'EDUCATING AN ARMY':

AUSTRALIAN ARMY DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE OPERATIONAL EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH VIETNAM, 1965-72

R. N. Bushby

CANBERRA PAPERS ON
STRATEGY AND DEFENCE NO. 126

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Cover photograph: Australian War Memorial Neg. No.COM/69/0250/VN, Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam, 18 April 1969. Photographer Sergeant David Combe. Two members of C Company, 9th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment, forcing their way through thick jungle, supported by a Centurian tank of B Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment, Royal Australian Armoured Corps, search for Viet Cong during Operation Surfside.

ABSTRACT

This monograph examines the way in which the Australian Army met the challenges to its doctrine presented by the Vietnam War. The war produced some widely varied tactical problems, and the flexibility and deep experience which were the hallmarks of the army in the 1960s provide the key to understanding how these problems were solved.

After surveying the origins of the Australian Army's counter-revolutionary warfare doctrine, the monograph examines in detail the challenges to and development of this doctrine in the four periods of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War: working alongside US forces (May 1965-June 1966); the establishment of the independent task force (May 1966-January 1968); the period of 'out of province' operations (January 1968-June 1969); and the final period of Vietnamisation and pacification. The developments in tactics and doctrine of the Vietnam War period marked a substantial step in the process of developing Australian Army doctrine - a process which is worthy of study as, at the turn of the century, the army develops new doctrine and concepts to meet the challenges of the future.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADFA	Australian Defence Force Academy
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AMF	Australian Military Forces
ANZAM	Australian, New Zealand and Malayan area (Agreement)
APC	armoured personnel carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ATF	Australian Task Force
ATOM	*The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya*
AWM	Australian War Memorial
BCFESR	British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve
BM	brigade major
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CMF	Citizen Military Force
CO	commanding officer
COMAFV	Commander, Australian Force Vietnam
COMUSMACV	Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (US)
CRW	counter-revolutionary warfare
CT	communist terrorist
DCGS	Deputy Chief of the General Staff
DDMT	Deputy Director of Military Training
DF	defensive fire
DMO&P	Directorate of Military Operations and Plans
DMT	Director of Military Training
	Directorate of Military Training
DS	direct support
FAC	forward air controller
FARELF	Far East Land Force
FCC	fire control centre
FO	forward observer
GHQ	general headquarters
HEAT	high-explosive anti-tank
HQ	headquarters

JTC	Jungle Training Centre
LFT	light fire team
LZ	landing zone
MAC-V	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MFC	mobile fire controller
MLW	*Manual of Land Warfare*
NCO	non-commissioned officer
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAOC	Royal Army Ordnance Corps
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment
RCL	recoilless rifle
RF/PF	regional force/popular force
RPG	rocket-propelled grenade
SAS	Special Air Service
SEATO	South East Asia Treaty Organisation
SOP	standard operating procedure
SWPA	South West Pacific Area
TAOR	tactical area of responsibility
UHF	ultra high frequency
USAF	United States Air Force
VC	Viet Cong

INTRODUCTION

Military doctrine[1] provides one of the essential touchstones in the functioning of any military organisation. Alongside tradition and history, doctrine provides one of the most concrete expressions of an army's *raison d'être*, and thus defines many of the organisation's professional characteristics. In achieving this, doctrine can be regarded by the inexperienced or ill informed as an inflexible monolith, by which the character and form of military operations are prescribed directly in accordance with a nation's higher strategy. While this perspective ascribes to military doctrine a rigidity and inflexibility inappropriate in modern war, it suggests the way in which military operations at even the lowest level reflect the higher national and military policies on which they are based.[2] Roger Spiller, although writing about the US Army, could easily have described the Australian Army of the mid-1960s when he noted that:

> Military doctrines, fighting doctrines, always have been expressions of their time and place, an artefact in the mental life of a fighting organisation. Any armed force operates in accordance with a conception of war that has been formed as a consequence of its history, the state of military knowledge available at the time, the material and technical assets at hand, the objectives to which the force expects to be committed, and, certainly not least, the calibre of those who must attempt to give it life in battle.[3]

All the factors listed above are apparent in an examination of the Australian Army's doctrine before and during the Vietnam War, and it was these factors along with several others which shaped the development of Australian Army tactics throughout the period.

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[1] A general definition of 'doctrine' is found within the Oxford dictionary: 'doctrine: what is taught, or a body of instruction'. Military doctrine specifically is defined by the Australian Joint Service Glossary as 'the fundamental principles by which military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative, but requires judgement in its application'.

[2] Roger J. Spiller, 'In the Shadow of the Dragon: Doctrine and the US Army after Vietnam' in Jeffrey Grey and Peter Dennis (eds), *From Past to Future: The Australian Experience of Land/Air Operations* (Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1995), p.6.

[3] ibid., p.7.

This monograph concerns itself with the Australian Army's tactical doctrine during the Vietnam War. Doctrine operates at several levels, but even at the lowest level, the tactical, there exist strata and a hierarchy formed by the relationship between junior and senior commanders which shapes the nature of operations on the ground. At the level of the lowest tactical sub-unit, the platoon or even the section, doctrine is better described as minor tactics, while at a higher level doctrine encompasses the application of higher tactics or operational method to combat operations. For the Australians in Vietnam, the exercise of higher level tactics was the responsibility of the battalion or task force commander, and although these figures operated at a level considerably higher than the platoon or section commander they rarely, if ever, functioned at the operational or strategic level of war.

The Division in Battle series of pamphlets was the published expression of the army's doctrine in 1965.[4] The traditional role of doctrine is to provide guides for action or to suggest methods that might work best. Because the body of doctrine with which the war was fought was written prior to the army's commitment to Vietnam, it was designed to cover a range of scenarios, locations and types of operations, and not just, or even primarily, those conditions found in Vietnam. As a result of six and a half years of continuous military involvement in Vietnam, some army personnel came to equate doctrine with the system of specific tactics and techniques employed in Vietnam. For example, there are numerous instances throughout the literature of commanders referring to new techniques as departures from or variations to doctrine. What they are in fact referring to are merely changes to tactics and techniques established previously, within the overall guiding framework of tactical doctrine.

Former commanding officers drawn together by the Infantry Centre in 1972, at the end of the Australian commitment to Vietnam, commented that

> The Australian war in Vietnam was unusual in that it gave us five periods of 12 months in which the nature and pattern of operations was so varied that it is difficult to produce lessons with broad application to either counter revolutionary war or

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4   Australian Army, Military Board, *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlets Nos 1-11 (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1965-70).

limited war ... due to changes in conditions and the enemy threat over the years.[5]

Just as these different periods made it difficult to draw out lessons with broad application to the army after the war, they also make it very difficult to trace the development of doctrine during the war. The widely varying nature of operations conducted by the Australians during their six-and-a-half-year presence in Vietnam provided some inherently contradictory experiences. To resolve these apparent contradictions it is necessary to examine certain influences on the development of doctrine:

- Australian doctrine during the Vietnam period was influenced profoundly by the pre-war experiences of the army in the Malayan Emergency, which continued to have an effect long into the period of the Australian commitment to Vietnam.

- Small-group tactics have always held a fascination for doctrine writers and for the Australian Army generally. The employment of small groups for tasks such as patrolling, ambushing and searching has long been the method with which the army has felt most comfortable.

- Until late in the Australian involvement in the Vietnam War, the distribution of relevant tactical information and guidance on tactical developments suffered from a lack of centralised direction or control.

- Australia, as a minor member of the American-dominated Free World forces in Vietnam, placed sovereign forces under the operational command of American commanders whose view of the war differed significantly from that of the Australians.

- Pressure, such as that described above, from higher commanders restricted the freedom of action available to Australian commanders and thus at times helped to shape the way forces reacted on the ground.

- Australian operational methods were altered by changing and differing perceptions on the part of our own national

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5   Australian Army, SO1(GS) Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', Infantry Centre, Ingleburn, 1972, p.1.

commanders, as well as any external pressure that may have been applied.

Tactical doctrine does not develop in a vacuum. Robert Doughty has noted that:

> the evolution of tactical doctrine illustrates that the great value of tactical doctrine lies not with the answers that it provides but the impetus it creates toward developing innovative and creative solutions for tactical problems on future battle fields.[6]

Doctrine is a complex, constantly evolving set of ideas which reflects not only the military situation for which it was written, but also the personalities and experiences of those individuals who wrote it.

In the case of small nations with small armies, such as Australia, it becomes clear also that doctrine reflects the attitudes and preconceptions forced onto the country by its allies and the compromises which its own national commanders are forced to make. This monograph examines the way in which the Australian Army met the challenges to its doctrine which the Vietnam War presented. The war produced some widely varied tactical problems, and the flexibility and deep experience which were the hallmarks of the army in the 1960s provide the key to understanding how these problems were solved.

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6   Robert A. Doughty, *The Evolution of U.S. Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-76* (Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, 1979), p.2.

CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGINS OF COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE

When the Australian Army finally deployed to Vietnam in May 1965, this marked a significant step in the process of development in Australian counter-revolutionary warfare (CRW) technique that had as its origins the Australian experience in the South West Pacific Area (SWPA) theatre over twenty years before. Despite the fact that doctrine and tactics would evolve markedly over the subsequent seven-year involvement in the war in Vietnam, 1965 marks the end of one period of significant development in counter-revolutionary warfare doctrine.

Starting in 1942 and continuing until 1965, with one large but important gap after the end of the Second World War, the development of Australian tactics was gradual. The outbreak of the Malayan Emergency in 1948, and the eventual commitment of Australian ground troops to that theatre in 1955, revived the Australian Army's jungle experiences and added a new depth, while observation and subsequent application of British methods and tactics allowed the Australians to develop their experience of this new type of warfare. This experience was combined subsequently with close observation and reporting of foreign conflicts by Australian officers that led to a deep interest in, and a wide professional knowledge of, a style of operations that was to become known as counter-revolutionary warfare. While operations in Malaya provided a valuable basis for the development of Australian doctrine, they also provided several misleading experiences which were to confound the development of Australian tactics for some time. At the conclusion of the Emergency a period of confusion and uncertainty reigned, leaving army organisation and tactics flawed in fundamental ways which would not be resolved until well into the Vietnam commitment.

Until the beginning of the jungle campaigns in New Guinea in 1942, Australian forces had habitually borrowed other nations'

doctrine and tactical techniques.[1] Welburn has argued that, with the brief exception of the New Guinea campaigns, this process continued unabated until the mid-1960s. Australian experiences during the jungle campaigns in the Pacific provide a starting point for the examination of Australian methods of warfare which underwent their most complete evolution during the Vietnam War. The virtual absence of a British presence in the Pacific after 1942 forced the army to rethink and redevelop almost all of the doctrinal and tactical concepts that had served it faithfully in the war's initial years.[2]

Much is made in Australian military mythology of the soldier's preference for fighting in small, well-drilled, sub-unit groups at close quarters with the enemy in the jungle. While much of this is purely hyperbole, there is some element of truth in the notion that jungle operations formed the basis of a distinctly national form of warfare. This type of warfare stressed personal training, skills and discipline rather than superiority in numbers of men and technical expertise in handling machines, as was the case in large-scale, set-piece, formation battles. The physical conditions of the jungle - limited mobility and visibility - and the reduction of British influence in tactics and techniques combined to allow the Australians to develop the first concepts of a unified, completely Australian method of fighting. In order to allow the development of these techniques to be better managed and understood, the Jungle Training Centre (JTC) was opened at Canungra, in Queensland, in November 1942.[3] The new centre aimed to combine the specific experiences of the Australians in the South West Pacific theatre with Australian and British training précis for infantry fieldcraft and conventional infantry tactics. This training focused on meticulous attention to individual and small-group training, mental and physical toughness and the ability to live rather than just survive in the trying conditions of the jungle.[4]

Training concepts developed initially in an *ad hoc* fashion, but gradually over time the army developed a cogent and unified body of

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1   M.C.J. Welburn, *The Development of Australian Army Doctrine 1945-1964*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No.108 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1994), pp.2-3.

2   ibid., p.5.

3   Peter Dennis *et al.* (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995), p.136.

4   ibid.

doctrine for fighting in the jungle. By mid-1943 the process of disseminating doctrinal lessons had become more formalised and controlled, published later in Army Training Memoranda and disseminated throughout the army.[5] As experience increased army-wide, information was included that gave advice on ambushing, the use of indirect fire support and marksmanship training.[6] This doctrine, while conventional in its applications, represented the first real attempts by the Australian Military Forces (AMF) to develop, teach, disseminate and employ a body of tactical doctrine that was Australian in its development and based upon the considerable experiences of Australians at war. This doctrine, with its emphasis on small-unit action, was later used in the production of *The Division in Battle* series of the 1960s and can thus be seen as one of the shaping forces of Australian doctrine in Vietnam.[7] Interestingly, the initially confused and uncoordinated attempts of the army to disseminate tactical lessons from the front lines during the Second World War would be mirrored by significant failings on the part of the Directorate of Military Training to collate and publish tactical lessons from Vietnam. In the case of the Vietnam War, it would take until 1969 until the Army Headquarters Battle Analysis team was formed, specifically to investigate the development of Australian tactics within the 1st Australian Task Force.

After the end of the Second World War the Australian Army went through a considerable period of change and development. While three battalions were raised for occupation service in Japan, the demobilisation of the 2nd AIF and the subsequent scaling down of interest in the military generally led to a huge reduction in the size of the postwar army.[8] While relatively small in size, these units formed the basis of the postwar Australian Regular Army and were blessed with an extraordinary level of combat experience. For a variety of strategic reasons, the army was again forced to adopt the doctrinal role of fighting alongside British troops in the desert as part of an

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5   Welburn, *The Development of Australian Army Doctrine*, p.10.
6   ibid.
7   ibid., p.11.
8   David Horner (ed.), *Duty First: The Royal Australian Regiment in War and Peace* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990), p.1.

Australian contribution to a global war.[9]   During this period the experience of jungle fighting held little importance for the development of the army's roles, tactics and doctrine.

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, Australia was one of the first nations to pledge its support to the fledgling United Nations' effort to defend the Republic of Korea against communist aggression. Operations in Korea were conducted within a traditional British brigade structure sharing the same staff procedures and operational methods.[10]   The Australian Army was engaged in a conventional conflict in rugged, mountainous terrain that contributed little to the subsequent development of counter-revolutionary warfare concepts involving small-unit operations that would begin to dominate the army's thinking in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The Korean War served as the first real operational experience for many of the commanders who would later lead battalions in the Vietnam War, and it reinforced the importance of small-unit operations and the role of junior leaders at section and platoon level, as well as giving a new generation of commanders their first experience in the application and adaptation of tactical doctrine.[11] They gained first-hand experience of the changes to tactics, staff procedures, unit establishments and sub-unit employment that characterised the dynamic process of tactical development by units at war.[12] When this is compared with the processes of tactical development during the Vietnam War, it is clear that Korea provided the first layer of what subsequently would become the most through, comprehensive and varied range of operational experiences ever to be taken to war by the Australian Army.[13]

While Australian doctrine remained heavily influenced by British doctrine after the Korean War, attempts were made to reconcile Australia's changing strategic focus with the tactical doctrine employed. The army updated its doctrine from the Second World War

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9 Ian McNeill, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950-1966* (Allen & Unwin in assoc. with the Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 1993), p.4.

10 Jeffrey Grey, *The Commonwealth Armies and the Korean War: An Alliance Study* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988), p.150.

11 Interview, Major-General R.A. Grey, Canberra, 29 April 1997.

12 Australian Army, Military Board, *The List of Army Officers of the Australian Military Forces*, Volume 1, *The Active List* (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1970), pp.61-120.

13 Interview, Major-General R.A. Grey, Canberra, 29 April 1997.

during the mid-1950s and attempted to reshape it toward the increasingly important counter-revolutionary warfare role, but with little real experience of the requirements of counter-revolutionary warfare, the new doctrine remained biased heavily toward conventional jungle operations. The result was *Tactics (Tropical Warfare)*, Part 1 and 2, *Infantry Section Leading 1956 (Draft)* and *The Platoon and Company in Battle 1957 (Draft)*. The doctrine in these new publications was combined with *The Infantry Battalion in Battle* (1957) to produce the basis for infantry training until the late 1950s.[14] Its conventional warfare bias notwithstanding, the Australian doctrine being produced retained an emphasis on the Australian penchant for small-unit operations in the jungle.

In 1955 the Australian government joined with Britain and New Zealand to form the British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve (BCFESR). The three nations were already partners in the ANZAM defence agreement to protect Malaya, and Australia's contribution of an infantry battalion, a field artillery battery and a troop of engineers represented the first-ever peacetime commitment of troops overseas.[15] These troops were to become part of the British 28th Commonwealth Brigade and had as their primary role deterrence of communist, specifically Chinese, aggression. Added later was the secondary task of defeating insurgents in the jungles of Malaya.[16] The decision to send troops to Malaya reinvigorated interest in jungle warfare in Australia and placed jungle fighting back at the forefront of Australian doctrinal thinking. As a result of this, the Jungle Warfare Training Centre was reopened at Canungra in 1955 and was charged with the job of redeveloping Australian jungle tactics to meet the requirements of the Malayan Emergency.[17] Eventually, the centre became the focus for the general study and practice of jungle warfare techniques. Yet again, the Australian Army had no specific body of doctrine to apply to the situation found in Malaya, and Australians were forced to rely upon the British pamphlet, *The Conduct of Anti Terrorist Operations In Malaya* (ATOM), developed by the Director of

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14   Welburn, *The Development of Australian Army Doctrine*, p.32.
15   McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.6.
16   ibid.
17   Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation: Australian Military Operations in Malaya and Borneo 1950-1966* (Allen & Unwin in assoc. with the Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 1996), p.19.

Operations and High Commissioner for Malaya, General Sir Gerald Templer, first published in 1952.[18]

By the time the Australian ground forces arrived in Malaya in 1955 the higher levels of intensity in the Emergency present between 1948 and 1951 had largely passed, and Australian forces were employed to hunt remaining pockets of insurgents deep in the jungle.[19] The ATOM pamphlet recognised the need for an essentially new type of warfare. In addition to recognising the long-known effects of jungle conditions on troop mobility, weapon effect and range, and the need for aggressive action, it also outlined the requirements to defeat an insurgent enemy rather than a conventional one. Implicit in this was recognition of the importance of the civil population and the need for close integration with the police.[20] At the level of small-unit tactical doctrine it was a very frustrating period for troops involved in the procedures and drills of deep jungle patrolling. Searches of villages, jungle navigation, contact and counter-ambush drills, harbour routines and employment of jungle bases all introduced the army to valuable skills that were to be adapted later in Vietnam.[21]

Malaya provided the army's first experience of combating an insurgent enemy, but many techniques employed there were relevant only to Malaya. For example, many of the ambush and counter-ambush drills were based upon a specific level of operational intensity and were misleading as a guide for subsequent conflicts. Chapter 10 of ATOM described the process of conducting an 'Immediate Assault on a CT [Communist Terrorist] camp'. That a commander would assume that an enemy base area was able to be attacked using a simple drill rather than as a result of a thorough tactical appreciation indicates how different a CT camp was from a Viet Cong bunker system encountered subsequently.[22] An alternative method was offered in a subsequent chapter, and in this instance the commander allocated the same number of men to the assault as he estimated were present in the camp

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18 ibid., and p.51; Director of Operations, Malaya, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya* (Headquarters Malaya Command, Kuala Lumpur, 1952, 3rd edn 1958).
19 McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.6.
20 Director of Operations, Malaya, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya*, chapter 3; Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, p.16.
21 McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.6.

and then employed the remainder of his force as small cut-off groups around the outside of the camp.[23]

While the above tactics were successful against the communist terrorists, they highlight the fact that in all cases the security forces were expected to gain an immediate advantage over enemies and destroy them before they could escape. Little emphasis was given to the employment of fire support to help defeat enemies or to the notion that enemies could fight for their camps aggressively when threatened. Clearly, a highly aggressive enemy was not part of the equation in Malaya, and it was this aspect of the Malayan Emergency that was to offer some misleading lessons in subsequent years. Such fire support as was available was limited in its usefulness, with two types of weapons available to troops. First, the 25 pounder gun was a mobile and accurate weapon that could bring down fire to range of 13,400 yards, but was limited to areas served with roads or motorable tracks. Second, the 4.2 inch heavy mortar was able to fire a 20 pound bomb to a maximum range of 4,100 yards, but was so inaccurate that its fire could not be employed within 500 yards of friendly troops.[24] In a theatre where visibility was often measured in yards and where contacts occurred at similar ranges its value was limited. Experience in Malaya thus provided few worthwhile lessons on the integrated and coordinated employment of fire support of the type that would become so necessary in Vietnam.

The Malayan Emergency exposed Australian troops to long, deep jungle patrolling. In order to find the elusive communist terrorists, sub-units were deployed into the jungle for weeks at a time, and Australian forces became adept at remaining alert, moving silently and tensed ready for immediate action for long periods; this skill would later pay dividends in Vietnam.[25] The technique of fighting from jungle bases was of refined in Malaya and chapter 6 of ATOM describes the sequence for occupation and administration of a jungle base. Regardless of whether they were designed for a company,

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22   Director of Operations, Malaya, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya,* chapter 10.

23   John Coates, *Suppressing Insurgency: An Analysis of the Malayan Emergency 1948-1954* (Westview Press, Boulder, 1992), p.161.

24   Director of Operations, Malaya, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya,* chapter 18.

25   McNeill, *To Long Tan,* p.6.

platoon or patrol size, these bases served as a type of semi- permanent harbour from which to conduct patrols.[26]

The Malayan experience had some profound effects on the Australian Army, which were to persist until they were replaced by the experiences of Vietnam. The army became highly experienced at seeking an elusive insurgent enemy in jungle terrain, and the Malayan Emergency has correctly been described it as the catalyst that allowed the rebirth of Australian jungle warfare doctrine.[27] Lessons relating to the importance of small-group tactics, aggression, adaptation of weapons and equipment to suit the enemy and the environment were all useful in the lead-up to Vietnam, and ATOM had a pervasive influence on the way in which Australian forces thought about counter-revolutionary warfare for a number of years. Despite this, ATOM did not provide, nor was it intended to provide, a blueprint solution for all forms of counter-revolutionary warfare. Templer had written it under almost perfect circumstances, with the three major variables in any tactical equation - ground, enemy forces and friendly forces - known to him before he began to write. In addition to this, the enemy he was fighting was far removed from the well-organised, well-equipped and motivated force that was becoming more common in Southeast Asian insurgencies at the time. Australian doctrine writers were well aware of these limitations, as subsequent doctrinal developments were to show.

