



# The Battle of Long Tan



## OPERATION VENDETTA & SMITHFIELD - THE BATTLE OF LONG TAN

D Company was on a company patrol named "*Operation Vendetta*" that remained in place until approximately 2300 hours 18 August 1966. The Task Force then commenced "*Operation Smithfield*".

The Battle of Long Tan occurred in the late afternoon of 18 August 1966 in a rubber plantation some 4500 metres to the east of the Task Force base at Nui Dat. The events of previous days set the scene.

On the 16th of August, 5RAR were patrolling in an area of jungle to the north of the Australian Task Force (1ATF) Base. They were trying to locate enemy identified in the latest intelligence reports. Estimates of enemy strengths operating in the area varied from 300 - 3500. However the most recent patrols had only fleeting contacts with 3 - 6 man groups. There appeared to be little to add any substance to reports of three enemy Regiments operating in the area.

A Coy, 6RAR were also away from the Nui Dat base involved in patrol work, but they were operating to the east and north-east. A Coy had been in three small contacts, killing 2 VC and capturing one. Once again, nothing to indicate a large force.

Back at Nui Dat the remaining soldiers were looking forward to a planned concert by Col Joyce and Little Patti on the 18th of August. The constant poor conditions while in the field were generally little better than in camp as at this stage there was a lot of work required in the base camp area to build up defenses.

At 0243 hours (02:43am) on the morning of the 17th of August the 1st Australian Task Force Base (1 ATF Base) came under mortar and recoilless rifle (RCL) attack. Compass bearings were taken by various units as to the direction from which the mortars had been fired, and soon the Artillery at the base camp returned counter bombardment fire. The following morning a further patrol - B Coy, 6RAR - was sent from the base to find the firing location of the enemy mortars, and harass the VC responsible. Earlier intelligence reports had still not ruled out the threat of 274 and 275 NVA Regiments, plus D445 VC Battalion,

mounting an attack on the 1 ATF Base. This was considered unlikely, although not impossible, and thus 5RAR were ordered to return to Nui Dat.

B Coy, 6 RAR spent the day of the 17th of August sweeping the area to the east north east and east of Nui Dat, and finding the mortar baseplate position. Meanwhile A Coy had several sightings of small groups of enemy to the north east, but still nothing to suggest a larger force. On 18 August, D Coy, under the command of Major Harry Smith, were ordered to relieve B Coy and follow up tracks leading from the baseplate position used for the earlier attack. For most men in D Coy this was seen as just another patrol. The only difference was this one was going to deprive them of the concert.

At 1035 hrs, just as D Coy were preparing to leave Nui Dat, B Coy reported discovering a dug-in position with weapon pits for about 20 men. They also found signs of the 75mm RCL that had fired at the Base. B Coy then sent patrols to the east and south to follow enemy tracks leading from the position.

At 1100 hrs D Coy left the base and began their patrol eastwards, at that stage, a company with a strength of 108 all ranks (105 Aussies and 3 New Zealanders). Meanwhile A Coy was continuing their patrol back to the 1 ATF Base.

At 1200 hrs the B Coy patrol that had followed the enemy trail to the south found another RCL position with signs of a least 2 wounded VC, presumably as a result of the artillery counter bombardment fire.

The men of D Coy met up with B Coy at 1300 hrs. The two company commanders exchanged the relevant information about the enemy positions and then B Coy set out for Nui Dat. Major Smith decided to follow the trail to the east and D Coy began its search along the track running east into the Long Tan rubber plantation. After a while the track divided into two, and ran about 300 metres apart but roughly parallel. Major Smith adjusted his company patrol formation to suit. He placed 10 Platoon (pl) under Second Lieutenant (2Lt), Geoff Kendall as the forward left, 11 pl under 2Lt Gordon Sharp on the high ground to the forward right and 12 pl under 2Lt David Sabben to the centre rear behind Coy Head Quarters (CHQ).

