

The story behind The Battle of Long Tan

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547 Sig Troop was a small top-secret unit at HQ ATF at Nui Dat, a group of about 15 men in a tent with HF radios, led by a Captain Richards, whose role was to intercept enemy radio transmissions and advise the deductions only to Brig Jackson and his close Staff, ie. Ops Officer Major Hannigan and IOs Major Rowe and Captain Keep.

On 29 July 66, Richard's radio team locked onto morse code signals from the VC 5th Div's two Regiments, 274 and 275. 275 Regt was then located north of Xuyen Moc, 22km east of Nui Dat, 274 Regt to the NW/N. The radio traffic indicated North Vietnamese units had joined in and they were all preparing to move. In subsequent days the 275 Regt HQ Radio was tracked moving west from north of Xuyen Moc at about 1km a day until it stopped just north-east of the Long Tan rubber on 14 August. The radio map is shown in the Official History "To Long Tan", page 310.

Despite the evidence, Brigadier Jackson could not be persuaded to believe the enemy was approaching to attack ATF, even though Captain Mike Wells (2 Commando on FTD), AATTV at Hoa Long, with units of 10 ARVN Div, told frequent ATF Conferences that ARVN Agents reported the VC 5 Div was moving down to attack the Australian Base. He dismissed various reports of enemy movements as being ARVN or own Troops. SAS did not locate any significant movement. He said the 275 radio was "just the HQ doing a recce".

Jackson claimed that any suggestion of an attack on his base was "preposterous". Colonel Townsend is also on record (before this event) as saying "the enemy would not be so stupid as to attack our Base". All "famous last words". You might recall we were sent up from Vung Tau to Nui Dat a week ahead of schedule because of rumours of a VC attack. The Diary of 274 Regt indicates they first considered attacking Nui Dat from the north, then later ambushing 5RAR in June. They set an ambush for 5RAR which was supposed to go out to investigate a plane shot down, but they did not go out as the wreckage could not be located from the air - lucky.

There was a problem at HQ ATF in that Keep by-passed Rowe and spoke direct to Jackson and thus Rowe and Keep were at odds. Keep was unwell, not impressive, and then appeared to suffer a breakdown. He was incensed with the importance of the intelligence but could not get Rowe or Jackson to comprehend it's significance. Keep let himself go to the pack in his personal hygiene and dress and was sent off to Vung Tau hospital and flown to Malaya on the 15th. The version in Paul Ham's book is that he was moved out to save him from a Court Martial offence for homosexual advances to Gp Capt Raw, the senior ATF RAAF Officer with whom he

shared a tent. Then Rowe was sent to hospital on 16th with Hepatitis, so both ATF Int Officers were unwell and had departed by the night of the 16th.

Jackson long-ignored wire and minefield defences for the undermanned Base and even after the mortaring on the early morning of the 17th he still allowed the Concert to go ahead. He told none of his other Staff, nor the 5 and 6 Battalion CO's of the enemy intelligence. Captain Mollison claims in his 2005 book that "he" knew, and had the IO brief his Alpha Company about it on the 15th, but in Paul Ham's book Page 216 that is shown as being untruthful. No one outside four officers at HQ ATF knew. IO Brian Wickens denies briefing A Coy about it, as he did not know. CO6RAR was also in the dark. No one at HQ ATF wanted to tell the world they had a signals intercept unit on air lest the enemy got to hear about it and changed their radio habits? The enemy probably knew anyway. They had agents and spies around Nui Dat.

What is staggering is that not a whisper about an enemy regiment being tracked to east of the Long Tan rubber on the 14th was ever passed on to the two Battalion COs or more importantly, to the Company Commanders of patrolling companies in the area, ie. Alpha, Bravo and then Delta. Despite the top-secret rating, one would think Jackson would have whispered it into our CO's ear, and suggest we be very careful ? Further, why didn't he send SAS Patrols out to the SE Nui Dat 2 area ?

Some of his Staff believe Jackson's cavalier attitude and conduct amounted to grave neglect and possibly a dereliction of duty (Paul Ham's book Page 214). Indeed, when I discovered all this from the AWM Historian circa 1989, and still saddened by the loss of my 17 men, I was to suggest he should have faced a Court of Inquiry rather than be decorated with the DSO for his able personal direction of the Battle. And in 1968 he was to boast to a JTC Tactics Course that "he knew the enemy was out there and he sent Smith's company out to entrap them inside gun range". In hindsight, ATF with US Troops back-up should have planned a large ambush for the enemy when it was to attack the Base on the night of the 18th. Luckily for ATF, Delta Company and the supporting troops and arms thwarted that attack.

Delta Company had patrolled near Nui Dat 2 and back through the rubber on the 15th and saw nothing - lucky. Bravo patrolled into the rubber on the 17th and morning of the 18th and saw no enemy - lucky. A Coy to the north had small contacts and was almost down to the bottom of Nui Dat 2 when it was ordered to return - lucky.

It is now obvious the enemy, now known to be five battalions (three of 275 Regt; NVA806, and D440), plus supporting arms and troops, like Mrs Phoung's medical evacuation unit, was hiding in the jungle east and northeast of the Long Tan rubber to the south-eastern side of Nui Dat 2 and did not wish to be seen lest it upset their secret plans to attack Nui Dat base on the night of the Concert. The large enemy force of at least some 2500 troops would have covered a large area, at least a kilometre, if not two, and we found some of their trenches east of Long Tan. D445 was probably the "meeters and greeters" and guided 275 Regt units into hides and indicated the large rice caches just east.

Other than one D445 company encountered by the APCs and Alpha Company at about 1km south of the main battlefield, D445 was not involved in the main battle at Long Tan. Obviously, if 275 had wanted, they could have attacked Delta on the 15th, Alpha and Bravo on the 17th, or clobbered B Coy HQ and D Coy at mid-day on the 18th on the edge of the Long Tan rubber.

That's the background. 547 Signals Troop people have now requested they be awarded a MUC for their good work in Vietnam. I gather a National advertisement last week calls for submissions to the Honours Tribunal. I was contacted by the advocate on Monday and he asked my support. He claimed the unit had been offered a US Army award but that was rejected by the Govt, so they are now asking for the 1991 Aust MUC which is for "sustained outstanding service in warlike conditions".

Peter Harvey of 60 Minutes must have been solicited to add TV support and he rang Tuesday and sent a camera crew to see me yesterday. I might get 15 seconds on TV out of the 15 minute interview, and as usual, it could use odd phrases, and out of context. In brief, my response is that I can not justify a MUC for the Sig Unit when one compares the outstanding service of such as the Engineer Tunnel Rats, the RAAF Helicopters; the Artillery, the APCs, Coral-Balmoral and Bin Ba battalions, and other Infantry units like A Coy and B Coy 6RAR who supported us at Long Tan. One can argue that most should have been awarded a Unit Gallantry Citation, as was my recommendation to the 2009 Tribunal, and that is extant.

The bottom line, in my opinion, is that 547 Signals Troop should endeavour to get the US Army award approved (if offered), as that should be possible under the 1989 Legislation on Foreign Awards.

Of interest, some 21 MUC awards have been made since introduced in 1991. Three went to SAS, RAN and RAAF units in Timor, and almost every unit and ship have been given a MUC for Iraq and Afghanistan, the last being 6RAR MTF in 2011. The out of date Honours web site states 19 as at June 2010 but has not been updated since. It also says one VC, but Ben R-S has had the second one for near two years. One would think it was not that hard to update the List as awards are approved ?

For those who may not be aware, the unresolved Long Tan awards are now to be reviewed later this year by Part 2 of the current Valour Inquiry.