The end of the Malayan Emergency in 1960 marked a watershed for the Australian Army. With no war to fight, but with the prospect of further regional conflict probable, commanders were forced to determine a new set of priorities and situations upon which to base training and doctrine. A conference of staff officers from Headquarters, Eastern Command noted that:

> It was agreed that our training and doctrine, including lessons from MALAYA, could be adapted to meet the above points but certain aspects of training for counter insurgency operations would need greater emphasis in current training programmes ... The conference was reminded that it was found necessary to provide Australian troops with specialised

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26 Director of Operations, Malaya, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya*, chapters 6 and 8.

and concentrated training for anti-CT (which may be compared with counter insurgency) operations at FARELF Training Centre before they could be committed to operations, and that absolute perfection in technique was vital.[28]

Australia continued to provide a battalion to the 28th Commonwealth Brigade Group as part of its BCFESR commitment. The main task of the brigade ostensibly remained to provide a bulwark against communist Chinese conventional aggression in Southeast Asia, but the Malayan experience has provided a salutary lesson on the new direction taken by communist warfare and most soldiers realised that the chance of the brigade ever being deployed in its primary role was remote. For example, the threat of conventional war was considered so low that in 1957 2RAR did not have any anti-armour weapons with it and had not received any instruction on nuclear warfare.[29] As a consequence of its role as the strategic reserve in Southeast Asia, the 28th Commonwealth Brigade, and its commander, Brigadier F. G. Hassett, was at the forefront of doctrinal and tactical thinking on counter-revolutionary warfare. Brigadier Hassett and his BM Major Ron Hassett led a group of thinking officers within the 28th Commonwealth Brigade who realised that the doctrine which existed for the brigade to deploy at short notice on light scales to Southeast Asia required a good deal more than the ATOM pamphlet was able to provide. A study group was set up and it produced papers which complemented brigade exercises, which stressed the need to operate away from roads and to be able to move by rotary- and fixed-wing aircraft.[30] The influence which this group exercised is clearly evident in the Commonwealth Brigade's later draft operational concepts for a deployment to Asia.[31] The Commonwealth Brigade provided much of the doctrinal guidance and assumptions that would shape Australian Army thinking prior to the deployment to Vietnam.[32]

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[27]   Welburn, *The Development of Australian Army Doctrine*, p.43.
[28]   Summary of Conference Minutes: 18 May 1962 Review of Tactical Doctrine, Concept of Operations South Vietnam, CRS A6059/2, 40/441/19.
[29]   Welburn, *The Development of Australian Army Doctrine*, p.42.
[30]   Letter, Brigadier J.R. Salmon to D.M. Horner, 4 December 1997.
[31]   Concept of Operations in South Vietnam with Light Scales Vehicles and Equipment, CRS A6059/2, 40/441/19.
[32]   Letter, Brigadier N.R. Charlesworth to author, 13 May 1997. Charlesworth noted the practice, instigated by Hassett, of sending Australian officers from the brigade on observation tours around the region. As a result, 28 Commonwealth Brigade

As a consequence, in 1961 GHQ FARELF directed Hassett to develop a new concept for operations and a doctrine to combat a Viet Minh style enemy supported by Chinese forces in an insurgency. This planning was done primarily with a view to deploying the Commonwealth Brigade in its SEATO role in the event of a conflict on the Southeast Asian mainland.[33] The final product drew on a range of sources reflecting Australian and overseas jungle warfare experience since the Second World War. The military sources included the AMF's *Infantry Training,* Volume IV *(Australia),* Part 1(1956) and Part 2(1957), *The Phantom Army (Provisional)* (1961) and the ATOM pamphlet. In addition to military pamphlets, Hassett also drew on personal accounts of guerrilla and jungle warfare such as Bernard Fall's *Street without Joy*[34] and Spencer Chapman's *The Jungle Is Neutral.*[35] The result was a draft pamphlet which revised and updated the Commonwealth Brigade's likely response to a contingency in Southeast Asia. Response to the pamphlet was generally positive, and the Deputy Director of Military Training (DDMT) wrote to FARELF in February 1962 suggesting joint development of the doctrine in order to provide doctrinal guidance in Australia on the subject of counter-revolutionary warfare.[36]

Within the army several different, often contradictory, sources were being used as foundations of tactical doctrine for counter-revolutionary warfare, and this was responsible for much of the confusion and contradiction apparent in Australian interpretations of doctrine. By 1963, three separate organisations were producing widely varying concepts of operations for counter-revolutionary warfare, due in part to the fact that the pentropic establishment had been adopted, but its doctrine had not yet been written. As noted, the Commonwealth Brigade was advising elements of the Directorate of Military Training (DMT) on the form it believed future operations would take, while concurrently the Directorate of Military Operations and Plans (DMO&P)[37] was producing its own separate concept of

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was a vital element in developing levels of awareness in counter-revolutionary warfare technique.

33 Anti Guerilla Operations Training Pamphlet, CRS A6059/2, 52/441/36.
34 *Street without Joy: Indochina at War, 1946-1956* (Stackpole, Harrisburg PA, 1961).
35 (Chatto and Windus, London, 1949).
36 Welburn, *The Development of Australian Army Doctrine,* p.60.
37 Draft Operational Concept 1966-1970, Combat Development Policy, CRS A6059/2, 41/441/135.

operations, and elements of Headquarters Eastern Command were also making revisions to the training syllabus based on the HQ's internal assessment of likely threats.[38]

While FARELF and DMT discussed the matter, the Australian Staff College noted the absence of an Australian doctrine or tactical concept for counter-revolutionary warfare. It is clear that doctrine did exist, but knowledge of its development was limited either to the small circle of officers involved intimately with its production or to those officers who had a sufficiently rigorous intellect and sense of professionalism to read independently what literature was available. While the army of the 1960s was undoubtedly a highly professional organisation there were, as there will always be in any large organisation, a lamentable number of officers who lacked either the intellect or the professional rigour to participate in written or verbal discussion of emerging tactical methods. This partly explains the apparent contradiction between the seemingly high levels of understanding of the requirements of counter-revolutionary warfare displayed by organisations such as the 28th Commonwealth Brigade and HQ Eastern Command and its absence in those sections of the army not connected with doctrinal development. The Staff College suggested that an Australian doctrine be developed quickly and that close liaison be maintained with Australia's allies on this topic.[39]

Hassett's pamphlet was adopted on 14 December 1962 and put into service as Army Routine Order 21/1962 or *Anti Guerrilla Operations in South East Asia Interim Tactical Doctrine*. It was intended to suffice until the publication of *The Pentropic Division in Battle,* Pamphlet 11, *Anti Guerrilla Operations,*[40] published in September 1964, which drew heavily on the information contained in Army Routine Order 21/62 and the ATOM pamphlet. The dalliance with pentropic ended in January 1965,[41] and the army was again faced with the necessity of redrafting its doctrine. *The Pentropic Division in Battle* was replaced with *The Division in Battle* (see Figure 1 for infantry battalion organisation from this series), while the former's *Anti-Guerilla Operations* pamphlet was replaced with the latter's *Counter*

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38   Minute, Summary of Conference Minutes: 18 May 1962 Review of Tactical
      Doctrine, Concept of Operations South Vietnam, CRS A6059/2, 40/441/19.
39   Welburn, *The Development of Australian Army Doctrine*, pp.62-3.
40   ibid.

Revolutionary Warfare pamphlet. Published alongside the new doctrine were two compact, *aide-mémoire*-style, all-arms pamphlets, *Patrolling and Tracking* (1965) and *Ambush and Counter Ambush* (1965), which were written to provide doctrine on the core sub-unit skills common to either counter-revolutionary or limited warfare.[42]

There are similarities between all three publications. Much has been made of textual similarities between ATOM, Army Routine Order 21/62 and Pamphlet 11, *Counter Revolutionary Warfare*, but while these similarities exist they should not be over-emphasised when attempting to establish a direct link between the British doctrine of the mid-1950s and the Australian doctrine of 1965. While ATOM certainly was the intellectual basis of Pamphlet 11, the attitudes of doctrine writers and senior infantry officers had undergone a significant change. ATOM was designed to combat a relatively small-scale insurgency, and while the communist terrorists were capable of inflicting damage they were very different to the type of force which Australian soldiers would face in a subsequent revolutionary war in Southeast Asia.

The author of *Patrolling and Tracking* and *Ambush and Counter Ambush* was Lieutenant Colonel Ron Grey, an infantry officer who had served as a major on the staff at the Infantry Centre running the company commanders' course.[43] His course was based heavily on the pamphlet, *The Enemy* (1964), which drew on numerous case studies of revolutionary warfare, especially the First Indochina War between the French and the Viet Minh. Officers were taught the outline of Mao's phases of revolutionary war and were made to study the insurgent solder.[44] Lieutenant Colonel Peter D'Arcy produced the pamphlet, which had been sponsored by the Directorate of Intelligence. D'Arcy was assisted by Lieutenant Colonel John Salmon, who had recently been posted to the position of Staff Officer Grade 1-Tactical Doctrine in the Directorate of Military Training. In addition to assisting D'Arcy, Salmon had responsibility for collating and editing Pamphlet 11,

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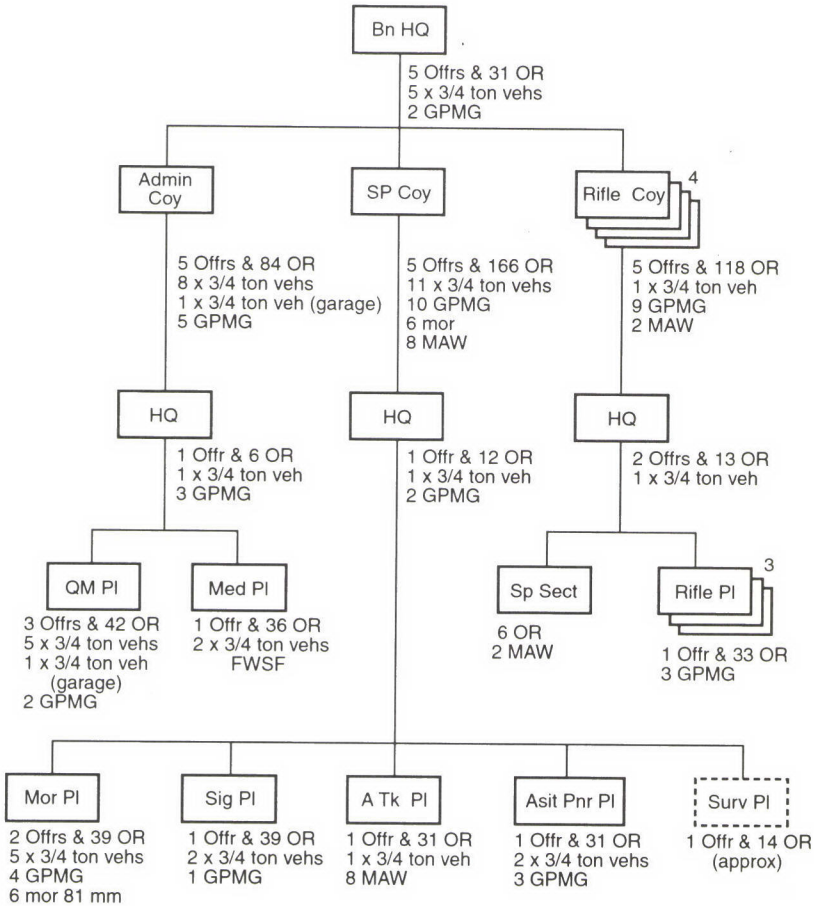
41 McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.22.
42 Interview, Major-General R.A. Grey, Canberra, 29 April 1997.
43 McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.18; Interview, Major-General R.A. Grey, Canberra, 19 April 1997.
44 Australian Army, Military Board, *The Enemy* (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1964).

Figure 1: Infantry Battalion Organisation

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                              ┌──────────┐
                              │  Bn HQ   │
                              └──────────┘
                              5 Offrs & 31 OR
                              5 x 3/4 ton vehs
                              2 GPMG

        ┌──────────────────────────┼──────────────────────────┐
   ┌──────────┐               ┌──────────┐              ┌──────────┐ 4
   │  Admin   │               │  SP Coy  │              │Rifle Coy │
   │   Coy    │               └──────────┘              └──────────┘
   └──────────┘
   5 Offrs & 84 OR            5 Offrs & 166 OR          5 Offrs & 118 OR
   8 x 3/4 ton vehs          11 x 3/4 ton vehs          1 x 3/4 ton veh
   1 x 3/4 ton veh (garage)  10 GPMG                    9 GPMG
   5 GPMG                     6 mor                     2 MAW
                              8 MAW

   ┌──────────┐               ┌──────────┐              ┌──────────┐
   │    HQ    │               │    HQ    │              │    HQ    │
   └──────────┘               └──────────┘              └──────────┘
   1 Offr & 6 OR              1 Offr & 12 OR            2 Offrs & 13 OR
   1 x 3/4 ton veh           1 x 3/4 ton veh           1 x 3/4 ton veh
   3 GPMG                     2 GPMG

   ┌──────┐  ┌──────┐          ┌────────┐  ┌────────┐ 3
   │ QM Pl│  │Med Pl│          │ Sp Sect│  │Rifle Pl│
   └──────┘  └──────┘          └────────┘  └────────┘
3 Offrs & 42 OR  1 Offr & 36 OR   6 OR      1 Offr & 33 OR
5 x 3/4 ton vehs 2 x 3/4 ton vehs 2 MAW     3 GPMG
1 x 3/4 ton veh  FWSF
  (garage)
2 GPMG
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┌──────┐  ┌──────┐  ┌──────┐  ┌──────────┐  ┌ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┐
│Mor Pl│  │Sig Pl│  │A Tk Pl│ │Asit Pnr Pl│  │ Surv Pl │
└──────┘  └──────┘  └──────┘  └──────────┘  └ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┘
2 Offrs & 39 OR  1 Offr & 39 OR  1 Offr & 31 OR  1 Offr & 31 OR  1 Offr & 14 OR
5 x 3/4 ton vehs 2 x 3/4 ton vehs 1 x 3/4 ton veh 2 x 3/4 ton vehs  (approx)
4 GPMG           1 GPMG           8 MAW           3 GPMG
6 mor 81 mm
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Summary

Offrs	OR	All Ranks	3/4 ton Vehs	3/4 ton Veh (Garage)	GPMG	Mor	MAW
37	753	790	28	1	53	6	16

Source: *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet No.8, *Infantry* (1965), p.5.

Counter Revolutionary Warfare, in the new *The Division in Battle* series. When it is considered that Salmon had been part of the group of officers working in the 28th Commonwealth Brigade on new doctrine for the brigade and that he was re-posted to the Directorate of Military Training, an organisation for which the recently promoted Hassett had responsibility in his capacity as DCGS, this helps explain why the concepts developed by the 28th Commonwealth Brigade became so pervasive in the wider army.[45]

Patrolling and Tracking and *Ambush and Counter Ambush* make it abundantly clear that the enemy to be faced in future counter-revolutionary warfare conflicts would be a very different proposition from the communist terrorists. *The Enemy* explained the communist 'annihilation ambush', a tactic designed for use against convoys or columns travelling on a road, in which the enemy would employ up to a battalion of troops to blockade the road at either end while a killer party swept in from a flank and destroyed the convoy.[46] This was a tactic employed against the French in Indochina, which involved a much higher level of operational intensity and required much better trained troops than had been encountered in Malaya.

These two *aide-mémoires* were written after an extensive tour of Malaya, Borneo and Vietnam and reflect observations in all these theatres. The type of war Grey observed caused him to adapt many of the jungle tactics from the ATOM pamphlet for a new type of warfare.[47] For example, the ultra-aggressive contact drill contained in ATOM does not feature in *Patrolling and Tracking*, nor does that governing the immediate assault of an enemy camp.[48] This assumed that the nature of the enemy had changed fundamentally and that both these drills relied upon an enemy who was neither entrenched firmly nor willing and trained to stand and fight. *Patrolling and Tracking* advised that 'patrols will usually require fire support to carry out their tasks'.[49] In Malaya, provision of fire support was the exception rather than the rule. In addition to observing the changed nature of the likely

45 Letter, Brigadier J.R. Salmon to D.M. Horner, 4 December 1997.
46 Australian Army, Military Board, *The Enemy*.
47 Interview, Major-General R.A. Grey, Canberra, 29 April 1997.
48 Australian Army, Military Board, *Ambush and Counter Ambush* (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1965).
49 Australian Army, Military Board, *Patrolling and Tracking* (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1965), p.23.

enemy, Grey was quick to realise the impact the widely varying terrain had on tactics. His experiences in riverine warfare in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam and in Borneo provided the basis for the section in *Ambush and Counter Ambush* dealing with ambushing and patrolling in small boats. Similarly, his observations in what would later become I Corps Tactical Zone in South Vietnam formed the basis for much of the information on patrolling and tactics in higher intensity situations.

Back in Australia, the army was undergoing a similar change in thinking. The Jungle Training Centre, and in particular its Battle Wing, had shifted its emphasis from jungle warfare to 'training troops for operations in a tropical environment'.[50] This change was subtle but important, as operations in the rice paddies, the Long Green, the Light Green, and the Long Hais in Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam were to show. Within those sections of the Australian Army principally involved in the preparation for a counter-revolutionary war, notably the Infantry Centre, JTC and the senior command elements of the three existing infantry battalions, there was an increasing awareness of the requirements of counter-revolutionary warfare.

Within the army's field force units, exercises and training, especially for the infantry battalions, had embraced counter-revolutionary warfare concepts and practices with growing enthusiasm. Despite this, several factors which influenced the conduct of training would have consequences for operations in Vietnam. In November 1963 the 1st Task Force, comprising the 1RAR (Pentropic) battle group, exercised in a counter-revolutionary warfare environment for the first time. Exercise Sky High was conducted in the mountainous Gospers area of New South Wales and followed the basic tactical concept for deployment of Australian forces to Southeast Asia, revealing much about the way in which army planners envisaged forces being committed to that theatre. The task force was required to establish a forward base on a high plateau and to patrol outward to form a controlled area, precisely the concept that would be employed by the 1st Australian Task Force during Operation Hardihood three years later.[51]

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50   Interview, Major-General R.A. Grey, Canberra, 29 April 1997.
51   McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.19.

McNeill has noted that while Exercise Sky High was a success, it revealed a preoccupation with the role of the infantry. The army was undoubtedly an infantry-based organisation; it was not exercising the dispersed combined-arms aspects of counter-revolutionary warfare operations that would become so important in Vietnam. Artillery units did not practise deployment to fire support bases and organising for their defence, while engineer units were limited to conducting major construction tasks. This was important, of course, but only a small part of their role in counter-revolutionary warfare. Engineers practised none of the specialised skills of demolitions, mine clearance and tunnel searches, and the employment of sappers in dispersed splinter-teams and mini-teams to support dispersed infantry had not been considered.[52]

Many of the reasons for the lack of combined-arms training can be traced to SEATO and Commonwealth Brigade assumptions about the terrain over which a future war would be fought. As described, similarities between SEATO exercise scenarios and exercises such as Sky High indicate that the field force in Australia was drawing much of its guidance on the planning of exercises from the scenarios played out in SEATO and BCFESR training. The situation anticipated by the army saw Australian forces deployed to a highland plateau region within Southeast Asia; in the case of a deployment to Vietnam this would most likely be in the Kontum-Pleiku-Ban Me Thuot region.[53] The perceived implication of this was a requirement to operate on the lightest possible scales of equipment and support, relying almost totally on resupply by air. The logistic implications of air resupply presupposed that artillery would be cut to between 25 per cent and 50 per cent of establishment and that offensive air support would be necessary to make up for the lack of support from artillery and armour.[54] The harsh nature of mountainous terrain and the difficulties imposed by the monsoon season developed a belief that tanks would be unable to support the force in all but the rarest of circumstances. The requirements of air portability were also

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52 ibid., p.20.
53 Concept of Operations in South Vietnam with Light Scales Vehicles and Equipment, CRS A6059/2, 40/441/19.
54 28 Commonwealth Infantry Brigade Group Training Instruction No 2/61, CRS A6059/2, 65/441/167; Concept of Operations in South Vietnam with Light Scales Vehicles and Equipment, CRS A6059/2, 40/441/19.

responsible for the limitations placed upon the use of engineers. The training priorities for the Commonwealth Brigade engineer squadron were rapid construction of airstrips for light aircraft, helicopter landing zones and drop zones; water supply skills; mine warfare (for the defence of the base area); rafting and rapid obstacle crossing; and construction of field defences.[55] All of these restrictions came from the 28th Commonwealth Brigade. Not only were some former Commonwealth Brigade officers now responsible for writing doctrine, but others were responsible for setting the scenarios for the annual CGS exercises which tested and validated the army's doctrine.[56] For all these reasons the lack of combined-arms training, exemplified by Exercise Sky High, was allowed to develop.

If any criticism can be made of either Pamphlet 11 or *Patrolling and Tracking* and *Ambush and Counter Ambush*, it is that they did not bring out fully the subtle changes that had occurred in doctrinal thinking. The army had become comfortable with a number of concepts and phrases as a result of recent counter-revolutionary warfare experience. Thinking about the issues involved in deep patrolling, cordon and search and framework operations can all be traced back to ATOM, yet by 1965 the terms, although still in general use, had developed significantly different meanings. The evolution of Australian tactical doctrine for counter-revolutionary warfare was a gradual process, but by 1965 the army finally had a doctrine that was Australian in concept and matched the strengths and capabilities of the army, while the attitudes of the officers who would be charged with implementing it had developed commensurately. A majority of the officers who would aspire to command battalions and 1ATF in Vietnam had a long history of operational and non-operational service, both at home and overseas, and perhaps more than in any other period of the army's history these men understood the requirements of the situation with which they were faced.

Subsequent analysis of the performance of Australian doctrine in Vietnam must be tempered with the acknowledgement that neither *The Division in Battle* series nor *Ambush and Counter Ambush* and *Patrolling and Tracking* was written specifically for Vietnam. Similarly,

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[55] 28 Commonwealth Infantry Brigade Group Training Instruction No 2/6, CRS A6059/2, 65/441/167.
[56] Letter, Brigadier J.R. Salmon to D.M. Horner, 4 December 1997.

the weaknesses that the army inherited from the 28th Commonwealth Brigade should not overshadow the considerable number of positive influences which that organisation passed to the wider army. The strategic situation in the mid-1960s in Southeast Asia meant that the army needed to develop doctrine which was as applicable to Vietnam as it was to any other regional theatre. While weaknesses existed in some of the army's tactical methods, it is difficult to be overly critical of them given the uncertain nature of the circumstances in which they were developed. The lack of a specific enemy between 1960 and 1965, and the broad range of operational experiences within the army over the twenty years prior to Vietnam, spurred innovation and creative thought and helped to ensure that significant elements of the Australian Army understood both the characteristics of doctrine and its methods of application.

