

# AN INDEPENDENT COMMAND

## Command and Control of the 1st Australian Task Force in Vietnam



R. W. CABLE



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**R.W. Cable**

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## ABSTRACT

The commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Task Force in Vietnam held the key operational command in Australia's largest military commitment of the Cold War period. Although the Vietnam War has been written on at length, the brigade level of command, held in Vietnam by the commander of 1 ATF, has received comparatively little attention. This is the more remarkable given the Australian Army's recently renewed interest in a 'task force' structure and the modern trend away from large-scale conventional warfare.

This monograph examines the problems and conditions faced by the seven Task Force commanders; their styles of command and the degree of independence they were allowed by Australian and US higher commanders; how much operational command they exercised and the types of operations carried out under each. It concludes that although the commanders were allowed a large degree of independence, apparent variations in Task Force methods were due less to the influence of personality than to differences in the types of operations required to counter a changing enemy situation.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

1 ACAU	1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit
1 ATF	1st Australian Task Force
1 ALSG	1st Australian Logistic Support Group
2IC	Second in Command
II FFV	Second Field Force Vietnam (US Corps-level headquarters for the (Vietnamese) 3rd CTZ)
AAFV	Australian Army Force Vietnam
AAR	After Action Report
AATTV	Australian Army Training Team Vietnam
AO	Area of Operations
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South)
CATDC	Combined Arms Training and Development Centre (Australian Army)
CCOSC	Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CO	Commanding Officer
COMAFV	Commander, Australian Force Vietnam
COMUSMACV	Commander, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam
CT	Communist Terrorist
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
FSPB	Fire Support Patrol Base
GSO	General Staff Officer
GVN	Government of Vietnam (South)
HES	Hamlet Evaluation System
HQ	Headquarters
ICAP	Integrated Civil Affairs Programme
MACCORDS	Military Assistance Command Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MATT	Mobile Army Training Team
MC	Military Cross
MR	Military Region
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer

NVA	North Vietnamese Army (as distinct from locally raised VC units)
NLF	National Liberation Front (VC)
NZ	New Zealand
Op	Operation
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment (usually prefixed by the battalion numeral)
R&C	Rest and Convalescence leave (generally taken in Vung Tau)
R&R	Rest and Recreation leave (overseas)
RF	Regional Forces
TAOR	Tactical Area of Responsibility
TFMA	Task Force Maintenance Area
US	United States
VC	Viet Cong (term most commonly used for 'enemy' by Australian forces)
VCI	Viet Cong Infrastructure



## INTRODUCTION

The commander of the 1st Australian Task Force held the key operational command in Australia's largest military commitment of the Cold War period. Although the Vietnam War has been written on at length, the brigade level of command, held in Vietnam by the commander of 1 ATF, has received comparatively little attention.<sup>1</sup> This is the more remarkable given the Australian Army's recently renewed interest in a 'task force' structure and the modern trend away from large-scale conventional warfare.

The position held by the commander of 1 ATF was unusual. Contrary to some previous attempts to suggest otherwise, the Task Force attained a level of independence unknown in the Australian Army's century of expeditionary warfare, due to the attitude of senior Australian and US commanders, and the experience of seven Task Force commanders which dated back to the Second World War. Their distinguished operational service was tempered by comprehensive intellectual preparation in which the concepts of counter-revolutionary warfare were well understood. Consequently, apparent variations in Task Force methods were due less to the influence of personality than to differences in the types of operations required to counter a changing enemy situation.

The nature of the enemy threat was well understood by all commanders, as was the military role befitting a combat formation such as 1 ATF. With the responsibility for Phuoc Tuy province resting firmly with the Government of Vietnam (GVN), the Task Force was continuously deployed on military operations with the aim of improving security. This necessitated a focus on the greatest threat to security, enemy main force units, within Phuoc Tuy and sometimes in provinces to the immediate north. Operations against main force units were conducted throughout the deployment and were seen as the

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<sup>1</sup> For some discussion, see D.M. 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).

## 2 *An Independent Command*

essential precursor to 'pacification' operations targeting the grass roots strength of Viet Cong (VC) in the villages.

A chronological treatment of the Task Force's deployment will display how operations met a changing enemy threat. A number of themes will be discussed to highlight specific problems of command, though constraints of length preclude the discussion of lesser issues, such as the use of the Special Air Service or RAAF helicopters, covered in detail by other authors.<sup>2</sup> Although emphasis shifted according to the enemy situation, the key role of the Task Force commander throughout the war remained the orchestration of operations within the campaign, and the attention of commanders focused on the control and coordination of resources, rather than direct command in battle.

Issues of command weighed most heavily on the first four Task Force commanders. Initial operations aimed to secure the base and expand a controlled area to separate the enemy from its resources, base areas and the population. A lack of resources to carry out these operations presented difficulties which commanders addressed in a number of ways. From the earliest stages, search and destroy operations were the predominant activity of the Task Force, often conducted in concert with US and other allied forces. This experience was developed in large operations during 1968 and 1969 following the Tet offensive, which raised a number of issues pertaining to relations with the US command.

From 1969, success against main force units permitted a re-emphasis on operations in support of 'pacification' and 'Vietnamisation', and operations within the Task Force were increasingly conducted at the sub-unit level. With a diminished enemy threat and increasing experience and familiarity with the war, the role of the final three commanders was more closely associated with the control of resources for operations. Constant pressure wore the VC down, and understanding the effect operations had on the enemy

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<sup>2</sup> D.M. Horner, SAS, *Phantoms of the Jungle: A History of the Australian Special Air Service* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989); R.N. Bushby, *Educating an Army: Australian Army Doctrinal Development and the Operational Experience in South Vietnam 1965-72*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 126 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1998), pp. 44-5; 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).

suggests the extent to which 1 ATF achieved domination over enemy forces.

The nature of the war explains the marked difference between the Task Force commander's experience and that of Australian brigadiers in earlier wars. Relations with unit commanders assumed increased importance, yet the stress of continuous operations and the burden of responsibility could only be alleviated by headquarters staff and the deputy commander to a limited degree. Conversely, very few burdens were caused by the interference of senior commanders or political figures. Independent command was thus more concerned with military considerations such as enemy strength, the ground on which the Task Force was required to fight, and tasks assigned. These factors set the scene for the war 1 ATF had to fight.



## 1 ATF AND PHUOC TUY PROVINCE

### Evolution of the Task Force

The origins of the task force in the Australian Army lay in the pentropic structure adopted during the 1960s. British-pattern military organisations are traditionally modelled on a 'triangular' structure of three (or occasionally four) component parts, which gives a narrow span of command while allowing a balance between units committed and those held in reserve. In the mid-1950s, the United States experimented with a pentagonal model as a basis for the 'pentomic' division, based on a five-sided structure and designed for warfare on an atomic battlefield where greater dispersion would require enhanced independence and firepower in the sub-units of the division. Australia also saw advantages in this structure for jungle operations and restructured its army into divisions each consisting of five 'battle groups'. These were essentially large battalions with embedded supporting arms which, with the addition of headquarters and logistics assets, aimed to be self-sufficient.

Pentropic divisions would control battle groups directly, thus eliminating the need for an intermediate brigade headquarters. However, operations involving between two and four battalions could be brought under the command of a task force headquarters. With only a small regular army, the development of a task force became the first priority for the pentropic reorganisation. It was based on two regular battlegroups and logistic support force and was raised, prophetically, for an expeditionary role.<sup>1</sup>

The pentropic structure was abandoned by the Australian Army in late 1964 for a number of reasons, and reversion to a tropical warfare establishment implied a reversion to brigades. But to avoid admitting that the tremendously disruptive and wasteful pentropic

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<sup>1</sup> J.C. Blaxland, *Organising an Army: The Australian Experience 1957-1965*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 50 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1989), p.63.

period was a mistake, the 'task force' designation was retained.<sup>2</sup> Although this nomenclature suggests that the terms 'brigade' and 'task force' could be used interchangeably, the term 'task force' suggested that this 'new' organisation could be tailored for specific roles simply by adding two or more battalions.<sup>3</sup> The danger in such a flexible definition was that the composition of a task force could be determined by factors such as scarcity, rather than the requirements for the task at hand. When 1 ATF became operational in May 1966, it comprised two infantry battalions, an artillery field regiment (including a US medium battery), and supporting sub-units including engineer and cavalry (armoured personnel carrier) squadrons (see Figure 1).

It soon became apparent that the tasks that 1 ATF had to perform exceeded the capacity of the force. A similar problem existed with the Task Force headquarters, which was identical to the establishment used in Australia despite the additional requirements made of it in theatre. These difficulties were indicative of a wider problem. A brigade consists of more than a headquarters able to accept units under command; it is a homogeneous formation designed to operate as part of a divisional structure. Without the support rendered by the division, a task force on independent operations was known to require additional support and staff,<sup>4</sup> but the initial lack of adequate augmentation in Vietnam was to create enormous difficulties for 1 ATF when it was first deployed. In Vietnam, operational control of 1 ATF came directly from an American corps headquarters, designated Second Field Force Vietnam (II FFV).<sup>5</sup> This was one of four corps headquarters under the US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). The commanding general of the Second Field Force was the

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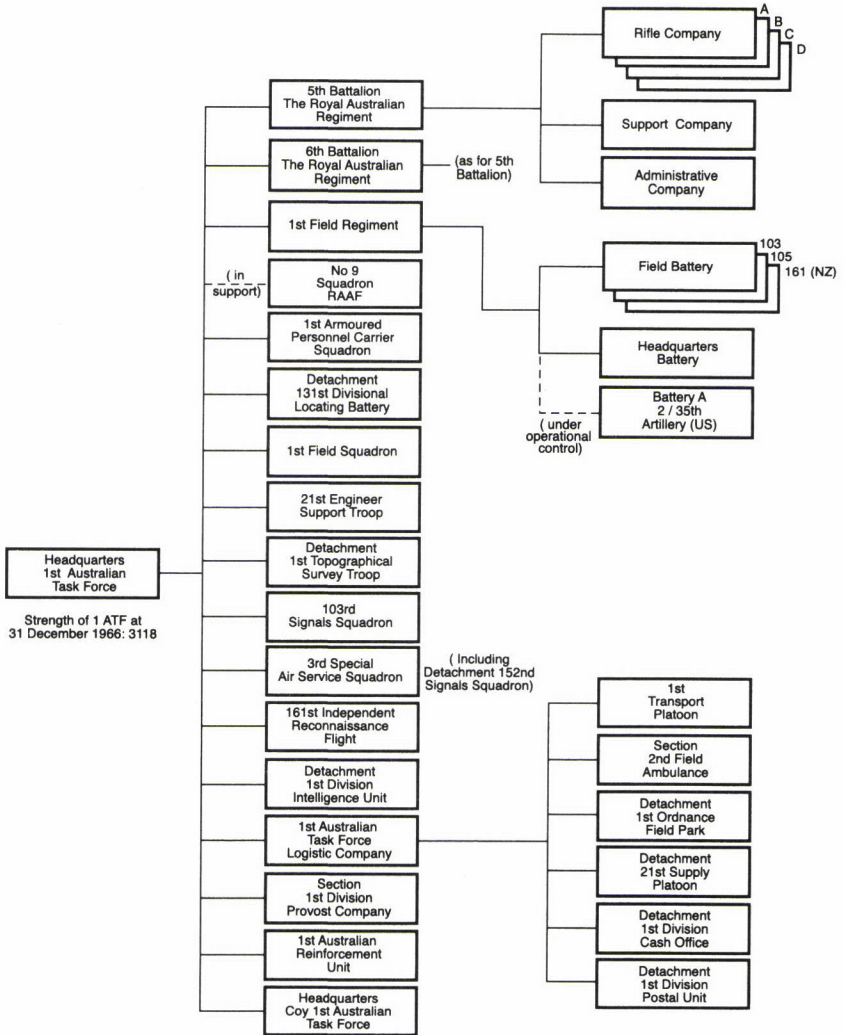
<sup>2</sup> M.C.J. Welburn, *The Development of Australian Army Doctrine 1945-1964*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 108 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1994), p.58.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Army, Military Board, *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet No. 1, 'Organization and Tactics' (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1967), section 35, paragraph 50.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, paragraph 51b.

<sup>5</sup> South Vietnam was divided into four corps tactical zones (CTZs) (see Figure 2). The US Second Field Force (II FFV) operated in III CTZ. The term 'field force' was used to denote a flexible corps structure and avoid confusion with the Vietnamese corps. The presence of the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force in I CTZ accounts for the difference in the numbering of III CTZ and II FFV. Major General George S. Eckhardt, *Vietnam Studies: Command and Control 1950-1969* (Department of the Army, Washington DC, 1974), p.53.

Figure 1: Organisation 1st Australian Task Force



Source: Based on Ian McNeill, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950-1966* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993), p. 239.

Figure 2: The Corps Areas and Major Towns, South Vietnam



Source: Based on Robert J. O'Neill, *Vietnam Task: The 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, 1966-67* (Cassell Australia, Melbourne, 1968), p.4.



immediate commander of 1 ATF but, as in previous wars in which Australia was part of an allied army, there also existed a senior commander of Australian forces - the Commander, Australian Force Vietnam. His role was similar to Blamey's in the Mediterranean theatre during the Second World War, responsible for a national force but not actually in command of it.<sup>6</sup> The manner in which this command structure controlled 1 ATF meant that the doctrinal requirement, that a task force on independent operations should 'be given a clear and definite task but must be allowed maximum freedom of action within the over-all aim',<sup>7</sup> came close to realisation.

### Role

The military working agreement signed between the Australian Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General J.G.N. Wilton, and the commander of the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV), General William Westmoreland, dictated four tasks for 1 ATF:

- a) To secure and dominate the assigned Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) in Phuoc Tuy Province.
- b) To conduct operations related to the security of Highway 15, as required.
- c) To conduct other operations in Phuoc Tuy Province, as required.
- d) To conduct operations anywhere in the ARVN III Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) and subsequently in the area of the adjacent province of Binh Thuan in the ARVN II CTZ as agreed by COMAFV and COMUSMACV.<sup>8</sup>

This set out clear and definite tasks for the commander to pursue, apparently quite distinct, but actually closely interrelated with success in one area impacting on one or more of the others. As in all wars, the commander had to decide where to place the emphasis while conforming to the requirements of higher command and the enemy situation. The working agreement also stated that 1 ATF was neither

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<sup>6</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.15.

<sup>7</sup> *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet 1, section 35, paragraph 51b.

<sup>8</sup> 'Military Working Arrangement between the CGS and COMUSMACV', March 1966, AWM 102, 46.

totally responsible for Phuoc Tuy province, nor restricted to operations within it.

### Level of War

Discussing the level of war at which 1 ATF operated poses some difficulty. In today's terms, conflict is waged at a hierarchy of levels: political, strategic, operational and tactical. Unlike some other nations, Australia defines these levels by the nature of operations conducted and outcomes desired rather than the size of the forces engaged or the level of command involved.<sup>9</sup> However, attempting to apply modern definitions to the 1960s is difficult because there was very little awareness of the concept of an operational level of war in the Australian or US armies at the time.<sup>10</sup> War was thought of in terms of strategy and tactics, and the exercise of command between these was sometimes referred to as 'high command'.<sup>11</sup> According to Bushby, 1 ATF 'rarely, if ever, functioned at the operational or strategic level of war'.<sup>12</sup> This emphasises the limited military outcomes a small force can achieve rather than the ability of such a force to fulfil higher political objectives.

It can be argued that 1 ATF never reached the operational level of war because the degree of 'operational effect' which it was able to achieve was limited. True strategic impact required either complete political and military control of a province or, alternately, free rein to be used anywhere in Vietnam that circumstances required.<sup>13</sup> Alternately, 1 ATF could be considered to have functioned at the operational level because of the context of its employment. While under operational control of II FFV, the Task Force was under Australian command and virtually autonomous. It was given a specific geographic area in which to pursue a definite objective, and control over the resources with

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<sup>9</sup> Australian Army, Training Command, Combined Arms Training and Development Centre (CATDC), Doctrine Wing, 'Land Warfare Doctrine 1: The Fundamentals of Land Warfare', 1998, paragraph 2-11.

<sup>10</sup> This is one of the most serious criticisms of the United States' conduct of the Vietnam War. See Edward N. Luttwak, 'The Operational Level of War', *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Winter 1980/81, p.62.

<sup>11</sup> D.M.Horner, 'High Command - The Australian Experience', *Defence Force Journal*, No. 48, September/October 1984, p.11.

<sup>12</sup> Bushby, *Educating an Army*, p.2.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Major General D.M. Butler, Portsea, 8 July 1999.

which to do it. In modern terms, this would place 1 ATF firmly at the operational level of war.<sup>14</sup>

The 'level of war' was influenced by other factors. Australia's contribution to the alliance was, by its lack of size, unable to influence the military result of the war. It was committed for political reasons.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the United States regarded 1 ATF as important to the overall US effort at the 'politico-strategic' level.<sup>16</sup> Since 1 ATF was the major contribution to an alliance seen as essential to national strategy it supported political objectives, a higher level outcome than is possible at a tactical level.

This is not to say that the Task Force always performed at the operational level. For example, 1 ATF clearly operated at the tactical level when under command of II FFV during the Tet offensive.<sup>17</sup> This situation resulted in activities to support the operational-level objectives of a higher US formation,<sup>18</sup> and illustrates both the fluctuating nature of the war and the tendency for the level of war at which the Task Force operated to hover somewhere between the operational and tactical levels according to circumstances.

Despite the twin difficulties involved in defining the operational level of war and assessing whether 1 ATF actually fought at this level, the most important factor is that throughout its time in Vietnam the Task Force carried out a series of operations which, by definition, constituted a campaign.<sup>19</sup> The planning and conduct of a campaign is an idea central to the operational level of war,<sup>20</sup> and it is in terms of this campaign that the operational performance of 1 ATF will be discussed.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview, Lieutenant General H.J. Coates, Canberra, 6 July 1999; CATDC, 'Land Warfare Doctrine 1', paragraph 2-13.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987), p. 178; Peter Edwards, *Crises and Commitments: The Politics and Diplomacy of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1965* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992), p.361.

<sup>16</sup> Letter, General Michael S. Davison to author, 6 July 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Although, as Coates shows, numerous headquarters may work at the operational level simultaneously. John Coates, *Bravery above Blunder: The 9th Australian Division at Finschhafen, Sattelberg and Sio* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1999), p.139.

<sup>18</sup> CATDC, 'Land Warfare Doctrine 1', paragraph 2-14.

<sup>19</sup> H.T. Hayden, *Warfighting: Maneuver Warfare in the U.S. Marine Corps*, Book Two: *FMFM 1-1 Campaigning* (Greenhill, London, 1995), p. 82; D.M. Horner, 'The ADF and the Operational Level of War', *Defence Force Journal*, No. 78, September/October 1989, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> See Horner, 'The ADF and the Operational Level of War', pp.4-5.

### Phuoc Tuy Province

1 ATF was based in Phuoc Tuy to 'provide a specifically defined area of operations',<sup>21</sup> similar to other allied formations throughout III CTZ. Consequently, '1 ATF did not, as often supposed, have responsibility for the security of Phuoc Tuy Province. That responsibility rested squarely on the shoulders of the Province Chief'.<sup>22</sup> Appointed by Saigon and placed in charge of a key administrative unit in South Vietnam, he was a powerful figure and directly responsible for the implementation of government policy.<sup>23</sup> Alongside the Province Chief was the American Province Senior Advisor. He was usually a military officer under the command of MACV (later MACCORDS),<sup>24</sup> with team of 90 members located in the provincial 'Sector Headquarters' at Baria and in each of the five districts.<sup>25</sup> The advisory structure aimed to assist the GVN to implement the national strategy of 'revolutionary development' by way of the province 'pacification plan'.<sup>26</sup>

The Province Chief was also the military commander of all Vietnamese units in the province <sup>27</sup> and in Phuoc Tuy he was responsible for a sizeable military force numbering around 4000. This included attached ARVN battalions, Regional Force companies, Popular Force platoons, the People's Self-Defence Force and other forces such as the National Police Field Force. These forces were scattered throughout the populated areas and, in line with the Province Chief's responsibilities, were engaged primarily in the 'village war'. This freed the Australians from much of the burden of pacification tasks but shackled the success or failure of the war in Phuoc Tuy

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<sup>21</sup> Letter, Davison, 6 July 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Lecture by Brigadier S.C. Graham, Brisbane 1968 on 1 ATF Operations in South Vietnam (copy in author's possession), p.1.

<sup>23</sup> The basis for this structure lies in the French system of government established during colonial times.

<sup>24</sup> Military Assistance Command Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support. See J.F. McDonagh, 'Civil Affairs in Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam 1967/68', *Australian Army Journal*, No. 231, August 1968, p.9.

<sup>25</sup> Ian McNeill, *The Team: Australian Army Advisers in Vietnam 1962-1972* (University of Queensland Press in assoc. with the Australian War Memorial, Brisbane, 1984), p.428.

<sup>26</sup> 'Revolutionary development is defined as the integrated military and civil process to restore, consolidate, and expand government control so that nation building can progress'. See McDonagh, 'Civil Affairs in Phuoc Tuy Province...'

<sup>27</sup> Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Westview, Boulder, 1991), pp.1, 15.

province to the American advisory effort and the Vietnamese political situation. Australia's alliance relationship had been spelt out in the working agreement: 'The general mission of the Australian Task Force will be to carry out operations in coordination with and in support of operations of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) and the United States forces'.<sup>28</sup> Even though the emphasis was placed upon coordination, rather than cooperation, operations in conjunction with allied forces presented a number of difficulties for successive Task Force commanders.

A measure of the regard in which the United States held Australia was displayed in placing the Task Force in Phuoc Tuy province, which was important for a number of reasons.<sup>29</sup> In the south of the province was the relatively secure port of Vung Tau, at the mouth of a vital shipping channel and an important alternate port to Saigon.<sup>30</sup> Vung Tau was the origin of a number of important roads, in particular Route 15 which led to Saigon and Route 2 which passed the Task Force base and ran into Long Khanh province towards the vast US logistic base at Long Binh. The security of these routes was vital and of direct benefit to military operations throughout III CTZ. Phuoc Tuy province also constituted a southeastern approach to Saigon.

While its position accounted for its importance, the nature of the ground presented its own unique problems for the commanders of 1 ATF and shaped the way in which the campaign was conducted. Although geography is discussed in several works,<sup>31</sup> it is worth noting a number of aspects that were of particular concern to the Australian commanders.

