



AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES

Quote in Reply

ADDRESS ~~6 RAR~~
~~NUI DAT~~
~~Mar 67~~

THE BATTLE OF LONG TAN

SOUTH VIETNAM, 18 AUG 1966

By Lt Col C M TOWNSEND and Maj H A SMITH MC

THE BACKGROUND

The Battle of LONG TAN, in which D Coy 6 RAR magnificently and successfully defended itself against a VC Main Force Regiment, developed suddenly from a company patrol. The patrol was operating NORTH of the Village of LONG TAN, 4000 metres EAST of the newly-established 1 ATF operational base at NUI DAT.

The Battlefield (Map 1)

The scene of the battle was a relatively clean plantation of young rubber with some undergrowth in places. Visibility was about 150 metres but fell to 100 metres when heavy rain started about 1730 hrs.

D Coy fought on a gradual slope, the final position being a reverse slope position, facing SOUTH EAST.

The Enemy

It was known that two VC Main Force Regiments were operating in PHUOC TUY Province - the 274th and 275th. In addition the VC Provincial Mobile Battalion - D445 operated, either independently or with these regiments.

In the first two weeks of August there were numerous low grade reports and indications of enemy activity in the area of LONG TAN and NUI DAT, the 126 metre hill feature ^{was} immediately to the NORTH. These range from agent reports of a battalion and companies in the rubber itself and in LONG TAN and to the SOUTH of it to a report of radio interference to a HL3 helicopter over LONG TAN. 2IC 6 RAR

was in this aircraft at the time. This latter was on 13 Aug; the glide path indicator in the aircraft indicated ^{the} ~~the~~ transmissions were emanating from the southern base of NUI DAT.

On 11 Aug a fighting patrol contacted an enemy section on the WESTERN edge of the rubber plantation with one possibly killed.

No special significance was given to these reports.

Enemy Activity Night 16/17 Aug 67

From 0243 hours to 0305 hours the enemy shelled and mortared 1 ATF Base with 75mm recoilless rifles and 82mm mortars.

The Prelude

To locate the enemy fire positions and follow up in an attempt to destroy the various groups responsible for the offensive action of that night, B Coy was ordered to leave at first light. From MORTREPS and other observations approximate locations were deduced.

At 0800 hrs B Coy found the mortar base plate position for 5 82mm mortars ~~perimeter~~ and ^{perimeter} weapon pits for 35 men, 1200 metres EAST of 6 RAR. The company was ordered to follow up a track which had been located, to establish direction of VC movement. This track led NE for 500 metres, then split into a number of tracks over dry padi. At this point the tracks were lost. B Coy then split into patrols to re-locate the main track but they were unsuccessful by last light.

Early the following morning B Coy patrolled to the EAST. At 1035 hrs ~~was found~~ ^{was found} a dug-in position for 20. In the area were 22 75mm recoilless rifle round carrying cases. Tracks from the WEST indicated this was the RV for the mortar crews as well. Tracks from here went NE and SOUTH.

Further search of the track leading to the SOUTH located the firing point for the 75mm recoilless rifles. 3 RRs appear to have fired 24 shells as the shell casings had been left behind.

B Coy had not left the Base for its task equipped to stay out for longer than about 24 hours as it had insufficient opportunity to get organized before it

was required to leave at first light -0630 hrs. Accordingly late 16 Aug ^D Coy, which was to have left on ~~the~~ a three - day company patrol on 19 Aug, was now ordered to move out 24 hrs earlier. D Coy's task was to take over from B Coy and continue the follow-up of the enemy.

D Coy left the Base with a strength of 108 all ranks and effected an RV with B Coy at 1300 hrs. After studying the evidence of enemy tracks the decision was taken to move to the NE, ~~beginning~~ leaving at 1500 hrs.

THE BATTLE

D Coy duly left the RV at 1500 hrs and advanced following the line of a fresh VC track, one-up.

