



## FIFTH BATTALION THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN REGIMENT ASSOCIATION WEBSITE



▣ OPERATIONS CONDUCTED 1969-70 ▣



### *OPERATION HAMMER*

**Battle of Binh Ba 6 - 8 June 1969**

Captain Mike Battle

Back at **Nui Dat**, between ready reaction tasks, company operations, convoy protection and other operational tasks, 5 RAR were enjoying their 'break'. A Company was in 'Vungers' (Vung Tau) making sure their break was not wasted resting, C and B Companies were involved with training, and D company was Ready Reaction Company on the morning of 6 June.

1 ATF Ready Reaction Company was part of a force which included a **Centurion Tank** troop and an **APC** troop. This force was always at thirty minutes notice to react against any major enemy threat to the population centres of Phuoc Tuy province.

Binh Ba village some three miles north of **Nui Dat** base is on Route 2. Its population of one thousand is made up mainly of farmers and rubber workers of the surrounding Gallia Plantation. Most of the houses of the village are sturdy structures of concrete and tiles.

at 0810 hours (8.10.am) a tank and an armoured recovery vehicle moving through to the 6 RAR Fire Support Base further north, were fired on by an **RPG** (Rocket Propelled Grenade) from one of the houses. Initial intelligence said that there were two enemy platoons in the village and consequently the commander 1 ATF decided to deploy the Ready Reaction Force. After briefing, the force was assembled by 1030 hours (10.30.am) just south of Binh Ba. Although the District Chief of the Duc Thanh District had requested 1 ATF assistance, he had not given his clearance as he wanted to satisfy himself that all civilians had been evacuated from the town. Since Binh Ba was in 6 RAR's area of Operations, command of the Ready Reaction Force was initially invested in the CO of 6 RAR.

At 1120 hours (11.20.am), when D Company came under heavy **RPG** fire it was

evident that there was more than two platoons in the village and the District Chief did not hesitate in telling the force to "do what you have to do" and stated that he would take responsibility for any damage to the village that might result from the action.

At 1200 hours (midday), the CO 5 RAR deployed his tactical headquarters comprising himself, the intelligence officer and two signalers, forward to the district post of Duc Thanh, north of Binh Ba. C Company reacted against another enemy attack against Hoa Long on the south of the Nui Dat perimeter. B Company was also reacted to Binh Ba. The CO 5 RAR was given control of the Binh Ba Battle and placed B Company in a block on the east of the village.

D Company had, by this time, fought their way to the centre of the village. The tanks drew heavy RPG and small arms fire and the enemy were concentrating the efforts against them. The fighting was so fierce and confused for two hours that a detailed description is impossible. The enemy was indeed much stronger than the estimated two platoons. (Captured documents later revealed that the enemy force was the 1st Battalion 33 NVA Regiment, guided by the Binh Ba Guerilla Unit).

A light fire team (RAAF Bushrangers) reported enemy movement south and west of the village. After an hour one tank was forced to withdraw west with the other two tanks immobilized by crew casualties.

D Company Commander, Major Murray Blake, decided to move the two tanks and APC protection out of the village and move around to the west to conduct another sweep. This was made possible by the Bushrangers containing most of the enemy movement. The tank troop was relieved by another troop. All crew commanders had been wounded and their ammunition had been spent.

By 1400 hours (2.00.pm) the force had formed up west of the village and started their second sweep with infantry leading and the tanks close behind flanked by the APC's. The village was ominously quiet. Contact was made again as the detailed house clearing commenced. The enemy in the houses fired through the doorways and then jumped into underground bunkers built by the inhabitants for use in time of attack. Fortunately these usually had only one entrance. A pattern developed. When the enemy fired on the infantry, the 'Diggers' returned fire until a tank could get into position. The tanks then blew a hole in the concrete wall, put a canister round through the hole then sprayed the area with machine guns. The infantry then cleared the house room by room and then threw grenades into the tunnels. Many face to face confrontations with the enemy occurred inside the houses

Throughout the operation the soldiers showed remarkable courage and control. On several occasions they held their fire and exposed themselves to their front as some civilians were still in the village unable to escape. When fire was directed at them the identity of the occupants of the house was determined. The raw leadership of the soldiers was outstanding. Of the twenty one rifle sections involved, twelve were commanded by private soldiers. Two platoons were led by sergeants and one by a corporal. Some of the civilians being evacuated were found to be enemy soldiers dressed in civilian clothes taken from deserted houses. This sweep stopped at last light with the whole force exhausted after eight hours of continual contact. That night the village was still not secure. C

Company killed two enemy trying to break out of the village.

At 0600 hours (6.00.am) 7 June, some of B Company blocking in the rubber to the south, noticed a force of company strength moving towards them from the south. Thinking they were friendly PF (Provincial Forces) soldiers, the Australians waved to them upon which the force, in fact NVA, waved back. They probably thought they were rejoining their comrades at Binh Ba. Realisation dawned on both groups at the same time, causing a hasty enemy withdrawal under a torrent of fire from our troops.

Action on 7 June was mainly in Duc Trung, a rubber factory some five hundred yards north of Binh Ba. An APC was fired on and a reconnaissance helicopter observed up to eighty enemy were moving between the buildings. The 5RAR Assault Pioneer Platoon was sent from Nui Dat as the PF platoon in Duc Trung held its ground. an RF (Vietnamese Regional Force) Reaction Company from Baria was sent in to clear this village as our Pioneer Platoon blocked to the south. However, the enemy had already departed.

Meanwhile at 0950 hours (9.50.am) D Company with a platoon from C Company swept through the western half of Binh Ba from the west. PF forces were blocking enemy escape to the north, B Company and armour were blocking to the south and east. Three prisoners were taken and evacuated. Spasmodic contact only was made with small groups of NVA still in the village.

At approximately 1300 hours (1.00.pm) heavy firing again broke out in Duc Trung. The District Chief reported that the PF platoon had been overrun by an estimated one hundred enemy resulting in four PF killed and seven wounded. Artillery was effectively employed to the north-west of Duc Trung and was observed by an air observer to fall in the midst of the enemy and within twenty yards of the houses. Again a Light Fire Team was most effectively employed around this village.

B Company with a tank troop were ordered to sweep Duc Trung. After crossing their start point, the District Chief received word that a number of civilians were still intermingled with the enemy, and the force was halted. As a PF force moved in to do the sweep, the enemy withdrew to the north-east and north-west continually harassed by artillery and Light Fire Teams.

At 1500 hours (3.00.pm) D Company continued to clear Binh Ba. That night the companies blocked around both villages. Next morning, 8 June, the action at Binh Ba concluded at 0900hours (9.00.am), the Australian Civil Affairs arrived at Binh Ba to assist in the resettlement of the villagers.

In this vicious battle, a large enemy force was defeated by rapid reaction, skill, and courage and fire power. The 'Battle of Binh Ba' ranks as one of the major military victories of the Australian Force in Vietnam.