At 1540 hrs a group of six VC literally walked into 11pl. They were fired at and subsequently withdrew, leaving one dead and taking two wounded with them. 11 pl reported the contact to CHQ and stated that the enemy was dressed in Khaki uniforms. This went basically unnoticed by all concerned but indicated that the enemy may of been Main Force soldiers and not the anticipated village guerrillas. The Platoon Commander of 11 pl, 2Lt Sharp called in artillery fire on the enemy withdrawal route about 500 metres from the original contact. 11 pl then followed up the enemy and chased them to a small hut, where a platoon attack was conducted to ensure the hut was free of enemy. No one was found, despite extensive bloodstains, so they then continued the advance further into the rubber plantation. The soldiers were now fully alert and 11 pl were moving south south east, following a fence on the right flank, towards a small clearing in the rubber.



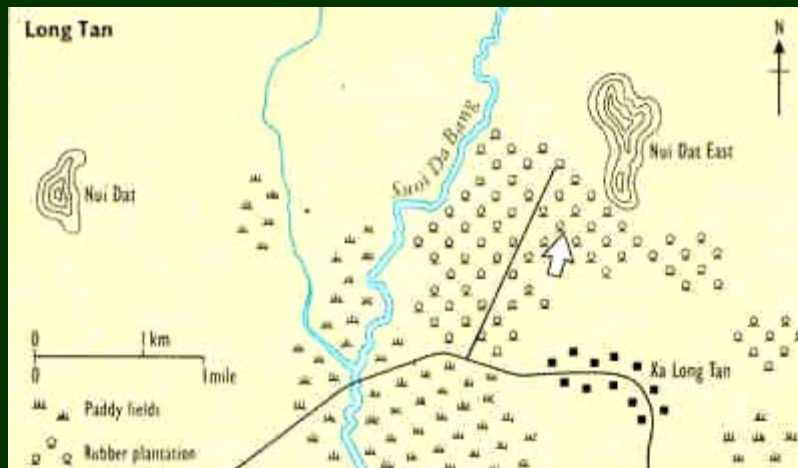
**Aerial View: Long Tan Battlefield 18th August 1966**

It was 1608 hrs and 11 pl had reached the near side of the clearing, when heavy fire broke out to their left flank. The platoon went to ground and began to return fire. There was a pause in the fire and 5 section (Sect) was moved to bring fire onto the enemy position. No sooner had 5 Sect begun to carry out this task when the heavy fire commenced again. This time the fire appeared to be more deliberate and intense than on the first occasion. 2Lt Sharp reported a platoon size enemy to his direct front, changing this to a company size enemy in the ensuing minutes. At this time, 60 mm mortars began to fall near the position of CHQ, 10 pl and 12 pl so Major Smith moved these elements to the north of the mortar blasts into an area which was to become the company's final defensive position. 11 pl was ordered to withdraw as the artillery from the Task Force began to fall, with missions of 10 rounds Fire For Effect (FFE) and repeats being called. The Battle of Long Tan had begun.

Meanwhile A Coy had just returned to Nui Dat, and were warned out for movement on 15 minutes notice. The continual thumping of the gun line told the story - somebody was in trouble. B Coy was halted on its return to base and told to move back to the D Coy location. 1 APC Sqn was also placed on 15 minutes notice to move A Coy out to the rubber plantation.

11 pl were being flanked, suffering heavy casualties and unable to withdraw. 2Lt Sharp was killed and Sergeant (Sgt) Bob Buick took over. 10 Pl were ordered to move around from the north to give support to 11 pl and allow them to withdraw. A mass of fire started in the 10 Pl location and all radio communications between 10, 11 and CHQ were lost. The second signaller from CHQ dashed to 10 pl and communications were soon restored. Artillery fire engaged targets to the south and helped to suppress the fire the fire of an enemy mortar position to the east. Casualties were mounting in 10 pl, but they managed to get to within 100 metres of 11 pl before being halted by intense small arms fire. 2Lt Kendall and his

platoon were then ordered to withdraw to the CHQ position due to the large numbers of casualties it had received.