After about 300 metres this track divided into two tracks, both heading EAST SOUTH EAST, roughly parallel and about ³⁰⁰ metres apart.

With the evidence of the two new tracks and the change in direction, OC D Coy ordered the advance to continue but with two platoons forward, 10 Pl on the LEFT and 11 Pl on the RIGHT on the high ground. Coy HQ and 12Pl followed in centre rear. In this formation D Coy's frontage was 400 metres and a similar distance in depth (Map 2).

At 1540 hrs, 11 Pl contacted 6 VC about 400 metres along the new axis of advance. The VC who were dressed in khaki with NO equipment fled EAST leaving behind 1 killed and a CHICOM - 7.62mm Assault Rifle Model AK - 47. 11 Pl was ordered to continue moving EAST with the remainder of the company deployed as before.

At 1600 hrs 300 metres further forward 11 Pl reported movement and noise in ~~the~~^a house. While 10 Pl to the NORTH deployed to a cut-off position facing SOUTH, 11 Pl assaulted the house and cleared it without incident. The advance then continued to the EAST.

At 1608 hrs OC 11 Pl (Lt SHARP~~s~~ subsequently killed in the battle) reported a platoon - size force to his EAST front and called for artillery fire in that direction. He further reported that he was being attacked on his LEFT, FRONT and RIGHT and was suffering casualties. As a result of this 11 Pl was ordered to withdraw and D Coy deployed as shown in Map 2.

Coy HQ and 12 Pl continued to move forward. About 300 metres to the NW of 11 Pl, overs from the attacks on 11 Pl fell into their area and approximately 20 rounds of 82mm mortars fell to their RIGHT flank. At this stage firing had increased. OC D Coy moved Coy HQ and 12 Pl about 200 metres to the LEFT out of the mortared area. Artillery fire was placed on the suspected mortar position which caused the fire to stop. The mortars later fired again into the same area from positions to the EAST.

At this stage 11 Pl reported that it was almost surrounded and could not extract itself, suffering heavy casualties and almost out of ammunition. Artillery fire continued to support it with the FOO receiving corrections from the platoon sergeant after Lt SHARP had been killed. Because there was some confusion of the exact location of enemy and own troops, fire support initially was not close. In the event though it did considerable damage to the enemy in depth.

OC 10 Pl (Lt KENDALL) reported that he was not under fire and could possibly get into 11 Pl to support its ~~own~~ withdrawal. Consequently OC D Coy (Maj SMITH) ordered 10 Pl to attack from the NORTH. 10 Pl's advance met with a large volume of fire and radio contact was lost; at about this time too contact was lost with 11 Pl after reports had been received that the VC were ^{all} around them

OC D Coy then ordered 12 Pl followed by Coy HQ to move forward (SE) in an attempt to get ~~it~~ closer to 11 Pl to fight them back. At this time 10 Pl communications were restored when a Coy HQ radio operator reached them. This operator was later mentioned in dispatches for this feat. 10 Pl reported it had had casualties and was under attack from the high ground to the NORTH. It had, in fact, got to within 100 metres of 11 Pl before it was stopped by small arms and mortar fire and then infantry attack. The platoon was ordered to withdraw as its ~~wounded~~ wounded were now arriving back at Coy HQ (Map 3)

By now 12 Pl had moved left to the SE. As it was impracticable to move Coy HQ, which now was ~~not~~ caring for 10 Pl's wounded, OC D Coy organized security for the Company Aid Post Area and deployed 10 Pl as they returned.

12 Pl reached a point about 150 metres behind 11 Pl and came under heavy fire and subsequently attack from the area of the house, previously assaulted by 11 Pl, and also from the NE (Map 4).

At the same time the Coy HQ Area was attacked from the EAST, enemy were moving in and out of 12 Pl's RIGHT flank and HMG and MMG fire was received into the company area from the NE (Map 5).