CHAPTER 2

'WITH GREAT AND POWERFUL FRIENDS': 1RAR AND THE 173RD AIRBORNE BRIGADE, MAY 1965-JUNE 1966

The period encompassing the operational deployment of the 1RAR Battalion Group in 1965-66 highlighted several weaknesses in the army's preparation for the Vietnam War. The paucity of combined-arms training and over-reliance on SEATO operational concepts in shaping army thinking prior to 1965 had a direct and immediate impact on 1RAR's operational effectiveness. For much of the period under review, Australian operational methods suffered from a fundamental mismatching of operational opportunities and tactical abilities. This divergence was manifest and was not resolved satisfactorily during 1RAR's tour in Vietnam. As well, the influence of US operational methods, the tempo and pressure of Australian-inspired operations and the nature of the war contributed to a situation where Australian tactical abilities could not be exploited to their full potential. The efforts of individuals within the battalion's structure provide the key to understanding how problems were solved. As alluded to earlier, the depth of experience present in the army in this period contributed to much of the success enjoyed by Australian forces, while 1RAR's experience in Vietnam provides a valuable key to understanding developments in Australian operational methods later in the Vietnam War; many of the lessons learnt by the battalion, both positive and negative, were incorporated into the methods of the task force in subsequent years.

While Australia and the United States had been allies since the Second World War, Australian military thinking on and operational experience in counter-revolutionary warfare was based firmly upon British lessons and experience, and upon Australian experience within a British framework. 1RAR was to be deployed to Vietnam to form the third manoeuvre battalion of the American 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate),[1] and this necessitated the assumption of roles and tasks commensurate with its position as an integral element of an American

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[1]   McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.86.

brigade (see Figures 1 and 2). The Airborne Brigade was to secure the approaches to Bien Hoa airfield, and within this role 1RAR had three tasks assigned to it. First, it was to secure a battalion defensive position, secure its assigned sectors in airfield defence and prepare to patrol its outer tactical area of responsibility (TAOR); second, it was to conduct deep patrols and offensive operations within the TAOR; and third, it was to be prepared to conduct search and destroy operations and reserve reaction operations within the ARVN III Corps Tactical Zone (see Figure 3).[2]

For much of the time 1RAR integrated with the US formation without difficulty, so long as the 173rd Brigade confined its operations to the general area of Bien Hoa. When Brigadier-General E. W. Williamson, the brigade commander, deployed his forces away from the Bien Hoa area 1RAR was not able to go with it.[3] This was due to an apparently contradictory order from army headquarters that the deployment of 1RAR away from Bien Hoa was to be referred to Australia. Even at this early stage, a divergence of US and Australian operational methods was apparent.

American forces believed that their role was to strike hard at the enemy and keep them off balance and unsettled, in order to seize the initiative and gain tactical advantage for future operations, thus allowing the government of the Republic of Vietnam to gain some measure of relief from the near-constant onslaught of communist offensives. This presupposed numerous operations of short duration over a large area to find the enemy and bring them to battle,[4] and was the antithesis of Australian conventional wisdom. The slow, deliberate patrolling operations and painstaking searching of ground learnt in the Malayan Emergency were foreign to US methods of operation. The US forces viewed the pacification operations that had been so vital in Malaya as of secondary importance to finding the enemy main force units. The aggressive and hard-hitting American methods were not unreasonable given the precarious military situation within South Vietnam at that time, but they certainly unsettled Australian commanders and placed them on notice that they were now part of a
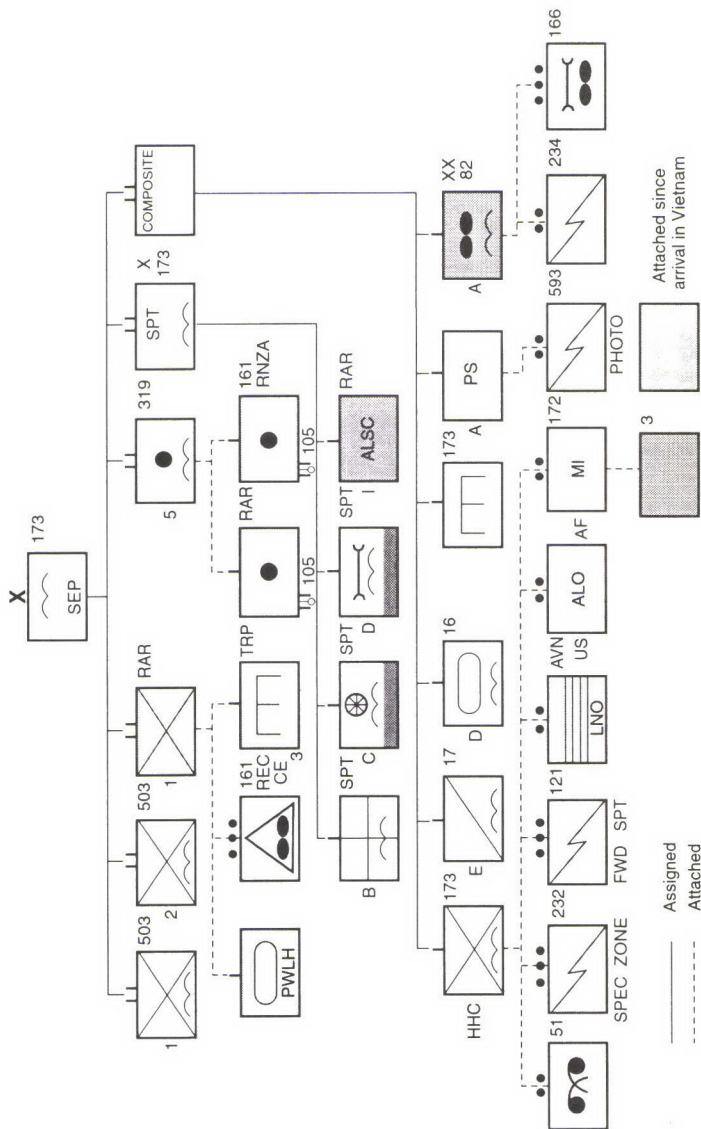
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2   ibid., p.89.
3   ibid., p.86.
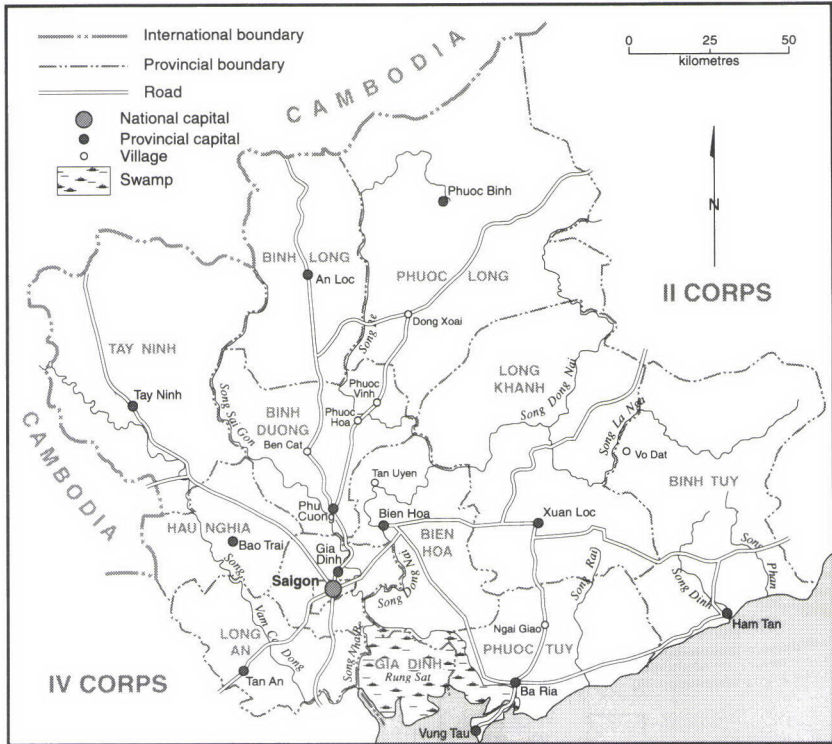4   Address to CGS Exercise 1966, Lieutenant Colonel I. Brumfield and Lieutenant Colonel A. Preece, AWM 102 Box 1[2].

Figure 2: Organisation of the 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate) Including 1RAR, May 1965

Figure 3: III Corps Tactical Zone in 1965

very different kind of war from that for which they had prepared.[5] The battalion's operations officer, Major John Essex-Clark, noted this difference in his memoirs, stating that:

> an air-mobile assault is a roller-coaster helicopter ride accompanied by a screeching Wagner and a thundering Guy Fawkes. It is madness, and the surrealism makes me laugh with incredulity. It is adventure, it is excitement, but it is utter fantasyland ... what on earth are the VC thinking as they slip away from all this bother?[6]

Initial operations highlighted this divergence of approach; in its first operation 1RAR was tasked to search and clear an area of 25 square kilometres within the Bien Hoa area within an allocated time period of just over twenty-four hours.[7] The limited time available for exploiting gains made on operations was generally the result of programming of future operations on a rigid time scale by higher headquarters.[8] For an area of this size, Australian doctrine would have allowed over three days, with time allocated to searching areas thoroughly and setting ambushes after following up signs of the enemy.[9] The fast-moving, aggressive American tactics unsettled Australian commanders and precluded the application of many of the battalion's greatest strengths, such as silent patrolling, ambushing and searching. Australian tactical methods were hampered further by the strong personal control exercised over the brigade by its commanding general. Williamson had raised and trained the brigade and had stamped his personality on all aspects of its operations. No decision was taken by the brigade's staff without reference to him, and unit and sub-unit commanders enjoyed little scope for tactical initiative. This precluded the wide-scale pattern of dispersed operations that had characterised Australian counter-revolutionary warfare exercises prior to deployment.[10] The commanding officer of 1RAR, Lieutenant Colonel I. R. W. Brumfield, was wary of American tactics and sought

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5   McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.172.
6   John Essex-Clark, *Maverick Soldier: An Infantryman's War* (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1991), p.84.
7   McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.98.
8   Address to CGS Exercise 1966, Lieutenant Colonel I. Brumfield and Lieutenant Colonel A. Preece, AWM 102 1[2].
9   Australian Army, Military Board, *Patrolling and Tracking*, p.46.

to protect the battalion from the consequences of overly-aggressive American tactics as much as possible. By and large he was successful, and gradually the battalion acquired a greater degree of operational autonomy.[11]

While differences in tactical methods and operating procedures did cause some early problems, none proved intractable and most were solved relatively quickly. An analysis of the changes to tactics and techniques within the battalion was made by its officers upon return to Australia, which highlighted four main areas that underwent change or required new methods to be developed: airmobile planning, patrolling, employment of fire support, and low-level tactics.[12]

Helicopters provided the primary form of mobility for the brigade's operations. While not new to the Australian Army, the employment of helicopters in Vietnam was on a scale never before witnessed in Australia. The battalion had to learn to cope with the increases in air mobility that allowed large numbers of troops to be airborne at any one time, with the capacity to land in sizeable elements within minutes of one another. The 1RAR notes on operations were intended to enable officers to benefit from recent operational experience when interpreting existing doctrine.[13] In order to facilitate smooth, well-drilled airmobile deployments the battalion had to develop emplaning and deplaning drills and landing zone (LZ) rally procedures; refine the use of indirect fire support and offensive air support in LZ preparation; and develop effective command, control and liaison procedures - all of which allowed commanders to make best use of the flexibility inherent in airmobile operations.[14] This was not such a problem for soldiers at the junior level on the ground but it proved to be a major consideration for staff planners, becoming a contributing factor in the introduction of the battalion operations

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10   Address to CGS Exercise 1966, Lieutenant Colonel I. Brumfield and Lieutenant Colonel A Preece, AWM 102 1[2].

11   McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.100.

12   Australian Army, Directorate of Military Training, Training Information Bulletin Number 11: 'Lessons From Operations in Vietnam By 1 RAR' (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1966), pp.1-37.

13   ibid., p.2.

14   ibid.

officer to replace the adjutant as the commanding officer's principal staff officer in the headquarters.

While the objectives of patrolling did not really change during 1RAR's tour, several significant developments in patrol methods occurred as a result of having to conform to American operational intent. The paucity of accurate intelligence led to short-duration, highly aggressive patrolling, and for this reason two basic methods of deployment evolved. The first of these employed a battalion base area from which supporting artillery and the battalion headquarters could support the rifle companies. The battalion area of operations would be broken down into company search areas that would then be cleared by company patrols.[15] This meant that individual platoons were rarely too dispersed to come to each other's aid if in difficulty, and the chances of encountering an enemy group of sufficient strength to destroy a patrol before it could be reinforced was rendered less likely. This method was employed when time allowed more thorough searches to be conducted, and companies were allocated search areas which forced enemy groups fleeing from one advancing company into the search area of another. Operation Marauder, conducted south-west of Saigon between 1 and 7 January 1966, employed this method to search for the enemy 506 Local Force Battalion. On this operation the enemy was expected in company strength, and patrols were not permitted to search in less than company groups.[16] A variation on this theme, employed on Operation Hump, used patrol bases within a company's allocated area of operations, allowing individual platoon patrols to search the area by sectors. This method permitted a more detailed search of allocated areas but risked having platoons spread out more within an area of operations and thus increased the time it would take to come to the aid of a platoon caught in an engagement with the enemy.[17]

When time was limited, sub-units generally moved from point to point on a pre-arranged schedule.[18] When this method was

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15 Address to CGS Exercise 1966, Lieutenant Colonel I. Brumfield and Lieutenant Colonel A. Preece, AWM 102 Box 1[2].
16 ibid.
17 ibid.; McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.142.
18 Australian Army, Directorate of Military Training, Training Information Bulletin No.11, 'Lessons From Operations in Vietnam By 1 RAR', p.13.

employed on Operation Smash, between 17 and 21 December 1965,[19] the battalion was inserted into a landing zone and then patrolled through sectors to an extraction point.[20] Although large areas could be searched and the enemy's plans upset, albeit temporarily, the short duration of such operations resulted in little long-term damage to enemy capabilities.

A brief comparison of the relative success of these two operations reveals that where greater time was allocated to search operations, improved results usually followed. Operation Marauder allowed seven days for the battalion to search a 20 square kilometre area, resulting in one enemy killed and six enemy wounded, with several bunkers, caches of rice and medical supplies located and destroyed, together with two sixteen-metre-long sampans. In contrast, Operation Smash allowed only four days to search a 59 square kilometre area, resulting in only two enemy killed and two camps located.[21] While several factors, including lower levels of enemy presence and a less effective brigade plan, could have contributed to the lower level of success in Operation Smash, there is little doubt that when time was allocated to searching, even within the confines of high-tempo dispersed operations, the effort was attended by greater success.

On arrival in Vietnam 1RAR was not fully prepared for the techniques of planning air support and had only limited knowledge of the use of artillery.[22] This gave rise to several changes in techniques and methods both within the battalion's headquarters and on the ground with the rifle companies. The legacy of pentropic, SEATO-based concepts on pre-deployment combined-arms training has been noted earlier, and it was this that contributed to the generally low standard of preparation evident in fire-control procedures. The secrecy and speed which surrounded 1RAR's deployment to Vietnam left no time to remedy this situation, even if its significance had been realised

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19 McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.442.
20 Training Information Bulletin No.11, 'Lessons From Operations in Vietnam By 1 RAR', p.18.
21 McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.442.
22 Training Information Bulletin No.11, 'Lessons From Operations in Vietnam By 1 RAR', p.19.

prior to commitment overseas.[23] In addition, the amount of fire support available to 1RAR from US sources was on a scale never before experienced in Australia. Even when fire support was available on exercises in Australia, it was rarely provided by more than a single field battery; by contrast, the combined use of the battalion's mortars, the direct support field battery, US medium guns, helicopter gunships and offensive air support by tactical fighters required a level of coordination never before experienced by the Australians.

The solution lay in the development of the Fire Planning Group, consisting of the commanding officer, the direct support battery commander, the officer commanding support company acting in the role of operations officer (US equivalent S3), the mortar platoon commander and a USAF forward air controller (FAC) when required.[24] These individuals worked in concert to solve the significant problems inherent in the provision of fire support: intelligence and air clearance. The general lack of intelligence made the task of fixing the enemy and using fire support to destroy them difficult, giving rise to the increased use of harassing fire on suspected enemy approaches, possible mortar sites and supply routes.[25] The most important local aspect to fire planning was the extremely heavy density of air traffic, and the problems of clearance which this presented delayed many fire missions beyond a reasonable period of time. This was caused primarily by a delay in communications between the artillery battalion fire direction centre and the air control groups, or by a lack of coordination and urgency between clearance agencies. To combat this, an air grid system was developed and employed, which enabled airspace users and fire units to communicate directly.[26]

While on operations the resolution of these problems was the responsibility of the newly created fire control centre (FCC), run primarily by the direct support battery commander and the mortar platoon commander. While the FCC was co-located with the battalion command post and provided communication, liaison and control for

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23 Robert Breen, 'Problems of an Expeditionary Force - First Battalion Royal Australian Regiment in 1965', *Defence Force Journal*, No.60, September/October 1986, p.30.
24 Training Information Bulletin No.11, 'Lessons From Operations in Vietnam By 1 RAR', p.18.
25 ibid., p.19.
26 ibid.

all the battalion's supporting fire, it was not yet incorporated as an integral component of the headquarters and required either field telephone or radio communications to pass information.[27] Refinements of this system would come later in the army's commitment to Vietnam as the fire control centre was incorporated into the headquarters and air clearance became the responsibility of the unit controlling the ground over which the clearance was requested.

On the ground, the provision of fire support also caused some particular problems which training in Australia had not been able to simulate adequately. There had been little realistic demonstration of the effects which different types of fire actually produced on differing targets on the ground, nor had the importance of ranging artillery by sound rather than by sight in the close confines of the jungle been demonstrated adequately.[28] Officers down to the company level were also expected to be trained fully in the conduct of an air strike in support of a sub-unit while conducting operational movement.[29] Problems caused by difficulties in navigation and the dense canopy made the accurate spotting of targets by forward air controllers and pilots difficult, which further compounded problems of fire support and close air support. As a result, the effectiveness of fire support varied widely.[30]

Differing attitudes to the provision of fire support also created the potential for friction between allies. Previous US operational experiences and the limited war role of the US brigade resulted in tactics based upon superior fire power and aggression, with a willingness to use massed artillery as a standard tactic during both offensive and defensive operations. By contrast the Australians, both as a result of previous experience and in response to general parsimony in defence resources, tended to use artillery very cautiously. Commenting on the American pactice of firing 'harassing

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27 ibid., p.18.
28 Training Information Bulletin No.11, 'Lessons From Operations in Vietnam By 1 RAR', p.19. One assessment noted it as being between 28 and 80 per cent effective, depending on local circumstances.
29 Address to CGS Exercise 1966, Lieutenant Colonel I. Brumfield and Lieutenant Colonel A. Preece, AWM 102 Box 1[2].
30 Training Information Bulletin No.11, 'Lessons From Operations in Vietnam By 1 RAR', p.21.

and interdiction' artillery tasks during the night, Essex-Clark noted that 'H and I [was] new to me because I had never had the luxury of inexhaustible 105 millimetre ammunition'.[31] American infantry battalions provided NCOs as artillery forward observers to their companies, a practice that tended to unsettle Australian company commanders who were accustomed to having captains allocated from the artillery battery as their artillery observers.[32] Artillery signal procedures differed also. As a result of the US practice of sending artillery defensive fire targets (DFs) in clear (uncoded) speech over the radio, at least one company commander stopped using them to protect his harbours at night.[33]

Awareness in combined arms techniques was not limited to the coordination of fire support. A valuable legacy of the airmobile concept upon which the 1RAR battle group had been based was the lightweight Italian L5 pack howitzer, with which the Australian 105th Field Battery was equipped. Its design allowed the weapon to be disassembled for movement by helicopter and thus be flown into a landing zone during an airmobile assault to provide fire support before road convoys towing heavier artillery arrived. Limited helicopter support available while training in Australia precluded practice of this technique, however, and Operation Hump saw Australian artillery committed to action by air for the first time during the battery's first operation in Vietnam.[34]

Operation Crimp presented 1RAR with the challenge of searching and attempting to destroy large-scale tunnel and bunker complexes for the first time, and the developments in engineer techniques that resulted provided the basis for large-scale revision in engineer training and employment. As noted above, engineer training on exercises in Australia and during anticipated overseas deployments

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31 Essex-Clark, *Maverick Soldier*, p.108. H and I tasks were artillery missions fired at random intervals during the night on suspected enemy supply routes or possible mortar or rocket sites. They were intended to unsettle the enemy and make them feel that nowhere was safe.

32 Address to CGS Exercise 1966, Lieutenant Colonel I. Brumfield and Lieutenant Colonel A. Preece, AWM 102 Box 1[2].

33 Interview, Colonel I.D. MacFarlane, Canberra, 11 June 1997; A DF target was a pre-registered artillery mission which was laid on the enemy's most likely approach to a position. In the event of an enemy attack, it could be fired by the guns with a minimum of delay.

34 McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.161.

emphasised large-scale engineering tasks such as road and airfield construction, and left sappers unprepared for tasks related specifically to counter-revolutionary warfare.[35] Conventional engineer wisdom dictated centralising engineers to the greatest possible extent, a sensible notion when conducting large-scale, labour-intensive tasks, but one which was unsuited to providing engineer support to dispersed company operations. In response to this problem, Major Ian MacFarlane, commanding B Company, broke the six engineers allocated to his company down into three two-man 'splinter' teams'.[36] These teams could then be sent forward to the rifle platoons as they were required. This practice was latter developed on Operation Roundhouse to allow an engineer team to be attached to a platoon at the start of an operation and left there until its conclusion.[37] The experiences during Operation Crimp proved valuable to the engineer troop in Vietnam, and to the School of Military Engineering in Australia, both in developing approaches to tunnel search and clearance and in dealing with booby traps. Despite this, 1RAR's commanding officer noted after the battalion's return to Australia that further development of techniques and equipment for tunnel search and destruction was needed, which contributed to later developments during the task force's operations in 1966.[38]

Such differences in operating methods and aspects of tactics as existed, were simply concrete expressions of a much higher level divergence of perspective on how the war should be conducted The situation which had existed when the government agreed to send troops to Vietnam had changed. Initial troop placements were based upon the American enclave strategy, which envisaged controlled base areas, such as Bien Hoa, gradually being extended to meet up with other expanding controlled areas. This had obvious analogies with the expanding White Area/ Black Area strategy that had been successful in Malaya, and with which the Australian defence establishment, in particular the army, was familiar. By the time 1RAR had arrived and

35 28 Commonwealth Infantry Brigade Group, Training Instruction No.2/61, CRS A6059\2, 65/441/167.

36 Interview, Colonel I.D. MacFarlane, Canberra, 11 June 1997; McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.167.

37 MacFarlane Papers, 3 Rd Tp RAE, Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation 3-66, CD 83/OPS 1-18 1965 + MISC.

38 Address to CGS Exercise 1966, Lieutenant Colonel I. Brumfield and Lieutenant Colonel A. Preece, AWM 102 Box 1[2].

had conducted its initial operations, this strategy had given way to Westmoreland's Search and Destroy strategy, and it was upon this approach that the battalion's short-duration, widely dispersed operational pattern would be based. It demonstrated the degree to which Australian operational methods had diverged from those of the United States.[39] While minor problems in tactical methods could usually be reconciled sufficiently to permit effective operational performance, general Australian principles on the conduct of a counter-revolutionary warfare campaign - such as population control and civic action - were not easily adapted to fit in with American higher strategy for the prosecution of the war.

