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ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: COLONEL J.A. WARR DSO, CO 5RAR SOUTH VIETNAM, 1966-1967

INTERVIEWEE: COLONEL J.A. WARR DSO

INTERVIEWER: DAVID A. CHINN

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

> Identification: This is the interview with Colonel John Warr, who commanded 5th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment in South Vietnam 1966-67, at his home in Sydney on 19th December 1989. (Note: Colonel Warr had mislaid the questionnaire, and the interviewer's copy was used by him to both introduce and answer each question.)
>
> John, perhaps if you could introduce each question and then deal with it. If I have any further questions to add, I'll raise my hand and indicate, and you could take my question.

The sort of thing I want to say is, the first question is: What was the emphasis in preparation for Vietnam? The emphases, in my opinion, were on field craft; on small arms training; physical fitness; combatting booby traps and minefields, for which we had little training and little time to do it; the direction of artillery and mortar fire at the platoon level; the training of platoon commanders, particularly, to call in close air support, and for the officers particularly, flexibility of mind, in that we were going into a new type of warfare and there was a need, in my opinion, to always strive to overcome the problems and to improve every aspect of operations. That is, to be more professional in every job that you did. They were the most important things which we tried to stress in the training before we went to Vietnam.

The second question is: Did you have adequate warning? What was the state of your battalion when warned for Vietnam? Let me say that half way through 1965 I was advised by a friend of mine from Army Headquarters that 5RAR would be the battalion to relieve 1RAR in March or April the following year. Knowing this, it was very frustrating trying to get training done because the battalion was at a very low strength, I had no priority in training and I couldn't get anybody to provide support for me at that time. In January '66 I was sent off to visit 1RAR in Vietnam and when I got back we had something like 60 to 80 days before we would be in operations and at that stage the official statement did not come out that 5RAR would replace 1RAR. However, shortly after that, early in 1966 the announcements were made and I received that detail from a news broadcast and not from any other source. The battalion was filled overnight with additional reinforcements from 2RAR in Enoggera. We then started on a very concentrated period of training and that all occurred between January and March of the same year, which included one battalion exercise at Gospers which lasted four or five days and a period of approximately a week to ten days for most soldiers at JTC. The battalion therefore, I think, did a very good job in getting ready for operations in such a short time and I understand the reason for the slowness in advising the date of movement because of the political problems, but it certainly didn't help the soldiers when they were required to prepare for operations in Vietnam.

The period of time spent at JTC in my opinion could have been better spent elsewhere and it seemed to me that one of the reasons for sending the battalion to JTC was a political reason rather than a military reason, and it was there so that if some disaster befell us in Vietnam, somebody could say that they were exceedingly well trained because they'd been through the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra, and the soldiers were aware of this sort of reasoning behind them being there, and they thought that their time could have been better spent in training, particularly on mines and booby traps, for which we were given about one day's training at SME and that was all.

The next question is: What were the most significant operation of the battalion and why?

I believe that the two most significant operations undertaken by the battalion were these: firstly, the attack on the battalion less a company shortly after the battalion had been established on the north side of the Task Force. Let me explain that the task of 5RAR at that stage was to protect the area to allow the Task Force to move into Nui Dat. We had on the north side of the Task Force base the Battalion Headquarters; most of Support Company and one company, it was A Company. We had another company over where 1RAR, where 6 Battalion eventually moved in. We had another company at the south which eventually became the artillery area. It was very clear what was happening. Each night for about ten nights in succession the northern area of the battalion was probed in a different area and once you could see the pattern taking place you could see exactly what was happening. That was that a battalion from the enemy was probing the base systematically to determine the extent of the defences, to determine where these small arms were, to determine where the weak points were and so on. We understand that significant casualties were caused to the enemy at this time, from diaries picked up later on, but we were not able to pick up any bodies at all as a result of those encounters. After nine or ten days of this there was a sudden lull and it became very clear what the enemy had done. He had done his reconnaissance, he was now about to attack in force onto the base itself and it became clear that if he was going to attack he would do so from the north where his bases were. He would have to use Route 2 from the north to the south; he would have to do it very quickly and he would have to move in darkness. We estimated therefore that he would arrive at our defences somewhere about two hours after last light using Route 2 because he would have to use Route 2 to move with greatest possible speed, and he would have to break off about two hours before first light the next morning. So the timing was therefore quite restricted to him and he would try to do it at night to reduce the effect of our artillery and air strikes. We therefore established a listening post out on the west side of Route 2 and their job was to merely tell us when the enemy were coming down Route 2. On about the third or fourth night after the reconnaissance had stopped the report came in from the standing patrol that there was lots of movement down Route 2. We merely got the artillery going and they hammered away at this for quite a long period of time, for some hours; the enemy eventually reached the wire and they did not get beyond

the wire, and they never tried again. We did hear that that force was composed of two battalions who suffered considerably; no bodies were picked up the next day and they never tried again.