Apart from a number of isolated villages, the bulk of the population was concentrated in the southern central zone of the province. Beyond the rice paddies surrounding populated areas was dense jungle, ideal for concealment and movement. The enemy maintained base areas in the mountainous parts of the province. The Nui Dinh and Nui Thi Vai mountains (see Figure 3) were an early concern since they commanded stretches of Route 15. To the south of

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<sup>28</sup> 'Military Working Arrangement between the CGS and COMUSMACV', AWM 102, 46.

<sup>29</sup> Robert O'Neill, 'Australian Military Problems in Vietnam', *Australian Outlook*, Vol. 23, No. 2, August 1969, p.52; Letter, General Frederick C. Weyand to author, 16 June 1999.

<sup>30</sup> Based at Vung Tau were units supporting the Task Force including 1st Australian Logistic Support Group and 9 Squadron RAAF.

<sup>31</sup> Including O'Neill, *Vietnam Task*, pp.9-14; McNeill, *To Long Tan*, pp.208-11.

Dat Do was a traditional guerrilla sanctuary in the Long Hai mountains. This was a heavily mined and fortified VC base, described by one Task Force commander as a 'fortress in the middle of the populated zone'.<sup>32</sup> The Long Hai area would remain a problem for the Task Force until its withdrawal. Two base areas presented a particular problem: the Hat Dich and May Tao regions, which spanned the northwest and northeast tri-border areas respectively (see Figure 4).<sup>33</sup> As these regions overlapped a number of province boundaries and areas of responsibility, any effective operations necessitated either combined operations with allied units based outside Phuoc Tuy province, or clearance to operate beyond the normal Phuoc Tuy boundary. Furthermore, allied forces were disinclined to operate close to boundaries since this increased the need for cooperation with neighbouring units in order to avoid 'friendly fire' incidents. This reluctance was exploited by the enemy, who used the northern boundary of Phuoc Tuy as a transit route,<sup>34</sup> and was indicative of a wider difficulty: 'Phuoc Tuy' province was a South Vietnamese government designation, not a VC one. For the VC, Phuoc Tuy province was only part of 'Ba Long' (later Ba Bien) province, which covered a number of other provinces to the north of the Phuoc Tuy boundary (see Figure 5). For this reason, the VC could operate in and around Phuoc Tuy without the hindrances imposed on Australian forces.<sup>35</sup> It also meant that 1 ATF operations external to Phuoc Tuy were still within the VC province.

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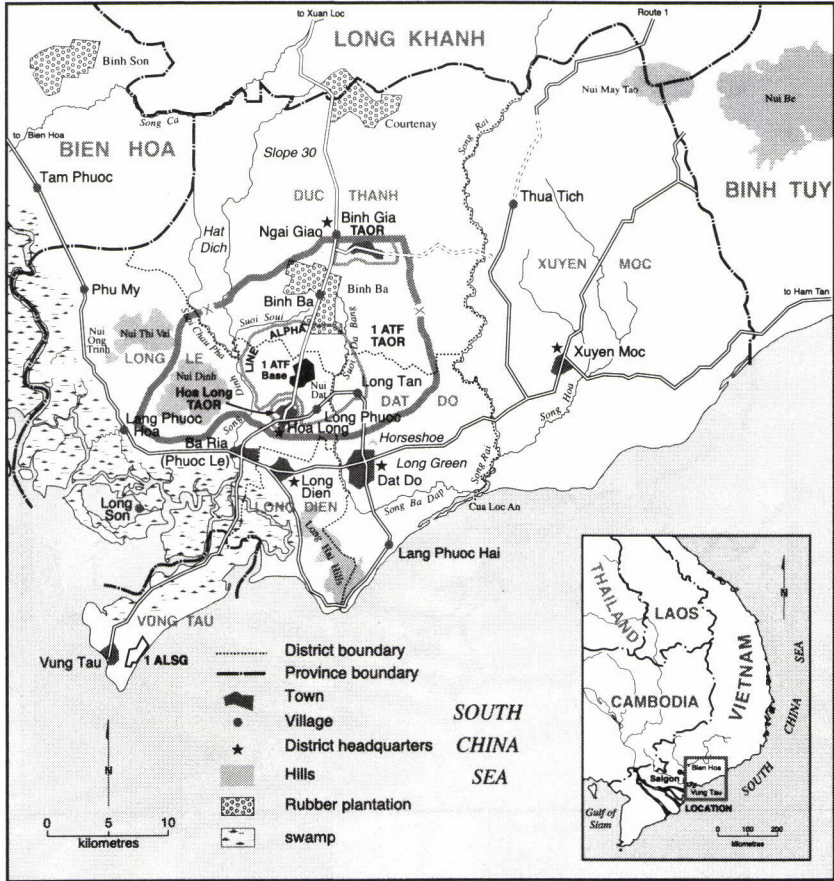
<sup>32</sup>Michael O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars: With the Seventh Battalion in Vietnam* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995), p.17; Interview, Major General R.L. Hughes, Canberra, 27 May 1999.

<sup>33</sup>Tri-border areas were considered to be particularly attractive to guerrillas in Malaya. John Coates, *Suppressing Insurgency: An Analysis of the Malayan Emergency 1948-54* (Westview, Boulder, 1992), p.152.

<sup>34</sup>Interview, Brigadier C.N. Kahn, Canberra, 4 June 1999.

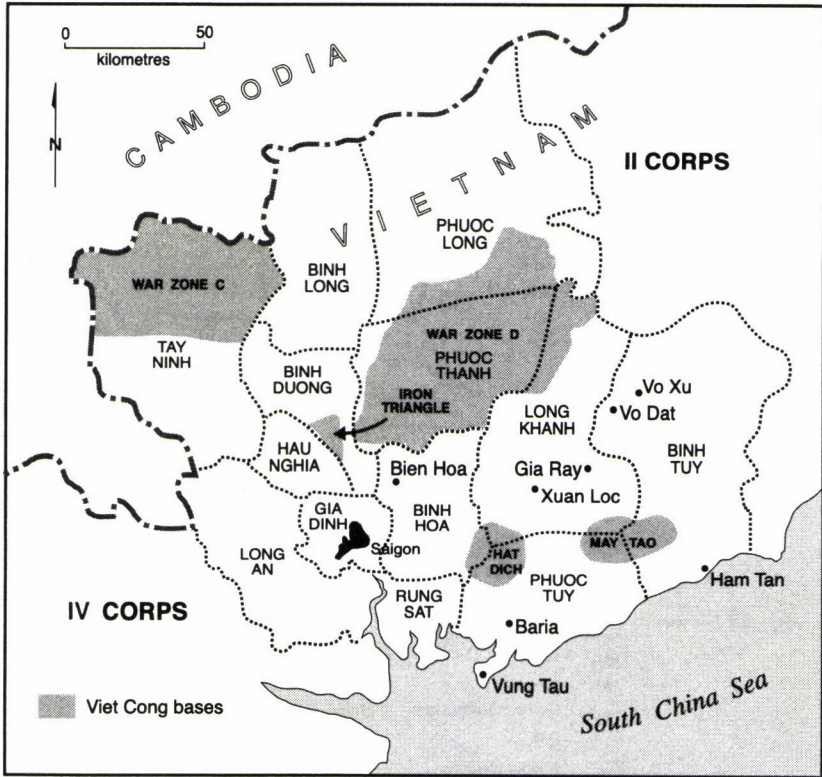
<sup>35</sup>The problem of non-matching-border areas providing a sanctuary for enemy forces was a feature of the Malayan experience. See Coates, *Suppressing Insurgency*, p.153, Map 3, 'Insurgent Boundaries and Areas - 1951'.

Figure 3: Initial Tactical Area of Responsibility



Source: Based on McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.251.

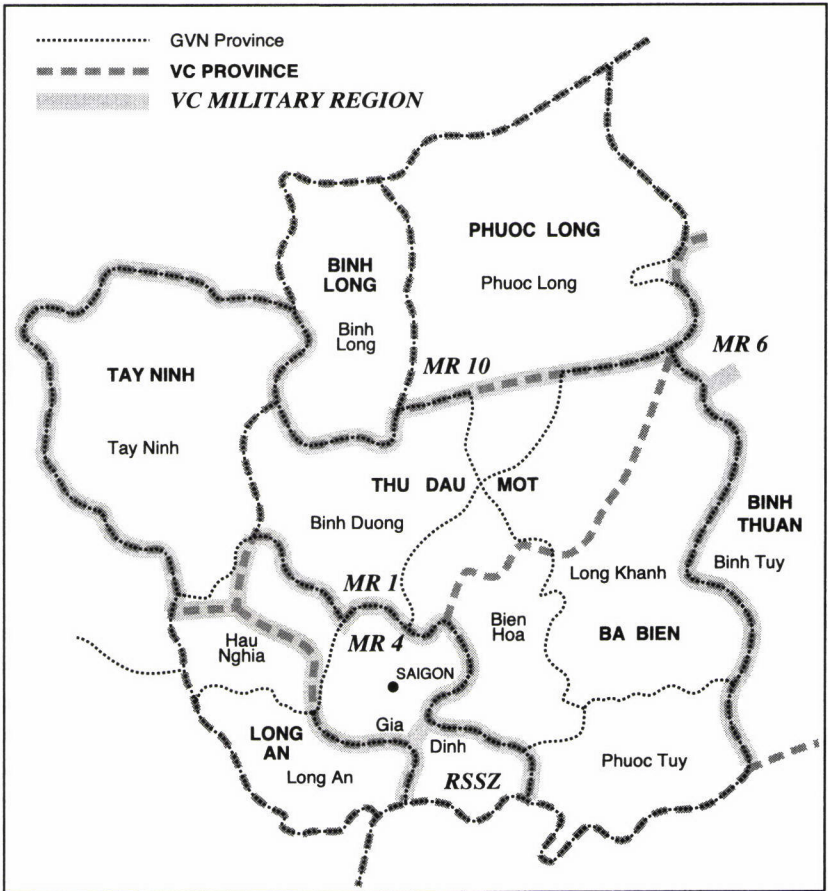
**Figure 4: The Provinces, Major Towns and Viet Cong Bases, III Corps Area**



Source: Based on O'Neill, *Vietnam Task*, p. 7.



Figure 5: GVN and VC Boundaries, III CTZ



Source: Based on Map Supplement to Troops Information Sheet Number 80, Period 21-27 January 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/85.

### The Nui Dat Base

A basic tenet of Australian counter-revolutionary warfare doctrine was separating the enemy from the source of its support, the civilian population.<sup>36</sup> As the bulk of Phuoc Tuy's population was concentrated in the southern central zone, the province was considered well suited for this purpose.<sup>37</sup> The first Task Force commander, Brigadier O.D. Jackson,<sup>38</sup> chose to base the 1 ATF at Nui Dat, a small hill eight kilometres north of the provincial capital, Baria. Ideally placed for interdiction, it would stand as a significant obstacle to VC movement in the province, but did not conform to the US preference for placing the base in a position to secure the provincial capital. The Nui Dat base also enhanced the security of the Australian force. Vietnamese nationals were generally denied access to the base, which minimised their knowledge of the inner layout and reduced the effectiveness of any attacks. Conversely, Australian access to civilian areas, with the attendant social and economic effects, was restricted. Initial operations cleared an area around Nui Dat to effective mortar range, termed 'Line Alpha' (shown on Figure 3), which permitted free use of the base's defensive firepower and deprived the VC of opportunities to provoke action causing civilian casualties.

Although a firm forward operational base was established in line with prevailing doctrine,<sup>39</sup> Nui Dat was later criticised on several grounds, chiefly because its isolated location demanded additional resources and manpower to maintain it.<sup>40</sup> Battalions that were already under strength deployed to the field with at least 10 fit men per company left behind for base defence.<sup>41</sup> Initial construction of the base also detracted from the core role of the battalions and demanded great physical effort on the part of the soldiers. Lieutenant Colonel David

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<sup>36</sup> Australian Army, Military Board, *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet No. 11, 'Counter Revolutionary Warfare' (Army Headquarters, Canberra, 1967), section 2, paragraph 8a.

<sup>37</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.14.

<sup>38</sup> Jackson was a very experienced commander in the Vietnam War, having served in the Mediterranean and Pacific during the Second World War, commanded all three battalions of the RAR (two of them pentropic) and had already commanded the Australian Army Training Team, Vietnam (AATTV) and Australian Army Force Vietnam (AAFV). See Lex McAulay, *The Battle of Long Tan* (Random House, Sydney, 1986), p.21.

<sup>39</sup> *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet 11, section 36, 'The Tactical Concept', paragraph 2b.

<sup>40</sup> Lecture notes, Colonel D. Dunstan, Presentation to Staff College, Fort Queenscliff 1969, 1 ATF Operations SVN - 1968 (copy in author's possession).

<sup>41</sup> O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.29.

Butler, CO of 6 RAR believes this could have been avoided if an entire construction regiment had been initially deployed to construct the base and then withdrawn.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, more appropriate pre-planning of the initial logistic buildup would have eased many of the supply problems experienced by the Task Force in the early stages of the deployment (see below).<sup>43</sup>

One alternate solution would have been to base the Task Force at Vung Tau and deploy from there to temporary fire support bases. This would have placed emphasis on route security or forced greater dependence on US helicopter resources, but would not have allowed a constant presence within the province.<sup>44</sup> It also would have diminished the ability of the Task Force to react to enemy action from a central location.

### Enemy Forces

Phuoc Tuy province was chosen because it was likely to be an area of 'significant military activity',<sup>45</sup> and powerful enemy units attempted to operate within the province throughout the deployment. There were four major types of enemy units, generically referred to as 'VC'. The first were main force units such as 274 and 275 VC Regiments (part of 5 VC Division) and, later, regular units such as 33 NVA Regiment.<sup>46</sup> These units were not locally based but operated according to direction by higher command and the availability of logistic support. The second type of unit was the provincial mobile battalion, primarily D445 (and on occasion D440) Battalion. D445 comprised three companies, often operating separately, yet able to concentrate rapidly for battalion operations.<sup>47</sup> The third type of unit was the VC District Company, based in three of the five districts of the province. Finally, there were the village guerrillas and Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI), who performed many important roles including terrorism, proselytising, supply and intelligence dissemination.

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<sup>42</sup> Interview, Butler, 8 July 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Interview, Coates, 6 July 1999.

<sup>44</sup> O'Neill, 'Australian Military Problems in Vietnam', p.54.

<sup>45</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.14.

<sup>46</sup> NVA units were recruited in North Vietnam. VC units were increasingly reinforced with northern recruits throughout the war, especially after losses sustained in 1968.

<sup>47</sup> 'Intelligence report on D445 LF Bn', AWM 95, 1/4/Jan 69, pt. 5.

Each type of unit possessed certain strengths. Main force regiments were powerful and well trained. The three types of local force units were less so but had the advantage of an intimate knowledge of their home province and strong links with the population. When dispersed or living in villages they were difficult to identify or destroy piecemeal, yet were able to concentrate rapidly for operations in strength. Enemy units operated over a wide area and, with no concern for the holding of ground, were able to achieve surprise by using jungle terrain to strike at targets virtually at will. This made efforts to combat them inherently reactive in nature. A further difficulty presented by the range of enemy units was the fact they could simultaneously conduct operations of varying intensity.<sup>48</sup> The Australians thus required a flexible force able to counter an enemy capable of mounting a multitude of dissimilar threats across space and time.

The main effort of the Task Force was directed towards main force units for a number of reasons. Initially, the large units operating in Phuoc Tuy province presented a major threat to Australian units on patrol and even to the Task Force base itself. Moreover, 1 ATF was best equipped, trained and organised to fight these large enemy forces while leaving garrison tasks to government troops. Even if enemy forces could be dispersed or forced from the province by Australian operations, their ability to concentrate and move rapidly meant that a situation could develop which required a switch to conventional operations at short notice. This threat was present in varying degrees throughout the Task Force's time in Vietnam and, until reduced, precluded any focus on pacification.<sup>49</sup>

Comparisons with the Malayan Emergency lose their relevance alongside this consideration, and Jackson knew that in 1965 Vietnam had become far more than just a guerrilla war.<sup>50</sup> The dissimilar natures of threats presented by the enemy required a balanced approach but one weighted against large enemy units that constituted a threat that could not be ignored, and the Task Force was to deal with this threat in a number of ways.

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<sup>48</sup> John Jackson, 'The Impact of the 1968 Tet Offensive on American and North Vietnamese Strategy', *Defence Force Journal*, No. 77, July/August 1989, p.35.

<sup>49</sup> Interview, Coates, 2 June 1999.

<sup>50</sup> McNeill, *The Team*, p.86.

## The Task Overall

The commander of 1 ATF was granted considerable scope to conduct operations within his TAOR in Phuoc Tuy province. Tasks were clearly detailed and the differing responsibilities of Australian and South Vietnamese forces delineated. The province was large, with operationally important and difficult geographic regions. Given the modest size of 1 ATF, Jackson had to secure the base and begin to deal with a strong and complex enemy threat. This would be accomplished through the application of well-understood doctrinal procedures:

- a) Securing a Base Area.
- b) Establishing a Firm Forward Operational Base or Bases in the Allotted Area of Tactical Responsibility.
- c) Securing a Controlled Area.
- d) Close Co-operation with the Civil Administration.
- e) Continued Expansion of Controlled Areas.
- f) Offensive Operations in Depth.<sup>51</sup>

Initially, enemy strength would be targeted through 'priority operations', including cordon and search operations against enemy-dominated villages and search and clear operations in enemy-dominated areas.<sup>52</sup> With security established, painstaking 'framework' operations would begin, characterised by systematic search and destroy operations designed to grind the enemy down and expand the controlled area.<sup>53</sup>

The Task Force's ultimate objective was to establish security for the government, but it was left to the Vietnamese, with US advisors, to win the political war. Phuoc Tuy allowed operations to be conducted in a distinctly Australian way, allowing systematic offensive patrolling against enemy forces and base areas in an attempt to regain the initiative. The war became, for the most part, a small-unit war of companies and platoons. While the detail of a battle was rarely, if ever, the immediate concern of the Task Force commander, the special conditions imposed by the peculiarities of the war in Vietnam presented him with a range of special problems. In a sense it was

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<sup>51</sup> *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet 11, section 36, 'The Tactical Concept'.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, paragraph 9c.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, paragraph 9a.

## 22 *An Independent Command*

'more the orchestration of a campaign than the conduct of a battle'.<sup>54</sup> It was through the conduct of such a campaign that each Task Force commander sought to overcome the difficulties presented to him, and it was the ultimate success of the campaign that would dictate the measure of success achieved by 1 ATF.

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<sup>54</sup> Interview, Kahn, 4 June 1999.

## ESTABLISHING SECURITY

1 ATF was established in Phuoc Tuy province during Operation Hardihood, a US 173rd Airborne Brigade (Independent) clearing operation with 5 RAR and elements of 1 RAR (before its return to Australia) under command. Task Force headquarters was established at Nui Dat on 5 June 1966 and 'maximum continuous and aggressive patrolling' out to Line Alpha began immediately.<sup>1</sup> The designation of this area as a free-fire zone was approved by the Province Chief, suggesting a spirit of mutual understanding and close cooperation from the beginning.<sup>2</sup> Although it has been suggested that the commanders of 1 ATF had to decide between conventional and pacification operations,<sup>3</sup> Jackson had little difficulty in deciding where to place the emphasis because the presence of powerful enemy units within the province was one of his major concerns.<sup>4</sup> Initial operations were aimed at securing the base by diminishing the immediacy of this enemy threat, with search and destroy operations becoming the primary means of doing so.<sup>5</sup>

### Search and Destroy Operations

Although the enemy forces in Phuoc Tuy were large and powerful, their weaknesses were well known. The most serious was the support structure required to move and maintain themselves, a weakness that could be exploited by 1 ATF in a number of ways. Support derived from villages could be targeted at the source in cordon and search operations. Movement into these villages could also be interdicted by patrolling and ambushing, conducted as part of search and destroy operations. The latter could also be directed against enemy base areas, which gave them the 'reach' to move light forces around the

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative, May 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/2.

<sup>2</sup> Narrative, June 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/2.

<sup>3</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Letter, Brigadier O.D. Jackson to author, 26 May 1999.

<sup>5</sup> The Australian 'search and clear' was used interchangeably with the American 'search and destroy'. This term was later 'outlawed' by MACV and was replaced by the more agreeable 'reconnaissance in force'. HQ 1 ATF Command Conference, 20 April 1968, AWM 103, 220/1/18.

province and, potentially, against Nui Dat itself. Emphasis was placed not on finding the enemy *per se*, but on a methodical search of ground to discover and destroy caches and base camps.

Jackson targeted key terrain as part of the initial security operations. An example of this was Operation Vaucluse, conducted in the Nui Dinh mountains that overlooked Nui Dat (and Route 15) and were a known enemy base area. The operation was conducted by 6 RAR over a 16-day period in September 1966, and was carried out within the resources of the Task Force (other than those usually rendered by US air and artillery support). Intensive patrolling brought little contact, although the operation was useful because of the number of base camps and installations destroyed and documents captured.<sup>6</sup> Operations of this type also sought a moral advantage over the enemy by attempting to establish in their minds that Australians were to be 'found anywhere and everywhere without warning and that we cannot be beaten'.<sup>7</sup> Vaucluse marked a 'turning point' for the Task Force as it was the last of the series of operations carried out to secure the TAOR that extended a 'partial umbrella of protection over the populated areas of the province'.<sup>8</sup>

On search and destroy operations the greatest fear was that an Australian patrol would be isolated by a large enemy force and destroyed piecemeal. To counter this possibility, Jackson sought to maintain a company-strength ready reaction force, mounted in armoured personnel carriers at one hour's notice to move. Battalions were also required to stay within 105 mm artillery range at all times, which usually required the deployment of a fire support base (FSB) close to a battalion area of operations, with the loss of a company to defend it in consequence. Both measures pressured the limited infantry available to the Task Force.

### **Cordon and Search Operations**

Search and destroy operations were supplemented by cordon and search operations. As an alternative 'priority operation' they sought out areas of definite VC strength.<sup>9</sup> The first such operations

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<sup>6</sup> Narrative, September 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/12.

<sup>7</sup> S.C. Graham, 'Observations on Operations in Vietnam', *Australian Army Journal*, No. 235, December 1968, p.7.

<sup>8</sup> Narrative, September 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/12.

<sup>9</sup> O'Neill, *Vietnam Task*, p.190.



against villages were actually resettlement and destruction operations. For example, Operation Enoggera, conducted between 21 June and 5 July 1966, aimed to destroy the village of Long Phuoc, resettled as part of Operation Hardihood. This 'fortified village' was destroyed, above and below ground, and a large quantity of supplies captured, denying the enemy a staging area in close proximity to Nui Dat.

