



## July/August 2022 Newsletter

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### Vietnam Veterans Day Commemoration

#### Long Tan Lunch 17 August 2022



The Sub Branch is holding a luncheon on the 17<sup>th</sup> August to mark the 56<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan. Vietnam veterans are especially welcome and all members and partners are invited to attend.

#### **The Story – Battle of Long Tan**

In May 1966 the first soldiers of the 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR) arrived in South Vietnam; the rest followed in June. Within two months elements of the battalion found themselves

engaged in one of the largest battles fought by Australians in the Vietnam War.

By August 1966 the Australian task force base at Nui Dat was only three months old. Concerned at the establishment of such a strong presence in their midst, the Viet Cong determined to inflict an early defeat on the Australians. In the days before the battle, radio signals indicated the presence of strong Viet Cong forces within 5 kilometres of the base but patrols found nothing.

The catalyst for the battle was the Main Force VC (Viet Cong, an abbreviation for Vietnamese Communist) attack on the Australian operational base of Nui Dat, located in the centre of Phuoc Tuy. The attack occurred during the early hours of 17 August 1966, with the VC using mortars and recoilless rifles.

The Australians were based at Nui Dat, from which they sought to operate and assert control of Phuoc Tuy, the province for which Australia had operational authority. While the attack caused only limited damage, it perturbed the Australian Task Force Commander, Brigadier Oliver Jackson, as he recognised the base's potential vulnerability to a significant VC attack.

In response to the attack, B Company, 6th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR) was directed to patrol from the base to locate the VC's firing positions. B Company achieved this task, before being replaced by D Company, 6RAR at midday on 18 August. D Company followed parallel cart tracks leading away from the firing positions into a rubber plantation towards the abandoned village of Long Tan.

It was in this rubber plantation, approximately 4 kilometres to the east of Nui Dat, that the battle took place. As D Company moved through the rubber, 11 Platoon commanded by Lieutenant Gordon Sharp

on the Australian right ran into a small group of VC. After a short exchange, the enemy fled eastwards with 11 Platoon in pursuit.

Little did the Australians know that they were about to collide with a major concentration of enemy forces. Just after 4.00 pm during the chase, 11 Platoon was forced to the ground after coming under heavy fire. Lieutenant Geoff Kendall leading 10 Platoon (in the front left position) was ordered to move to 11 Platoon's assistance; however, his platoon was also stopped by equally intense fire before it could provide that help. Behind D Company's two forward platoons, the company commander, Major Harry Smith, with 12 Platoon and Company Headquarters, sent reports to Nui Dat requesting support for his beleaguered company.

From the battle's outset, the skies opened and an intense afternoon storm added to the cacophony of noise and terror in the rubber plantation. Adding to general chaos in the plantation was the rise of 'mud mist', which reduced visibility and made it difficult for both sides to visually identify targets. This phenomenon was common during the Vietnam War. Further complicating the desperate situation was the loss of comms, with the radios for both 10 and 11 platoons damaged by gunfire.

With 10 Platoon unable to reach 11 Platoon, Lieutenant Kendall was ordered to withdraw his platoon and re-join Company Headquarters. At this point, Lieutenant David Sabben was ordered to swing two sections from his 12 Platoon in a southerly attempt to reach 11 Platoon from a different direction. En route, Sabben's group also encountered stiff resistance and could not reach their target.

Thus, D Company was now splintered into separate groups, each harassed by determined VC attacks. 11 Platoon's predicament was the direst. Isolated from the remainder of the company for an hour and a half since first contact, more than half the platoon's strength of 28 men had been wounded within 20 minutes of the first exchange of fire.

Back at Nui Dat, the Australian base buzzed as reports from Long Tan kept increasing the estimated number of VC opposing the Australians. Allied artillery was already firing on the VC, with targets identified by Forward Observers embedded with D Company. US air support was requested with the Americans enthusiastically agreeing to help. However, when three F4 Phantom jets responded, they could not identify targets on the ground through the thick cloud, and dropped their ordnance beyond the range of the enemy. Two daring RAAF pilots from 9 Squadron had more luck when they flew through atrocious weather to drop boxes of ammunition from treetop height down to D Company whose supply was alarmingly low.

Later in the afternoon, a relief force was arranged to move to D Company's aid. First, B Company (which was returning to Nui Dat after their earlier mission) was ordered to turn around and find D Company. Second, permission was granted for the Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC) of 3 APC Troop to move to support D Company. Subsequently ten APC's left Nui Dat carrying A Company, 6RAR. En route, the APCs had a minor encounter with a group of VC that were attempting to flank the Australians.