But the most significant thing about this was - and we got this from the diaries of Nam Hung some time later - was that the actual plan of the enemy was to attack with three battalions up, which should have been their normal tactics, to make sure that they had about ten to one superiority against us, but just shortly after they finished their reconnaissance they managed to shoot down a reconnaissance plane which had taken off from the Task Force to go back to Vung Tau and they shot it down up in the north west area of the Province. We didn't learn that the plane had been lost until the next day. We also know now that the enemy established a battalion ambush on that plane, believing that we would send out something like a company to recover the plane and the bodies if we had found the plane, and that was so. We were directed to have a company standing by to go out and do it. Where the plane was shot down was just outside our artillery range, so we would have been at a significant disadvantage at that stage. Luckily for us they didn't find the aircraft that day; they did find it many months later. But because of this, the enemy only attacked us with two battalions instead of three and this obviously had some effect on him not being able to be successful that particular night. We think that particular battle, while it didn't appear to us at that time to be of significance, was of considerable significance.

The other operation which was of significance to us was the first cordon and search of any significance on the Binh Ba Rubber Plantation. The reason why I say that is that it was the second of the cordon and searches. The first cordon and search we undertook was just south of Binh Ba and it was successful, but we also learned a great deal from it. The second one, which was on Binh Ba in which about 1,200 soldiers took part, was very successful indeed. We certainly cleared the enemy out of Binh Ba with little loss to the local inhabitants and the rubber plantation was put back into operation and the whole of the area around Binh Ba and back to the Ba Ria area was therefore opened up to normal communication and commerce again. That was the start of the clearing of the Province. We therefore think that it was quite significant because it also allowed us to put civil aid and other supporting activities back into the village to get the civil population back into normal running; to put police and civil people back into the general area and to get the whole of the farmers back to a normal standard of living, or a normal type of living. We think that they were the two most significant operations.

The next question is: What were the least significant or productive operations and why?

I believe that the least significant operation, the least productive, was an operation in which Bruce McQualter was killed and most of his Headquarters was taken out of

operations. The reason why I say that is that we had always gone to great length to hide from the enemy what our intentions were regarding operations. Prior to us going down to the Long Hai hills, a squadron of armour was sent down there and they spent considerable time with their vehicles running around the area when prior to that there'd been no movement there at all. In other words, we were suddenly saying to the enemy, who must have been watching us from the hills, that we suddenly had a great interest in that particular area. When we got down there we suddenly found, of course, that the place was mined - booby trapped - and the mine which took out B Company Headquarters which was Bruce McQualter's Headquarters, was a 500-pound bomb, we think from a B52. The enemy had obviously put it there because they'd been given ample warning that we were going to go into the area. It was just lack of security from start to finish.

Also, the second part of the operation which was not carried out was to do a cordon and search of a fishing village down on the coast which was to be the next phase. It didn't take place because the whole battalion was called back to the Task Force because of a threat to the Task Force base. But the proposed cordon of the fishing village was against all the principles which we had established. That is, that you looked after the people; you took great care of the people and you tried to put yourself into their thinking and their way of life and do what you believe was best for them. The plan required that once the village was cleared the people would be taken out from beside the coastal village where they were fishermen and resettled up in some hinterland area in the Province to become farmers. None of our people who had thought about it really agreed with it. We were only pleased we didn't have to go and do it. I think that was the least significant of all and certainly the most costly in men and equipment.

The next question is: What was your impression of the enemy forces encountered at various organisational levels?

The enemy as a soldier was very good. He had the advantage of being able to know the area better; know the people better; merge with them and become one of the people so we couldn't find them; he had the ability to use the intelligence gained by the local people which was more than we could do and, as the French found, we were at a significant disadvantage. I can't say about the various organisational levels. The few times when we got to operate against people at the regimental level they appeared to be good. They also appeared unwilling to fight if they believed that they were going to suffer a major defeat and that's in accordance with their philosophy. We basically found them to be good soldiers.

Talking to one of the Viet Cong officers who had been captured some months later, he pointed out that a number of things which we did were not really sound. He quoted the case of calling for air strikes. He said, 'Once contact was made, that was fine, but if we were going to call for an air strike, the first thing that would happen was that a light aircraft or a FAC would appear'. This merely told the enemy that they were about

to get an air strike on them and they would disappear. By the time the aircraft had been lined up to make the attack, nine times out of ten the enemy weren't there. We really need to find better ways of overcoming that sort of problem in the future.

They also pointed out that it's a very simple thing to have someone go past our Task Force base and count the number of artillery pieces in the base. If they pass the base and see that six guns are gone, they know that a battalion group had gone, not just six guns had gone, and they then know that as the battery can fire ten thousand metres and our battalion won't operate outside the range of the guns, if they get a report from some other place that the battery is located somewhere they can just draw on a map where the battalion is operating within that range and its their decision, as it is in ours, what they're going to do about it. It's very difficult to overcome these sort of problems.