Proficiency at cordon and search rapidly developed, with 5 RAR 'specialising' in such tasks. Operation Holdsworthy, conducted on 9 August 1966, represented the maximum effort the Task Force could devote to a cordon and search operation. 5 RAR, with two companies from 6 RAR and supporting arms, simultaneously cordoned Binh Ba and the adjacent Duc Trung villages,<sup>10</sup> involving close cooperation with the local authorities and contact with the local population. The operation resulted in 17 VC apprehended without a shot being fired. Following the cordon and search, influence could only be maintained by patrolling approaches to the village. The battalion remained in the area to do this until 16 August.<sup>11</sup>

The size and complexity of such operations, and the rapidity of doctrinal development required to undertake cordon and search operations, have been written about at some length.<sup>12</sup> Their conduct required close liaison with provincial authorities, use of intelligence and planning. However, cordon and search operations never acquired the importance of search and destroy operations. Holdsworthy demonstrates why. They had a practical length of one day, after which patrolling would resume. Battalion commanders considered them a 'sideshow' between operations,<sup>13</sup> and the 1 ATF commander's diaries classify them as 'minor operations'.<sup>14</sup> Although Holdsworthy was considered a great success, it can be argued that the VC, having been surprised by the effectiveness of the Australian *modus operandi*, then took greater care as a result, thus diminishing the effectiveness of cordon and search on later occasions. Operation Camden, conducted in February 1967, showed that VC activity in Hoa Long village was largely

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<sup>10</sup> J.A.Warr, 'Cordon and Search Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province', *Duty First*, No. 5 (New Series), Spring 1997, p.59.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p.61.

<sup>12</sup> O'Neill, *Vietnam Task*; Bushby, *Educating an Army*, pp.46-50.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, E.H. Smith, 19 July 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Narrative, November 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/16.

ineffective.<sup>15</sup> However, it is more likely that the VCI was simply acting in a more covert manner and VC were thus less susceptible to capture during cordon and search operations.<sup>16</sup>

1967 saw a decrease in both the number of cordon and search operations conducted and the success achieved. Operations Mosman, Burnside and Ulmarra, conducted in August 1967, produced little result and were the only cordon and search operations in the six-month period from April to September.<sup>17</sup> By 1968 they were virtually discontinued, although not, as Frost claims, abandoned altogether.<sup>18</sup> The Task Force commander at the time, Brigadier R.L. Hughes, only conducted cordon and search operations when expected results made the effort worthwhile.<sup>19</sup>

The success of cordon and search operations was often negated by the inadequacies of the provincial authorities, to assist whom these operations were conducted. On one occasion, 30 VC were apprehended, only to have 29 released by an ineffective judicial system.<sup>20</sup> This tendency was also noted by American sources, who stated that 'the very few VCI apprehended are, by and large, promptly released'.<sup>21</sup> Cordon and search operations were increasingly left to Vietnamese forces, to the extent that 7 RAR did not conduct a single cordon and search during its second tour,<sup>22</sup> and this was also true of other battalions.

Despite claims to the contrary, cordon and search operations were not indicative of a trade-off between 'pacification' and 'military' operations.<sup>23</sup> A choice between types of operations was based upon the need to most effectively attack enemy strengths, rather than personal preference, US pressure or a doctrinaire approach. Furthermore, cordon and search operations should never be confused with the range of activities associated with pacification. The entire campaign had

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<sup>15</sup> Narrative, February 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/30.

<sup>16</sup> Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*, p.99.

<sup>17</sup> Quarterly Operations Summaries, Period 1 April-30 June 1967 and Period 1 July-30 September 1967, AWM 98, R569/1/57.

<sup>18</sup> Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*, p.117.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Evaluation by Mr Braddock, MACCORDS Eval. Pacification Studies Group, dated 24 November 1968, Pacification Assessments Phuoc Tuy Province (in author's possession).

<sup>22</sup> Major General R.A. Grey, Canberra, 26 July 1999.

<sup>23</sup> cf. Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, pp.28-9.

pacification as an ultimate objective and, indeed, Graham (Jackson's successor) believed that success in this area was 'directly proportional to that made in search and destroy and security operations'.<sup>24</sup>

### **Route Security Operations**

The early campaign was interrupted by the need for numerous route security operations such as Robin, Canary and Duck, designed to enable the insertion of a number of US brigades through Vung Tau. Jackson regarded these operations as a distraction, noting that they 'severely limited the ability to conduct offensive operations against the VC'.<sup>25</sup> While it is natural for a commander to resent interruptions to his plan, these route security operations demonstrated 1 ATF's wider responsibilities. 1 ATF could not divorce itself from the wider war; it was strongly linked to the larger allied effort and subject to enemy influence external to the province. Route security operations constitute an early example of support for II FFV, support which was freely reciprocated on numerous occasions.<sup>26</sup>

Route security operations also indicated a greater harmony between the tasks contained in the working agreement than is generally acknowledged.<sup>27</sup> Writing of route security operations, Jackson noted that 'the clearance of the Nui Thi Vai hills, the early clearance of the Nui Dinh hill mass and subsequent deep patrolling contributed greatly to their success',<sup>28</sup> suggesting that the search and destroy operations practised by the Task Force had beneficial effects on its other roles. Although route security operations were uncommon over the course of the war, other operations within the province had the side-effect of enhancing route security. By 1971, civilian officials could drive from Saigon to Vung Tau for the weekend break on roads that had been considered dangerous two years earlier.<sup>29</sup>

Jackson's concern at the interruption to search and destroy operations was well founded. Enemy forces did exploit the decrease in pressure by attempting to re-establish their presence amongst the

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<sup>24</sup> Quarterly Operational Summary, Period 1 April-30 June 1967, AWM 98, R569/1/57.

<sup>25</sup> Narrative, January 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/24.

<sup>26</sup> O'Neill, 'Australian Military Problems', p.49.

<sup>27</sup> Bushby, *Educating an Army*, p.40.

<sup>28</sup> Narrative, October 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/14.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, Lieutenant General Sir Donald Dunstan, Adelaide, 16 July 1999.

population,<sup>30</sup> and intelligence reported the greatest number of enemy-initiated incidents since April 1966.<sup>31</sup> Jackson wanted to counter this resurgence by a series of large operations, but the US forces required to assist were unavailable, and instead a search of the TAOR out to 105 mm artillery range was made to detect any enemy bases re-established in the Task Force area.<sup>32</sup>

### Force Limitations

A resurgent enemy displayed Jackson's inability to fulfil his role of conducting both route security and patrolling operations, and was a direct result of the inadequate forces under his command. His successor, Brigadier S.C. Graham, also thought that that 'the major problem continued to be a shortage of ground troops for protracted operations', a shortage that could only be alleviated by calling on US forces.<sup>33</sup> Although supporting units were not allowed their full complement of personnel, the most serious deficiency was the lack of a third battalion.<sup>34</sup> This was due to the upper limit on the size of the Task Force being set by the prime minister at 4500.<sup>35</sup> This figure was derived from a 'rough estimate' given by General Wilton that was immediately regarded by politicians and the public service as a cast iron limit.<sup>36</sup> Thus the final composition of the Task Force was determined not by the task at hand but by arbitrary limitations imposed at the political level. The resultant ad hoc force created some serious problems and gave an impression of being penny-pinching to our allies.<sup>37</sup>

This restriction on numbers was to have a direct effect on the operations and security of the force. It meant that only one battalion could operate at once, since two companies were required for base defence with one more as the reaction force.<sup>38</sup> Performance of the

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<sup>30</sup> One notable VC operation resulted in the capture of 184 ARVN recruits at Baria firing range. Narrative, December 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/20.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Narrative, January 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/24.

<sup>33</sup> Quarterly Summary Report 1 July-30 September 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/64.

<sup>34</sup> Letter, Jackson, 26 May 1999.

<sup>35</sup> Ian McNeill, 'The Australian Army and the Vietnam War' in Peter Pierce, Jeff Doyle and Jeffrey Grey (eds), *Vietnam Days: Australia and the Impact of Vietnam* (Penguin, Melbourne, 1991), p.38; Edwards, *Nation at War*, p.94.

<sup>36</sup> Interview, Butler, 8 July 1999.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Annex C, 'Domination of TAOR', AWM 95, 1/4/2.

essential tasks requiring immediate completion would have been eased by a third battalion, but the added burdens were borne by the soldiers of the two existing ones.<sup>39</sup> Jackson was forced to balance his mission against the very security of his force. An example of this can be seen at the battle of Long Tan, where a company just returning from operations was used as the reaction force, because the shortage of infantry meant that a reaction force was not standing by before the battle.<sup>40</sup> The building of the infamous barrier minefield, discussed below, was a direct result of inadequate numbers.<sup>41</sup>

Reinforcement of the Task Force from late 1967, which included a third battalion, greatly improved the security and flexibility of the force. An upper limit of 8000 was imposed, but 1 ATF could now be regarded as a balanced formation.<sup>42</sup> The importance of maintaining this balance was suggested in 1971 when the previous and current Chiefs of the General Staff, Generals Wilton and Daly, vigorously resisted efforts to withdraw 1 ATF in a piecemeal manner.<sup>43</sup>

Jackson's concern about the security of his small force was well illustrated by the battle of Long Tan. As is well known, D Company, 6 RAR was sent to locate mortar baseplate positions from which the VC had fired at Nui Dat the previous night.<sup>44</sup> Engaged by a large enemy force, D Company was all but overrun. The isolation of 11 Platoon during the battle justified Jackson's belief in the need for patrols in company strength,<sup>45</sup> and measures taken prior to the battle were essential to its outcome. In particular, patrolling within artillery range and the retention of a mounted reaction force, when there were great temptations to utilise these forces elsewhere, ensured the company's survival.<sup>46</sup> The absence of either of these measures would probably have resulted in defeat. Committing the reserve was a major decision, taken only after consultation with the commanding officer of 6 RAR,<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> McAulay, *The Battle of Long Tan*, p.9.

<sup>40</sup> McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.320; E-mail, Lieutenant Colonel H.A. Smith to author, 7 September 1999.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, Colonel S.J. Maizey, Sydney, 24 June 1999.

<sup>42</sup> Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.155.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p.204.

<sup>44</sup> This patrol was named Operation Vendetta and was later renamed Operation Smithfield for the pursuit operation following the battle of Long Tan.

<sup>45</sup> AAR Operation Smithfield, AWM 95, 1/4/26, 6.

<sup>46</sup> CO's comments, D Coy AAR Operation Smithfield, AWM 95, 1/4/26, 8.

<sup>47</sup> AAR Operation Smithfield, AWM 95, 1/4/26, 6.

that effectively ended the battle. Both measures also display the extent to which preparation accounts for the performance of a commander in battle.

The role of a formation commander in a unit-sized engagement was also shown by the battle. While subordinates commanded the actual battle, Jackson was able to influence its outcome through application of the resources held by him: the considerable artillery assets available at task force level, supplemented by air strikes and helicopter re-supply.<sup>48</sup> Coordination of this support was effected through Task Force Headquarters, where Jackson remained throughout the battle,<sup>49</sup> a location where he could best maintain control. Furthermore, Jackson's concerns were broader than the immediate battle taking place. With enemy dispositions unclear, the security of Nui Dat was a serious concern.<sup>50</sup> This responsibility was delegated to 5 RAR, representing half his infantry. Meanwhile, Task Force Headquarters was still responsible for future planning, that subsequently enabled him to exploit the success achieved by following the retreating enemy.<sup>51</sup>

### The Soldiers

Although units were backed by a cadre of experienced NCOs, the 'absence of battle experience and battle training' was a major concern for Jackson.<sup>52</sup> This deficiency was a consequence of the wider burdens on the army at the time. Training resources were placed under immense strain by the massive influx of National Service recruits,<sup>53</sup> and the first battalions in the Task Force lacked some of the advanced training given to battalions on later tours. Jackson's initial concerns over training deficiencies were alleviated by performance displayed in combat, and the dependability of the soldiers suggests the extent to which a senior commander relies upon the ability of the private soldier.

Jackson was also concerned about the burdens placed on his soldiers and the subsequent effects on their performance. A major

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<sup>48</sup> GS Instr 22/67 'Fire Support', AWM 95, 1/4/60; in addition to the helicopter resupply of the company in contact, the artillery was also resupplied by *Chinook* helicopter at 11.15 p.m. on 18 August 1966. Operations Log, AWM 95, 1/4/7.

<sup>49</sup> McAulay, *The Battle of Long Tan*, p.62.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, pp.75, 94.

<sup>51</sup> AAR Operation Smithfield, AWM 95, 1/4/26, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Letter, Jackson, 26 May 1999.

<sup>53</sup> Interview, Maizey, 24 June 1999.

problem was fatigue caused by near-constant activity,<sup>54</sup> necessitated by the pace of essential operations required to counter the immediacy of the enemy threat. Even when troops returned to Nui Dat, there was little opportunity for real rest because the state of base defences had to be improved continually under monsoonal weather conditions.

It was thought that the pace of operations would ease once security was established, but the tempo of operations actually remained high throughout the war. In McNeill's view, 'the war in Vietnam placed the Australian soldier into longer periods of contact, or imminent contact, with the enemy that at any time in our history except the Gallipoli campaign'.<sup>55</sup> The arrival of the third battalion in December 1967 meant that each battalion could be rotated through a rest cycle.<sup>56</sup> This improvement was in turn lost after the withdrawal of the third battalion in November 1970, even though it was claimed that the workload of the remaining two battalions would not increase.<sup>57</sup> When the Task Force reverted to two battalions, company rotations through rest cycles were continued, allowing each battalion to maintain a presence in its respective area.<sup>58</sup>

The burden on the troops was addressed through a number of measures. Increasing facilities at Nui Dat allowed soldiers to rest for short periods between operations and were considered particularly beneficial after long periods on distant operations or forward basing at the Horseshoe.<sup>59</sup> Soldiers were also permitted rest and convalescence leave in Vung Tau, and rest and relaxation leave overseas once during their tour. The physical condition of soldiers when on operations was a concern and early indications suggested that 14 days should be seen as the maximum duration for operations. Any longer than this meant a considerable increase in the incidence of skin and stomach complaints,<sup>60</sup> an occurrence particularly evident during the wet season. Although the 'ideal' figure of 14 days was sometimes exceeded, the health of the troops was always closely monitored.

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<sup>54</sup> Narrative, August 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/6.

<sup>55</sup> I.G. McNeill, 'An Outline of the Australian Military Involvement in Vietnam, July 1962-December 1972', *Defence Force Journal*, No.24, September/October 1980, p.53.

<sup>56</sup> Interview, Major General C.M.I. Pearson, Sydney, 22 June 1999.

<sup>57</sup> Message COMD 1 ATF to COMAFV, AWM 95, 1/4/Nov 70, pt. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Interview, Major General J.C. Hughes, Sydney, 16 June 1999.

<sup>59</sup> Interview, Major General R.A. Grey, Canberra, 26 July 1999.

<sup>60</sup> AAR Operation Sydney I, AWM 95, 1/4/9; 'Lessons learned', dated September 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/12.

Training and leadership cannot fully account for the performance of Australian troops in Vietnam. It relied equally upon the quality of soldiers, who were stringently selected for military service. Lieutenant Colonel Colin Kahn, commanding officer of 5 RAR, has claimed that the National Service soldiers 'were the best troops I believe we've ever sent away from this country. They were 21 years of age, they were intelligent, they were fit and they were terribly loyal. The NCOs and officers were the most professional we've ever had'.<sup>61</sup> Basic training was identical for both regulars and national servicemen. This was followed by corps specialist training and then training in units for approximately one year before deployment. Strong, common bonds were established between soldiers, alleviating many of the serious problems experienced by US forces in the same conflict.<sup>62</sup> The various Task Force commanders were thus assured that highly competent and dependable units would be provided for 1 ATF.

Apart from the obvious burden placed on the soldiers, the pace of operations also limited the opportunity for training during a battalion's one-year tour. Apart from 'warm-up' operations upon arrival, battalions were working almost constantly, and the operational effect became evident in a number of areas.<sup>63</sup> Butler noticed that his battalion's shooting performance diminished throughout the tour, due to a lack of practice while on operations, and the deterioration in upper-body strength and agility after weeks of slow patrolling.<sup>64</sup> The problem could only have been addressed by retraining periods at Nui Dat.

The lack of time for retraining was exacerbated by the constantly changing nature of the war and the subsequent requirement for vastly different skills,<sup>65</sup> a difficulty brought out by 5 RAR's second tour. Kahn's view was that 'I was trained for a war of cordon and search and bunkers weren't mentioned. When we got there all we did

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<sup>61</sup> Interview, Kahn, 4 June 1999.

<sup>62</sup> Eric M. Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993), p.300.

<sup>63</sup> Michael O'Brien, 'An Army in Transition: The Development and Performance of the Australian Army, 1965-1986' in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds), *The Second Fifty Years: The Australian Army 1947-1997* (School of History, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1997), p.103.

<sup>64</sup> Interview, Butler, 8 July 1999.

<sup>65</sup> Australian Army, SO1(GS) Directorate of Infantry, 'Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam', Infantry Centre, Ingleburn, 1972, p.1.



was fight bunkers. I was trained for totally the wrong war'.<sup>66</sup> Even though 5 RAR received no training with tanks, it fought the major Australian infantry/tank battle of the war at Binh Ba in 1969. With no time for retraining, skills had to be learned while on operations and it was only the level of 'professionalism [being] such that having trained in the nuts and bolts of soldiering we could adapt to anything readily'.<sup>67</sup> A potentially serious problem was thus alleviated by the thorough training and ability of the soldiers. In later years, training in Australia was continually refined with accumulated experience so that successive Task Force commanders received units that were increasingly well prepared.<sup>68</sup> By the time 4 RAR was sent on its second tour as the sixteenth and final battalion, most problems had been resolved, with the battalion given first call on resources and training throughout the army.<sup>69</sup> Like previous units, 4 RAR was also considerably assisted by the number of soldiers returning for their second tour, 141 in this case.<sup>70</sup>

### Logistic Difficulties

While the training of soldiers was initially hampered by the influx of national servicemen, it also strained the army's logistic services. As a result, 1 ATF suffered supply shortages throughout the first year of the deployment. The effect of equipment shortages on operations was acute. Major S.J. Maizey, the second in command of 5 RAR during 1966, recalls the number of troops on operations being restricted by something as basic as a shortage of jungle green uniforms.<sup>71</sup> Early logistical difficulties were exacerbated by problems in the US supply system, due to America's own massive buildup without the required pre-deployment of a logistical base ahead of its combat divisions.<sup>72</sup> As a result, the logistical support arranged in the military working agreement fell short of expectations. Expediency was the order

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<sup>66</sup> Interview, Kahn, 4 June 1999.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Bushby, *Educating an Army*, p.73.

<sup>69</sup> Interview, J.C. Hughes, 16 June 1999.

<sup>70</sup> R.L. Sayce and M.D. O'Neill (eds), *The Fighting Fourth: A Pictorial History of the Second Tour in South Vietnam by 4 RAR/NZ (ANZAC) Battalion 1971-1972* (Printcraft Press, Sydney, 1972), p.13.

<sup>71</sup> Interview, Maizey, 24 June 1999.

<sup>72</sup> Joel D. Meyerson, 'War Plans and Politics: Origins of the American Base of Supply in Vietnam' in John A. Lynn (ed.), *Feeding Mars: Logistics in Western Warfare from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Westview, Boulder, 1993), p.284.

of the day and convoys were sent to Vung Tau to scrounge for equipment, making up for the deficiency in machine guns for base defence by swapping slouch hats and butter with American forces.<sup>73</sup> In later years, priority of effort was devoted to 1 ATF, although sustaining three battalions in Vietnam required the maintenance of six others in Australia.<sup>74</sup> The 'supply crisis' was gradually overcome, although new problems arose when equipment originally deployed reached the end of its service life.<sup>75</sup> Later in the war, American support reached the lavish scales characteristic of the US way of war. Increasing use of Australian modified equipment also reduced dependence on US supply.<sup>76</sup> It is important to note that reliance on the United States for supply did not reduce the independence of the Task Force because resources could be used at its commander's discretion.

### **Developing the Campaign**

Brigadier S.C. Graham took command of the Task Force on 7 January 1967. Graham was an Armoured Corps officer of considerable experience, and was widely regarded as the smartest man in the army.<sup>77</sup> He had served in Italy during the Second World War and won a Military Cross commanding an infantry company. Graham's corps background restricted his ability to serve in Korea and Malaya, a deficiency seen by some as an important gap in his experience.<sup>78</sup> He was experienced in commanding large units (2 RAR battle group and 1 Armoured Regiment), and was also familiar with the type of operations being conducted from his period as commandant of the Jungle Training Centre. Graham's background in intelligence was to prove particularly useful in circumstances where the essential difficulty was not the collection of intelligence but the abundance of it.<sup>79</sup> A wide range of sources added to the confusion. These included agent reports, prisoner interrogations, electronic surveillance and Special Air Service patrol reports. The validity of these sources was often undermined by

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<sup>73</sup> S.J. Maizey, unpublished article for *Duty First* on 2ic 5 RAR 1966.

<sup>74</sup> O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.24.

<sup>75</sup> O'Neill, 'Australian Military Problems', pp.51-2; interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>76</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>77</sup> Interviews: Colonel E.H. Smith, Canberra, 19 July 1999, Maizey, 24 June 1999, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999, Coates, 6 July 1999.

<sup>78</sup> Interview, Brigadier N.R. Charlesworth, Sydney, 15 June 1999; Interview, E.H. Smith, 19 July 1999.

<sup>79</sup> Letter, Jackson, 26 May 1999.

competition between competing agencies.<sup>80</sup> Consequently, 'accurate and reliable' intelligence was a major problem.<sup>81</sup>

The situation prior to Long Tan illustrates this problem. Before the battle there had been 'numerous low grade reports and indications of enemy activity in the vicinity of Xa Long Tan',<sup>82</sup> such as the agent report of two enemy regiments with wheeled guns in the vicinity of the village. This intelligence was rated 'F-3' by US sources, indicating dubious reliability.<sup>83</sup> The after action report highlighted the basic problem; 'there was little in these reports during August which differed from previous indications of enemy activity in this area or many others in other parts of the Task Force area of operations'.<sup>84</sup> One organisational measure taken by Graham to overcome the problem of multiple intelligence agencies in Phuoc Tuy was to establish a 'Province War Council'.<sup>85</sup> Coordinating committees were later established by MACCORDS at the provincial and district levels but the system never achieved the effectiveness of an 'Area War Executive Committee' on the Malayan model that McNeill suggests may have better coordinated activities within the province.<sup>86</sup>

Despite the success at Long Tan, enemy forces were still powerful and remained capable of large-scale action: 274 Regiment, based in the Hat Dich area, was still considered capable of inflicting heavy casualties on isolated battalions; 275 Regiment was capable of raiding isolated companies, despite being understrength and poorly trained. D445 was suffering logistically, due to Australian operations against base areas and supply caches. This weakened the battalion and forced a greater reliance on the local population for resupply and tax collection. Thus D445 was vulnerable, but 'any threat to 274 Regiment bases by 1 ATF patrols would be met by an aggressive defence'.<sup>87</sup> This

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<sup>80</sup> Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1984), p.30.

