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# THE RAAF AT LONG TAN

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August 18 marks the anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan in 1966, which was arguably the most famous action fought during the ten-year Australian commitment to the Vietnam War. While some other actions, such as the battle for the fire support bases Coral and Balmoral in May 1968, were probably comparable in size and ferocity, these are not so well known and certainly not as celebrated. It was at Long Tan that D Company of 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR), part of the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF), encountered an enemy force believed to have numbered between 2500 and 3000 Viet Cong and resisted annihilation for some three hours until reached by relieving forces.

Since there were only 108 men on the Australian side (105 infantry, plus a three-man New Zealand forward observer team for the artillery), this battle equated to the pitting of a company against the combat component of one of our own brigades. The scale was so lopsided that it was physically impossible for D Company to have actually met and fought all of the enemy force – it probably had direct contact with only about 1000 of the VC in the opposing formation throughout the battle's duration. This sense of a small band of 'Diggers' winning out against overwhelming odds is what probably cements the battle's place in popular imagination.

Today's seminar is not in any way to attempt to snatch, or muscle in on, Army glory by trumpeting the RAAF contribution. Rather, its purpose is more to draw attention to the fact that Long Tan is an outstanding instance of the kind of integrated action which has become the norm for how the Australian Defence Force expects to fight these days. This battle

actually demonstrates that it has been this way for many decades. Given the unprepared circumstances in which D Company found itself forced to mount a defence, it was only logical that survival would depend upon the support the infantry could obtain from other elements of 1ATF, and even allied forces in the area. This it got from a regiment of 105mm howitzers, one unit of which was a New Zealand battery, operating from the task force base at Nui Dat, and also from a US battery of 155mm medium guns. The artillery ended up firing some 3500 rounds over the course of the battle, an average of about 20 rounds a minute.



**Memorial cross erected at Long Tan, 1969.**

D Company also received support from a troop of 1 APC Squadron, an armoured personnel carrier (APC) unit, which sallied out from the task force base carrying men of A Company 6RAR and had to fight its way through groups of VC forming up to attack in order to bring relief. There was also support from

a platoon of B Company 6RAR, which had been returning to base after being relieved from patrol duty and had to be diverted back to give help once it was learnt that D Company was in trouble. And, of course, there was support from the helicopters of the RAAF's No 9 Squadron, which carried out an ammunition resupply mission at an absolutely critical juncture in the battle.



**'Long Tan action, Vietnam, 18 August 1966',  
Bruce Fletcher (1970), oil on canvas,  
Australian War Memorial.**

The joint nature of the victory at Long Tan is already well known and generally acknowledged, so there is nothing new in taking this view. Bruce Fletcher's 1970 painting of the battle, which is held in the Australian War Memorial, actually shows it all, if you care to look at it. By compressing the various events that happened at intervals throughout the battle, we can actually see just what I've been talking about. Up in the left-hand corner there's bursting artillery. In the right rear there are the APCs arriving in the nick of time (they didn't actually come with their lights on, by the way). And in the central top of the frame there is the ammunition resupply, signified by a blanketed box of ammunition being lowered on a rope down through the tree canopy. In fact, it didn't happen that way, but at least that was how the artist managed to get the RAAF contribution into his depiction of the story.

Major Harry Smith, the officer who commanded D Company during the battle, also said much the same as I have been saying when he was writing for the Australian War Memorial's *Wartime* magazine in 2006. He went out of his way to express his pride and thanks to all 'who supported us,' and he then named 'the artillery, the RAAF, the USAF [United States Air

Force], the APCs, our A Company and the B Company platoon, and others.'

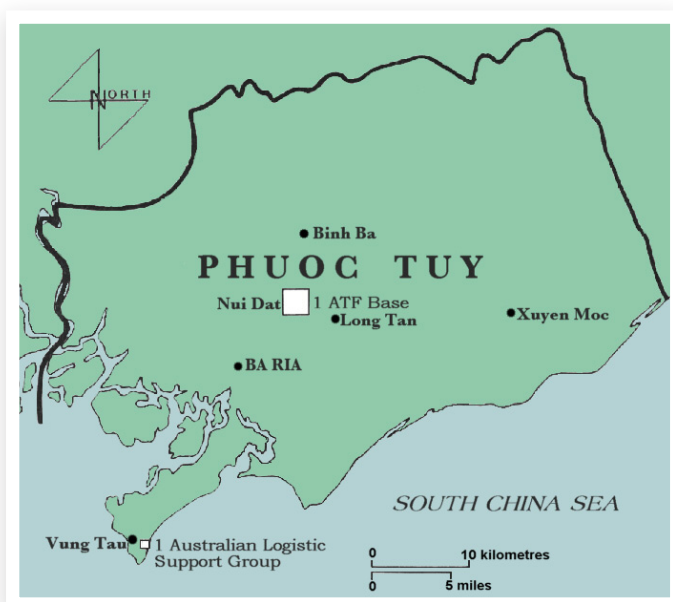
It is not intended to give a detailed description of the battle here, but I consider it is essential to provide some context that helps you understand what was at stake, and why an Australian defeat in this action could have been catastrophic in its consequences.