To help break up the attacks an immediate air strike was called ~~for~~ to drop NAPALM to the EAST of the battle area. Although the aircraft arrived quickly they could NOT see the area because of the low cloud and heavy rain. Coloured smoke was thrown but it could not get up through the canopy ^{spanning trees.} and communications could NOT

be established with the FAC, airborne over the area, to direct the strike aircraft on to the target.

In answer to a demand by D Coy, 2 RAAF helicopters carrying a resupply of ammunition dropped their loads through the trees " right into the CSM's lap " (CMS KIRBY, subsequently awarded the DCM). This position was in a very small clearing and indicated by smoke which could be seen by the low-hovering helicopters. OC A Ech and RSM 6 RAR who were in the aircraft dropped the ammunition as directed by D Coy from the helicopters which were very skilfully handled by the 9 Sqn RAAF pilots. The battle was still going on at this time.

By now, with the visual assistance of the coloured smoke thrown for the airstrike, the survivors of 11 Pl had fought their way back to 12 Pl, and with 12 Pl withdrew to the Coy HQ and 10 Pl Area at about 1815 hrs. Quick orders were given for defence. For the next hour the enemy kept up a continuous volume of fire into the area from the heavy and medium machine guns to the EAST, a tremendous amount of LMG and SA fire from the SE and attacked successively from the SE (the main thrust), EAST, NE and SOUTH (Map 6).

Artillery fire continued throughout and was extremely effective. The FOO (Capt M THOMPSON, RNZA) had fire bought in close to the EAST, SE and SOUTH of the company perimeter. At times some rounds fell into the company area but only one member of D Coy was wounded by this. 4 of the company were killed from enemy SA fire during this period.

As the situation during the afternoon became more serious A Coy 6 RAR, which had just returned from a three-day company patrol at approximately 1530 hrs, and 3 Tp 1 APC Sqn were alert^{ed} as a relief force and the APCs moved to A Coy's base location for instant movement.

At 1745 hrs the relief force left 6 RAR; A Coy mounted in the APCs. CO ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ 6 RAR moved with this force as Force Commander. The route taken is shown on Map 1.

As the relief force approached the battle area from the SOUTH an enemy force moving SE was contacted about 1000 metres to the SW (Map 1). This force was ~~about~~^{about} company size and included a 57mm RR which engaged one of the APCs but did NO damage. After a short fire fight the enemy fled EAST and the advance continued.

Approximately 300 metres further on a similar group of enemy moving parallel to the first group was encountered but broke up in the face of the APC ^a assault and withdrew EAST.

At 1910 hours the relief force arrived and the enemy discontinued his attacks and withdrew to the EAST. The last attack was from the NE as the APCs came into D Coy Area.

At about the same time, B Coy, which had been ordered to return to ^a assist D Coy, after having moved over half-way to its Base location, arrived.

CO 6 RAR, who had arrived with the relief force, assumed overall command of the whole situation.

During the next five hours D Coy regrouped. Casualties were treated and at about 2230 hrs ^{they were} evacuated to a landing zone by the APCs, from which they were evacuated by RAAF and the US army ~~BUSTOFF~~ helicopters.

A Coy, B Coy and 3 Tp were re-deployed to protect the regrouping and the evacuation of the casualties. When this had been completed, this force moved to the LZ area where the combined force re-deployed and planning ^{was} undertaken for the next days operations.

THE AFTERMATH

Early next morning the remainder of the battalion concentrated at the landing zone from where the casualties had been wounded. In addition, D Coy 5 RAR was placed under command and was air landed by a US Air Mobile Company. Orders issued by CO 6 RAR at 0700 hours 19 Aug implemented the plan to ^{Search} leave the LONG TAN Area especially the area NORTH and NE to NUI DAT.

It was initially the intention to locate the enemy withdrawal route and follow up quickly with the aim of destroying the withdrawing elements. However it took some time to positively establish the general direction of withdrawal, and by this time, the battalion was almost out of effective gun range and was not balanced adequately for a sustained pursuit.