At the same time, 12 pl was sent out to approach 11 pl from its west. As they left CHQ, Major Smith was advised that 10 pl was withdrawing with its casualties, so Smith retained on the 12 pl Sections to reinforce CHQ's strength.

As 10 pl arrived in the company location a Company Aid Post (CAP) was established, and CHQ, 10 pl and the 12 pl Section were placed on the ground to, provide protection for the casualties.

12 pl reached a position about 200 metres behind 11 pl and came under heavy fire: they were subsequently attacked from their north east and south east. With the attacks continuing on 11 pl, CHQ and 10 pl were also now being subjected to attacks from the east by the enemy who were following up 10 platoon's withdrawal. Major Smith called for an air strike at 1702 hrs and would accept napalm to 100 metres. At the same time an ammunition resupply by helicopter was called for.

The time was now 1710 hrs and D Coy reported "Enemy now 200 metres to our direct front, 42 (the radio call sign for 11 pl) being attacked from north, east and south, 43 (the radio call sign for 12 pl) pinned down attempting to reach them." The artillery continued with rounds now falling dangerously close to the friendly locations. The success this had on preventing the enemy from overrunning the position was immeasurable. At 1720 hrs, artillery began firing regimental missions as ordered by the Forward Observer (FO), Captain Stanley. The expenditure of Artillery ammunition became a concern, and additional supplies were ordered from the Logistics Support Base at Vung Tau. Soon, a flight of Chinook helicopters were delivering pallet-loads of shells directly into the Artillery area, despite the near impossible flying conditions.



*Accurate and sustained artillery support was vital to the outcome of the battle. The photo above shows A 105-mm L5 Pack Howitzer of 105th Field Battery firing from the Bien Hoa gun position, South Vietnam, 1965. (L-R: Sgt Ian Morley, Gnr Frank Guylus, Gnr Dick Hall). Eighteen similar guns at the 1 ATF base at Nui Dat provided Delta Coy close support during the battle. With permission 105th Battery RAA Historical Collection, Ian Morley photograph.*

[The Jim King Story](#) describes the scene on the Gun Line.

[Morrie Stanley's Story](#) describes his experience as the Delta Coy FOO  
(Forward Observation Officer)

D Coy reported that all platoons and CHQ were now under constant attack from the east and south. Artillery fire was brought within 100 metres from 11 pl. The strike aircraft requested earlier reported they were unable to give close support to the now desperate D Coy due to the cloud cover and torrential rain. Their visibility was reduced to nil, so the aircraft dropped their ordnance to the north east.

Back at the 1 ATF Base 5 RAR took over the defense of the perimeter. Two "Huey" choppers



from 9 Sqn RAAF had been tasked to fly the ammunition resupply out to D Coy. The 6 RAR RSM, WO1 George Chinn, organized the ammunition resupply on to the choppers, and at 1800 hrs the artillery ceased for 15 minutes to allow the helicopter resupply to get to D Coy. Again, the dreadful flying conditions were overcome, and with the aid of a coloured smoke grenade the critical resupply was successful; falling literally into the hands of the CSM WO2 Kirby (who subsequently was killed later in the tour), who quickly organized its distribution.

Meanwhile, 2Lt Sabben's 12 pl had sustained 6 casualties out of its 20 man strength in keeping the 11 pl escape route open. Another coloured smoke grenade thrown by 12 pl allowed the remainder of 11 pl to finally withdraw to the 12 pl position. After fighting off several more assaults, the 11 pl and 12 pl group withdrew the 300 metres to the Company position.

Concurrently, 3Tp 1 APC Sqn with A Coy on board were heading towards the D Coy location. The going in the late afternoon torrential downpour was very slow and the move was not without its problems, the departure from base having been delayed for over an hour and a crossing of the flooded Suoi Da Bang River yet to be negotiated. However none of their problems quite matched the problems of D Coy at that point of time. Light was fading, as was the Coy's ammunition supply. It seemed impossible for D Coy to hold on any longer.