<sup>81</sup> Letter, Jackson, 26 May 1999.

<sup>82</sup> AAR Operation Smithfield, AWM 95, 1/4/26, 3.

<sup>83</sup> Operations Log, August 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/6.

<sup>84</sup> AAR Operation Smithfield, AWM 95, 1/4/26, 4.

<sup>85</sup> S.J. Maizey, 'G2 Ops V 1 Australian Task Force Vietnam 1967', *Duty First*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (New Series), 1999, p.33.

<sup>86</sup> Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, p.259; McNeill, 'An Outline of the Australian Military Involvement...', p.50.

<sup>87</sup> Intelligence Review no. 4, 052400h December 1966-092400 January 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/24.

incentive for Australian forces to avoid enemy strongholds was matched by a similar reluctance on the part of the enemy to make direct 'excursions' into the 1 ATF TAOR.<sup>88</sup> It was on this intelligence, and on the basis of security established by Jackson (who did not have a markedly different personal approach) that Graham developed the campaign.<sup>89</sup>

Contrasting Australian with American ideas at the time, Graham recalled:

I had stopped at the US 1st Division en route [to assume command of 1 ATF] and had a briefing, which started with the statement - OUR MISSION: TO KILL VC. I didn't believe this was my mission, which I felt was to help ensure the security of the main areas of population and resources of Phuoc Tuy'.<sup>90</sup>

Graham instructed his operations officer, Major S.J. Maizey, to prepare an appreciation. As Maizey recounts:

[the] appreciation showed that in order to restrict access to the major population areas [we] must cause the VC to 'wither on the vine' and make him react to our activity rather than vice versa.<sup>91</sup>

The appreciation recommended taking advantage of the enemy's reluctance to fight by seeking to keep the powerful enemy main force units at 'arm's length' in border base areas, where they were under pressure from allied units to the north,<sup>92</sup> and isolated from the population, until such time as they could be engaged. The 'partial umbrella' of security achieved thus far would be consolidated and expanded. A number of isolated villages also required protection. These people would normally have been resettled,<sup>93</sup> but as Australia was only there to support the legitimacy of the GVN such an action could not be taken without undermining the legitimacy it was there to support. The southern area of the province, centred on the villages of Dat Do, Long Dien and Baria, was identified as the key to control of the population and resources in Phuoc Tuy.

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<sup>88</sup> Intelligence Review no. 9, 082400 May-052400h June 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/45.

<sup>89</sup> O'Neill, *Vietnam Task*, p.191.

<sup>90</sup> Lecture by Brigadier S.C. Graham, Brisbane 1968 on 1 ATF Operations in South Vietnam (copy in author's possession), p.4.

<sup>91</sup> Maizey, 'G2 Ops...', p.37.

<sup>92</sup> Bushby, *Educating an Army*, p.52.

<sup>93</sup> *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet 11, section 33, paragraph 31.

Immediately before Graham's arrival, an intelligence report noted the impact of early military operations on the VC supply system and concluded that 'continuous pressure on the resupply system is probably the quickest way to destroy the VC's ability and will to fight'.<sup>94</sup> Attacking the guerrillas' 'Achilles' heels' was in keeping with Graham's beliefs on counter-insurgency, which emphasised patient and methodical operations as part of an 'indirect approach'.<sup>95</sup> In an attempt to gain the initiative by threatening enemy resources, Graham formulated an innovative, yet controversial, plan to construct a 'barrier minefield'.<sup>96</sup>

### **The Barrier Minefield**

Although the building of an extensive minefield proved to be a serious mistake, it is worth examining the reasons for its construction to determine the way in which a commander dealt with the problems caused by terrain and enemy operations using his own limited forces. Maizey's appreciation had identified a range of essential tasks that would require more troops than were available: 'we found troops to task impossible to balance'.<sup>97</sup> This dilemma was to be addressed by greater cooperation with government forces (encouraged by advocates of 'pacification') and the construction of a physical barrier to enemy movement through the Long Green area (see Figure 3), which ran parallel to the southern coast of Phuoc Tuy. During Operation Leeton, a permanent company base was established at the Horseshoe feature, a small hill 8000 metres southwest of Nui Dat. Then, a 10 kilometre long 'fence' was constructed and filled with M-16 anti-personnel mines. Graham believed this would 'form an effective barrier and considerably reduce the ability of the VC to operate in this area'.<sup>98</sup> Patrols from the east of Nui Dat to the Horseshoe and to the west of the Task Force base would attempt to 'seal off' the entire southern region of the province.<sup>99</sup> In so doing, Graham would take advantage not only of the

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<sup>94</sup> Intsum no. 64-67, 050001-052400h March 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/30.

<sup>95</sup> Graham, 'Observations on Operations in Vietnam', p.8.

<sup>96</sup> Coates believes this idea came from the 'Maurice Line' in Algeria. Interview, 2 June 1999.

<sup>97</sup> Maizey, 'G2 Ops...', p.37.

<sup>98</sup> Narrative, March 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/34.

<sup>99</sup> Interview, Maizey, 24 June 1999.

commanding position of Nui Dat, but also of the very disposition of population which made the selection of Phuoc Tuy so attractive.

According to Maizey, it was agreed with the Province Chief that Australian and GVN forces would patrol the minefield on the eastern and western sides respectively. Although it is difficult to ascertain whether this did in fact occur, the establishment of the Horseshoe feature as a permanent base lends support to this intent. 2 RAR, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel N.R. Charlesworth, had responsibility for the Long Green area to the east of the minefield. Although a number of operations were conducted in the Long Green area, patrolling of the minefield south of Dat Do was not conducted by 2 RAR (despite both battalion commanders expressing concern that the minefield should be effectively protected).<sup>100</sup> In any case, the ability to dominate a minefield by patrolling, rather than by direct fire and observation, was dubious.

Graham realised the difficulty of securing the minefield by patrolling and admitted that the reliability of local forces left much to be desired,<sup>101</sup> and intelligence reports should have indicated to him that minefield patrolling was not achieving the desired effect. On 2 May 1967, instances of VC cutting the fence were reported,<sup>102</sup> while some large operations conducted to the east of the minefield discovered M-16 mines in VC camps.<sup>103</sup> Despite these warnings, it is clear that Graham viewed Leeton as a success, estimating that VC movement of supplies in the area had dropped by 80 per cent.<sup>104</sup> Consequently, the decision to establish the minefield would not be reversed until 1968.

Subsequent Australian casualties caused by mines removed from the barrier minefield allow criticism with hindsight, but this must be balanced with the credit given at the time of its construction for the innovative approach taken.<sup>105</sup> It was certainly an ingenious project that maximised the advantages held by the Task Force in ground and resources, while minimising the deficiency in troops. Moreover, the

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<sup>100</sup> Letter, Brigadier N.R. Charlesworth to author, 2 August 1999.

<sup>101</sup> Quarterly Operational Summary, Period 1 April-30 June 1967, AWM 98, R569/1/57.

<sup>102</sup> Operations log, July 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/47.

<sup>103</sup> Narrative, July 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/47; Sitrep, 290001-292400h July 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/50.

<sup>104</sup> Narrative, April 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/35.

<sup>105</sup> Wilton stated: 'credit must be given for that initiative in a difficult situation regarding balance of forces', see letter, I. McNeill to S.J. Maizey, 23 March 1990, in S.J. Maizey private documents (copy in author's possession).

responsibility for the decision must be shared by those who forced such actions on a commander lacking a necessary third battalion.

### **Large-Scale Operations**

The barrier minefield was only one aspect of Graham's conduct of the campaign. The more familiar search and destroy operations continued unabated. The limitations of such operations against an elusive enemy who vanished in the face of opposition were well known: critics make the oft-raised point that the VC were able to reoccupy areas that had been 'cleared'. While this is true, such operations were far from worthless. The destruction of base camps and bunkers required the devotion of enemy efforts to reconstruction and deprived them of flexibility at the same time. This was the purpose of 'spoiling operations'. While it was seldom acknowledged, VC at even quite low levels acted on the direction of higher headquarters, and well-timed search and destroy operations could seriously interrupt these plans. Similarly, VC operations were far more dependent on seasonal factors than is generally recognised. For instance, enemy offensive plans could be seriously impaired by harassment of their preparation and training, and commanders with a grasp of these intelligence factors could target the VC at the most advantageous periods.

Graham conducted a major spoiling operation in Operation Ainslie. It was known that the rice harvest took place between December and January and the VC would be fully occupied in the transport and protection of this crop.<sup>106</sup> In line with his concept of operations, Graham sought to attack this critical vulnerability by eliminating 'Slope 30' as a VC supply and movement area between the Hat Dich and May Tao regions.<sup>107</sup> Slope 30 was the 'last remaining purchasing and resupply area in Phuoc Tuy province' not already addressed by resource denial operations.<sup>108</sup> Ainslie was an extensive operation, lasting an entire month. It comprised an integrated series of operations, the most ambitious of which was the resettlement of the population to the village of Suoi Nghe.<sup>109</sup> This involved route security and constructions tasks. Search and destroy operations were an

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<sup>106</sup> Intsum no. 149, 280001-132400h October 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/14.

<sup>107</sup> J. F. McDonagh, 'Suoi Nghe - A Refugee Hamlet in Vietnam', *Australian Army Journal*, No. 232, September 1968, p.12.

<sup>108</sup> Narrative, September 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/57.

<sup>109</sup> McDonagh, 'Suoi Nghe', p.17.

integral and continuing part of the operation, and were assisted by the resettlement in enabling the direction of more responsive fire support into the newly cleared AO.

Graham thought the effects of the operation were far-ranging in a number of respects. First, a great deal of intelligence was gained on the enemy, especially local forces and VC 'provincial economics'. Second, it seriously affected the VC economically while improving the condition of those people resettled. Finally, the psychological impact of a formerly inviolate VC resupply, purchasing and staging area being 'whisked away and resettled under very close [allied] supervision and protection' was regarded as a serious long-term effect.<sup>110</sup> In purely military terms, it was hoped that Ainslie might render the Hat Dich area untenable for the enemy, and also place pressure on the May Tao base area,<sup>111</sup> and further large military operations were to be planned to take advantage of this effect.

### Communications

One feature of war that has been an enduring source of friction for commanders is communications. An important technological factor that alleviated this situation in Vietnam was the wide employment of the dependable PRC-25 radio. Conversely, the enemy had few means to interfere with communications, although jamming was attempted on a number of occasions,<sup>112</sup> but did have some intercept capability which was addressed by the use of codes. Without this time-consuming encoding process, future intent could not be expressed over the radio. This was a particular problem when commanders were working together for the first time; for example, when the NZ companies 'married up' with the Australian battalions in Vietnam without having trained together.<sup>113</sup> Australian commanders on operations favoured face-to-face contact. The Task Force commander would frequently visit units in the field, to the point where the 'milk run' became a standard morning activity later in the war. While briefings for Task Force operations were carried out in a formal manner, with the assistance of HQ staff, planning was far more informal. Lieutenant Colonel E.H. Smith, CO of 7 RAR, recalls discussing operations with Graham

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<sup>110</sup> Narrative, September 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/57.

<sup>111</sup> AAR Operation Ainslie, AWM 95, 1/4/69.

<sup>112</sup> Operations log, November 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/19.

<sup>113</sup> Interview, J.C. Hugnes, 16 June 1999.



informally over a beer. This anecdote highlights an important leadership issue. Rather than acting in an autocratic fashion, Graham adapted his approach to the personality of his commanders, recognising that it is not enough to establish control over subordinates and expect rank difference to force an adaptation on them. Smith felt that the relationship Graham fostered maximised his effectiveness and encouraged a spirit of mutual cooperation. However, personality clashes did inevitably occur. One such incident arose from the common temptation in Vietnam to use good communications to interfere with the actions of subordinates. This was prevalent with the Americans, where commanders often found superiors overhead in helicopters interfering with their actions.<sup>114</sup> Charlesworth noted Graham's tendency to listen in to the 2 RAR company radio nets and then question him on events taking place, sometimes before the normal reporting chain had made these known to him as commanding officer. The resultant conflict required the assistance of the deputy commander to resolve.<sup>115</sup> R.L. Hughes, on the other hand, who commanded the Task Force from October 1967 to October 1968, knew of this incident and made it clear that his own leadership style would not involve interference. In his opinion, appointing a person to do a job meant that you trusted them to do it; if they later proved unable to do so they would be liable for immediate replacement.<sup>116</sup> Although the political implications of replacing a battalion commander in the field were not tested in Vietnam, a number of company commanders were removed on grounds of incompetence.<sup>117</sup> Unit commanders were carefully selected and highly experienced. Consequently, relations between commanders were generally good. In a small army, people had often worked together before and knew each other personally, frequently from as far back as a period as cadets or as instructors at Duntroon military college.<sup>118</sup> This was valuable in that it could allow frank discussion across rank barriers but, alternatively, old rivalries could be counter-productive.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Palmer, *The 25-Year War*, p.62.

<sup>115</sup> Interview, Charlesworth, 15 June 1999.

<sup>116</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>117</sup> Interview, J.C. Hughes, 16 June 1999.

<sup>118</sup> Interview, Major General J.W. Norrie, Sydney, 22 June 1999.

<sup>119</sup> Interview, Pearson, 22 June 1999; interview, Norrie, 22 June 1999.

### The 'Big-Unit War'

While Graham carried out extensive measures in relation to the populated areas of the province, he also devoted a great deal of effort to operations in depth in order to keep the main forces at 'arm's length'.<sup>120</sup> He also took advantage of the experience the Task Force had gained in operations thus far.<sup>121</sup> Large operations were conducted, of necessity, in conjunction with US and other allied forces.<sup>122</sup> These operations also benefited from the considerable intellect and abilities of Graham, and strained the capacity of the Task Force Headquarters, especially when required to take under command numerous large allied units. Graham reported on the difficulties experienced during large combined search and destroy operations following Operation Paddington in the Hat Dich area during July 1967:

The major problem involved in mounting an operation outside the 1 ATF TAOR is one of coordination [of] whatever resources other than purely 1 ATF units are involved ... Most other potential 'problems' such as maintenance of the force, coordination of fire support and areas of operation and coordination of effort are all subordinate to the above.<sup>123</sup>

Horner uses Operation Paddington as evidence of US pressure to engage in the 'big-unit war'.<sup>124</sup> While General Westmoreland, COMUSMACV, did instigate the operation, it did not depart from the style or concept of operations pursued by Graham, who had sought operations 'further afield to keep the enemy off balance in his erstwhile secure base areas'.<sup>125</sup> Paddington was simply part of a series of large operations building from Operation Portsea in April 1967,<sup>126</sup> while Westmoreland merely brought forward the timing of the operation. This lends little evidence to claims that US pressure interfered with an Australian desire to engage in 'pacification'. In fact, Graham:

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<sup>120</sup> Graham, Lecture on 1 ATF Operations in South Vietnam, p.5.

<sup>121</sup> AAR Operation Kenmore, AWM 95, 1/4/74.

<sup>122</sup> Graham, Lecture on 1 ATF Operations in South Vietnam, p.1.

<sup>123</sup> Quarterly Operational Summary, Period 1 July-30 September 1967, AWM 98, R569/1/57.

<sup>124</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.30.

<sup>125</sup> Quarterly Operational Summary, Period 1 April-30 June 1967, AWM 98, R569/1/57.

<sup>126</sup> Graham, Lecture on 1 ATF Operations in South Vietnam, p.13.

strongly recommended that these joint operations continue, especially bearing in mind that 1 ATF will never be able to mount protracted operations into major base areas (such as the May Tao) without allied support.<sup>127</sup>

Operations were aimed at:

consolidation in areas already secured, and major thrusts deep into enemy held territory to keep the enemy off balance and to make it even more difficult for him to launch his monsoon offensive with any reasonable chance of success.<sup>128</sup>

Large operations were regarded as complementary to and beneficial for the overall campaign of depriving VC forces of resources derived at the village level: 'all operations have forced the VC to reconsider their capacity to operate in strength against the population and food producing areas of the province'.<sup>129</sup> Operations in depth reduced the main force threat and complemented the damage done through resource denial. Heavy losses had been inflicted on the enemy at Long Tan and in operations such as Bribie and Portsea.<sup>130</sup> The latter operation had captured 100 tons of rice in a single cache, an example of the level of damage being done to VC logistics.<sup>131</sup> Food shortages were a growing concern in 5 VC Division and shortfalls were increasingly made up from Long Khanh province to the north.<sup>132</sup> It was to this province that 1 ATF operations turned in the following year.

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<sup>127</sup> Quarterly Operational Summary, Period 1 July-30 September 1967, AWM 98, R569/1/57.

<sup>128</sup> Monthly Evaluation Report, July 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/50.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Graham, Lecture on 1 ATF Operations in South Vietnam, p.12.

<sup>131</sup> Narrative, April 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/34.

<sup>132</sup> Intsum no. 308-67, 040001-042400h November 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/69; Intel review no. 9, 082400 May-052400 June 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/45.



## TET 1968

By the time Brigadier R.L. Hughes relieved Graham in October 1967, the enemy had already been seriously damaged.<sup>1</sup> At the time of hand-over there was much speculation over the intent of 5 VC Division. Offensive activity remained low, 274 Regiment had dispersed and was existing at a subsistence level while 275 Regiment had moved to War Zone D (see Figure 4).<sup>2</sup> Despite the change of commanders, there was little alteration to the pattern of operations within the province. Hughes' first operation, Santa Fe, was actually planned by Graham and conducted a few days after his departure. Operation Santa Fe was a large combined operation that targeted remaining VC base areas and troops in the May Taos area.<sup>3</sup> It aimed to reinforce success against the main force and formed an integral part of the campaign and was actually one of a series of operations planned to follow up Operation Ainslie.<sup>4</sup>

Operations as large as Santa Fe relied heavily on allied assistance, a requirement that significantly diminished with the arrival of a third battalion in December 1967.<sup>5</sup> The addition of two NZ infantry companies to an Australian battalion during 1967 also enhanced the flexibility of the 'ANZAC' battalions.<sup>6</sup> A third battalion also extended the capabilities of the Task Force to allow operations remote from Nui Dat. This capacity was assessed in early January 1968, without II FFV being informed, suggesting an Australian desire to operate outside Phuoc Tuy, rather than the common view that there was American pressure to do so.<sup>7</sup> 1 ATF was further attracted to these operations

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Intelligence review no. 14, 302400 September-312400h October 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/69.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Narrative, September 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/57.

<sup>5</sup> Quarterly Evaluation Report, 1 January-31 March 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/94B.

<sup>6</sup> Ian MacFarling, 'New Zealand and the Vietnam Conflict', *Defence Force Journal*, No. 79, November/December 1989, p.16.

<sup>7</sup> Planning Data-Future Operations-1 ATF, 2 January 1968, AWM 98, R569/1/101.

because it was considered that the VC were 'virtually finished' in Phuoc Tuy province.<sup>8</sup>

### The Tet Offensive

The decrease in main force activity also resulted in speculation as to the intent of local units who were considered likely to increase their activity, as it was known 'the enemy must show their teeth if they are to influence the people'.<sup>9</sup> This action would most likely be limited to 'spasmodic' raids and harassment. A month before Tet, intelligence reported low levels of VC activity. It was known that 274 Regiment had recovered from earlier losses but the low levels of main force activity in VC Ba Bien province were only expected to undergo a 'slight increase'.<sup>10</sup> There was little to indicate the coming of the Tet offensive in Phuoc Tuy, although the enemy's capacity to operate in strength was well known.

The Tet offensive that began on 30 January 1968 was not, however, a surprise attack. The fact that an offensive was being prepared was known to the commander of MACV, General Westmoreland. The commander of II FFV, General Frederick C. Weyand, who had a strong intelligence background, also anticipated the timing and objectives of the enemy in his corps area.<sup>11</sup> Enemy objectives were ambitious, attempting to penetrate allied blocking forces in the 'rocket belt' to attack Saigon and Long Binh.<sup>12</sup> The enemy aimed to attain these objectives through large-unit actions in conventional battles. Australian forces were subjected to operations of a high intensity, albeit of a similar nature to the large combined operations previously conducted within the province.<sup>13</sup>

The manoeuvre of large enemy formations required the redeployment of numerous allied divisions within III CTZ under what were literally emergency conditions. 1 ATF was one amongst a number of major formations desperately required for defence against this

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<sup>8</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.30.

<sup>9</sup> Intelligence review no. 15, 312400 October 1967-302400h November 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/74.

<sup>10</sup> Intelligence review no. 16, 302400 November 1967-312400h December 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/80.

<sup>11</sup> Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning*, p.166.

<sup>12</sup> OpO 4/68 (Operation Coburg), AWM 95, 1/4/79.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, E.H. Smith, 19 July 1999.

attack, and played an important role.<sup>14</sup> Two Australian battalions were deployed on Operation Coburg on 24 January 1968, a week before Tet began.<sup>15</sup> An AO was allocated in Long Kahn province on the approaches to the American bases at Bien Hoa and Long Binh. Each battalion established a fire support patrol base (FSPB), while a Task Force maintenance area was established alongside US facilities at Long Binh. Task Force Headquarters was co-located within FSPB Andersen.

