

Long Tan 40 Years On

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In South Vietnam on the afternoon of 18 August 1966, D Company of 6 RAR was seeking an enemy force that had mortared Nui Dat, the Australians' base that morning. These 100 men encountered an estimated two Viet Cong (VC) battalions (estimated at 2500 men) whilst sweeping through a French rubber plantation east of the 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) base.

The leading 12 Australians were killed or wounded immediately and as the enemy began to encircle the company, torrential rain commenced. Forward Observer (FO) Captain M (Morrie) Stanley RNZA in direct support, called for the field guns of his 161st Kiwi Battery and then the remainder of the 1st Field Regiment—the 103rd and 105th Australian Batteries—and the self-propelled mediums from Battery A of the 2nd/35th US Artillery Battalion.

In four hours, 3440 rounds fell on the attackers, some as close as 30 metres from D Company. The guns stopped only for the Iroquois helicopter crews to drop blanket-wrapped boxes of ammunition to the beleaguered infantrymen. Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) borne reinforcements finally arrived and the VC fled leaving behind 245 dead. Some 500 were believed wounded and three were captured. The ANZAC forces suffered 18 killed and 24 wounded.

On the 105th Battery gun position in Nui Dat, the battery captain, Bruce Stark recalled, 'It was "all hands to the pumps" serving the guns, unboxing ammunition and everyone was flat chat. Even had the cooks, RAEME and the detachment of 131 Div Loc Battery (their radar was out of action) involved.'

D Company was awarded the United States Presidential Unit Citation for its distinguished performance. The decorations and awards bestowed on Diggers directly involved in the battle under the Commonwealth system included the Military Cross for company commander Major H A (Harry) Smith, two Distinguished Conduct Medals and two Military Medals whilst seven members were Mentioned in Dispatches. On the Gunner side, Captain Stanley was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire for his gallantry whilst his radio operator, Lance Corporal W G (Willy) Walker was Mentioned in Dispatches. Flow-on decorations included Distinguished Service Orders for the Task Force commander and the 6 RAR commanding officer.

The rubber plantation in which this force stubbornly performed in the true spirit of ANZAC was called Long Tan. The casualties in this battle were the ANZACs' highest for any engagement during their entire time in Vietnam between 1965 and 1972 and this Battle of Long Tan, as it became known, therefore became symbolic of the Vietnam War.

Australia's involvement in this war was not popular with its people. The government's prophylactic approach to arresting the spread of Communism before it arrived on the nation's doorstep and the introduction of selective National Service were two particular policy pillars which the moratorium-motivated elements of the public attempted to knock down during some very emotive times in the late 1960s and early 70s.

Such public sentiment was also levelled at the soldiers returning from their 12-month tour of duty in Vietnam. Unlike their forefathers who had been feted as heroes whenever First and Second World War Diggers marched through the streets, the Vietnam veterans were rebuked, publicly ridiculed and even sustained buckets of red paint simulating blood thrown over them. National Servicemen returning to the civilian workforce after completing their obligation were, in many cases, belittled and verbally persecuted. Even members of the Returned & Services League shunned these new veterans as 'not being in a real war' and in numerous cases denied them membership of the League.

Not without just cause, the Vietnam veterans formed organisations of their own and, as their members rose in stature in the public arena, became a volatile and emotive voice seeking a 'fair go' for their numbers. It was not until 25 years after Australia's involvement in Vietnam had ceased that public sentiment swung to reconciliation and a vast 'Welcome Home' parade was held in Sydney in 1987. Vietnam veterans became the flavour of the month to such an extent that the next year, following a recommendation of the Evatt Royal Commission Report into Agent Orange, Prime

Minister Bob Hawke announced that the government recognised 18 August as 'a Vietnam Veterans' Day'.

With the passage of time, this day has become 'the' Vietnam Veterans' Day, a nationally-acknowledged date set aside for that war's veterans to march, conduct memorial services and have reunions. It is somewhat a shame, however, that there was such a feeling of guilt at the treatment of Vietnam veterans that they have become separated from Australia's one day of the year in which the service and sacrifice of all our nation's servicemen and women from all conflicts are traditionally remembered—ANZAC Day, 25 April.

On a similar note, it is unfortunate that the Battle of Long Tan veterans have had their day of commemoration gate-crashed by the remainder of the Vietnam veteran community. Long Tan Day is very precious to those who were involved in 1966—it is the day when they remember their mates and their time in that particular battle. On the other hand, why should the other 50 000 or so personnel who also served in Vietnam be side-tracked in the commemoration of their mates and their service to focus on a battle which, during their time in Vietnam was just one of many in which the supreme sacrifice was made by Australians?