The first factor that deserves consideration was that the battle took place barely three months after 1ATF had arrived in Vietnam and began establishing its operational base at Nui Dat, roughly in the centre of Phuoc Tuy Province (or what is now called Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province). Australia had actually begun its military commitment in Vietnam in 1962, when it sent a small team to help train and advise the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in combating the communist insurgency. The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) was expanded in 1964, which happened to be the same year in which the first RAAF unit – a flight of Caribou light transports – was also committed to the conflict.

Then, in June 1965, Australia sent a battalion group to Vietnam. This had seen a year of hard fighting alongside the US Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade based at Bien Hoa, about 30 kilometres north of the capital, Saigon. It was in March 1966 that the government decided to upgrade its army presence to a task force or a brigade-size element, comprising two battalions – 5RAR and 6RAR – with supporting elements that included No 9 Squadron, RAAF.

While the leading elements of 1 ATF had begun reaching Vietnam from April, it was only on 6 June that 9 Squadron's eight Bell UH-1B Iroquois helicopters arrived at the port town of Vung Tau on board the troop carrier HMAS *Sydney*. The unit's 24 pilots and 24 aircrew, along with the majority of the ground personnel, did not reach Vietnam until six days later on board a Qantas charter flight.

The squadron's arrival also coincided with the establishment of 1ATF at Nui Dat in the jungle 30 kilometres northeast of Vung Tau and about 7 kilometres northeast of the provincial capital, Ba Ria. The Long Tan battle accordingly came fairly soon after both 9 Squadron and the Task Force had arrived and finished sorting themselves out, and set about establishing the procedures that would shape how the RAAF helicopters would operate in support of the ground troops they were there to serve.



### Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam.

While it probably sounds strange that any such process of adjustment might have been necessary between the elements of Army and Air Force embarking on serious military operations together, it should be remembered that the RAAF had only been operating helicopters at squadron level for less than four years at this stage, after the first of its 24 Iroquois arrived in Australia in 1962. Initially the Iroquois had been acquired as a search and rescue aircraft, and No 9 Squadron was originally formed with that designation. It had a secondary role as a ground support vehicle.

While the reversal of the priority of those roles came fairly soon after, even then it was never envisaged that the Iroquois would be used in a 'hot' combat setting. It was an unarmoured utility lift vehicle, not really a battlefield aircraft. The RAAF had used helicopters in Malaysia from mid-1964 to strengthen army counterterrorist operations along the Thai border, but this environment was very different to that encountered in Vietnam.

The newness of the Australian presence in Phuoc Tuy is generally assessed as having been a significant factor in what brought on the Long Tan battle. While largely speculation, it is believed that the local VC leadership, having noted the arrival of a contingent of foreign troops in their midst, determined to test the newcomers' mettle. If possible, they wanted to deliver a punishing blow that would put the Australians on the back foot and leave the VC in the ascendancy in Phuoc Tuy – a situation they had grown pretty used to over the preceding years.

This remains the most likely explanation of why a VC force of such size had been assembled and what it was doing in the rubber plantation four kilometres east of Nui Dat on the afternoon of 18 August. Without question, the newly-established task force base at Nui Dat had been targeted by the VC in some form. For the week leading up to the battle, a mysterious radio transmitter was being plotted by Australian signallers as it shifted location at a steady rate across the province, travelling west towards Nui Dat. The significance of this intelligence find was debated at the time but has since been recognised as a clear indicator that a large enemy formation had been on the move, making a deliberate course towards the Australian Task Force base. The distribution of radios within the VC setup was so limited that one didn't find radios at less than battalion or even higher headquarters. So it was a significant force that had been detected in the area.

Then in the early hours of 17 August the Nui Dat base was hit by a 20-minute barrage from VC mortars and recoilless rifles, which wounded 24 Australian personnel, two seriously (one later died). It was this attack on the task force which drew the Australians out into the Long Tan rubber plantation in the first place. Initially, B Company 6 RAR was sent in search of the firing positions from which the bombardment was mounted. It was not expected that the enemy would have hung around, so the infantry's task was to establish in which direction the attackers had withdrawn and follow them up. The VC mortar positions were located during the morning – empty as expected, and with the enemy group, which was estimated to number about 70, thought to be long gone too.

About midday on 18 August, B Company was relieved by D Company, and Major Smith's men took over pursuit of what was presumed would be fleeing enemy. It so happened that a party of entertainers from Australia—Col Joye and the Joy Boys, plus Little Pattie—had been flown from Vung Tau in two RAAF helicopters earlier in the day. They were to give a series of three concerts to entertain the troops on the base during the afternoon. These performances were planned to have been finished before the daily onset of heavy monsoonal rain which typified this time of year, and which generally began at around 1600 hours. In fact, the men on patrol in the scrub beyond the perimeter that afternoon could actually hear the music from the concert party as they pressed on with their patrolling.