A further restricting factor to a quick follow up was the enemy strength which was believed still to be about two battalions. Although the enemy had suffered heavy casualties and probably was carrying a lot more, it was believed he still had the capacity to interfere with our pursuit by at least company size groups and maybe a battalion, probably using ambushes. It would have been unwise to have thrown caution to the wind, despite the temptation.

The enemy almost certainly withdrew to a base area or areas to the NE and EAST to reorganize.

THE ENEMY

TACTICS

The enemy met was well organized and equipped and showed very skilful battle drills at company level with control by visual signals and bugles. It is almost certain at least a North Vietnamese Army battalion was included in the force and that 6 RAR's previous enemy of Operation HOBART, the Provincial Mobile Battalion D445, provided guides in strength, and probably some support elements.

The enemy initially was undoubtedly warned of D Coy's presence by the contact with his screen or standing patrol. Although he had one line of fire trenches, these were possibly dug after the battle started. He appeared to be static when contacted.

His immediate reaction was to hold 11 Pl down with fire from a fire base. He then sent out (to the SOUTH WEST) about a company or two company force which virtually surrounded the platoon with about 6 groups of 20-25 (Map 7)

The group at A remained local fire base and other groups gave cross-fire, whilst other groups moved forward e.g. groups A, B and D fired; C, E and F moved forward. Then groups A, C and E fired whilst B, D and F moved forward. This process without voice or apparent signals was obviously the result of a lot of training and rehearsal. It could have been on a timed programme.

When 10 Pl attacked the VC on the LEFT flank of 11 Pl, the enemy held it with fire from the main fire base to the EAST (X) and at least one company attacked from the LEFT (Y), coming down off the spur (Map 8). The enemy also fired light and medium mortars into 10 and 11 Pl areas and moved another large force (Z) in an attempt to outflank 11 Pl. This force was met by 12 Pl. As 10 Pl withdrew, Force (Y) went through into the LEFT flank of 12 Pl but was successfully engaged by artillery and small arms fire from the company area (Map 9).

When 11 and 12 Pls withdrew, there was a slight lull as the VC regrouped. Then he attacked in force mainly from the SOUTH EAST but also from the EAST, NORTH EAST and SOUTH, supported by heavy HMG and MMG fire from the NORTH EAST (Map 10).

Artillery and small arms fire kept these attacks back, but large numbers of enemy could be seen moving WEST, obviously trying to encircle the position. However this force was cut off by the relief force as it arrived from the SOUTH. B Coy reported VC to the immediate WEST of D Coy's area as it arrived on the scene. This smaller group fled NE (Map 11)

Dress, Weapons and Equipment

The enemy was generally well-equipped. Clothing was a mixture of green, khaki, black and grey. Webbing and packs were well made and plentiful. He camouflaged the back of his ^{body} ~~post~~ (often with the aid of a simple bamboo frame) and his headdress (jungle hats). Ho Chi Min sandals was the main footwear; during contact these were tucked into webbing or carried in the hand. One dead VC had a pair of sandals and two 60mm mortar bombs in one hand, and a mortar bipod in the other. Each man had a shelter, hammock, rice tin, spirit lamp, housewife, cleaning gear, oil bottle and personal items.

Whistles and bugles were carried and used for signals. Line was laid as the enemy moved forward (D10 cable on large wooden spools).

The VC and ^{NVA} ~~NVA~~ soldiers were extremely well armed. Almost every man carried an SKS or an automatic AK-47 rifle. All had 2-3 grenades and some "grenadiers" carried haversacks with 10-12 grenades of various types. Small arms ~~amm~~ ammunition on the man was up to 250 rounds, mainly in magazines. In addition a large number of metal MG magazines for LMG, 60mm mortar bombs, rockets and 57mm RR rounds were carried. Members of crew-served weapons did not always have personal weapons, but carried a large amount of weapon ammunition.