Nevertheless, here we were 40 years on since the Battle of Long Tan and the nation was determined to remember it with a vengeance. The federal government splashed out millions of dollars to charter-fly veterans to Canberra for a 1200-strong function on 17 August and to conduct a day of commemorations and celebrations the next day. Whilst this appeared laudable, it detracted from the home of D Company, 6 RAR at Enoggera, Brisbane where the battalion and its associations had planned their own remembrance of their Diggers' sacrifice in 1966. Fortunately, it would appear that good reason overrode, or at least paralleled political grandstanding and some of the veterans from the Canberra shindigs were flown to Brisbane arriving in time for the afternoon and evening events at Enoggera on 18 August 2006.

So what happened in Brisbane? First of all, the 105th Medium Battery conducted a formal Long Tan Dinner at the ANZAC Officers' Mess, Enoggera on Wednesday 16 August. The battery extended an invitation to all previous local-resident battery commanders and members of the 105th Battery Association. It was wonderful to see the old veterans sitting amongst today's Gunners animatedly engaged in conversations and war stories. Throughout the evening a combo from the RAA Band, Brisbane provided musical interludes and members of the battery read cameos of events from that fateful day at Long Tan 40 years ago.

On the morning of 18 August, the Brisbane City Hall resounded to Adrian Cronauer's 'G-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-d Morning Vietnam' which heralded his breakfast speech to an auditorium full of Vietnam veterans and partners. This very traditional wake-up call from the 1960s set the scene for a day of nose to tail activities.

Next, there was the Vietnam Veterans' Day March. Many vets moved straight from the City Hall to the Irish pub diagonally opposite the forming up area and bonhomie and backslapping became the order of the day as they were joined by hundreds of their mates. There was no formal call to parade—the Army Band Brisbane struck up and marched off and the veterans just fell into eight abreast and into step and swung through the city with medals flashing in the noonday sun. They wheeled into ANZAC Square where a memorial service was held. Retired Brigadier Adrian D'Hage AM MC delivered a strong pacifist message reminding those present that our young men and women are still paying with their lives in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon.

As the sombre notes of the Last Post faded away, Fihelly's Arms opposite the Shrine became the focus for the vets and their parched throats. This small pub cranked out beer and food at a very creditable rate, the crescendo of camaraderie reached a new height and one struggled to be heard. Nevertheless, all too soon it was time to catch a train from Central to the Enoggera Station and board a shuttle bus to Gallipoli Barracks to continue the celebrations.

Opening with the explosions, machine gun fire and bugle calls of a Vietnam-style battle, 6 RAR performed a splendid United Drum Head Service on Duncan Oval. Long Tan veterans from all regiments and corps were allocated priority seating and a busload of their mates from Canberra arrived from the airport just in time for the show. These included 105's first tour veterans BK Bruce Stark, FO Alan Hutchinson and LO Graeme Maughan. Understandably, there was hardly a dry eye as

the ceremony climaxed with the old 6 RAR veterans filing proudly through the ranks of the battalion on parade. 105th Medium Battery and APCs held ground around the parade area.

This was followed by a 1960s-era band concert by the combined Army and RAA Bands Brisbane. A medley of toe-tapping Vietnam era songs by the band's vocal group and a nostalgic trumpet solo of Wonderful World were the precursors to one of master of ceremonies' Adrian Cronauer's longest ever 'G-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-d Morning V-i-i-i-I-i-etna-a-a-m' signature call. Then that great trooper, the beautiful and very long-legged Rhonda Burchmore wound the boys (and girls) up with a magnificent bracket of songs that brought the audience literally to their knees (and a couple of blokes in the front row actually to that position). With everyone was at fever pitch, the Joy Boys played in Col Joye who made sure everyone participated with tears of laughter as he swung into I Like Aeroplane Jelly . . . followed by We're Happy Little Vegemites . . . It was a wonderful evening which no one wanted to end.

But this was not the finale. During the weekend of 17–20 August, there was a 'bigger than Ben Hur' Vietnam Vets extravaganza at the Pine Rivers / Lawnton Showgrounds on Brisbane's northern outskirts. Campers and caravaners were well catered for and many grey Nomads took advantage of this facility. A children's concert on Saturday afternoon 19 August ran into another period concert that evening. Next day, tri-service display teams kept audience interest at a high pitch.

Finally, on the evening of Saturday, 19 August, the Long Tan Veterans' Association invited ten 105th Field Battery Long Tan veterans to their dinner in the Stradbroke Room, Holiday Inn Hotel, Roma Street, Brisbane. This suit and tie formal dress occasion included a night of entertainment which closed another chapter of Long Tan memories.

There is no doubt that the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan was a highlight of Vietnam veterans' lives for 2006. Much planning went into the activities in Brisbane and those who missed being part of them will regret it. Every participant was guaranteed a share of the enjoyment and camaraderie that can only be found when veterans get together to remember their mates and the good times of military service. Let there be no doubt that one should look forward with pleasurable anticipation to the 50th anniversary in ten years' time.