The next question was: What were the greatest strengths and weaknesses of your soldiers on operations?

I believe the greatest strengths were the soldier's sense of humour; his good training; the mateship which develops between soldiers; good leadership, particularly at the platoon and section level; the initiative developed by soldiers and shown by soldiers, and the confidence that the soldiers developed in a system which is basically very sound. I believe that the weaknesses are that it was a one-year tour of duty, nobody can overcome that, but as people progressed towards the end of their tour they get more careful and less liable to take acceptable risks. In fact by so doing they often create more risks.

I believe one of the weaknesses, not in the soldiers, but in the system itself, was the lack of time and opportunity to retrain periodically throughout the tour of duty. All too often people could see that they were lacking skills. The certain skills they had developed weren't used for a long period of time, and even though they might have been very good at them, if they are not used and honed up, they will deteriorate, particularly in a system where your turnover of soldiers can be quite high. In battalions which followed me later on I know they had great difficulty where there would be a new batch of national servicemen every three months. This wasn't a problem with me as I had the one intake of national servicemen all the way through and compared to other battalions this was a great source of strength to us. That's all I've got on that one.

> If I could comment on that, John, that's exactly one of the points that Colin Townsend made very strongly, this lack of time to retrain.

You really didn't have it.

> He really emphasised this. It is interesting to hear both of you say the same thing.

This is an aside. We found that we did a number of air operations in the initial stages, then we didn't do any for about five months, and we suddenly had to do one onto the Long Son Island and really we suddenly found that our skills had deteriorated, that they weren't as good as they should have been. We should have been aware of that. There had also been a great change of people; officers of various levels and so on. We therefore, if we are going to do that sort of operation, we should have gone over those skills and rehoned them up before we did the operation, but it didn't happen because we just didn't think we were that much out of date. It's interesting, isn't it?

Yes.

The next question was: What was your reaction at the time to the concept of a fence or minefield at Dat Do to Phuoc Hai?

Can I stress again that when the fence was to be built in March '66 it was a month after the time when we'd lost a complete company headquarters on a minefield in the Long Hai hills, where the previous month we'd also lost a Company Commander and a Company 2IC in mines. In fact the majority of our casualties were caused by mines and booby traps, particularly in the previous month. They were caused by being able to tell the enemy in advance where we were going to operate and what our intentions were. Here was a classic case of a minefield being built which once we'd started it we're saying to the enemy, 'I'm going to build a minefield from A to B' and you could bet your life that after two to three days of working on the minefield the area ahead of us would be strewn with mines and booby traps. I raised this with the Task Force Commander on several occasions and said that I was concerned that my troops would have in fact to operate in these conditions. I said to him, 'I believe if we're going to go ahead with this, we need to do it with all possible speed, to put every soldier we can get out there to do it as quickly as possible and get it over and done with, because if we didn't we'd be losing lots of guys'. It didn't dawn upon me at that stage that in fact our own mines would be used against us as happened at a later stage, but I wasn't aware of that at the time.

The next question is: Outline the efforts of the battalion in erecting the fence?

The battalion was given the task of erecting a fence and the mines and so on. Unfortunately, once we'd started we were taken off and sent back to base because there was a threat to base or some similar problem, and this happened two or three times. So that every time we went back to the area again, then there was a whole new problem because the enemy had had time to put his mines and booby traps in and we lost a number of people there because the fence wasn't finished quickly. They were the basic problems as I saw them.

The next question was: What were the most significant problems encountered by your battalion?

The most significant problems, I believe, were firstly, to know what was the aim of the Task Force. And I never did find out what was the basic aim of the Task Force. We had assumed that it was to clear Phuoc Tuy Province, but we really don't know. Secondly, keeping the troops informed as to not just the operations but after the operations why various decisions were made. We found it very beneficial after the operation to get the IO to visit all the companies and talk to them about the operation and explain to them what happened, why decisions were made that were made and the background to taking those decisions and the reasons for them. We found that this was very beneficial indeed because the soldiers could then see the decisions which affected them weren't made off the cuff, they weren't made lightly. They were made after great consideration taking all the factors into account and from that time onwards when we started this we found that they had very great confidence in the company-and-above people.

The next significant thing was the difficulty of the battalion because of the organisation of the battalion and the equipment provided in carrying out the two tasks of defending the base and operating outside the base at the same time. I'll cover this in later questions that the organisation of the battalion at that time was quite inadequate and not designed to provide for both those requirements, either in equipment or organisation. We also found it difficult at times because of lack of communication to section level and when we wanted to get smaller patrols out it would have been of great help to have been able to put communication down to the section level. While there was a pool of sets in the battalion which could be used on occasions for a few special tasks, we believe that communications ought to be available in this sort of operation down to section level.