From a national perspective, the success with which 1RAR integrated into a larger national force so quickly and effectively was a credit to the unit, but despite this the experience of working alongside the Americans during 1965-66 had profound effects upon the development of Australian tactical methods in subsequent years. Whether the experiences of 1RAR are examined from the perspective of operating concepts, tactics, battle and staff procedures or roles and missions, major variations existed.[40] The commitment of the battalion within an American brigade highlighted the fundamental differences between Australian and American concepts and illustrated to the Australians some significant deficiencies in tactics and techniques. The resolution of some of these problems through the creation of the fire coordination centre or the splinter team remained with the army for the whole of its commitment to Vietnam, while adaptations such as coping with American artillery procedures and patrol methods diminished in importance with the deployment of an independent task force.

In some respects the sharply differing nature of American and Australian tactics served to focus and clarify counter-revolutionary warfare doctrine within Australia. Even though American big-unit warfare surprised and unsettled the Australians at the time, with the benefit of hindsight some officers, including the commanding officer and at least one of his company commanders, are more sanguine about

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39 McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.120.
40 ibid., p.101.

the battalion's experiences.[41] The former officer commanding B Company, Major Ian MacFarlane, notes wryly that the circumstances with which the battalion was faced in 1965 would have precluded the implementation of Australian doctrine to any significant degree, even if the opportunity had arisen.[42] Instead, the style of war with which the Australians were presented forced them to confront weaknesses in their training and organisation far more quickly than might have been necessary had Australian methods alone been employed. After several years of reliance upon theory, the Australian Army's enemy now had concrete form and substance, and this enemy's form was adopted quickly by the army's schools and units. Various papers written by the officers of the battalion were disseminated around the army and served to inform and interpret existing doctrine, while other procedures which had no existing parallel, such as the battalion's technique of airmobile command and control, were adopted in their entirety to form the basis of the task force's standard operating procedures. 1RAR's experience helped to refine and develop Australian counter-revolutionary warfare techniques in preparation for the introduction of a much more independent Australian military presence in Vietnam.

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41 Interview, Colonel I.D. MacFarlane, Canberra, 11 June 1997; McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.172.

42 Interview, Colonel I.D. MacFarlane, Canberra, 11 June 1997.

CHAPTER 3

AN INDEPENDENT TASK FORCE: MAY 1966-JANUARY 1968

The experiences of working alongside the Americans were mixed, and although 1RAR had conducted itself in the field with proficiency, frustrations over Australian inability to determine independent roles and missions matched reservations within army headquarters about committing Australian forces to Vietnam solely within a US context. As a result, as early as June 1965 the Chief of the Genberal Staff, Lieutenant General J.N. Wilton, was planning to increase the Australian commitment to a task force,[1] although in May 1965 a battalion was all the army was able to provide for service in South Vietnam. With one battalion in Malaysia, a group of 100 advisers already in Vietnam, and with the manpower increases that national service would provide not yet able to be drawn on, a battalion was all that was immediately available. Wilton and his successor as Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General T. J. Daly, understood that the commitment of a task force would allow Australian forces to adopt roles and tasks more suited to the employment of Australian doctrine and would allow Australia to make a significant and identifiable national contribution to the war. As a later Commander, Australian Force Vietnam (COMAFV), Major-General K. Mackay, explained:

> When a nation goes to war even in a small way, there is an understandable desire to receive credit and publicity. The result is that one seeks to form a nationally separate operational unit and then formation as soon as possible, and keep the national effort concentrated. At times the political implications of a planned deployment are more important than purely local military factors.[2]

This is not to say that the decision to increase the Australian contribution was based solely upon a desire to nurture national pride.

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[1]   David Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No.40 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1986), p.12.

[2]   ibid.

The tactical role of a battalion within a task force was significantly different from that of a task force within a division.[3] A task force enjoyed a measure of self-sufficiency which a battalion did not, and due to its organisation and staffing a task force could accept between one and four battalions under command, an expanded regiment of field artillery, medium artillery, supporting armour and engineers, an independent and effective intelligence organisation, together with integral logistic elements, all commanded by a headquarters that was sufficiently large to allow forward planning as well as control of current operations[4] (see Figure 4). The advantages which this conferred were many, because in theory a task force could operate independently of American control, thus allowing employment of distinctly national doctrine and operational methods. An independent task force would not be subject to the same level of operational interference as a lone battalion.

In broad terms the task force had two main tasks, the first being to conduct operations to destroy or at least neutralise the enemy main and regional forces, and the second being to dismantle the Viet Cong infrastructure within the villages. This strategy largely fitted with the Australian doctrinal model, since it was based upon the idea of Australian military forces working in concert with the local authorities to ensure the destruction of the enemy and a return to lawful civil government. What happened, in effect, was that the level of implied cooperation between Australian forces and province authorities was much lower than anticipated. The parallel and integrated civil/military structure that had been the basis of success in Malaya, and upon which much of Australian counter-revolutionary warfare method was based, simply did not exist in South Vietnam. At the commencement of operations on 20 May 1966[5] the task force did not have responsibility for the security of Phuoc Tuy Province. The province's chief, Colonel Le Duc Dat, held that responsibility and was in control of the provincial organisation of regional force companies

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3   The 'task force' nomenclature was a carryover from the pentropic establishment. A task force maintained more inherent flexibility than a true triangular-pattern British brigade, but it remained the command headquarters which fitted between a battalion and a division.

4   McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.179.

5   Commander's Diary, HQ 1 ATF, May 1966, General Summary May 1966, AWM 95 1/4/1.

Figure 4: 1ATF Organisation
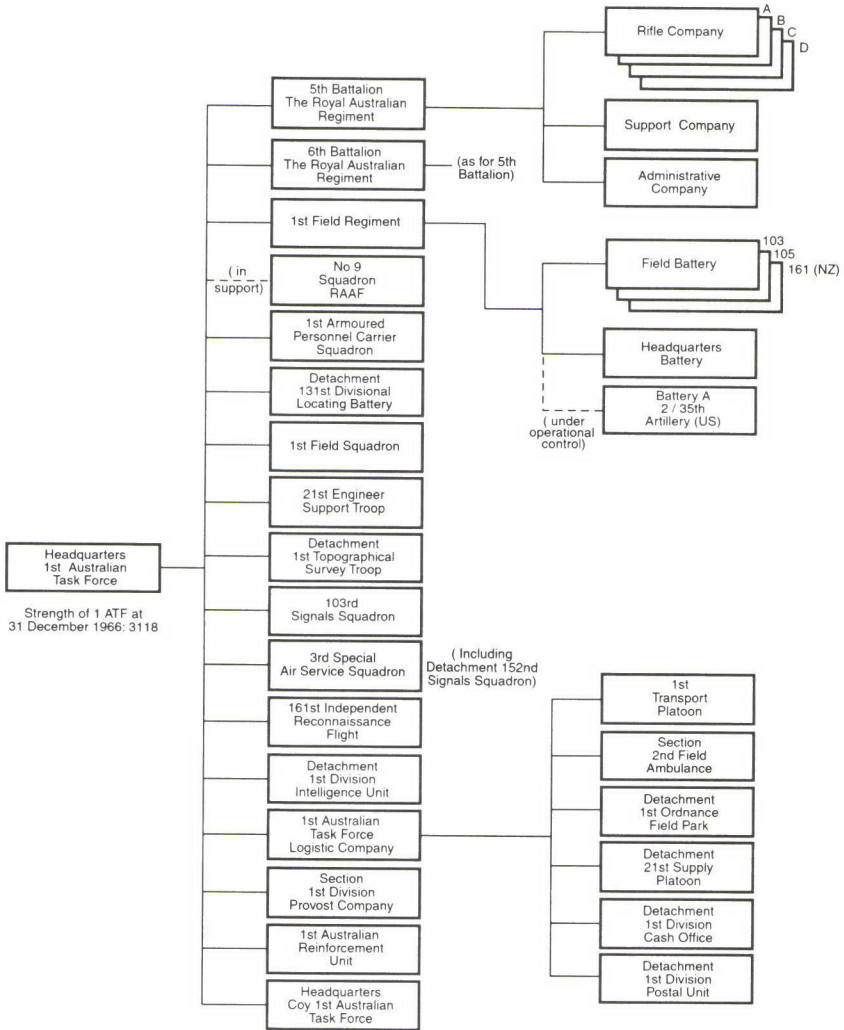
and popular force platoons and the one regular ARVN battalion, as well as the support of the US Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) advisers.[6] While the premise governing the introduction of a task force was well founded, the reality of operations soon indicated that combating the enemy in Phuoc Tuy would not be accomplished without a great deal of adaptation and some compromise of existing operational methods. The army would face a situation in which its operational methods were hamstrung by the pressure of operational necessity and by an unrealistic assignment of roles. As noted, the task force had two separate operational priorities, conventional operations and pacification, but each would require a major effort from 1ATF which was beyond the capabilities of the units assigned to it. From the beginning of its operations, attempts to apply Australian doctrine would force the task force to conduct simultaneous conventional operations to neutralise the main force units while conducting continuous pacification operations in the villages, with neither assigned the priority it deserved.[7]

It quickly became apparent that within these roles the task force would be called upon to perform four main tasks, all different. First, the task force would be responsible for maintaining the security of its base area through intensive patrolling. Second, it had within its assigned role the dominance of its tactical area of responsibility within the province; this included a requirement to conduct highway security operations on Route 15 within the boundaries of the province. Third, it was to assist with pacification operations within Phuoc Tuy as required. Finally, it was to be available to conduct operations anywhere within the III CTZ, as agreed with COMUSMACV - the so-called 'out of province tasks' which would employ the task force outside Phuoc Tuy for much of 1968 and 1969.[8] The task force faced enormous difficulty in attempting to meet these varied tasks. In response, the commanders of the units within 1ATF refined and developed tactical methods in the conduct of search and destroy
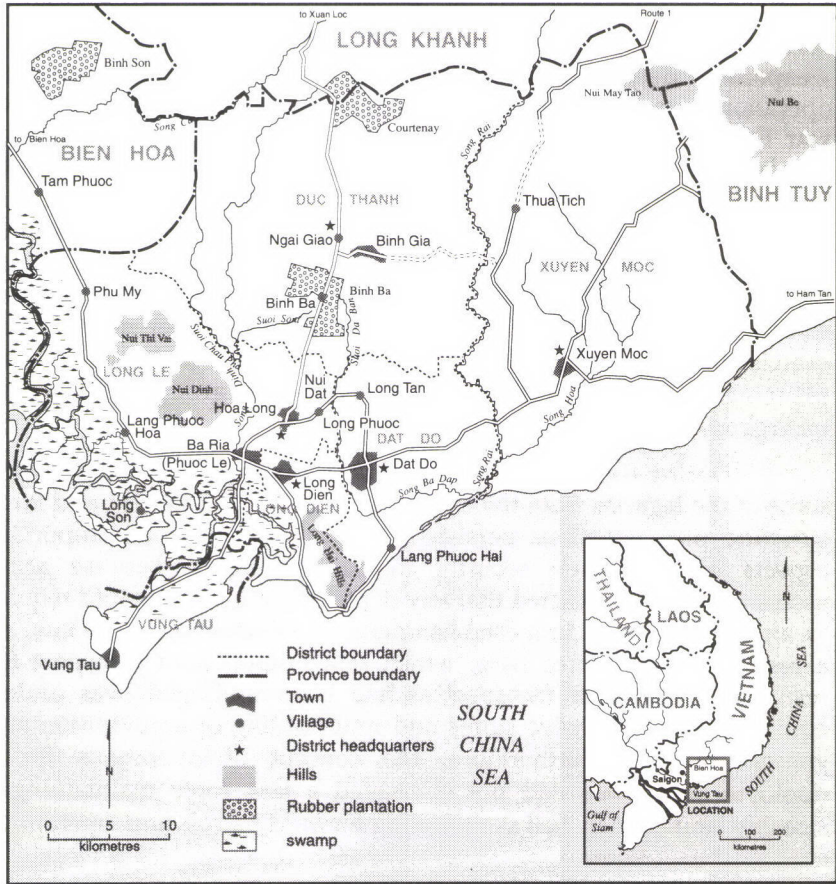
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6   Lecture by Brigadier S.C. Graham, Brisbane 1968, on 1ATF Operations in South Vietnam, copy in author's possession.
7   Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, pp.28-9.
8   McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.238.

Figure 5: Phuoc Tuy Province

operations and cordon and search tasks as well as base security (see Figure 5).

The purpose of the first assigned role was the establishment of a controlled area free of civilians out to mortar range to prevent the enemy from hiding among the population and launching surprise attacks against the base. It also gave the soldiers the ability to fire their weapons in defence without fear of hitting civilians. Initial clearing operations around Nui Dat owed much of their conception to the pre-war Exercise Sky High of 1963. Operation Hardihood, the clearance and initial base security operation, required the infantry battalions to conduct saturation patrolling out to medium mortar range,[9] designated Line Alpha, during which the task force had its first fleeting encounters with small groups of enemy.[10] The initial task force commander, Brigadier O.D. Jackson, had been Director of Infantry during Exercise Sky High and had been responsible for much of the exercise planning.[11] Furthermore this operation reflected general army planning for the introduction of a task force-sized group to counter an insurgency in Southeast Asia (see Figure 6).[12]

During the early stages of the task force's build-up operations some of the legacies from the earlier pentropic establishment and force structure preconceptions persisted, and this caused some important aspects of the base's security to be prejudiced. Because army assessments had predicted that any deployment in Asia would require an air-portable force, unit establishments of vehicles were very low. As a result, the task force base, which relied upon road transport for resupply and not air transport as had been envisaged, was under-equipped with defensive stores and unit holding of ammunition and general stores.[13] Furthermore, the concept of operations for a deployment in Asia had not envisaged a task force maintaining a sizeable land base as well as mounting forward patrols and operations

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9   Commander's Diary, 1 HQ 1ATF, May 1966, OPLAN HARDIHOOD, AWM 95 1/4/1.

10   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, May 1966, General Summary 1-31 May 1966, AWM 95 1/4/2.

11   McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.18.

12   Concept of Operations - South Vietnam, CRS A6059/2, 40/441/19.

13   Robert O'Neill, 'Australian Military Problems in Vietnam', *Australian Outlook*, Vol.23, No.1, 1969, p.51.

Figure 6: 1ATF Tactical Area of Responsibility
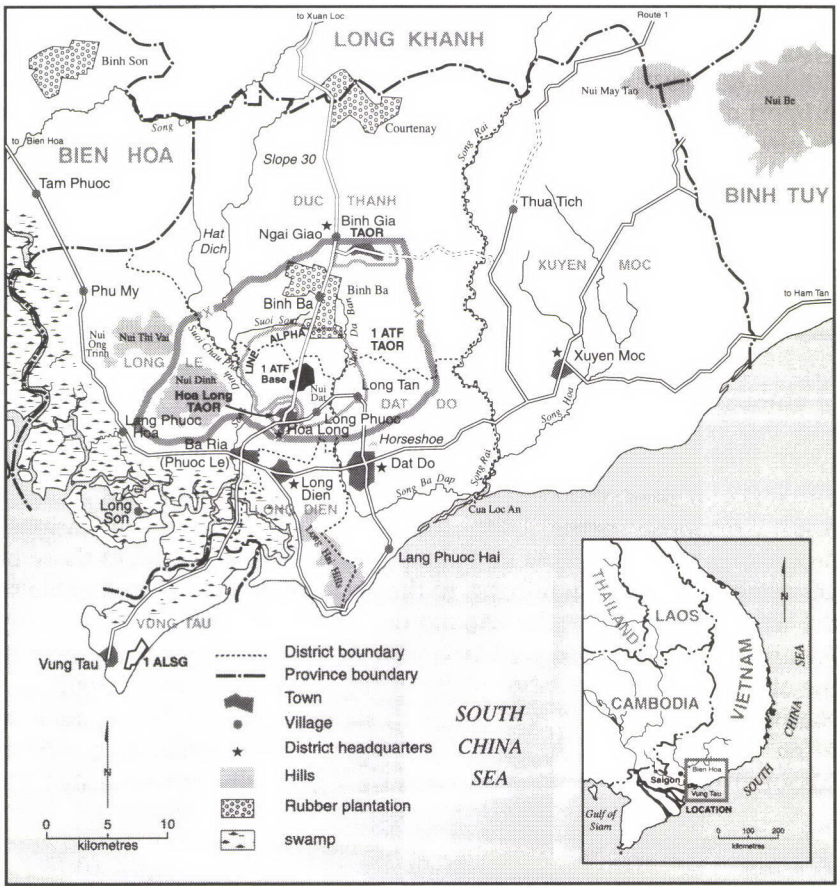
in depth, and thus holdings of machine guns and communications equipment were strained severely.[14]   As a consequence, the rifle companies were forced to leave machine guns behind when on patrol to protect the task force base.[15]

Operations were characterised initially by near-constant patrolling on the part of the two battalions. Both units noted problems, similar to those which 1RAR had encountered, with the use of air support on a large scale,[16] while in-theatre airmobile training was still required despite the fact that 1ATF standard operating procedures for airmobile planning were taken directly from 1RAR's notes on operations and later issued as standard operating procedures.[17] Both 5RAR and 6RAR had had a much longer period of warning for operations in Vietnam and had benefited from information passed back to Australia by 1RAR, but despite these advantages adequate helicopter training had still not been conducted before departure overseas. The major reason for this appears to have been a general lack of enthusiasm for ground support tasking on the part of the RAAF, and this manifested itself in several ways. Jackson, as Commander 1ATF declared as a consequence that 'there is still a fundamental difference in basic thinking between the army and the RAAF'.[18] As a result, response times were inadequate and RAAF operational procedures appeared slow and cumbersome in comparison to those of US aviation units.[19] In fairness to the air force, it was unreasonable of the army to compare the capabilities of the RAAF and US Army Aviation units too closely. Rotary-wing aircraft were relatively new to the air force and even those pilots in the RAAF who understood and championed the use of helicopters to support ground forces, such as Wing Commander R. A. Scott, No.9 Squadron's commanding officer, laboured under restrictions imposed by a generally unresponsive Air

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14   ibid.
15   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, July 1966, General Comments July 1966, AWM 95 1/4/4.
16   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, July 1966, General Comments August 1966, Notes From Commander's Conference, AWM 95 1/4/6.
17   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, October 1966, Standard Operating Procedures Book 1 Parts 1-6, AWM 95 1/4/14.
18   Commander's Dairy, HQ 1ATF, July 1966, General Summary July 1966, AWM 95 1/4/4.
19   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, June 1966, Minutes of Meeting to Discuss RAAF Air Support Between BRIG Jackson and GPCAPT Raw, AWM 95 1/4/4.

Staff in Australia.[20] For most of the air force, helicopters were something of a Cinderella element, which held little interest for an organisation dominated by bomber and fighter pilots. Despite this, many defenders of the air force's performance in Vietnam point to the way in which the RAAF was forced to deploy helicopters overseas with little warning, usually attributed to army pressure, as an excuse for poor operational readiness upon arrival. It is true that No.9 Squadron was deployed on short notice, but the resultant lack of preparedness had more to do with inter-service politics and with the recalcitrance of air force higher command than with operational requirements. Chris Coulthard-Clark has pointed out that:

> A complaint on these grounds might find little sympathy among services who pride themselves with thoughtful anticipation of real requirements, and in this case it deserves even less. As early as 1965 the Army had signalled its thoughts on the desirability of helicopter support for 1RAR in Vietnam and received a cold rebuff from the RAAF. The Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Murdoch, *may* have been justified in terms of resource allocation for the stance he took, but the terms in which he rejected the Army's suggestion were tactless at best.[21]

Conventional wisdom within the army regarded helicopters as an integral part of the land battle and held that the ground commander should determine their tactical employment. The physical separation of No.9 Squadron at Vung Tau and the task force at Nui Dat made dealing with this problem all the more difficult, and it was never resolved satisfactorily during the whole of the task force's operations in Vietnam. The problem was eased by the development of greater faith in the task force on the part of the RAAF, and by a relocation of the RAAF ground liaison section from Vung Tau to 1ATF headquarters at Nui Dat.[22] Both these developments signalled a greater willingness on the part of the RAAF to meet the operational

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20   Chris Coulthard-Clark, *The RAAF in Vietnam: Australian Air Involvement in the Vietnam War 1962-1975* (Allen & Unwin in assoc. with the Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 1995), pp.130-48.
21   Chris Coulthard-Clark, 'The Australian Experience of Air/Land Operations: Vietnam' in Grey and Dennis, *From Past to Future*, p.135.
22   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, June 1966, Minutes of Meeting to Discuss RAAF Air Support Between BRIG Jackson and GPCAPT Raw, AWM 95 1/4/4.

needs of the battalions, but it was the product of time and personal contact between individuals.

The limited resources of the task force meant that only one battalion could be deployed away from the base on extended operations at any one time, while the other was tied down on close protection patrols and manning the defensive positions of the base area.[23] When troops were deployed away from the task force base, the tactics developed reflected much of the uncertainty and hesitancy which characterised this period. Unlike later periods of task force operations, search and destroy tasks were conducted at battalion level, with units assigned relatively small areas in which to search, precluding free-ranging, dispersed operations. General operational patterns involved the occupation of a fire support patrol base and company patrolling within specified sub-unit areas, permitting a considerable level of physical control over sub-units by commanding officers. During this period artillery support was mandatory for all operations, due to an understandable unwillingness to be left without fire support if a large encounter with a still relatively unknown enemy occurred,[24] and calling for artillery became a standard procedure within the task force as soon as contact with an enemy was made.[25]

The pattern of searching resembled that developed by 1RAR during 1965-66, with companies employing either a patrol base from which platoon patrols could be sent, or a patrol route which allowed a whole company to search across a wide frontage. Patrol bases were not occupied for more than 6-8 hours, which was a significant departure from past Australian experience and doctrine, which envisaged occupying patrol bases for a minimum of 48 hours, and serves to highlight the caution which limited intelligence forced upon the battalion sub-unit tactics.[26]

While intelligence suggested that two main force regiments and one local battalion were active in the Australian TAOR, it was

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23   McNeill, *To Long Tan*, pp.250-60.
24   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, July 1966, 1ATF Operational Analysis July 1966, AWM 95 1/4/5.
25   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, August 1966, 1ATF Operational Analysis August 1966, AWM 95 1/4/7.
26   Commander's Dairy, 5RAR, July 1966, Sub Unit Operational Analysis - Operation SYDNEY, AWM 95 7/5/6 Part 2.

unable to provide a reliable indication of their locations or intentions.[27] As an example of the consequences of this uncertainty, Operation Hobart II (a proposed cordon and search of Duc My village) was postponed while 6RAR was deployed on a clearing operation (Operation Brisbane) to ensure the security of the task force base.[28] Uncertainty as to the location of the VC Main Force led Jackson to mount operations to try to find it, and if not to destroy it, then at least to keep it away from the main centres of population.