Offensive patrolling in company strength began immediately, with 45 contacts (mainly with local force VC) before Tet.<sup>16</sup> After periods of intense contact, enemy activity culminated with three large-scale attacks on FSPB Andersen in late February. The success of the deployment lay in the enemy forces being hindered from moving to attack positions, and in interference with their subsequent withdrawal.<sup>17</sup> Contacts with potential guides for main force units prior to the offensive contributed to the failure of attacks on the Saigon area.<sup>18</sup>

Besides the intense enemy activity, major difficulties of an administrative nature were experienced by the Task Force. Tet was the first time the Task Force maintenance area had been deployed outside Nui Dat and it 'only barely and adequately function[ed] when split'.<sup>19</sup> The ad hoc nature of the maintenance area meant that a large number of fragmented units were brought under an inefficient command system.<sup>20</sup> Administrative difficulties were exacerbated by a lack of planning time, yet the logistics services also demonstrated sufficient flexibility in making a smooth transition from road to air resupply when forced to do this by enemy action.<sup>21</sup>

Frost is critical of the deployment of 1 ATF to the north because of the 'considerable impact' the deployment had on the situation in Phuoc Tuy.<sup>22</sup> During Tet the towns of Long Dien and Baria were

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<sup>14</sup> O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.103.

<sup>15</sup> Narrative January 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/76.

<sup>16</sup> Intelligence review no. 17, 312400 December 1967-15 2400h 15 February 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/85.

<sup>17</sup> AAR Operation Coburg, AWM 95, 1/4/86.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> P.A. Davison, 'Proposed Reorganization of Task Force Logistics', *Australian Army Journal*, No. 251, April 1970, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> AAR Operation Coburg, AWM 95, 1/4/86.

<sup>22</sup> Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*, p.111.

attacked, which brought into question the Task Force's success against the enemy in the province after 18 months of operations, but the ease with which these attacks were repulsed undermines the suggestion that these attacks constituted a 'major NLF assault' in the province,<sup>23</sup> especially when compared to the scale of the offensive throughout Vietnam. The capacity of the enemy to operate in the strength they did, especially in an 'all out effort', was always known to Hughes. Consequently, a battalion was retained at Nui Dat and, with a reaction force on standby, they comprised significantly fewer forces than were required to maintain security 18 months previously. The success of the Task Force's campaign in driving main force units out of the province meant that the responsibility for actions during Tet fell on the less capable provincial battalion, D445, to the ultimate advantage of the Task Force.<sup>24</sup>

The idea that enemy actions during Tet could have been more successfully countered by the retention of forces within the province and a greater focus upon 'pacification' operations can be refuted by enemy actions later in the offensive. Long Dien was attacked again on 27 February, while only one battalion was absent from the province. This was despite Operation Clayton, a cordon and search operation that had cleared the town on 20 February.<sup>25</sup>

Although Frost believes the Task Force should have remained in the province, he acknowledges that Phuoc Tuy was not Australia's responsibility.<sup>26</sup> That responsibility, and ultimately responsibility for success in the war, lay with GVN forces. Tet in Phuoc Tuy only reinforces this understanding, as the provincial sector headquarters requested the 1 ATF reaction force only after an ARVN brigade could not reinforce in time.<sup>27</sup> The rapid ejection of the enemy from Baria by the Australian reaction force, despite the absence of two Australian battalions, displayed the adequacy of measures taken to deal with VC actions. As Hughes stated, 'the VC Tet offensive was easily contained within the Task Force TAOR', and the provincial administration was

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Intelligence review no. 17, 312400 December 1967-15 2400h 15 February 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/85.

<sup>25</sup> Narrative, February 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/81.

<sup>26</sup> Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*, p.113.

<sup>27</sup> Sitrep 311800-012400 February 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/85.



not disrupted to any major degree.<sup>28</sup> Because of this, the moral advantage gained by the enemy was limited, although in the minds of an Australian public uneducated in the nature of guerrilla warfare, occupation of the provincial capital was viewed with deep concern.<sup>29</sup> Reaction to lower level enemy actions must be balanced against the far more effective and urgent actions taking place to the north.<sup>30</sup> The political outcome of the allied victory during Tet would take time to manifest itself.

### Relations with the American Command

Operations during Tet further displayed the 'decentralised' command the United States exercised over allied forces in Vietnam.<sup>31</sup> In the case of Australian forces, this relationship was of mutual benefit. Even when under command of II FFV during Tet, broad directives or expressions of intent were issued that left the method of implementation to Australian discretion. The best-known case of this style of command occurred during the deployment of the Task Force, when Jackson was ordered simply to 'take over Phuoc Tuy'.<sup>32</sup> Although a bald and exaggerated statement, it allowed Jackson to carry out the tasks he knew were required with a minimum of interference.<sup>33</sup> A similar relationship existed in Graham's time; he stated that 'CG II FFV gave 1 ATF a pretty free rein, whilst going out of the way to help with his considerable US resources'.<sup>34</sup> The way in which II FFV exercised command over 1 ATF when the Task Force was deployed outside the province reflected that used within Phuoc Tuy, where 'they would allot an AO and a role and leave it at that'.<sup>35</sup>

The various commanding generals of II FFV actually favoured the autonomy given to 1 ATF because they could be sure of the security of an important area and as one of them, Lieutenant General Julian Ewell, wrote, 'could more or less forget about it'.<sup>36</sup> This was

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<sup>28</sup> Commanders Personal Analysis, Quarterly Evaluation Report 1 January-31 March 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/94B.

<sup>29</sup> O'Neill, 'Australian Military Problems in Vietnam', p.56.

<sup>30</sup> Notice in 1 ATF Routine Orders from Lieutenant General Weyand, AWM 95, 1/4/91.

<sup>31</sup> Palmer, *The 25-Year War*, p.194.

<sup>32</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.28.

<sup>33</sup> McNeill, 'The Australian Army and the Vietnam War', p.49.

<sup>34</sup> Graham, Lecture on 1 ATF Operations in South Vietnam, p.1.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>36</sup> Letter, Lieutenant General Julian J. Ewell to author, 18 June 1999.

particularly important given the span of command and problems with which the corps commander had to deal.<sup>37</sup> The commanding general of II FFV would visit only occasionally, otherwise contact was limited to briefings and written orders. Relations between commanders were amicable and fondly recalled,<sup>38</sup> and fostered a spirit of cooperation rather than direction.

One reason why American commanders sometimes issued Australian commanders with only the vaguest expressions of intent was because of their sensitivity to Australian national interests. Hughes' briefing prior to Tet involved a number of US divisional commanders being given detailed orders, after which Weyand turned to Hughes and said, 'Say, Ron, would you mind bringing your Task Force up to this area here?'.<sup>39</sup> Hughes was relatively certain of his task, but still needed to ask a number of specific questions to carry it out.<sup>40</sup> It also illustrated a casual American habit of couching orders as simple requests.<sup>41</sup> However, it is also true that Weyand 'totally' trusted in the experience of Australian commanders and their ability to carry out their missions independently.<sup>42</sup> Hughes had commanded in operations at company and battalion level, and had filled a number of liaison and staff appointments (including some time as a relief brigade major) during the Second World War.<sup>43</sup> The various American commanders of II FFV were also highly experienced and distinguished officers, many with prior experience in working with allied forces;<sup>44</sup> Weyand, for example, was the last commander of MACV and eventual Chief of Staff of the US Army. A mutual basis of experience was of great benefit to command relations although different backgrounds occasionally led to differences of opinion.

Even though American officers sometimes questioned Australian methods, there was very little actual pressure to change.

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Letter, Davison, 6 July 1999; letter, Ewell, 18 June 1999; letter, Weyand, 16 June 1999; interview, Pearson, 22 June 1999; interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.33.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, Coates, 6 July 1999.

<sup>42</sup> Letter, Weyand, 16 June 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Letter, Major General R.L. Hughes to author, 9 January 2000. Hughes was appointed as a liaison officer for HQ 1 Australian Corps, performing such duties as Australian liaison officer for the US 162<sup>nd</sup> Regiment.

<sup>44</sup> Letter, Ewell, 18 June 1999.

When Westmoreland criticised their methods, Australians 'took no more than polite notice'; after all, independence was a central reason for deploying an independent Task Force in the first place.<sup>45</sup> Westmoreland did, however, praise the mutual understanding attained with Korean forces that had been 'created in the American image and according to U.S. Army doctrine'.<sup>46</sup> Probably nothing less than total commonality would have satisfied him. Australian commanders were confident of their approach and knew that they were under no obligation to agree with American ideas.<sup>47</sup> In this they had Wilton's full support.<sup>48</sup> While Australia was allowed a large measure of autonomy, a close liaison with II FFV was maintained and it was natural that US ideas would be placed before the Australians, often with some enthusiasm. Coates, GSO 2 (Ops) in 1971, recalls pressure being placed on the Task Force to use B-52 strikes against suspected enemy locations.<sup>49</sup> This differed substantially from the Australian idea of using fire support to facilitate manoeuvre, rather than as an end in itself. This did not, however, restrict the maximum use of available fire when circumstances permitted, sometimes to an even greater degree than its use by US forces.<sup>50</sup> Cases of real pressure being applied were the exception rather than the rule, and these cases had very little effect on the conduct of the campaign.<sup>51</sup>

### Task Force Headquarters

The organisation of most importance in easing the pressures on a commander is the headquarters. A headquarters carries out a wide range of planning, coordination and administration tasks based on decisions made by the commander. As with field commanders, quality headquarters staff were essential, and 'the preparation for people in key jobs was very good, very good indeed'.<sup>52</sup> Responsible for the running of the headquarters was the General Staff Officer Grade Two

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<sup>45</sup> McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.429.

<sup>46</sup> William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Doubleday, Garden City, 1976), p. 257.

<sup>47</sup> Interview, Grey, 26 July 1999; For a description of a difference of opinion between Australian and US commanders, see O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.167.

<sup>48</sup> McNeill, 'The Australian Army and the Vietnam War', p.54.

<sup>49</sup> Interview, Coates, 6 July 1999. The actual term used by the American officer was 'Snipe!', while pointing at the supposed enemy positions on the map.

<sup>50</sup> Interview, E.H. Smith, 19 July 1999.

<sup>51</sup> McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p.429.

<sup>52</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

(Operations).<sup>53</sup> The GSO 2 (Ops) was typically an arms corps officer who had passed staff college, and performed several years of regimental service including approximately six months in Vietnam. The GSO 2 (Ops) was the senior staff officer in the headquarters. Even though he cooperated closely with, for instance, the GSO 2 (Intelligence), this arrangement ensured that the operations branch dictated activities and priorities, as has always occurred in British-pattern armies.<sup>54</sup>

The role of Task Force Headquarters was to facilitate operations conducted by subordinate headquarters. It coordinated fire support and operations between units and provided resources requested by them. For instance, if air support was requested by an infantry battalion, Task Force Headquarters would conduct the liaison required to obtain the use of aircraft, constantly monitored for availability, after which direct control would be handed to the battalion headquarters.<sup>55</sup>

The ability of the headquarters to assist operations was hindered by inadequate numbers of staff during the initial deployment. After the abandonment of the pentropic organisation, permanent task force headquarters were allocated a personnel level of 99.<sup>56</sup> According to Hughes, this figure was based not on the required strength, but on the number of personnel the army could afford to pay.<sup>57</sup> The restriction on staff numbers would have been of little consequence had it not been written into doctrine for use in war. This limitation restricted the very purpose of a task force headquarters in its ability to conduct current operations and planning for future operations simultaneously.<sup>58</sup> Insufficient headquarters personnel virtually eliminated the possibility of being able to split the headquarters for the control of operations in separate locations, but doctrine solved this problem by declaring that a task force headquarters could not be split!<sup>59</sup> The ridiculous nature of

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<sup>53</sup> The GSO 2 (Ops) was previously known as a 'Brigade Major' (BM) and was equivalent to a US (or current Australian) S3 - currently the senior staff officer in a brigade (although some brigades have a Chief of Staff).

<sup>54</sup> The importance of this structure is discussed by Coates in *Bravery above Blunder*, pp.129-30.

<sup>55</sup> Interview, E.H. Smith, 19 July 1999.

<sup>56</sup> *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet 1, figure 36.

<sup>57</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>58</sup> McNeill, 'The Australian Army and the Vietnam War', p.34.

<sup>59</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

this restriction was realised by senior officers, and Task Force commanders were forced to split the headquarters during field exercises irrespective of doctrine.<sup>60</sup>

The Task Force Headquarters was divided at an early stage of the deployment on Operation Hayman, a battalion search and clear operation of Long Son island to the west of Vung Tau, in November 1966. Task Force Headquarters was established on the island and a rear headquarters was maintained at Nui Dat to coordinate fire support and base defence. With the GSO 2 (Ops) at the forward headquarters, junior operations and intelligence staff officers maintained the rear headquarters at Nui Dat. Without a deputy task force commander, the CO of 6 RAR commanded the rear HQ, while his 2IC commanded the battalion.<sup>61</sup> This arrangement worked well, aided by good communications.<sup>62</sup>

Difficulty in dividing the headquarters was not the only problem caused by inadequate personnel numbers. Not as evident during training in Australia was the inability of the headquarters to perform the plethora of additional tasks presented by the war in Vietnam. Further responsibilities accrued because 1 ATF operated independently of the support usually provided by a divisional structure. As with the Task Force itself, task force headquarters was initially not tailored for the tasks it was required to perform in Vietnam. For instance, the information entering the intelligence cell far exceeded that on exercises in Australia in both volume and type. Late in the war, information processing was greatly assisted with the acquisition of a computer, which also significantly relieved the workload on junior staff officers previously required to collate the mass of data involved in conducting framework operations.<sup>63</sup> In the meantime, the only way Jackson and his staff were able to fulfil their responsibilities was with 'sheer hard work and long hours'.<sup>64</sup> The difficulties associated with an inadequately sized and structured headquarters were the impetus for a review of establishment urgently submitted by Jackson in September

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<sup>60</sup> Hughes was forced to split his headquarters on Exercise Barra Winga, conducted in Australia from September to October 1966. Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>61</sup> AAR Operation Hayman, AWM 95, 1/4/27.

<sup>62</sup> Narrative, November 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/16.

<sup>63</sup> Interview, Coates, 2 June 1999.

<sup>64</sup> Covering letter to 'Proposed Amendment to Establishment Headquarters, T.F. II/2/1 (TW)', 16 September 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/12.

1966.<sup>65</sup> This compared the Australian headquarters' allocation of one major and three captains to that of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade: one colonel, two lieutenant colonels, four majors and six captains. Although the eventual augmentation of the headquarters never reached this lavish scale, it did mean the task force headquarters became far more suited to the tasks it was required to undertake. Task force headquarters also included personnel from agencies working in cooperation with 1 ATF. The RAAF provided a large air cell, the US Air Force maintained a liaison and the US Marine Corps provided a naval gunfire support liaison officer. The basic Australian task force headquarters soon resembled a joint and combined headquarters the size of a 'mini-divisional headquarters'.<sup>66</sup> Operations would significantly benefit from the additional flexibility provided by this increase in size and capability. This also meant that it was able to control operations at up to divisional strength. Brigadier C.M.I. Pearson, who took over command of 1 ATF in October 1968, was able to command 27 major units on Operation Goodwood in December 1968.<sup>67</sup> This capability was aided by the nature of the war, in which units could be allocated independent TAORs, thereby decreasing the amount of coordination required to a manageable level. During Tet, task force headquarters was able to maintain effective control during heavy contact with elements divided between two locations. Later deployments on a smaller scale utilised a forward headquarters to act as an intermediate headquarters between Australian units placed under direct command of II FFV. Under these circumstances, the role of the deputy commander became particularly important.

### **The Deputy Commander**

A deputy commander was appointed on the basis of recommendations made under the review of establishment submitted by Jackson in 1966. The idea was not new: pentropic battalions had a lieutenant colonel executive officer,<sup>68</sup> and pentropic divisions had a

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<sup>65</sup> 'Proposed Amendment to Establishment Headquarters T.F. II/2/1 (TW)', AWM 95, 1/4/12.

<sup>66</sup> Interview, Coates, 6 July 1999.

<sup>67</sup> Interview, Pearson, 22 June 1999.

<sup>68</sup> David Horner, 'From Korea to Pentropic: The Army in the 1950s and Early 1960s' in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds), *The Second Fifty Years: The Australian Army 1947-1997* (School of History, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1997), p.62.

chief of staff.<sup>69</sup> Although a lieutenant colonel deputy was requested, a colonel was actually posted. This became useful when the deputy acted as commander of multi-battalion forces, each commanded by a lieutenant colonel. Otherwise, the primary role of the deputy was administration, a task he was able to take over almost completely.<sup>70</sup> The deputy commander during 1968, Colonel D.B. Dunstan, regarded the deputy's position as particularly important in a Task Force unsupported by a division, where an excessive administrative load would have been placed on a commander already fully committed to his tactical responsibilities.<sup>71</sup> The deputy could also perform as acting commander, and facilitated operations remote from Nui Dat with a split headquarters.<sup>72</sup>

The role of the deputy as an assistant commander was of particular importance during May 1968. Following the battle of Coral, Hughes was given permission by the Commander, Australian Force Vietnam to take his allocated rest and recreation leave overseas. Hughes believed that the situation had quietened down and that there was an opportunity to take leave after eight months of constant work. Dunstan took command of the Task Force and during this time a major engagement occurred at FSB Balmoral. After four months in Vietnam, commanding Headquarters 1 ATF (forward) in February 1968, and a career in the army dating back to the Second World War, Dunstan thought he was well prepared for the task. While Hughes has been criticised for his decision, Dunstan felt Hughes 'needed the break'.<sup>73</sup>

### The Burden of Command

Command of 1 ATF was indeed a demanding experience. Hughes was the only commander to hold the job for a full year.<sup>74</sup> The length of tour was then limited to nine or ten months, although Pearson believed he could have commanded for longer than that.<sup>75</sup> A number

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<sup>69</sup> Blaxland, *Organising an Army*, p.69.

<sup>70</sup> Interview, Dunstan, 16 July 1999.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.37.

<sup>73</sup> Interview, Dunstan, 16 July 1999.

<sup>74</sup> See Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.116. Jackson had already commanded the AATTV and AAFV before 1 ATF, and Graham left for other reasons besides fatigue.

<sup>75</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.37; interview, Pearson, 22 June 1999.

of commanders returned home sick and Hughes admitted to being 'very tired'.<sup>76</sup> However, he also believed that his personal disposition and sober personality made him more able to deal with stress than more highly-strung commanders.<sup>77</sup> In previous wars, rest periods were built into the programme of activity. Entire brigades were routinely withdrawn from the line in Korea, while brigades were returned to the Atherton tablelands from New Guinea in the Second World War. In the Pacific war, it was not abnormal for commanders to be rotated through their units to provide them with rest, given tropical conditions and attendant fatigue.<sup>78</sup>

Horner classifies the pressures on a commander as those imposed by enemy action and other factors such as interference by seniors.<sup>79</sup> While conflict due to interference was minimal in Vietnam, it was the nature of war that became the prime cause of stress. Hughes believed that 'the sort of war we had in Vietnam was much more stressful on the commanders than the others, [though pressures] might have been more intense in World War Two [at] various times'.<sup>80</sup> Units of the Task Force were constantly on operations, which meant that commanders and their staffs were constantly working. Like their soldiers, commanders required a 'mental break' from the war. Hughes would occasionally stay overnight and have a swim at Vung Tau, although he could not escape the sound of guns firing at Nui Dat. Pearson was noted for working for months at a time but would then take a break to visit friends in Saigon. All commanders needed to realise their requirement for rest. Where this rest was not taken, commanders had an obligation to monitor their subordinates and send them for rest anyway.<sup>81</sup>

In the absence of leave, the personal sleep patterns of a commander become vitally important and transcended notions of the 'right way' to sleep or the 'right' length of sleep. Lieutenant Colonel J.C. Hughes, CO of 4 RAR on its second tour, knew from experience he needed seven hours of sleep per night to perform, and that he did not

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<sup>76</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.21; D.M. Horner, *Crisis of Command: Australian Generalship and the Japanese Threat, 1941-1943* (Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1978), p.212.

<sup>79</sup> Horner, *Crisis of Command*, p.xviii.

<sup>80</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*



have the ability to 'catnap'.<sup>82</sup> His older brother, R.L. Hughes, knew proper rest was required if mistakes were to be avoided.<sup>83</sup> In this situation, staff officers became important. Major H.J. Coates, GSO 2 (Ops) in early 1971, considered it a matter of personal pride that the Task Force commander was not woken for trivial reasons.<sup>84</sup> While the deputy commander could alleviate some of the burdens of command, very little of the stress could be alleviated because the responsibility could not be delegated.<sup>85</sup>

Pressure on a commander due to enemy action can best be seen in the example of Long Tan. Due to a lack of intelligence, Jackson knew very little about the locations or intent of large enemy forces, and was 'deeply concerned' about the battle, as the whole security of his force could be threatened.<sup>86</sup> The pressure caused by uncertainty was exacerbated by a conflict between the requirement for base security and that for reinforcement of the company in contact. Reinforcement also risked ambush en route, and the arrival of the relief was 'a very close thing indeed'.<sup>87</sup> Being in a headquarters some distance from the battle area also generated its own stress. Vague reports and weather conditions added to the chaos of battle and the overall sense of friction. When the battle had ended there was initially little evidence of the casualties inflicted upon the enemy, while Australian losses looked like a disaster. The effect on the commander was profound. With a deep sense of responsibility, Jackson was visibly shocked by the battle. This is best described: 'once he had finished talking with Townsend, he went over to a chair and sat with his head buried in his hands for a long time'.<sup>88</sup>

### The Role of the Commander

Major battles were not, however, the usual experience of the Task Force commander. Even when big battles did occur, the commander would supervise the running of the headquarters but remain focused on future operations and the 'big picture' situation.

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<sup>82</sup> Interview, J.C. Hughes, 16 June 1999.

<sup>83</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>84</sup> Interview, Coates, 2 June 1999.

<sup>85</sup> Interview, Dunstan, 16 July 1999.

<sup>86</sup> McNeill, *To Long Tan*, pp.320-1.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, p.349.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p.340.

Throughout the war, but increasingly after 1969, the campaign was waged by companies and platoons. The role of the Task Force commander in these low-level operations was primarily one of coordination of many small operations. This elevated the importance of unit visits as a key tool in the exercise of command. Commanders understood the danger of fighting a war from the abstract environment of a headquarters and visits to the field were undertaken to maintain familiarity with ground and conditions. Such visits avoided a problem found in the US Army, where overuse of reconnaissance from helicopters could give an abstract impression of the actual situation on the ground.

