

New Zealand Combat Gallantry Recognition

Operation Hermit Park – South Vietnam

V Company Operational Background

During 14 Jun - 27 Jul 1971 4RAR/ANZAC was tasked to destroy North Vietnamese Army/Viet Cong in Area of Operations Picton. 1st Australian Task Force operational policy had also just been changed. As Canberra was increasingly sensitive to casualty rates. Platoons to now patrol only as complete entities. The Australians considered this less risky. We didn't. It had been long standing New Zealand Army capability to operate in half platoons when the situation permitted. V6 had the benefit of lessons learned by the previous eight rifle companies, had trained extensively, and recently deployed in Phuoc Tuy in platoons, half platoons, sections and half sections. It was also equipped to do so having four M60 machine guns per platoon plus enough radios. Company HQ also operated as a separate but limited combat patrol – having about half rifle platoon strength and one or two M60s. V6 platoons were about 40 strong on patrol. For various reasons Australian conscript platoons were about half that size. As regulars V6 infantrymen were all cross-trained in at least one other of a range of section roles. And from section 2IC up all commanders could control indirect artillery and mortar fire. Plus launch and control close air support and all helicopter operations. All very difficult in the terrain and missions presented. From ground level under fire it was unusual to be able to actually see the targets for indirect fire support adjustment. But to conform to the new policy meant all 1ATF rifle companies were reduced to only a three-man patrolling front – in our case with the lead scouts of the three platoons each followed in single file by up to 40 trained soldiers. (Coy HQ chose to continue to patrol independently in that its strength almost matched Australian rifle platoons.)

Enemy in the assigned area were estimated at 200 VC main force and 100 local force trained and equipped combatants. Significant NVA were also in the 1ATF operational area.

Although some open areas existed, unless essential these were not traversed because of security and concealment factors. The general ground feature was dense secondary bush, very difficult to move and navigate through. Much comprising tangled masses of thorned bamboo. Visibility was only a few yards. Operational results relied on junior leadership and the effectiveness of individual soldiers. Patrolling, shooting and fire control abilities were paramount for success against a skilled and determined enemy. Such circumstances demanded acute observation, listening, decision-making and target recognition. All reliant on manual navigation and junior command skills. Ultimately depending on collective readiness for instant effective action at very close range. The penalties for error were likely to be fatal.

While this demanded very high competency and confidence at all levels V6 would patrol at maximum visible range separation between individuals – depending on the ground, up to about 10 metre between each soldier. Communication only by visual signal. Up to the point of combat contact. This considerably reduced vulnerability to ambush and greatly extended the lineal track coverage to detect and counter any merging enemy approach from flanks.

V6 was allocated an area of about 42 map squares and about a month to do their task. But before being deployed was hurriedly given a blocking role in support of B Company 4RAR/ANZAC on 23 Jun in an adjacent area. To comply with the timings this involved a several kilometre night foot redeployment by VCompany. However the B Company mission was unsuccessful and V Company was then released back to continue its original task. This was a traditionally enemy dominated area operating ruthlessly against the civil population and government facilities. Although recently patrolled by C Company 4 RAR also without any contact success. The V Company plan had each platoon and Company HQ taking an independent route by foot into separate AOs within the company boundary. Offensive searching patrols and area ambushing being the initial tasks.

At 1430 hrs on 24 Jun Company HQ located evidence of significant nearby enemy presence. Company HQ set an immediate ambush and deployed the support section under Cpl A. M. Lee to further check sign. Who initiated a contact with what was subsequently proven to be an enemy covering position for a heavily fortified base. The enemy suffered casualties and withdrew. Our lead scout Pte K. H Harding was hit, evacuated by helicopter and died of head wounds that night in Long Binh US Army base hospital. That possessed full surgical and care facilities.

Suspecting a larger enemy concentration V Company then re-deployed eastwards 2 Platoon 3000 metres from their initial platoon AO in the west. To close with and identify the western approaches to the enemy area. Early on 25 Jun 2 Platoon initiated contact against elements of an occupied bunker system. Coming under intense RPG, MG, claymore, and AK47 fire from close range and a frontage of at least 75 metres. Using their own fire and movement plus platoon directed helicopter gunships and artillery 2 Platoon remained in close contact for over eight hours. Suffering four casualties - three being evacuated by helicopter and one remaining on duty. Essential helicopter resupply of severely depleted ammunition stocks succeeded under heavy enemy fire.

3 Platoon remained on a carefully assessed and selected enemy exit route about 1200 metres to the north in an area ambush blocking position. Coy HQ remained 300 metres to the northeast in another blocking position. Artillery and gunship fire maintained pressure on the enemy position by day and night while 2 Platoon then disengaged westwards. Thus clearing the way for a main assault from the opposite direction in the east by an also relocated and retasked 1 Platoon accompanied by APCs and Centurian tanks. With supporting artillery and aircraft strikes, planned and on call. At the direction of CO 4 RAR/ANZAC operational control of 1 Platoon for the actual assault was passed to the OC of the RAAC Squadron. Where and when line of sight contact and control was considered critical for success.

Captured documents after the successful assault by the reinforced 1 Platoon included a diary stating the enemy had been well aware of C Company 4RAR/ANZAC in the area two weeks previously and were fully prepared to repel an assault from the north. But C Company had not located them. And the enemy remained concealed. But when HQ V Company found and probed their perimeter causing them casualties they were no doubt even more prepared for an attack from this direction. Friendly casualties would have been very heavy if we had taken that route for the ground was also

extremely difficult with very dense undergrowth and obstacles with cleared killing lanes at knee height. The V Company follow up operation by tasking 2 Platoon on foot initially from the west and then by the armoured reinforced and skilled 1 Platoon assault from the east overcame this enemy capacity and heavily damaged their on-going intentions in the surrounding area. Until 1 ATF withdrew entirely from Phuoc Tuy Province some months later.

HQ ANZAC Battalion and Task Force intervention and communication equipment breakdowns did cause some command and control difficulties for the assault. And 3 Platoon's well sited cut-off ambush positions were compromised by Battalion HQ requiring their relocation to secure a questionable map only selection of a helicopter Landing Zone for insertion of possible supporting forces. Subsequent tracking confirmed that the surviving enemy withdrew by night through the area 3 Platoon had been tasked by Coy HQ and where they had sited their original blocking ambush positions.

It was a major honour to continue contribution of NZ capabilities to the ground-breaking ANZAC battalion concept. The outstanding and relevant skills plus the bravery level of all ranks of V Company not only upheld the ANZAC tradition, but added to it. The particular competence, persistence and devotion to duty of junior leaders pursuing contact with a very determined and well-prepared enemy were a distinguishing tribute to all involved. The constant and final success of this very demanding operation was conducted by 1 Platoon and the outstanding efforts of four soldiers were the subject of gallantry recommendations in 1971.

LCpl John Adams, since deceased, was awarded the MM, but at that time the ANZAC awards priorities and system failed to register and acknowledge the successful and highly hazardous efforts of Pte William Papuni, Pte Mike Williams and Pte John Galley. Appropriate New Zealand acknowledgement and recognition of the bravery under fire of these soldiers is long overdue.

The recommendations of Norman Fry's submission are fully supported.

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