By September 1966 the task force was able to consolidate what it had achieved and conduct the last operations, involved closely with ensuring the security of the task force base.[29] During the latter part of 1966 the pressure on the task force of maintaining search and destroy operations lessened, as the task force grew more confident of its ability to ensure the security of the base area and to deal effectively with the threat posed by the main force units. Within 5RAR this led to a re-evaluation of strategy which convinced the task force commander to allow the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel J. A. Warr, to begin a campaign targeting the Viet Cong infrastructure within the villages. 5RAR had conducted several cordon and search operations during the latter half of 1966, which had convinced Warr of the efficiency of targeting the villages rather than the main force units.[30] Operations Sydney II, Holsworthy and Yass had developed several skills relating to night movement, population control during a cordon, and command and control within the battalion which were later incorporated into standard operating procedures.[31] As a result of this

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[27] Commander's Dairy, HQ 1ATF, May 1966, 1ATF Intsum 1/66, AWM 95 1/4/1.

[28] Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, July 1966, General Summary July 1966, AWM 95 1/4/4.

[29] Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, September 1966, General Summary September 1966, AWM 95 1/4/12.

[30] Commander's Diary, HQ 1 ATF, September 1966, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation HOLSWORTHY, AWM 95 1/4/12 Part 1. During Operation Holsworthy in August 1966, the battalion had cordoned the town of Binh Ba and rendered the village guerrilla platoon ineffective, during which time the Australians had been employed for one day and not fired a shot. Seventeen Viet Cong were captured during this operation; months of patrolling and searching would normally have been required before anything approaching this success could be expected.

[31] John Warr, 'Cordon and Search Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province', *Australian Army Journal*, No.222, November 1967, pp.3-31.

success the new task force commander, Brigadier S. C. Graham, utilised 5RAR in cordon and search operations to implement his newly developed operational concept of concentrating on the population centres of Dat Do and Phuoc Hai, which were the recruiting ground for D445 Battalion.[32] As a consequence, 6RAR was used in the search and destroy role in order to keep pressure on D445 Battalion and the main force units.

Operation Sydney II illustrated that the crucial moment in a cordon and search operation was the closing of the cordon, and that the cordon should be closed immediately prior to first light. This allowed the cordon force to move into its final positions quickly, before the village awoke, and with the minimum chance of a patrol clash occurring as patrols moved onto cordon points from converging axes in the dark.[33] Lessons drawn from Sydney II included the need for a more efficient system of interrogating suspects,[34] and a requirement to present a more positive image of cordon operations to the villagers. As a consequence, later operations employed white tape rather than barbed wire to create compounds in the interview area, and the battalion band was employed to play music for the villagers.[35] Later operations, such as Operation Beaumaris, the cordon and search of An Nhut held on 13-14 February 1967, saw the development of a considerably more complex and effective screening and interrogation area, and much of the success in identifying enemy cadres during these later operations was owed to this system (see Figure 7).

Similar advances were made in the searching of villages and the clearing of fortified positions. 1RAR's commanding officer noted after Operation Crimp in January 1966 that improved methods of tunnel search and clearance and demolition of bunkers and caches were required by the engineers supporting the battalion, and by June 1966 Operation Enoggera demonstrated that such developments had taken place. This operation was aimed at destroying the tunnels and

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32   Lecture by Brigadier S.C. Graham, Brisbane 1968, on 1ATF Operations in South Vietnam.

33   Commander's Diary, 5RAR, September 1966, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation SYDNEY, AWM 95 7/5/6 Part 2.

34   Commander's Diary, 5RAR, September 1966, A Company Sub-unit Operational Analysis Report - Operation SYDNEY, AWM 95 7/5/6 Part 2.
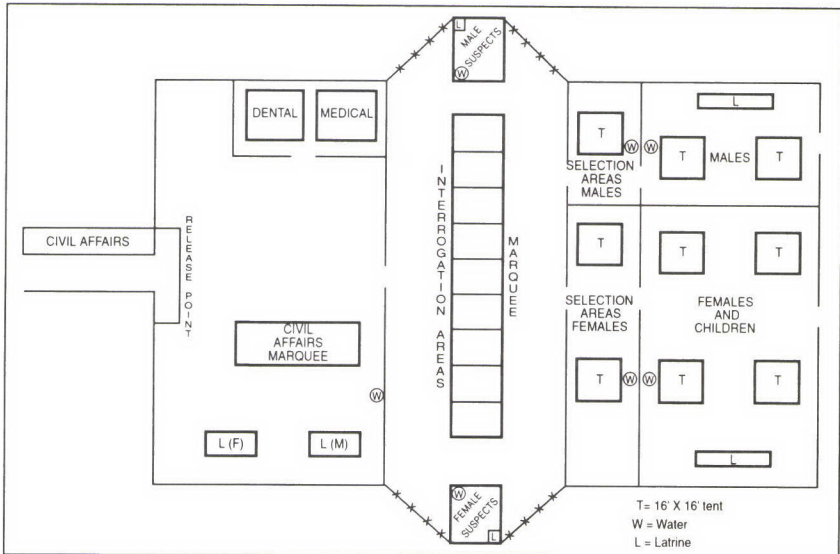
35   Warr, 'Cordon and Search Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province', p.13.

Figure 7: Comparative Layout of Cordon and Search Screening Centres 🌳
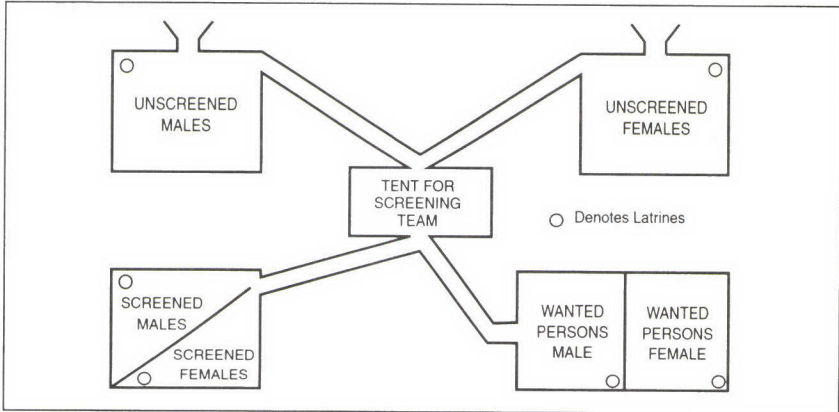
Doctrinal Cage Layout as suggested in Pamphlet 11

Screening Centre Layout developed by 5RAR 1966-67

Source: *The Division in Battle,* Pamphlet No.11, *Counter Revolutionary Warfare* (1965), p.135; and Warr, 'Cordon and Search Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province', p.14.

fortifications beneath the deserted village of Long Phuoc, and to achieve this 6RAR was allocated the whole of 1 Field Squadron RAE in support.[36] During the operation the engineers tested and evaluated six different items of equipment and techniques, including US acetylene gas-generating equipment for the destruction of tunnels and Australian-designed gas turbines for locating tunnel entrances, conventional explosives, an Australian-designed communications system for use by tunnel searchers, and a gas-sensing device.[37] An examination of 6RAR's organisation during this operation gives a sense of how lavish engineer support was during this period of task force operations, especially when it is noted that an engineer troop of one officer and approximately 30 men was the normal scale of support offered to an infantry battalion[38] (see Figure 8). While engineer support was lavish, the techniques of employing sappers in small, dispersed groups had not yet been perfected. Figure 8 indicates that while the numbers of engineers was high, their command and control was still very centralised.

This was the situation that existed by the beginning of 1967, and January 1967 brought a number of changes within the task force. This period also saw the handover of command of the task force from Brigadier Jackson to Brigadier Graham, and the new task force commander would develop an operational plan which took advantage of the advances already made in province security and was based upon much greater levels of intelligence than had been available to his predecessor. Graham recognised that destroying the main force units was an unrealistic aim, given the task force's still limited strength, and he concentrated his efforts on the local force battalion and the village guerrilla companies, acknowledging that destruction of one led to the destruction of the other.[39] The result of this was a renewed emphasis on specifically targeted search operations which supported pressure on the Viet Cong village infrastructure.

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36 Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, August 1966, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation ENOGGERA, AWM 95 1/4/8.
37 ibid.
38 ibid.
39 Lecture by Brigadier S.C. Graham, Brisbane 1968, on 1ATF Operations in South Vietnam.

Figure 8: Task Organisation of 6RAR during Operation Enoggera

Graham had a significant advantage over his predecessor due to the presence of the 9 US Division at Bearcat and the 11 US Armoured Cavalry Regiment at Camp Blackhorse, near the centre of 274 VC Main Force Regiment's usual area of operations. This allowed him to concentrate the efforts of the task force in the south and southeast of the province.[40] One of the keystones in this policy was the development of the barrier minefield between the task force's new advanced base area, at the Horseshoe, and the sea. This minefield would eventually be regarded as a costly mistake, with many of the mines it contained later being lifted by the enemy and used against task force soldiers, but at the time of construction it represented a new direction in operations.

Despite the new direction which the task force commander was anxious to pursue, the Americans still believed that pacification was a task better left to the South Vietnamese. While the Australians may have wished to spend more time on pacification operations, in line with their doctrine and experience, the task force commander could hardly deny that conducting large-scale operations alongside the Americans fell within the tasks assigned to them. The problems faced when attempting to operate according to the tenets of national doctrine, by a task force which was too small to encompass all the operational requirements of the force, were well illustrated.[41]

Following the resumption of sweep operations, 7RAR - one of the two newly rotated battalions within the task force - was forced to develop several new techniques for the command and control of large-scale operations and the coordination of fire support. The battalion's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Eric Smith, was the only one of the Vietnam-era commanding officers to have seen commissioned service within the 2nd AIF, and as a result of his experiences fighting the Japanese during the later stages of the New Guinea campaign held the effectiveness of supporting fires in high regard.[42] In consequence, 7RAR tended to employ fire support to a much greater degree than other battalions, and developed some unusual SOPs and techniques to facilitate its use.[43] The pattern of operations pursued by the task force

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40 ibid.
41 Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.30.
42 Interview, Colonel E.H. Smith, Canberra, 31 July 1997.
43 ibid.

contributed to this also, with 7RAR bearing much of the burden of operations in depth against D445, while 2RAR(ANZAC) tended to be employed in the south and southwestern areas of the province conducting pacification tasks.[44]

Smith considers that despite the work done by the task force during the initial twelve months in Vietnam, much of the province beyond the populated areas was unknown and thus extremely dangerous, resulting in a reluctance on his part to employ single platoons on patrolling operations without the remainder of the company close at hand.[45] As in previous unit tours, patrols were not permitted to operate outside the range of artillery and, as a consequence, 7RAR became very proficient at deploying in and out of fire support bases.

Patrol patterns were still reasonably closely controlled, with companies given strict sub-unit boundaries, with relatively little dispersion of platoons, allowing the company forward observers to be retained as a single party located either with the company headquarters or with the leading platoon. In order to allow companies to bring in very close fire support in the event of a contact, the mortar platoon was occasionally broken down to give each rifle company a section of two mortars in direct support. The flexibility which two mortars gave companies on operations allowed them to utilise close fire support in situations when terrain or position placed limitations on the effectiveness of artillery.[46] The value of this solution had been discussed in one of 6RAR's after-action reports the previous year, with both the commanding officer and the company commander involved concluding that firing mortars on primary charge allowed fire support to be brought within minimum range.[47] Smith had access to both 5RAR's and 6RAR's after-action reports while preparing 7RAR for

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[44]   Interview, Brigadier N.R. Charlesworth, Sydney, 23 July 1997; K.E. Newman (ed.), *The ANZAC Battalion - A Record of the Tour of 2RAR and 1 RNZIR in South Vietnam 1967-68* (Printcraft Press, Sydney, 1968), Volume 2, Operational Maps.

[45]   Interview, Colonel E.H. Smith, Canberra 31 July 1997.

[46]   ibid.; when an artillery target and the supported unit were in a direct line from the gun position, forcing artillery to fire down over the heads of troops in close contact, mountainous terrain or high tree canopy could cause problems with the safety of artillery by detonating rounds prematurely whilst still in flight.

[47]   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, August 1966, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation HOBART 1, AWM 95 1/4/11.

overseas service,[48] and had noted the utility of mortars at platoon and company level during the Korean War.

As a result of 7RAR's extensive use of fire support it became a standard operating procedure to respond to any contact report coming into the battalion command post with one ranging round from both the direct support battery and the mortar platoon, and thus fire support response became very fast and accurate. Utilisation of weight of fire was not limited to artillery, however, and sections developed the habit of firing a complete 100-round belt of machine gun fire on initial contact in order to cover their deployment.[49]

Unlike many commanding officers, Smith chose not to operate from his direct support helicopter, preferring to remain on the ground in the command post whenever possible. It was his belief that the poor radio fit of the light observation helicopter precluded him from commanding the battle to best effect. However he did employ the helicopter to carry the battalion's second-in-command in the role of an airborne safety officer for artillery missions and close air support tasks.[50]

It is clear that the desire to employ Australian operational methods and doctrine was a prime factor in the decision to expand Australia's commitment in Vietnam to an independent task force. What becomes clear also is that the form that the task force would take, with only two infantry battalions available, would be insufficient to allow many of the task force commander's intentions to be realised fully. As a result, the first year and a half of operations in Phuoc Tuy Province were a frustrating mix of successful pacification tasks and often fruitless operations in depth, many of which were instigated by the Americans. In response to these competing demands, the thinly stretched and often overworked units of the task force were forced to adapt existing operational methods to fit the reality of the tasks assigned to them. The development of 5RAR's specialised cordon and search methods and 7RAR's fire support coordination techniques are prime examples. What this period displays most clearly is the effect a higher commander's intentions have upon tactics at even the most

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48   Interview, Colonel E.H. Smith, Canberra, 31 July 1997.
49   ibid.
50   ibid.

basic level. The Australians were never forced to abandon the central tenets of their doctrine, namely methodical searching and population control, but the ubiquitous influence of the Americans stretched the Australians' desire to maintain their own unique doctrine almost to breaking point on some occasions.

CHAPTER 4

'OUT OF PROVINCE OPERATIONS': JANUARY 1968-JUNE 1969

The decision to add a third battalion (3RAR) to the task force in December 1967 had wide-reaching implications both in Australia and in Vietnam. It forced upon the army a requirement to raise and train another battalion in less than a year to meet the need for replacement and rotation, and allowed a significant expansion of the task force's capabilities, restricted to date by lack of manpower.[1] Of the two infantry battalions previously available, only one could be deployed on operations while the other was required to remain and protect the task force base.[2] With a third battalion deployed, two full battalions were available for operations and this gave the task force significantly more flexibility. Operations became longer and wider ranging as the task force began to seek out the enemy main force units which had, until that time, been too powerful to confront. A change of task force commander also affected the operational tempo of the task force. Brigadier C. M. I. Pearson, who took over command in September 1968, believed that the role of the task force was to destroy the enemy, as opposed to conducting pacification tasks.[3] The Tet offensives of 1968 and 1969 saw the role of the task force upgraded, correctly in Pearson's view, following requests from the Americans to take a greater role in operations outside the province and against the enemy main force.[4] As a result, 1ATF was deployed for significant periods outside Phuoc Tuy Province. These deployments often placed the task force astride major enemy routes of infiltration toward Saigon[5] (see Figure 9).

Between early 1968 and mid-1969, 1ATF was involved in a range of operations that differed significantly from those which had

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1   Brief to the CGS: Feasibility of a Third Battalion in 1ATF, AWM 101 Item 10.
2   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, May 1966, General Summary May 1966, AWM 95 1/4/1.
3   Interview, Major-General C.M.I. Pearson, Sydney, 24 July 1997.
4   Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.37.
5   Australian Army, Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', p.5.

Figure 9: 'Out of Province' Operational Area
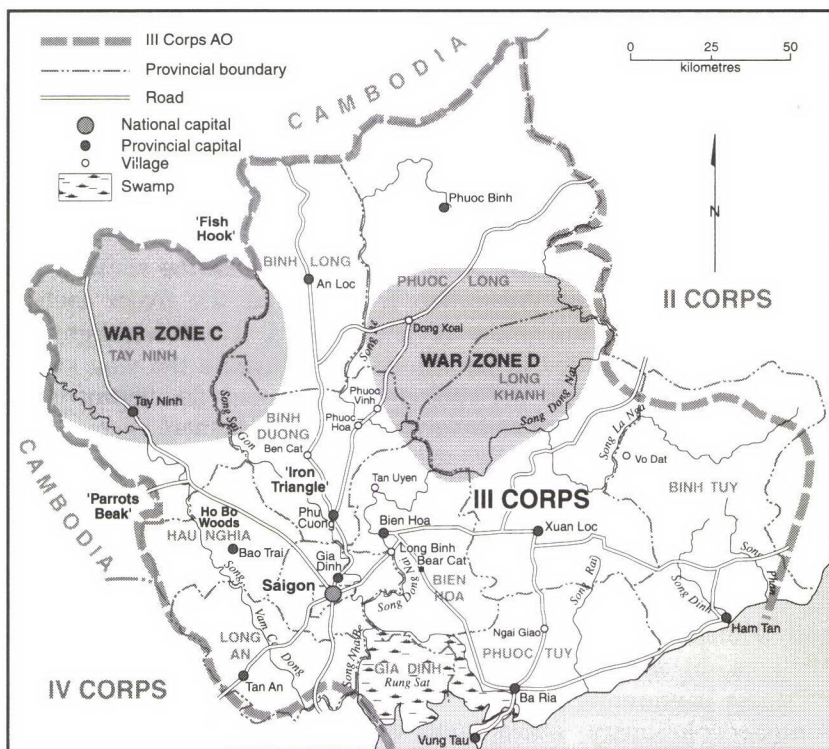
Source: Based on McAulay, *Contact: Australians in Vietnam.*

gone before.[6] The soldiers of the task force were now faced with a range of situations that led to one of the most concentrated periods of tactical development during the Australian commitment to Vietnam. The decision by North Vietnam to mount an unprecedented offensive in the South forced a change in operating methods at the task force level and a re-evaluation of some aspects of sub-unit tactics and techniques. Before this, tactics and techniques had moved through several distinct phases which were governed by lack of manpower as well as compromise and disharmony between the Australians and the Americans over the task force's true role. A resolution of manpower problems and an intensification of the war that led to an expansion of the task force's role produced a situation where tactical development was driven by purely technical factors.

This chapter has two aims. First, it will describe some of the methods by which the Australian force solved the major tactical challenges of the period under review. Second, it will highlight the way key skills continued to be refined and illustrate the way tactics and techniques remained the subject of continuous development for the duration of the Australian involvement in the Vietnam War.

The 'out of province' years provided two very different ranges of experience. On one hand, the increased intensity of the war forced onto commanders at all levels a requirement to develop a range of new measures in bunker tactics, improvements to armoured/infantry cooperation and the practice of defensive tactics, while on the other hand something very different occurred concurrently within the battalions. In addition to the major developments outlined above, minor yet continuous improvements and changes occurred in core counter-revolutionary warfare skills such as cordon and search, reconnaissance in force, ambushing, and convoy protection. As has been noted previously, operations such as patrolling, cordon and search and interdiction of enemy supply lines were major features of the first year and a half of task force operations. It is not suggested here that these operations were discontinued during the 'out of province' phase. These skills continued to develop, but at a slower pace, while the pace of development of new skills reflected a very steep learning curve. The development of the core skills in the first

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6   Horner (ed.), *Duty First*, p.228.

phase of the task force's operations represented a period during which the army consolidated the lessons learnt from pre-deployment exercises and initial operations. The lessons learnt during the 'out of province' years, on the other hand, forced the task force to relearn and reapply skills that had been outside the army's range of experience and training for some time.

Most infantry battalions, with the notable exception of those deployed in 1966-67, accumulated a wide range of experience in attacking bunker systems in close country.[7] The bunker system was generally not well understood initially by most levels of command and was one aspect of operations in Vietnam on which no emphasis had been placed during training prior to deployment.[8] The concept of attacking a strong point or defended locality was described in the relevant training pamphlet[9] but, despite this, practical experience of these skills had not been a feature of Australian counter-revolutionary warfare experience. For this reason it was accorded no priority in training, and in this the Malayan Emergency was clearly important in shaping perceptions of how the enemy would behave when confronted in its base areas. *Counter Revolutionary Warfare* stated that 'the enemy is likely to disperse at the first threat', and used this assertion as a basis for employing encircling tactics when confronting the enemy in a static location such as a camp.[10]

By contrast, confronting the enemy in its base areas in Vietnam was likely to provoke extremely heavy and aggressive defence that resulted in the fiercest of contacts. That the task force was not trained for bunker fighting represented a significant failure in the design of the pre-deployment training programmes, a situation which led Lieutenant Colonel Colin Kahn, the commanding officer of 5RAR on its second tour, to declare that 'in my opinion my battalion had been prepared for entirely the wrong form of war'.[11] Attacks on defended

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7   Australian Army, Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', p.35.

8   Major A.W. Hammett, 'More about Bunkers', *Infantry Magazine* (Directorate of Infantry, Ingleburn), September 1970, p.8; Australian Army, Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', p.21.

9   Australian Army, Military Board, *Infantry Training*, Volume 4, Part 2, *The Platoon* (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1967), p.125.

10   Australian Army, Military Board, *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet 11, *Counter Revolutionary Warfare* (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1965), p.125.

11   Interview, Brigadier C.N. Kahn, Canberra, 22 July 1997.

strong points had been a tactical method employed by Australian troops in every war this century, and in an article published after the return of 1RAR from their second tour, one of the company commanders pointed out correctly that, as in bunker fighting, 'hard won experiences gained in war are often forgotten in peace only to be relearned by bitter experience'.[12] His assertion is particularly pointed when we consider that almost all the bunker fighting tactics that developed in Vietnam were broadly similar to those techniques developed in other theatres of other wars. As early as 1965, on its first tour, 1RAR had fought bunker contacts, but the threat that these systems posed was not incorporated initially into the training syllabus for battalions working up for service in Vietnam. It appears that despite the information that returned to Australia with 1RAR, bunker fighting was regarded as uncharacteristic of operations in Vietnam, and this belief was not dispelled in any way by the task force's first year and a half of operations, which suggested that bunkers were not for fighting but for shelter.[13]

Locating a bunker system before contact occurred depended on the ability of soldiers to 'read signs' and deduce the possible location of the system. The greatest problem of bunker fighting was overcoming the effect of heavy initial casualties, and only reading signs could do this.[14] Most bunker systems shared a number of common characteristics that aided in their identification.[15]

The presence of a bunker system having been identified, it was necessary to determine its size, the location of its flanks (if any existed) and the location of any tracks leading out of it before an attack could be launched. If this could be done without the enemy becoming aware of the presence of friendly troops then ambushes could be laid on tracks leading out of the system, but these would prove successful only if the enemy were driven out of their bunkers. To this end an artillery fire mission outside the camp was sometimes used to scare the enemy out of the camp while ambushes caught retreating enemy, a

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12   Major A.W. Hammett, 'The Bunkers of Bullecourt, Buna or Bin-Son', Discussion Paper (Terendak Garrison, Malaysia, 1969), held in the Hammett Papers, p.1.