Visits also highlighted the important leadership role of the Task Force commander. The soldiers liked to see their commander gaining first-hand experience in the field, and 'showing the flag' was a central reason why visits took up a great deal of the commander's time.<sup>89</sup> Hughes made a particular point of wearing a highly visible slouch hat when visiting and the Commander, Australian Force Vietnam, Major General A.L. McDonald, would often accompany him wearing his red-banded Staff Corps cap.<sup>90</sup>

Although the morale of Australian troops never became a problem, especially when compared to the deterioration of morale experienced in the US Army, the morale and welfare of the soldiers was always a natural consideration. This extended from ensuring soldiers took their R&R entitlement to expending valuable time on smoothing mail arrangements and supplying socks.<sup>91</sup> Troops' Information Sheets were also distributed from task force headquarters to keep soldiers informed of the commander's intent behind operations and what results were achieved. Morale was primarily a unit commander's responsibility, monitored by the Task Force commander during visits. However, Task Force commanders were careful about visiting too frequently to avoid interfering with their subordinate commanders. The usual task performed during visits was to discuss operations with commanders and deliver orders verbally, which was a particular feature of Australian command. When, later in the war, contact with

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<sup>89</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Narrative, August 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/6.

the enemy diminished, Pearson regarded visits as essential for motivation of his subordinates.<sup>92</sup>

### Australian Command Relations

The relationship fostered between the Task Force commander and his immediate subordinates was essential to the success of operations. This relied on the commander's ability to express his intent clearly and to step back to allow his commanders to 'get on with the job'. Micro-management was not tolerated in the Australian Army and, as shown in the incident between Charlesworth and Graham, interference was strongly resented by subordinates. Best results could be achieved through cooperation and overall supervision. Although the term *Auftragstaktik* ('mission-type orders') has come into vogue more recently, this term accurately describes the method of command naturally adopted between Australian commanders, who expected to be told what to do, not how to do it. Decentralisation of command and the encouragement of decision making at junior levels added to the effectiveness of the Task Force and was particularly applicable to low-level operations.<sup>93</sup> However, this also presents a danger in low-level operations where mistakes made at lower levels will have far-reaching effects, sometimes exacerbated by close media scrutiny. By decentralising authority, the commander relied upon the competence of leaders at all levels in the Task Force. His immediate subordinates, the battalion commanders, had all served in Korea in the course of comprehensive combat experience and training that had 'left no gaps in their military education'.<sup>94</sup>

### Visitors

The prominence of 1 ATF continually drew visitors throughout the deployment. At an early stage this had become a problem, with Jackson remarking in his diary that:

The flow of visitors over the month has reached the point where we are averaging one senior visitor every 2 days. Whilst

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<sup>92</sup> Interview, Pearson, 22 June 1999.

<sup>93</sup> Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Ma, 1985), p.270.

<sup>94</sup> Lecture notes, Dunstan.

we appreciate their interest, they are becoming an increasing hindrance on operations.<sup>95</sup>

Although visits continued unabated, the appointment of a deputy commander did alleviate the Task Force commander's responsibility to accompany all but the most important guests. Visits performed practical functions, allowing new COs to conduct a reconnaissance of the battle area, chief instructors to hone training programmes to current conditions and Citizen Military Force officers to observe combat operations. Being the commander of a distinct national force also entailed a number of 'ceremonial' duties, including attendance at formal dinners, parades and change of command ceremonies.

### **Phuoc Tuy after Tet**

Although the Tet offensive severely damaged the enemy, it was known that enemy forces still remained powerful enough for further attacks; fewer than half the enemy units had been committed to the offensive.<sup>96</sup> Units within Phuoc Tuy were rapidly reconstituted for offensive operations, but main force units remained absent from the province.<sup>97</sup> Hughes sought to take advantage of these gains by consolidating the Task Force's influence and maintaining pressure on the enemy, deciding that the best way to reduce VC influence and protect the population was to destroy local VC bases and installations.<sup>98</sup> Intelligence reports indicating the retreat of D445 into its Long Hai stronghold resulted in a concerted effort to destroy enemy forces recovering from reverses during Tet. Operation Pinaroo, conducted in the Long Hai mountains primarily by 3 RAR, developed from the reaction to the enemy's post-Tet attack on Long Dien. It became the longest operation yet undertaken by the Task Force and was made possible by the post-Tet lull in enemy activity.<sup>99</sup> Operation Ashgrove Tram complimented Pinaroo with a cordon and search of Long Hai village. This was the site of two hotels which were 'conspicuously (and suspiciously) untouched by the rigours of war' and Task Force

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<sup>95</sup> Narrative, October 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/14.

<sup>96</sup> 1 NVA unit and 21 VC units were committed, 13 NVA and 13 VC units remained uncommitted, cementing the influence of Northern forces in the NLF. Troops Information Sheet Number 84, Period 18-24 February 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/91.

<sup>97</sup> Intsum no. 111-68 200001-202400h April 68, AWM 95, 1/4/94B.

<sup>98</sup> Quarterly Evaluation Report, 1 Apr 68-30 Jun 68, AWM 95, 1/4/113B.

<sup>99</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep, April 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/94B.

Headquarters deduced, with some licence, that it was 'not the place, at present, to spend your R&C'.<sup>100</sup> Operation Cooktown Orchid, conducted by 2 RAR, complemented Pinaroo in the area surrounding the Long Hai mountains and the village of Dat Do.

With enemy forces preparing for future phases of the Tet offensive, the Task Force prepared for further operations of a similar nature. The capacity to deal with such threats was rapidly improving. Reinforcement of the Task Force had included the addition of a squadron of *Centurion* tanks. Earlier arguments for their inclusion had been made, but such factors as cost, reliability and suitability for tropical conditions, despite earlier experience in New Guinea during the Second World War, had prevented their deployment.<sup>101</sup> Operations with American armour had proved that tanks could operate in the wet season,<sup>102</sup> and tanks greatly enhanced the combat power of the reaction force and units in heavy contact. Preparations began immediately for counter-attacks on future VC lodgments in Baria, Long Dien and Dat Do,<sup>103</sup> and these were proven worthwhile when the second VC offensive saw the deployment of the Task Force north on Operation Toan Thang to protect the Bien Hoa-Long Binh area, under circumstances similar to the first phase of Tet during Operation Coburg.

1 RAR was inserted by helicopter on 12 May 1968, and their insertion late in the day was exploited by the enemy with an attack that night on FSB Coral. Another attack was made three nights later, but Coral's defences had been greatly improved by the addition of a troop of *Centurions*.

Australian forces inflicted heavy casualties on enemy forces moving through the area of operations through aggressive patrolling. The focus of enemy attacks was then switched to 3 RAR in FSB Balmoral, which was attacked on 26 May and again on 28 May. Balmoral was the first time the Task Force had repelled enemy attacks in regimental strength on a defensive position, and emphasised the 'need for a local defence commander of field rank with a small HQ to

<sup>100</sup> Op Instr 12/68 Operation Ashgrove Tram, AWM 95, 1/4/90.

<sup>101</sup> R.N.L. Hopkins, *Australian Armour: A History of the Royal Australian Armoured Corps 1927-1972* (The Royal Australian Armoured Corps Tank Museum, Puckapunyal, 1993), p. 251.

<sup>102</sup> Graham, Lecture on 1 ATF Operations in South Vietnam, p. 14.

<sup>103</sup> OpO 20/68 Operation Moruya, AWM 95, 1/4/94A.

lay out, coordinate and command the local defence of a large FSB'.<sup>104</sup> Such a role was fulfilled by the cavalry squadron commander, freeing the Task Force commander from immediate tactical concerns when his headquarters was deployed in a forward position.<sup>105</sup>

Lessons learned on Operation Coburg were applied to Toan Thang and the Task Force Maintenance Area operated smoothly.<sup>106</sup> The logistic burden was very heavy, requiring five CH-47 *Chinook* loads of water per day, a burden increased through the addition of two troops of tanks at the insistence of the deputy commander, Dunstan, who was acting commander during Hughes' absence. The tanks arrived on 23 May after an approach march of over 95 miles involving a number of light bridges. The tanks soon proved their worth, leading Dunstan to conclude that 'irrespective of the problems you may have getting them there and keeping them going they are well worth it'.<sup>107</sup> Hughes accorded the addition of tanks to the Task Force the same significance in operations out of the province, and commented that 'tanks could cope with the going and proved a decisive factor in many contacts'.<sup>108</sup> Tanks would prove their worth many times over in the large-scale operations required well into the new year.

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<sup>104</sup> AAR Operation Toan Thang (1), AWM 95, 1./4/11.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Dunstan, Presentation to Staff College, Fort Queenscliff, 1969.

<sup>108</sup> Quarterly Evaluation Report 1 Apr 68-30 Jun 68, AWM 95, 1/4/113.

## CONSOLIDATING SUCCESS

Hughes handed command of the Task Force to Pearson on 20 October 1968. Pearson was an experienced commander, having won an MC in the 2/7th Infantry battalion during the Second World War. Although Pearson was an armoured corps officer, the pentropic system had allowed him to command 1 RAR battle group from 1962 to 1964. He also had first-hand knowledge of insurgency from his time as defence attaché to Indonesia during 1960 and 1961. Although noted for his aggressive style, Pearson closely followed the type of operations practised by his predecessor.<sup>1</sup>

### Out of Province Operations

Writing on the Task Force has typically divided the deployment into a number of periods. Its efforts are usually discussed in terms of the 'securing' phase, followed by the 'out of province' phase and then a refocus on 'pacification'. This narrative convenience is misleading because it oversimplifies the broad range of operations pursued throughout the war against a dynamic enemy. This is especially true in relation to the 'out of province' phase, which is misleading because the Task Force only spent a few short periods out of the province during the period concerned.<sup>2</sup> For instance, during Tet two battalions were deployed from the province on 24 January 1968. 2 RAR and 7 RAR were withdrawn by 13 February and were replaced by 3 RAR, which remained only until 3 March.<sup>3</sup> A misunderstanding of operations outside the province was furthered by Frost, who argued that they were an indication of a 'change of role' for the Task Force.<sup>4</sup> In reality, Hughes knew he was operating well within the role allocated by the military working agreement.<sup>5</sup> Operations in the north were simply more ambitious versions of large allied operations, welcomed by the Task Force since lodgment during Operation Hardihood. Insinuating

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<sup>1</sup> Horner, *Duty First*, p.246.

<sup>2</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Narrative, February 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/81.

<sup>4</sup> Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*, p.103.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

that this 'change of role' was due to American pressure, rather than occurring as a direct result of a reaction to the enemy situation, suggests that the Task Force commanders were pursuing something other than an independent campaign. Horner speculates that 'the Australians may have wished to spend more energy on pacification of the province, but they could not deny that out-of-province operations were consistent with their directive'.<sup>6</sup> Pacification operations were not, however, the 'wish' of the commanders of 1 ATF at the time. They saw their major role in operations against the main force threat, leaving pacification to the Province Chief.<sup>7</sup> Operations were conducted against enemy strength and assistance was freely given to allies, who were more than generous in their support of Australian operations within Phuoc Tuy throughout the deployment. Large operations were not a matter of American pressure, but undertaken through mutual agreement based upon a common understanding of the war.<sup>8</sup> Hughes knew that main force units had to be neutralised before pacification could proceed unhindered. This was a view also held by his successor, Pearson, who understood that 'if you couldn't get rid of main force you couldn't pacify'.<sup>9</sup> This personal view happened to correspond with that of the Americans.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, enemy units engaged outside the province included 274 and 275 Regiments, which frequently operated within Phuoc Tuy.

That large operations against the main force were not seen as an end in themselves is suggested by the Task Force's actions following Tet. Rather than being the beginning of a new phase of big operations out of the province, it was clear that Tet significantly changed the focus of Task Force operations towards the villages. Cordon and search operations in addition to close ambushing and patrols would be required, in order to eliminate the 'minor gains' made by the VC.<sup>11</sup> Operations against the main force were always seen as a precursor to pacification.

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<sup>6</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.30.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Pearson, 22 June 1999; interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999. This also contradicts the view of O'Neill in 'Australian Military Problems', p.49.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Pearson, 22 June 1999.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.37.

<sup>11</sup> Quarterly Evaluation Report, 1 January 68-31 March 68, AWM 95, 1/4/94B.



Operations outside Phuoc Tuy cannot be regarded separately from those within the province, simply because the Phuoc Tuy boundary bore no relation to that of the VC Ba Bien province. The enemy was free to transit border areas to its own advantage and obtain supplies and reinforcements from the north. The difficulty for the allies that resulted from this situation has been described thus:

... if you [the VC] were on the tri-province boundary nobody ever came near you because the most difficult thing to do was co-ordinate operations with people in other provinces.<sup>12</sup>

The alternative was to conduct combined operations encompassing tri-border areas in a single area of operations. This method was adopted on Operation Goodwood, conducted from December 1968 to February 1969 in the Hat Dich region against installations and elements of 274 Regiment, operating under the new VC HQ Military Region 7 (HQ MR-7).<sup>13</sup> All allied forces were placed under the command of 1 ATF, displaying the regard in which US commanders held their Australian counterparts. The operation was highly successful, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy and forcing them from their bases, with a consequent drop in effectiveness.<sup>14</sup>

Tet in 1969 required the deployment of the Task Force north under similar circumstances to the previous year. Blocking positions were occupied for attacks responding to outcomes of the Paris peace talks.<sup>15</sup> Operation Federal, which started on 17 February 1969, began with uneventful patrolling but the situation changed sharply when the headquarters of MR-7 was located by 5 RAR on 4 April. The resultant clash had the effect of disrupting the headquarters to the extent that it withdrew, eventually to Cambodia.<sup>16</sup> This had a serious effect on enemy operations, not only in Phuoc Tuy but also throughout III CTZ. The enemy's 1969 Tet offensive was largely disrupted by allied forces,<sup>17</sup> and Pearson recognised the success of Operation Federal, not only in

<sup>12</sup> Horner, *Phantoms of the Jungle*, p.333.

<sup>13</sup> Horner, *Duty First*, p.250; MR-7 was the VC headquarters responsible for the area encompassing the (South Vietnamese) 3rd Corps Tactical Zone. See John Jackson, 'The Impact of the 1968 Tet Offensive on American and North Vietnamese Strategy', *Defence Force Journal*, No. 77, July/August 1989, p.36.

<sup>14</sup> Horner, *Duty First*, p.252.

<sup>15</sup> Intsum no. 338-68 040001-042400h December 1968, AWM 95, 1/4/131.

<sup>16</sup> Intsum no. 95-69 050001-052400h January 69, AWM 95, 1/4/Jan 69 pt.3; interview, Kahn, 4 June 1999.

<sup>17</sup> 'Vietnam Digest' 9-15 February 1969, AWM 95, 1/4/Feb 69 pt. 4.

terms of the effect on HQ MR-7 but in the supplies captured and base areas denied that would restrain the enemy for some months.<sup>18</sup>

### **A Redirection of Priorities**

Goodwood and Federal constituted the two major operations carried out outside Phuoc Tuy during Pearson's command. In April 1969 he was ordered by the commander of II FFV, Lieutenant General Julian J. Ewell, to concentrate on pacification and Vietnamisation rather than large-scale operations against VC main force units. Ewell's order was consistent with those previously issued by II FFV, in that it set the broad objective and allowed the Australians to pursue it in the manner of their choosing. It also displayed the broader political context of the war, in which the United States was seeking an exit by attempting to increase the effectiveness of GVN forces while withdrawing its own troops.<sup>19</sup>

Ewell's order reoriented priorities towards pacification and Vietnamisation operations already taking place.<sup>20</sup> It did not, however, end operations outside the province or alter the practice in the Task Force of attacking obvious main force targets, which corresponded to the US view of aggressively hitting large enemy units when contacted.<sup>21</sup> Pearson recalled that even though the stated priority was pacification, this was barely discussed when, for instance, the new commander of MACV, General Abrams, visited.<sup>22</sup> Enemy units like 33 NVA Regiment could enter the province at will and would use the northern border as a transit area. In this situation, a complete focus on pacification could not guarantee security within the province or diminish the flexibility required to deal with the threat of main force units when they appeared. The need to deal with transiting main force units can be seen in the battle of Binh Ba, discussed below.

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<sup>18</sup> 1 ATF Order of the Day dated 17 April 69, AWM 95 1/4/ Apr 69 pt. 3.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.40. Battalions were rotated through pacification operations in their affiliated districts in addition to Task Force operations. Quarterly Evaluation Report 1/69 dated 6 Apr 69, AWM 95, 1/4/ Apr 69 pt. 3; 'Pacification Programme Plan for Assistance to SVN Authorities', October 1968, AWM 103, R569/4/1.

<sup>21</sup> Memorandum For Record: Commander's Conference, dated 4 May 1969, HQ II FFV, AWM 103, 220/1/36.

<sup>22</sup> Letter, Major General C.M.I. Pearson to author, 30 July 1999.

The redirection of priorities also reflected American concerns about the situation in Phuoc Tuy province at the time. At a briefing in May, Ewell said: 'In Phuoc Tuy Province I've asked Brigadier Pearson to do whatever he can to get things straightened out. That Province is now in the disaster category'.<sup>23</sup> Pearson suggests that subsequent events belied the severity of this assessment,<sup>24</sup> and it should be noted that responsibility for the situation was not ascribed to 1 ATF but was attributed to a very poor state of province administration, itself the responsibility of the Province Chief.<sup>25</sup> In acknowledging the role of GVN forces during the Task Force's absence from the province, a US report noted that, on a national scale, Phuoc Tuy was the 35th most populated province but ranked 10th in the ratio between military assets and population. Poor Vietnamese leadership frustrated the expected good results.<sup>26</sup>

American ratings of the situation in Phuoc Tuy were based on such measures as Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) figures. In Phuoc Tuy province on 31 May 1969, only 31,000 among the 107,000 population were assessed as being in the 'A-B' (good) status. Even more seriously, not one of the 21 hamlets in Dat Do district was in the 'A-B' status. Six were in the 'D' category with the remainder assessed as 'C'.<sup>27</sup> Such results certainly provided a base for American fears, but they did not identify the source of the problem. Accuracy of HES reports was often dubious due to a tendency among reporting officers to inflate figures to 'look good'.<sup>28</sup> Australians were reluctant to play any 'numbers games' and HES figures for Phuoc Tuy probably reflected this tendency to some degree.

A 'statistical approach' to the war was pursued by US generals like Ewell, who continually sought to increase the 'body count'.<sup>29</sup> 1 ATF

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<sup>23</sup> Memorandum For Record: Commander's Conference, 4 May 1969, HQ II FFV, AWM 103, 220/1/36.

<sup>24</sup> Letter, Pearson, 30 July 1969.

<sup>25</sup> Memorandum for Mr Hank Cushing regarding Phuoc Tuy dated 31 March 1969, in Pacification Assessments Phuoc Tuy Province (copy in author's possession).

<sup>26</sup> Analysis of pacification progress in Phuoc Tuy province 1969, in Pacification Assessments Phuoc Tuy Province (copy in author's possession).

<sup>27</sup> 'Provinces III CTZ as of 31 May 69', AWM 103, 569/4/1.

<sup>28</sup> David Donovan, *Once a Warrior King: Memories of an Officer in Vietnam* (Ballantine, New York, 1986), p.159.

<sup>29</sup> As commander of the 9th US Division, Ewell became known as the 'Delta Butcher' because of his ruthless pursuit of kill ratios. This was often at the expense of his subordinate commanders, although attempts to influence Australian commanders were

was required to report on body count and, indeed, never shied away from increasing it, since battalion commanders knew that their primary role on many operations was simply to 'kill the enemy'.<sup>30</sup> However, body count was never more than a measure for Australian forces, who approached it differently from the Americans. Only bodies actually recovered were tallied, and excess use of firepower was not justified when civilians were at risk. Australian operations served a number of more important purposes, whether or not a high body count was achieved. In line with efforts to prevent movement between enemy bases and the population, contacts with the enemy established a moral superiority, attacking the enemy psychologically and eroding VC confidence to operate in previously secure areas.<sup>31</sup> This had a direct effect on enemy logistics due to the difficulty of resupply and the immense burden caused by wounded.<sup>32</sup> The actual capture of bodies was seen as important, not to establish the 'kill' but, more importantly, for intelligence purposes.<sup>33</sup> This was reflected in some Australian procedures; for example, 7 RAR usually assaulted through the killing ground after springing an ambush to prevent the removal of bodies and documents.<sup>34</sup> Rules of engagement would often be applied in an overly strict manner to present the opportunity for enemy to surrender.<sup>35</sup> If an enemy would 'chieu hoi' (rally), valuable intelligence could be contributed to ongoing operations. Ralliers would sometimes lead Australian forces to attack their old camps.<sup>36</sup> The identity of the enemy killed or captured was often of great importance. During one week, the Task Force captured the executive officer of 274 Regiment and killed a company commander from D445 Battalion.<sup>37</sup>

Criticism of Australian performance was not widespread and American commanders thought that Australian units performed very

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rejected outright. Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr, *The Army and Vietnam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986), pp.203-4; interview, Grey, 26 July 1999; O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, pp.166-7.

<sup>30</sup> Interview, Kahn, 4 June 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Interview, Pearson, 22 June 1999.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, Coates, 2 June 1999.

<sup>34</sup> O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.193.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, Grey, 26 July 1999.

<sup>36</sup> Interview, Grey, 26 July 1999; O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.160.

<sup>37</sup> Enemy Situation Phuoc Tuy Province 181200 April-021200 May 1969, AWM 95, 1/4/May 69 pt.4.

well. This was a major reason why they interfered so little with Australian operations: Weyand believed no influence over Australian operating methods was necessary because they were 'outstanding',<sup>38</sup> while Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, who commanded II FFV from April 1970 to April 1971, has stated that the Australians displayed 'excellent professional qualities'.<sup>39</sup> This did not mean that American commanders avoided all criticism of Australian methods. Stealthy, methodical patrolling did not bring results equal to those of American forces, especially when assessed by means such as body count, although Australian casualties were comparatively lower.<sup>40</sup> The overt methods practiced by American forces aimed to provoke the enemy to make contact, which surrendered the initiative to the enemy who could evade or fight under favourable circumstances. With an emphasis on stealth, Australian techniques actively sought out the enemy and were in this way more offensive in character. Australians always sought to maintain the initiative and operations within enemy base areas had the effect of asserting a moral superiority over the enemy, regardless of the body count achieved.

The American perception of Australian methods is illustrated by an account of American troops observing some unidentified (enemy) soldiers in the Ia Drang valley whom they believed to be Australians because of the discipline they displayed.<sup>41</sup> Ewell stated that the Australians 'were probably the best trained outfit in Vietnam', although he also believed their methods were better suited to Malaya and Borneo.<sup>42</sup> This displays the common belief that Australia's experience in Malaya was the major influence on methods used in Vietnam.<sup>43</sup> While many operating methods can be traced directly back to Malaya, the Australian Army was engaged in a far wider range of operations in Vietnam.<sup>44</sup> The primary reason for this was a vastly different enemy

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<sup>38</sup> Letter, Weyand, 16 June 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Letter, Davison, 6 July 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia* (Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1990), p.232.