That the search for the abandoned firing positions was not a futile exercise was brought home to the



Australians at about 1540 hours, when it was discovered that not all the enemy had made good their escape. A group of VC accidentally and quite nonchalantly walked into one of D Company's platoons. They were not expecting to find anybody there, until they were fired on. One VC was killed, and others were wounded but helped away by their comrades. An AK-47 assault rifle from the group was picked up by the Australians, who also chased them for a short distance.

Significantly, it was noted at this juncture that the enemy were not clad in black pyjamas that normally indicated local village guerrillas. They were in khaki uniforms worn by VC main force units. Also, the AK-47 that was picked up was not a weapon normally carried by local force elements. That was commented on at the time by some members of the platoon, and it was recognised that this must have been 'a special group' of some kind, but everybody was too concerned at the time with other things to realise the full importance of this observation. In fact, among the 2000 or 3000 VC that were in the area was a North Vietnamese regular battalion, so this really was a special group.

It was just after the whole of D Company set off again shortly after 1600 in the general direction taken by the fleeing enemy group – that is, east into the Long Tan plantation – that the company's 11 Platoon walked into a mass of enemy fire and the battle commenced. It was at this moment, too, that the afternoon monsoonal downpour started, soaking the battlefield with torrential, blinding rain. Initially that was a factor that probably helped shield the men of D Company – it certainly helped confuse the enemy about the size of the force they were up against. The fact that D Company was operating in a dispersed mode also gave the enemy the impression that they were up against a bigger force than was actually the case. Whatever benefit the rain provided, however, it was also true that the downpour would complicate the efforts to help D Company in the hours ahead.

In the opening moments of the fighting, the leading platoon commander believed he was opposed by an enemy force equal to his own size, but then almost immediately he got on the radio and raised that estimate to a company. When Major Smith found himself unable to withdraw his leading elements or get forward to their relief because of the fierce volume of enemy fire coming from the east, north-east and south-east, he quickly realised he was up against a much bigger force than just a company. At 1702 hours Smith called for an air strike, advising that he would be

prepared to accept the dropping of napalm as close as 100 metres from his own position. He also requested delivery of reinforcements and an ammunition resupply by helicopter.

In the meantime, D Company was obliged to rely on fire from the task force artillery, which often came dangerously close to D Company's own positions. The rate of fire from the guns soon gave rise to concerns that they might run short of rounds and not be able to sustain their support, so orders were given for more rounds to be brought up from Vung Tau. This resupply was accomplished by a flight of US Chinook helicopters, which delivered pallet loads of shells directly into the task force base, despite what was recorded by them as near impossible flying conditions.

These conditions were so bad that the US strike aircraft reported they were unable to give the close support that had been requested. The aircraft were overhead, but the cloud cover and rain had reduced visibility to the point that the pilots could not recognise the coloured smoke grenades that were used to mark friendly positions on the ground and avoid calling in air strikes onto own troops. Because they could not deliver their bombs directly in support of D Company, the American fighter aircraft dropped their ordnance to the north-east.

The weather was also a factor in determining whether reinforcement by helicopter was feasible in the circumstances, although that probably was not as important as the difficulty in organising such a large operation in the time available, and the lack of an LZ (landing zone) in the area known to be suitable. In any event, the task force had other resources handy nearby in the form of the APCs, so a decision was made to mount B Company in 3 Troop of 1 APC Squadron and convey it overland to D Company's rescue.

When it came to considering Major Smith's request for an ammunition resupply by air, the means to do this was also readily on hand, in the form of the two Iroquois helicopters used to fly in the concert party. These were still on the ground at Nui Dat, although the flying conditions due to atrocious weather was a vital concern. Just as poor visibility over the battlefield had prevented close air support being provided by the fighter aircraft, the same inability to accurately locate the D Company position meant a high risk of failure. The fluidity of the situation on the ground was also a factor, because it was known that every platoon of D Company and the company headquarters were being engaged at close range from multiple directions. In

overflying the enemy at low level, No 9 Squadron's helicopters would be extremely vulnerable to even small arms fire.

It is not known in what precise terms these considerations were expressed by the task force air commander, Group Captain Peter Raw, to the task force commander, Brigadier O. D. (David) Jackson. Unfortunately, Raw died in 1988 without leaving (so far as is known) a detailed account of his discussion with Jackson. We do have an account by an Army second lieutenant who was Jackson's personal assistant, but unfortunately this presents such a coloured and prejudiced rendition that its voracity must be suspect. It does appear, however, from all accounts that Jackson provided before his death in 2004 that he was greatly upset by Raw's approach to the D Company request.



**BRIG O. D. Jackson (right) with his air commander, GPCAPT P.F. Raw, at the opening of Luscombe Field airstrip at the 1ATF base in November 1966.**

In the two months since 9 Squadron had joined 1ATF, Jackson had allegedly become a stern and bitter critic of the RAAF. Probably his attitude was not

without some cause, but from what can be judged, there was rarely full knowledge or balance in his views. In the situation now developing out in the Long Tan rubber plantation, any questioning of whether a resupply submission was feasible or a reasonable ask of the aircraft crews seemed like further evidence of RAAF prevarication, even disobedience. To Jackson's mind, in these circumstances, only instant and willing compliance with his wishes would do.