The enemy continued to attack from the east, north east and south east. D Coy were finally regrouped as a Company. At 1820 hrs Major Smith reported that the enemy could be reorganising for another attack and that they had temporarily broken contact. He stated that he had two platoons about 75% effective and one platoon virtually non - effective. The Company had hastily reorganised into all-round defence and the ammunition resupply was distributed, just as the enemy launched another series of massive wave-style attacks on the Coy front. These lasted until it was noticeable that it was approaching last light.

A Coy and 3 Tp were about 800 metres away and they were struggling to get to D Coy. As they got closer they began to take fire, and reported that they had contacted possibly three enemy Companies who withdrew after being fired upon by the APCs. B Coy, moving on foot, were also closing up behind D Coy and the Commanding Officer (CO) of 6 RAR, Lt Colonel (LtCol) Townsend aboard another APC joined A Coy as the force relieved D Coy.

As the last of the massive enemy assaults faded, B Coy arrived in Delta's position and were used to cover the approach from the west. It was just on dark. The Artillery was stopped to allow APCs to approach the Company position, and in the silence, the D Coy survivors could hear the APCs approaching. The battle was over.

On their arrival, 3 Tp and A Coy moved across D Coy's front, firing the 50 cal's of the APCs as a precaution. The 6 RAR CO, who had arrived with A Coy, then took control of the aftermath. A Coy formed a screen to the east while D Coy took care of their dead and wounded. A casualty evacuation was organised in a clearing some 750 metres to the west, with the APCs forming a hollow square using their internal lights with top hatches open to guide the incoming choppers. The following morning, after a sleepless night with constant threat of further attacks, battlefield clearance commenced. D Coy again were up front for this task.

This was ***"The Battle of Long Tan"***.

THE ENEMY

The enemy was found to be the 275 NVA Regt and D445 VC Provincial Battalion plus one other NVA battalion in support. The original contact was believed to with a standing patrol or screening force. The enemy constantly tried to envelope the Australians, from the northern and southern flanks. The dispersion and movement of D Coy and all three Platoons probably deceived the enemy as to the size of the force they had contacted. The large amount of fire support would have aided in this deception.

The enemy were well equipped and were almost certainly prepared for a major assault on the base rather than a contact out in the field. Most of the enemy soldiers carried ammunition for crew-served weapons which were not in evidence on the battlefield in addition to their personal AK or SKS rifle with up to 250 rounds of ammunition.

Furthermore, most were found to have 2 or 3 grenades on them, with some Grenadiers carrying satchels of 15 to 20 grenades. These were not used during the battle. The individual soldier was not camouflaged, yet had netting or fames on which to hang camouflage. His drills and discipline were of a high standard. He was apparently well fed and his clothing and equipment were in good order. Most Australians were surprised at the personal proficiency and battle discipline of their counterpart.

*Footnote (VC Defector) In 1969, Ex Sgt Loc of D445 Bn, Battle of Long Tan, a guide and interpreter with 6 RAR stated that most casualties were caused by artillery. That the total number of VC killed in the battle was well in excess of 1,000. Most of these they were able to carry out on the night of 18 August to a very large hospital complex dug out in the mountains to the North-East of the battlefield. There were also 1,000 missing from the units. He refused to believe that the total Australian force was only about 100 men with casualties of 18 killed and 25 wounded.*

#### Enemy Casualties

- 245 KIA (*Body Count*)
- 3 Captured
- 150 KIA (*Subsequent Intelligence estimate*)
- 500 WIA (*Subsequent Intelligence estimate*)
- *NOTE: During Operation MARS DEN in late 1969, Australian forces captured a Viet Cong dispensary that had a list of dead and wounded attributed to Long Tan. Those figures were 878 KIA/Missing/Died of wounds and approximately 1500 WIA*

#### Friendly Casualties

6 RAR

- D Coy: 17 KIA , 23 WIA
- A Coy: 3 injured
- B Coy: 1 WIA

### 3 Tp 1 APC Sqn

- 1 DOW (Cpl Clements) 1 WIA (remained on duty)

#### Finds

Documents; large quantities of enemy webbing and clothing; 33 assault rifles; 5 SKS rifles; 8 light machine guns; 3 carbines; 1 heavy machine gun on wheels; 2 recoilless rifles; 4 rocket launchers; 1 60mm mortar; ammunition (12,000 rounds of various small arms, 300 grenades of different types, 100 rounds of mortar, recoilless rifle and rocket launcher ammunition).