<sup>41</sup> Harold G. Moore and Joseph Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young: Ia Drang: The Battle that Changed the Vietnam War* (Random House, New York, 1992), p.177.

<sup>42</sup> Letter, Ewell, 18 June 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Bushby, *Educating an Army*, p.3.

<sup>44</sup> Significantly, the range of higher level operations required in counter-revolutionary (as distinct from counter-insurgency) warfare was encompassed in the *Division in Battle* series of pamphlets. Welburn, *Development of Australian Army Doctrine 1945-1964*, p.64.

situation that dictated the operations required. Dunstan recounts the opinion of one American officer who believed that there were more VC 'looking at the monkeys in Saigon zoo on Sunday afternoon than there were CTs in all of Malaya' - which, in Dunstan's opinion, was a pretty accurate comparison.<sup>45</sup> The war was far more than a counter-insurgency operation and, as such, the success of conventional operations must be attributed to broader factors. Certainly many American ideas, like fire support bases, were adopted and often improved upon. Lieutenant Colonel C.N. Kahn once landed in a US 9th Infantry Division FSB and thought it was his own because the Americans had copied the exact layout used by 5 RAR.<sup>46</sup> Other methods were independently developed in-country, the use of tanks being a good example.

The background of unit commanders provided an excellent basis of experience when conventional operations were required, dating from the Korean War for battalion commanders and the Second World War for Task Force commanders. Lieutenant Colonel E.H. Smith, the only battalion CO who had served in the Pacific war, witnessed a 'growing maturity' in the army and the development of techniques which drew on various experiences to produce a distinctly Australian doctrine.<sup>47</sup> Familiarity, though not outright compatibility, with US methods came through experience and common sense, while a number of officers had undertaken training in America. For instance, Colonel J.W. Norrie, Defence Attaché in Saigon during 1969 and 1970, had attended the US Command and Staff College and consequently knew a number of key personnel serving in Vietnam during his time.<sup>48</sup> Malaya meant that Australia still had counter-insurgency experience in recent memory which had been studied in detail and this was appreciated by American commanders, who were always interested to hear what the Australians had to say.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Interview, Dunstan, 16 July 1999.

<sup>46</sup> Interview, Kahn, 4 June 1999.

<sup>47</sup> Interview, E.H. Smith, 19 July 1999; Welburn, *Development of Australian Army Doctrine 1945-1964*, p.66.

<sup>48</sup> Interview, Norrie, 22 June 1999.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

## Civil Affairs

US reports suggested that the deterioration of the situation in Phuoc Tuy was due to the time the Task Force spent outside the province.<sup>50</sup> The CO of 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit (1 ACAU), Lieutenant Colonel P.C. Gratton, also felt that Pearson had spent too much time on operations outside Phuoc Tuy. Task Force intelligence had detected an increase in VC terrorism, especially at night,<sup>51</sup> but as Grey has noted, this renewal of Viet Cong strength was short-lived once 1 ATF renewed its efforts in Phuoc Tuy.<sup>52</sup>

The means by which the Task Force reoriented its priorities toward pacification was by emphasising civil affairs, which referred to the range of activities encompassing 1 ATF relations with the people and government of Phuoc Tuy. Civil affairs was the responsibility of 1 ACAU, ostensibly under command of MACCORDS through the Province Senior Advisor.<sup>53</sup> However, this arrangement was to undergo some modification during the deployment.

The 1 ATF civil affairs effort actually began in 1966 and was seen as 'an integral part of all operations',<sup>54</sup> with the aim of 'develop[ing] the loyalty and respect of the population for their government'.<sup>55</sup> An appreciation of the importance of this was derived from Malayan experience, but from the outset responsibility for operations involving the population was left to GVN authorities under the direction of US advisers.

The concept of operations was divided into three phases: establishing contact, gaining the confidence and acceptance of the people, and then rehabilitation in concert with major projects.<sup>56</sup> Initial work was largely handled by units of the Task Force conducting 'civic action', defined as the use of military forces for civilian projects.<sup>57</sup> These included operations such as medical and dental assistance and a range

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<sup>50</sup> Memorandum For Record of Visit to 1<sup>st</sup> ATAF (by Mr Whitehouse DEPCORDS, III CTZ), Nui Dat, Phuoc Tuy Province - 19 March 1969, MACCORDS-PP&P-FLD, in Pacification Assessments Phuoc Tuy Province (copy in author's possession).

<sup>51</sup> Enemy Situation Phuoc Tuy Province 271200h March-041200h April 1969, AWM 95, 1/4/Apr 69 pt. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, p. 235.

<sup>53</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p. 23.

<sup>54</sup> Organisation and Function of Civil Affairs, AWM 95, 1/4/3.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> GS Instruction 8/67 'Civil Affairs', AWM 95, 1/4/45.

of minor construction activities performed by units of the Task Force in respective areas of responsibility. Although civil affairs was considered a vital part of operations like cordon and search, more conventional operations designed to diminish the enemy threat in the province, by necessity, took priority.

Perhaps the most important aspect of civil affairs within 1 ATF was the attitude taken toward the Vietnamese people. The tone was set with the declaration that 'every effort will be made to establish friendly relations with the civilian population and the government officials'.<sup>58</sup> Relations with the population were subject to strict discipline and it was considered prejudicial not to cooperate with the civil authorities or not to maintain friendly relations with the civilian population of South Vietnam.<sup>59</sup> Orders stated that 'every effort will be made to safeguard the lives and property of the local population during the conduct of operations'.<sup>60</sup> The policy of restricting the soldiers' access to villages when on leave certainly freed the Task Force from many of the difficulties experienced by Americans in this respect.<sup>61</sup> The image of the Task Force was closely monitored, to the extent that three prostitutes were removed from Ap Suoi Nghe resettlement village to deprive the enemy of propaganda advantage.<sup>62</sup> Rules of engagement contrasted sharply with those applied by US forces during the war with standing operating procedures explicitly stating 'IF IN DOUBT DON'T SHOOT'.<sup>63</sup>

The limitations of civil affairs were quickly realised and Graham noted that:

... there is a tremendous amount of work to be done in the civil affairs field. With our present resources and limited finance we are barely scratching the surface of the problem.<sup>64</sup>

The upgrading of the Task Force civil affairs section by the deployment of 1 ACAU in 1967 represented a four-fold increase in strength,<sup>65</sup> but it was not until 1969 that a concerted effort toward aiding pacification through civil affairs was made. Although the focus on civil affairs

<sup>58</sup> Organisation and Function of Civil Affairs, AWM 95, 1/4/3.

<sup>59</sup> Routine Orders part 1, No. 76, AWM 95, 1/4/20.

<sup>60</sup> GS Instruction 8/67 'Civil Affairs', AWM 95, 1/4/45.

<sup>61</sup> Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*, p.167.

<sup>62</sup> Commander's Conference Minutes, 26 October 1967, AWM 103, 220/1/18.

<sup>63</sup> 1 ATF SOPs, sect 3, para 69, AWM 103, (HQ 1 ATF-Unregistered Items).

<sup>64</sup> Narrative, January 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/30.

<sup>65</sup> Quarterly Operational Summary, Period 1 April-30 June 1967, AWM 98 R569/1/57.



stemmed from a direct order, its implementation was dictated by the progress of the campaign, not by a fundamental reassessment of its role. In this way, all earlier operations had contributed to pacification. Gration, like Pearson, believed that success against the main force enabled the civil affairs effort to take place.<sup>66</sup> Gains against the main force were maintained and extended through military operations in depth and were consolidated through pacification.

Although early efforts at pacification were limited in their effect, Gration believes they performed an important function in softening the impact of 1 ATF's operations on the population. They also gained the trust of some villagers.<sup>67</sup> From 1969, 1 ACAU sought to develop trust by selecting lengthy projects within the villages, designed to familiarise the people with an Australian presence and allow bonds to develop between soldiers and the population. This was aided by the easy-going approach taken by soldiers who had little training in public relations or the Vietnamese language.<sup>68</sup> National service soldiers were particularly useful because of the range of trade skills attained before enlistment. Though some mistakes were made, the approach taken added to the effectiveness of the programme. An unsuccessful project to install water-pumping windmills throughout the province taught Australia that the Vietnamese could not be told what they needed, and future efforts were made to discover the actual needs of the population through courteous consultation with district officials, maximising the benefit gained from resources.<sup>69</sup>

Civil affairs involved an enormous range of operations. A number of large projects such as road building were undertaken which not only benefited military transportation but added a significant boost to the economy. The amount of effort devoted by combat units, with 1 ACAU acting as the chief coordinating agency, far exceeded the small monetary figures quoted in relation to the civil affairs effort.<sup>70</sup> Criticism that a presence was not maintained in villages at night led to an Integrated Civic Action Programme (ICAP), involving a range of civil

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<sup>66</sup> Interview, General P.C. Gration, Queanbeyan, 28 July 1999.

<sup>67</sup> Civil Affairs Report 8/66, dated 25 September 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/12.

<sup>68</sup> Interview, Gration, 28 July 1999.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*; P.C. Gration, 'Reflections on 1 ATF in Vietnam', *Australian War Memorial Journal*, April 1988, p.46.

<sup>70</sup> Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*, p.164.

affairs tasks after dark.<sup>71</sup> Characteristically, sport was also seen as an important part of civil affairs, 'breaking barriers' between 1 ATF and the population. Despite some success, civil affairs could only assist the GVN in its pacification programme. Furthermore, responsibility for eliminating the real grassroots strength of the enemy, the VCI, remained with the Province Chief. It would have been extremely difficult for foreign troops to target the VCI. Even the assassination operations carried out in Phuoc Tuy as part of the Phoenix programme were assessed as 'mostly ineffective'.<sup>72</sup> Beyond gains made as a result of normal operations, damage to the VCI never occurred.

At first glance, any weaknesses in the civil affairs effort would appear to be attributable to the command of 1 ACAU through the American Province Senior Advisor, rather than through 1 ATF. However, a close relationship with the Task Force was established with 1 ACAU from the start with Graham approving the instruction detailing the role of the unit.<sup>73</sup> Informal command arrangements were later made to bypass the official chain of command by appointing the CO of 1 ACAU as a staff officer on Task Force Headquarters. This meant he could give orders to 1 ATF units with command authority. In this way, the Task Force effectively gained control over the unit, an action that would have been significantly more difficult had official approval been sought,<sup>74</sup> and thereby gained direct control over the civil affairs effort in Phuoc Tuy.

Increased emphasis on pacification demanded increased liaison at the district level.<sup>75</sup> Small Australian liaison teams attached to each district headquarters furthered Task Force domination over civil affairs because they not only controlled Task Force resources but were more experienced than the US advisers. As a result, Australia virtually 'hijacked' the advisory effort in the province, to the frustration of US advisers.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, many of the benefits of running the province's advisory effort were gained without the expense or political costs associated with the eventual withdrawal. The extent to which

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<sup>71</sup> These included medical and dental assistance and movies. GS Instr 4/70 ICAP, AWM 95, 1/4/Jan 70 pt. 2.

<sup>72</sup> McNeill, *The Team*, p.407.

<sup>73</sup> Narrative, June 1967, AWM 95, 1/4/42.

<sup>74</sup> Interview, Gration, 28 July 1999.

<sup>75</sup> Message 4 May 69, AWM 95, 1/4/May 69 pt.3.

<sup>76</sup> Interview, Gration, 28 July 1999; Gration, 'Reflections on 1 ATF in Vietnam', p.45.

Australia came to dominate the province's advisory effort led Gration to conclude that the outcome in the province would have been little different had Australia formally accepted the advisory role in the province.<sup>77</sup>

The effectiveness of pacification was limited by what was perhaps the key problem in the war, government weakness in Saigon directly manifested at the provincial level. South Vietnam's political instability undermined:

... the capacity of administration throughout the country to take effective action in pacification and the non-military measures required to organise the countryside.<sup>78</sup>

Enemy reaction to pacification resulted in a significant increase in small-scale harassing attacks directed against the civil population, which indicated 'that 1 ATF pacification operations are creating difficulties for the VC and are forcing him to react to demonstrate to the civilian population the ability to retaliate'.<sup>79</sup>

### **Military Domination 1970-71**

The most important role the Task Force continued to perform in support of pacification was, of course, maintaining security within the province. This took the form of framework operations which continued to grind the enemy down to the point of military ineffectiveness. 5 RAR continued operations in the Hat Dich region, maintaining contact with the enemy and destroying base areas. This had an important effect on the VC, hampering 'normal rice procurement to the extent that the situation was now critical'.<sup>80</sup> In Pearson's final month as commander, enemy activity remained low.<sup>81</sup>

The style of operations which Pearson conducted from April 1969 would largely continue until the withdrawal of the Task Force in 1971. Consequently, the experiences of the final three Task Force commanders were very similar because 'by 1970 and 1971, Viet Cong ability to mount operations by his main force units had been greatly

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<sup>77</sup> Interview, Gration, 28 July 1999.

<sup>78</sup> Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1991), p.84.

<sup>79</sup> Intsum no. 146-69 260001-262400h May 1969, AWM 95 1/4/May 69 pt. 4.

<sup>80</sup> Intsum no. 229-69 170001-172400h August 1969, AWM 95 1/4/Aug 69 pt. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Enemy Situation Phuoc Tuy Province reports for August 1969, AWM 95, 1/4/Aug 69 pt. 4.

diminished',<sup>82</sup> corresponding to a reduced level of enemy activity throughout III CTZ.<sup>83</sup> Enemy forces were increasingly difficult to locate, yet after weeks of uneventful patrolling contacts with large enemy forces, often in defensive positions, could suddenly occur.

By this stage of the war the operational requirements of the Task Force 'were matched evenly by capabilities and training'.<sup>84</sup> Earlier problems of command had been overcome and the role of the commander became more directed toward the control of resources. The enemy situation emphasised operations at the small-unit level and command became increasingly decentralised, adding to the importance of the relationship between the Task Force commander and his unit commanders. However the leadership style of Brigadier S.P. Weir,<sup>85</sup> who took command of the Task Force on 31 July 1969, was to strain this relationship as Weir was more inclined to intrude into the affairs of his subordinate commanders.<sup>86</sup> During his time in command, Weir became increasingly frustrated at his force's inability to bring the enemy to battle. A wide range of means were developed by allied forces in an effort to engage the enemy. This included everything from the application of 'psyops' (psychological operations) to the targeting of B-52 airstrikes on the basis of intelligence gained by air reconnaissance.<sup>87</sup> Land-clearing operations designed to expose enemy movement were also conducted over large areas.

In February 1970 intelligence noted that there had been no significant enemy-initiated action for several months.<sup>88</sup> In contrast to the two previous years, Tet saw no major contacts, despite enemy intent.<sup>89</sup> This was attributed to the 'very serious plight in which the VC are finding themselves in Phuoc Tuy Province'.<sup>90</sup> 1 ATF operations which continued to put pressure on enemy food supplies further

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<sup>82</sup> McNeill, 'An Outline of the Australian Military Involvement ...', p.50.

<sup>83</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 2/69 290001h September-052400h October 1969, AWM 95, 1/4/Oct 69 pt. 3.

<sup>84</sup> Bushby, *Educating an Army*, p.24.

<sup>85</sup> Weir, an MC winner with Second World War service, had later gained distinction as patrol master of 1 RAR in Korea.

<sup>86</sup> O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.158.

<sup>87</sup> Message from 1 ATF to CG II FFORCE V 'Preplanned Arclight request', 9 May 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/May 70 pt. 2.

<sup>88</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 6/70 3-9 February 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Feb 70 pt. 3.

<sup>89</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 5/70 27 January-2 February 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Feb 70 pt. 3.

<sup>90</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 2/70 6-12 January 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Jan 70 pt. 3.

increased the vulnerability of VC forces. Operations in depth also acted in a spoiling capacity. A spring offensive planned by HQ VC Ba Long Province failed to eventuate because of Task Force operations to the north and south.<sup>91</sup> Due to the combat superiority of Australian forces, contact was often only made with large groups of enemy or with enemy in strongly defended bunker complexes. For instance, during February 1970 both 8 RAR and 5 RAR inflicted heavy losses on company-sized enemy groups attempting resupply.<sup>92</sup>

Bunker contacts presented their own distinct problems for commanders and meant that a situation could suddenly develop which would require elements of all Task Force resources to be directed toward the contact. Tank support was a particularly important asset against bunkers. While local enemy activity remained low, jungle terrain allowed main force units to move into the province at short notice, as happened in June 1969 when 5 RAR was suddenly deployed against elements of 33 NVA Regiment in the village of Binh Ba. In this battle, 5 RAR was called upon to switch from low-level jungle patrolling to a conventional infantry-armoured battle in urban terrain. Heavy casualties were inflicted upon the enemy during the recapture of the village.

Brigadier W.G. Henderson took command of the Task Force on 31 May 1970. He was 'a very experienced infantryman with service in World War II, Korea and Malaya'.<sup>93</sup> After a year of pacification operations, the situation in the province had improved significantly with particular economic benefits for the population.<sup>94</sup> 1 ATF intelligence reports described enemy activity as 'probably the lowest ever',<sup>95</sup> and even though outright attrition was never the Task Force's objective, the enemy was suffering greatly from losses with company strengths in D445 averaging 24 personnel.<sup>96</sup> The security situation was aided by circumstances throughout III CTZ, with enemy activity at relatively low levels. Enemy operations were also seriously affected by the wider war. One month before Henderson took command, Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, commanding general of II FFV,

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<sup>91</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 9/70 24 February-2 March 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Mar 70 pt. 3.

<sup>92</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 7/70 10-16 February 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Feb 70 pt. 3.

<sup>93</sup> O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.190.

<sup>94</sup> Interview, Gratton, 28 July 1999.

<sup>95</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 22/70 1-7 June 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Jun 70 pt. 2.

<sup>96</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 18/70 5-11 May 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/May 70 pt. 3.

had launched an attack into Cambodia which set back enemy offensive plans by two years.<sup>97</sup> Davison considered the province pacified,<sup>98</sup> and Weyand believed that, by 1970, Phuoc Tuy was well on the way to total pacification.<sup>99</sup> Ewell, on the other hand, felt that the province was 'semi-pacified' because the VC did not want to 'rock the boat' in Phuoc Tuy province for fear of disrupting supplies (particularly medical) coming through Vung Tau.<sup>100</sup>

The weak enemy threat had a definite effect on the way in which operations were conducted in this period. Where initially even company-sized forces had been vulnerable, now operations were frequently conducted at platoon level. Operations were conducted increasingly further away from Nui Dat, sometimes outside artillery range. For instance, Major H.J. Coates used his cavalry squadron outside artillery range on an operation into the enemy's former stronghold in the May Tao area.<sup>101</sup> Lieutenant Colonel R.A. Grey, CO of 7 RAR, persuaded Henderson to permit him to use 7 RAR outside artillery range because helicopter gunships were available to provide immediate support. Operating without establishing FSBs added to the possibility of surprising the enemy,<sup>102</sup> and reflected the level of trust in the US Air Force and the immense firepower it could deliver in an emergency.<sup>103</sup>

Pending the withdrawal of the third battalion (8 RAR) in November 1970, Henderson divided the province into two battalion AOs. This allowed each battalion to build an intimate knowledge of the ground and establish firm relationships with its corresponding district officials.<sup>104</sup> The allocation of battalion AOs affected the Task Force commander's role by further reducing his need for direct command. However supervisory visits became a daily routine, and displayed the primary role of the Task Force commander as the coordinator and facilitator of resources for battalion operations.

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<sup>97</sup> Palmer, *The 25-Year War*, pp.101-2.

<sup>98</sup> Letter, Davison, 6 July 1999.

<sup>99</sup> Letter, Weyand, 16 June 1999.

<sup>100</sup> Letter, Ewell, 18 June 1999.

<sup>101</sup> Interview, Coates, 2 June 1999.

<sup>102</sup> O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.241.

<sup>103</sup> Interview, Butler, 8 July 1999. For an American example of the use of the 'Broken Arrow' emergency codeword for air support, see Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once ...*, p.175.

<sup>104</sup> O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.203.

The operations of 7 RAR in the eastern half of the province were typical of those conducted during this period. While one company always operated in depth, the remainder continued to apply the consistent theme of separating the population from the enemy by way of operations on the outskirts of villages.<sup>105</sup> 'Saturation' of the area often meant ambushing in half-platoon groups, although proximity to friendly forces was maintained. Support for these ambushes was often lavish and showed the increasingly 'combined arms' character of operations. One 12-man group from 7 RAR ambushed more than 42 enemy with the support of direct tank fire (from an FSB), Australian and US artillery as well as a US 'Shadow' gunship. A US destroyer was also standing by off the coast.<sup>106</sup>

The effect of these operations on the enemy was serious. Intelligence reported a prisoner captured by 7 RAR on 20 June 1970 as stating that:

... the VC no longer consider PHUOC TUY to be one of the major battlefields in SVN. He states that the concentration of allied forces in the province has made large-scale attacks by the VC impossible and that this fact has seriously effected morale in the area.<sup>107</sup>

This intelligence was shortly followed by the withdrawal of the provincial battalion, D445, from Phuoc Tuy. This put increased pressure on the two small district VC companies, which were drastically understrength and limited in capability.<sup>108</sup> When D445 attempted to re-enter the province, its reconnaissance party was ambushed, the executive officer (acting battalion commander at the time) was killed and enemy planning and operations were seriously disrupted.<sup>109</sup>

Intelligence continued to report very low levels of enemy activity throughout 1970.<sup>110</sup> The enemy did display an ability to concentrate and conduct major attacks with little warning but heavy losses were often inflicted when the enemy was exposed in large

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<sup>105</sup> Interview, Grey, 26 July 1999.

<sup>106</sup> O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, pp.178-80.

<sup>107</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 25/70 22-29 June 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Jun 70 pt. 2.

<sup>108</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 28/70 13-19 July 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Jul 70 pt. 3.

<sup>109</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 37/70 14-20 September 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Sep 70 pt. 2.