It is alleged that Jackson responded to Raw's hesitation – if that, in fact, was what Raw's response actually was – with an angry comment that since he was about to lose a company of his troops to enemy action, what the hell was the loss of a few more choppers and a few more pilots. That seems a pretty disgraceful way of devaluing the men and equipment of another service, even it was said in the heat of the moment and in understandable circumstances.

It might be suggested at this point that Raw should have anticipated the Army reaction that he got, simply kept his doubts to himself, and immediately agreed to fly the mission if it was at all possible to get the helicopters in the air due to the bad weather. Raw could have left it to circumstance and the skill of the aircraft crews to determine if the fears of being able to find the D Company positions would be realised.

While Raw may not have been particularly astute that day, he was not without personal experience of being placed in exactly the same situation he was being asked at that point to place his crews. As a junior pilot serving in RAF Liberator bombers during World War II, in August 1944 he took part in at least three missions to air drop supplies to the Polish Home Army when that insurgent group staged an uprising against the German occupiers of Warsaw. These were long arduous night missions undertaken from Italy 1400 kilometres away and involved battling ice, snow and strong winds over the target area. On 16 August 1944 his was the only crew that got through and delivered their cargo. It earned him the Polish Cross of Valour, so it is certainly not a case of Raw lacking moral fibre to tackle the new task at hand, nor understanding exactly what it was he was asking of his men.

However, recognising that he – just like Jackson – was not qualified in combat helicopter operations, Raw did the entirely sensible thing of asking the pilots who were going to fly the mission what they assessed their chances were of getting through. Fortunately, we have an account of that discussion from the Commanding Officer of 9 Squadron, Wing Commander Ray Scott,

who was not present on that occasion but was given a detailed account of what transpired by Raw the next day.

We have it from Scott that there was in 9 Squadron a mix of pilot experience which fell into three categories: one-third of the pilots were very experienced; one-third held aircraft captain status but were effectively inexperienced, in relative terms; the rest were of co-pilot status only. The pilot strength and the rate of effort required to support the task force precluded additional training being conducted in the squadron during its first weeks in Vietnam, so the practice was to place inexperienced captains and pilots with experienced captains to further their training on the job, whenever possible during operations. It so happened that among the four pilots standing in front of Raw that day there was only one that could be counted as very experienced, this being Flight Lieutenant Bruce Lane.



**FLTLT Bruce Lane at Iroquois controls on 19 August 1966.**

Because the task of bringing up the concert party from Vung Tau was not classed as an operational mission, Lane had been crewed for the day with an inexperienced captain, Flight Lieutenant Cliff Dohle. In the other aircraft was Flight Lieutenant Frank Riley, who was an inexperienced captain, and he had been crewed with Flight Lieutenant Bob Grandin, his co-pilot. Now, Raw was not aware of the disparity of the experience among the group of four, so when he asked the pilots for their views on the mission's prospect of success, he found that half believed it was worth a try while half said it was impossible. In Scott's view, had Raw understood the relative experience levels of the men whose advice he was seeking, he probably would

have switched Dohle with Lane as captain on the first aircraft and immediately approved the mission. As it was, Raw hesitated in the face of the difference of opinion among the pilots and his own awareness of the difficult weather conditions.



**FLTLT Frank Riley, who was awarded the DFC for his role at Long Tan.**

It was then that Lane spoke up and suggested that with both helicopters flying the mission there was at least a chance that one aircraft would get through. He also argued the obvious point that, given the grave danger facing D Company, the mission simply had to be flown. It was unconscionable to do otherwise. Persuaded by Lane's observations, Raw gave approval for the mission to proceed. This was an authorised mission.

It was at that point that the decision was made to load ammunition all into one aircraft crewed by Dohle and Lane and have it fly just above tree level while the other helicopter scouted ahead at slightly higher altitude. This followed an established procedure for resupply. It was meant to give the more laden aircraft protection because enemy on the ground had too little time to engage through the trees with an aircraft flashing by at tree-top height, while the lead



helicopter needed a bit more height to successfully pick out coloured smoke markers, and it could then direct the aircraft following on to the target.

When it came to loading the helicopters at 6RAR's landing pad at Nui Dat, called Eagle Farm, it was realised that the load of ammunition was actually too heavy for one aircraft to carry. Each aircraft normally also had two crewmen on board. In the Dohle aircraft it was Corporal Harrington and Leading Aircraftman (LAC) Hill, and in the Riley aircraft it was LAC "Blue" Collins and LAC George Stirling. So, with the extra 1150 pounds on a single aircraft, the aircraft would never have got off the ground.

Lane had the idea of splitting the ammunition between the aircraft, putting roughly two-thirds into his helicopter and a third into Riley's. The Regimental Sergeant Major of 6RAR, Warrant Officer George Chinn, helped organise the loading from the Army side and then climbed on board when the helicopters took off at 1800 hours. Chinn was there to help ensure the rapid delivery of the ammunition once the D Company position was reached. The ammunition was still in boxes, wrapped in blankets, to cushion the impact of fall. It was never intended that the helicopters would try and find a place to land. The ammunition was always going to be just dumped over the side.