The other problem which we faced early on was telling friend from foe. We found that it was very difficult for soldiers to determine who was a civilian, who was an enemy and who was a friendly. We therefore developed our own rules of engagement which we understood, at least persisted for some time after we left. There was great criticism of these rules of engagement and they were basically - and this is off the cuff and I'd need to look them up to check what they exactly said - but they were something like: 'Soldiers will fire only when fired at. They will fire only when they see a person carrying a weapon who can be identified clearly as an enemy soldier. They'll fire when they see a person carrying out a hostile act, such as putting mines and booby traps in position. They will not fire when they're in doubt'. This is the one which created the most discussion and it was thought by many people that this would endanger our soldiers' lives by saying to the soldier, 'If in doubt, don't shoot'. But on going back over these rules and all the engagements at the end of the year's operations, we found that there was no case ever where a soldier had fired and caused distress or injury to a civilian or caused himself to be placed in danger by following these rules. We believe that these rules are basically sound.

I have a feeling as you went through those that those are the rules that applied in 1ATF SOPs when I was GSO2 (OPS). They ring an exact bell all the way through.

The significant thing is that there were no such rules of engagement when we went to Vietnam. We in fact had to develop these rules ourselves. This places people like battalion commanders in difficult situations. It's the same old story that if you produce these things and you're right, that's fine, and they get accepted into normal operational procedure. If you produce the rules and you're wrong, look out. The other thing which was difficult was to ensure the security of operations. We found that it was essential that once I was given the task of producing the plan for an operation, that no more than five of the officers in the battalion would ever be informed of it. There were occasions where we cancelled operations because information about the pending operation had been leaked out and got down to people outside the Task Force. On an another occasion - it's well written up in Bob O'Neill's book, 'Vietnam Task' - we had produced cover plans of sending people down to the bars at Vung Tau to talk about the operations, to cover them up, and a whole series of things which were necessary because we found if you wanted to be successful you really had to have great security and not inform the enemy of what you're doing. Can I only say again that the operation in the Long Hai hills cost us one company commander and a company headquarters, due to broadcasting quite early what our exact intentions were.

The next question was: What was 5RAR's reaction to the Battle of Long Tan?

On the afternoon of the Battle of Long Tan 5RAR were located about 8,000 metres north of the Task Force, just on the east side of Route 2. We had been up there for about ten days looking for an underground concrete bunker, for which we'd been given a grid reference. It turned out later that this grid reference was 10,000 metres out. However, we'd spent some time there looking for it, couldn't find it, had had no contact, we were frustrated because of this and the night before Long Tan the Task Force itself was mortared. We could hear the mortars coming in, et cetera, and we also could sense the build-up around the Task Force base, yet we were 10,000 metres out and not part of it. So the next morning, that is the morning of the Long Tan battle, I called up the Task Force commander and suggested that I should bring my battalion back to the Task Force base because that's where the action seemed to be and not where I was up around Binh Ba. His answer was, 'Certainly, bring your battalion back and be mortared like the rest of us', because they'd been mortared the night before. So about midday we started to move our battalion back and I had a section of APCs and they ferried the troops back and I think we might have moved some by helicopter as well. By about half past three or four o'clock in the afternoon all the battalion was back in the base except for a company which was left at Binh Ba to secure the area there. By about five o'clock when the Long Tan battle was underway we had already moved some of our companies down to other areas of the Task Force to strengthen them up. We also

had D Company of 5 Battalion standing by ready to move out to assist 6 Battalion.

None of these things would have been possible if we hadn't got frustrated and asked to come back that day. I wonder what the situation would have been if we had not moved that day to come back to the Task Force base and had been still out 10,000 metres north of the Task Force base when the Long Tan battle took place. It's worthwhile considering.

The next question is: What are your views on the adequacy of the field defence of Nui Dat at the time of the battle? If they were inadequate, why?

I believe the defences of the Nui Dat base were adequate at the time. Let me stress again the earlier statement I made about the two battalion attack on our Battalion Headquarters, Support Company and two companies earlier in the piece, before the Task Force got in there and we were able to stave off two battalions. From that time onwards the defences within the base were developed and certainly around our battalion they were reasonably good. We did have to keep adjusting them because as time went by and buildings went up they'd often obscure fields of fire and this sort of thing. You therefore needed to be alert to adjust your defences accordingly. There was also a tendency, once you came back from patrol, to switch off mentally and relax back in the base thinking you were safe. That was a problem I think we are always going to face. But I believe in basic terms that the defence of Nui Dat at the time of the battle were adequate, bearing in mind that the enemy would always be reluctant to undertake a major battle in daytime in an area such as the Nui Dat defences because of the overwhelming superiority in artillery and fire power that we could muster. I believe that they were quite adequate. It was better to patrol out as far as you could and keep the enemy at bay, as was the policy at that time.

The next question was: Do you feel that the two battalion Task Force was of the size and structure suitable for an independent role, bearing in mind the particular area into which it was deployed and the size of enemy force that was likely to be encountered?