13   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, June 1966, General Summary June 1966, AWM 95 1/4/3.

14   Commander's Diary, 5RAR, September 1969, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation CAMDEN, AWM 95 7/5/September 1969.

15   ibid.

technique utilised by 1RAR during Operation Hawkesbury in the Hat Dich in September 1968.[16]

While the above method was certainly simple, it was rarely successful because only very small enemy logistic or transit units would choose regularly to abandon a defensive position without a fight. Stubborn defence in the face of attack became increasingly the case during 1969, when the depleted ranks of provincial and local force units were swelled with northern regular soldiers. The northerners, having limited local knowledge of the areas in which they fought, were reluctant to leave known positions to attempt to evade searching forces.[17] Additionally, sending out reconnaissance elements to explore the extent of bunker complexes ran the risk of pushing small forces into situations from which they would have considerable difficulty fighting their way out if engaged. 5RAR found reconnaissance patrols to be of limited value in bunker systems because they limited the ability of artillery and gunships to give vitally important initial fire support.[18] Attempts to insert blocking forces at the rear of systems, as described in the relevant pamphlet, suffered from similar problems because the prevalence of sentries on the approaches to bunkers and the camouflage of the systems meant that few systems were spotted before contact was made.[19] By contrast, 6RAR employed fighting patrols to conduct reconnaissance by fire in order to determine the extent of a system. While the difference in approach reflects partly the attitudes and opinions of the individual commanders on the spot, it was also the result of different methods of patrolling employed by the two battalions. 5RAR's patrols tended to be generally smaller, based on a half company, and therefore less able to afford detaching elements in reconnaissance.[20]

Once in contact, dominating the firefight became more important than continuing reconnaissance. Most contacts in bunker systems occurred at particularly close ranges, mostly between two and

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[16] Hammett, 'The Bunkers of Bullecourt, Buna or Bin-Son', p.10.
[17] ibid.
[18] Commander's Diary, 5RAR, September 1969, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation CAMDEN, AWM 95 7/5/September 1969.
[19] Military Board, *Counter Revolutionary Warfare*, pp.126-7.
[20] Interview, Brigadier C.N. Kahn, Canberra, 22 July 1997.

20 meters,[21] and at this point in the contact the advantage generally lay with the enemy. Australian troops were forced to develop methods to regain the initiative, in order to have the ability to create tactical options. The two main methods employed were the 'bounce' attack and the deliberate attack. The 'bounce' attack was an immediate assault after contact or after discovery of the system, with no preparatory bombardment. Some of these attacks were successful, but usually only against small camps and logistic units. The obvious risk was that the unit in contact would push forward into a system without knowing its true size, incur heavy casualties and be unable to withdraw.[22] 5RAR's Operation Camden in August 1969 saw a most intense period of bunker fighting, resulting in the discovery of the headquarters of the Viet Cong Military Region 5, containing over 2000 bunkers. The operation gave the battalion exposure to bunker attacks of both types, and as a result of their experiences the deliberate attack became more common, and made the greatest possible use of all available fire support.[23]

One of the disadvantages inherent in the basic tactical sub-unit, the rifle platoon, was that it lacked organic explosive firepower. The Viet Cong made effective use of the rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) and automatic weapons to produce an enormous volume of fire on contact but in contrast the Australian platoon, conditioned by the experiences of the Malayan Emergency, placed heavy emphasis on the use of single, well-aimed shots or quick double taps.[24] This attitude proved to be an inadequate solution in attacking bunkers, where the attacking force was required to achieve superiority of fire very quickly. The weakness was particularly apparent to commanding officers who had seen service in the Korean War, where platoons had two light mortars and two 2.5-inch rocket launchers as an integral part of their headquarters.[25] The newly introduced M72 light anti-armour weapon

21   Australian Army, Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', p.36.
22   ibid.
23   Commander's Diary, 5RAR, September 1969, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation CAMDEN, AWM 95 7/5/September 1969.
24   A double tap was two rounds fired in quick succession from the standing or kneeling position and the shots were fired instinctively, usually looking over the sights of the weapon rather than through them. While it was effective for engaging fleeting targets, it was incapable of producing a sustained volume of fire.
25   Interview, Brigadier C.N. Kahn, Canberra, 22 July 1997.

was pressed into service because its high-explosive anti-tank (HEAT) warhead could be employed to strip away foliage and engage bunkers.[26] Problems with these weapons were encountered, though, because the warhead often detonated on foliage before striking a bunker, a problem not solved until the introduction of a rifle-projected M26 grenade in December 1969. Once the rifle-projected grenade was introduced, troops had the ability to punch explosives through foliage, and an immediate increase in the success of bunker contacts was noted.[27] Withdrawals from a contact to allow fire support to be employed became a regular feature of bunker fighting. The integrated use of small arms, M79s, hand grenades and Claymore mines, combined with ambushes and snipers in depth, was developed to create a depth of fire within sections, platoons and companies, allowing a vital breathing space to be gained. If the enemy could be forced to pause for even the briefest of periods, the initiative could often be regained.[28]

Once troops were out of contact, the full weight of firepower available to the task force could be employed against the bunker system. Techniques for employing fire support varied little from past practice. When the bunker system was first identified a helicopter gunship light fire team (LFT) was placed on standby and the artillery forward observer requested a fire mission and registered cut-off targets. An air strike might also be planned at this point. If heavy fire was required, 155 mm medium artillery and air strikes had the greatest effect. Once the assault had penetrated the system, artillery was used to isolate the position, while gun ships could provide intimate support for attacking infantry. Air strikes, while providing significant capacity for destruction of bunkers, also produced significant deadfall from the surrounding canopy, which impeded the movement of infantry and tanks,[29] and an air strike procedure was developed which gave maximum flexibility while allowing the infantry commander to fight

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26   Interview, Colonel E.H. Smith, Canberra, 31 July 1997.
27   Commander's Diary, 5RAR, December 1970, Combat After Action Report - Operation KINGS CROSS, AWM 95 7/5/December 1970.
28   Major General David Butler, interviewed by Major I.A. Cruickshank in G. Pratten and G. Harper (eds), *Still the Same: Reflections on Active Service from Bardia to Baidoa* (Army Doctrine Centre, Sydney, 1996), p.97.
29   Australian Army, Directorate of Military Training, Training Information Letter 4/70, 'The Destruction of VC/NVA Bunker Systems' (Army Headquarters Battle Analysis Team, Canberra, 1970), pp.15-16.

the battle uninterrupted. Responsibility for coordinating the air strike was passed to the commanding officer (CO), rather than the company commander in contact, and the CO conducted all the air support briefings to the pilots. This process allowed the CO to follow the battle and removed a considerable amount of aircraft chatter from the company command net.[30]

In the assault phase itself, the section possessed sufficient resources to neutralise bunkers. The ten-man rifle section specified on the battalion's establishment was usually reduced to around six or seven men actually on operations. An individual bunker therefore became the task of a section. Bunkers were generally mutually supported by at least two others, and these had to be suppressed while the target bunker was attacked. To achieve this, the machine gun team and two or three riflemen employed small arms and M79 grenade launchers to suppress enemy fire while one or two nominated members crawled forward to destroy the target with rifle fire and grenades. The importance of recognising dead ground was critical to success, since forward motion in contact relied upon the ability of the individual soldier and those immediately around him to employ fire and movement.[31] The skills of careful and controlled fire and movement were badly taught and applied,[32] a situation which can be blamed, in many respects, on the tactical lessons drawn from the Malayan Emergency. While poor fire and movement remained a problem for the duration of the war, its importance was highlighted during this period of operations. Most of the tactics developed to counter insurgents were based upon the notion that the enemy would not stay and fight when encountered, and it was this assumption which developed the quick attack into a drill. This experience prepared soldiers for the 'patrol clash' type of contact, but did not prepare them for the complexities of bunker fighting. The techniques for employing fire and movement correctly were laid out in the relevant training syllabus but recent operational experience had not underpinned the

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30 Australian Army, Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', p.58.
31 Hammett, 'The Bunkers of Bullecourt, Buna or Bin-Son', p.5.
32 Australian Army, Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', p.21.

importance of using them.[33] In bunker fighting progress was laborious and slow, and commanders faced the problem of controlling several battles in miniature within their sub-units.

Because the forward observer's party was usually with company headquarters, it was often unable to adjust fire support in front of the lead platoons accurately enough. To combat this, the party was split to allow the forward observer to remain with the company commander, while the assistant, usually a bombardier, moved with one of the forward platoons. The other platoon usually received a mobile fire controller from mortar platoon, thus allotting each forward platoon a specialist fire support observer. This practice was in contravention of the principle of grouping control of artillery at the highest level, but was usually possible in battalions where the direct support battery commander had a close working relationship with the commanding officer.[34]

Once defeated, a bunker system still had to be destroyed or otherwise denied to the enemy. Engineer support became essential during this phase and two approaches to the task developed. Some commanders, especially engineers, believed that destruction of a system guaranteed immediate denial to the enemy of both living and fighting accommodation, and also transit accommodation. The alternative, leaving bunkers intact, was based on the notion that this encouraged the enemy to return to areas that were known, thus allowing ambushes to be set. The solution to the problem in fact drew on both schools of thought. Bunkers were generally destroyed by explosives or seeded with riot control/tear gas, while ambushes were set around a bunker complex for several days to catch enemy parties returning to conduct damage assessment.[35] If the size of the system was sufficiently small, a platoon could be employed on this task while the remainder of the company continued to follow up the enemy.[36]

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33   Australian Army, Military Board, *Infantry Training*, Volume 4, Part 2, *The Platoon*, pp.89-90.

34   Australian Army, Military Board, *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet 5, *Artillery* (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1969), para. 301; Interview, Brigadier C.N. Kahn, Canberra, 22 July 1997.

35   Australian Army, Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', pp.50-1.

36   Commander's Diary, 5RAR, December 1969, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation KINGS CROSS, AWM 95 7/5/December 1969.

Undoubtedly the greatest weapon for defeating bunkers was the tank. Tanks were able to move forward in contact in a bunker system because they were largely impervious to small-arms fire and had a direct-fire weapon with enough power to defeat a bunker, providing a significant morale boost to troops. Tanks fired high-explosive and canister rounds to clear undergrowth and expose bunkers, or any other enemy location, and they provided more intimate direct fire support than artillery or even helicopters.[37]

While bunker tactics offer the best illustrations of the development of tank tactics in Vietnam, they were only one way in which tanks were employed on operations. The development of infantry-armour tactics provides yet another example of the 'corps-centric' nature of the army of the 1960s. The initial deployment of the task force to Vietnam was undertaken without the inclusion of tanks. Both Brigadier O. D. Jackson and the Commander Australian Force Vietnam, Major-General D. Vincent, lobbied hard for the inclusion of tanks in the task force's order of battle, but the prevailing view in army headquarters was that tanks would be an administrative burden and unable to cope with the terrain and climate of Vietnam.[38] While both the counter-revolutionary warfare pamphlet and the pamphlet on armour described the roles of armour in that type of war, practical experience of employing armour on either exercises or operations was limited.[39]

Responsibility for this lies with both the infantry and the armoured corps. For their part, many of the senior officers of the army were former infantrymen who had seen the value of tanks in both the Second World War and Korea. Tanks demonstrated their utility in a counter-revolutionary warfare exercise in 1964, and it was this activity which had convinced Colonel O. D. Jackson, then acting as a task force commander of both regular and CMF troops, of their worth.[40] Based

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37   Draft paper on combined-arms warfare matters presented to the 1971 CGS Exercise by Heads of Corps, un-accessioned archive document, copy in author's possession, p.2.

38   R.N.L. Hopkins, *Australian Armour: A History of the Royal Australian Armoured Corps 1927-1972* (Australian War Memorial and Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1978), p.251.

39   Australian Army, Military Board, *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet 4, *Armour* (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1969), chapter 9; Australian Army, Military Board, *Counter Revolutionary Warfare*, pp.158-9.

40   Hopkins, *Australian Armour*, pp.224-5.

on this experience, armour should have been included in the planning of counter-revolutionary warfare exercises on a routine basis, but again preconceptions regarding armour's limited role in counter-revolutionary warfare persisted from SEATO exercises and the pentropic experiment. While the army of the day was an infantry-based organisation and should not have displayed the level of combined arms myopia that it did, the armoured corps did little to alleviate this problem. A former troop commander in C Squadron, 1 Armoured Regiment, the squadron initially deployed to Vietnam, thought that much of the training undertaken by his unit was more suited to the plains of Germany than the jungles of Vietnam.[41] Certainly, the rolling hills of Puckapunyal range bore little resemblance to the terrain of Southeast Asia. Over time, both infantry and armoured commanders realised slowly that there was no such thing as 'tank country' in a restrictive sense, and that while some types of terrain were better suited to tanks than others, with time and effort (sometimes engineer effort) tanks could operate almost anywhere.[42]

Communication with the infantry also posed problems. As an indication of how divergent infantry and armoured tactics had become, the radio sets installed in tanks were not compatible with those operated by the infantry,[43] and this posed particular difficulties when directing fire against targets in bunker contacts. The implications of this for close cooperation were not realised prior to deployment to Vietnam because the infantry were generally not exposed to tanks as part of their pre-deployment training during this phase of the war.[44] Solutions to the problem varied, and dismounted armoured liaison officers, use of radios when possible and employment of white phosphorus and tracer rounds were all methods employed for indicating enemy locations to tanks.[45] These techniques solved the problems of target indication, but could not be extended to

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41 Major J.M. Heath, interviewed by Colonel Gerry McCormack in Pratten and Harper (eds), *Still the Same*, p.205.

42 Australian Army, Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', p.42.

43 Australian Army, Military Board, *Armour*, Annex A, Appendix 2.

44 Draft paper on combined arms warfare matters presented to the 1971 CGS Exercise by Heads of Corps, un-accessioned archive document, copy in author's possession, p.2.

45 Australian Army, Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', p.42.

more complex combined-arms tasks. Without reliable radio communications, it remained difficult to give tanks orders or request advice.

When on the move, command and control problems between infantry and armour still occurred. The problems tended to lie with the employment of armoured personnel carriers (APCs) rather than tanks. APCs were often used in the battlefield mobility role, and in doing so were subjected to the threat of ambush or other forms of contact when on the move, while tanks were usually only called forward to support the infantry after a significant contact had developed. As a result, problems of command between tanks and infantry posed fewer problems because the tanks were unlikely to be in a position where they were operating with infantry in circumstances where snap decisions had to be made immediately following a contact. The task force commander, Brigadier Jackson, first raised the issue in 1966, but despite this confusion and disagreement continued over command relationships in an infantry-armour combined-arms operation. Both the armour and infantry pamphlets were quite clear that when infantry were carried, the infantry commander had control. Despite this, when armoured priorities and infantry priorities came into conflict, command issues proved difficult to resolve quickly. For example, when armoured units came under fire from anti-armour weapons, armoured doctrine dictated that troops must dismount and clear the enemy.[46] In contrast, infantry priorities often lay with maintaining the momentum of the attack or advance. The armour pamphlet stated 'that the small numbers of tanks available to the infantry division would preclude permanent infantry/tank affiliations'. It was considered vital, therefore, that 'all infantrymen be made familiar with the capabilities of tanks and their methods of operation. The drills for infantry/tank co-operation in all likely types of operation must be clear, detailed and rehearsed', and further that 'the successful use of the APC demands that infantry commanders at all levels be expert in giving and receiving radio orders'.[47] The experience of actual operations proved to be very different, with some junior infantry commanders reluctant even to wear the APC radio

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[46] Australian Army, Military Board, *Armour*, p.8-5.
[47] ibid., and p.12-1.

headset.[48] This reluctance could be interpreted as a refusal to embrace combined-arms operations on the part of some within the infantry battalions, but often more simple reasons such as the desire of the infantry commander to listen to his platoon or company net, or to ride on top of the vehicle so he could navigate, might explain this phenomenon. In some cases the armoured headsets provided in the vehicles were either unserviceable or had cables which were too short to allow the commander to sit on top.

Traditional area defensive tactics, which relied upon employing ground to best effect to destroy the enemy, were generally outside the requirements of counter-revolutionary warfare. The importance of holding terrain simply for the sake of holding it was not a feature of insurgency warfare, and for that reason battalions did not train to conduct traditional area defence. While constructing field defences was important in the building of fire support patrol bases, this type of base changed the style of a battalion's defensive layout. Traditional defensive tactics were based upon having flanking units and formations to either side of a battalion's allocated frontage. In this case a commander could make a reasonable appreciation of the enemy's most likely approach. In a war with no defined fronts or flanks, defensive tactics had to evolve to accommodate an enemy who could approach from any direction, or several directions simultaneously. As a result, defensive positions took on the appearance of huge harbours with infantry companies spread around the perimeter protecting the headquarters in the centre. The principles of defence, such as depth and all-around defence, remained applicable, but the resulting layout of the defensive position was totally different (see Figure 10).[49]

As noted already, developments in core techniques of counter-revolutionary warfare continued, driven by a combination of enemy action, higher commanders' directives and personal preference on the part of commanders. Patrolling continued to be a feature of operations, but the intent of the patrols changed. During the initial stage of the task force's operations, patrols had been conducted to gather

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[48]   Commander's Diary, HQ 1ATF, October 1966, Lessons Learnt October 1966, AWM 95 1/4/14.

[49]   Australian Army, Military Board, *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet 8, *Infantry* (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1969), pp.253-7.

Figure 10: Comparative Layout of Battalion Defensive Positions
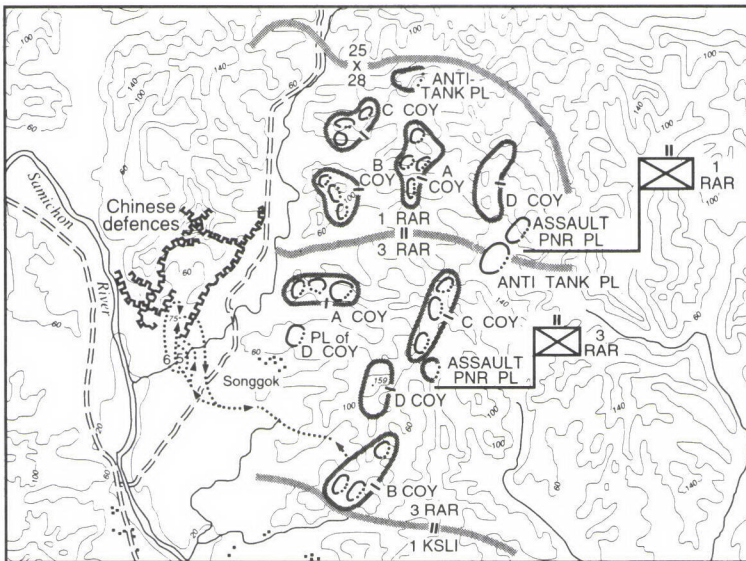
1 RAR and 3 RAR in Area Defence in Korea
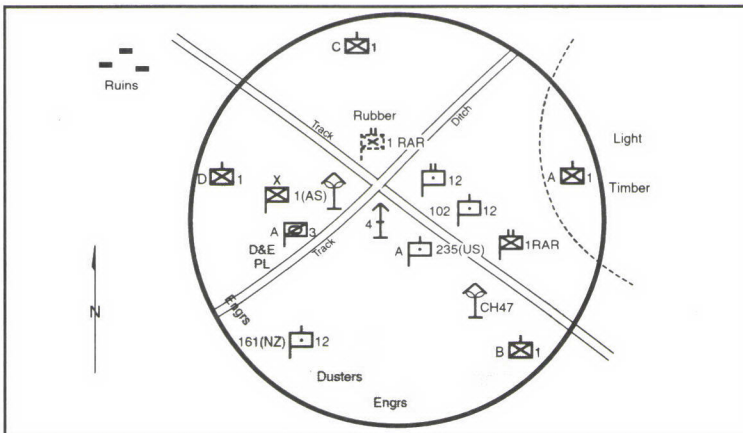
Defensive Layout of 1RAR at FSPB CORAL 15/16 May 1968

information on the enemy, deny access to the task force base, deny access to the villages and interdict lines of supply, but these patrols employed very cautious tactics. The enemy Tet offensive of 1968 brought an increase in the intensity of the war and with it an increase in the intensity of patrol operations. As a result, the task force spent large periods of time pursuing the enemy main force units into their base areas and the levels of contact experienced were much more intense, demonstrated by the frequency and intensity of bunker contacts.

In order to meet the demands of intensive patrolling, 5RAR altered both its method of patrolling and the employment of its support platoons. The commanding officer believed that the levels of fire support available to the battalion made a reversal of the traditional combat ratio of 3:1 superiority a viable proposition. As a consequence, sub-units were allowed to attack enemy units that were up to three times their size.[50] In order to cover more ground when patrolling, companies were split in half, and where possible allocated either the anti-armour platoon, the tracker platoon or the assault pioneer platoon to give each half-company a strength of two or more platoons.[51] This type of patrolling was aggressive in the extreme, and on several occasions relatively small forces were able to defeat considerably larger enemy groups with the aid of heavy fire support.[52] By contrast, the commanding officer of 6RAR, Lieutenant Colonel D. M. Butler, employed his tracker platoon in conjunction with patrols of the SAS, confirming in his mind the utility of having a reconnaissance organisation within the battalion.[53] Despite this, an integral reconnaissance element was only of use as long as the battalion was deployed to known areas of operations for reasonable periods of time. During much of this period, operations took place in areas that were virtually unknown, outside Phuoc Tuy Province. In contrast again, the commanding officer of 3RAR, Lieutenant Colonel J. J. Shelton, was reluctant to allow his sub-units to deploy in below company strength and employed the anti-armour platoon with either anti-armour

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50   Interview, Brigadier C.N. Kahn, Canberra, 23 July 1997.
51   ibid.
52   Commander's Diary, 5RAR, January 1970, Lessons Learnt January 1970, AWM 95 7/5/January 1970.
53   Australian Army, Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', paragraph 121.

weapons, extra machine guns or tracker dogs, as the circumstances demanded.[54]

Although problems relating to the role of 1ATF had been largely resolved by an increase in the task force's manning and by a change in operational concept, past experience, in particular the Malayan Emergency, had narrowed perceptions of what counter-revolutionary war would involve and led to a serious decline in some basic military skills. The 'out of province' phase forced some dramatic developments in tactics and techniques, which highlighted some of the army's most serious weaknesses as well as its greatest strengths. While many operations ran counter to the assumptions concerning Australian involvement in a counter-revolutionary war, the speed with which solutions to tactical problems (such as bunker fighting and cooperation with tanks) were developed indicated that experienced commanders were able to draw on a huge range of personal experience once the essence of a tactical problem had been identified. What should have been more worrying for the army was that the importance of most of the skills that were relearned in Vietnam had been already been demonstrated in past wars. Elements of the army were drawing far too heavily on the very recent past rather than the longer term institutional memory. Important lessons learnt about combined-arms cooperation and some aspects of enemy tactics do not appear to have been disseminated properly and passed on to those who were charged with preparing the battalions for war.