The rain appeared to ease off slightly as the helicopters got airborne, which made it marginally less unsafe as the aircraft headed eastwards the few minutes' flying time to where D Company was holding out. But the pilots still had to pick their way through drastically reduced visibility due to low cloud, rain mist, and low light levels because of the time of day and shrouds of drifting smoke left by bursting artillery rounds. The artillery had actually stopped firing for 15 minutes to allow the helicopters to get in and back out again.

On the ground, Major Smith was advised by radio that the helicopters were on the way and responded to the call by throwing a coloured smoke grenade, which was spotted by Flight Lieutenant Grandin in the lead chopper. First one and then the second aircraft went into the hover about 10 feet above the rubber trees, about 30 feet above the ground, and the ammunition was tipped overboard. It has been reported that an exultant voice was heard over the radio, saying, 'You bloody beaut. That was smack on.' It was also later said that the load landed virtually into the lap of the company sergeant major, Warrant Officer Jack Kirby.

At the point at which the ammunition was

delivered, there was reportedly available only 100 rounds within the whole of D Company. Some members of the company had actually expended all their rounds already and were sitting with empty magazines on their rifles, so the resupply came at a truly critical point. The battle still had another hour to run. The resupply has actually been described as a turning point in the battle, because without the means to repel the many more assault waves that the VC mounted, D Company would simply have been overrun.

Despite later claims that the helicopters had heavy but inaccurate ground fire directed at them during the mission, it seems doubtful that this is true. Most crew on the aircraft said they were not aware of being fired on, and when the helicopters returned to Nui Dat, there were no bullet holes found in either aircraft. Apart from the cautionary tactics that had been used in flying the mission, it also undoubtedly helped that the VC had been unable to completely surround D Company, so the western side from which the helicopters approached was still open and the helicopters did not actually overfly enemy positions.

This was effectively the full extent of the part that the RAAF was able to play during the course of the battle, before the cavalry arrived right in the nick of time a few minutes after 1900 hours. Coming from the south, the APCs had to fight their way through several VC companies that had been forming up for what was probably another battalion assault from the south-east of the company's position. With the arrival of the relief, the VC simply faded away and silence replaced what had been a deafening cacophony for the previous three hours.

The RAAF still had a useful and important role to play in helping to clear the battlefield of D Company's dead and wounded. While the two Iroquois were in the last stages of preparing for the resupply mission, all except one of 9 Squadron's six remaining aircraft had been flown up from Vung Tau and were being held at readiness at the task force's Kangaroo LZ in readiness for other tasking. That meant that virtually all 9 Squadron pilots had a part in the aftermath.

There was also a US Army "Dust Off" (medical evacuation) helicopter on the pad on hand to assist. About midnight, Group Captain Raw arrived and briefed the crews on the task that had been finally allocated. They were to fly into a clearing in the plantation that was not much larger than a double tennis court. This was located about 750 metres west from where D Company had fought, which was a

part of the battlefield which had been free of enemy throughout the battle.

Wing Commander Scott asked whether the aircraft could use landing lights during the final approach into the LZ. He was told that because the enemy situation was unknown, the Army would not sanction this. The aircraft would have to take as a guide marker an APC with its headlights switched on. The squadron took off from Nui Dat in line astern, with only navigation lights showing and with minimum separation between the aircraft, as each pilot had to keep in sight the tail navigation light of the helicopter ahead of him.

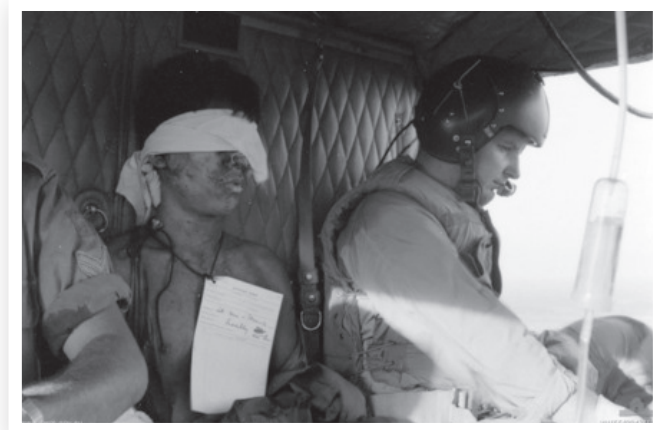
They all still had to negotiate the same conditions of poor visibility, with low cloud and lingering smoke adding to what was now a very dark night. Scott was piloting the lead 9 Squadron aircraft following the US Army helicopter, and he recalls that when he arrived at the LZ, he noted that there was a single strong light showing, but was then surprised to observe that this was immediately extinguished. It left him with the great difficulty of retaining the location where he was to land, because – in his words – the ‘only semblance of light now visible was a small, hazy red/purple glow which frequently appeared to waver and disappear in the poor visibility’.