There is no doubt in my mind that the two battalion Task Force was not of a suitable size and that the three battalion Task Force which was developed later had much more effect and at times we were just pushed to the limit to both defend the base area and to carry out the patrolling that we were required to do to clear the Province. It just didn't give enough flexibility to allow things to be done the way they should've been done.

The next question is: The adequacy of higher headquarters of Task Force and Division in the Australian Army post World War II.

Let me say that when 5RAR was warned for service in Vietnam, 1 Australian Task Force Headquarters was also required to go.

The Task Force Headquarters therefore had two jobs to do at that time. One was to prepare itself for an operational role in Vietnam and the other was to carry out the normal task of administering and training those parts of the Task Force which were under its command, such as 1 Field Regiment and 5RAR. It's quite clear that it's a very major task to prepare a Task Force Headquarters for operation and then go to war. That in itself should have been a full time job for it, but to give it both tasks at the one time meant it didn't do either job well. It was quite unfair to expect the Task Force commander to carry out that role. In addition, of course, the Task Force commander wasn't here, he was in Vietnam. Again, this is not a reasonable thing to expect someone else to do the job of training your Task Force Headquarters for you and then hand it over to somebody else.

I think the big lesson is if you are going to do this in future then have a separate headquarters which does nothing else than train itself to go to war and a second headquarters which takes over the role of housekeeping and training and administration back here in Australia.

I think it's worthwhile to stress here, that like the battalion, the Task Force Headquarters only had about two months to get itself ready to go away to war. This is quite different to say, World War II where Brigade Headquarters and battalions would have operated in a non-operational role for a quite considerable time before they were required to go into operation. This was not the case with 1 Australian Task Force. The other thing is, I noticed that the Task Force itself was expanded considerably in strength during the first year in Vietnam and this again showed that the Task Force organisation was inadequate for the task. But it's easy to be wise after the event and I just hope that people learn from that in the future. One thing that did concern us with reference to Headquarters was the lack of intelligence, which was available to the Task Force Headquarters but which was not passed on to the battalion and which, I understand, was passed directly back to Army Headquarters from a signals unit which was located there. I was also concerned about the security which was imposed upon us from time to time which was quite inept. For example, one officer came from Army Headquarters and made me sign a piece of paper saying I would never divulge what he was about to tell me and all he was telling me was that we in Vietnam had the facility to listen in to enemy radio nets and to determine the location of their various headquarters. If that was the best that they could do when sending a guy from Army Headquarters, it was a waste of a visit.

The next question is: The refusal by Army Headquarters to provide information for troops on the reason for deployment to South Vietnam.

Let me say that one of the major problems which the soldiers faced in preparing at Holsworthy to go to Vietnam was that they wanted to believe that the reason they were going to Vietnam was a sound reason. They were concerned that when they went on their final seven day's leave they would be asked appropriate

questions about the war in Vietnam by their families and friends. They therefore asked many times to be given background information so that they could adequately answer the questions and be better informed as to why they were going to go to the war. I think that's a fairly good reason to tell them. I approached the appropriate authorities in Victoria Barracks and I was told I would not tell them anything. I therefore approached some people I knew outside the Army to have them give lectures to the soldiers about the background of the war in Vietnam but the Army said to me that I would not give any such lectures. I therefore asked for approval for Bob O'Neill to provide such lectures to the soldiers and I was told that he would not provide the lectures. In turn the Army sent out an intelligence corps officer to address the soldiers on this matter and all that he said was, 'When you go on leave you'll not discuss the war in Vietnam', which was quite ridiculous. I therefore then arranged for Bob O'Neill to prepare a series of lectures on the war in Vietnam and they were given to the soldiers. These lectures were subsequently published by Bob O'Neill in pamphlet form.

The next question was: The failure of Army Headquarters to respond to 1RAR and 5RAR requests for increased scalings of machine guns and radio sets for base defence.

In January '66 I made a visit to 1RAR in Vietnam which I found very rewarding indeed. One of the things that was stressed to me by the battalion at that time was that they had found that the organisation of the battalion was quite inadequate for the task that they were required to carry out. They had made a submission to the Australian Headquarters in Saigon for an amendment to the establishment to provide for additional M60s, additional radio sets and telephones and lines, so that they would be better equipped to defend the base area with fewer weapons. For example, all the M60s, one per section, were always taken out in the field with the battalion and therefore there were no machine guns left back in the base. The battalion had overcome this problem by obtaining extra M60s from the American 173 Airborne Brigade. Having got this information I then took it up with the Army Headquarters in Saigon and I was informed that the information had been passed to Army Headquarters. When I came back to Australia I took it up again at both the Victoria Barracks Sydney level and Army Headquarters and I was informed by the Master General of the Ordinance that I was required to go to Vietnam, using the current establishment, and when I had proved for myself the need for these additional weapons then a request would be made. Again, I didn't agree with it.

