Platoon, had taken out a standing patrol to our front and a load of star pickets and wire had arrived. It was a pitifully small amount, but we did the best we could by stretching it pretty tight. Neil's 3 Platoon, for example, had a single roll of concertina to cover his entire front.

Digging in to soft and sandy loam was a continuing task, with occasional interruptions as Charlie probed for our boundaries and defences. One of my M60s finished off a fellow up a tree some 300 metres to the north.

As dark approached, the standing patrols came in and we stood-to. My command post was dug, but without overhead protection. We attempted to make it light-proof with ponchos.

Radio traffic was fairly heavy, but nothing overly important, so by 2200 I decided to give it away. The radio watch roster was set and instructions given.

Sleep did not come easy as my mind was alive with questions I could not answer. I was sure that Charlie would come again. There was just too much activity out there for it to be otherwise.

As it turned out, we had a respite that night and spent the 14th strengthening our defences somewhat and continued with standing patrols.

Stand-to that night brought about further problems. Shorty Thirkle and Frank Maton were both struck down by heavy-calibre machine-gun fire, leaving Neil's 7 Section on the vital flank next to the gap without its two NCOs.

The 15th passed without major incident. A pitiful amount of defence stores arrived again and was quickly used. Our standing patrols kept Charlie at arm's length.

He hadn't forgotten us of course. We were sitting across his main supply route and his only choices were to go around us and have us in his rear, or to dislodge us completely. Logic told me we would see him in some force.

About 0200 on the 16th he came with satchel charges and bangalore torpedoes, blowing my wire. Mortars and RPGs were falling heavily on Neil's left-hand section and causing further casualties. I was on my feet and ran for the CP, tripped over a roll of wire, got up and was knocked flat again by a nearby explosion. Nothing big about it, but 25 years later, pieces of metal were still coming out of my back.

Only a couple in Neil's section were still standing and I told him to withdraw them. This, of course, left the gap even wider. By this time, Charlie was also visiting the whole of my front and spilling over to B Company. Our mortars and the cav troop began to put fire into the gap and the guns were dropping rounds into likely form-up points. My M60s were covering the front and C Company was assisting as planned.

For the time being, the assault had stalled somewhat, though Charlie was still in a couple of my weapon pits. I told Neil to counter-attack and this he did with much efficiency.

Then a heavy fire team of three gunships arrived and began to cover my front with mini-guns and 40mm grenades. Being warned of their task, we did our best to assist



them by lighting blocks of hexamine in our dioxies. This worked quite well as none of their fire seemed to fall inside the remnants of our wire.

Bob's and Mal's platoons were having their share of exertion as well. Bob's wire was breached by bangalores, but his position was not penetrated.

On my right flank, Mal was taking RPG fire without assault but then there was a whoooooosh like an express train and an 8-inch shell from Tan Yuen exploded some 10 metres in front of him. Then a second round arrived about the same distance in front of the junction between 2 and 3 Platoons. Troops were deafened, tons of dirt was flung into the air and an M60 was snatched out of a gunner's hands and tossed quite a distance. Small fires started everywhere and the stink of explosives was choking. It was good to have such accurate close support!!!

In the meantime, the gunships were having their own battle. Charlie had set up a 12.7mm heavy machine gun and green tracers were going skywards while the Hueys were driving down the track with mini-guns blazing. This seemed to put the HMG out of action, but one of the Hueys was also damaged and all three diverted to Bien Hoa.

Then came the grand finale. Completely without notice, a trio of F100 Super Sabres bore down on us from the north at about 50 feet. I saw their underbellies and wings reflect the fires and I saw the barrels of napalm dropping no more than 50 metres to our front! The explosions were deafening,

not to mention the banshee scream of jet engines so close to us.

And that was it. By 0530 it was all over and Charlie had gone.

As the sun came up we were all a bit shaken. The air stunk of explosives, kerosene and dirt – and not a bird was seen or heard. The silence collapsed around us as we cleaned up, paid respects to our comrades and began to talk among ourselves.

John Harmes gave me a mug of tea and I thanked him. My CQ, Frank Dean, arrived with supplies and took our casualties back to the A echelon. Gino Terranova, my medic, went off to replenish platoon stocks and the sergeants came in for a few words with CSM Jack Cramp.

I went forward to my platoons and had a few words with the troops. They were all in good form and excited about the night's events.

We had a shave and cleared our front, leaving standing patrols for early warning.

Something like 20 attackers were found within Neil's platoon location, another two in front of Bob's and there was a large number in Mal's shell hole as well.

Charlie came back again a few more times but it was all a bit half hearted.

We patrolled in strength and sought him out. C Company found him one day and bloodied his nose.

For a further two weeks we commanded the battlefield before being recalled to Phuoc Tuy, where Charlie had been taking advantage of our absence.

So, we started all over again.



Privates Paul Slattery and Neville Riddock and Warrant Officer Class Two Jack Cramp