It subsequently emerged that, contrary to what Raw had been told the RAAF crew could expect at the LZ, the Army had decided to show no exposed lights. It is claimed that the APCs which had earlier come to D Company’s rescue had been formed up into a hollow square and opened up their top cargo hatches so that their internal lights would be visible from the air. Some RAAF pilots, including, I believe, “Laddie” Hindley present here today, have stated that the only aid for landing that they got was from four soldiers each holding a torch upwards at the corners of the landing zone.

The light that Scott had first seen on reaching the LZ had actually been the landing light of the US Army helicopter that he had been following, the pilot of which declined to follow the restrictions the Australian Army had imposed. The US aircraft landed and took off again, using its landing light, contrary to the instruction that 9 Squadron had been directed to observe. That the Australian pilots managed – without the same benefit – to also land, albeit slowly, in Scott’s opinion speaks volumes for their capabilities. However, this did not stop later writers and commentators on the battle from contrasting the bold and dashing manner

that US helicopters operated to evacuate Australian casualties with the supposedly tentative and timid approach of the RAAF pilots.

With the return of daylight, 9 Squadron had further tasks to perform in the aftermath of battle. In clearing the battlefield, Australian troops had recovered three wounded enemy personnel and taken them prisoner. Over the course of 19 August, these were placed on board RAAF helicopters and flown to Vung Tau for medical treatment.





Turning now to the consequences and effects of Long Tan, it is not entirely clear to this day what the VC had intended with positioning of the force it had available – a large scale ambush of a task force element, or a full scale attack against the task force base at Nui Dat which, at that time, was only lightly defended. Both courses were possible. Either way, the loss of an entire Australian company at such an early stage in the Australian mission in Vietnam would have been a severe military setback to the newly-established task force and would undoubtedly have produced major political repercussions back in Australia. The successful outcome of Long Tan averted all that. Just think what would be the political repercussions of losing an entire company of Australian troops in Afghanistan today, which is a comparable situation.

Long Tan was the first time in Vietnam that the RAAF was called on to provide ammunition resupply to an embattled army element in the field, but it was not the last. What might just as easily have happened at Long Tan is evidenced by events that occurred during Operation *Overlord* in Long Khanh Province on 7 June 1971. That was when B Company of 3RAR was heavily engaged and need an urgent resupply of ammunition. While attempting this mission, the RAAF helicopter from 9 Squadron was hit by enemy ground fire and crashed, exploding on impact. It killed the pilot and a crewman and the other two personnel on board were seriously injured, along with an army member on the ground.

Certain myths have built up regarding the way that the RAAF performed at Long Tan, but it is about time that these were compared to the facts of the matter. For instance, just last year when it was announced that the former Flight Lieutenant Cliff Dohle was to be awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, the modern equivalent of the Distinguished Flying Cross (for which he had been recommended back in 1966), it was reported in the *Australian* newspaper that this recognised that he had 'ignored orders by flying urgently needed ammunition to besieged comrades at Long Tan.' Putting aside the fact that there never was an order given for Dohle to ignore in flying the resupply submission, or that it is unusual for service personnel of any country to be decorated for defying the direct orders of their superiors, one has to wonder where such a claim came from.

It was definitely not the report of the inquiry conducted by the Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal, which recommended the upgrading of

the Mention in Dispatches (MID) which Dohle had originally received in November 1967. Unfortunately, in the fashion that's all typical of the media, what one paper mistakenly reported was subsequently taken up and parroted by other outlets, until it is now widely believed as fact. Perhaps it is fortunate that Cliff Dohle passed away in February 2009, so he did not have to bear this false and unnecessary burden.



**The late Cliff Dohle, DSM**

Soon after I published an article in 2007 about the RAAF career of Air Commodore Peter Raw, in which I referred to the controversy surrounding his part in the Battle of Long Tan, a retired general wrote to me to say that he believed it was that episode which lay behind the Army's later push to take over the ADF's fleet of battlefield helicopters. This seminar is not the place to attempt to answer that vexed (and vexatious), not to mention complicated subject, but it does prompt some observation on related matters which might provide interesting food for thought.

For a start, the allegations of widespread 'bad blood' between the RAAF and Army elements from the moment of 9 Squadron's arrival in Vietnam seem to have been largely the creation of a number of later writers, and came as a complete surprise to the men who were supposedly party to this lamentable situation. It is striking that, when later commenting on the Army-RAAF relations record, Air Commodore

Ray Scott remarked that, 'During my numerous visits to the TFHQ [task force headquarters], Army staff officers had ample opportunity to bring to my attention any criticism they had of 9 Squadron. They failed to do so. The 1ATF Commander was always courteous and friendly and offered no criticism. In fact, after his return from Vietnam, during a presentation in Canberra in early 1967, he [Jackson] specifically referred to the "magnificent" support provided by 9 Squadron.'

The main point that emerges from this is that whoever laid the basis for the mythology that has now emerged in this matter, it is obvious that they were not reflecting a view that was universal by any means. It certainly did not reflect the state of Army-RAAF relations at unit level, but was more a reflection of power politics being played out by staff officers within the task force headquarters. It has also been suggested that while there were some hiccups in sorting out suitable operating procedures for the RAAF helicopters, Long Tan had actually been the turning point in that situation too. As a result of 9 Squadron's performance in the battle, thereafter relations improved dramatically and remained at a high level for the rest of the Australian commitment in Vietnam.



