

Fighting to the Finish:
The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1968-1975

Authors: Ashley Ekins with Ian McNeill

Review by David S. Wilkins

This thoroughly researched final volume of the official history of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War covers the peak period from the middle of 1968 to the end of 1971. Eleven infantry battalions and their supporting arms undertook tours of duty in this period and carried out almost 100 major operations. Australian soldiers fought a difficult war on several fronts simultaneously, conducting reconnaissance-in-force operations in the remote enemy-frequented areas of Phuoc Tuy and neighbouring provinces, pacification operations to provide security in the populous regions, and civic action and reconstruction tasks to improve the lives of the local people and to help restore government control. The pace of operations was unrelenting and intense, and the cost was high with 250 soldiers killed in action or died from other causes during this period. It also provides an account of the aftermath of the war in Phuoc Tuy province leading up to the defeat of South Vietnam in 1975, two years after we withdrew.

Fighting to the Finish is a beautiful publication and is a really first class history of that very complex and controversial war. One of the main Australian controversies was the barrier minefield that led to so many of our casualties. This book includes probably the most authoritative account of the clearing of that minefield. It also covers the phased withdrawal of the task force as enemy pressure increased the burden and danger for the remaining soldiers.

This book provides a fresh interpretation of the fierce battle between 5RAR, with armoured support, and North Vietnamese Army forces in the village of Binh Ba in June 1969. In fact the support of tanks during both urban fighting and jungle bunker battles receives worthy attention, not just in our own 5RAR experience but continuing right through to 1971 including support of 3RAR in the Battle of Long Khanh and of 4RAR during Operation Iron Fox near the Courtenay Rubber. Most unfortunately however, the tanks were packed up early from June 1971 ("a sorry day" said CO 4RAR/NZ at page 598) and returned to Australia just a week before a major battle broke out between 4RAR/NZ and the North Vietnamese Army's 33rd Regiment in the Battle of Nui Le to the south-east of Courtenay Rubber (pages 613-618).

Fighting to the Finish is of particular interest to readers of this website as it covers the period of 5RAR's 2nd tour of duty in 1969-70. In addition to

providing a comprehensive account of our battalion operations, of additional interest is the analysis of the overall Australian Task Force plan and how 5RAR fitted in. Although the Task Force was fairly independent when fighting the enemy in Phuoc Tuy Province, it remained under operational control of II FFV (Field Force Vietnam) and it is interesting to note just how much pressure was imposed by that American commander. For example, 1ATF commander Brigadier Sandy Pearson (in the first half of our time there) had to reluctantly comply with US General Ewell's directive to extract our troops from the Australian pacification programme around Dat Do (page 292). Ewell believed pacification/Vietnamisation to be necessary but a waste of time for fighting soldiers who should be killing the enemy and therefore should concentrate on increasing their kill ratio. This explains our constant redeployment to chase the ever-elusive 5 VC Division units (274 Regiment, D445 etc).

Even though various significant events were occurring while we were there, many of us were blissfully unaware of some, such as 6RAR's Operation *Marsden* into the Mao Tao Mountains, the base area for the enemy HQ 5 VC Division. 6RAR combed the slopes and caves and finally planted the Australian flag on the mountain peak. Amongst the many finds made by 6RAR were a VC hospital located deep in caves and another major complex known as K76A Hospital. The book rightly gives these finds considerable coverage but unfortunately gives no coverage at all to a similar, albeit smaller, hospital complex discovered by 9 Platoon and CHQ of C Coy 5RAR in January 1970.

It is of interest to read the analysis of the Australian decorations and awards system, which we all know is flawed and unfair, particularly the quota system, which restricted awards made despite the greater intensity of operations in the Vietnam War than in earlier wars (page 807). Recommendations for awards originated at unit level, then went to Commander 1ATF, then onto Commander AFV in Saigon, and finally to AHQ in Canberra for approval. A recommendation could be varied at any higher level. A good example relates to our own Pte John "Blue" Burrige of D Coy. Following the 5RAR battles with HQ MR7 in Bien Hoa Province in April 1969, Blue was unanimously recommended for the Military Medal by LTCOL Khan, his CO, by BRIG Pearson (Comd 1ATF) and by General Hay (COMAFV). In Canberra however, the Adjutant General unaccountably downgraded this award to an MID (page 807).

Another interesting statistic on decorations and awards is that 5RAR (covering both tours) was the highest-decorated Australian infantry battalion in 1ATF (page 808).

I believe from 5RAR's point of view there are one or two minor disappointments with the book's coverage:

- As the war from an Australian perspective revolved primarily around the infantry battalions, it seems a shame that not all battalion commanders had their photographs included in the history, particularly as some appeared more than once. Our own LTCOL Colin Khan was undoubtedly one of Australia's most successful battalion commanders but unfortunately his photo is not in the book. To be fair though, maybe not all battalion commanders had suitable photos available.
- On 21 August 1969 the half-company group commanded by Captain Bill Grassick and comprising 3 Platoon A Coy under LT John James and the Assault Pioneer Platoon under Lt Graham Locke, was involved in a jungle battle with the full strength 3rd Battalion of 274 Regiment defending its bunker system. The larger enemy force almost overran the sixty Australians who suffered 1 KIA and 37 wounded. This major engagement is given two short paragraphs (at pages 302-3) based upon fairly cryptic after action reports and, unlike many other similar engagements covered in the book, was apparently not the subject of interviews by the authors of the soldiers involved so as to provide more in-depth detail.

I have noticed two 5RAR-related errors in the book:

- At page 234 the caption is incorrect. The soldiers shown are not from 6RAR but are from the intelligence section and B Coy 5RAR in the aftermath of the Battle of Binh Ba.
- At page 977, footnote 10 says 5RAR officers (1969-70) were awarded two Military Crosses when in fact there were three MCs. Notwithstanding this, all three are correctly recorded in Appendix D.

Overall however, this is a magnificent book that covers a huge amount of Australian activity at virtually every level, from the senior commanders and planners to the experiences of infantrymen on patrol and in contact with the enemy. The book contains unflinching critical analysis and candour about the successes and failures of the Australian Army experience in Vietnam, and does not shirk from revealing the political spin given by Australian parliamentarians of all persuasions in their deliberations, such as the rationale behind the government's decision to suddenly withdraw from Vietnam in a most unsatisfactory and tactically unsound military way (for example, a piecemeal withdrawal which had the tanks return home early).

The authors, Ashley Ekins and the late Ian McNeill, are to be highly commended for this substantial and critically analytical work.