Weapons recovered included:

- 7.62mm Assault Rifle Model AK-47
- 7.62mm Carbine Model SKS
- 7.62mm LMG Model RPD
- .30 cal US M1 carbine
- 7.62mm SMG PPSH - 41 (BURP Gun)
- 60mm Mortar Type 31 (M1943)
- 7.62mm HMG Model 56-43 (with shield)
- .30 Cal US M1 GARAND Rifle

57mm RR Type 36 with modified BREN tripod.

Atk Grenade Launcher Model RPG - 2, Chicom Type 56, VC B-40.

.45 Cal THOMPSON M141 SMG.

.30 Cal BROWNING LMG (BAR)

Ammunition recovered indicated that a 12.7mm HMG and probably a german
7.92mm MG Model MG - ~~B4~~³ were also included in the enemy's armoury.

Hand grenades were US M26, "Pineapple", grenades and "Stick grenades"
were as ~~were~~ as other types.

LESSONS

D Coy's action which precipitated the Battle of LONG TAN again proves the value of patrolling in strength in depth. By its contact and subsequent development, D Coy completely disrupted what is believed to have been the enemy's preparations for an attack in regimental or multi-regimental strength on 1 ATF Base Area. While these types of patrols are operating well outside the perimeter it reduces significantly the enemy's capacity to ~~securely~~ ^{with security} deploy in strength and launch an attack. The chances of detection are very high and it must at least be upsetting for the enemy not to know when or where he will run into a large ^{to} patrol ready to fight and capable of being of far more than nuisance value.

There were particular valuable lessons learnt in this battle.

(a) While a company patrol is out another company plus a command element of the TOC (Tactical Operations Centre) must be on no more than 30 minutes notice to move. This must include the ^{RMO} ~~operation~~ (This has now been further improved by placing a third company on one hours notice). The reaction force must have its first line holdings of ammunition and at least 2 days rations ready for immediate issue. It must keep up with the tactical situation and be able to move, by air, APC or foot, with the minimum briefing and orders.

(b) All ammunition for ⁵ VLRs should be in magazines and ammunition resupply should also be in magazines. The provision of disposable plastic magazines should be considered. Under the particular conditions which would easily recur, it was impracticable to load more than 5 rounds into SLR magazines because mud clogged them. Similarly a suitable light metal ammunition container ~~which can be carried, preferably slung and which can be attached to the gun, is needed.~~ ^{for M60 MG is required to prevent feeding failures due to dirt and mud on the belt.}

(c) When large contacts are always possible, as is presently the situation in PHUOC TUY Province, at least 140 rounds of ammunition ^(in magazines) should be carried by each rifleman.

(d) Tracer ammunition was invaluable. Before this battle D Coy had the initial 5 rounds rifle and 25 rounds MG tracer, followed by normal 1 in 5 tracer. This proportion proved successful in the poor conditions of visibility and lack of back ground to show fall of shot, and is recommended as a minimum tracer content of magazines and ammunition belts.

CONCLUSION

D Coy's feat was a very fine company action and the company conducted itself throughout the battle with calmness, determination, ^{bravery}~~bravery~~ and professional skill. By their efforts they were instrumental in turning what could easily have been a decisive defeat into a magnificent victory. The supporting artillery, decisive as it was and the relief of A Coy and the APC Troops, life saving as events proved them to be, detracts nothing from D Coy's very commendable performance. Overall command and control was good.

There is no doubt that our training, organization and equipment is generally adequate, though ^{minor} improvements are needed.

The battle showed no need to change ~~of~~ the pattern of operations then existing but the meeting of such a large force emphasized the need to keep the battalion balanced and, when operating as a battalion, the need to keep companies reasonably close together to provide ^{help}~~keep~~ when the need arises.

While this magnitude of engagement exists, and it still does, forces must move in a minimum of company strength to ensure adequate security. Platoon patrols are acceptable, but their operations must be limited in distance, depending on terrain, so that they at all times can be supported quickly by the remainder of the company.

This was a great victory. The lessons and experience gained provided a very sound basis for subsequent successful operations, the most recent of which was the disruption of a major VC ambush operation on 17 Feb 67.