**Major Harry Smith (centre) thanks FLTLT Cliff Dohle, while GPCAPT Peter raw (left) looks on.**

Support for Scott's professed mystification can also be found in some other quite surprising places. Photographs in the Australian War Memorial's collection show Major Smith thanking Dohle for the RAAF support in the battle, in company with Group Captain Raw, taken on 19 August. There is another dating from January 1967, showing the ceremony at Nui Dat marking Brigadier Jackson's last official act as

Commander 1ATF, at which Raw spoke to congratulate Jackson and commend his fine record as a commander. It would be easy to dismiss all this as just PR, but the challenge is really to prove that these people were not truthfully reflecting the situation as they knew it to be. There is certainly no more reason to believe those who could be suspected of deliberately running negative agendas.



**Raw praises Brigadier Jackson at Nui Dat parade, 8 January 1967.**

A fitting point to end this seminar is probably the observation made by former Flight Lieutenant Bob Grandin, in a book that he published on the battle in 2004. He commented that members of D Company at least recognised that there was a series of critical events during 18 August without any one of which there would almost certainly have been a different ending to the story of Long Tan. Grandin concluded: 'One of these is the ammunition resupply. Like a house of cards, take out one critical card, and the whole thing falls in a heap. So the participation of the RAAF on that day should be seen as yet another act in which the army and the air force worked together to achieve an excellent outcome in the highly demanding circumstances of the day.'

I think that is a very fitting summary of the broader lesson to be derived from the Battle of Long Tan. It acknowledges that warfare is not a one-dimensional exercise anymore and it has not been this way for many decades. Like it or not, the ADF has actually learned the lessons of integration. It is what got it through Long Tan and other situations like it, where air force needed to work effectively with ground forces to ensure success on the battlefield.

I'll finish it there, thank you.

**QUESTION:** Two questions. First, what was the time difference between the call for an ammo resupply and then ammo on the ground, and secondly, what was the time difference between the call from D Company for APCs before they got there?

**DR CLARK:** The request, as I mentioned in the paper, came at about 1702. The actual ammunition resupply took place around 1800, so just under an hour. Part of the reason for that was that the two helicopters, as I understand it, were sitting on the task force LZ. They had to switch over to 6RAR's LZ to take on board the ammunition. Plus, of course, there was the toing and froing that I've described within the task force headquarters.

The fly-up of the other helicopters happened concurrently with that. They were on the ground probably about 6 o'clock, and they then sat there for 6 or 7 hours.

**QUESTION:** How long did it take from when B Company received the call before they rushed in on the ground at Long Tan on board the APCs?

**DR CLARK:** Well, they ran into a few problems, and it probably needn't have taken as long as it did. As I said, they actually fought their way into D Company's position at 1900. They'd actually set off, I believe, some time after 1700, but they found that the main tributary or main creek through that area was flooded because of the rain, and they had difficulty getting across at that point. Then, of course, they ran into the delays approaching the D Company position from the south. They actually had to fight their way there. In fact, I distinctly recall as a junior armour officer having an instructor who won the DCM at Long Tan for shooting VC off his carrier with an F-1, so that was also, at times, a hairy fight.

**QUESTION:** Is there any truth in the rumour that Army wanted 9 Squadron billeted at Nui Dat rather than Vung Tau, or is that a different argument?

**DR CLARK:** It is a different argument. That came, I believe, very shortly after 9 Squadron arrived, and arose from inadequate understanding of what the RAAF needed to actually operate and supply Army's needs. You can understand the initial idea that the task force commander would like the helicopters with him at all times, but this took no account of the fact that the helicopters needed to be serviced. That had to be done outside normal operating hours, at night, and the basis on which defence of the task force base operated,

requiring no lights visible after dark, just didn't facilitate that. The counterargument was put that the flying time from Vung Tau to Nui Dat wasn't that great in any event – only about 15 minutes – so there really wasn't a tactical imperative for having them on the ground all the time.

The helicopters were positioned at first light up at Nui Dat anyway – that was standard procedure. But, as I said, it was those sorts of arguments that contributed to the development of some bad blood between Army and Air Force in the months before Long Tan. The same sort of misunderstanding resulted when Army logisticians insisted that 9 Squadron had to keep eight helicopters on 24-hour call at all times, in case the bridges on the roads leading up from Vung Tau to Nui Dat were blown by the VC – little realising that eight helicopters was the full extent of the squadron's complement of aircraft, and it only expected to have six on line at any one time, because the other two would be undergoing servicing. That was the expectation. Those sorts of things contributed to wider problems, but they didn't feature at Long Tan though.