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[54]   Major I.P. Cross, interveiwed by Major-General Howard in Pratten and Harper (eds), *Still the Same*, p.170.

CHAPTER 5

VIETNAMISATION AND PACIFICATION

In mid-1969 1ATF's operational focus shifted for the fourth and final time. The decision made by the newly elected Nixon administration in the United States, to begin a gradual and phased withdrawal of US combat troops from Vietnam, affected the style of operations conducted by the Australians. The change was heralded by a return to operations within the boundaries of Phuoc Tuy Province and a shift in priority and focus away from targeting the Viet Cong main force units and units of the North Vietnamese Army. As a direct consequence of this decision, the task force commander, Brigadier C.M.I. Pearson, received a new operational instruction on 16 April 1969 which changed the operational priorities of the task force.[1] The task force now became involved in three types of tasks. The first was pacification, the second was improving the quality and effectiveness of the Regional Force and Popular Force (RF/PF), and the third was the continuation of other military operations within Phuoc Tuy Province. As noted in chapter 4, the tours of the battalions which served throughout the 'out of province' period had been characterised by large-scale search and destroy operations in Bien Hoa, Long Khanh and Phuoc Tuy provinces. During the latter part of 1969 the importance of these operations dwindled, and the emphasis reverted to stopping localised infiltrations into the villages and the training of Popular Force and Regional Force soldiers. This new phase of the war was characterised by small-scale ambushes and very small patrols. It was fought in and around the population centres of the province against the provincial mobile battalion D445 and the village guerrilla units (see Figure 11).

In many respects the period between late 1969 and the middle of 1971 may be regarded as the halcyon days of the task force's involvement in Vietnam. By this time, operational requirements were matched evenly by capabilities and training. The lessons of almost five years of continuous operational service in South Vietnam had been incorporated into preparations for battalions going to war.

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1 Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.40.

Figure 11: 7RAR's Main Area of Operations, 1970-71
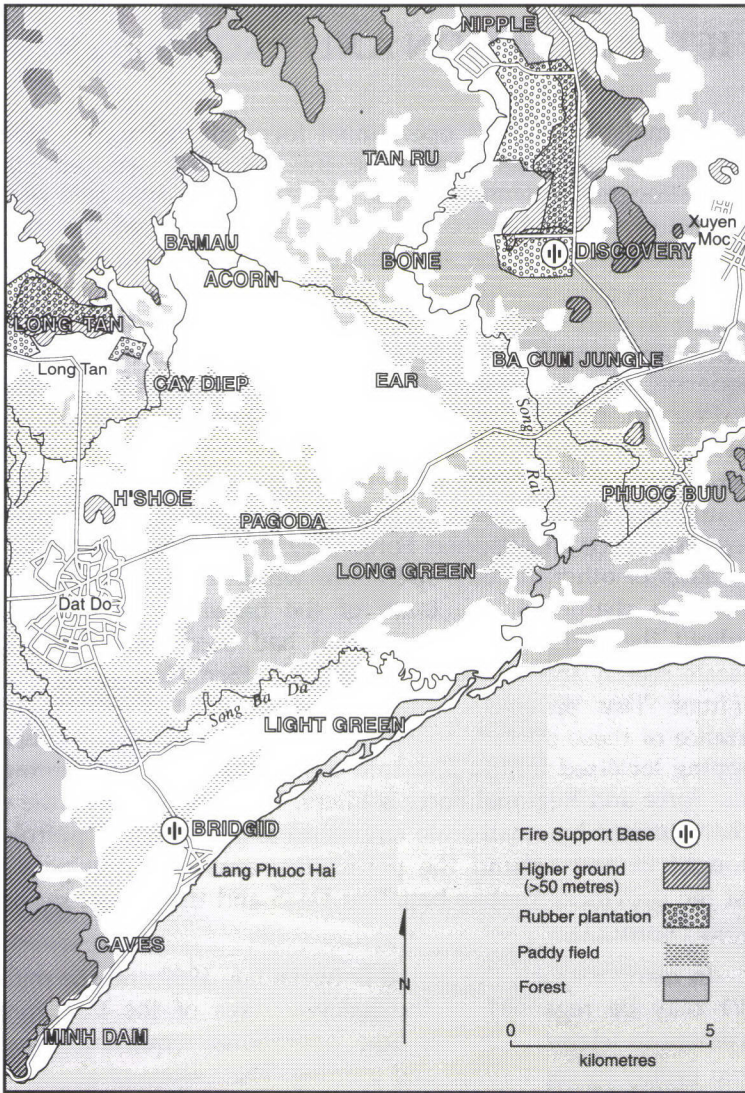
Source: '7RAR Notes on Operations Vietnam 1970-71'. This map shows approximately a third of 7RAR's AO during 1971, and illustrates how a battalion became familiar with its AO, giving nicknames such as 'Ear' or 'Acorn' to topographic features traversed regularly.

The experiences of 5RAR, 7RAR and 3RAR demonstrate the significant progression in the development of operational experiences and tactics and techniques which had occurred. These battalions represent three generations of experience in Vietnam. First, a link had been established between the commanding officers of these battalions prior to deployment to Vietnam. 5RAR's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Colin Kahn, was a classmate and friend of 7RAR's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ron Grey.[2] Kahn wrote extensively to Grey while 5RAR was in Vietnam, detailing 5RAR's experiences while on operations and noting the developments the battalion had undergone while in theatre. Grey had found these letters so useful while preparing 7RAR that he insisted his officers write to 3RAR's officers as well.

Second, the task force and the army were surprised badly by the type of activities encountered during the 'out of province' phase. As a result, the processes of tactical investigation and development appear to have been stimulated to a greater degree. The formation of the Army Headquarters Battle Analysis Team (charged with the investigation and documentation of tactical lessons at the task force level) in 1969 was a concrete expression of this new attitude.[3] As a result, the amount of tactical information published and disseminated regularly increased greatly. Training Information Letters and Training Information Bulletins had been produced prior to this, but on a limited basis without centralised control or organisation. Their production was more a result of the efforts of conscientious officers who recognised the significance of their operational experiences and documented them, rather than of any directed policy. Other than these, much of what was disseminated, especially during 1965, was information produced by the American Military Assistance Command - Vietnam (MAC-V), and while these papers contained interesting information, the fact that they were concerned with non-Australian activities and operations limited their usefulness. This was highlighted when many of these MAC-V documents were copied and reissued with only a covering page added by the Directorate of Military Training in Australia, with no attempt made to analyse their content and indicate how Australian units and

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2   Interview, Brigadier C.N. Kahn, Canberra, 22 July 1997; Interview, Major-General R.A. Grey, Canberra, 29 April 1997; Michael O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars: With the Seventh Battalion in Vietnam* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995), p.147.

3   Interview, Colonel A. V. Preece, Canberra, 28 May 1997.

schools might apply their lessons. By mid-1969 this had changed, and relevant Australian tactical information was being passed on much more widely within the army.[4]

Finally, when the above two points were combined, the preparation of battalions for Vietnam service appears to have been much more closely adapted to meet the likely conditions on the ground in Vietnam than had been the lot of previous units. Lieutenant Colonel Kahn's opinion, that his battalion was not well prepared for the type of operations likely to be faced in Vietnam, clearly was noted and corrected by the planners of subsequent exercises.[5]

A brief examination of 7RAR's preparations helps to illustrate this point. As noted, 7RAR had access to 5RAR's operational summaries and regular letters. The lessons contained within these letters and summaries were distilled and published in the form of a soldiers' field handbook that was oriented specifically for the forthcoming tour in Vietnam.[6] While much of the information contained in this booklet was based on basic soldier skills and infantry doctrine, it provided a convenient summary of large amounts of information usually contained in several different, detailed pamphlets. Additionally, it provided some very specific guidance on aspects of service in South Vietnam based on recent experience. Chapters on Vietnamese customs, the enemy and enemy tactics, service in 1ATF 'Dos and Don'ts', as well as enemy mine markers, signs and booby traps helped to focus the minds of soldiers on the requirements of the task ahead.[7] Officers and non-commissioned officers received an *aide-mémoire* that detailed orders procedures, the format for operational reports and returns, and tabulated data for supporting weapons specific to conditions in Vietnam.[8]

Tactical training also demonstrated a much better understanding of the importance of integrated combined-arms support to the infantry battalion than had been the case previously. Despite the fact that the artillery battery (106 Field Battery) which was allocated in support of 7RAR's tour in Vietnam was based in Townsville rather

4   ibid.
5   Interview, Brigadier C.N. Kahn, Canberra, 22 July 1997.
6   O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.147.
7   7RAR, *Soldiers' Field Handbook* (Printcraft Press, Sydney, 1969).
8   '7RAR Aide Memoire', p.1.

than Sydney, the battery commander and his forward observer parties attended five field and command post exercises during the battalion's training.[9] This allowed the command post to develop and cement some of the fire-support procedures it would employ in Vietnam well before arrival in country. Additionally, a demonstration firing of the 5.5-inch medium guns of 8 Medium Regiment was organised to allow officers and NCOs to observe the effects of artillery of a comparable calibre to the US 155 mm guns that would support the battalion in Vietnam.[10] While some of these issues may seem insignificant, the attention to small details which they represent displays a level of understanding of the smallest technical details of the war in Vietnam which was previously lacking. The experiences of 5RAR and 7RAR on its first tour were drawn on, and inspired the purchase of sets of secateurs and section radios for the platoons.[11]

The battalion's final exercise at Shoalwater Bay, Exercise Cold Steel, conducted between 2 and 11 December 1969, tested the battalion in a much more complete range of tasks than previous final exercises had done. This exercise included phases of reconnaissance in force, the insertion of a blocking force against an enemy attack on a fully developed fire-support base, a bunker attack and a cordon and search.[12] This prepared the battalion for a number of tasks, and incorporated all the skills learnt during more than four years of task force service in Vietnam.

Ironically, the situation envisaged by Cold Steel bore little relationship to the type of operations that the battalion conducted during its twelve months in Vietnam. The changes to task force operational policy discussed above meant that many of the circumstances that 7RAR had trained for no longer existed. This is not to say that the training which had been conducted failed to prepare the

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9   O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.148.

10   ibid, p.151

11   While information such as this was appreciated by the officers and soldiers of the battalion, many resented the fact that regimental canteen funds, subsidised out of the soldiers' own pockets, had to be used to pay for items which they believed should have been added to the unit's equipment entitlements. That they were not, reflected the often parsimonious attitude of some elements of the army back in Australia. O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.152; Commander's Diary, 7RAR, August 1967, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation SOUTHPORT, AWM 95 7/7/August 1967.

12   O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, pp.152-3.

battalion for service, because the pattern of operations facing the task force upon 7RAR's arrival was one with which Australian battalions were both comfortable and familiar. Patrolling and ambushing had long been central themes of counter-revolutionary warfare doctrine, and these core skills were now enhanced by the addition of skills such as fighting bunker systems and employing support arms, which had previously posed so many problems. One company commander in 7RAR noted that a few tactical drills needed changing as methods of employment varied, but training was generally sound.[13] Tactical development during this period centred on improving patrolling and ambushing and controlling a widely dispersed battalion conducting a diverse range of operations. While patrol tactics, employment of support arms in low-level operations and command and control procedures provided many new lessons, they did not require wholesale reassessments of doctrine, and occurred within the framework of a higher operational concept with which the Australians were very familiar.

The patrol tactics developed during this final period were based on the requirement to deploy as many sub-units in the field as possible. By this stage of the war the level of threat posed by the enemy was relatively low, in sharp contrast to the situation that existed during earlier phases. The enemy no longer had the ability to mount multi-regimental attacks against the task force base or isolated sub-units within the province and, not surprisingly, this level of enemy threat was reflected in the battalion's sub-unit tactics. This was especially the case in the areas around the population centres, where the bulk of patrol activity occurred until the early months of 1971. As a result, the task force commander could employ the three (later reduced to two) battalions of the task force away from the Nui Dat base, giving him an ability to dominate far more of the province.[14] The pattern of operations that developed saw two or three rifle companies deployed to patrol and ambush around the villages with the remaining one or two companies deployed on operations in greater depth to keep the enemy off balance in its base areas.[15] This concept was begun with

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13   7RAR, Notes on Operations - Vietnam 1970-1971, Impressions of a Rifle Company
      Commander II, paragraph 2.
14   7RAR, Notes on Operations - Vietnam 1970-1971, Impressions of a Rifle Company
      Commander I, paragraph 11.
15   ibid.

Operation Concrete I, conducted between 19 April and 7 May 1970,[16] and was continued for most of the battalion's tour.[17]

The employment of platoons within the companies usually saw each platoon broken into two half-platoon patrols or ambushes, and manning was such that each patrol usually numbered between twelve and fifteen men. For protection, patrols were allocated patrol routes that allowed the two halves to concentrate within no more than twenty minutes' march of each other. By doing this more ground could be searched than by a single platoon, while safeguarding the security of the individual patrols.[18] This policy was an extension of the earlier 5RAR policy of employing each company in two halves, now adapted to suit the lower level of enemy activity which permitted its application to platoons. To give each patrol enough firepower to operate independently, each platoon received extra machine guns, allowing each half-platoon patrol to have at least two per patrol.[19] Similarly, each platoon usually received a second radio, thus allowing each patrol to maintain communications when the platoon was split. The second radio also allowed any detached reconnaissance element to maintain communications when the platoon was operating as a whole.[20] This lack of alternate radio communications in the reconnaissance element of a platoon had been a major limiting factor in bunker fighting during the 'out of province' years.

The return to very small-scale patrolling allowed many of the tactics developed during the earlier periods of Australian counter-revolutionary warfare experience in the 1950s, such as the patrol base, to be re-introduced. The patrol base was useful when enemy numbers and capabilities were limited, because it allowed the soldiers to leave their packs in a central location and patrol in webbing only, ensuring that soldiers remained much more fresh and alert for the duration of

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16 Commander's Diary, 7RAR, June 1970, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation CONCRETE I, AWM 95 7/7/June 1970.

17 7RAR, Notes on Operations - Vietnam 1970-1971, Lessons Learnt From Operations - Operations CONCRETE I and II.

18 ibid., paragraph 12.

19 Interview, Robert Hall, Canberra, 18 April 1997.

20 7RAR, Notes on Operations - Vietnam 1970-1971, Impressions of a Rifle Company Commander II, paragraph 13.

their patrol.[21] The necessity of reducing the load carried by soldiers on operations was a constant theme of all periods of the war, as indeed it had been in Malaya and Borneo previously.[22]

The insertion of troops into their search areas was done either by helicopter, by APC or on foot. Several interesting similarities between this period of the war and earlier periods can be noted. Insertions against an enemy who was harassed and dispersed required maximum use of deception and stealth. Unless a move by foot at least 3000 metres from the landing zone was undertaken, it was extremely unlikely that the enemy would be contacted.[23] This contrasts sharply with 5RAR's experience. 5RAR had encountered considerable reluctance on the part of the enemy to move simply because of indications that troops had appeared in an area.[24] The battalions during 1970 noted an enemy preference for withdrawing when engaged, particularly in bunker contacts, the enemy rarely remaining to fight. Instead, it was more usual for the enemy to leave a 'stay behind party' to hold up the attackers' advance for as long as possible before withdrawing to a pre-designated rendezvous point.[25] As a result, bunker tactics on the part of the Australian companies tended to revert to an earlier form.[26] Once a bunker system was discovered, constant pressure by attacking infantry troops was required to stop the enemy withdrawal. In such cases a bounce attack, combined with ambushes in depth when possible, proved more successful than the deliberate attack. The enemy often preferred to risk the chance of being killed running through an artillery cut-off rather than staying to fight the attacking infantry. Operations Concrete I and Concrete II, between 19 April 1970 and 11 June 1970, saw several examples of this pattern of enemy behaviour.[27]

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21   ibid., paragraph 22. This removed one of the greatest impediments to patrolling and helped to ensure that soldiers were able to patrol silently and react quickly and aggressively in contact without being weighed down by their packs.

22   Australian Army, Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', p.30.

23   Commander's Diary, 7RAR, April 1970, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation FINCHAFEN, AWM 95 7/7/April 1970.

24   Interview, Brigadier C.N. Kahn, Canberra, 22 July 1997.

25   Commander's Diary, 7RAR, June 1970, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation CONCRETE I, AWM 95 7/7/June 1970.

26   Australian Army, Military Board, *Counter Revolutionary Warfare*, pp.126-7.

27   Commander's Diary, 7RAR, June 1970, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation CONCRETE I, AWM 95 7/7/June 1970.

Hoi Chanh ralliers (surrendered VC who agreed to work for the Australians) were allocated to each company, giving company commanders an additional source of advice on enemy tactics. Such consultation allowed commanders to develop more effective SOPs and to discern likely enemy reactions to Australian actions. For example, it was a surrendered Hoi Chanh who indicated that the Viet Cong were prepared to run through Australian cut-offs and harassing and interdiction fire missions because they knew that Australian artillery procedure prevented firing artillery close to friendly troops. By watching where fire missions fell they could identify relatively safe areas to move within when withdrawing from a bunker system or moving into a village.[28] A former platoon commander in 8RAR, Robert Hall, recalls his company commander drawing the company's officers together with the company's Hoi Chanh to discuss enemy tactics on numerous occasions. Any contacts which had occurred were analysed step by step, with the Hoi Chanh explaining why the enemy reacted as they did at each step. As a result, Hall took to patrolling with two riflemen at the front of his formation with M79s carried in the 'ready to fire' position, as a counter to the enemy's use of the RPG.[29]

Ambushing formed the other major aspect of operations in Vietnam during the pacification phase, and it was undertaken to deny the guerrilla cadres access to the population during the night. As with patrolling, the method of operation usually employed was to break platoons into two patrols, allowing a battalion to set upward of thirty ambushes in a night in and around the villages. Rifle companies operating out of night defensive positions Brigit and the Horseshoe did much of this ambushing. Because the distances to be covered from the night defensive position were usually reasonably short, and many ambushes were pre-planned and prepared activities staged out of a fixed base, heavy weapons such as the 90 mm recoilless rifle (RCL) could be employed. Its heavy weight and awkwardness to carry meant that it had not been used regularly in the ambush role until now. It had a flechette round that fired hundreds of tiny darts that were very effective in the anti-personnel role.[30]

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[28]   Interview, Robert Hall, Canberra, 18 April 1997.

[29]   ibid.

[30]   Commander's Diary, 7RAR, June 1970, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation CONCRETE I, AWM 95 7/7/June 1970.

Even when an ambush was not staged out of a fixed base area, half platoons could still lay extremely effective ambushes, and patrols began to ambush rather than harbour as a standard procedure.[31] This was particularly tiring and labour-intensive for soldiers, and prompted the development of altered ambush techniques. Reduced numbers meant that ambushes needed to be developed to allow for maximum firepower, but also to allow maximum rest time for troops. The solution was the strong point ambush, which employed three positions of four or five men in a triangle pattern.[32] This form of ambush was an adaptation of the triangle harbour which had begun to be used commonly in battalions during 1969. The real significance of ambushing lay in the intelligence that it provided on the enemy's strengths and capabilities, not solely in the destruction it wreaked.[33]

Despite attempts at deception, ambushes around villages suffered from predictability, since the limited number of good ambush sites around any one village led to patterns in ambush activity becoming apparent. 7RAR noted that this was a particular problem after several months of intensive ambushing during Operation Cung Chung in June 1970.[34] The solution developed by 7RAR involved small-scale night patrols instead of static ambushes, and allowed the battalion to search more ground by night and thus break away from familiar routines. The unit's next operation, Birdwood, conducted between 29 June and 23 July 1970, employed this method to deny access to villages astride Route 23 and Route 44.[35]

The dispersed nature of operations during this period placed a particularly heavy burden on the battalion command post and the fire

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31 Interview, Major-General R.A.Grey, Canberra, 29 April 1997.
32 7RAR, Notes on Operations Vietnam - 1970-1971, Impressions of A Rifle Company Commander III. Two of these strong points were on the likely axes of approach of the enemy, and the third provided rear and flank protection. Within each position one soldier in turn would man the machine gun and the remainder would sleep, giving each man two four-hour periods of sleep a night. The sentry, on sighting or hearing the enemy, would wake the other members of his strong point and alert the other sentries by means of a cord or string. These ambushes employed large numbers of Claymore mines to supplement the machine guns and personal weapons of the soldiers.
33 Interview, Major-General R.A. Grey, Canberra, 29 April 1997.
34 Commander's Diary, 7RAR, July 1970, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation CUNG CHUNG, AWM 95 7/7/July 1970.
35 Commander's Diary, 7RAR, August 1970, Combat Operations After Action Report - Operation BIRDWOOD, AWM 95 7/7/August 1970.

control centre, and as a result both organisations were forced to adapt procedures to cope with the changed nature of operations in Vietnam. The set-up of the battalion command post reflected the manner in which the unit functioned and the attitudes of its commanding officer, with emphasis always on simplifying procedures in order to allow the maximum number of men to deploy in the field (see Figure 12).[36] The command post was responsible for all aspects of safety within the battalion's area of operations, and to this end was the agency through which all ground, air and boundary clearances were issued. The policy of issuing ground clearances to allow safe firing of artillery took on a particular importance when a lot of small patrols operated over a large area. This had been less of a problem when companies operated as whole units in widely separated areas of operations. Sub-units were required to pass their location to the command post every hour, and this resulted in a fast system of ensuring that no friendly troops were within the intended impact area. Every location was double-checked by the duty officer and the duty clerk and entered on the duty officer's work map and the location board. Once a positive written clearance from the command post duty officer was obtained, the fire mission or air strike could be engaged.[37] Similar systems were employed to grant boundary and air clearances. The system was fast and efficient and retained final control for all activity within the battalion area of operations with the battalion's staff. Pro-forma boards displaying common operational reports and returns were located with the duty clerk. The system allowed the duty clerk to record information as it came into the command post and permitted the operations officer or the commanding officer to grasp relevant information as it unfolded, and it removed the necessity for call signs to submit detailed reports after the event.[38]

The second major component of the battalion command post was the fire control centre (FCC). Despite the large amount of integrated training conducted back in Australia by battalions and their direct support batteries, significant changes to operational procedures occurred while in Vietnam due to a lack of detailed information on artillery procedures in Australia together with the changed nature of

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[36] 7RAR, Notes on Operations- Vietnam 1970-1971, The Battalion Command Post, paragraph 4.

[37] ibid., paragraphs 14-15.

[38] ibid., paragraph 44.

