

6RAR and HMAS *Sydney*

On 18 August 1966, the best known battle of the Vietnam War, involving Australian forces, occurred in a rubber plantation north of the abandoned village of Long Tan, four kilometres east of the Australian base at Nui Dat. Troops from D Company, of the Sixth Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR), in pursuit of a squad of six to eight of the enemy, came under intense small arms and rocket propelled grenade fire, and were immediately pinned down. The intensity of this fire decimated the leading platoon, with at least a third of its strength either killed or wounded.

Artillery counter-fire from Nui Dat was called in, and throughout the action this was the one element for which the enemy had no answer. Despite the high risk involved, the artillery at one time was adjusted to within 50 metres of certain sections of D Company's position, so that the shells scythed through the enemy formations.

As each platoon and section of D Company collected in one area, two RAAF Iroquois helicopters from 9 Squadron RAAF arrived overhead and dropped boxes of ammunition wrapped in blankets. Resupply could not have come at a more critical time. It was estimated that the remnants of D Company was down to about 100 rounds. The action continued in a relentless tropical downpour as darkness descended, with the enemy engaging in repeated human wave assaults. These were broken up partly by the Australians' fire, but mostly by the effective artillery barrages called in by the New Zealand forward observer.

The enemy force was comprised of the Viet Cong 275th Main Force Regiment, reinforced by at least one North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Battalion, and a Local Force unit, D445 Battalion - the total estimated to be over 2,500 men. When the enemy forces finally withdrew, they left behind 245 bodies, although it was estimated that a further unknown number of killed and wounded had already been removed.

D Company, 6RAR, lost 17 of its number and 19 wounded, two of whom were not recovered until the following day having spent a terrifying night watching Viet Cong evacuate their casualties, which were estimated, to number in the hundreds. Three members from other Australian supporting units were wounded, one of whom later died.

We who served in HMAS *Sydney* April-June 1967, were to, ever so briefly, be in the company of some of these men, when, on 30 May 1967, 533 men from 6RAR were embarked in *Sydney* for the voyage home. Included in their number was one Sergeant Bob Buick, who had fought at Long Tan. He later wrote: *It was beaut just to stand on her decks knowing she was part of Australia. Under the cover of darkness, she and her destroyer escort slid quietly into anchor in Vung Tau*

harbour. At first light, Chinook helicopters started ferrying the troops to Nui Dat while landing barges loaded with stores shuttled to and from the shore.

Buick also noted: *There was always a sense of urgency in a troop changeover as the plan was to have the Sydney in and out in a day, and have Viet Nam well astern before dark. If the VC could have damaged the Sydney while she was anchored in Vung Tau harbour it would have struck a significant blow to the RAN and their ability to support the war and Australia's efforts in Viet Nam could have been quite different.*

In praise of the sailors and the way the soldiers were treated in Sydney, Buick wrote that: *The tucker could not be faulted and the friendliness and assistance given by the sailors was beaut. We surely must have been a pain in the arse to the matelots, always getting in their way when they moved around the ship on their daily tasks.*

Buick also noted that during the voyage south, Sydney always had an escort, which was either a frigate or a destroyer. The escort on this occasion was HMAS Stuart. He describes the following in some detail: *I would watch the Stuart move off to the flank to a distance of several thousand yards, then come back again in closer, and then move ahead or astern of Sydney as we steamed along. It was as if we aboard were a mob of sheep and Stuart was a lone sheepdog guarding and keeping us safe. As we approached Singapore HMAS Duchess ... joined us for the return to Australia.*

Another activity - which gave Buick a first-hand insight into the Navy's combat state of readiness - was experienced during a realistic exercise designed to test the anti-submarine capabilities of the escorts. A RN submarine attached to the Far East Strategic Reserve had been tasked with a mission to silently detect, attack and sink Sydney. The two escorts, with the assistance of an embarked Westland Wessex ASW helicopter in the carrier, would attempt to thwart this threat. As Buick noted: *Stuart and Duchess, with the aid of a Wessex ASW helicopter from the Sydney, searched for and found the submarine. When the escorts 'sank her' the war game ended and to our relief, the good guys had won. We continued towards home safe in the knowledge that the Navy could look after us.*

As if to confirm the Navy's constant need for preparedness, every few days there was always the inevitable replenishment at sea. Naval vessels need to be ready at all times when on operational service, in order to undertake other duties such as search and rescue. This required both the escorts to be refuelled from Sydney, which was commented on by Buick thus: *I would watch, admiring the skills of those who had the job of driving these ships at speed and manoeuvring in such close proximity. It was probably easy for the sailors who do these things as a matter of routine, but I was in awe.*

In conclusion, Buick has written: *The journey home was about two weeks and it allowed us to really unwind. I was happy not to have flown home on the QANTAS 'Freedom Bird' as most non-infantry blokes did. We went away as a battalion and it was good to come home the same way.*

Dr John R Carroll

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