Let me say that shortly after I arrived in Vietnam when we were about to be attacked by several Viet Cong battalions which I mentioned earlier, and this became apparent I then arranged for the 2IC Major Maisey to go to various American units and obtain by various means extra 50-calibre machine guns. I also sent the Signals Officer, Brian Le Dan, off with a series of khaki fur felt hats and shower buckets which the Americans valued and exchanged these for telephones and lines and by this means we were able to equip the battalion better for the defences which

were needed at some later date.

The next question is: Why were unit deployed to South Vietnam after 5RAR not permitted to produce histories of their tours of duty in the form of 'Vietnam Task'?

I don't know for sure why they were not permitted to do this or whether they were or were not permitted. What I do know is that when Bob O'Neill produced his book, 'Vietnam Task', he was informed by the Chief of the General Staff at that stage, Sir Thomas Daley, that this would be the last of such books ever produced, and he was absolutely right. It was the only book of this sort ever produced by a battalion in Vietnam. I understand the problem was that the book ventured some opinions about various matters. All other future things were on picture books. Let me stress that I found the same thing later on when I was asked to write various articles for the Army Journal. I wrote an article on cordon and search and I received an award for the best article in the journal that month and the best article for that year. I was then asked to write other articles for the Journal and I wrote one on a Task Force base. It was sent to the Director of Military Training and some months later I found that the remnants of this article had been published in the Director of Military Training Training Notes where my information had been changed, more information had been added to it, a lot of it had been thrown away and it was put under my name but I was never informed of this until I read it. When I took this up with the Director of Military Training he informed me that the reason for doing this was that my article appeared to be a criticism of the way that the Task Force base had been established in Vietnam and he didn't want this to go into publication because a question may be raised in the House, in Parliament, as to why these things had or had not happened. I pointed out that the whole basis of the article was one I am trying to raise the professional standard of officers in the Army and if we didn't have this sort of discussion we had little hope of ever raising the professional standards. The article was never published. I then told the DMT I proposed to have the article published in the British Army Quarterly and I was informed if I did so I would be court martialled.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

> Introduction: This is tape two of the interview with Colonel John Warr, Commanding Officer, 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, South Vietnam 1966-67.

The difficulties with working with 1 Field Regiment. Firstly, the ammunition scalings. Let me say that the way the operations were developed were that the Task Force commander would come out to see me if I was on operations, and he did this almost every day, during which time we'd talk about the future operations. Or if I was in the base area I'd go down and see him every day. We therefore knew very clearly what was in the Task Force commander's mind for future operations. When

it came time to prepare for the operations the Task Force commander would tell me what the requirement was, ask me to produce the plans for the battalion and he would come back the next day or ask me to go to see him the next day, and tell me what support I needed and what the plan would be. Having done that, he would then give me to the best of his ability whatever support I asked for. I must say it was an excellent way, from my point of view, to operate. He would then provide that in an order from the Task Force. On all of these occasions we would ask for so many rounds per gun to be on the line wherever we were going to operate.

On one occasion when we were out in the Nui Thi Vai hills we suddenly required major fire support, only to find that in fact there were not 200 rounds per gun on the line as we had requested, but there was something like 30 rounds per gun because the field regiment didn't agree with my requirement for 200 rounds and there was only 30 rounds there. I then asked for additional rounds to be flow out and I was advised by the Task Force Headquarters by radio that I could not get the additional rounds because it was Saturday afternoon and that people in the support area at Vung Tau did not work on a Saturday afternoon. I daren't tell my soldiers that was the reason, but that was the reason that was given to me. I therefore called up the Battalion 2IC, asked him how many mortar rounds we on line in the base area, he told me, and I arranged for those to be flown out to the area of operations and we supported the operation with our own mortars from that time onwards. That isn't a good way to operate.

The other question was: The order of march for deployment?

Again, when the Task Force order would come out for an operation it would give me the required artillery support, normally a battery. I would then place that battery in the order of march so that I could best protect it and keeping in mind that whenever the battery went into position I would have to provide a company to protect the guns anyway. On one occasion when we were going down to do an operation at Hayman Island or in that general area, sorry, Operation Hayman near Long Son Island, I arranged the order of march accordingly but this was changed by the CO Field Regiment because he didn't agree with the way I was going to move the guns that day on the grounds that I didn't have command of the guns, and technically he's quite right. I didn't have command of the guns but I did have the responsibility for protecting them and I wanted to put them where I could best protect them, so that the guns moved independently on that particular occasion.

With reference to the cease fire ordered by the CO Field Regiment on Operation Hayman, on this particular occasion was the first time that the Task Force Headquarters had operated outside of Nui Dat. It was on Long Son Island, on the southern part of the Phuoc Tuy Province and on this particular occasion the battery was on the mainland and my battalion plus a company of 6RAR was on the island, together with the Task Force Headquarters. The company of 6RAR was under command of the Task Force, not under my command. The reason for this was that

the Task Force was getting itself ready to operate more often in the field and I can understand what they were doing.