**QUESTION:** What was the command status between 9 Squadron and the task force?

**DR CLARK:** The squadron was there to support the task force. But Group Captain Raw's role was dual – he was there as the commander of the RAAF contingent at Vung Tau which, in addition to 9 Squadron, now comprised the Caribous that had originally gone there in 1964. They'd been upgraded to squadron level, 35 Squadron. There was also a base support flight that became 1 Operational Support Unit. There was actually quite a large RAAF contingent at Vung Tau, which Raw commanded in addition to his role as the Task Force Air Support Commander. While he was there basically to provide what the task force commander said he wanted in the way of air support, Brigadier Jackson did not command the RAAF helicopters.

The command situation was the same that applied in the case of a company of infantry being carried inside APCs. Who commands there? Well, for the period that the APCs are conveying the troops, the APC commander has full authority over every aspect of how his vehicles will move and fight; the company commander does as he is told until his men are off the vehicles. People did not understand those nuances at that stage in Vietnam, and it took a while for these sorts of issues to be sorted through. Actions like Long



Tan speeded up that process, and eventually it was resolved to everybody's satisfaction. Throughout the rest of 9 Squadron's time in Vietnam, the helicopters gave outstanding support to the Task Force. Certainly, members of the Special Air Service Regiment that relied on the RAAF helicopters to support their patrol activities in Vietnam, all swore by the level of close support, effective support, that they received from 9 Squadron at all times.

**QUESTION:** Is it true that D Company members were killed or injured by the ammunition boxes dropped from the helicopters during Long Tan?

**DR CLARK:** Not that I ever heard of. If something like that happened, nobody really complained considering the circumstances.

**QUESTION:** I have a comment on the moving to Nui Dat. I heard what you have said. The squadron had eight aircraft, five or six online. Most days there were seven. Some days, I guess, there were eight. The maintenance was done on a 24-hour basis. But these services, from memory, took sort of 10 weekdays to be done (inaudible). That could not have occurred at the base at Nui Dat. As you said, there were no lights, no noise.

**DR CLARK:** Another thing that people didn't take much account of was the fact that the fuel supplies which the helicopters needed were extremely vulnerable on the ground at Nui Dat, as the mortaring the night before the Long Tan battle actually indicated. That was another consideration for why the RAAF didn't want their helicopters based at Nui Dat.

**QUESTION:** I was wondering if the aircraft that went through the ammo drop did it with door guns and, if so, at any stage were they employed?

**DR CLARK:** I have not read anything about what role the side gunners actually played. [To Air Commodore Lane in the audience:] Do you know, Bruce? No. I mean, why would they have fired? They weren't engaged by enemy on the ground; that is something the crewmen actually have said. There wasn't any point during the battle when they needed to bring fire to bear from their weapons. Consider also that the rubber trees in the plantation were between 12 and 20 feet high, and even allowing for the fact that the artillery had shredded an awful lot of the foliage around the company position, the enemy would have been very lucky to have glimpsed an aircraft to shoot

at it. The VC might have heard a helicopter coming in, but they wouldn't have been able to see it. Nobody might have known that at the time, of course, so the side gunners would have been on board in case the aircraft did get into a fire fight, and they could be engaged.

**QUESTION:** (inaudible)

**DR CLARK:** There was a directive issued along those lines when the helicopters were initially deployed to Vietnam, but, as I understand it from Scott, it was instantly ignored, because as CO he realised it didn't really apply and wasn't very helpful in 9 Squadron's situation. Even so, it was common sense that unarmoured or light helicopters like the Iroquois could not be sent into combat zones with a high expectation of survivability. Keep in mind the effect of losing any aircraft when the squadron has a total of only eight. Lose two and the unit's effectiveness and utility to the task force is effectively crippled. Naturally, the preference was always that helicopters would be used in situations where significant enemy action was not anticipated.

The Americans operated off an entirely different philosophy, but then the US Army could afford to do that – they were operating hundreds of helicopters. There was an expectation among Australian Army members, particularly those who had gained some knowledge of how 1RAR had operated during the year that it was with the Americans at Bien Hoa before the task force went in, that Australian forces could operate the same way. But RAAF people knew perfectly well that Australia could not afford to operate helicopters that way – we just didn't have enough.

**QUESTION:** (inaudible)

**DR CLARK:** I'm not entirely clear, but I don't believe Raw was guided by that at Long Tan. I've seen no evidence that he attempted to get in contact with Australia. I'm not sure he even attempted to get in touch with Air Commodore Dowling, the Commander RAAF Vietnam (COMRAAFV) who was based at Saigon. I think it was recognised this was a situation where decisions needed to be made on the spot, and Raw made ultimately the right decision. He may have angered Brigadier Jackson in the way he got there, but it was entirely understandable, if not entirely reasonable perhaps, why he stopped to think what the consequences would be.

I think I'm getting the signal that our time is up.

**CONVENOR:** Thanks very much, Chris, for a fantastic seminar, and for a great analysis of an incredibly important part of the air force's history, including some rather sensitive elements of interservice relationships through difficult times.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for taking time out of your busy weekdays to attend, especially the veterans who served in Vietnam for coming today and for participating. Can I ask for a round of applause for Chris.

(APPLAUSE)

**CONVENOR:** Please take a Pathfinder on your way out. If you want to take a bunch back to your workplace, please feel free. Thank you.

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