

THE BATTLE OF LONG TAN

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The Battle of Long Tan is remembered for the bravery and sacrifice of D Company, 6 RAR, and the effective implementation of Australian weapons and tactics.

In 1966, 1 ATF (the First Australian Task Force) took responsibility for a large and tactically important slice of Vietnam. It was a tough gig: Phuoc Tuy Province had a long frontage to the South China Sea, including the strategic port Vung Tau near the mouth of the Saigon River. The geography included coastal mangrove swamps, flat lowlands, hills, and mountainous country in the far north east. The Viet Cong had supply routes and bases across the province.

Brigadier David Jackson, commander of the Task Force, chose to site the Australian base at a rubber plantation called Nui Dat. It was a provocative move, right on a Viet Cong supply route, and holding a commanding position over the central part of the province.

Villages within mortar range of the proposed base, were cleared and relocated, and work began on the base in May and June 1966. Viet Cong

resistance was fierce and numerous small-scale battles were fought in the establishment phase. Jackson insisted on strong fixed defences to negate fears of a full-scale Viet Cong attack on the base.

Early in the morning of the 17th of August, 1966, personnel on the base were looking forward to a concert by visiting performers Col Joye and Little Pattie, when the first mortar round dropped in from VC baseplate positions to the East. For twenty-two minutes the bombardment continued. One man was killed and twenty-four wounded.



The next morning B Company, 6RAR, were ordered out through the wire to find the perpetrators. They had little trouble locating the Vietcong fire positions, but the enemy had withdrawn, and none were encountered.

On the morning of the 18th, it was D Company's turn. They patrolled out past B Company's position, intent on following the tracks left by the enemy. Splitting into their four platoons, they followed two cart tracks leading off to the east into a thick rubber plantation.

It was a dull and frightening environment in which to operate, with evenly spaced rubber trees in all directions – good visibility along the rows, but only a few metres at certain angles. Even so, at this stage the 108 men of D Company still believed that they were facing a band of local VC, who had most likely left the area.

At 1540 that afternoon, 11 Platoon came under fire through the rubber from a six-man enemy patrol. Fire was exchanged, and, as they returned to the route,

more contacts followed. Before long, the Australians were heavily engaged. 11 Platoon found themselves all but surrounded by uniformed troops firing AK47 rifles.

The rest of the company hurried forward to assist, but they had underestimated the enemy. The company was being encircled by a battalion strength force that included the Viet Cong's 275 Regiment, and elements of the North Vietnamese Army. To make matters worse, heavy monsoon rain began to fall.



11 Platoon's commander was an early casualty, and with one third of the men down, the tattered remnants withdrew to join their comrades. The company commander, Major Smith, brought his beleaguered men together and formed a strong defensive perimeter.

There, deep in the rubber trees, as darkness fell and the rain poured down, less than a hundred men, many of them wounded, withstood wave after wave of attacks from an enemy armed with automatic weapons. But the Aussies chose their targets well, and their SLRs were reliable and built to perform in any conditions. Again and again those Lithgow-made rifles barked, and the bolts slid forwards and backwards sending their deadly load into the seemingly

limitless attackers. Using field radios the Australians called brutally precise artillery fire down on the Viet Cong positions. The use of artillery in this battle was the decisive factor.

By 1700 the men, lying or kneeling shoulder to shoulder in the mud, fighting for their living, dead and dying mates as much as themselves, were running low on ammunition. A desperate call went out and two RAAF Hueys were loaded up with boxes of 7.62mm cartridges and grenades. Despite ground fire from below, the daring pilots dropped their loads with pinpoint accuracy.



The Company Sergeant Major, Big Jack Kirby, supervised the distribution of ammunition, and with full magazines, morale improved. Even better was news of a relief column on the way, including Armoured Personnel Carriers, but the creeks were rising quickly, and some doubted they would get through.

Finally, however, at around 1900, the relief force reached the battle zone, engaging the enemy and driving them off. D Company had suffered high casualties: 18 dead and 24 wounded, the largest Australian loss of life of any single engagement in the Vietnam War. Yet, when mopping-up operations resumed the next morning, the bodies of at least 245 Viet Cong and NVA soldiers were found around the company perimeter.

The Battle of Long Tan was a costly but decisive victory that may have prevented a major attack on the Nui Dat base. It had lasting implications for peace in Phuoc Tuy Province.

Bibliography

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