Harry Smith and Jack Kirby test fire a captured 50mm machine gun.

#### **Congratulatory Messages**

FROM ARMY CANBERRA  
TO 1 ATF

*" The Prime Minister's Press Secretary has asked that the following message be passed to you. QUOTE. Our forces in their latest engagement have acquitted themselves with skill effectiveness and high courage in the best Australian tradition. Please tell them that Australia is proud of them. I have publicly expressed my sympathy to the bereaved. My sympathy also goes to the wounded. I send them best wishes for a speedy recovery."*

SIGNED HAROLD HOLT, PRIME MINISTER.

*"Hearty congratulations to the 6th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment and a company of the 5th Battalion RAR for their fine show in Operation SMITHFIELD. Your troops have won a most significant victory over the enemy and one of the most spectacular in Vietnam to date."*

SIGNED W. C. WESTMORELAND, General, Commander USMACV.



*"Please pass on to the 6th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment. My heartiest congratulations for the outstanding results attained during Operation SMITHFIELD. The large number of enemy killed as compare to the light casualties of the Australians is indicative of the professionalism of your Task Force. I especially want to congratulate D Company for its outstanding performance."*

SIGNED MAJ GENERAL SEAMAN, Commanding General II Field Force Victor.

### **Approval to wear CGCP**

Following the Battle of Long Tan, Delta Company was awarded on 28th May 1968, the [United States Presidential Unit Citation](#) for "Extraordinary Heroism in Military Operations Against an Armed Enemy".

It was the intention of the South Vietnamese Government to also award the Gallantry Cross with Palm Unit Citation (CGCP) to Delta Company however this was not approved at the time by the Australian Government.

Following a number of reviews and changes of government, on 15th August 2008, the Australian Government announced changes to military awards in response to the independent review of Battle of Long Tan recognition.

Cabinet Secretary, Senator John Faulkner, Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Alan Griffin, and Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Support, Dr Mike Kelly, have carefully considered the reports of the independent review panel and a number of public responses to the reports.

Key decisions, approved by the Governor-General, are:

Harry Smith, Commander D Company 6RAR, will be offered the Star of Gallantry (equivalent to the Distinguished Service Order), and Platoon Commanders Dave Sabben and Geoff Kendall, will be offered the Medal for Gallantry (equivalent to the Military Cross). This restores the original award recommended for Smith by his commanding officers, and accepts that the intention was to award Sabben and Kendall higher honours.

- The strength of D Company 6RAR in Vietnam on 18 August 1966 will receive approval to wear the former Republic of Vietnam's Gallantry Cross with Palm Unit Citation Emblem.

Any other unresolved concerns regarding individual awards for Long Tan will be referred to the independent Defense Honors and Awards Tribunal. The Government will consider itself bound by the Tribunal's recommendations on these matters.

Implementation of these recommendations will properly recognize the individual and collective gallantry of these men on 18 August 1966, provide an equitable mix of awards for

the battle, and will confer considerable honour on all the men of D Company 6RAR in Vietnam who fought in the Battle of Long Tan.

[TOP](#)

**"Our aim is to perpetuate the camaraderie that was generated amongst us when we served."**



The United States of America Presidential Unit Citation for Gallantry



Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm Unit Citation (CGCP)

THE LONG TAN Flower

THE LONG TAN HIBISCUS



**Recalling and celebrating your service in Australia, Vietnam, Singapore, RCB  
Malaysia,  
,East Timor, Timor Leste, Solomon Islands, Iraq and Afghanistan.**

**Duty First**