During the night the company of 6RAR was attacked by enemy and I heard the company commander call for artillery fire which came in from the mainland directly in towards the battalion and the Task Force Headquarters. So it was the exact opposite to that which was normal. A little while later I heard that the fire had stopped and the company commander was informed that it had been stopped because the CO of the Field Regiment on the island felt that it was coming in too close and it was dangerous. I then called up the company commander on the Task Force net and said to him that I had mortars in the area and did he want to use them, they were there for him if he wanted to use. He said, 'Yes'. He then used my mortars to protect his area which was under attack. The next morning when I went down to see the Task Force Commander I was informed that the CO of the Field Regiment had been removed because of the incident that particular night. That's all I can tell you about that one.

There was also a similar incident on two previous occasions shortly after the Task Force was established. One was an operation just west of the Task Force in which a platoon of D Company was involved. The Company was suddenly shelled and it was claimed at the time that the shelling came from enemy artillery on the hills about five or six miles away. The enemy was never known to have artillery in the area. I believe that they were our guns which were firing in response to the mortar radars indicating that there was incoming fire and our own people were shelled by our own artillery and we lost a couple of guys. It didn't happen once, it happened twice, about that time. Again, I think it was due to lack of training and lack of experience and lack of opportunity for infantry to work with artillery in the training period. I can only stress again that prior to going to Vietnam we did no training with artillery at all and our soldiers never heard an artillery shell fired until they got to Vietnam. So it's not altogether the gunner's fault. I think it's the fault of the system in not being able to provide adequate training for all concerned.

That's a very good point.

The next question is: The transfer of soldiers from other battalions to bring 5RAR up to strength; there is nothing really to say on this. The next question then is the death of Private Noak, who was the first national serviceman killed in Vietnam and the method of obtaining a written report from the company commander at ministerial direction.

Let me say on the night of the first operation in Vietnam, Noak was wounded, evacuated and subsequently died. The next morning the Task Force Commander flew in in his helicopter to see me and he said that the Minister required a written statement from the company commander regarding the facts of how Noak was killed the night before. I explained to him that we had provided all the information that we had available and he said, 'No, I want written statement from the company commander', who

was Bruce McQualter, who was subsequently killed. I informed the Task Force Commander that right at that moment Bruce McQualter was about two miles away physically in contact and you could hear the sounds of the fighting at that stage. I was told, 'Go and get the written report from the company commander'. It was also raining at this stage. I therefore asked to use his helicopter and I called up the company commander, asked him to clear a pad, I wanted to come out and get a written statement from him - he was not too impressed. He therefore suggested that I waited until he could clear a pad and secure it and he'd let me know. About ten minutes later he said, 'I've got a pad secured, come quickly I think I can hold it long enough for you to get in'. When we got there and we exchanged the required smoke, et cetera, to get in, the helicopter came down on the pad and the stakes where the trees had been cut were still sticking up about one or two feet high and the pilot was reluctant to drop the aircraft onto them when suddenly the enemy opened up from one edge of the clearing about ten metres away and the pilot dropped the aircraft. I dived for the bushes, we found Bruce McQualter shortly afterwards and the pilot stayed by the aircraft, lay on the ground, put his hand up through the opening where the door was and switched off all the controls before he made his way to the correct side of the clearing. I then lay on the ground with Bruce McQualter in the rain and got a written statement from him to the best of my ability as the paper got wet and soggy. Bruce then put out a patrol to clear the area again, we inspected the aircraft which had about ten or a dozen holes in it and the pilot got it going and we flew back to the base area and handed over the soggy piece of paper for the Minister. It really could have been a very disastrous operation which I believe was quite unnecessary. It would have involved the loss of a pilot, a CO and an aircraft. That's all I can tell you about that one.

The next one is: The commander of 1ATF method of planning and direct the operation with unit commanders.

Let me say that I believe that I believe - as I have mentioned this several times - that the system was really first class and we were given every support by the Task Force Commander. I liked the way he operated; I liked the fact that I was always fully in his knowledge - that is, the first Task Force commander that was there. I always knew what was in his mind and what he was thinking about several weeks ahead so we could think about it and so on and he really gave me all the support I could possibly ask for and I couldn't have asked for anything better. With reference to the change of commanders there, I found that there was a change and for example, I mentioned the loss of Bruce McQualter out in the Long Hai hills which I think was due to not taking the battalions into their confidence at that the Task Force level at that stage, and allowing the armour to go out there by itself before the battalion got there; to broadcast to the enemy our sudden interest in the area. There was also the question of the occupation of the Horseshoe feature; the initial plan by the Task Force was to take a company from under the command of the battalion and put it under command of the Task Force Headquarters on the

Horseshoe feature. I objected strongly for several weeks before I was able to get that company back under command of the battalion and not under the command of the Task Force because I think that we were better equipped in every way to command that company rather than have the Task Force Commander command it. Do you have any questions to statements I have made there? Any more you want me to say?

