

## **B COY AT BINH BA**

*by Mostyn (Mo) Hancock O.A.M.*

*B Coy, 4 Platoon, 3 Section, Forward Scout.*

It was the worst of times and the best of times.

Sixth of June 1969 found all of B company 5 RAR feeling the loss of one of our own, Private Andy Drummond, who was accidentally killed just before the end of the Op in the Warburton Mountains, correct name Nui Thi Vai and Nui Dinh. Andy Drummond was an indigenous man from Carnarvon in Western Australia and without a doubt the most loved and respected Digger in B Company. Operation Twickenham parts one and two had started on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1969. It was interrupted with Operation Roadside taking us up to Long Binh for 9 days to look after the United States Airforce Base, who were worried about enemy activity in that area. As it turned out it was a lot of walking with little return. Ambushing at night and chasing the enemy by day.

Then it was back to the Warbies to finish off what was a hard month of patrolling with little to show for it.

The best of times was being back in camp, to rest up and recharge the batteries, with a chance of a few beers in the evenings and a bit of training on the rifle range. I took the opportunity to attend the PX to purchase a new Yashika camera. The showers and good food were much appreciated.

We were reinforced in 4 Platoon 3 Section by two new recruits, Healy and Curnow and they were most welcome, as we were very short on numbers. As the time progressed, it became apparent that we would always be short of full strength for the rest of the tour.

My section commander, Corporal Jim Revington, gave us the news that morning, 6 June 1969, that Delta Company had been ready reacted to Binh Ba to sort out an RPG (rocket propelled grenade) strike on a passing tank. That meant that Bravo Company was next in line should the matter get serious, and we were told to prepare for action. I didn't take it too seriously as it sounded like local hit and run which the Viet Cong (VC) engage in from time to time.

The next thing I knew, a string of trucks turned up and we were on our way to Binh Ba to assist D Coy. It would appear the incident had escalated and there were a few more nogs around than anticipated.

We arrived a little after midday and drove past the village and dismounted on the north-eastern corner of Binh Ba in the middle of a mass of civilians evacuating to a safer place. Initially we were trying to check whether the enemy was mixed up with the stream of humanity that was heading north as fast as it could go, women, children, the whole sorry lot of them. This turned out to be a useless task and we just stood back and let them all go. It didn't take long for the road to clear.

4 Platoon moved back to the eastern side of the road to await events. We set up as the blocking force on the eastern perimeter.

Corporal Bob Leckie, section commander of 2 Section decided to check out a temple in the very northeast corner of the village with a couple of his soldiers. To their surprise they came across a North Vietnamese soldier with a slight head wound, and he immediately surrendered to them. On returning to the platoon, I was instructed to guard the prisoner whilst our medic Bear Hutchison dressed the wound.



*Bear Hutchinson treating wounded prisoner.*

It was only a scratch, but it must have felt worse to the prisoner as he seemed very happy to give it up. Later I handed him over to the South Vietnamese Army for interrogation. We took at least two more prisoners, one of whom had been extremely lucky. He had broken out of the eastern side of the village and headed directly for us, dodging from stump to stump. He didn't realise that the rounds that were ricocheting around him were coming from us, in front of him. In the end somebody yelled out "if you can't shoot him take him prisoner!" So, we did. Lieutenant Moose Dunlop, Platoon commander of 4 platoon, said later that it was one of the funniest things he had ever seen.

By this time Delta Company had started the sweep from the eastern side to the west side of the village of Binh Ba, along with armoured support, which was made up of a troop of Centurion Tanks. It was about 1400 hours and suddenly our position became a little hairy as we were sitting on the eastern edge of the village and the overs (random shots) were heading our way. We immediately packed up onto APCs (armoured personnel carriers) and departed for a safer place, which was on the southern side of the village. The show was spectacular from our position, as we watched the helicopter gunships make their strafing runs.



*Gunships attacking Binh Ba.*



*B Coy mounted, watching dust off.*

One of the centurion tanks turned up with a wounded crewman and was dusted off by helicopter as we watched. Eventually we dismounted from the APCs and as dusk approached, moved into the rubber on the northern side of the village to take up our harbour for the night. Delta Company withdrew back to the west and all fell quiet. 5 Platoon and 6 Platoon also harboured up not far away from our position. We were joined by an APC for the night and fitted him into the cordon facing the village to our north.

Our section (3) had the responsibility for the northern side of the perimeter facing Binh Ba, with the addition of an APC in the middle. Jim decided to use the APC as our sentry post and planted two Claymore mines to the front about 50 metres out. He then instructed our two new chums, Privates Healy and Curnow, to put up their tent and not come out regardless of what went on. I think Jim had a bad feeling about what the night was going to bring and didn't want the newbies wandering around. This left us short on personnel for sentry duty and we would have to do 3 hours each. After the obligatory rain shower, we had a brew and settled in for the night. Bob (Pom) Hunter chummed up with the APC crew and decided to sleep in the APC where there was a

dry bed and plenty of tucker. Pom stood the first shift as was the privilege afforded to the machine gunner in the section and that left Dooly Simpson, Jim and me to do the rest.

Jim and I were sleeping peacefully when Dooly woke us. He insisted in his loudest whisper that there was someone out there in front of our position. His words were "I'm not troppo there is some c... out there!". The three of us were lying with weapons at the ready, looking out through the rubber. Outside the plantation it was a full moon, lit up like daylight but if you were looking behind, it was so dark you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Anything that moved looking out, was silhouetted by the moon light. Dooly kept insisting that he had seen movement, so we waited. Just to our front, in full silhouette was a small bush, about 10 metres away. Suddenly the "bush" stood up and walked off to our left! We were so shocked that we forgot to open fire and just watched the shadow walk off around the APC and back into the plantation! We realised later that the enemy scout had probably walked straight through our harbour position and out the other side when we saw him. Jock Whittaker, who was inside the perimeter, later stated that someone fell over him, but it was too dark to see who, and he thought it was just our sentry changing over. It was my turn on sentry and Jim suggested that we do the last four hours together. I readily agreed.

We sat on the turret of the APC with a starlight scope and the clackers for the claymore mines that Jim had set up earlier. The starlight scope was not very effective (you are supposed to see in the dark, like the night vision of today) but they eventually go flat. The clackers are to set the claymores off. You were rather exposed sitting up there but if you went to sleep you would fall off and soon wake up.

At about 0230 hrs I spotted movement outside the rubber, heading towards us. I alerted Jim and we watched as two enemy moved into the rubber, heading directly towards our position. We waited, as the first enemy soldier was stopping every few steps allowing the second to catch up. They were almost standing on the two claymores when we let them both off together. There was a massive flash and a rolling cloud of sticks and dirt rolled back over us. We jumped off the APC and had to wake up the occupants as they had slept through the explosion! The machine gun had to be manned by Pom in case of further activity. The APC commander decided he had heard movement, so he opened with his twin 30 cal machine guns on the turret. They were at maximum depression, so they bounced up just in front like a red curtain ricocheting straight up in the air. You couldn't see anything, so I still wonder to this day what he was firing at. Then Pom decided to have a go with the M60 just to get in the act. When I examined the bodies at daylight neither had any bullet wounds. Just the blast of two kilos of high explosive had done its job.

Jim and I went back to our sentry duty, there were no worries about dozing off now! The peace didn't last long, as just on dawn, at about 6 o'clock, 6 Platoon made contact with a group of enemy coming through the rubber onto their position. There was an exchange of fire with the enemy's green tracer followed by the red of our rounds in reply looking quite spectacular. Then an RPG (rocket propelled grenade) followed and

hit the rubber trees. This was several hundred meters from us, but that was the end of any rest for the whole platoon.

As dawn broke, we had breakfast and a brew, after checking out the enemy dead. One AK47 (sub machine gun) and some rounds was found on the bodies. Gary (Foss) Forster and Mitch Mitchel were given the task of burying the dead. Not a good task and Mitch has never forgiven us. We stood around as 5 Platoon joined us. One of 5 Platoon's Corporals had headed back into the rubber, in front of the machine gun, to relieve himself (no 2), when suddenly somebody noticed movement in the rubber to our east. Thinking it may be the South Vietnamese Regional Forces, someone waved, and they waved back. Moose Dunlop, Platoon commander of 4 Platoon said later that Sargent Merv McCullough turned to him and said 'they are nogs ". I think both sides had that realization at the same time.

It was a little chaotic after that, with the machine gunner not able to open up, due to the chap taking care of toiletries out the front. No amount of clicking or whistling hurried him at all, until the enemy opened fire. That moved him! Moose came and grabbed me, and we took off towards a centurion tank that had just pulled up outside the rubber, about 50 metres from our position, leaving Barry Ryan, Platoon Commander of 5 Platoon, to sort out the response. The idea was to get the tank to engage the enemy in the rubber. Meanwhile things were getting a bit serious, with enemy machine gun fire coming into our position and a firefight erupting. Foss and Mitch were not happy as the enemy machine gunner took a liking to them and whilst they took cover behind rubber tree stumps, their back packs were shot full of holes.



*Corporal Joe Dziedzic and his centurion tank.*

Moose and I approached the tank. With its engine idling and turret cover all closed, the crew, led by Corporal Joe Dziedzic, were unaware of what was happening outside. Moose said later that he thought they were having a cup of tea and didn't want to be disturbed. Moose went for the telephone on the back of the tank and furiously wound the handle. Nothing happened, so he threw that away and then proceeded to clamber

up the back of the tank to the closed turret. He fired a shot over the cover and then realizing they probably didn't hear that proceeded to thump on the cover with the butt of his Armalite. Next minute Joe's head popped out and he received the latest news in no uncertain manner!

It seemed like ages before Joe had permission to move into the rubber, but when he did the enemy decided to take off at a great rate. I followed behind the tank during the push, thinking that was the safest place to be. I was walking alongside the motor, which was deafening, when I saw Joe throw something from the turret. In front, (about 10 yards away) was a hole, almost like a fox hole and Joe was taking no chances by throwing a grenade into it. He couldn't see me below him, but fortunately for me he has a good arm. The grenade went off with no harm done.

By this time Barry Ryan had organized 4 and 5 Platoons into a sweep towards the rapidly disappearing enemy. The 5 Platoon diggers picked up a 57 mm recoilless rifle which they placed on the side of Joe's tank. I think there were mixed feelings when the tankers saw it, as it would have made an awful mess of a tank with a direct hit.

The rest of the morning was spent as a blocking force to the south-eastern part of Binh Ba. We lost 5 Platoon when they went to help D Company with the next sweep of the Village. I caught up with my sleep.



*The plantation manager came to complain about damage to his rubber trees.*

Early afternoon, on day two, we moved around the eastern side of the village and took up positions with 6 Platoon. The sweep had been completed and the enemy had moved out north into the little hamlet of Duc Trang.



*B Coy lined up to attack Duc Trang.*



*View of Duc Trang from the start line.*

We lined up to assist the tanks and APCs and took off towards our target. I do recall that one of the tanks opened up with a 50-calibre machine gun, and then we came to a screaming halt and pulled back to the start line. It turned out that civilians were mixed up with the enemy, so the South Vietnamese Regional Force was sent in to sort it out. I had to laugh, as one of their soldiers was mounted on his Lambreta.



*South Vietnamese regional forces attacking.*

It was the charge of the bike brigade! Moose took it upon himself to advise the leading tank by repeating the trick of climbing on the back to stop the 50 cal. Communications seemed to be a bit slow. At that time, we didn't know why we were withdrawn but some wag yelled out that "Ghengis didn't like it and we have to do it again!" Colonel Colin Khan, commonly known as Ghengis in the lines was Commanding Officer of the Fifth Battalion. I won't repeat what the response was.

We eventually moved through to Duc Trang, the enemy well gone to the north, where we didn't care, it was somebody else's worry. We harboured up just to the north of the hamlet in case the enemy came back again. Before we had settled down, I went

out on listening post and nearly fell over one of our 105 artillery shells that hadn't exploded and was sitting up in the mud. I tiptoed around it back to the platoon and Moose moved us well away whilst reporting it to those who deal with these things. We had a good night's sleep, apart from the rubber trees dropping branches all night. If the tree has been hit in the upper branches the sap runs out until the branch will let go and come crashing down. After an uneventful night, we were trucked back the next morning to Nui Dat .



*Waiting for transport home. Trying to buy barmy ba (beer) from the young lad in the white shirt.*

Jim, Pom and I returned two days later to guard the Australian Civil Defence Team, who were organising food and compensation claims for the village. By then a bulldozer had dug a mass grave for the enemy dead and things were coming back to normal for the local population. By 11<sup>th</sup> June I was on my way to Vung Tau for my first R & C whatever that meant. Rest & Corruption maybe? But that's another story!

*I would like to thank those who assisted me with notes and memories, Moose Dunlop, Barry Ryan, Jim Revington, Garry Forster and notes from Barry Ryan.*