

National Servicemen in Combat.



By Dave Wilkins OAM

When I arrived in Vietnam on 28 January 1969 with the 5RAR advance party, I had a number of tasks as Adjutant in preparation for the battalion's arrival on 15 February. My first main undertaking was to write administrative instructions for when the battalion settled in, on such topics as notification of casualties, R & R leave, rules & regulations for living within Vietnam and Nui Dat, in particular pay, postal, etc, etc. Operationally, I also checked on any peculiarities for the planning of air strikes, use of transport helicopters, reconnaissance helicopters, medical evacuation choppers ('Dustoff') etc. This knowledge was enhanced by my accompanying A Company 1RAR on an operation into the foothills of the Nui Dinh and Nui Thi Vai Mountains. When that finished I needed to talk to the staff officer in Saigon about the reinforcements policy. I had some concerns.

I was aware of the government edict requiring infantry battalions to be 50:50 ARA: National Servicemen and we had in fact balanced 5RAR accordingly as we built to full strength in Australia. My concern was the comparative vulnerability of Nashos and Regs. It was clear that because Nashos had not served as long as most Regs, there would be more Nashos of Private rank and fewer as NCOs or officers. The lower the rank, then as a general rule, the closer you are to the enemy in combat. From that premise in my argument to this staff Major in Saigon, it seemed logical that a greater proportion of Nashos would become casualties. In pointing this out to the Major I suggested the proportion should be adjusted to have a lower level of Nashos, say 45 percent instead of 50 percent. He would not hear of it. That was the government policy so it would remain a 50:50 split.

Once the battalion arrived and we began operations I was able to observe officers, NCOs and Private soldiers in the 408 days I was on active service. This was in BHQ and Fire Support Bases working in the Battalion Command Post, as an acting Platoon Commander of 11 Platoon D Company for one operation, as 2ic then acting Company Commander of B Company for another operation, as 2ic of C Company and finally as its Company Commander. With that range of positions, I was well placed to observe how all ranks operated and performed in different roles.

One of the main things that stood out to me was just how well trained the troops were and what a high standard they were at. Indeed, until I chatted with individuals and heard their background, I could not tell if he was a Reg or a Nasho. The exception to this was that I knew the officers personally and most NCOs who were mainly ARA. On the standard of our soldiering, I was interested to subsequently read in some of the recently published VC and NVA unit histories (of those who opposed the Australian Task Force) that our enemy referred to us when we were patrolling, as 'Commandos' and the SAS as 'phantoms'. We should take that as quite a compliment.

When it was all over for our battalion, I had occasion to look at some of our statistics particularly relating to casualties:

Total who served with 5RAR including reinforcements in 1969-70:

55 officers and 1280 other ranks = 1335 all ranks

Casualties: 25 KIA; 202 Wounded

The ratio of ARA to Nashos killed was close to 50:50.

The ratio of ARA to Nashos wounded was 42% ARA and 58% Nashos.

Casualties for NCOs were 3½ times greater for ARA than for Nashos but there were of course many more ARA NCOs.

For Private soldiers however, the opposite was the case: there were almost 3 times as many Nasho casualties than for ARA.

In hindsight, I was proven correct by these statistics and I believe the Army should have convinced the politicians to alter the ratio of ARA strength to Nashos to 55:45 in combat units. I have no idea if the argument was ever raised but in 1969 -70 the policy remained fixed and inflexible at a 50:50 ratio.