Figure 12: Layout of the 7RAR Battalion Command Post and the Fire Control Centre

PROVINCE MAP
1:25 000

AO MAP

CIVIL ACCESS MAP
1:50 000

TRAJ CHARTS

FIRE PLANNING & FINAL LOCSTAT MAP

1:25 000 MAP

Bn Ops Staff

FCC Staff

Forms used
F.M. Briefs
AB 545
Task tables etc.
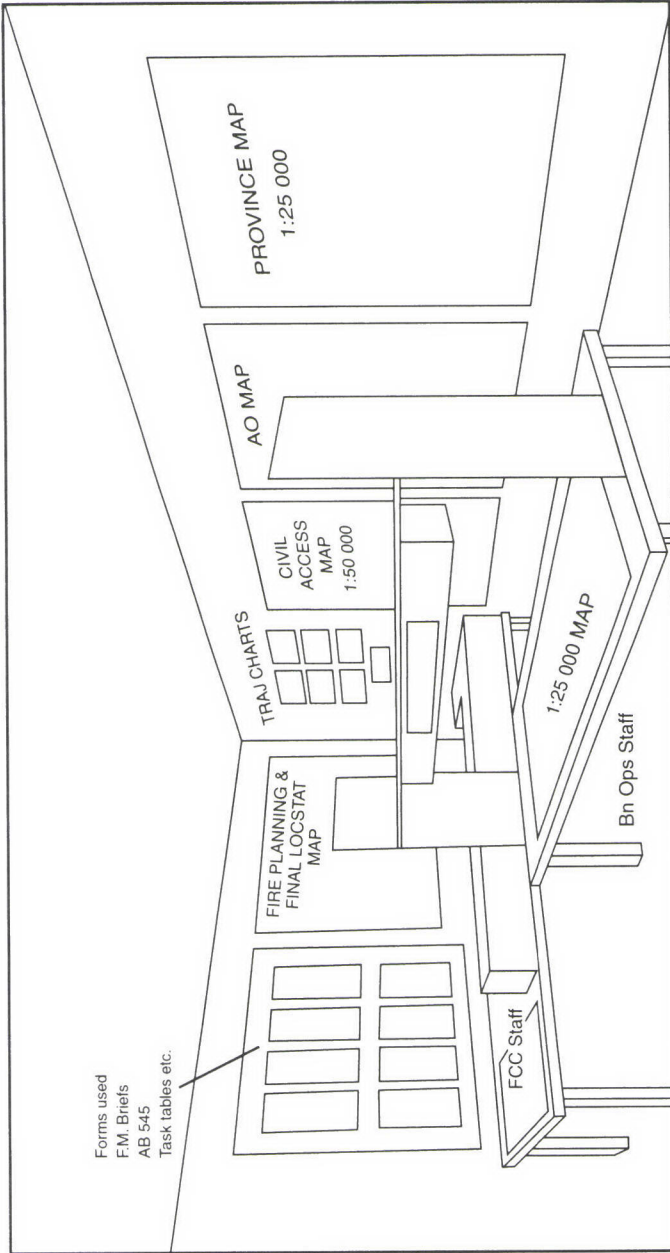
Source: '7RAR Notes on Operations Vietnam 1970-1971', Annex B.

operations. Dispersed operations meant that requests for fire support and their adjustment were devolved to a very low level, often to corporal and below, and artillery command and control procedures were not well suited to such dispersed operations. Control of artillery support was routed through the direct support battery net, and this worked provided that the company forward observer (who worked on this net) was present with the unit in contact. When platoons and half-platoons were deployed individually away from company headquarters, the forward observer was unable to control their fire. While all officers and NCOs were trained in fire control, it was very difficult for a patrol commander to coordinate four or five different elements of the fire support at once. The solution was to provide more fire controllers for allocation to platoons, and this was done in two ways. First, the forward observer's party was split to provide a captain and a bombardier, each trained to control fire, along with a signaller.[39] The second method was to vest shooting control of the mortar platoon in the hands of the direct support battery commander.[40] This system allowed the mortar platoon's mobile fire controllers (MFCs) and the artillery battery's forward observers (FOs) to adopt common fire control procedures and thus allowed both FOs and MFCs to control the full range of fire support available to the battalion on the one radio net. Additionally, it removed mortar fire control information from the battalion command net.[41]

Detailed air support procedures had been developed by 5RAR during their tour, and 7RAR largely adopted these procedures. A generally lower level of enemy activity considerably reduced the number of targets warranting air strike, and a withdrawal of fixed-wing air support by the US government led to a lower level of air support being employed by battalions on these later tours.[42] As noted in chapter 4, once an airstrike was called for, the detailed air briefing was given over the battalion command net rather than the company net. An alternative to this system was that the commanding officer

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39   Interview, Major-General R.A. Grey, Canberra, 29 April 1997.

40   7RAR, Notes on Operations - Vietnam 1970-1971, The Fire Control Centre, paragraph 10.

41   7RAR, Notes on Operations - Vietnam 1970-1971, The Mortar Platoon, paragraph 12. Mobile fire controllers adopted artillery call signs with a 'mike' suffix, and thus became indirect fire controllers rather than solely mortar fire controllers.

42   7RAR, Notes on Operations - Vietnam 1970-1971, Air Support, paragraph 15.

could use his pilot to talk directly to the air support commander on the aircraft's internal UHF net. This allowed briefings to be given by a pilot to another pilot.[43]

During air-mobile troop insertions the command post was usually allocated a command and control helicopter which contained the DS battery commander and the operations officer, while the CO retained the use of the *Sioux*.[44] The improved radio fit and increased load capacity of the command and control helicopter allowed the entire command post to be airborne to control the insertion. In such cases the battalion opened an administrative/air net. This net did not normally exist but it was useful in allowing control of air operations without cluttering the command net, and was important if a contact developed soon after insertion which required the FCC to arrange a fire mission.[45] 3RAR developed this procedure even further during its tour by employing the newly introduced *Kiowa* light observation helicopter as an airborne command post. Because the *Kiowa* was larger and more powerful than the *Sioux* it was able to carry a pilot and the commanding officer in the cockpit and one or two passengers in the rear. 3RAR's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel F.P. Scott, placed his battery commander and a signaller in the rear of the helicopter and found this to be advantageous in controlling a battle from the air. The new helicopter also had a secure radio system which allowed him to pass long and complex messages to his operations staff without the need for time-consuming coded messages.[46]

The requirement to operate around the villages from company patrol bases as well as operating in greater depth to block enemy main force access to the population forced elements of the support company to be used as rifle platoons. The anti-armour platoon had no specialist role to perform and was thus employed as a rifle platoon; although designated as the reconnaissance platoon, it did not perform any

43 ibid., paragraphs 18-20.
44 The command and control helicopter was a *Huey* with a purpose-designed radio fit, capable of monitoring several radio channels at once. The direct support *Sioux* was a light observation and reconnaissance helicopter with a limited capacity for radio communications and limited passenger space.
45 7RAR, Notes on Operations - Vietnam 1970-1971, Air Support, paragraphs 36-38.
46 3RAR, Lessons Learnt by 3RAR in the 1971 Vietnam Tour, p.34; Colonel F. P. Scott, 'The Light Observation Helicopter', *Infantry Magazine* (Directorate of Infantry), September/October 1973.

specific reconnaissance tasks. The limited requirement for defensive works and construction during the latter stages of the war also saw the assault pioneer platoon employed as a rifle platoon.[47] During 7RAR's tour the battalion was forced to develop a very small number of fire support bases, but the engineering and pioneer support required was within the capacity of the attached engineer troop. Engineer support was limited usually to the provision of splinter-teams and mini-teams. These small two-man engineer teams were employed to clear and destroy bunker systems and disarm enemy mines rather than engage in the full range of sapper support tasks that had been more common during the early years of the task force's operation.[48]

The pacification phase of the war was in many ways the most productive period of operations in the task force's operational history in Vietnam. Most of the problems that service in Vietnam was likely to present had either been solved through tactical experience or development, or at least envisaged prior to deployment. Few surprises greeted the units during this period of operations, and for this reason it cannot be considered to be a period of real doctrinal development. Unlike the 'out of province' phase, there were no significant issues that presented major problems of tactical employment for the battalions. This was due in part to the fact that the task force returned to basic operational concepts with which the Australian Army had been familiar for some time. In addition, the commanders responsible for training and preparing battalions during this phase of the war were afforded the benefit of five years of previous operational experience.

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47 7RAR, Notes on Operations - Vietnam 1970-1971, Impressions of a Support Company Commander, paragraphs 60-62.

48 7RAR, Notes on Operations - Vietnam 1970-1971, Notes on RAE Support of 7RAR, paragraphs 4-6.

CONCLUSION

Major-General J. F. C. Fuller observed that 'the central idea of an army is regarded as its doctrine, which to be sound must be based upon the principles of war, and to be effective must be elastic enough to admit of mutation in accordance with circumstances'.[1] The experience of the Australian Army in Vietnam demonstrated this point. Throughout its six-and-a-half-year involvement in operations in South Vietnam, the army was forced to adapt and redefine its tactics and techniques in a number of significant ways. That it was able to achieve these shifts in operational focus and their accompanying changes in tactics so often over such a short period of time is a significant tribute to the army and the men who comprised it. What permitted the army to demonstrate such elasticity in its doctrine was a combination of wide operational experience and rigorous professional training.

One of the complex issues which bedevils the study of tactics during the Vietnam War is the fact that doctrinal development did not occur in any easily definable chronological pattern. Spiller has noted that:

> as a practical matter, military doctrine possesses certain properties and behaves much like any other complex, evolving set of ideals. It does not evolve with quite the stately progress that would please theoreticians and romantics, who would impose upon doctrine a structure and meaning as of it were a self-contained body of thought quarantined from the world in which it is meant to work.[2]

During the Vietnam War the Australian Army was presented with four varied periods of operational experience, each coming close on the heels of the previous one. As a result tactics were forced to develop very quickly, in response to given sets of circumstances which usually only persisted for a relatively short period of time.

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[1]   Major-General J. F. C. Fuller, *The Foundation of the Science of War*, 1926 quoted in Peter Tsouras, *Warrior's Words: A Quotation Book* (Arms and Armour Press, London, 1992), p.146.

[2]   Spiller, 'In the Shadow of the Dragon' in Grey and Dennis (eds), *From Past to Future*, p.7.

It has been said that retrospectively one may deduce an army's implied doctrine from how it organises, trains and equips itself.[3] The style and concept of pre-war exercises and unit establishments provides an excellent picture of the type of war the army expected to fight, one drawing heavily on the experiences of the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s. By 1965, after a period during which it had been seemingly bereft of strategic and tactical direction, the army focused on Southeast Asia as a theatre and the insurgent as an enemy to form a base for its doctrine and tactics. While the army's past experiences and preconceptions had left it with some significant weaknesses, most notably its obsession with infantry and an often shameful ignorance of some aspects of combined-arms warfare, the basic tenets of Australian doctrine were sound. Reliance upon patrolling, small-unit operations and population control left the army well placed to fight in Vietnam.

The experiences of 1RAR in 1965 highlighted generally the strengths and weaknesses of the army at the beginning of the Vietnam commitment. While the battalion was successful in applying minor infantry tactics, the unit's initially low ability to operate as part of a combined-arms team reflected the low priority placed on these activities army-wide. That the battalion was able to come to grips with new methods and adapt its tactics so quickly demonstrates the persistence of one of the central themes of this monograph. Deep operational experience led the battalion's officers to adapt existing doctrine to fit in with new, often externally driven, operational concepts. It was the application of doctrine at the higher level that posed most problems for Australian commanders, and while the specific circumstances faced by 1RAR were unique, the problem of bringing Australian tactics into line with American operating methods would persist for much of the war.

Likewise issue of roles and tasks proved problematic for the deployment of the task force in 1966, and the relationship between tactical methods and assigned roles was a problem which persisted long into the task force's operations. Initial task force operations again proved that the army was well prepared for the minor tactical aspects of operations, but problems of combined-arms cooperation (such as

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3   ibid., p.8.

employment of large-scale fire support and operations with the RAAF) demonstrated that not all the lessons which could have been drawn from 1RAR's operational experience had been passed on and applied. While the officers of 1RAR at the battalion and company level had prepared papers on their operational experiences upon their return from Vietnam, it appears that these operations were considered to be so different from those likely to be conducted by the newly established task force that they were not emphasised. As a result, the task force relearned many of the lessons which had been learnt already.

Greater consensus over the role of the task force was reached only when more troops were provided to 1ATF in December 1967, and the nature of the war changed. During the 'out of province' period the pressures of operations, influenced by both enemy action and American demands, matched a new task force commander's operational perceptions more closely. It is no accident that during the period when Australian and American higher commanders' operational conceptions reached their greatest level of consonance so far in the war, the most serious discord over tactical skills and preparation occurred. For the first time during the Australian involvement in the war, troops were placed in situations where many of the tasks that they had been trained to perform bore little relationship to those actually faced. Again, the army was forced to fall back on past experience to solve the problem. However, where this situation differed from previous doctrinal developments during the war was in the fact that the army was forced to abandon many of its recently acquired operational practices in favour of much older ones dating from the Second World War or Korea. This reinforces the idea that while the army had become highly specialised in counter-revolutionary warfare, it was still able to draw on much older experiences to lend sufficient elasticity to its doctrine and tactics.

The final period of the army's involvement in the Vietnam War, the pacification phase, provided an opportunity to match the task force's role to its refined tactical abilities. As noted, this period saw a revival of intensive small-scale patrolling and ambushing accompanied by operations in depth mounted against specific targets. While it might appear that doctrine had come full circle, this view would not account for the significant advances which had occurred in combined-arms warfare and its application to small-group tactics.

Finally, the army's obsession with the role of the infantry was tempered with appropriate knowledge and skills related to the employment of support arms, and as a result operations during this period were rendered particularly effective. It appears that the shock of the 'out of province' period provided sufficient impetus for change and allowed some serious study of emerging tactical methods.

This monograph has noted the changes in the way in which the army applied its doctrine during the Vietnam War, and by 1972 significant changes had occurred in the way the army thought about and conducted counter-revolutionary warfare. Despite this, there was very little textual revision conducted on *The Division in Battle* series, a fact which reinforces the way in which doctrine operates. As noted in chapter 1, *The Division of Battle* series was never intended to provide definite guidance on how to conduct the Vietnam War. Rather, it codified in general terms the concepts upon which an Australian counter-revolutionary war would be based. Embarking on a wholesale revision of the army's doctrine based solely upon the operational experience in Vietnam would have displayed a lack of understanding of the way in which doctrine operated and of what doctrine is intended to provide. The operational experience in Vietnam validates Doughty's observation that 'the real value of tactical doctrine lies not with the answers that it provides but with the impetus it creates toward developing innovative and creative solutions for future problems on future battlefields'.[4] Very few of the tactical problems that service in Vietnam presented were outside the scope of the army's doctrine. Weaknesses in operational methods, were they occurred, were the result of a narrowing of the perception of what a counter-revolutionary war would involve and can be traced back to a lack of appreciation for the long-term institutional memory of the organisation. For example, the utility of tanks in counter-revolutionary warfare was well documented in *The Division in Battle* series, but for a variety of reasons their use was not emphasised. When the effectiveness of armour was eventually demonstrated, doctrine did not require revision, but the attitudes of commanders toward using it did. Doctrine existed as the framework on which operations would be based, and experience and observation of local conditions provided the specific tactics and techniques of how to

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4   Doughty, *The Evolution of U.S. Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-76*, p.2.

conduct operations. The key element in this process remained the professionalism of the army's officer corps.

The term 'educated' has acquired a distinct but subtle meaning when applied to modern armies and modern professional soldiers. It means a person 'who takes work seriously, who studies it from all aspects, who (above all) has the mind as well as the aspiration to think an issue through from first to last - the reading, battlefield experience and staff courses are taken for granted. Educated soldiers are those who have learned and will put into practice all those lessons and many more'.[5] The Australian Army during the Vietnam War proved itself able to adapt to and cope with a widely varying range of situations. The reason it was able to do this was because the army, as an organisation, was trained and experienced both in breadth and in depth. In the senior ranks of both the officer and non-commissioned officer corps successive years of operational service provided a sizeable body of experience which could be drawn upon to provide solutions to almost any tactical problem. This depth of experience was combined with a professional, intellectual approach to training in, and application of, specific counter-revolutionary warfare skills. One simple expression of this attitude is the large number of articles appearing in the army's professional publications, such as the *Australian Army Journal* and *Australian Infantry*, which discussed and analysed emerging tactical techniques. These forums reveal an active practical and intellectual interest in tactics and doctrine, which was evident from the bottom of the army to its top. When one considers that the authors of these articles ranged in rank and appointment from section commanders in South Vietnam to Chief of the General Staff in Canberra, it is clear that by the end of the Vietnam War Australia possessed a truly educated army.

The Australian withdrawal from Vietnam posed a number of significant problems for the Australian government and for the Australian Army. Horner has noted that:

> The end of the Vietnam War in 1972 brought fundamental changes to Australian defence policy. For over 30 years the Australian services had been deployed overseas, often on

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5   John Terraine, *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier* (Hutchinson and Co, London, 1963), title page.

operations. For the next two decades the Australian Defence Force (ADF) remained at home, organising and training to meet an undefined threat of limited scale and intensity. Determining what sort of force was necessary in these circumstances presented a considerable challenge to the planners in Canberra ...[6]

The change to the governing parties in 1972 marked the end of an era in which defence and foreign policy issues had played a significant part in determining the outcome of seven successive general elections in Australia.[7] The newly elected Labor government completed the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam which the previous Liberal government had begun and formally abandoned the policy of forward defence. For the first time in the twentieth century the government was able to take advantage of a relatively benign regional environment in Southeast Asia which permitted the development of a more autonomous strategic perspective.[8] Additionally, both of Australia's traditional allies had signalled their clear intentions for Australia to shoulder a greater proportion of its defence commitment. In the late 1960s the British Labour government announced its intentions to withdraw from 'east of Suez', and in 1969 President Nixon indicated that the United States expected its allies to look after their own defence interests unless threatened by a major attack.[9] This indication came to be known as the Guam doctrine, and this, together with the other factors outlined above, required Australia to develop the concept which became known as defence self-reliance.

Labor's minister for defence, Lance Barnard, formally disavowed the concept of forward defence during his first months in office, but was unable to find a catchphrase to describe its replacement.[10] It took until 1976 and the election of the Fraser Liberal government for Australia's newly emergent defence policy to be

6 David Horner, *The Gunners: A History of Australian Artillery* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995), p.497.
7 Robert O'Neill, 'Defence Policy' in W.J. Hudson (ed.), *Australia in World Affairs 1971-75* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1980), p.11.
8 Michael Evans, 'From Defence to Security: Continuation and Change in Australian Strategic Planning in the Twentieth Century' in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds), *Serving Vital Interests: Australian Strategic Planning in Peace and War* (Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1996), p.130.
9 Horner, *The Gunners*, p.497.
10 O'Neill, 'Defence Policy', p.16.

codified as self-reliance in an alliance framework in the government's Defence White Paper, *Australian Defence*.

While the White Paper marked a major change in Australian defence policy, it was unclear on the actual strategy for Australian defence. Unclear and often ambiguous strategic guidance meant concepts of operations and force structures were particularly difficult to formulate.[11] Despite the fact that emphasis was on the defence of Australia, no specific guidance was available on what sort of enemy might be expected. The years following the withdrawal from Vietnam forced the army to refocus its attention on the task of defending continental Australia, a task which its jungle and tropical experience left it poorly placed to achieve. As a result, the army began training to fight a conventional war in northern Australia. Operational techniques forgotten since the Second World War had to be revived. Skills such as moving and fighting at night, vehicle camouflage and operating in a hostile air situation presented challenges which the army was not accustomed to. This process was not difficult for those officers and NCOs who were thoroughly trained in conventional tactics before the Vietnam War period, but it did present problems for those junior officers and NCOs who had experience only in Vietnam. Many of these men, used to contacts at short range and in close country, lacked an appreciation of the use of ground and of the employment of weapons at longer ranges.[12] Despite attempts by the army to restructure its training in accordance with new defence priorities, no consolidated body of doctrine was available which allowed the arms and services to develop a coherent approach to training and operational methods.

Such doctrine was not available until the publication of the *Manual of Land Warfare* (MLW) series. Most of the volumes of the MLW series were published in the late 1970s, but the capstone volume, *The Fundamentals of Land Force Operations*, was not published until 1985. This manual stated that 'the primary emphasis in the employment of the Australian Defence Force is defence of Australian

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11   Horner, *The Gunners*, p.512.
12   Horner, *Duty First*, pp.291-4.

territory and interests, with a preparedness to undertake that task alone if necessary'.[13]

Despite the publication of the MLW series, and the demonstrated commitment by the army to come to terms with the requirements of fighting a war in Australia's north, many commentators have questioned the wisdom of some of the elements of defence self-reliance. Michael Evans, for example, has suggested that three main areas of weakness exist in current defence planning. He has suggested that defence self-reliance has encouraged an isolationist security posture which forces the Australian Defence Force to plan for continental defence. Since Australia's experience of war has always demonstrated the utility of forward deployment of troops inside a powerful defence framework as opposed to anti-invasion planning, he contends that the notion of defending Australia, as it exists currently, is an untried philosophy which has little connection with the Australian historical experience of war.[14]

Second, he suggests that defence planning in the last twenty-five years has restricted the structure and training of the ADF. The lack of a credible threat to the Australian mainland has led to belief that the only possible scenario for the employment of the army is in short warning conflicts on the Australian mainland. As a planning tool, short warning conflict is structurally restrictive and limits the capability of the army to respond to higher intensity operations in areas other than the Australian mainland.[15]

Finally, Evans suggests that defence planning has demonstrated that there is a disconnection between defence policy, and trade and foreign policy. He argues that a major weakness of self-reliance is that it attempts to formulate defence policy in isolation from diplomacy. As a result, defence policy, and through it army doctrine and training, have not reflected as accurately as might be hoped the types of operations which national foreign policy have called upon it to conduct.[16] For example, foreign and trade policy have called for

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13   *Manual of Land Warfare*, Part One, *The Conduct of Operations*, Volume I, *The Fundamentals*, Pamphlet No.1, *The Fundamentals of Land Force Operations* (Department of Defence, Army Office, Canberra, 1985).

14   Evans, 'Continuity and Change in Australian Strategic Planning ...', pp.126-31.

15   ibid., p.133.

16   ibid., p.135.

increased regional engagement and for multidimensional security which embraces far more than physical security, evidenced by recent troop commitments to Cambodia, Somalia and Bougainville, but army structures, doctrine and training have remained firmly based on the defence of the Australian mainland.

It is outside the scope of this monograph to attempt a detailed analysis of the policy of defence self-reliance and its impact on Australian Army doctrine. This said, however, the discernible influences which self-reliance has had on the army highlight some of the issues examined in the monograph's discussion of the army's performance during the Vietnam War.

As discussed, one of the great strengths of the army of the Vietnam era was wide operational experience in a range of conflicts combined with a deep-seated professional and intellectual approach to the special problems of counter-revolutionary warfare. This breadth of experience was gained as a result of a willingness by government to commit Australian forces to a number of theatres over a relatively short period of time in pursuit of Australian interests. Depth of experience grew from the army's ability to shape its structures and doctrine based upon firm strategic guidance and a realistic appraisal of potential threats. Out of these two factors grew the operational success and the rigorous professional and educated characteristics of the Vietnam War-era Australian Army. It is not appropriate in this monograph to speculate on the degree to which the era of defence self-reliance will lead to a degradation of some of these characteristics, but the lessons of history are there to be absorbed.

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