Just before 6.00 pm, the surviving 13 members of 11 Platoon were finally able to pull back from their position and make their way to 12 Platoon guided by a smoke grenade. Half an hour later, taking

advantage of a temporary lull in the fighting, the combined 11 and 12 Platoon were able to regroup with the rest of the company, consolidating the strength of D Company for the first time in the battle.

The following half an hour saw relentless wave attacks on D Company. Fortunately for the Australians, the ground they occupied fell away slightly at their rear, which afforded some protection from the rifle and machine gun fire which mostly passed safely over their heads. The VC attacks were determined, with their courage proven by their willingness to continue the attack even as large numbers of their own troops fell.

As darkness fell over the rubber plantation at 7pm, D Company's relief appeared with the simultaneous arrival of B Company and the APCs, their .50 calibre heavy machine guns blasting through the rubber, breaking up the attacking ranks of VC and sending them scattered into the darkness. The Battle of Long Tan was over.

With the battle's conclusion, and despite the desire of some D Company members to immediately return to 11 Platoon's location, Lieutenant Colonel Colin Townsend, the (Commanding Officer of 6RAR whom arrived with the APCs), made the decision to pull the Australians back to the western edge of the rubber plantation, where priority of effort was devoted to the evacuation of wounded. The Australians were despondent, believing they had suffered a terrible defeat. However, over the following days, the outcome of the battle crystallised. In short, an Australian infantry company of 108 men had survived an unexpected encounter with two VC formations – later identified as 275 VC Main Force Regiment and D445 Battalion – from which as many as 1,000 probably came into contact with the Australians.

Australia's casualties were 18 killed and 24 wounded. Although that number exceeded any other single day loss in the Vietnam War, the number could have been much higher given the disparity in troop numbers between the two sides. Long Tan is now remembered as an exemplar of Australian soldiers channelling the same attributes of bravery, teamwork and endurance that their forbears displayed in earlier conflicts.

## RSL News

The State Conference was held on the 16<sup>th</sup> July. The members of the State Executive up for re-election were returned unopposed. There was a discussion on the voting method for the State Executive with a number of alternatives being offered ranging from "one service member one vote" to a "hybrid system combining one service member one vote plus each Sub Branch having a vote" as well as the present system. As there was no motion on this, the voting system will not change for the 2023 election.

There were a number of rule motions passed and the two policy motions discussed were,

- RSL VIC to cease directly soliciting bequests – (failed).
- To exempt the RSL policy rewards logo from the prohibition of advertising of the rewards program on the RSL card (passed).

Two working parties have been working towards preparing the State RSL for the future.

The first looked at the process to elect the State President and other members of the executive. Suffice to say some progress has been made with the conference agreeing to extend tenure of the executive to 3 years, to ensure no more than 50% of positions were up for election at any one time and to limit the number of terms (3) members may serve. No alteration to the method of electing the State Executive has been achieved yet.

The second's task was to design a fairer method of funding the State Branch for the next three years whilst it undertakes an organisational and functional review. The outcome of the review had to be agreed by at least 70% of the 10A Sub Branches (i.e., those with gaming operations). This level of agreement is close to being achieved. The acceptance of this review will see only a minimal change to the Sub Branch contribution to the State Branch.

## Securing our Future (Project 2022 & Beyond)

The development partners have finalised the planning application which is in the process of being sent to the Maroondah City Council.

However, the current economic, supply chain and trades shortages as well as real estate circumstances are having an adverse impact on projected project costs and timeframes and the timing for sales of the units. The developers and the Committee felt it would be prudent to slow down the project. These circumstances are

expected to push out the construction of the new complex by some two years. The added benefit to the Sub Branch is that we expect to be in a stronger financial with the additional two years of trade before we have to restrict our operations as trade performance is above our original expectations at the moment.



## Want to become more involved.....



Please consider how you can be involved and help the work of the Sub Branch by volunteering. We are always on the lookout for veterans and members with organisational and management skills who could contribute to the running of the Sub Branch either as part of the committee or in an advisory capacity. As well there is always scope for assisting with the various member's programs such as helping with the two major appeals (ANZAC & Poppies), the Veteran Fitness Engagement Program, Women's' Auxiliary, assisting the conduct of the Friday night board and Oculus games, the "Friendly Friday" social connection program, Hospital & less mobile veterans visiting program, Tuesday mobility class and of course the sporting sub sections can always do with assistance in organising their events.

***Volunteers are needed and your involvement is always welcome.***