<sup>110</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 39/70 28 September-4 October 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Oct 70 pt 2; 1 ATF Supintrep 46/70 16-22 November 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Nov 70 pt.2.

groups, particularly in ambushes.<sup>111</sup> On 29 November 1970 B Squadron, 3 Cavalry Regiment relieved an RF post under heavy attack at Xuyen Moc.<sup>112</sup> 7 RAR had major contacts with enemy bunker systems in December and January 1971. Patrolling in base areas seriously affected enemy logistics with the enemy losing a large quantity of rice, its last mortar and the Ba Long armoury in January 1971.<sup>113</sup>

### Vietnamisation

The military efforts of the Task Force were increasingly directed towards 'Vietnamisation'. This involved operations designed to increase the capabilities of Vietnamese forces with a view to increasing their responsibility for the war effort, and corresponded to the desire of commanders like Weir, who sought the gradual handover of areas to the Vietnamese, thereby allowing Task Force operations against the main force in the jungle.<sup>114</sup> When Pearson took command of the Task Force, he took advantage of a lull in enemy activity to begin the training of the Regional Forces. A programme to train three ARVN battalions at the Horseshoe began in June 1969.<sup>115</sup> This was matched by concentrating the AATTV in Phuoc Tuy and the establishment of a jungle warfare training centre in February 1971.<sup>116</sup> By December 1970, fourteen AATTV mobile army training teams (MATTs) were operating in the province.<sup>117</sup>

Vietnamisation saw the style of Task Force operations increasingly become that of integration with Regional Forces. This trend reached its zenith in the Cung Chung series of operations, beginning in June 1970, during which integration was achieved down to the level of joint ambushes.<sup>118</sup> Vietnamisation involved a gradual handover of AOs to Vietnamese forces, pending the withdrawal of the third battalion and eventually of the entire Australian force. This was effected gradually, so that by the time 4 RAR arrived, as the final battalion, all operations were again conducted remotely from the

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<sup>111</sup> 23 VC were killed in a joint B Squadron, 3 Cavalry Regiment/7 RAR ambush. Narrative, December 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Dec 70 pt. 1.

<sup>112</sup> Sitrep 300001-302400h November 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Nov 70 pt. 2.

<sup>113</sup> 1 ATF Supintreps 1-4/70, 28 Dec 70 - 24 Jan 71, AWM 95, 1/4/Jan 71 pt. 3.

<sup>114</sup> Horner, *Phantoms of the Jungle*, p.333.

<sup>115</sup> GS Instruction 6/69 'ARVN Battalion refresher training', AWM 95, 1/4/May 69 pt. 3.

<sup>116</sup> McNeill, *The Team*, p.438.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*, p.447.

<sup>118</sup> O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars*, p.195.



villages.<sup>119</sup> The timetable of withdrawal which dictated the pace of this handover could not be altered, regardless of the preparedness of the RFs to undertake the responsibility. The view of the CO of 8 RAR echoes the perception of the Task Force at the time:

... our general assessment of RF capability is that they would be incapable of ensuring the security of Phuoc Tuy Province without US, Aust or ARVN assistance.<sup>120</sup>

The CO of 7 RAR also had serious concerns about RF standards of battle discipline and soldier skills, especially when unsupervised during joint operations.<sup>121</sup>

Such operations required much greater cooperation with sector headquarters and the Province Chief, whereas until that time 1 ATF had been able to 'scrape by with a fairly low level of cooperation.'<sup>122</sup> The US advisory structure had alleviated much of the doctrinal requirement for close cooperation with the civil administration.<sup>123</sup> There was, however, a strong basis for cooperation laid by early Task Force operations, especially during cordon and search operations when the Task Force operated within the Province Chief's area of responsibility.<sup>124</sup> Interestingly, language was not a particular problem when working with Vietnamese forces, which aimed for English proficiency.<sup>125</sup>

All allied operations were assisted by the nature of the war, which allowed the allocation of independent TAORs. This minimised the need for cooperation and reduced the chance of clashes. The importance of using liaison officers when working with allied units was paramount. Liaison officers were always deployed to neighbouring units, primarily to supervise their actions and act as a 'safety

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<sup>119</sup> Interview, J.C. Hughes, 16 June 1999.

<sup>120</sup> 'Report on Regional Force Units', 8 RAR dated 2 November 1970, AWM 103, 569/1/15.

<sup>121</sup> 'Assessment of RF, 7 RAR AO', dated 29 October 1970, AWM 103, 569/1/15.

<sup>122</sup> McNeill, 'An Outline of the Australian Military Involvement...', p.50.

<sup>123</sup> *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet 11, section 36, paragraph 2d.

<sup>124</sup> Operation Bundaberg showed that cooperation 'proved to be no great problem while the two HQ were co-located'. AAR Operation Bundaberg, 'AWM 95, 1/4/18.

<sup>125</sup> Operations with Thai forces did present some language difficulties. 5 RAR was able to overcome this problem on its second tour as the battery commander of the direct support battery, Major Lockie Thompson, was a Thai speaker, having become close friends with the Thai crown prince at Duntroon. Interview, Kahn, 4 June 1999.

measure'.<sup>126</sup> This was particularly important on large combined operations like Goodwood.<sup>127</sup>

### Political Pressure

Within the province, the enemy had suffered such losses in personnel and material that after January 1971 it was virtually ineffective for the rest of the year. As a result, the final operational Task Force commander, Brigadier B.A. McDonald, a Second World War veteran and highly competent commander,<sup>128</sup> who took command of the Task Force on 28 February 1971, had few concerns about the security of his force before its withdrawal.<sup>129</sup> There was still a desire to attend to more distant main force threats. The 3rd Battalion of 33 NVA Regiment was deliberately based on the southern border of Long Khanh province,<sup>130</sup> in the belief that the border would act as a sanctuary.<sup>131</sup> However, the conclusion of the 'out of province' phase did not preclude operations outside Phuoc Tuy and Operation Overlord, in June 1971, targeted this threat. The disruption caused to enemy operations displays how offensive action outside the province could directly benefit the situation within the province. However, the threat imposed by main force units from outside Phuoc Tuy remained until the withdrawal, as evidenced by heavy contacts between 4 RAR and 33 NVA Regiment on 21 September 1971.<sup>132</sup>

Despite the success of Overlord, it 'raised the old problem of operations outside Phuoc Tuy', especially when casualties occurred, with concerns expressed in the press and by government.<sup>133</sup> Large-scale operations outside what was by then firmly considered to be 'Australia's province' required approval from the prime minister

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<sup>126</sup> Liaison officers were often attached simply to prevent allied forces, particularly Vietnamese, from doing anything, due to lack of faith in their abilities.

<sup>127</sup> OpO No. 72/68, Operation Goodwood, AWM 95, 1/4/124.

<sup>128</sup> Interview, Coates, 2 June 1999.

<sup>129</sup> Message For COMAFV From COMD 1 ATF 5 November 1970, AWM 95, 1/4/Nov 70 pt. 2.

<sup>130</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 1/71 28 December 1970-3 January 1971, AWM 95, 1/4/Jan 70 pt. 3.

<sup>131</sup> 'Message for CCOSC from COMAFV', 050550Z Jun 71, AWM 98, R569/171/8.

<sup>132</sup> 4 RAR simultaneously contacted the 2nd and 3rd battalions and the Regimental Headquarters of 33 NVA Regiment attempting to ambush the 1 ATF reaction force. 33 NVA Regiment had been reinforced from North Vietnam after Overlord. 1 ATF Supintrep 32/71 2-8 August 1971, AWM 95, 1/4/Aug 71 pt. 3; Horner, *Duty First*, pp. 275-6; interview, J.C. Hughes, 16 June 1999.

<sup>133</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, pp. 53-4.

himself.<sup>134</sup> Media discussion had reinforced this view to the extent that 'in the minds of the Australian public and of some military planners, the 'Battle of Phuoc Tuy' appeared to assume an identity separate from the rest of the campaign'.<sup>135</sup> Previous allegations that the Task Force had left the province without authorisation (and that the army had sought to 'sabotage' civil affairs in Phuoc Tuy) were the products of rumours circulating in the press gallery,<sup>136</sup> demonstrating how inaccurate perceptions about the role of 1 ATF were built by public discussion, which, subsequently brought legitimate operations into question.

Despite the above, however, and despite the increasing unpopularity of the war, 1 ATF still experienced very little interference from superior command, political sources or the media. Operation Overlord elicited concern in Australia over casualties. This sensitivity had grown throughout the deployment, yet commanders were never given formal restrictions on the issue. However, all commanders understood that casualties were politically and professionally undesirable. This was particularly noticeably during operations in the Long Hai mountains, where mine casualties were numerous. The 'costly and dubious value' of Operation Hammersley, an 8 RAR operation into the Long Hai area in February 1970, prompted the Chief of the General Staff to question the Commander, Australian Force Vietnam on the reasons for the operation.<sup>137</sup> The Task Force did not operate in the Long Hai area again and, although he was never asked, Dunstan, as Commander, Australian Force Vietnam during 1971, believed a request to operate there would have led to one of the few occasions he would have intervened to stop an operation.<sup>138</sup> Alternative operations to interdict movement between the Long Hai base and the surrounding villages, primarily Dat Do, achieved similar effects in restricting D445 Battalion.

Political questioning occurred throughout the war, though with limited effect on operations. One instance arose following Long Tan, when the Commander, Australian Force Vietnam sent Jackson a message which read:

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<sup>134</sup> Michael English, *The Battle of Long Khanh* (Army Doctrine Centre, Sydney, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>135</sup> McNeill, *The Team*, p. 427.

<sup>136</sup> Routine Orders Part 1, No. 62, 'Statement by the Prime Minister Concerning the Army'. AWM 95, 1/4/Mar 71 pt.3.

<sup>137</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.42.

<sup>138</sup> Interview, Dunstan, 16 July 1999.

... in order to answer parliamentary question would appreciate your earliest advice on whether friendly aircraft used napalm in battle for hill on 18 Aug. My views on question are same as yours but afraid it does require an answer. A YES or NO over the phone will do.<sup>139</sup>

A similar incident occurred after the battle of Balmoral, in which the medical officer of 3 RAR was wounded while tending to five enemy wounded on the edge of the perimeter, resulting in a query direct from the White House.<sup>140</sup> In circumstances such as these, Task Force commanders particularly valued the Commander, Australian Force Vietnam acting as a 'buffer' against political influence.<sup>141</sup> This allowed the Task Force commander to focus on the operational situation while assuming that all orders received from II FFV were endorsed by his Australian superior.<sup>142</sup> In any case, Norrie believed that there was very little attempted political interference.<sup>143</sup> Perhaps the greatest influence government had on operations was through the force limitations placed upon 1 ATF. Although operational difficulties caused by the lack of a third battalion have already been discussed, reinforcement was also limited by political factors, as a direct result of the Tet offensive, which caused a ceiling of 8000 to be placed on the Australian commitment by the prime minister.<sup>144</sup>

Although inaccurate media reports inflamed soldiers who felt justifiably proud of their efforts, the government contributed to this problem by applying excessive censorship to details regarding the war. As O'Neill wrote:

No attempt has been made to place before the public the reasoning behind various operational methods, and in the absence of any account of a reasoned approach to the war, the majority of Australians assume that there is not such an approach, and the war is simply a welter of body-count statistics.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Operations Log, 280910h August 1966, AWM 95, 1/4/6.

<sup>140</sup> Dunstan, presentation to Staff College, Fort Queenscliff, 1969, p.14.

<sup>141</sup> Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>142</sup> Horner, *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War*, p.23.

<sup>143</sup> Interview, Norrie, 22 June 1999.

<sup>144</sup> Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.196.

<sup>145</sup> O'Neill, 'Australian Military Problems in Vietnam', p.57.

The perception thus formed disguised the extent of the success achieved by the Task Force.



## CONCLUSION

The military achievements of the Task Force were extensive: 'by 1971 ... the roads were open, markets were flourishing, enemy tax collection was all but removed and government control was restored'.<sup>1</sup> This was a direct result of 1 ATF's military success, with enemy forces avoiding Australia's area after years of costly defeats. In July 1971, intelligence noted that 'D445's moves into Phuoc Tuy over the past year have been costly to them and short lived'.<sup>2</sup> The VC presence in Phuoc Tuy was always related to offensive tasks but contacts with the enemy were scattered. Between 27 September and 25 October 1971, 1 ATF intelligence recorded only six minor contacts with the enemy and no indication that 33 NVA Regiment or 274 VC Regiment intended to move back into the province.<sup>3</sup> The danger from main force units had been all but eliminated.

The military role of 1 ATF was understood by all commanders, was authorised in the working agreement and was largely within the goals and tasks of the American command. It is worth reinforcing the point that, by 1965, the situation was so serious that there was no other option for any allied commander in Vietnam but to place the destruction of powerful enemy units throughout the country first on their list of priorities. Although the way in which 1 ATF conducted its campaign differed from the methods of American forces, the point of continuity throughout the deployment was the targeting of major enemy forces with an influence on the TAOR. This objective was paramount and overrode all other considerations popularly believed to have influenced Task Force commanders, such as pressure from the Americans to conduct 'big-unit operations' or the supposed 'trade-off' between the needs of conventional operations and those of pacification.<sup>4</sup> While operations targeted enemy weakness in hunting main force units and logistics and base areas, the 'village war' could

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<sup>1</sup> McNeill, 'The Australian Army and the Vietnam War', p.60.

<sup>2</sup> 1 ATF Supintrep 29/71 12-18 July 1971, AWM 95, 1/4/Jul 71 pt. 3.

<sup>3</sup> 1 ATF Supintreps 40-43/71 27 November-25 October 1971, AWM 95, 1/4/Oct 71 pt. 3.

<sup>4</sup> This 'dilemma' is raised by O'Neill in 'Australian Military Problems in Vietnam', p.49.

only be pursued to a limited extent. Otherwise main force units could have demonstrated their power in key points virtually at will. Even so, gains against the main force always had as their objective consolidation at the local level.

Task Force dominance over the enemy forces fulfilled the overall aim of providing an environment in which the government could carry out its programmes in a relatively secure environment. At the same time, the military success of the Task Force was frustrated by the wider political context of the war.<sup>5</sup> This simply confirms the assertion that there are definite limits to what military forces can achieve in counter-insurgency warfare. The added difficulty for a foreign military force in defeating an established guerrilla movement that was essentially nationalist in character was realised by Australian senior commanders from the beginning, and reinforced the wisdom of insisting on Vietnamese responsibility for pacification. At the diplomatic level also, allied forces assisted the GVN and the 'hearts and minds' of its own population rightly remained its own responsibility. Ultimately, the war was its own: the reasons why the GVN could not win the war stemmed from the very legitimacy of the regime and its ability to govern at all.

The achievements of the Task Force were intimately linked to the wider war at the political and strategic levels. After the departure of the Task Force in December 1971, Australians remaining in the province as part of the Training Team witnessed a slowly deteriorating security situation.<sup>6</sup> This led one officer to conclude that, despite the efforts of the Task Force, it was as if they had never been there at all.<sup>7</sup> This ignores both the achievements of the Task Force and the strength inherent in all insurgency movements, especially when strongly assisted by North Vietnamese units infiltrating the province. Had allied forces elsewhere been more successful, units of 33 NVA Regiment would have been unable to re-enter the province after two serious defeats at Binh Ba in 1969 and during Operation Overlord in 1971.<sup>8</sup>

Given the influence of factors beyond its control, the success of the Task Force must be assessed against the military context in which it fought. With a degree of autonomy achieved from both US and

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<sup>5</sup> Letter, Weyand, 16 June 1999.

<sup>6</sup> McNeill, *The Team*, p.468.

<sup>7</sup> Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*, p.162.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Khan, 4 June 1999.



Australian command which may never be repeated, the commanders of 1 ATF could formulate and pursue a campaign that achieved marked success. While it is generally acknowledged that what the Task Force could accomplish was limited by its size, it was nevertheless not an insignificant force. The actions during the first and second phases of the Tet offensive displayed the significant role 1 ATF could play within III CTZ. American commanders certainly regarded 1 ATF as equal to an American brigade, one of a number of independent brigades controlled by II FFV during the war. Indeed, the Task Force performed at a standard beyond that expected of its size. Consequently, it may be argued that 1 ATF was more successful than much larger forces in other provinces, albeit sometimes against more serious opposition. Even though the Task Force worked in a limited geographic area, Davison believed the Australian contribution was beneficial because it 'freed up' US forces for use throughout both III CTZ and Cambodia. Even though Australia sometimes viewed Phuoc Tuy in a vacuum, the Americans certainly did not think in these terms. Through operations both outside the province and within it, 1 ATF made a valuable contribution to the allied effort. The high regard in which the Task Force was held by the Americans gives an indication of how well the Australian government met some of its Cold War obligations to its major ally.

In Dunstan's view, 1 ATF could have been even more useful had it been less confined to Phuoc Tuy province:

... for the last two years the operations of the force had been almost a waste of time - the enemy had been neutralised to such an extent that seeking them was like looking for a needle in a haystack.<sup>9</sup>

The possibility of operations further afield was discussed by the Task Force and American commanders but would have raised issues of Australian national policy.<sup>10</sup> Not undertaking such operations certainly avoided excessive casualties and political repercussions, but it is governments that must settle on the strategic outcome desired and decide whether the costs in men and materials will be borne in the quantities required to produce results at the operational level. In Butler's view, confining Australian forces largely to Phuoc Tuy meant

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<sup>9</sup> Interview, Dunstan, 16 July 1999; McNeill, 'The Australian Army and the Vietnam War', p.60.

<sup>10</sup> 'Message: COMAFV to Major Garland II FFV Liaison Officer', AWM 103, R569/1/9.

that the Task Force was not employed at the operational level of war, thus limiting the strategic effect of its operations.<sup>11</sup>

Military solutions rarely come cheaply. For this reason, senior commanders must impress on government the limitations of military force. A flexible definition of task force structure exists to allow the tailoring of means to military needs, but not to budgetary or political ends. The deployment of only two battalions to Phuoc Tuy to meet a planning figure, rather than deploying a homogeneous force capable of undertaking the task at hand, was a false economy that risked the security of the force and restricted its ability to carry out its mission. Clearly the lesson is that commitments must be made of discrete military formations and must not be based on arbitrary figures set by non-military sources. (More recently, in the far more benign environment of Somalia, 'setting figures' again raised difficulties.<sup>12</sup>) Future commitments must consider the independent brigade group as the building block rather than focusing on easily digestible personnel figures, which leads to ad hoc solutions.<sup>13</sup> Explaining this requirement to politicians and the media would be well worth the effort.

Otherwise, the problems faced by the various commanders of the Task Force were directly linked to the type of war being fought. The burden of constant operations was more sharply felt than the better known stresses caused by major battles, of which there were relatively few, not all requiring the direct intervention of the Task Force commander. His efforts were far more likely to be directed toward campaign strategy and the coordination of allied resources through Task Force Headquarters.

According to Millett and Murray:

... the problems confronting military institutions at the tactical and operational levels of warfare have two facets. The first is learning on the battlefield. The second is finding some method to insure that the combat lessons of the past remain embedded within the collective memory of the officer corps.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>During the 1980s, Butler successfully pushed for the introduction of the concept of the operational level of war into Australian Army doctrine. Interview, Butler, 8 July 1999; Horner, 'The ADF and the Operational Level of War', p.6.

<sup>12</sup> Bob Breen, *A Little Bit of Hope: Australian Force - Somalia* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998), p.34.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Butler, 8 July 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, 'Lessons of War', *The National Interest*, No.14, Winter 1988/9, p.89.

Battlefield learning in Vietnam was of particular importance during a war where flexibility in skills was required to fight under rapidly changing conditions, while experience gained on operations was constantly reinvested in pre-deployment training in Australia. The Task Force also had to learn many lessons about cooperation within an allied force and tying in with the civilian government apparatus.

Successful adaptation to the varying requirements of the war was aided significantly by the prior experiences of the Task Force commanders. This adaptation was based on a thorough understanding of the particular insurgency and a commonality of training which allowed each to continue the campaign in a manner far more consistent with that of previous commanders than has generally been acknowledged. In an army where soon subalterns will have the same level of combat experience as generals, future operations must be tempered with the realisation that such experience will be almost entirely absent.

The broad range of experiences acquired before Vietnam also allowed the army to progress subsequently beyond the specialised nature of the war in Vietnam. As commander of the 1st Division after Vietnam, R.L. Hughes was able to draw on his experience in Korea and the Second World War to redirect the attention of the army towards open warfare.<sup>15</sup> As Chief of the General Staff, Dunstan was particularly concerned to retain the right lessons from Vietnam and this led directly to the establishment of the jungle training facility at Tully.<sup>16</sup>

Preparations for the defence of Northern Australia and a desire to modernise the army have led to a renewed interest in task forces. Changes in this direction are fraught with difficulty:

... restructuring is shifting the army away from a proven and flexible divisional organisation towards independent task forces which are really not designed for a wider range of possible conflicts. It is worth noting that recent experimental trials carried out by the United States Army using autonomous brigades, without the benefit of divisional headquarters, proved the least lethal and survivable of force structure designs. When the threat was low-level, the autonomous brigade performed well, but when conflict escalated to

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<sup>15</sup> Exercises like Iron Man, conducted in late 1975, were particularly important in this respect. Interview, R.L. Hughes, 27 May 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, Dunstan, 16 July 1999.

conventional warfare, the brigade combat organisation proved deficient.<sup>17</sup>

Although 1 ATF proved its flexibility in switching between counter-insurgency and conventional operations at short notice, the higher levels of conflict possible in modern war were not faced, and comparisons must be drawn carefully. Evans also argues that a weakness in the current task force structure 'is in the adoption of the principle of using embedded units with combined arms assets. This approach may have the effect of reducing its combat power'.<sup>18</sup> It could also diminish the key role of the task force commander in the coordination and focusing of resources held at task force level. The Australian Army underwent a significant change in Vietnam, from the infantry basis of the pentropic years to what was very much a combined-arms army.<sup>19</sup> Current changes leave the Australian Army in danger of having to re-learn this lesson.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Evans, 'The Role of the Australian Army in a Maritime Concept of Strategy', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute of Australia*, Vol. 19, December 1998, p.69.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Bushby, *Educating an Army*, p.20; Interview, Coates, 6 July 1999.

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The commander of the 1st Australian Task Force in Vietnam held the key operational command in Australia's largest military commitment of the Cold War period. Although the Vietnam War has been written on at length, the brigade level of command, held in Vietnam by the commander of 1 ATF, has received comparatively little attention. This is the more remarkable given the Australian Army's recently renewed interest in a 'task force' structure and the modern trend away from large-scale conventional warfare.

This monograph examines the problems and conditions faced by the seven Task Force commanders; their styles of command and the degree of independence they were allowed by Australian and US higher commanders; how much operational command they exercised and the types of operations carried out under each. It concludes that although the commanders were allowed a large degree of independence, apparent variations in Task Force methods were due less to the influence of personality than to differences in the types of operations required to counter a changing enemy situation.