> Do you have any other general comments you would like to make, John? We have covered a number of additional issues over and above the questions. Is there anything else really you would like to add?

Yes, I would like to make one point. At the end of the year's operations I sat down with most of the officers and quite a few of the junior leaders there and we talked about the operations as a whole, as to what we achieved and what we didn't achieve and what we could do better in the future and so on. We came to these conclusions: Firstly, that something like 70 per cent of all the casualties were mines and booby traps and we really have to find a better way in the future of overcoming that problem. The best solution which we can offer is security of operations so that you don't broadcast ahead of time what you're going to do. You don't fly into operations because you're telling the enemy what you're doing. You walk into operations, if you can hide that you are walking into them. You take every conceivable opportunity to secure the operations. We also found that looking back on it, that the majority of decisions were not tactical decisions. The majority of decisions were administrative and logistical decisions and that these were the decisions which were essential for the backup of the tactical decisions. If you haven't got your administrative and logistic support right then you're not going to get your tactical support right. The majority of the decisions by far were administrative and logistical.

We also found that age for leaders doesn't matter. That we had company commanders for example, of varying age groups, and it didn't really matter what age they were. The thing that really counted was how robust mentally the leaders at all levels were. That the guy who was mentally robust, more mature, a little older, would hang on longer than the guy who was less mature mentally. That's the thing I think we ought to be looking for, rather than trying to say our leaders must be such that you get battalion commanders at aged 29 or something. I think that's quite irrelevant. Age, I think, is something that doesn't really matter.

The other thing that really concerned me quite considerably was that we developed the cordon and search operation. We developed them because firstly we were told to do a cordon and search operation and then we developed them because we thought that was the best way to go and the Task Force Commander gave us free opportunity to do just that. There was some criticism of what I was doing from some of my contemporaries, on the grounds that if I develop new ideas, like the rules of engagement, and I developed new methods, and I was successful,

that was fine. But from a career point of view I would be no further advanced than if I followed the book and did exactly what was in the book. Because, if I followed the book and I failed, then my career was safe, then if I was successful then I might be a little further advanced. That, to me, is a disaster, and that isn't the way Army officers ought to be trained and that isn't the way they ought to be thinking. If we're going to have that sort of thinking then we're really not going to be professional soldiers.

The other thing that's important is that every time there is a problem we really need to seek out straight away the means by which we can overcome that problem so it doesn't occur again. What we've got to do as officers is constantly look for ways of being more professional and doing the job better so that we will have the greatest success with the least possible losses, and so that we can achieve the job in the shortest possible time. There were a number of times there when people said to me, - this was not the Task Force Commander saying this to me but others - 'I believe you ought to be able to do that job by 5 o'clock or 6 o'clock or 7 o'clock'. I believe that is irrelevant. You do the job in the timeframe which will cause you the least losses. I must say that before I left to go to Vietnam, Tom Daley gave me once piece of advice and it was very good. He said to me, 'If you can carry out an operation in two hours and lose no men, it's better than doing it in 30 minutes and losing some'. I said, 'I've got the message', and he's absolutely right. You cannot replace a soldier once he's killed. That's all I need to say.

The other thing that came out of all discussion at the end of the year's operation was this, that the battles are won and lost before the first shot is fired. In other words the battles are won and lost in the preparation whether it be in the training, in the equipment, in the tactical deployment, in the orders, it's all won at that stage rather than on the battlefield where those instant decisions are made. I think as we look back on all the operations we did and we were constantly on operations there was never a day when we didn't have operations on, then we were of the opinion that it was that preparation and the support from behind it that really made the day; not so much the decision of the guy on the spot. He could make those decisions easily because of that support that was behind it.

This is the interviewer who conducted the interview with Colonel Warr. This is a postscript to the interview which is worth recording.

After the interview was concluded Colonel Warr in conversation gave a comparison between US Army Aviation attitudes to command and conduct of air mobile operations and the RAAF 9 Squadron attitude at the time 5RAR was serving in South Vietnam.

The US Army Aviation policy described by the officer commanding the Army Aviation assault helicopter company

supporting 5RAR was that if the early stage of an air mobile assault struck trouble there were three courses open: (A) to reinforce the original landing zone regardless of casualties in troops and aircraft; (B) to go to an alternate landing zone as a route in to support the initial LZ; or, (C) cancel the operation. The point was made that the decision was up to the commanding officer of the assaulting unit and US Army Aviation would execute any order based on the decision regardless of casualties in aircraft or troops.

By contrast, the RAAF attitude, according to Colonel Warr, was that the CO of a squadron could cancel his support and withdraw it if he would chance losing aircraft, as indeed could individual aircraft captains.

The situation might be worth a short writing by Colonel Warr and should be also included in the interviews with RAAF 9 Squadron commanding officers.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW