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A SOLDIER RETURNS

Terry Burstall



A Long Tan veteran discovers
the other side of Vietnam

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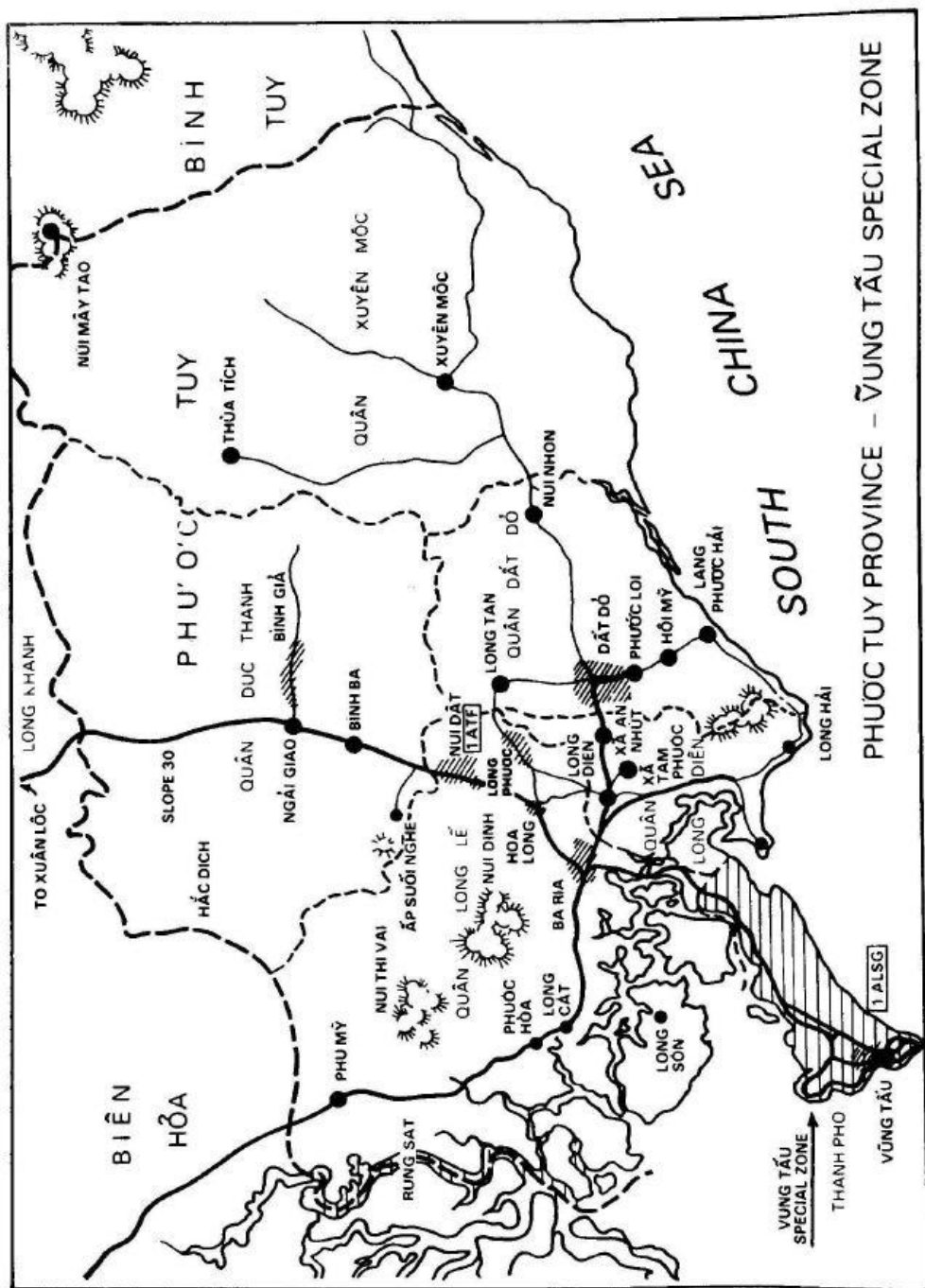
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A SOLDIER RETURNS

Terry Burstall has worked as a horsebreaker, drover, farmhand, rodeo rider and builder's labourer. In July 1965 he enlisted in the army and was posted to Vietnam eleven months later, taking part in the critical Battle of Long Tan. Burstall completed his tour of duty in 1967 and then spent three years in New Guinea managing a plantation. In 1984 he graduated with a BA from the University of Queensland, and his best-selling account of a soldier's war in Vietnam, *The Soldiers' Story*, was published in 1986. Terry Burstall now lives in Brisbane where he has undertaken postgraduate study at Griffith University.

University of Queensland





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A Long Tan veteran discovers
the other side of Vietnam

Terry Burstall

University of Queensland Press



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To Janet

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people, especially the people of Long Phuoc and Long Tan. Australia has a lot to answer for regarding the treatment of these people and perhaps this book may help to right the injustice done. Of course this work would be no more than a nebulous idea if it were not for the help of my good friends, Nguyen Quang Dy and Duong Quang Thang. From these two people I learnt the humanity of Vietnam, not with ideology, but with quiet dignity and humility. Through them I gained access to many sides of the Vietnamese people that remain hidden to the casual visitor. The humour, the friendship, the hardship and the pain were revealed with their help. To Thang and Dy I owe a deep debt.

Cam on (thank you), my friends.

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Introduction

A light drizzle pattered down on the 20 soldiers waiting to board the Qantas aircraft en route to war. It was May 1966 and I was 24 years old. I had joined the army 9 months before in order to help stop the “communist aggressor from the north” from pushing over the dominoes on the march to Australia.

Wearing a set of jungle greens, with slouch hat perched jauntily on my head, I felt both proud and apprehensive as I climbed on board. Once this flight started, I thought, my life would be changed forever. I had a wistful feeling about joining a long list of family forebears who had made this trip to war before me. I was entering the unknown, but determined to acquit myself well enough to be an equal partner in their circle. The mysterious, melodious word SIGH . . . GONE kept sounding in my head. It conjured up images of adventure.

After a 24 hour stopover in Manila we boarded an Air France plane for the flight to Vietnam. It was an eerie feeling flying over the Vietnamese countryside and realising enemy troops might be hidden in the thick forest. When the plane circled Tan Son Nhut airport for landing, it was late afternoon. There seemed to be every sort of plane imaginable on the strip. Along one side of the airfield were concrete bays for fighters, and boxes and stores ran literally for miles.

After waiting some time in the dull, dirty concrete terminal, a bus pulled up and a warrant officer told us to get on it. A large unsmiling Negro in an air force uniform sat behind the wheel, bored and disinterested. All the windows of the grey-brown bus were covered with thick wire mesh — so a grenade could not be lobbed inside. No one missed the significance of this.

When we got to the Australian transit hotel the bored warrant officer told us to put our gear in a room and be ready to go to the Australian base at Bien Hoa at 8 in the morning. That was it, no war, no weapons being fired, no-one seemed to care in the least.

Next morning it was raining and the trip by truck to Bien Hoa was slow. There were more people in that 50 kilometre ride than I had ever seen in my life. The paddies were full of water with shoots of rice just starting to show in places. In other fields there were men wearing conical hats with their trousers rolled up above their knees, ploughing little blocks of water with dejected-looking water-buffaloes pulling old wooden single-furrow ploughs. Many of the farmers wore sheets of plastic wrapped around their shoulders in lieu of raincoats.

Near Bien Hoa City we turned off the road and headed for the airfield where the Australian base was situated. Along this road were dozens of small shanty-town bars. They were constructed of all kinds of building material, many of them covered in sheets of Coke tin foil with the labels visible to the world. Whoever sold the foil on the black market did a marvellous advertising job for Coca Cola.

The truck passed through the gate and went across to the Australian lines. It was a bleak, depressing sight. There was not a tree in the whole area, just buildings that seemed to have been put up haphazardly. The Australian lines were tents with the kitchens made of prefabricated aluminium and fly wire. I was posted to D Company and taken down to the lines.

After two weeks in the battalion I was sent to Saigon for guard duty at the transit hotel where we had stayed the first night. Part of the duties of the guard was to send soldiers out

to the Australian transmitter situated on the main Saigon airfield. Across the open field from the transmitter was a shanty town full of the unwanted and unloved. Grass shacks teemed with the poor and destitute and the noise of crying, wailing, laughing, shouting and drumming from the area continued all through the night. By 2 a.m. I was deathly afraid of the place — what the hell was happening there. I was extremely relieved when the next shift came to relieve us.

That wasn't the finish of it, however. On another occasion I found myself inadvertently going into a refugee area in downtown Saigon as I tried to take a short cut between two main roads. The conditions were appalling. I turned a corner in the narrow lane and confronted the most pathetic sight I have ever seen. A woman sat on a small piece of rotting board, her buttocks just clearing the mud that was everywhere. She was dressed in rags and was nursing an emaciated infant clad only in a filthy singlet. He was almost bald and on one side of his head was a huge weeping sore. He was crying, but all he could manage was a pitiful whining whimper, as if that was all his strength would allow him. The woman was slowly and aimlessly waving her hand across his head to keep the swarming flies away.

As I came toward her she put out a hand to me and spoke in a voice stripped of emotion. I looked in horror and tried to brush past her. She grabbed at my pants as I went by and the sound that came from her was more like the cry of an animal than a human-being. I yanked my leg away from her feeble grip and hurried up the lane, not daring to look back at the pitiful sight of this human flotsam, abandoned and hopeless.

I needed air but, every time I breathed in, the filthy putrid air choked me. I hurried to the end of the lane where a group of South Vietnamese soldiers sat eating and playing cards. They looked at me as I came stumbling toward them and continued talking. I looked at them uncomprehendingly. Here was the army of the people we were supposed to be helping and they were sitting there as if they were on a picnic. Their weapons were scattered all over the place and there was no way they could have retrieved them had they needed them in a

hurry. They seemed oblivious to the plight of their own people only several metres away.

Later I went down to Tu Do street in the central area of Saigon, where there were hundreds of bars and areas of filth and depravity. In amongst all this was the very obvious affluence of the Americans, who had private restaurants, clubs with poker machines, beer and first-class entertainment. Swirling around outside, the majority of the Vietnamese lived in squalour and degradation. Though not all Vietnamese — there were many who were reaping the benefits of the American and Australian presence and could not have cared less about the desperate circumstances of their compatriots.

When One Battalion went home I was transferred to the newly arrived Six Battalion who were then at a newly formed camp on the Back Beach on the outskirts of the coastal city of Vung Tau. After a week on the beach we flew to Nui Dat where we were to help establish the new Task Force base. It was a strange experience going to Nui Dat as it seemed that there was no war going on at all. There was, however, the constant grind of work in atrocious living conditions. The battalion's first few months at the Nui Dat base were physically and mentally demanding because of the lack of organisation and equipment to work with. Five and Six Battalions had to virtually build the base from nothing. To make matters worse the wet season started and the rain and the mud increased the discomfort. As well as the task of building the base there were security patrols and operations to be carried out and these seemed to be endless slogs through the bush.

The first operation for the battalion was the destruction of the village of Long Phuoc, several kilometres from Nui Dat. We had been told the people from Long Phuoc had been "resettled" and tried not to think any more about it. The town of Long Phuoc was large and sprawling, with well-constructed houses built of timber and brick, nothing like the Australians' perception of grass-hut villages. The people had moved in such a hurry that they had left almost everything behind — clothes, cooking utensils, bedding, personal possessions. Where had the people gone? How were they going to

live without anything to cook in or a place to sleep? How could they replace the small family treasures we were throwing on to the small fires we had lit everywhere? Don't worry, the people have been resettled we were told. Don't worry! How could we? We were soldiers. The boss said pull down the town. We pulled down the town.

When we left, virtually nothing remained of Long Phuoc, two hundred years of Vietnamese history wiped away in two weeks. In ancient Chinese, the word *phuoc* means happy, well and prosperous. It would be a long time before Long Phuoc was ever happy, well and prosperous again.

The grind of patrolling and building the base continued and the operation into the Long Tan area in July was a portent of things to come. B Company was hit by an estimated company of main force troops and were lucky to escape being overrun. The action brought home to us that the Viet Cong forces in the area were not to be taken lightly. Still, it seemed inconceivable to us in the lower ranks that they would hit us because of the heavy logistic support we had on hand.

The VC flew in the face of this argument when they hit the base in August with an estimated 100 rounds of mortar fire. B Company Six Battalion were sent to find them, and D Company relieved B Company the next day. At 3.45 p.m. on 18 August we were ambushed in a rubber plantation just north of the village of Long Tan by an estimated regiment of the VC main force. The battle ebbed and flowed for four hours. When relief finally broke through, we hurriedly evacuated the area in order to fly out our dead and wounded. Some of them had to be left in the area overnight, however, and we returned at mid-morning the following day. The sight was horrendous — no-one who was there could ever forget the horror and the carnage. Two of our wounded were found where they had lain helpless all night while Australian artillery pounded the area. We recovered the bodies of our friends who had been laughing living beings the day before. Nothing takes the supposed glory out of war more quickly than the sight of dead mutilated friends. Unfortunately it brings about a hardening of feeling toward your enemy that pushes normal human feel-

ings of compassion to the back of the mind. It brings conflict down to a very personal level and gives you the licence to remain aloof from the suffering of others as long as your own little band of friends is protected.

These became my feelings for the rest of my tour in Vietnam. I cared nothing for the Vietnamese. I cared nothing for why we were there. I cared only for the small unit of people who shared my life 24 hours a day.

When D Company was reorganised, I was sent to Ten Platoon and took over as a machinegunner. Very little was explained to us about Long Tan and no one could be bothered asking. Life moved on, but now we knew there really was a war here. No doubt of that anymore.

In September the battalion went on an operation into the Nui Dinh hills, five kilometres west of Nui Dat. The hills were an endurance test, as they were very steep and covered in trees and foliage. We came from the northern slopes and up across the eastern face and over to the south. From the southern heights you looked out over the great mangrove expanses of the Rung Sat, or Jungle of Death, and to the west you could trace the highway through the many miles of rice paddies to Phu My. At night the glow of the lights in Saigon lit up the western horizon. We had to cut down huge trees to make a helipad to resupply the company and get us off. The only flat area was a huge rock so the landing zone was made on that.

Back at Nui Dat again, the operations and patrols went on and there was no indication of whether our presence in Vietnam had altered the course of the war one bit. How did you measure success in that type of war? Perhaps by the attitude of the people. If so there had been no success as far as I could see. In the villages the people looked at us with strange eyes that seemed to smoulder. Their dislike was apparent to all but the blind. There were no young men in the villages. All the work was done by women, children and men over 40. The children went from adolescence to . . . who could tell? Gone as soldiers every one, but to which side? Those who did not join the Viet Cong were conscripted by the South Vietnamese army.

My perceptions had narrowed so much by this time that there were for me only two kinds of people in Vietnam: those in the villages, who hated us and showed it; and those in the towns, who hated us and didn't show it too openly because they were making a dollar and waiting to rip us off. The only way we ever met Vietnamese was when we went on leave and there they were the pimps, the bar girls, the bar owners and black market racketeers. It was a very lopsided view of the Vietnamese that we developed.

At Nui Dat we drank Australian or American beer and ate Australian or American food, watched American movies and bought American goods from the PX that was set up on the base. We transported an Australian army camp and values to Vietnam and we lived in the same environment we had known at Enoggera or Singleton, except that we had to go out on patrols with live ammunition and a few of us would die and some would be wounded.

By January the rains had almost disappeared. The season was very dry when the New Zealand artillery accidentally dropped more than a dozen rounds on us during a very low-key operation. We lost 4 killed and 13 wounded from the company. One of the dead was the company sergeant major, big Jack Kirby, who was well liked and respected by everyone. Since Long Tan, Jack had been regarded as indestructible.

During January Brigadier Graham became the new Task Force commander. Such was the interest at our level that I didn't think anyone even knew or could have cared. Task Force commanders were so far removed from us that it was irrelevant who they were.

Early in the year the Australians made what turned out to be one of their biggest blunders in Phuoc Tuy. That blunder was the fenced minefield which stretched from Dat Do to Lang Phuoc Hai on the coast. The VC started to lift and reuse the mines almost as soon as they were put down. This was to cost more than 100 Australian lives. Writing of the minefield in *Soldier in a Storm*, General Alan Stretton said:

Another tactical error, which cost many Australian lives, was the laying of the 23,000 mines in a minefield from Dat Do to the South China Sea without making satisfactory arrangements for its security. It was naive to the extreme to think that such a minefield could be protected by regional South Vietnamese forces and that they would be capable of stopping the Viet Cong from lifting the mines and using them as a source of supply in their operations against the Australians. Some 8,000 were lifted from the field by the Viet Cong and caused death and injury to hundreds of young Australians.

In February the battalion was involved in another very costly operation. There had been an attack on a South Vietnamese outpost near the small hamlet of Hoi My. We were told to saddle up and get to the airfield, where there was frantic movement. I think we were the last company out. We raced on to the choppers and the one I scrambled into was full of holes up the tail. The American pilot turned to us as we were lifting off and screamed, "This is a hot LZ. I'm only touching down and lifting off. Anyone who isn't out in 3 seconds jumps when I'm leaving or comes back with me." Very encouraging words. When we landed we got out quickly and there was the sound of heavy fire coming from inside the bush off to the west of the landing zone. When the choppers left we were told to head to the eastern side of the landing zone and we scarpered across as fast as we could, slowed down by our heavy packs and weapons. There was some shooting coming at us as we moved across but I think it was from the area where the heavy firing was going on, and not someone deliberately firing at us.

We were placed just inside the scrub and lay there all afternoon listening to the sound of the battle raging on the other side of the paddy. There was very little information coming through to us, but we were expecting to be thrown in a hook to roll up the force holding down the rest of the battalion. About 4 p.m. we were told to move back to the west across the paddy and link up with the rest of the battalion in the scrub. We were bloody angry by this time as we knew very little of what had happened and we had been pumping ourselves

up for the inevitable clash. This order to move back came as a terrible let down as we had the enemy force bottled up and there was no way they could get away.

Planes and artillery pounded the area all night and we were warned for an assault the next morning. We weren't told too much during the night, only that B Company had been hit fairly hard and one armoured personnel carrier (APC) had been knocked out. We weren't told that the battalion had pulled back and left dead and wounded in the battle area.

In the morning we were formed up in an assault line and pushed forward into the area and one B Company soldier was found alive by our company. All the bodies of our own boys were found and the knocked out APC had obscenities written on the side of it in blood by the VC. It had been a bad day for the battalion, with 8 Australians killed and 27 wounded. And all we picked up were 8 VC bodies and two rifles. There was much talk after the operation that we were not to go in to get our own guys out because of the political implications in Australia of heavy casualties. It was maddening to realise we had the VC caught in a narrow strip of bush between the paddies and the sea, yet we just had to sit there, twiddling our thumbs, while our boys were chopped up because the whole battalion was not permitted to be engaged.

Not a good way to fight a war. If we were there to fight then why couldn't we fight when the opportunity was there to do some good? This was the sort of question that lowly privates were not to ask. If the questions weren't asked aloud, they were certainly thought about by many of us, and increased our frustration at the course of the war and at why good boys were dying and being mutilated.

When we left in June I don't know what I took with me. Anger. Disillusionment. Disappointment. I certainly wasn't going to be able to join the exalted ranks of my family forebears on the equal footing I had planned on the day of my departure. I had gone to Vietnam for all the right reasons but found that none of them fitted the cause. The pride I felt for the boys I served with was overwhelmed by the uselessness of

the whole year. We had achieved nothing, except the death of 37 young men and maiming of more than a hundred. We had upheld Australia's good name in the world, perhaps, but the cost of this boot-licking to an American insurance policy that might never be paid was way too high.

I was left feeling frustrated at the whole effort. The problem was that if there was anyone interested enough to ask about Vietnam, I was supposed to be an expert because I had been there. Been there! Been where? I had been to Bien Hoa airfield and some of the surrounding countryside. I had been to Vung Tau on leave and to Saigon for one week. I had been at the base at Nui Dat and had gone from there on operations. Even then the operations never took us far. To the north I had been no further than the Binh Ba plantation, a distance of only 5 kilometres from Nui Dat. I had been east to Xuyen Moc, 20 kilometres, and west almost to Phu My, 30 kilometres. My knowledge of Vietnam was Australian knowledge and Australian memories.

When people asked what progress we were making, what could I say? There was no way anyone could evaluate the progress of the war. The politicians kept giving all sort of figures to support the claim that the American and Australian effort was producing the results that were needed. But what were the figures: so many Vietnamese killed in such and such a week, so many villages destroyed and so many bombs dropped. The statistics were mind-boggling. How could the VC withstand the enormous resources of the Americans? There is an old story told in the army that, for all the destructive power and armament of a tank, the thing a tank commander fears most is a determined foot soldier. That analogy can explain the failure of the allied cause in Vietnam. We forgot the human factor. Driving our metaphorical tank we forgot the lesson and let the foot soldier snipe and chink at our armour while we drove at full speed blasting all before us. We ignored the pieces of armour that fell off as a result of the little man's bravery and persistence, until in the finish the shell we were driving collapsed.

When we returned to Australia there were other reasons

that made it hard for people who had been to Vietnam to say anything against the war. For me there were always the feelings of the parents and family of those who had died to consider. When you lose a son or husband in a war, there has to be at least a Cause — he died for his country, or defending our freedom, or something. In Vietnam none of these rationales could be used. Many of us who had been there knew this, but it was better not to rock the boat while other boys went off to risk their lives and parents and wives grieved. After twenty odd years I can talk openly of the uselessness because it is apparent now to all. Well, almost all — except the politicians who have pushed Vietnam and the veterans out of sight and out of mind.

The battalion returned to Australia in June 1967. We marched through Brisbane and the national servicemen were discharged that day. I went to Melbourne to see my parents and then home to my wife in Ballarat. One week later I walked away never to return. I still had one year of my three in the army to serve, so it was back to Brisbane when leave was finished.

My life had no direction and the army seemed as good a job to me then as any. By that time I was a corporal — promotion in those days was fairly rapid. Our company was sent to Canungra, to the Jungle Training Centre, which suited me. We were the demonstration platoon, so discipline was fairly loose.

It was while visiting my parents in Melbourne in February 1968 that the Tet Offensive hit the world headlines and tore apart Australian and American optimism over Vietnam. My stepfather, David, just kept looking at the television reports and shaking his head. He had been against the war from the start, which was strange because he was an ardent Liberal supporter. He had never been able to understand the policies and the rationale in Vietnam. David always had a lot of time for Ho Chi Minh because of Ho fighting against the Japanese. He had no time for the French and could see nothing wrong with the Viet Minh kicking them out of Vietnam; and, similarly; the Americans. He had been a prisoner

of the Japanese on the Burma railway for three years and he had a greater understanding of Asia than I had, even with my 12 months in Vietnam. David used to keep saying: "I just don't understand what we are supposed to be doing. If the South Vietnamese can't help themselves then us being there for twenty years will make no difference in the end. I just can't see the point." Neither did I.

When it came time to go to Townsville to join the rest of the battalion in March 1968 I signed again for another three years. As soon as we got to Townsville I was sorry about my decision. The battalion had changed completely. All the officers from the first tour had been posted out. After several severe exchanges with new officers I decided to become a civilian as I could see that there was no room in the army for me any longer. My ideas had changed too radically. I applied for discharge and this came through in November 1968.

I was discharged in Brisbane and decided to stay there. The first thing I needed was a job. The government was good to its ex-servicemen in those days. They had what they called a resettlement programme. This consisted of a trip to the employment office in the city, where a phone call would be made, on your behalf, to the employment office nearest where you would be living when discharged. I was living in a boarding house at Woollongabba, which meant I had to go to the Woolloongabba Employment Office for my resettlement. The resettlement was a phone call to a construction company building the Story Bridge expressway. Yes, they wanted men for jackhammer work. Could I use a jackhammer? Right, job's yours, bye bye.

The resettlement scheme reminded me of the one for the people of the village of Long Phuoc, but that was another time and another place. That was all behind me now. Needless to say, the job on the jackhammer didn't last too long. There was plenty of work at that time in Brisbane so it made no difference.

Six months later I was in Darwin. I spent three months there and came back to Brisbane with very little to my name because a business deal went sour. Several jobs later I applied

for a position as a plantation assistant in New Guinea. Much to my surprise, my application was accepted and I was off to a new life; it was not quite what I was expecting but not too bad either. After six months I was managing a copra and cocoa plantation on the north coast of New Britain. The job gave me plenty of time to think and I also became a voracious reader, developing interests in politics, history and sociology.

After almost three years, the isolation was starting to affect my nerves. I resigned and came back to Brisbane in 1972, still unskilled but prepared to work at whatever was available. There was never any shortage of work and one thing in my favour was that I was always keen to build up my nest egg. It was back to Darwin in 1975, after Cyclone Tracey, and a 60 hour working week for the rest of the year. It was symbolical for me being in Darwin surrounded by the destruction. It became a year for destruction, in fact, with Cambodia falling to the Khmer Rouge, then Vietnam falling like a house of rotten logs and, finally, on our backdoor step, the Indonesian invasion of East Timor and the killing of five Australian journalists.

Of these events Vietnam created the most media interest, and reports concentrated on the fall of the South Vietnamese army as the rout proceeded all the way to the jewel of Saigon. The patriot leaders in the south exhorted their people to fight to the last to hold off the communists while they filled their private planes and yachts with loot and made good their exit from the country they had drained for so many years. President Thieu was reported in *Time* magazine to have shipped out two to three tons of gold before he departed from Saigon in a plane supplied by the Americans. Good old South Vietnamese corruption and free enterprise at work right to the very end. I sat in the broken down make-shift bar of Lim's hotel in Darwin watching small waves wash in on the coast and didn't really give a damn. I knew it had all been lies from my first few months in Vietnam, but now at least the sham was exposed and perhaps we would be the better for it. Wrong again. The apologists came forward with If we had done this, and If we had done that. You can't make a politi-

cian change his vision, or make him admit he was wrong. But it was over, it was over. At least that could be said, and I didn't care who was right or wrong, the killing had stopped.

The next year I bought a house in Brisbane, but was still moving from job to job, mainly on construction work. In 1980 I realised with alarm I was almost 40. If I was going to do anything with my life it had to be now. Higher education interested me and I had always been conscious of my lack of basic educational skills. I decided to study at night for the Senior Certificate. It was quite a challenge as I had left school at 14 in Grade 9. After the examinations I was accepted at the University of Queensland.

The three years of my degree were the most satisfying I had ever experienced. Majoring in Government, History and English gave me the opportunity to examine Vietnam in more detail than I ever had before. I was determined to take an academic stance and view the whole thing from an objective angle, standing outside and looking in as an observer. What a strange experience that was. The more I looked, the murkier it became. I kept telling myself to leave it and get on with my life. The monkey on my back was becoming a baboon. Instead of letting it go, the thought of writing the story of the battle in the Long Tan rubber plantation began to interest me. The extra workload made things difficult finishing my degree as there was a lot of research on the battle to do before the manuscript stage. I pushed on with the idea and finished the book two months after my degree.

During this period I was introduced to a Brisbane film producer, Evan Ham, who specialised in documentaries on South-East Asia. He became interested in doing a project with me on the Long Tan battle and began talking about a return to Vietnam.

He also wanted to do a story on Kampuchea. Because of the Vietnamese invasion of that country in 1979 he had to deal through the Vietnamese in order to get there. When he received permission to enter Kampuchea, he had first to visit Hanoi to explain what he was doing. At that time very little was known about how Vietnam had been faring since the war

ended ten years before — very few Westerners had been there. Evan returned to Australia with amazing footage of Hanoi and was due to return there the following year.

He suggested it may be possible to get me a visa to go and talk to the Vietnamese about the idea of a documentary on the battle at Long Tan while he went filming in Kampuchea. The thought of being able to return to Vietnam almost had me a nervous wreck just thinking about it.

I waited for the visa for over six weeks and nothing happened. By the time Evan was due to leave it still had not come through. When he left I was mentally and physically exhausted from the thought of going back to that strange and beautiful country.

Four days later Evan rang me from Bangkok to say that my visa was at the Vietnamese Embassy there. “Get on the first plane and perhaps we will meet in Hanoi,” he said. I couldn’t believe it. Hanoi. The word sent shivers up my spine. My bags were packed and on the Saturday morning I was at Brisbane airport waiting to board the Thai International flight to Bangkok and then on to Hanoi.

Hanoi, 1986

The plane came out of the clouds not far from Hanoi and I looked in fascination at the scene below. The day was grey and dull and the clouds hung low. We were descending over a large circular plain ringed by dark, blue-grey, wild-looking mountains, the tops of which were covered by cloud. There were rice paddies as far as the eye could see, but, being the dry season, they were brown and stark. The bunds stood out, making irregular patterns across the landscape. The brown colour was broken in places by bright green, where paddies were planted with young rice. The numerous villages, about 2 kilometres apart, were typically surrounded by trees. It was hard to judge the size of the plain but it must have been 50 kilometres across. The area was densely populated and would have provided no cover during the war. I shivered, thinking of the American pilots who had been shot down there. There was absolutely no way they could ever have escaped capture if they survived the crash.

We came straight in for the landing and raced up the strip while the engines screamed under the strain. As the plane slowed down, about 40 open concrete bays flashed by with perhaps 20 MIG fighters in them. The planes looked old but still deadly. We stopped at the end of the runway, prior to turning. The scene was dank and dismal and there seemed to be no activity on the airfield at all. For an international air-

port, conditions were very basic. Mounds of dirt and material lay around as if construction work had begun and then been abandoned. As the plane turned and slowly taxied to the terminal, we passed an old bulldozer that would have been a museum piece in Australia. There was no one riding on it, but the engine was slowly ticking over.

As the aircraft approached the terminal, several people came out to meet it. They were dressed in ill-fitting grey uniforms and grey peaked caps like the old Brisbane tram conductors. No one seemed to be in any hurry and there was no laughter among them. When the plane came to a halt, four black Czechoslovakian cars cruised up and a Vietnamese woman aged about 40 got out of one of them. Her clothes provided the only colour in sight — she wore a red and yellow *ao dai* (traditional Vietnamese dress) with white pants. A delegation from Indonesia alighted from the first-class cabin of the plane, were warmly welcomed by the woman and her party, and whisked away. The rest of us then began to disembark.

Strung out across the tarmac, passengers walked unhurriedly to the terminal, a grey concrete building devoid of paint, decoration or amenities. There were forms to fill out and then the passport check. The customs inspection was done thoroughly. Filling in duplicate forms took up a lot of time as there was no carbon paper. The next hurdle was the money. I had been told to take only American dollars and to make sure I had plenty of small bills, as there would often be no change available. This created a problem as it all had to be counted out. A check is made of a visitor's expenses upon departure to see whether the money has been spent legally.

As I was working through the procedures, a good-looking Vietnamese man pushed his way through the small crowd and stood beside me. He introduced himself as Dy, pronounced Zee, and proceeded to help me through the arrival formalities. Dy was the representative from the Hanoi Foreign Press Centre, the organisation that arranged the trip for me so that I could research the Long Tan documentary film. He was wearing a pair of faded Levis and a green Army Surplus

jacket, under which was a turtle-neck sweater. On looking around, I noticed all the Vietnamese were all wearing sweaters as well as jackets. The temperature being around 18 degrees, I felt comfortable in a shirt and light sportscoat. Not so the Vietnamese, who appeared to think it was a very cold day.

When we emerged outside, it was still overcast, the low clouds exuding moisture. Dy introduced me to a driver and we boarded a black Soviet-built car. The road was a narrow ribbon of bitumen. There were very few cars on it but a steady stream of bicycles and bullock carts. None of the people looked prosperous — and all wore jackets and sweaters.

Dy was a quiet, studious man of 38 who ran the staff of the Foreign Press Centre. He spoke softly and his English was perfect; I felt at ease with him. In 1973 he had been in Saigon with the Viet Cong delegation which, along with a North Vietnamese delegation, was monitoring violations of the 1973 Paris peace agreements; the leader of the Viet Cong delegation was the well-known and respected southern VC general, Tran Van Tra. A corner of Tan Son Nhut airfield was reserved as a diplomatic base for the delegations. This facility was named Camp Davis, after the first American combat soldier to die in Vietnam, Specialist First Class James Davis (1961). The Vietnamese, however, had nicknamed it Camp David after the US Presidential retreat in Maryland, where Nixon had met Brezhnev in June 1973.

It must have been a strange life for them at that time, surrounded by enemy who were waiting for a chance to kill them. General Tran Van Tra, in his *History of the Bulwark B2 Theatre*, records that his party would not sleep in the buildings erected for them by the Americans because of the fear of listening devices. Tra brought in experts to search the building, who uncovered microphones hidden in ingenious places. His sense of humour showed when he wrote: "We didn't know whether they had been put there by the Americans or the puppets, or put there as a practical joke by carpenters who were also electronics experts." He also records that the Americans and South Vietnamese tried to intimidate them with helicopters and tanks and then to bribe

them with money and “pretty girls”. Dy spent the best part of a year at Camp Davis. After the fall of the south in 1975, Dy continued his formal education which the war had interrupted.

The driver hurried the car along toward Hanoi while in between conversation with Dy I took in the sights of this country that had become so important to me. I had only ever been to the south of Vietnam and had heard stories of how the northern people were so different from the southerners in social and personal attitudes. I had read that the climate and the economy had made the northerners more austere and thrifty than the southern Vietnamese who lived more for today than tomorrow. I don't know what I had been expecting in the north, but it was certainly not the poor and underdeveloped landscape I now saw, with the majority of people riding on bicycles and bullock carts. This was the country which had forced the Americans, with all their massive logistics and technology, to withdraw. Yet here they were, a peasant society with no cars and narrow bumpy roads. Perhaps in Hanoi I would see the signs of the industrial base that westerners assume is essential to successful warfare.

If I was about to see an industrial base, it was certainly well camouflaged — there were few signs of progress along the way. The houses were basic and the people had an air of struggle in their bearing and on their faces. Whenever the car had to pull off the road to let other vehicles past, they were always old rusting trucks, held together by pieces of wire and spewing diesel fumes.

There seemed to be some kind of building going on in places, judging by the small brick kilns along the road, but all were of cottage industry proportions. We turned on to a new road and up ahead loomed a large new bridge. It crossed the Red River, a river like the Burdekin in North Queensland in the dry season, only five times bigger. The sand on the river bed stretched several kilometres across, and down the middle flowed a small, slow-moving stream.

A kilometre or two downstream stood another bridge, its buckled, broken superstructure framed against the sky. Dy

followed my gaze and explained that it was the Long Bien bridge, the main bridge out of Hanoi during the war. The Americans bombed it repeatedly and this sad broken shell was all that remained. Impossible to repair, it was now used only for foot traffic and the occasional train. Dy laughingly remembered the Americans' efforts to destroy it. The Vietnamese had seldom used it for moving supplies during the war because they built a pontoon bridge just a little further downstream where we were crossing. They would dismantle the pontoon bridge during daylight hours, rebuilt it at night and run enormous amounts of material over. During daylight hours they ran empty trucks over the Long Bien bridge and repaired it ceaselessly in order to deceive the American satellite pictures. I recently came across a book by some Americans who were in Hanoi during the war which also tells the story of the pontoon bridge.

On the other side of the Red River we were on the outskirts of Hanoi but the atmosphere did not change. Houses, many of them two or three storeys, fronted directly on to the streets. They were unkempt and unpainted. The streets were full of people moving unhurriedly. On the footpaths many small tables and chairs were where people drank coffee or beer while children played in and out among them. There seemed to be many small workshops scarcely bigger than the houses. They may have been houses converted to workshops.

In Hanoi proper the roads began to overflow with people and bicycles with here and there a vehicle, usually a truck or bus. The buses ranged from old relics to large new ones. The streets were wide and very clean. On the main avenues there were no stalls but on the footpaths in the sidestreets there were, with people selling all kinds of goods, and fruit and vegetables. We turned into a wide avenue with large trees and parked outside the Thong Nhat Hotel.

The building was once an old French hotel and must have been beautiful in its heyday. In the foyer I noticed the high ceilings. There were coffee tables and armchairs, and several large ceiling fans turned in a desultory fashion. Nothing seemed to move in a hurry and most of the people in the foyer

— a diverse group of Western Europeans, Palestinians and Russians — were noticeably lethargic. They seemed to be just waiting for something to happen.

Carrying my bags up the stairs and along the corridor was an adventure in itself. Cracked paint was peeling from the walls and the linoleum strip along the passage was old and buckled. The large door to my room intimidated me to say the least. What awaited me on the other side? I pushed the large key into the large lock, turned it, and slowly the door creaked open. The room was musty but better than I was expecting. The floors were bare and the boards black with age. The two beds each had mosquito nets. The windows were closed, as were the storm shutters outside. I pushed open the shutters and let in the little bit of greyness. On one side of the room was an old cupboard with drawers at the bottom. There were also two chairs and a writing desk, on which was a kerosene lamp and a thermos of warm water.

In the bathroom was a huge old enamel bath, chipped, peeling, and yellow with age and neglect. The bath had no side covering and the feet reminded me of ducks. The floor tiles were all chipped and stained. I searched desperately but in vain for some soap. Ring the desk on the old crank telephone: No, sorry, no soap. By now I was starting to feel cold and decided to get the shower over with before nightfall. Off came the clothes and on went the shower. A lukewarm trickle spattered out of the shower hose. As I tried to splash the water on to me the rose came away from the wall and finished up in the bath at my feet.

I was glad that I had brought my sportscoat as I needed it. This really was a shock to me as this was Vietnam, wasn't it, the country where I had spent over a year and had never needed more than a shirt and only ever showered in cold water. It may have been the same country but it was certainly different here in the north.

I went back down to the foyer where nothing had changed. Dy and the driver were at a table, looking bored, and I joined them not knowing what to do next. Buy some beer, I thought, and walked to the bar past a Russian and a Palestinian, to

whom I nodded but received no acknowledgment.

The driver, as it turned out, was a very interesting man. His name was Dang and he had been in the army as a driver during the war. He had been guarding a group of American prisoners in Son Tay (North Vietnam) when an American rescue mission was mounted in 1970. Dang did not know whether the Vietnamese expected the attack or not, but the prisoners had been shifted from the camp several days before hand. They were in Hanoi at the time, probably to persuade the Americans to end their massive bombing of that city. Dang was still alive, thanks to the move, but all 55 guards at the Son Tay prison were killed in the attack.

The raid itself was a disaster. According to American sources it had been carefully planned but their intelligence section knew the prisoners had been shifted yet the raid still went ahead. A 56-member Special Forces team had been especially flown from America to Thailand and then across Laos to Son Tay, 37 kilometres from Hanoi. They had gone in with five helicopters and others in support. There were also several C130 aircraft as flare ships, and navy fighters from aircraft carriers stationed in the Gulf of Tonkin flew on diversionary attacks.

Several of the helicopters crashed on the way in and by the time the crews of the crashed choppers were aboard those remaining, there was hardly any room left for the prisoners — had they been there. The operation was a shambles.

Dang had also been the driver for Wilfred Burchett, the Australian journalist who since 1963 had been reporting from Hanoi and with the Viet Cong in the south. When Burchett made a film in Kampuchea, after the Vietnamese invaded that country, Dang had been his driver during the preparatory shoot. At the time of the filming proper, Dang had another job in Hanoi and so did not accompany Burchett. He was lucky, because Burchett was ambushed by Khmer Rouge guerrillas. He only escaped because the driver, himself badly wounded, managed to keep the car moving. Burchett, though unharmed, was extremely shaken by the attack. Dang, too, was shaken when he heard what had happened, as he did not

relish the thought of being in the hands of Pol Pot's butchers.

After several beers we felt quite merry and relaxed. There was some talk about why I was in Hanoi, but Dy preferred to leave that side to his director from the Press Centre, whom I would meet the next day. This was okay by me as I had not yet caught up emotionally on what was happening to me. I had to keep reminding myself that I was actually in Hanoi. This was it — home of the legendary Ho Chi Minh, jewel of the French Empire, headquarters of the Japanese occupation army. How many armies had marched across that vast plain of ricefields ringed by the dark, forbidding mountains into the tiny city of Hanoi? So many momentous events in only 40 years — the French, the Japanese, the Nationalist Chinese, the British, and back to the French again ending in their ignominious withdrawal in 1954. And then what the Vietnamese called “The American War” began. The small, wiry, determined people had refused to be dominated and spilled their blood all over their country. It is irrelevant to try to attribute right and wrong in the struggle. It is the struggle itself that is important and these people had been through the fire. The sense of history and of struggle was everywhere and the people had accepted me quite civilly. This had been my hope. Here I was drinking Japanese beer with two people I had once thought of as my enemy.

Several Europeans and their interpreters came in and Dy called them over to join the table. One was an American photographer, Bill Crawford, and the other was an English journalist, Nigel Holloway, from *The Economist*, based in Singapore. Bill Crawford was working on a coffee-table book about Hanoi and Nigel was doing a story for his paper on the Vietnamese economy.

They joined us and more beer arrived. Ours was the only table which was at all good-humoured — the other people in the foyer were all still waiting for something to happen. Bill's interpreter, Quang, was a real character, who drank beer like an Australian wharfie. Beneath his happy-go-lucky exterior, I suspect he was one of the real “hard” men I met in Vietnam. Like Dang, he had been with the American prisoners at Son

Tay and also in Kampuchea with Dang as Burchett's interpreter. Quang spoke very good English and claimed to speak Russian and Spanish. He had been to the Soviet Union several times, and also to Cuba, Angola and Mozambique, so he was a well-travelled revolutionary. Of course he said nothing about what he had been doing in these places and I was not going to ask.

We arranged to meet later that evening in the foyer, when Dy would take us to a restaurant for dinner. There was over an hour to spare before the agreed time so I asked Dy if it would be okay for me to go for a walk. He smiled quizzically and said, "Of course". Were there any restrictions that I should observe, I asked, and he laughingly replied no, I could do whatever I liked. By this time I was beginning to feel rather sheepish, recalling all the stories I had heard back home about totalitarian states.

I walked down the road toward the lake I had sighted on the way in. The lake is named the Returning Sword Lake and its story is not unlike the myth of King Arthur and the sword Excalibur. According to legend, Le Loi, a man of lowly birth, had been rowing on the lake meditating on how to rid Vietnam of the Chinese invaders, when out of the water appeared a giant turtle carrying a sword. The turtle gave the sword to Le Loi who went on from there to form an army. After a ten year struggle he succeeded in driving out the Chinese Ming Dynasty in 1428. Le Loi declared himself emperor and so began the reign of the second Le dynasty. Le Loi, however, because of the years of war, had forgotten about the origin of the sword he treasured. One day while he was out on the lake in a boat the turtle appeared again. Le Loi was so startled that he lunged at the turtle with the magic sword, whereupon the turtle took the sword and disappeared under the water. Le Loi was left to ponder the signs from heaven, the will of god, and the nature of man.

The number of people cycling along the road by this time was enormous — bicycles seemed to be coming by the thousands as people rode home from work. It was quite eerie standing on the footpath at the main intersection because

there was hardly any sound, only the continual swishing of bicycle tyres on the wet road. I had never seen so many bicycles. Every now and then a very old, small motorbike came down the road, upsetting the rhythm of the cyclists.

Wandering aimlessly up one of the tree-lined streets, I cast around for a way to dispose of my cigarette butt — the streets being so tidy. A little further up the road two old ladies were sweeping the gutters, so I waited until I reached their pushcart to throw my butt away.

Everywhere there were people, all of them wearing old but clean clothes. They all seemed to live life at the same level, which was quite poor, although there were no beggars anywhere. Old gentlemen drove rickety old cyclos, the pedal-powered taxis, some carrying as many as four people and others loaded up with bags of produce. It was an amazing sight and still no sign of an industrial sector. I knew there was no industrial base, how could there be in this impoverished society. Vietnam's strength was not its industrial resources but its determined people.

As I walked down the main street to the hotel, some shops had newspapers pinned up on boards for people to read. A crowd was gathered around them and again I thought of how much we take for granted in Australia.

The hotel was bewilderingly noisy when I arrived back. As I entered the foyer, trooping past me were about 30 couples heading for the hotel dining room. They were in high spirits, laughing and joking. I found out later they were Russian tourists on a vacation cruise who had come for dinner from their liner at Haiphong. By the time we left to go to dinner ourselves they were skolling vodka. So much for President Reagan's "Evil Empire", I thought. They looked no different to me from a group of Australian factory workers, except the women were a lot larger.

Bill and Nigel were in the foyer and when Dy arrived it was dark. We moved out to the street, where the lights glowed wanly. Electric power is so scarce in Hanoi that dull street lights are separated by great stretches of blackness. Rain pat-

tered on the street, increasing the swish-swish of the bicycles, none of which had lights.

We pulled up outside a house and Dy led us inside and up a small flight of stairs. The restaurant, the best in Hanoi, had only one room about five metres by four. The floor was bare and there were only four tables. A group of Palestinians sat at one and at another was a Belgian man whom I met later and an attractive Vietnamese girl. Dy led the way to a table and we ordered some beer. It was Hanoi beer, which comes in small dark bottles with no label. Dy laughingly described it as "Hanoi No Name". The food was delicious: a large bowl of onion soup to share and three crabs, followed by a steamboat at our table, of fish pieces, noodles and vegetables.

The meal started out in a light-hearted vein but Nigel, the economist, began talking earnestly to Dy about the problems of the Vietnamese economy and how Vietnam should be travelling a different road. Bill, Quang, the driver and I decided to keep out of the conversation and concentrated on our food and the "Hanoi No Name". By the time we were due to leave we were in good spirits, but it was sobering to hear Dy say to Nigel in his calm measured tone, "We cannot afford to look at 'if'. We had no choices. The choices were imposed on us." The words struck home to me like the blow of a sledge-hammer and have stayed with me since. So many times since have I heard variations on those words spoken in Vietnam.

Rain was still falling when we left for the hotel, but there were fewer people on the streets now. Near the hotel, we heard the sound of a jazz band echoing along the street. It was quite the last thing one expected to hear in Hanoi at 9 p.m. on a rainy night. Apparently, a rehearsal by a small orchestra had turned into an impromptu jam session.

The booming of a bell woke me at six in the morning. The day was again gloomy and heavily overcast and I wandered down to the dining room feeling wretched — too much wet weather or perhaps too much "Hanoi No Name". For the first time I had real Vietnamese coffee. I was expecting a pot, but out came my own dripolater. The volume of coffee was

small, only several mouthfuls, but so strong. The one small cup would have made three normal cups to my taste.

Dy arrived. The director could not see me until later in the day, so Dy had arranged for me to see some of Hanoi. The car took us along Dien Bien Phu Avenue to Ho Chi Minh's sombre mausoleum. This is set in its own gardens with a parade ground in the front. Queues of people, many of them schoolchildren, waited to go inside. I felt uneasy when Dy took me to the front of the line and we started to go up the stairs into the building. It is a huge structure similar to the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, only with more colour. At the entrance a soldier in dress uniform made sure no cameras were taken; he also reminded people to remove their headgear.

Inside there is a long flight of steps covered with a red carpet. The stairs rise slowly, adding to the solemnity. At the top and after two right turns is the glass-encased body of Ho Chi Minh, about three metres from the viewer. I don't know what I expected to feel or even if I know what I felt. It was without doubt an awe-inspiring sight. Here was the body of the man whose image I had seen on a thousand posters and books during the twenty years since my days as a soldier. For many who served in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh epitomised the war. He did for me. Ho Chi Minh, scholar, soldier, revolutionary — to some a hero, to others a devil incarnate. Whatever one's view of the man who died in 1969, his place in history is assured.

The place where the body lies is a metre lower than the walkway. The glass case which contains it is raised — in relation to the walkway it is about knee high — so the people filing past look down slightly. A blanket covers the body from the waist down and the hands lie across the stomach. It is as if Ho has only recently died or is perhaps asleep. The thin wispy beard and the thinning grey hair remain unchanged. The fingernails are neatly manicured. Children who had been chattering quietly on the way up the stairs were immediately hushed. The line does not stop but moves slowly around the body to the other side, past two soldiers in dress uniform with

white gloves and glistening stainless steel bayonets attached to their rifles. As we moved out of the room and down other stairs the children were obviously shaken by the experience. Perhaps not only the children.

The next stop for me was Ho's house on the banks of a small lake in the grounds of the French governor's residence. The story is told that when the French left and the Viet Minh forces marched victoriously into Hanoi in 1954 it was thought that Ho would live there. However, when he walked inside the building, he said he could not stand the smell of colonial power. He had a house built at the back of the grounds by the lake and lived there until he died in 1969, at the age, it is thought, of 79.

The house is almost a colonial Queenslander, but on stilts and open underneath but with only two rooms above. A set of stairs leads up to a verandah and the rooms lead off this. The first is the bedroom, where there is a bed, made up with the mosquito net down, one corner turned up in anticipation. There are books, clothes and other belongings on display. The other room is a study with a bookcase and desk. A typewriter has a page in it and beside it is an open book with a pair of glasses. As in the mausoleum the children speak quietly, reverentially. Fifteen metres from the house is the lake and a set of steps lead into the water. There is a bucket of dry fish food for the visitors to feed the carp — supposedly Ho's form of relaxation. The carp are huge, multi-coloured fish and one wriggled right up on to the top step, completely out of the water, when I threw in some food.

The rain still drizzled but there were now glints of blue in the sky. The route to the War Memorial was the wide Dien Bien Phu Avenue, off to which were many largish parks. In Lenin Park there was of course a statue of Lenin holding his lapel in his classic oratorical pose.

The War Memorial is a place of fascinating memorabilia. Because of Vietnam's history of struggle only a massive building could do justice to the story of the last 60 years alone. The building and area is nowhere near large enough for this. Inside the main gate a MIG fighter plane stands on a

concrete base four metres high. On its nose are painted 14 stars, reportedly one for every kill attributed to the plane although it was flown by different pilots. Around the base of the MIG is the wreckage of some of the American planes shot down over Hanoi during the war. Behind it is a SAM missile and over to one side is the huge watch-tower of the ancient citadel. The tower, made of ancient bricks, is probably 30 metres high. There was a soldier in the tower the day I visited. During the American war a guard in the tower rang a huge bell to warn the people of Hanoi that American bombers were coming.

Inside the War Memorial is the tank that broke through the Independence Palace gates in Saigon in 1975. This sequence was filmed by the now legendary Australian cameraman Neil Davis; it is one of the most memorable pieces of footage of the war. The tank, after it had broken down the gate, was left hanging on a gatepost. One of the crew clambered out and came running past Davis carrying a Viet Cong flag on a pole. Dy, who knew Davis well before he was killed in Thailand in 1985 during a bloody coup attempt, said that every time Davis came to Hanoi he wanted to see "his baby".

After lunch I met the director of the Press Centre, as arranged and learned that my trip had been a waste of time as far as the documentary film went. Long Tan was an insignificant battle in the overall war and very few people in Hanoi were even aware of it. The Press Centre had been under the impression that I would present them with technical details, but all I was qualified to do as far a film went was the research and the writing. However, the director suggested that in order not to waste the trip I would like perhaps to go to the south for a few days and depart for Bangkok from there. This was a most acceptable idea to me, so it was arranged that I should fly to Ho Chi Minh City in two days' time. In the meantime Dy would show me around Hanoi a bit more, if I liked. I liked very much.

The next morning Bill Crawford was going to Bach Mai hospital to take photographs, and Dy and I went along with him. The first place we stopped at was Kham Thien, an area

of Hanoi that was carpet-bombed by the American Air Force in 1972 during what is now known as the Christmas Bombing. Operation Linebacker Two began on 18 December 1972 and lasted for 11 days. Huge B52 bombers and other aircraft flew almost 3000 missions over Hanoi and Haiphong in that short time. Stanley Karnow in *Vietnam: A History* reports that the Americans dropped over forty thousand tons of bombs during the operation. The press in America called the bombing "savage and senseless" and Pope Paul VI said that the bombing of Hanoi was causing him daily grief. The official number killed, according to Vietnamese sources, was 1320 in Hanoi and 300 in Haiphong, despite the fact that the majority of the people had been moved from Hanoi to the mountains. Karnow, although excusing the bombing and saying that it was not deliberately aimed at civilians went to Kham Thien and interviewed survivors. By his account over two hundred died there. The whole area was completely demolished.

Kham Thien has been rebuilt, but like everything in Hanoi it looks old and bedraggled. A block of land has been set aside which is now a shrine in memory of those killed. Inside the unroofed area is a statue of a woman holding a dead child in her arms. The floor is tile and concrete and people from the area donate their time and what money they can spare to look after it. There were two elderly men volunteers tidying up when we arrived. Another old and gentle man, officially the caretaker, lost all his family during the bombing. He lives on the site in a small building on one side of the square. Now old and so frail that he can hardly get around, he is brought food and presents by the people and is treated with respect. It was a soul-destroying experience to talk with these people and to realise that they do not understand why Hanoi was bombed or why the Americans caused such death and destruction. The world of international politics means nothing to people whose world revolves around family and the immediate neighbourhood. To say the Americans were helping South Vietnam means even less to them — even the people in the south during the war said that there was, and always would be, only one Vietnam. General Khanh in 1964 publicly talked

of “the march north” to unify the country, much to the embarrassment of the Americans. So what rationale can an Australian who was part of what they see as the occupying army offer these people? Nothing. There is none.

Bach Mai hospital was also quite a shock. The conditions are not good and everything is in short supply, except patients. The hospital was almost destroyed during the war. Being at least twelve kilometres from the centre of Hanoi, it should never have received bomb damage. The doctors, staff and patients were inadvertently helped by the French builders of the hospital back in the 1920s when they incorporated a system of underground tunnels. The tunnels had nothing to do with bombing or ground attacks but were a sop to the sensitivities of French patients in the hospital who did not have to witness the corpses of French soldiers being taken away. During the bombing the tunnels served as bomb shelters for the patients and the operating theatre was also moved underground.

Dr Khoi, who was in charge of the kidney unit, took us to see his department, where there was one old kidney dialysis machine. He said the hospital has six, but only four were working — the machines were old and it was impossible to get spare parts. In 1986 there were only 25 dialysis machines in the whole of Vietnam, and at least 9000 people were known to need treatment. Of these only about 5 per cent had any chance of receiving aid from the limited resources. The staff, in white uniforms, try to do their best but they are hopelessly under-equipped and besieged by the sick.

Next we met Doctor Cau, who took us to the operating theatre. The veterinary surgeon in Cunnamulla has better facilities than we saw in the operating theatre of Bach Mai. A single light hangs over the operating table and the stainless steel around it is rusting due to the humidity. The operating theatre is underground and Doctor Cau became anxious after about 10 minutes. He was working there during the Christmas Bombing when part of the hospital above was hit. There was nothing for him to do but continue working and hope that the building did not collapse on them. The hospital could not be

evacuated because of the large number of patients already there and the bombing casualties who poured in seeking aid. Thirteen years later Doctor Cau still could not stay in this area of the hospital for long. He started to wring his hands and became very agitated while waiting for Bill to finish taking photographs. In the end he had to excuse himself for ten minutes. The Christmas Bombing, the Christmas Bombing — in Hanoi the words brought instant fear to the faces of those who lived through it. After all those years sweat still breaks out on the lips of many people and their demeanour changes as soon as the words are mentioned.

Because of the fear and the horrifying scale of the operation in Hanoi, I asked Dy if I could obtain photos of the bombing. Yes, he said, by all means. When he took me to the Photo Archives to look through them I was sorry I had asked. He brought me four huge photo albums — and I mean huge — and told me he would have reprints made of any I wanted. The horror, the terror and the futility of the exercise hit me from the first page. By the time I had been through one book I was sickened and emotionally distraught, and I am not someone who has not seen the casualties of war. After the first book I said that I had selected enough photos already. Dy looked at me with his sad little smile and slowly shook his head, “No, no, Terry. This is what you asked for, this is what you have”. Trapped in an emotional whirlpool I looked back at him pleadingly but he refused to relent. “Perhaps this is your penance, my friend, the way of loosening the monkey you told me you thought was on your back.” As I looked at him standing there like a schoolmaster gently chastising a student, I thought he just may have been right.

Several days later I was at the airport waiting for a flight to Ho Chi Minh City. Still the clouds hung over the Vietnamese landscape as I sat among the other passengers waiting to go south. I was pleased to be leaving Hanoi because of the lack of facilities and the bad weather. But in other ways this poor, austere city with its stoic and courageous people had let loose feelings I had not realised I possessed. I wanted to shout that I

was sorry, but, really, what would that mean to them, or me. Just another round-eyed bleeding heart.

As the Air Viet flight lifted off into the low-hanging clouds I stared with my nose pressed against the glass and tried to capture glimpses of some of the places I had seen. Hanoi — where the word had once sent a shiver up my spine, it now enveloped me with a great longing. Hanoi before meant soldiers marching to the clash of cymbals and the beat of drums; and Vietnam, an aggressive nation intent only on killing and war. Now Hanoi meant the great plain of ricefields and the looming mountains; the children playing hopscotch in the rain; the old lady in the streetstall offering me a cake; the old man at the suburban shrine at Kham Thien shaking my hand and asking the interpreter if I was an American pilot; the body of Ho Chi Minh lying serenely and for eternity in the mausoleum. Most of all, Hanoi now meant people, laughing, crying, loving. It no longer symbolised alien ideologies or ideals that we in our arrogance thought we could not live beside in Asia. When Vietnam invades Australia, however old I am I will be the first to volunteer. Until that time I will always feel a deep regret that the Australian people allowed themselves to become involved in the destruction of that country. Whatever the rights and wrongs of Vietnam from the Vietnamese point of view, we had no right to interfere in the internal politics of a sovereign state.

That extremely poor and decrepit little city of Hanoi had destroyed any arrogance I may have had on account of the “superiority” of Western culture. I thought of the people at that moment out in the rain, labouring under the weight of their dead, and looking to a better future that is nowhere in sight, even for the most optimistic. Dy’s words returned to me, “We cannot afford to look at ‘if’. We had no choice. The choices were imposed on us”. They reverberated in my head as the clouds came in and Hanoi and its struggling populace disappeared from sight.

Ho Chi Minh City, 1986

As the plane climbed into the heavy cloud I turned to Binh, the interpreter from the Press Centre who was to be my companion for the next few days. A studious man of 24 who wore thick-framed glasses, Binh was gentle and reserved. He had been 12 years old at the time of the Christmas Bombing. His father had sent the family to the countryside but stayed on himself in Hanoi. Binh remembered the time as a great adventure which quickly lost its appeal. He and his family left Hanoi in trucks and were taken into the hills where camps were established for them with the village people. The family missed their father and there was no news from Hanoi. They could watch the bombing from their camp and at night could see the fires burning in the city. The thing he remembered most was the kindness of the village people who unselfishly shared everything with them.

Some time into the journey the cloud began to thin and the landscape was visible in places. The central highlands were wild and rugged and appeared from this height to be almost uninhabited — there was no sign of any road, but what appeared to be villages were dotted here and there.

On a plateau area off to the west, appeared a town that looked small and lonely high up in the surrounding emptiness. Binh followed my gaze and said, “Ban Me Thuot”. This made me look again. Ban Me Thuot is a very important

town for the Vietnamese. One of the arms of the Ho Chi Minh trail passed close by, so many people from the north would have held memories of it. In 1975 General Dung launched the final offensive from near Ban Me Thuot, and there is no doubt that the fall of the town in 1975 was the beginning of the end for the regime in the south. Ban Me Thuot could be described as the windpipe of South Vietnam. In enemy hands, it meant a lightning strike could be mounted between the highlands and the sea, cutting South Vietnam in two. This had always been an American nightmare. General Dung struck Ban Me Thuot like a thunderclap on 6 March 1975. Three divisions supported by tanks overwhelmed the defences and left the generals in Saigon in a panic. The rout continued and 55 days later Saigon capitulated. Americans and panic-stricken Vietnamese who had managed to flee Saigon in its last hours watched from on board the heaving ships of the mighty Seventh Fleet as 30 years of American involvement in Indochina ended ignominiously.

South of Ban Me Thuot the country became visibly inhabited and roads and villages could be seen. The terrain was still hilly and there were no rice paddies. When the ricefields appeared, they splashed colour and imposed strange contours on the terrain. From there the colour became green, green, and more green. All shades of green. The towns were now closer together and below me was the Vietnam I remembered. Here was the sun and the bush and the bright green paddy fields, and the people moving in all directions, pushing for every spare inch of land.

As the plane began to descend, Binh pulled at my sleeve to indicate the window on the other side of the aircraft. A huge deserted airstrip could be seen below and Binh said, "Bien Hoa". I looked again and there was nothing there except a wide pot-holed tarmac, black and mournful with disuse. I thought back to the time twenty years ago when it was crowded with planes, helicopters and troops, and barracks were scattered all over the area. The memory of the big dark U2 spyplanes that were officially not in Vietnam flashed in front of my eyes as we left the broken scar behind.

Thick green paddies intertwined across the landscape, with no patch of land unused. The grass-thatched cottages backed right up on to the paddy fields and palm trees grew in profusion and confusion: large clumps, small clumps, and some, waving luxurious foliage, standing stately and alone.

The plane swept in a wide circle over Ho Chi Minh City. The Saigon River was like a snaking serpent below us, weaving and bending and rippling its scales as it basked in the sunshine. The river was full to overflowing and scores of ships lined the sides — large, medium, tankers, cargo ships, gunboats, barges. The opening phrase from Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* kept running through my mind, the drawn-out "Sigh . . . gone 1968". But this was 1986 Ho Chi Minh City, not 1968 Saigon, and the war had been over for me for almost twenty years, and for Vietnam for almost eleven. Below, on the wide tree-lined avenues human traffic flowed along as if drawn by a current.

Tan Son Nhut airport appeared, wide and clean with large areas of grassy parkland around one side. The plane came straight in and screamed to a halt. The pilot had to be an ex fighter pilot to have made a landing like that. The aircraft taxied quickly to the terminal and we passed a concrete-block fence with old planes on the other side. I went to see them later. They were the planes and helicopters the Americans left behind when Saigon fell and there are hundreds of them. It is eerie to walk along the rows of rotting metal with pieces of lagging blowing softly in the breeze. Air America, proclaims several of the planes. Air America, the covert airline of the CIA. What did these planes do? Whom did they carry? What stories these old rusting hulks could tell. The Vietnamese kept as many of them operable as possible, but the ones at Tan Son Nhut have been cannibalized for spare parts.

The plane stopped and the passengers strode purposefully across to the terminal — it was quite different from the landing in Hanoi. A small crowd had gathered to meet the passengers and a man came forward to greet us. Binh knew him well — his name was Chinh. Chinh quickly moved us out of the airport and into a small blue Datsun. The car was quite

new and spotless and we appreciated the air-conditioning as the day was quite hot. What a change from Hanoi. The people all wore light, brightly colored clothes and laughter and good humour abounded. A change too, from the Tan Son Nhut I had seen in 1966.

The drive into the centre of the city was full of the sound of traffic and the smell of Vietnam. There was movement in every direction. Small motorbikes carrying whole families spluttered along the roads, weaving and darting as quickly as their tiny engines and heavy load allowed. Many of the cycles were new and painted bright blue. Small cars and taxis moved as fast as they could through the endless stream of traffic on the roads. The trees lining the avenues branched out above the traffic providing shade from the sun. Young women were dressed in high heels and attractive light pantsuits, and many wore fashionable caps, their straight jet-black hair hanging down below waist-level. They rode on their motorbikes with a nonchalant air, indifferent to passing comments from the young men.

We passed the Independence Palace and eventually reached Tu Do street. It is now a wide commercial street full of shops, restaurants, antique dealers and tailors. There were no bars anymore. And no bar girls on the street tempting drunken Australian and American soldiers inside. No massive US military police (MPs) prowling the footpaths, slapping huge batons into the palms of their hands and waiting for the chance to hit out at an unsuspecting skull. Sitting in a bar in this street I had watched two huge MPs, one white and one black, come in. The American servicemen had been quite boisterous, but when the MPs walked in the silence was heavy. They shouldered through the door and sauntered down the narrow bar, their helmets pulled low over their eyes, and their heavy batons held at the wrist by a thick leather thong. They walked up to the end of the bar, turned and sauntered back — just letting the boys know they were around. The sighs of relief when they left sounded like a mini cyclone. To see the effect they had on the soldiers made one believe the horror stories about the American Military Police Stockades.

Tu Do was now just a bustling Asian street with people going about their business unmolested. It ends at a T intersection, across from which is the Saigon River. The street names have all been changed and Tu Do is now Dong Khoi street. I stayed at the hotel overlooking the river, once the Majestic, now the Cuu Long. It, too, was a pleasant surprise after Hanoi. My room was fresh and airy and there was an air-conditioner. The view was excellent, looking out on to the street and the river. The bath was clean and very deep. And there was soap.

Binh had told me that the My Canh floating restaurant still existed, in reply to my query. The name had been floating around in my head for years as it was the scene of one of the first terrorist attacks against American soldiers in Saigon in June 1965. The restaurant was popular with Americans as a place to eat so the Viet Cong planted a bomb in it in June 1965. They had then set off another bomb on the riverbank as the terror-stricken patrons tried to rush to safety. The death toll was horrendous: 12 Americans killed and 15 wounded; five foreign nationals were also killed. The local Vietnamese suffered the worst, with 27 killed and 80 wounded. The action brought home the fact that nowhere was safe in Vietnam.

The My Canh, in fact, was moored only a little way downstream from the hotel so we walked down there for dinner. The traffic on the street was heavy but people along the riverbank were relaxed and casual. The food was delicious, but the hygiene left a lot to be desired. My meal was spoilt when a huge rat came out of one of the hollow posts in the dining area. It emerged, ran to secure some food and then ran back to the post. While devouring its food, it was so unconcerned that it left its tail poking out. No one seemed in the least perturbed. When the meal was finished Binh and I stayed on, talking and drinking Ba Muoi Ba beer. By this time I had come to accept the rat in the pole and was not put off when it darted out for more food. However, as we were talking, I noticed something behind me out of the corner of my eye. It was another huge rat almost at my shoulder sitting on the metal stanchion and staring straight at me. I flew off the

chair like a cyclone, upsetting the table and spilling food and drink over Binh. The startled Vietnamese diners looked at me in amazement. When they realised what had happened the whole place burst out laughing. "Crazy round eye", I thought they were saying, shaking their heads. Sheepishly I sat down again while the laughter continued.

After I had settled down again Binh and I talked about the war in Phuoc Tuy, where the Australians had been stationed. One of the people I had been hoping to contact was Colonel Nguyen The Truyen, the commander of 5 VC Division at the time of the battle in the Long Tan rubber plantation in 1966. Binh had no idea what I was talking about but he had heard of Phuoc Tuy, because of the battle at Binh Gia in late 1964 and early 1965. According to him the battle at Binh Gia is an important part of Vietnamese history now, as it is considered one of the turning points in the war.

Binh Gia is located in Phuoc Tuy province only 11 kilometres north of the area at Nui Dat, where the Australians established their Task Force base in 1966. In the 1960s Binh Gia was a fortified village of mainly Catholic refugees from the north. They had come from North Vietnam during the 1954–56 period when those wishing to go to either part of the country were free to do so. The people who came south were set up in fortified villages as part of Diem's ill-fated Strategic Hamlet plan. By 1964 the VC forces in the south had gained such momentum that it was apparent to the Americans that the country was on the verge of collapse. The VC, to show just what they could do, launched an attack on the fortified village of Binh Gia. VC troops took the village against only minimal opposition from the defenders and held the town just to show that it could be done. This was the first time the VC units had held ground after a battle.

The army commanders in Saigon decided to send in forces to retake the town on 28 December 1964, but the ARVN (Army of the Republic of South Vietnam) advance toward the town was stopped by a determined VC force estimated to be of battalion strength. Sustaining only minor casualties, the ARVN force withdrew to await reinforcements. During the

night several South Vietnamese battalions arrived and on the 29th another attack was launched. This attack was also halted by the VC defenders of the town and one South Vietnamese company was overrun and destroyed. By 2 p.m. the ARVN forces had only managed to retake a small section of the western side of the town and had lost three helicopters.

At 3 a.m. the next morning, the 30th, the Ranger Battalion on the northern outskirts of the town was heavily attacked and sustained horrendous casualties. The battle lasted until dawn when the VC forces disengaged and disappeared into the countryside. The ARVN then retook the town without a shot being fired — the VC having faded away, there was no one left to fight. During the night battle with the Ranger Battalion an American helicopter was shot down and lost with all hands. When a company of South Vietnamese Marines was sent to recover the downed helicopter the next day they were ambushed. A full Marine battalion was sent to extricate the beleaguered company and were themselves ambushed by VC forces, suffering, as the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) report on the action states, “extremely heavy casualties”.

After these actions the ARVN, reinforced again from Saigon, were sent on search operations for the next two days and the area seemed to be cleared. On 3 January 1965 that piece of wishful thinking was abandoned when VC forces ambushed an ARVN armoured column in a rubber plantation 1.5 kilometres from Binh Gia. The ARVN unit again suffered horrendous casualties, with at least two armoured personnel carriers and one tank destroyed. By 6 January the ARVN and American Adviser casualties had still not been confirmed, but the incomplete figures were 201 killed, 192 wounded and 68 missing, a total of 461 casualties; the figures included 16 casualties among American advisers (5 killed, 8 wounded and 3 missing). Against this there were 32 confirmed VC dead. According to the report, 4300 ARVN troops were committed to the battle against an estimated 1800 VC. ARVN troops were also supported by aircraft and helicopters and the report states that “A total of 57 armed UH-1B and 67 unarmed UH-

1Bs supported the operation. Thirty sorties were also flown by conventional aircraft.”

Historians of the Vietnam War are agreed that this battle was the major reason for General Westmoreland's call for American combat troops. They arrived in Vietnam in March 1965, just 10 weeks after Binh Gia. In the official Marine history Westmoreland is reported to have said about the Binh Gia battle: “It meant the beginning of an intensive military challenge which the Vietnamese government could not meet within its own resources.” This meant the involvement of American and allied forces to take over the fighting of the war from the Vietnamese.

As I listened to Binh's account from his schooldays of the Binh Gia battle, I realised that it was an important component of the Australian story in Vietnam and determined to find out all I could about it. When I contacted the Australian commander of Six Battalion, who only 18 months after the action was stationed 11 kilometres from Binh Gia, it was disconcerting to learn that he had never heard of the battle. This seems an amazing oversight on the part of the Australian Army's intelligence people. Brigadier Jackson, the first Australian Task Force commander, was aware of it, but not one of his battalion commanders. Brigadier Jackson told me in an interview that he had been to Binh Gia to study the ground because he thought the VC would “have at go at us”. This seems logical, and it makes one wonder even more why the Task Force was caught flat-footed when the Long Tan battle occurred in August 1966.

I also found out in Vietnam that Colonel Truyen, the 5 Division commander part of whose forces attacked the Australians at Long Tan, had been at the Binh Gia battle. Unfortunately he was no longer alive, having been killed during the attack on Saigon during the Tet Offensive in 1968. General Tran Van Tra recorded in his book, mentioned earlier, that he would never forget some of his comrades, one being “comrade Nguyen The Truyen, a brave division commander who entered the puppet capital during Tet Mau Than in 1968 and later died during the fierce fighting on the outskirts”.

We left Binh Gia at the table of the My Canh restaurant because the next day we were to go to Vung Tau. Unfortunately there was not enough time to arrange a trip to the Australian Task Force area at Nui Dat. At that time in Vietnam there was no restriction on the movements of tourists in the cities; however, permission was required to travel in the countryside. The country is split into administrative areas similar to the Australian states, within which are a number of districts. To go to a certain area permission has to be obtained from the upper level and then the lower. The area of the Australian Task Force is in the larger area of Dong Nai province, which encompasses the old South Vietnamese provinces of Bien Hoa, Long Khanh and Phuoc Tuy. Within Dong Nai are the smaller administrative districts; the Australian base is situated in Chau Duc district and the Long Tan area in Long Dat. There was just not enough time to go through the formalities.

The next day the Datsun sped along the highway to Bien Hoa. The road was in excellent condition — providing good highways was one thing the Americans did for the south of Vietnam. This was a four-lane highway with a metre-high concrete divider up the centre. We crossed the Saigon River and then the mighty Dong Nai, which makes the Saigon look like a stream.

Before Bien Hoa City we turned off on to Highway 15 to go to Vung Tau. Now, as in the South Vietnam days, Vung Tau is a special zone. Because of its economic significance, it is administered differently, which was why it was simple to go there. Several kilometres from the turn-off, Binh pointed out the old base of Long Binh. This again was a significant area for the Australians as it was around here that Two and Seven Battalions were operating during the Tet Offensive in 1968.

Long Binh was the administrative and supply headquarters for the American II Field Force Vietnam and the Australians were under the direct control of the commander of II Field Force from 1966 onward. The base itself covered an enormous area, and every conceivable type of equipment required for the successful prosecution of the war was at Long Binh.

As the Tet holiday at the end of January 1968 approached there was a great deal of concern among American commanders about what the period might bring. Westmoreland thought that there would be a major strike into I Corps on the Laotian border and was manoeuvring troops accordingly. In January Westmoreland was looking at the I Corps area as the danger area, mainly due to the emerging seriousness of the situation at Khe Sanh. Khe Sanh was an isolated Special Forces camp near the Laotian border; the VC had surrounded it and were attacking in strength. Westmoreland had shifted troops from other areas to I Corps and as late as 25 January he sent a message to the commander of II Field Force telling him to "be prepared for the possibility that the entire 101st Airborne Division with appropriate helicopter support may be moved to I Corps tactical zone".

General Weyand, commander of II Field Force at the time, saw a different picture emerging in his area of operations. He was alerted to the fact that something big was in the wind as early as the first week in January. He did not execute the December strategy of deploying his forces along the Cambodian border and the plateau area, but brought what he could spare into a tight ring around Saigon. For Weyand, indications pointed to an attack on the populated areas and he predicted a major strategic shift from previous VC policy. Weyand was concerned by things like the reorganisation of the old VC Military Region 4 around Saigon, North Vietnamese "fillers" being placed into local force battalions, and persistent reports that a major offensive was being planned.

When VC forces launched the Tet Mau Than offensive on the night of 29 January 1968, Weyand had many of his forces in place, including two battalions of the First Australian Task Force who were out of Phuoc Tuy province for the first time. They were conducting Operation Coburg to the north-east of Long Binh, their main task being to help shield the massive logistic base.

The VC launched a strong drive against Long Binh, mainly with the 275 Regiment of the VC 5 Division. Their targets were the Headquarters of General Weyand at Plantation, the

prisoner of war compound containing more than 2000 POWs, and the ammunition bays inside the compound. The American 199th Brigade, from whom the Australians had taken over from on Operation Coburg, bore the brunt of the fighting and managed to dislodge the 275 Regiment. Several VC sapper teams, however, did manage to penetrate the perimeter of the Long Binh base and set satchel charges amongst the ammunition bays. Many of these charges were defused, but at least four of the bays were destroyed by massive explosions.

The Australian forces had been spared the initial assault but were to encounter many groups of enemy returning through their area after the attacks on Long Binh and nearby Bien Hoa City. Australian accounts of the operation record that the Australians killed 181 enemy.

As we continued our journey past the Long Binh base, there was a stretch of country, possibly a kilometre wide, that was entirely devoid of any plant growth. This was the area outside the perimeter of the base that had been defoliated to create a buffer zone. The effects had endured. Considering the density of the population in this area and the shortage of arable land, it was amazing to see it unused. Binh said that there had been attempts to cultivate the land but there was nothing that would grow. The authorities had tried to vegetate the area by planting trees but all had died. The bare, gently undulating land extended possibly five kilometres up a slope until it disappeared from sight. There was nothing growing on it at all. Off to the other side of the road thousands of young trees had been planted in areas that had been cleared but not defoliated. There was no doubt about what the problem was on the barren land. I wonder if the Australian soldiers who were engaged in operations in this area knew at the time of this heavy use of defoliant.

As we headed east toward the sea I expected that the density of the population would diminish. It didn't. There were people all the way along, and in many places old women had spread out cassava on the road to dry on the bitumen. The starch that comes from dried cassava is used for making

bread. The road came to Long Thanh township, where close by was the rubber plantation used as a base by Thai forces while they were in Vietnam. The plantation is now clean and working. Not far out of Long Thanh I sat up as the Nui Dinh mountain range came into sight way in the distance, a very prominent feature in the almost flat landscape. Heat haze made the hills appear to be a light blue colour and they were an impressive sight as we drove nearer.

The closer we came, however, the more I began to feel uneasy. There was something wrong, although I could not see what it was. When I realised I could only sit with my mouth open, staring in disbelief. The once majestic ranges, covered in forest when I last saw them, were bare of growth. On the southern side along the highway the only growth on the mountain was a small bush, like lantana, perhaps a metre high. Where were all the great trees? Now there were only the rocks. The whole range on the southern side was just a vast expanse of bare mountain and boulders — bare, eroded slopes with great scars down the sides where the erosion had started to tear the mountain apart.

It takes a long while to drive past the Nui Dinh range and I stared in disbelief all the while. I couldn't have imagined that such destruction was possible. Outlined against the skyline at one point was a lonely tree with no leaves. I had to stop the car to get a photo. So much for the Army and the Australian government telling their Vietnam veterans that there had been very little spraying in areas where they operated. Here was a whole mountain range of trees gone, as if they never existed — and the eastern extremity of the range was only five kilometres from the base at Nui Dat. I made a point of contacting veterans who had been in Nui Dat in the 1970s to ask them the state of the range then. All said it was still covered in forest, although there were bare patches visible in places. There are no patches now. It is all bare.

It seems that after the Tet Offensive in 1968 the Americans poured great amounts of defoliant on the range to deny it to the VC, who could use the cover of the ranges to intercept Highway 15 and Highway 2, the main arterial roads from the

port of Vung Tau. As it happened the plan did not work because the massive destruction did not really take effect until after the war was over in 1975. My mind could not really take in the sight. It is as if the mountain never had a tree growing on it.

The enjoyment of the day had gone for me. As we drove on I looked out lethargically at the countryside. Outside Baria, the road passes in a loop around the town to the south and does not go in. I stared longingly northwards catching glimpses of Nui Dat beyond Baria and telling myself that it did not matter. It did. I was terribly disappointed to have been so close and not to have had the chance to go to the Australian Task Force area.

As we rounded the long sweeping curve swinging south to Vung Tau the driver suddenly put his foot on the brake and the car stopped jerkily. Two soldiers were on the road, carrying machine pistols. They waved us on slowly and then told the driver to stop. Binh jumped out of the car looking very worried and went back to talk to the soldiers. He then came running back to the car and said to me, "Quick, quick, give me your passport." I hurriedly dug in my pocket and gave it to him and he walked quickly back up the road. The driver sat transfixed, his hands locked tightly around the steering wheel. Five minutes later Binh came back, got into the car quickly and said to the driver "Go". The driver did not hesitate and we took-off smoothly but quickly. Binh said not to look back so I kept my eyes to the front and asked him what the trouble was. "Nothing" he said. Nothing? I looked at him sitting there white-faced and decided that this seemed one of those times when you just have to accept which is happening without knowing why.

The airport was empty as we drove past and a little further on was Vung Tau. The car swung into the main street, which once was full of bars but now there are little shops. The wide streets are very clean and the Grand Hotel has been restored to its former glory. The little open-air cafes on the beachfront still remain, even the red-and-white checked tablecloths.

The road to the Back Beach is as rough as it was twenty

years ago but on the beachfront there are several new hotels for Eastern bloc tourists. The sea was wild and dashing itself on the beach, in places washing over the road. Up at the Australian logistic base there is nothing now but sandhills — it is as if all those Australians who cursed the sand had never been there. The Beachcomber Club is now a beer hall with rooms to let upstairs.

Vung Tau held nothing for me now and I was glad to get away, unsure whether I felt angry or not. I had not been very interested in Vung Tau but had decided to go because of its proximity to Nui Dat. The sight of the Nui Dinh mountains had depressed me terribly and not even getting into Baria had not made things any better. Still tomorrow was another day.

I booked a wake-up call for 6 a.m. and when it came through I crawled out of bed unenthusiastically just to stop the noise. After a shower things looked better. The sun was coming up over the Saigon River and because of the pollution it was a well-defined ball, the perimeter clear, like a fiery moon. Across the road in the park people were playing badminton and others were doing Tai Chi. The traffic moved lazily and no one seemed in a hurry.

After a leisurely breakfast we left for Cu Chi, about 35 kilometres north-west of Ho Chi Minh City. The Cu Chi area near the village of Phu My Hung is now famous in Vietnam because of its importance during the war as the headquarters of the VC Saigon area command. The tunnels there were started during the French occupation; when American combat troops arrived in 1965 these had become very important. The land around Cu Chi is about 4 metres above the water-table which made it good for digging tunnels. Even better was the fact that the ground was soft enough to dig quite easily, yet moist and firm enough to support the tunnels without having to shore them.

The Americans decided to build a base camp at Cu Chi in 1966 as part of General Westmoreland's plan to have a ring of troops and camps surrounding Saigon. The 25th Infantry Division were stationed at Cu Chi and they unknowingly built the camp over the tunnel system. For at least a year they

received fire from inside their own perimeter, from the tunnel complexes inside the base. Across the Saigon River to the north of the Cu Chi base camp was a roughly three-sided area running to Ben Cat in the north. This was declared a no-go area by the Americans. All inhabitants were moved out and anyone inside the area was declared VC. This became known as the Iron Triangle, and many costly American operations were mounted into this known VC base area. Planes returning with tonnage of bombs not dropped just let them go in the Iron Triangle. Artillery bombarded the area night and day. Nothing could survive in the Iron Triangle — except the VC who lived in their tunnels throughout the operations, the bombing and the artillery fire.

In the tunnels the VC had workshops, hospitals, and visiting troupes of entertainers to keep up morale. Story has it that a team would dismantle a full 105 mm artillery piece after use and drag the parts through the tunnels to a cave they had dug. They would then put the gun back together, ready for the next time it would be required. The tunnels, though linked, were self-contained to prevent gas destroying large areas. One system was linked to the next by a U tunnel dug down into the water table which therefore filled with water. Gas pumped into one area of the tunnels could not penetrate the water to get through to other areas. The device was also a terror tactic for any troops. The tunnels were only large enough for a small man to wriggle along, and the way out was backwards. When the VC came to the watertable blockage they knew it was simply a matter of swimming under the water and emerging into the tunnel on the other side. But the allied troops did not have the advantage of this knowledge. In some cases the water tunnels led nowhere, so the man going into these blank water areas could drown if he panicked and failed to move out backwards quickly.

The Australians participated in the operation to clear the Cu Chi area before the 25th Division established their camp. This was Operation Crimp, in January 1966, and the Australian One Battalion was attached to the 173rd Airborne Brigade. The Australians are in fact credited with finding the

first of the tunnels on that operation. Several Australian soldiers went into the tunnels and almost came to the headquarters of the Saigon area command.

When we got to the tunnels that bright morning in 1986 the area was quiet and peaceful. A part of the tunnel system has been preserved as a museum and I went into one of them. My heart stopped as the light faded and darkness closed around me. That was enough. I backed out rapidly and breathed deeply as I climbed out. Tunnel war was not for me. Throughout the area relics of the war abound, here a huge bomb crater, there an American tank sitting forlorn and derelict in spindly bush. Cu Chi is now part of a new economic zone and has been heavily resettled. After 1975 people went back to the Iron Triangle and were given a block of land and food for six months, after which it was expected that they would be self-sufficient. As repayment for the land and the support they received in setting themselves up, they are expected to donate a certain amount of their time to community projects in the area, such as building schools and community buildings and constructing canals for new ricefields. Many of the houses are set back from the road on blocks of about one hectare. They appeared to be quite basic, with cattle sheds nearby and farmyard dogs, chickens and ducks.

I left Ho Chi Minh City for home via Bangkok. The international airport on my day of departure was crowded to overflowing — and there were children everywhere. The flight I was booked on was taking passengers as part of the Orderly Departure Program. Those who wish to leave Vietnam may now do so but it is still not easy. On this day a group of Amer-Asian children were flying to homes in America.

These children are the real losers of the war. Even though they were born in Vietnam to Vietnamese mothers, they are not accepted as real Vietnamese on account of their American fathers. The part-caucasian children do not fare too badly but the part-negro children are treated with scorn and contempt. Many of the children were sitting with Vietnamese chaperones who were accompanying them to Bangkok, where other chaperones would take over the responsibility. The children

were well-dressed, but looked uncomfortable in clothes they were obviously unaccustomed to wearing. They moved as if in a trance, all with large tags pinned on them bearing a name and a number.

One girl of about 12 came up to me when I was buying a drink and tried to help me select the one I wanted. A very attractive and charming little thing, she reminded me of a puppy trying to reach out for affection. She spoke no English at all and I couldn't imagine what she must have been feeling. Where would the little darling go? Who would take care of her? I had to move away from her as I was starting to choke up thinking of her future. As I did so she looked at me as if I had struck her and her lip started to quiver. I don't think I have ever felt as bad as at that moment when I had to ignore a little girl reaching out for a small sign of comfort that I was afraid to give.

The plane lifted off and Vietnam was gone again from my life, physically at least. This trip was supposed to put Vietnam in perspective and let me get on with my life. Instead it had confused so many issues that I didn't know where I stood. As the miles and several planes took me back to the comforts and security of home, I wondered what Australia would hold for me now.

The Australian Story — and the Glory

After my trip to Vietnam, Brisbane in 1986 was not the same and neither was I. What had happened in those three short weeks? I had gained something and lost something and couldn't articulate what they were. Efforts to interest myself in other things invariably foundered — always came back to Vietnam.

My book, *The Soldiers' Story*, was launched in 1986 on the 20th anniversary of the battle in the rubber plantation at Long Tan. Its favourable reception by the general public as well as by many Vietnam veterans, started me thinking about Vietnam in general and the possibility of writing another book — a critical look at the Australian involvement, warts and all. As interested as I became in the project I realised this had not yet been attempted.

The published material available in 1986 on the Australian involvement was scant indeed. There were several novels, a book of essays, a study of the government's deliberations which led it to commit troops to the war, the experiences of an Australian journalist, and the battalion histories — not much for the historians of the future to go by. Of course there were also a great many articles by army officers in the *Army Journal* and articles in other journals by academics. The *Army Journal* was full of optimism in the early days of the involvement with articles unequivocally supporting the com-

mitment and reporting on how well the Army policies were working.

The only work that came anywhere near having a good look at the Army's role in Phuoc Tuy province, where the Task Force was based, was the thesis by Frank Frost which later became the book *Australia's War in Vietnam*. Frost must have been on very good terms with the Army or the Department of Defence because he was allowed classified information that is still unavailable to the general public. Accordingly he was able to produce a very good analysis of the role and workings of the Task Force from 1966 to 1971, although it could hardly be described as critical.

It began to amaze me that most of the works I read gave no legitimacy at all to the political claims of the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese. The Viet Cong were sneaky little bastards who would not stand and fight and resorted to terrorist tactics. The French resistance during World War Two and the Viet Cong in 1966 both used the same means of attacking a superior enemy, for which the French were considered heroes and the Viet Cong barbarians.

When the Americans or Australians destroyed a hamlet because a shot had been fired from it, the blame for the destruction was laid on the VC. The expression, "we had to destroy the town to save it" began to take on new meaning. If the VC used the people as a screen and civilians were killed that was the fault of the VC, not the soldiers who fired the weapons. This reasoning began to intrigue me. If it was applied in these instances, then any behaviour could be laid at the door of the VC. And if so, where did responsibility start and end for the Australians? It seemed there was no beginning and no end. And no need for the Australians to question closely their role in Vietnam because anything that happened was really the fault of the VC. This thinking probably has a historical precedent in Australia — we have said virtually the same thing about the Australian Aborigine for two hundred years. In most writings on Australian involvement in Vietnam, we are right, therefore the other side is wrong. Because they are wrong then there is nothing to stop us bombing and

killing them until they see the error of their ways. If the country is destroyed in the meantime, that's a pity, but it's not our country anyway, so it won't affect my family or my safe, ordered way of life.

As the war dragged on and the disenchantment at home began to be felt in the ballot box, Australia picked up its bat and ball and came home. First, one of the Task Force battalions was not replaced in 1970 and then the Nui Dat base closed down in 1971. Now we could say it was the Yanks who lost the war. But, with Australia pulling out before the Americans did, couldn't we be accused of seeing the writing on the wall? Perhaps even rats leaving the sinking ship? No, no, no. Australians aren't like that.

Okay, if that's so, what answer could I as an Australian give to an American if accused of it. Think, think. *Phuoc Tuy was cleared of VC*. No, that was not correct. *We had to fight for our survival somewhere closer to home*. No, that was no good either. *We were running out of money*. That might be true. How about: *The Australian people were getting sick of our Vietnam commitment and there was an election coming up*. Yes, that's a good one. So 10 years and 500 Australian lives after we first sent in troops, we pulled out, leaving the country crippled by bombs and chemicals. The people we supposedly fought for were left bankrupt, with a legacy of destruction and suffering that would take generations to wipe away. But, according to our logic, Australia had nothing to answer for. The politicians stood aloof, and the veterans and Vietnam were shoved under the carpet.

My attempts to find some sort of critical, objective analysis of all this in the material available were disappointing. The exceptions were Gerald Stone's *War Without Honour* (1966) and Alex Carey's monograph, *Australian Atrocities in Vietnam* (1968).

Even Frank Frost had been misled by some of the evidence. He had fallen into the trap of accepting what was written as being accurate, without checking back to original sources. For example, he stated that the battle near Hoi My, where my company sat on the edge of the paddies while the B Company

boys were chopped up, was a decisive victory for the Australians. This was news to me and to everyone from Six Battalion who was there. He claimed that the Australian force killed 70 VC and that the VC unit "subsequently withdrew from the battle but the Task Force lacked the means to prevent its escape". Not so, according to the after-action report and the memories of those who were there. In fact most people from A and B Companies who were in the thick of the fighting will say that there couldn't have been any more than 50 to 70 enemy because of the small size of the area. The actual body count was 8. To make 70 out of eight is stretching the bounds of credibility too far. Frost neglects to mention that it was the Australians who withdrew first; nor does he mention that the Australian dead and wounded were left for the night or the bombing and shelling of those men in the battle area.

He also stated that the claim made in 1968 that Australian soldiers shot wounded VC after the battle at Long Tan could not be supported. This is despite the eye-witness accounts of the shootings recorded in *The Soldiers' Story*, although the book is cited, and a signals log which clearly states that wounded were fired upon.

The resettlement of the Long Phuoc and Long Tan people was also something that seemed to be studiously avoided by all writers of the period. It received a paragraph at the most in many of the works and told absolutely nothing. All that was said was that the people had been "resettled". What did resettled mean? Where were they resettled? Who resettled them? How did they survive? There is no way that a researcher will find out from published Australian material.

When it came to many of the stories and books there was a smokescreen of fine but misleading sentiments. Robert O'Neill who served as the intelligence officer of Five Battalion in 1966-1967 wrote of the battle at Binh Gia, already discussed, in the Jan-Feb 1967 issue of *Quadrant*. The article, "Three Villages of Phuoc Tuy", tried to persuade the Australian public that the war was being won by the Australians in Phuoc Tuy; and that the people we were sup-

posedly helping appreciated our efforts and were doing all they could to keep out of the evil clutches of communism. His account of the Binh Gia battle in December 1964 and January 1965 is so different from the official reports that one would be excused for thinking they were not the same event. He wrote in the article:

The most severe test of Binh Gia's defences came in late 1964, when a regiment of VC attempted to put an end to the village's defiance. The battle lasted for two days and two nights. The people of Binh Gia fought back desperately. The superiority of the Viet Cong in numbers and equipment was very nearly decisive, but the situation was saved by a parachute landing of a Vietnamese marine battalion behind the Viet Cong. The marines suffered appalling casualties. The battalion commander's batman hid with his commander's body in the bush for days until he was able to carry it into Government hands. Nevertheless the Viet Cong thought that Binh Gia warranted no further losses and they withdrew.

The people of Binh Gia "fought back desperately"? A CIA report on the action, *Binh Gia — An Appraisal*, states that the VC entered the town on the first day "against only minor resistance". The "situation was saved by a parachute landing of a Vietnamese marine battalion behind the Viet Cong"? The CIA report notes that friendly forces in the action consisted of:

- 30th Ranger Battalion
- 38th Ranger Battalion
- 33rd Ranger Battalion
- 4th Marine Battalion
- 1st Airborne Battalion
- 3rd Airborne Battalion
- 35th Ranger Battalion
- 7th Airborne Battalion
- 1 Platoon 155's [artillery pieces]
- 1 Platoon 105 [artillery pieces]
- 1 Section of Tanks M24.

In sum there were 4300 government troops with tanks, artillery, helicopters and jet fighters, plus the 6000 people in the

village; against them were an estimated 1800 Viet Cong troops. What did O'Neill say? "The superiority of the Viet Cong in numbers and equipment was very nearly decisive." From his account one would hardly think the VC took the town at all, but that villagers themselves held against overwhelming odds until one battalion of marines arrived.

O'Neill also wrote about the choice of Nui Dat for the Task Force base in an article in *Australian Outlook* in April 1969:

The number of suitable sites for a base to contain 3,000 troops in central Phuoc Tuy was few. The base had to be away from closely settled areas so that the local population would not be endangered by the fire from Australian weapons if the base were ever under attack. It also had to be serviced by adequate roads, and it could not be permitted to dislocate the economic life of the province by taking up agricultural land.

Task Force records show that there were 8000 refugees created by the Task Force one month after it arrived in May 1966, almost 10 per cent of the entire province population. As far as not taking up any agricultural land, any soldier who ever went to Nui Dat could speak of the hundreds of hectares of paddy and garden land affected by the Australian presence.

Looking at the enemy, Ian McNeill, author of the official war history *The Team*, wrote of the VC 275 Regiment after the battle at Long Tan in the *Defence Force Journal* in September 1980. "It was a long time before 275 Regiment reappeared at any scene of action". I don't know what McNeill considers a "long time", but the 275 were up and running and on the attack in December 1966, only four months after the battle at Long Tan. Not only were they to hit American and South Vietnamese units, but according to official sources in America, they were the ones who stood and fought Six Battalion near Hoi My in February 1967.

The Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) history records that on 22 December 1966 units of the VC 275 Regiment attacked the US 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment on Route 1, south of Gia Ray in Long Khanh province. An American intelligence report on the 275 Regiment gives an

outline of its activities in the first half of 1967 which leaves no doubt that the 275 was alive and fighting fit.

- 9 Jan 67. Ambush vicinity of Suoi Cat. YT 595065
- 13 Jan 67. Attack on Bau Chanh compound. YT 545115
- 17 Feb 67. Contact with 6th RAR/1st ATF YS 5256 [Hoi My]
- 6 Mar 67. Ambush of U/1 ARVN unit on LTL 23 vicinity Xuyen Moc YS 655680
- 8 Mar 67. Shelling of Xuyen Moc Subsector Compound
- 20 Mar 67. Attack on Hoi May village YS 519566
- 21 Mar 67. Contact with B/6RAR/1st ATF YS 528552
Attack on ARVN OP 510549
- 22 Mar 67. Contact with A/6RAR YS 584597
- 20 Apr 67. Contact with 2 companies 50th ARVN inf YT 7837
- 6 May 67. Shelling of Ham Tan compound (possible)
- 28 Jun 67. Contact with 85th and 52nd ARVN Ranger battalions
YT 339329 to YT335325

Perhaps Ian McNeill does consider four months a long time to be out of action, but I would suggest that anyone reading the article would presume that he meant a lot longer than that. The suggestion is that the battle at Long Tan completely demoralised the 275 Regiment for quite a long period. The above documents clearly show otherwise.

The question that needed to be asked was why discrepancies existed in the purportedly accurate historical accounts of the time? Was it a deliberate attempt to falsify history or was it just a biased view with insufficient research or a biased view with selective use of available material. The latter seemed the most likely and the question then arose of whether it was important to review the period under study in order to obtain a more balanced perspective.

In 1986 I found out that many Australian Army documents relating to Vietnam had been cleared prematurely because of the government's Agent Orange inquiry. When I asked what was available, a list was sent to me. Although there were many gaps in the declassified material there were good pickings for a historian. Armed with this knowledge I applied to enrol at Griffith University to attempt a research thesis on the Australian involvement in Vietnam. The application was suc-

cessful and in 1987 I started work on the project full-time. My intention was to look at the writings of the period and see how they compared to the available original research material.

Another trip back to Vietnam was in order so that I might find out what I could of Vietnamese perceptions of the Australian presence in Phuoc Tuy. By August I had received permission to enter Vietnam again and arrangements for the stay were made, as before, with the Hanoi Press Centre. There was no guarantee that the trip would produce results, but I felt it could be worth the effort.

Long Tan Revisited

The Thai International flight came down over Bangkok, late again, and at 3.30 a.m. a taxi rocketed me into the centre of the city. I spent the next few days drinking a lot of Thai beer and Mekong whisky, but I was anxious to get to Hanoi — the wait in Bangkok began to make me irritable. After several days the visa for Vietnam was arranged and I was soon bound for Hanoi.

As soon as we were airborne the clouds came in, but as we reached the mountains of Laos the clouds were above us and the flying was clear. The mountains stretched out in an interminable chain, the villages folding into themselves. The mountain spines twisted and turned sharply in zig-zag confusion.

As we flew further to the north-east a huge river came into view, plunging down the mountain chain. Fed by tributary streams it quickly became larger and larger, racing down the mountain in a fury and sweeping away boulders and trees. The colour changed as it surged toward the lowlands, the muddy brown becoming a deep brownish red. The further down it went, the wider it became, a more ponderous, cumbersome creature. As we came out of the mountains the great plain of the delta lay before us awash with brown water. The mighty Red River swirled on majestically. It appeared as if the whole country was inundated, the roads into the villages

the only sinuous, tenuous lifelines to dry land. The little ambling river I had crossed on my last trip had swollen to a giant. In places it must have been the best part of 10 kilometres wide.

The airport and entry procedures had not changed and Dy was there again to meet me. On the drive into Hanoi he informed me that in an hour's time I was to meet General Hoang Phuong, the head of the Military Unit of the People's Army of Vietnam. The news cheered me as it augered well for the success of this trip. Nothing had changed, or improved, certainly not the Thong Nhat Hotel, where it seemed to me the same lethargic people were still sitting in the foyer.

General Hoang Phuong was a surprise. He was quite tall for a Vietnamese, probably 175 centimetres. Straight-backed and with sparse silver hair, he ushered us into his sitting-room and called for tea from his aide. General Hoang Phuong was a northerner who had fought with the Viet Minh during the French war. He was thought to be about 68 years of age, but looked a lot younger. As we sat sipping tea he asked me the purpose of my visit and we went into the details straight away.

As I finished explaining that I was on a research trip to find out about the Australian role in Vietnam, he became quite concerned. He doubted whether much could be done as there was nothing in Hanoi that would be of use to me. Australia had only played a small part in the conflict, he said. During the war someone had been in charge of collating information on Australia on what he described as the Australian "desk", but the information was more about what was happening in Australia. Hanoi, it seems, was well aware of what was happening in Australia as well as other countries. Everything was monitored and this affected their military strategy.

It appeared to Hanoi by 1968 that Australia was considering its options as far as the commitment was concerned. Pressure to withdraw the troops was increasing in Australia and it appeared to them to be just a matter of time before the Australian contingent would pull out of Vietnam. They were correct. As regards Phuoc Tuy, the Australians were doing no

harm there so there was no need to worry too much about them. I asked about the strategic importance of Phuoc Tuy and the General bridled when I suggested that the province was unimportant in the overall context of the war. From a purely military point of view, he said, that may have been correct but not in Hanoi's view. Every village and hamlet in Vietnam was as important as the next. There was no order of importance, all had to have cadres working among the people. This shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. I had not realised the importance placed on the whole as distinct from the parts. The Vietnamese looked on the country rather like a piece of fruit. If one little spot was allowed to appear (a village without a cadre) then the spot could grow until the whole fruit was rotten.

The general asked how I intended to go about my task and I said that I hoped to speak to some of the people involved with the Australians. He then proposed that he would arrange for me to go to the south and talk to officials there. The problem for me seemed to be that Hanoi would not force the people in the south to co-operate if they were unwilling to do so, because so much suffering had been caused there. He said that it would all depend on me personally. If the people decided they did not want to help me they would probably not say so — I would just never be able to find those I wanted to speak to, or the officials would be too busy to show me the way, or whatever.

Several days later I flew to the Ho Chi Minh City again. The city was even more vibrant than last time, with many more street-stalls selling all kinds of wares and there even seemed to be more motorbikes. I had a new interpreter this time, another quiet, studious young man. Thang, like Binh, had been evacuated from Hanoi during the Christmas Bombing and had spent time in the mountains outside Hanoi. He had received a university education in Vietnam and his English was very good. He was married, and his wife and their young son lived in Hanoi. Although he liked his work, it took him away from home too often and he missed his family very much.

We had made arrangements to meet General Hoang Phuong in Ho Chi Minh City when he was there on business of his own. The general came to the hotel for the meeting and this time he was armed with background information on the Australian Army in Vietnam. Although this was very good of him, the problem was that it was only secondary source material. Although not really useful from an academic point of view, the information was very good background material.

General Phuong felt he had to apologise to me as he had not really answered the question I had asked in Hanoi about the significance of Phuoc Tuy. He stressed again about the importance of every hamlet, but then said that he had to admit that Phuoc Tuy had little strategic significance in the overall context of the war until the final offensive stage in 1975.

His information indicated that the Americans had sent the Australians to Phuoc Tuy because they knew it was a quiet area and there would not be heavy fighting there. The Americans were concerned about the "More Flags" policy, and did not want Australian involvement compromised by heavy casualties. In military terms the Australian involvement was not important to Hanoi. But it was in political terms. The Vietnamese in the north had always looked on the Australian people as their friends, and so it seemed a contradiction that Australian troops should be involved. Hanoi, however, could see that the situation was because of American pressure. This was not actually the case — it has now been shown that Australia needed no outside pressure to become involved. If the advent of a small contingent of Australian troops would help maintain an American presence in South-East Asia then Australian politicians at the time were eager to make the commitment.

The question of the placement of the Australians in Phuoc Tuy is again one of those questions that seem to receive conflicting answers. Brigadier Jackson, the first Task Force commander, told me in an interview that he had suggested Phuoc Tuy and that the American forces commander, General Westmoreland, had agreed, after considerable discussion. He

had suggested to Jackson that the Australian force should be used in the jungle areas because they were jungle-trained. Jungle area, to him, was the central highlands, where arms came south on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But there were problems regarding the placement. Jackson had been told from Australia, (although he could not specifically say whom) that the Australian Task Force was not interested in "getting into anything in a major way in the north of the country where there were people streaming across the border". They were also restricted from the west of the country because Australia still had diplomatic relations with Cambodia and there was the fear of border incidents.

General Alan Stretton in his book *Soldier in a Storm* also pointed out that Chief of the General Staff, General Sir John Wilton, had Phuoc Tuy in mind before he left Australia to discuss it with the Americans. In his book Stretton pointed out that one of the major advantages of Phuoc Tuy for Australia was the deepwater port at Vung Tau:

In the event of the Viet Cong getting the military ascendancy, the proximity to Vung Tau would allow the Australian force to be evacuated or reinforced within Australian national resources. If we were operating inland any evacuation or reinforcement would depend on the allocation of American resources which would be fully extended in support of their own units. I think in selecting Vung Tau General Wilton showed remarkable military judgement and that there would have been a greater loss of life if the Australian force had been allocated to any other province.

It would seem to have been more of an Australian decision to place the Task Force in Phuoc Tuy rather than an American one, even though General Westmoreland stated in his diaries that it was he who decided on the placement of the Australians in Phuoc Tuy. His reason was for the Australians to secure Highway 15, which ran from Vung Tau to Saigon, and to carry out operations in the Rung Sat, or Jungle of Death, which the Australians for some reason never did.

A copy of the 1966 directive signed by General Westmoreland and Australian General Wilton concerning the concept of role has never been released. My request for a copy

of the document received the ludicrous reply that the document could not be found.

General Phuong asked if the news he had received that allegations of atrocities by Australian forces in Vietnam had been met by violent denials in Australia was correct. When I said this was so, he smiled slightly and shook his head in a bemused way. He said the American public were outraged at first about the allegations of the My Lai massacre of over a hundred civilians by American troops. (Lieutenant William Calley was later indicted and found guilty of a charge concerning the atrocity.) Later, when the evidence was presented, the public had to accept that it was true. Perhaps, too, there was a need for Australian society to confront its own image as well. Unfortunately I had to agree with him. We parted and he said that he was still working toward getting me to Phuoc Tuy.

Another day was lost while arrangements were made about meeting the officials at Bien Hoa. I was beginning to think I may have spent my money for nothing again when the word came through to go to Bien Hoa the following day. The bar at the Cuu Long Hotel does not have many customers but there were quite a few people there when I finished my jobs for the day and went for a drink in the afternoon. Six East German seamen were staring at their drinks and looking quite morose. Several of them could speak English and we engaged in a halting conversation.

It seems their ship had come from Europe and had to be refitted in Ho Chi Minh City over four months; they had already been there two. Afterwards, they were to go to Phnom Penh, to Singapore and then back to Europe. The German mark was not worth a lot in Vietnam and so they had very little money to spend. They had sold their spirit allocations on the black market in the first few weeks and had a good time on the proceeds but now they were counting all their money carefully. They were spending all their free time in the bar of the Cuu Long, drinking the Vietnamese vodka, Lua Moi, which is cheap, but quite good with lime juice. I was the first Australian they had ever met so we managed to

get into a rambling conversation, with me asking questions about their country and they asking me about Australia. By the time the bar closed we had become good friends, promising to meet again, we staggered off in different directions.

The next morning I had the worst hangover ever — it felt like I had a brick planted inside my skull. Thang the interpreter knocked on my door on his way to breakfast and I stumbled out of the room to join him. He looked at me, smiled, and said that Germans were very good drinkers. I didn't need to be reminded of that and in the dining room headed for some of that strong Vietnamese coffee. It's the only time I have ever enjoyed it.

The car travelled swiftly up the highway to Bien Hoa and the day reminded me of when I first made the journey in 1966. I chose to think that was a good sign — I certainly needed one the way I felt.

At Bien Hoa we were met by the local People's Committee and went through the intricate formalities of tea and discussions. After an hour of talk the chairman said I could go to Long Dat to meet the people there. When? Right now. I was stunned. I had nothing with me except my camera, a pen and notebook, very little money, and only a couple of cigarettes. I whispered to Thang on the way down the stairs, "Why didn't you tell me?" He looked at me hopelessly and said that he thought we would be going to Long Dat another day, if it were at all possible.

A group of Vietnamese got into their car and a Colonel Bao got into the back seat with Thang and me. Bao was an interesting man and we established a good relationship over the following two days. He was born in 1943 near the hamlet of Long My, just north of the Long Hai mountains in Phuoc Tuy province. He joined the guerrilla army at age 16, just as the Viet Cong were moving toward the action phase of their activity. He rose through the ranks (as all VC had to do) and was an officer with the D445 Battalion from 1966 to late 1968, when he was posted to 5 Division.

Bao had been in the province at the time of the Long Tan battle but he had not been involved personally. Only

something like a hundred men from the D445 had taken part in the action. The main unit involved had been the 275 Regiment of the main force VC 5 Division. Bao had been involved with actions against the Australians and although he had a high regard for their small-unit activities he did not feel they made a big military impact. He commented that the Australians would only fight when they had the advantage — unlike the Americans, who came in all guns blazing and did not seem to be worried how many men they lost. An example he gave was the action near Hoi My, where he said many Australian troops were stopped by about a hundred main force troops from 275 Regiment.

I had to sit up and take notice of this man. What he was saying was basically correct, much as I disliked hearing it. Australian tactics in Vietnam did not run to attacking a position unless the full back-up was there to support the assault. In the battalion histories there are many examples of Australians sighting VC positions and pulling back to wait for support. Bob Breen in *First to Fight* (1988) succinctly summed up the Australian attitude when he wrote:

Australian commanders were just not prepared to pay the price the US commanders were for success in causing enemy casualties. The prospects of tactical success were examined before commitment of troops to an assault. Many times this carefulness may have lost opportunities to cause enemy casualties. However, lost opportunities were better than lost men.

As much as I agreed with Breen, it is easy to see how this could have been interpreted differently by the Viet Cong.

When he spoke of the Hoi My battle, I knew that he was aware of the history of the area. It was then he told me that he had been born not far from there and that he knew the commander of that battle, who was still alive. When I said that I had been at that engagement, he looked at me strangely, as if not knowing whether to believe me or not. When I described to him where the area was and when the action took place he shook his head and gave me a queer smile. I got the feeling that perhaps he had been there himself and was seeing the

irony of us talking together about the event twenty years later.

The car moved quickly down the highway, past Long Thanh and the Nui Dinh range came into sight again. Just looking at the hills made me feel despondent. How much of this beautiful country had been laid waste for generations by the foul and deadly defoliant? It was anyone's guess.

As we came abreast of the hills I asked Bao if the small Buddhist temple was still tucked away in the folds of the mountain. Again he looked at me strangely and I think that was when he began to take me seriously. I had been close to the temple in 1966 on the operation into the mountains. It is only reached by foot track after a very arduous journey over some rough country. He wanted to know when I had seen the temple and I told him. He put out his hand and touched my arm and said, "You have a very good memory, Terry". I don't know what touched me the most, the mention of my good memory or to hear this man who had no reason to even talk to me, call me by my first name.

As the car went to Baria we turned from the main road and went into the town. It had not changed from my memories. The car did not stop and went right through the town on to the road leading to the beach town of Long Hai, a large fishing town. It is situated just to the south-west of the Long Hai hills, a name that will conjure up bad memories for many Australian soldiers.

Australian soldiers mounted several large operations into the Long Hais, mostly with disastrous results for them. The Long Hais had been a Viet Minh as well as Viet Cong base area since the French days and the Vietnamese called the area the Minh Dam Secret Zone. This was inside the mined fence the Australians had erected and the rationale was that the minefield would stop the movement of VC troops in and out of their bases in the mountains. It may indeed have stopped them from moving to the east, but it left them with free access to the population of Dat Do and Long Hai.

When the minefield was in place, the VC then had an enormous ammunition dump right at their back door, which they

used with devastating effect against Australian troops. According to a Vietnamese history of Long Dat printed in 1986, the mined fence created enormous difficulties for the D445 Battalion for the first few months in 1967. Supplies in the Long Hais were drying up and some of their people were close to starving. They then decided that the field would have to be breached and one of their men from the engineer reconnaissance unit, Hung Manh, volunteered to lead a party to attempt to lift a mine. Manh managed to lift one of the mines and also secured the anti-lifting device attached to it.

With these trophies they returned to the base area and then proceeded to hold courses on mine-lifting techniques. It became almost a competition to see who could lift the greatest number of mines in one night. The history notes: "Three Hoi My guerrillas, Tien, Dam and Chien, removed in one night 160 Australian mines".

The Long Hais became such a problem that David Horner records in *Australian Higher Command in the Vietnam War* that there was high-level discussion about continuing the operations into them. Horner quotes Brigadier Pearson, the Task Force commander at that time, recalling that "[General] Hay told him that the Chief of the General Staff was wondering whether in view of the casualties the operations in the Long Hai hills were worthwhile". Horner also quotes General Daly as acknowledging that there was "indirect pressure" from Canberra about these operations.

The most costly foray into the Long Hais for the Australians was the 8 RAR Operation Hammersley in February 1970, which resulted in 11 Australians killed, 59 wounded, one armoured personnel carrier (APC) destroyed and four damaged, mainly due to mines. VC losses were 42, according to the battalion history. This was the last operation into the area by Australian forces.

Dang Van Ba, a VC soldier whom I met later, told me that he was in the Long Hais when the Australians came into the area in 1970, although he did not know it was the 8 RAR. He said that the mines were not just scattered over the area in the hope that someone might step on them: many of them were

planted in the advance of moving Australian troops. He said that sometimes their men were within sight of the Australians as they planted the mines. He had a bit of a smile when he tapped me on the leg and said, "They were your mines that we had taken from the minefield". I had to smile ruefully and admitted that I knew.

As we came into Long Hai village the hills stood behind as bare of timber as the Nui Dinh. I had never been to the village or into the Long Hai hills but I had believed that there was a lot of timber on them. That was so, although they were not as heavily timbered as the Nui Dinh.

The town of Long Hai is a busy place with a large fishing fleet. The smell of seafood filled the air as we drove into the market area. It must have been a pretty town before the defoliant destroyed the countryside but now it is bare and bleak. All of the area to the west of the town is salt flats and to the east there are rolling sandhills with only sparse growth. The Long Hais once provided some greenery in the landscape.

Out of the town is the beach area and we went there to a state restaurant. The sky was overcast, the wind blowing and the sea wild. As I stepped out of the car I saw two boats about 200 metres from the shore. The swells were so big that they were being swallowed by them: one moment they would be in sight and the next disappear behind a huge swell.

Inside the restaurant a crowd of people had gathered and I became quite embarrassed to realise they were there for my benefit. The tables were full of seafood and I was ushered in and seated. Introductions were made and the splendid meal began. After the meal we got down to the serious business of discussing what I was there for.

At the table with me were five soldiers who had fought against the Australians. I found out later that there were others in the room but not everyone holds old animosities in check as well as the people I was to speak to. Do not imagine from the way I have spoken that all Vietnamese have forgiven and forgotten. There are many Vietnamese, as there are many Australians, who will never forgive or forget.

At the table with me were Colonel Bao from Bien Hoa,

Colonel Khanh, Colonel Ba Son and an ex cadre Chinh Nhung. There was also an ex-soldier from D445 Battalion, Dau Thu, who was said to have been a company commander. He did not say much and the interpreter said that he could not concentrate for too long. He had been shot in the head during the battle in the Long Tan plantation and was lucky to be alive. It was embarrassing to have to go and look at his wound but the Vietnamese insisted that I see it and feel it. The bullet had gone in just below his cheekbone, travelled up across the roof of his mouth, coming out on the other side of his face just under the temple. He had been left for dead on the battlefield and regained consciousness some time during the night. Disoriented and in agony, he slowly and painfully pulled himself along on his stomach out of the plantation and toward Long Tan village. His people found him in the morning and quickly took him away to the hospital complex in the May Tao mountains.

The meeting was long and exhausting and, for academic purposes, the material I was obtaining was next to worthless — not that that worried me. The talk went on all afternoon in the form of a general discussion. People would interrupt while others were talking and begin their own anecdotes, or someone would say something and the others laugh at him in disbelief. It began to remind me of the RSL on Anzac Day.

Beneath the bravado and the camaraderie of old soldiers, there seemed to be one theme that kept re-emerging: the point that Bao had made to me about Australians not standing to fight unless all was in their favour, or there was no way out, as happened at Long Tan. The VC had a great respect for the Australian tactics of quiet movement and limited resupply, which certainly restricted VC movements; so too did the constant ambushes which, they said many times, were the greatest fear for their small groups. But they were adamant that the Australians did not worry them overly much. Someone remarked that they feared the American operations the most, although one reason for this must have been the sheer weight of any American operation. Where the Australian operations were no more than a battalion until 1968, the Americans

could mount anything up to several divisions and seal off an area of 150 square kilometres.

One aspect of Australian policy they were still very angry about was the dumping of bodies for public display, or dragging them through the populated areas tied behind APCs. This ridiculous policy was counter-productive to the Australian effort and seemed a strange way to win over people to your cause. Yet this was a policy thought out at Task Force commanders' level. A *Memorandum for Record* from America, reporting on a meeting between the Task Force senior officers and a joint CORDS/PSA team, dated 19 March 1969, states:

(3) During an ensuing discussion, the following approaches were presented by the Australians.

(a) Display VC bodies, (in some inoffensive manner), so that the villagers could see what the shooting was all about and what is being done for them by Free World Forces. This may encourage them to increase their participation in their own defence.

I had to shake my head in despair when I found this document in America. After three years of the Australian presence in Phuoc Tuy I am sure that the local population knew quite well what the shooting was all about. Perhaps the words should have been changed to "what is being done to them" rather than "what is being done for them". The inoffensive manner in brackets was the piece that really broke me up, and I do not mean laughingly. How on earth does one put on display in an inoffensive way the broken mangled body of a person known in the village. I have always thought that I had a warped sense of the ridiculous, but the idiot officer who made that statement really deserves something, and it's not a medal.

The other area of anger still apparent is the spraying of the district. Long Dat district is about 40,000 hectares, of which about 8000 hectares of bush country were destroyed. There has been an effort to replant about 1500 hectares, but to date the results are extremely disappointing. The trees, though still alive, are growing very slowly.

By about 4 p.m. we were beginning to talk easily to each other and I think that it was emerging that they were gaining

as much as I was from the meeting. There was no formality by then and everyone was moving around freely and still drinking plenty of beer.

The convivial atmosphere changed abruptly on two occasions, once on my part and once on theirs. The first was when Colonel Khanh asked me if I knew of the two Australian prisoners taken during the battle of Long Tan. I was not taken aback and said that was incorrect. No prisoners were taken by their side at Long Tan. He looked me straight in the eye and said there were two wounded Australians collected during the battle. Again I shook my head and said that was incorrect. I asked him to show me on the map where they were taken and explain to me what happened to them. What he said had me looking at him in stunned silence, not knowing what to think.

Khanh said that during the battle they had found two wounded Australian soldiers lying in the battle area. Several of their men had attempted to take them out of the plantation to the north on to Nui Dat 2. Nui Dat 2 was a small feature just north of the battle area which was suspected of being the headquarters position of the attacking force. There were at least two heavy machineguns on this feature during the battle and telephone cable was found leading there the morning after. According to Khanh, the two Australian soldiers and several of the Viet Cong trying to get them out had been killed by Australian artillery after travelling only a short distance.

When he pointed out on the map the position they had been found in, I had to sit back and take a slow sip of my beer. My head was spinning and there was bile in my throat as I sat looking at him and wanting to lash out all around me. I wanted to cry out bullshit . . . bullshit . . . bullshit. But I couldn't. I couldn't because what he was saying could quite easily have been true. He had not read anything of the Australian side of the battle and knew nothing of what happened from our side, as I knew nothing of what happened from theirs. Yet his story and his map reference was accurate in terms of what could have happened. How could he know unless he was telling the truth? The other thing that I had to

ask myself was why he would lie. Why would he make up some story to impress me? There was no need.

During the battle in the planation, Eleven Platoon of the Australian force had been cut off from the rest of the company. The relief forces from Ten and Twelve Platoons sent to get to them had been unable to break through and in the finish there was nothing else for Eleven Platoon to do but attempt a running withdrawal. This was an every-man-for-himself situation and the survivors of the platoon just picked themselves up and ran in an attempt to reach the rest of the company. As Eleven Platoon withdrew there was an extremely heavy artillery barrage brought down on the area they had left. Those thought to be dead were left and several of the retreating soldiers were cut down on the way back. There was no way of knowing who was wounded and who was dead when the platoon broke and moved back.

When the rest of the battalion finally broke through to the company and reorganised for the medical evacuation, there were 16 soldiers missing from the company, all presumed dead. Those missing lay in the battle area all night while artillery continued to pound into the area. When we moved back at mid morning of the following day, two of the company were found alive. The question I kept asking myself was, if two were left for dead, who was to say that others were not still alive as well. There is no way that anyone can say that all our fellows were dead when the platoon fell back. Everyone thought Jimmy Richmond was dead and yet he was found alive, the next morning, lying helpless with a huge wound in his back. I had to keep trying to work out a reason for Khanh telling me the story if it were not true and couldn't come up with an answer.

This question is going to have to be one of the many unanswered questions concerning the Long Tan battle, unless the Vietnamese can present more concrete evidence. Questions about eye-witnesses to this event were unproductive, because the people who found the wounded Australians were from the 275 Regiment, whose soldiers were not local men. Most of 275 were recruited from the Bien Hoa, Ben Cat and

Xuan Loc areas. It remains to be seen whether there can be any verification of what the Vietnamese say happened. Another thing that makes the story plausible is the fact that Khanh said that they wanted to take prisoners from the battle. A prisoner to parade around their area would have done wonders for the morale of their units, who were at that time taking a terrible beating all over the south due to the massive American build-up that was still under way in 1966.

The other break in the conviviality of the meeting came when I asked about a Vietnamese who had defected from the D445 Battalion and had then worked at the Task Force at Nui Dat as a Bushman Scout. They all nodded their heads and said yes, they knew the man. The atmosphere changed to sullen animosity while they discussed this man amongst themselves. Later an ex-soldier, whose name I did not record, came over to me and said he knew the man very well. This man was small and softly spoken — he was an official in the district, evidently of some importance. He wore long pants and walked with a pronounced limp — I had the feeling that the leg was withered.

He said again that he knew the man well and would remember him for a long time. It seems when the defector gave himself up to the Australians he betrayed several people working under cover in the villages. One he betrayed was the speaker's brother who had been killed when he tried to escape from the Australians and the ARVN who had come to arrest him. Another brother had been lost in an Australian operation in the Long Hais, possibly the 6 RAR Operation Mundingburra in July 1969. The 6 RAR Battalion history records an incident that sounds like the action he was told of in which his brother had been killed.

At 0100 hours on 21 July [1969], six VC had walked into the ambush heavily laden with fresh food. The ambush was initiated with claymore and machine gun killing two VC. The remaining VC fought back and a heavy fire fight resulted. A sweep at first light revealed a further two VC dead and a large amount of ammunition, weapons, documents and packs which were recovered.

Throughout the Battalion records there are many instances of the VC fighting their way out of Australian ambushes. In one ambush with 5 RAR in January 1967 it is recorded the VC used a counter-ambush tactic as soon as the ambush was initiated. They moved around to the flank of the ambush firing and hurling grenades. By this action they retrieved a heavy weapon from one of their dead soldiers before hastily withdrawing.

When the meeting ended for the day, Thang, Bao and I were taken to the hotel at Long Hai where we stayed the night. The hotel room was basic with only a bed with a very thin mattress. There was a bathroom next door but no running water, only a large ceramic bowl holding perhaps 40 litres of water and a ladle. For bathing, you were meant to pour the water over yourself.

We sat in my room drinking coffee and by now I was confident enough to be able to talk openly with Colonel Bao. He asked how I thought the day had gone and I said without hesitation that there were many things wrong with the interpretation of some of the events I had heard during the day regarding the Long Tan battle. Again he looked at me as if he had been waiting for such a comment and shook his head slowly.

It seemed there was a big problem regarding the Long Tan battle as far as the local people were concerned. The battle had been fought mainly by the 275 Regiment and they were the ones who received most of the casualties. The local D445 only had about 100 men involved and from those there were only about 30 killed, which is what an Australian Intelligence report dated September 1966 also states. The D445 were told that they had been the ones most heavily involved and that the 275 were only supporting them. In fact the 275 had been the major attacking force and the D445 had come from Long Tan village to cut off any retreat and try to stop the Australian relief force from reaching the beleaguered D Company. There had been heavy fighting in their area against APCs so there was no doubt to the D445 men that they had been in a major action.

Because the 275 Regiment did not come from the area, the local people in Phuoc Tuy had no knowledge of how many Viet Cong had been killed. The 275 at that time had also started to reinforce with North Vietnamese, which also reduced the number of casualties from the local area.

All that the Vietnamese in Phuoc Tuy knew was that there had been a big battle and very few of the local people had been killed. It was also widely known that it was the Australians who had left the battle area first and had not returned until mid morning of the following day when they had received reinforcements. From this it would not be very hard to convince the people and the local soldiers that a significant action had taken place and that the VC forces had won on the day. Victors of a battle do not have to vacate the ground they have fought over and they do not leave their dead and wounded on the battlefield. This is especially true of the VC soldiers who would take enormous risks to retrieve their dead and wounded under fire.

For the majority of the VC forces to disperse that night and not attack the Australians on their return the next day was also easily explained to the Vietnamese. VC strategy was never to hold ground. When a battle was initiated by their forces, the intention was always to inflict casualties and then disperse before reinforcements could arrive to encircle them. Therefore the fact that the VC fought a battle against the Australians and remained in possession of the ground until 9 a.m. the following morning surely indicated that their troops had achieved their aim. This interpretation of the battle had been widely accepted by their people and the more senior officers who knew a different story about the battle and the major involvement of the 275 Regiment were not about to speak out and shatter the illusion held for twenty years of a victory for the local D445.

The situation had me shaking my head. Here was one battle and both sides, VC and Australian, claiming victory. As far as I was concerned there was no argument — it should be declared a draw. Both sides had a legitimate reason for their claim, but I could not see why there should be any subterfuge

involved. That, however, is not how politics work. There was loss of face to be considered, on both sides.

There has been subterfuge on the part of the Australians as well: the attacking force in the battle has grown since the event from one reinforced battalion to 2500 enemy. Over the years this number had been thrown around loosely and has in fact become an institutionalised myth. An advertisement for Duntroon Royal Military Academy in the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* of 10 July 1988 stated about the Long Tan battle: "The enemy force had numbered about 2,500 men". Australian documents do not support this claim. The after-action report on the battle puts only two battalions of the 275 in the actual fighting: "It is estimated that two of the battalions [of the 275 Regiment] were involved in the actual battle with D Coy, the others being in depth. Elements of the D445 battalion were moving to assault D Coy from the west and were contacted by A Coy." An enemy forces situation report, dated 1 June 1966, gives the strength of 275 Regiment as approximately 1850. The regiment includes three battalions of around 500 men with the rest as support forces. Even this is a high estimate of the strength of VC battalions. So two battalions of 500 men each and elements of the D445, an estimated 100, do not come anywhere near 2500. Even allowing for overestimation, the attacking force could not have been more than 1500, on these figures.

The other dispute with the Australian interpretation of the battle is the body count. The official Australian body count of VC dead is 245, but Bao insists that this is not correct. Information he received has their losses at around 150. When I returned to the battlefield the day after the battle, there were bodies lying all through the area. We were all in a state of shock and I don't think anyone really took in how many there were, but there were a lot, that is certain. One hundred and fifty dead bodies in a 2 square kilometre area is a mind-numbing sight. It is a great deal of death; and 250 dead bodies is the same. The mind cannot cope with the sight of destruction of that magnitude. The difference between 150 and 250 is not something that those who were there could even look

back on with anything like an objective view.

I had never questioned the body count before, although I have since learned that some in D Company say that they have always thought the body count was inflated. What now makes me question the count is that Bao asked me a most important question that had me shaking my head at the memory. When he told me the body count was definitely wrong he asked, "How did you count them?" That question really put me back on my heels. The count was done in slipshod fashion. My memory of it is that the sections were given areas and told to count the bodies there. We were wandering around half-dazed and didn't really care too much about anything so one can imagine the way the count was conducted. Would a shell-shocked digger count an arm, a trunk and a leg scattered over several metres as one body or three bodies? Nobody knew or cared at the time, and certainly not the people doing the counting.

I have since come across documents in Australia that also suggest that the count may not be accurate. According to the signal log recording messages sent and received during the action, the battalion reached the battle site at 9.20 a.m. on the morning of 19 August 1966. At 9.50 a.m. there were between 12 and 15 VC bodies found, yet by 10.20 a.m. only thirty minutes later, and no one was counting then, it was recorded, "Approaching 100 EN [enemy] DEAD".

By 7.20 p.m. that night the supposed body count was 188. When this was recorded it was then dark and there would have been no movement outside the night positions so it must be assumed that no more bodies could be accounted for after that time. Yet the *Canberra Times* of 20 August 1966 records that an Australian Army spokesman had given the body count figure that night as 193. Admittedly this is only a variation of five, but it is not accurate. Malcolm Fraser, minister for the Army at the time, was quoted two days later, on 22 August, as saying that the Viet Cong, "suffered 500 to 600 casualties". The commander of D Company made the comment to me in an interview that "eventually a body count of 245 was arrived at. I personally never saw 245 bodies in a

heap anywhere, but that was the count of bodies located". No one saw 245 bodies. They saw bodies here and bodies there. Looking back I don't really think that I would have seen more than 50 bodies and I spent three days in the area. How can one tell in such a situation? The only thing for sure is that the body count was not done accurately, as any private soldier who was on the spot will testify.

I personally do not care how many troops we faced at Long Tan or whether the body count is accurate or not. Whether it is 1500 or 2500, or whether the VC losses were 150 or 245 is irrelevant. I and the rest of the company who survived that day are aware how close to death we came. I think I can say for most of us that the glory put into the battle over the years is not important. Jingoism is the last thing we need. I do not care who claims victory and I certainly would not argue over the fact. The only fact I care about is that a lot of good men from both sides died that day and I will forever be saddened by that.

Bao and I stayed talking for a while after the others left to go to their rooms. Staying at the hotel were about two hundred children on a seaside holiday. The government seems to reward those who do well at school by giving them a holiday twice a year. These were children from Ho Chi Minh City and most of them had never seen the sea before. We had heard children laughing and roaring all the time we had been talking. When the others left I went downstairs to see what all the laughter was about.

At the foot of the stairs I moved behind a door so as not to disturb the scene. All the children were sitting on the floor, entranced by people on the stage who were entertaining them. At times they would all sing and at other times one of the entertainers would make them all call out and laugh. Two men behind the entertainer on stage went around mocking him and making the children shriek with laughter. It was a good sight to see in this poor country. The people have almost nothing by western standards and yet there is always laughter.

I slept fitfully on the thin mattress and tucked in the mosquito net tightly around the bed. I had visions of one of those

huge rats I had seen in Ho Chi Minh City coming to visit me in the middle of the night. I was awakened at dawn by the shrieking of the children as they all scrambled out to the sea. By the time I had washed in the bowl and cleaned myself up, they were out in the square in front of my room doing their morning exercises under the instruction of a teacher. Most of them looked about as enthusiastic as I had been doing early morning PT in recruit training. When the teacher dismissed them they really came to life and darted off in all directions. The teacher tried once to control them, but it was too late — they were all gone. He walked into the building shaking his head in mock severity.

After breakfast we went to the headquarters of the local party committee in Long Dien and then to Dat Do township — another place that would hold bad memories for a lot of Australian soldiers. Many Australian casualties were incurred around Dat Do by mines from the minefield. During 1969 the Task Force decided to mount operations in the area to deny the VC access to the town. A fence had been built with the help of local government forces but it did little to deter the VC who were helped by the people of Dat Do.

Another meeting took place with the district officials and I was introduced to the chairman of Long Dat district, Tran Tan Huy. Huy was a small thin man who had been born in the village of Long Tan in 1945. He was proud to come from a revolutionary family. His father, who had been with the Viet Minh, had been killed fighting the French in Phuoc Tuy in 1953. Huy was the eldest of two sons, but his brother had been killed in the Long Hais in 1969. His mother was also an ardent revolutionary, although not a fighter.

Huy said that he had been in the local district guerrilla forces and had been in C Company of 25 District. This was a district group of about 25 who lived in the bush but returned to their homes quite often. He said the western concept of guerrilla by night, farmer by day was not correct. He said that in Long Dat there were three levels of VC forces. One was the group he was with, the district guerrillas. There were also the local force D445 Battalion, and the regular forces of the VC 5

Division. As well, people from the villages who were not soldiers would help when required, acting as guides or carrying supplies.

Huy had served with the district forces until he was wounded in an Australian ambush near Long My in 1968. A friend of his had been killed and he himself had been shot in the hand and wrist — the old bullet wound is plainly visible. When his wound healed it was decided that he should become a cadre and concentrate on political activities.

This was a very dangerous job with very little protection. Huy moved around the area with two trusted people as bodyguards. All three were armed, which made it even more dangerous, as anyone moving with a weapon was fair game to any Free World Forces in the area. They lived in the bush, moving into the villages and hamlets at night for meetings and political rallies. They were helped constantly by the local people, who gave them information and supplies. The locals always met them outside the hamlets and led them through any obstacles, including mines. The people would also post sentries around the meetings and rallies.

There were times when the Australian troops made it difficult for Huy and his bodyguards to get to their supply caches or to receive help from the people and then they suffered badly. Sometimes they were reduced to boiling leaves and roots to make some soup in order to survive. For Huy it was all made worthwhile when the local forces entered the capital of Baria, before the fall of Saigon. He now lives on the outskirts of Long Dien with his wife and children in a comfortable home surrounded by fine wooden furniture he has made himself.

By this time in the meeting I had run out of cigarettes, but the Vietnamese put several packets on the table and told me to help myself. It had been arranged for me to go to Long My to meet some people who had been personally involved with Australian troops, and after that to go to Long Tan village and the rubber plantation. I asked about the cross that the members of 6 RAR had erected in 1969 on the site where Eleven Platoon had been trapped. None of the officials knew

of the cross or if they did, it had seemed unimportant. One of the village children said he thought he knew where it had been and agreed to be the guide for the party when we came back.

There were two cars and Bao sat in the back of one with Thang and me. We went down to Tam Phuoc and then through the green rice paddies toward the sea. The paddies stretched endlessly, waving slowly in the gentle breeze. The sky was a brilliant blue, and here and there, very high up, was a thick white puffball of cloud gleaming starkly out of the blue. The road was narrow and in very poor condition and the cars travelled at no more than 15 kilometres an hour. To the south rose the bleak, bare slopes of the Long Hais. Great sandy-coloured boulders on the hills stood out, accentuating the lack of trees.

All the people from the rice areas had been forcibly shifted by the Australian Army and the ARVN forces, and herded into the town of Phuoc Loi so they could be kept under supervision. The Australian minefield mentioned earlier, which was meant to isolate the VC from the populated areas, ran from Dat Do in the north to Lang Phuoc Hai on the coast, and just to the east of Phuoc Loi, where we were now heading. Here and there were small thatched houses and people out working the paddy fields. The trees around the houses were still young, as they had only been planted since 1975. The area had been cleared of trees during the war to deny the VC cover and food.

We turned off toward Hoi My on to an even narrower road and went along perhaps two hundred metres. Across to the right was a stand of tea-trees surrounding a tiny thatched cottage on the edge of one of the rice paddies. We all got out of the cars and set off up the small narrow path between two paddies. A group of children came toward us and several of them chattered excitedly and ran straight to Bao. He was in military uniform, but I could no longer see him as the fearsome enemy soldier he had once been. It was strange to think of his past now as he walked up the muddy path holding the hands of small children who spoke to him as if he were a revered uncle.

When we came to the hedge surrounding the cottage a group of people came out of the house and stood under the small thatched eave. A frail old lady came forward to greet us. She was no more than 150 centimetres tall and must have been well in her advanced seventies but she still carried herself well. She was wearing black peasant clothes of a blouse and pair of loose-fitting pants. Her feet were bare, brown, wrinkled and hard. Around her head, a piece of towelling held her thin grey hair in place. She moved directly to me and stood before me as if barring the way. She looked up at me and one old betelnut-stained tooth was the only one that was visible in her mouth. She clucked loudly, which alarmed me. Immediately I thought that something was wrong. I looked at Thang in terror and saw that he was beginning to laugh. All the other Vietnamese also started laughing. Thang laughingly told me she had said, "Look at you. Look at you. When you were here before you were young and fit and very strong, and now you are fat and an old man." Of course I had never been there before but she was thinking of all the young Australian soldiers she had seen. We were introduced and her name was Huynh Thi Xiu.

I put out my hand to her and she took it in her small brown one and gave it a squeeze. She continued to hold my hand as she led me into the cottage. It was basically only one room with a partial division between the cooking area and the living side. The floor was concrete — the local committee had done this for her, I was told. In the living area was a beautiful table and six chairs, and a lovely sideboard. Other than that there were basic peasant utensils. As she ushered me to the table another woman began pouring tea.

Mrs Xiu sat on one side of me and Thang on the other. On the table was an Australian hootchy, the small half-tent that infantrymen carry. I couldn't help myself — I touched the hootchy and felt one edge of it. Mrs Xiu spoke to me quickly and the sound of her voice startled me. I looked at Thang in confusion and his face was chalky as if he wanted to be sick. He translated softly that this was the thing "your people" had sent my youngest son home in.

I sat staring at the hootchy as if it were alive and the patches on it became bloodstains in my mind. "Display VC bodies (in some inoffensive manner)." I wonder if she thought it was inoffensive as she collected the mangled body of her son from the military post at Phuoc Loi. I looked down at Mrs Xiu as she sat staring at the hootchy and couldn't imagine what was going through her mind. I wanted to get outside to get more air but couldn't move. In the finish I reached out and took her hand and we sat staring at the hootchy together.

Bao broke the mood by pushing my tea toward me. He later suggested that we get up and look at the mementoes of her sons. Over the sideboard hung the certificates for Heroes of the Revolution — they were all she had left of her four sons. Three of the certificates had photos pinned to them. On one was the picture of a young boyish-looking Vietnamese standing proud in military finery. He wore long trousers, an army shirt, and VC rubber-tyre sandals. On his head was a cloth hat and he carried a light pack with the straps pulling down on his shoulders. Proudly held in his hand was an AK47 automatic rifle with the curved magazine pointing out. Beside him was a young girl dressed in black pants and white shirt. Her hair was pulled back and a long braid of it hung over her shoulder almost to the waist.

The photo was of Mrs Xiu's eldest son who had been killed in 1966. He and his wife had both joined the Liberation Movement in 1965. In 1966 a baby girl was born to the couple and several months later her son was killed. At that time his wife had been living with Mrs Xiu in Phuoc Loi. Not long after they heard of his death, the Saigon Army came and took the daughter-in-law away. Mrs Xiu heard she had been taken to the infamous Con Son island prison. She has never been heard of since, gone without trace, no word, no grave, nothing.

Saigon Army officers had then come to Mrs Xiu and taken her granddaughter from her. The little girl was taken to Baria and lived in an orphanage there for three years. Attempts to retrieve her had met with hostile refusals, but in the end the

authorities relented and let Mrs Xiu take the girl back to Phuoc Loi.

As she finished talking, she turned and gestured toward the other side of the cottage where four young people were standing listening to the conversation. She pointed toward the young people and said, "That is my granddaughter there. She is now 21." A girl I thought was about 17 stood side-on to me, leaning against one of the upright poles that supported the roof. She was dressed in a light blue blouse and the black loose-fitting peasant trousers. She was looking over her shoulder at me with no trace of a smile on her face. I tried to smile at her and nod, but received no response. Embarrassed, I turned away, not knowing whether she had snubbed me or whether she was just shy. She certainly did not look shy with her unblinking gaze that burned into me like a laser.

I was glad when the old lady spoke again because it broke the tension building up inside me. I looked at the other documents with the photos of the young Vietnamese looking back at me. After losing three sons and a daughter-in-law, she did not want her other son to go away. But for her, and him, there was no option. That old refrain again, "We had no choice. The choices were imposed on us". He had gone with her blessing and her prayers for his safety, and he had been sent back in a bloody Australian hootchy, so she could "see what the shooting was all about". What *were* we doing here! How much humanity did we manage to lose while we tried to impose our will on these simple people who didn't need us to tell them how to live their lives.

Mrs Xiu must have been reading my mind, or starting to feel the weight of her sorrow again because she said to me curtly, "Why did you come here? What right did you have to destroy my sons? I had never heard of your country before your soldiers came here."

Bao moved over quickly and extricated me from the situation. He said to me quietly, "Do not worry, Terry. She now has nothing but her memories and she is bitter at the loss of her sons. You must remember that she knows nothing of the world outside this district. Her world has always been this

place and her family.” This explanation made me feel even worse about the old lady and I looked back at her sitting at the table staring vacantly through the opening that served as a window.

Bao introduced me to the other two women in the house. One was Mrs Bay Cong who was mentioned in Maddock and Wright’s book, *War: Australia & Vietnam*. In a chapter by a Vietnamese Army historian, Tran Quoc Trung, it was claimed that Mrs Cong was beaten and crippled “for taking to the fields a meal they [the Australians] considered too large for her needs alone”.

When I met Mrs Cong she was not crippled, although she had a slight limp. She said that she was stopped near Ap Lo Gom by two Australians and two Vietnamese in a Jeep on about 29 September 1971. When I asked if she was sure they were Australians and not Americans, she had to admit she was not sure. By September 1971 the Australians were about to leave Phuoc Tuy, so it is uncertain whether or not they were Australians. There were American Advisers in the province at the time, but there were also MAT teams of Australians (these Military Advisory and Training teams were advisers who worked with South Vietnamese units).

Her story of the beating differs from the published version in that it excludes Australians or Americans from committing the actual offence. She said she was detained by the four army men and roughly treated — she did not say beaten — and then taken to the Saigon Army headquarters in Baria. She was held there for four days, during which time she was badly beaten several times, but by the Vietnamese, it seems, although Australians or Americans were close at hand.

The other lady I met was Mrs Le Ku Hoa. She was badly disfigured by a burn over her neck and parts of her face and I was told that her body was badly burnt. She had been a soldier and had suffered the injuries when struck by napalm during an air-strike on the Long Hai base area in 1969.

When it came time to leave I was both relieved and saddened. It had been an emotional meeting and I thanked the people for their time and hospitality. I wondered how many

Australian families would give the same hospitality to a VC soldier if he came to Australia. I kept thinking of my mother and my grandmother and the animosity they bore the Japanese over the death of my father in 1943.

The cars moved slowly back to Dat Do where others joined us and we headed north to Long Tan. Just out of Dat Do the car stopped at the old Australian base known as the Horseshoe. This was an old volcano crater, a 30 metre feature in the otherwise flat surrounding landscape. This base, a defended position, was built in early 1967 to control the eastern approaches to the populated areas and to help in the protection of the minefield.

We went into the rim of the crater, looking south, and could just see the sea from where we stopped. The Vietnamese have now established a quarry on the site to extract road-building material.

To the north lay the village of Long Tan. It has been rebuilt and looks quite prosperous again. At that time of the year (August, the wet season) the growth was luxurious and spilled over the roadway. We turned off the main road and went up a small track toward the rubber plantation that had been visible for some time. It was then midday and the clouds were starting to build up for the afternoon storm. My heart started to gallop as we moved under the canopy and the sun almost disappeared.

It was an uncanny feeling moving back inside the plantation again after all those years. It seemed as if time had stood still in that dark, doomed place. I was expecting the rubber trees to have grown large after twenty years, but they were hardly any bigger — perhaps only 7 centimetres in diameter larger. This nevertheless makes them seem closer together than I had remembered, but that was the only difference. The plantation was still being worked and most of the area was clear of undergrowth. The trees had not been thinned, which explains their lack of growth. Young trees are planted close together and after several years every second tree is taken out and used elsewhere. This is repeated several times until the

trees are mature; they then have room to grow and are not competing for nutrients.

The atmosphere of the place was foreboding and stagnant. I have read accounts of old soldiers returning to the battlefields of Europe and commenting on the beauty and tranquillity of what they saw. Such was not my experience here. The day was hot and steamy, but I was cold the whole time, occasionally breaking out in a sweat. The ground was red and wet and damp and an air of decay pervaded the place.

The child who was acting as a guide found the area where the cross had been. There was nothing there but a hole in the ground and the block of concrete that had been poured as a base to secure the cross. This must have been close to the area where Jimmy Richmond lay wounded all night, hoping that the Australian artillery would not hit him and finish the job the VC had started.

Through the trees to the north I could see the base of the feature of Nui Dat 2. This was where it was thought the VC headquarters had been, and was the placement of the heavy machineguns that raked the area with tracer fire almost non-stop for four hours. I wanted to walk around the area and especially get to the place — only several hundred metres away — where we had finally made the defensive position we thought would be our last stand.

This was not to be, as Thang said that Bao had to be back at Bien Hoa by 2.30 p.m. and we would have to leave soon. I took photographs of the area and walked around with the other people looking at the site. I asked about the cross again and no-one seemed to know what had become of it. There was some story that a farmer whose father was a Christian had taken it to put on his father's grave. This seemed unlikely and the thought of a three-metre concrete cross somewhere in the middle of the rice paddies seemed ludicrous.

I moved away from the group, down the gentle slope where the main attack had been mounted against the company. Colonel Khanh moved over to me and asked which direction the main attack had come from. I said that it had been mounted along this line, from this area down the slope to the north-

west. He shook his head and firmly stated, "We attacked from the south-west". He pointed to the direction of the D445 action with the APCs, and said again, "The main attack came from there". I was not in any mood for this type of pedantic argument and said firmly exactly where the main attack came from. He looked at me and then abruptly moved away to the other group of Vietnamese, who talked quietly amongst themselves. That was a test of some sort, I was sure, and I was not certain whether I had passed or not. Bao had been listening to the exchange and said quietly, "You are right, Terry. I know that, so do not worry."

Part of me wanted to walk around the plantation and part of me wanted to get out of the accursed place. I don't know whether I was sorry or not when Thang said that we would have to be getting back to Bien Hoa. I frantically asked Thang about the cost of the trip. I had not paid for a thing the whole time I had been in Phuoc Tuy and had been supplied with a room, food, beer and cigarettes. Thang went over to Khanh and returned with a smile on his face, saying that there was no cost to me. He looked at me in a knowing way and said quietly, "I think you have made some friends here, Terry." I was unsure about that but I certainly hoped so. My aim had been to meet the people and establish a rapport that had been lacking for twenty years. Whether we became friends or not was not quite as important. The main thing to my mind was to instigate some form of dialogue so that we could begin to understand their side of the conflict and they might begin to understand ours. I hoped that with my visit some small step might have been taken in that direction.

We all shook hands before leaving, amidst so much conviviality and good humour that Thang had to urge us to hurry before the rain caught us in the plantation. We left the other Vietnamese standing in the plantation and drove across onto a different track, leaving the plantation by the south-west corner. From there the Task Force rubber stood looking as it had twenty years before just across the bush and the low ground. The Nui Dinhs stood stark and bare, a grim reminder

that even though some things may look the same, a lot had happened since I had been there last.

As we reached the edge of the rubber, the rain that had been threatening for the last hour lashed down on us and the car slowed almost to a halt. The whole area was plunged into semi-darkness and I put my nose against the glass of the side window in an attempt to catch one last glimpse.

The sweat was pouring from me in the humidity, which was worse for having to keep all the windows shut. I sensed my heart was fluttering out of control and I took Bao's hand and placed it on my chest to let him feel the racing. He held it there for a moment and then looked at me with that sad little smile of his and slowly shook his head. I had the feeling that some of his ghosts had come back that day, as well as some of mine.

As the car moved into the outskirts of Baria, the rain had stopped but I was still staring out the window trying to take in as much as I could. There was a strange silence in the car as if we were all mentally exhausted. When we arrived back in Bien Hoa there was another meeting with the Dong Nai officials. Thang and I were taken to a hotel in Bien Hoa and given a room and we were to meet the officials again in two hours. I think this may have been to allow them to talk to Colonel Bao and discuss the trip. When we went to the meeting there was a good feeling in the room. Things must have gone well in Long Dat because it was suggested that if I wanted to return to do further research, then the officials at Dong Nai would do all they could to help. They presented me with a letter written in English, explaining that I could come to Vietnam in 1988 for up to three months if required and that they were prepared to help in any way possible.

I slept most of the way back to Ho Chi Minh City, and made that beautiful large bath my first priority on reaching the hotel. Over the next few days I met other people and did more sightseeing. In Ho Chi Minh City now there are many street cafes where people sit at little tables, drink beer, eat, and watch the world go by.

On Sunday nights in the city it seems that everyone who

owns a motorbike comes into Dong Khoi street. Thang and I sat in an outdoor restaurant and watched the traffic get heavier and heavier. When we went out into the street, the footpaths were jammed with people watching the motorbikes go around and around the block. It was a carnival atmosphere. Down one of the sidestreets two policemen sat on a 1000 cc Honda motorcycle and chatted with the crowd while the motorcycles in Dong Khoi street became thicker and thicker.

I thought about leaving on the following day, but didn't want to go. I had fallen in love with this country and its people, so full of contradictions. What a place it is. Austere one moment and exciting the next. As in the days of the Americans, there are people in Ho Chi Minh City living in the streets and others who seem quite wealthy. Exotic restaurants stand beside dirty little street cafes. In Le Loi street the footpaths are full of street-traders selling all sorts of things. One shop made fairy floss — one of the last things I expected to see.

When I arrived at the airport the following day, the chaos was even worse than the last time. There were two flights going at about the same time and this created enormous problems. A group of factory workers were going to the Soviet Union and of course all their families were there to see them off. As the plane took off I looked longingly back at the city as it became smaller. This time I knew that I could and would return.

Face to Face with a VC Colonel

My next visit to Vietnam came unexpectedly only three months after the last. Evan Ham, the film producer who had been interested in the Long Tan battle, was now planning to make a documentary on Hanoi and then cover the December withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea. He asked if I was interested in going to Hanoi with one of his crew to make arrangements for the shoot. I jumped at the chance of an all-expenses-paid trip and the possibility of seeing Kampuchea.

A member of his crew, Kieran Knox, sound recordist and still photographer, set off with me in late November 1987. In Hanoi we found we could not do anything until Evan arrived, so we waited for news from him. But word came that he could not arrange flights for the crew and they would have to postpone the trip. This left us on hold as well. I suggested to Dy, who was again assisting us, that Kieran and I could go south, where I could start on some of my own work, rather than remain in Hanoi doing nothing. Overcoming organisational difficulties, Dy managed to arrange this for us, with no guarantee that anything productive would come of it. We were to meet Thang, the interpreter from the last trip, who was already in Ho Chi Minh City. So far so good. He met us at the airport and we went into the city by taxi — this was a surprise as there was no private taxi service allowed the year before.

Next day, Thang took me to visit the main military barracks, where I met several senior officers. It seemed he had been busy arranging something for me but he refused to say what it was until it was all set. This intrigued me, but whenever I tried to find out what was going on, he kept telling me to relax and enjoy myself for a few days while he tried to arrange something that could prove very interesting.

That night he came to my room around 9 p.m. and said quietly that in the morning we were to go to Bien Hoa. When I asked why, he gave me a smug little smile and said I would find out in the morning. Could he give me a hint? "Terry, do not be impatient." He then instructed me to take enough clothing for a few days and to leave the rest of our gear and equipment in the hotel store room and book out. This really did have me intrigued and I spent most of the night awake wondering what was going on.

At Bien Hoa we went straight to the hotel I had stayed in on the last trip. Thang still very secretive, arranged rooms for us and then went off to make several telephone calls. He came back grinning from ear to ear. I was to meet an ex-Viet Cong colonel who had been a staff officer of 5 VC Division in 1966. When he told me, I stared at him in disbelief.

An hour later a car arrived and a strong, thick-set Vietnamese man stepped out from the back seat. He was dressed in khaki dress uniform with two medals on his chest and took off his officer's cap as he came through the door. He stood very aloof as the introductions were made and then we went upstairs to the large sitting-room on the first floor. I asked if he was still in the army and he said no, adding that he had worn his uniform to show me he had been a soldier. His authoritative air gave me no doubt about that. He was now director for Transport in Dong Nai province and lived in Ho Chi Minh City with his wife and four children.

When we sat down at the table he pulled out an American picto map from his briefcase and said that it had been captured from an Australian unit in the Hat Dich area by a unit of the 274 Regiment. We each behaved with reserve, feeling a little uneasy.

The colonel's name was Nguyen Thanh Hong, but he was introduced by his nickname Hai, which means two. He was the first son in the family and in Vietnam the first son is considered number two after the father. Hai — it is simpler to call him this — had been a staff officer of 5 VC Division from 1966 to 1968, a major in charge of military operations.

Our conversation was tape-recorded and I also made notes. As soon as the meeting was finished I wrote up the interview using both sources. This then is his story as he told it to me. For the sake of simplicity, I have altered the sequence in which he told me some of the information and I have also interspersed his account with findings of my own. I have checked whatever I could from other sources and have been able to verify some points but not others. Twenty years is a long time and it is apparent that some timings are incorrect.

Hai was born in 1932 near the village of Hoi My in the old Phuoc Tuy province. He joined the revolutionary forces in 1947 at the age of 15 and fought with the Viet Minh during the whole of the French war. During that time his mother was arrested twice and detained for quite lengthy periods and his uncle was killed fighting in Phuoc Tuy. During the 1954–60 period he remained in the army and would neither confirm nor deny that he was sent to the north. In 1960 he was with the 275 Regiment, which had several different names in its life.

Between 1960 and 1965 there were no regular divisions in the south. The VC forces were rather fragmented with the level of regiment being the highest. Hai was at a loss to know why the American Marine History recorded that it was the VC 9 Division who attacked the town of Binh Gia and fought off the South Vietnamese Rangers and Marines in December 1964. To the best of his knowledge the units who attacked at Binh Gia were all independent units who came together for that attack. The 275 had been one of those units and Hai had been at the Binh Gia battle. When I asked him if he knew what happened to the three Americans who were classified as Missing in Action as a result of that battle, he said that their forces captured two and took them to Tay Ninh. He only

knew of two prisoners, not three. I have since found a painting of the two prisoners done by a soldier who became a director of Cultural Affairs. The soldier had been in charge of a supply unit at the Binh Gia battle and painted the very detailed work from memory.

In 1968 Hai had been promoted to lieutenant colonel and had become deputy commander, Chief of Staff of 5 Division. In 1970 5 Division was upgraded and moved west; it was stationed in Cambodia around the area of Kompong Som and Kampot. The unit moved regularly back into Vietnam but left two regiments permanently in Cambodia. In 1971 Hai had been promoted to deputy commander-in-chief of Military Operations in Military Region 7. In 1975 he was the Commander in Chief of Staff of Military Operations during the final offensive on Saigon. His units were involved in the fiercest fighting of the final campaign with the attack on Xuan Loc.

In 1977 he became the commander of 5 Division and in 1978 he and the division were sent to Kampuchea when the border fighting started. When the Vietnamese invasion was launched on 25 December 1978, 5 Division were inside Kampuchea near Kratie, in support of the pro-Vietnamese Heng Samrin forces. His orders had been to move quickly to Poipet on the Thai border and set up a firm base. He thought this was about 400 kilometres from Kratie and he moved his entire division of about 7600 men, with APCs, artillery, anti-aircraft weapons and trucks in three days. The advance was so fast that they outstripped the following Vietnamese forces and it was 15 days before the other Vietnamese linked up with the division. During that time, 5 Division encountered strong resistance and his fear was that the Khmer Rouge forces would be able to consolidate and counter-attack while he was still mobile and only loosely co-ordinated. This did not happen, however, and Hai was able to establish the firm base at Poipet. An interesting sideline to the conversation was when he said that one of his forward units had ambushed a car in the dash to Poipet, but the occupants had escaped. On searching the car, soldiers found the Chinese passports of Pol

Pot. Hai is sure that he almost had the Khmer Rouge leader.

When the Chinese invaded Vietnam in February 1979, his division was rushed north to the border, but the fighting was almost over by the time they arrived. They were then immediately sent back to Kampuchea and were thrown into the fighting of a heavy Khmer Rouge counter-attack around Phnom Penh. I had never heard of a Pol Pot counter-attack in March, although Kampuchean specialist Martin Stuart-Fox, from the University of Queensland, agrees that it is more than possible there was such an attack then, although it is unlikely that their supplies could have come from outside Kampuchea.

Around the end of April 1979 the division had moved again to Poipet; they were still in Kampuchea in 1987. In 1979 Hai was promoted to colonel and in December 1980, senior colonel. He remained in Kampuchea until 1982 when he was posted back to Vietnam as commander in chief of staff of Dong Nai province. He retired in 1984. Life now, he said, was quiet and he missed the army very much.

Looking back on the 1965 period, he said that when the Americans entered the war with combat troops in March 1965 (the landing of the Marines at Da Nang), there had been a broad evaluation of strategy on the Viet Cong's part. They decided that the units needed to be brought under tighter control and so divisions were formed, 5 Division, officially, on 23 November 1965. An American intelligence report on 5 VC Division states that the unit was activated in August 1965.

According to American sources, the American build-up caused some dispute at that time between the Viet Cong and Hanoi over the implementation of policy. Hanoi thought it better for the forces in the south to make a strategic shift and go back to raiding and harassment tactics, thus enabling them to hold much of the ground won and to shield the regular units, such as 275 Regiment and 5 Division Headquarters, from heavy casualties. General Thanh, the North Vietnamese commander in the south in 1966, argued against this move and said that the forces were now reorganised and would be able to sustain the offensive. He wanted to continue with the

policy of large-scale clashes, and was adamant that to pause then would mean a psychological defeat that could be disastrous in view of the heavy American build-up of combat troops.

This argument prevailed and the VC units in the south continued with their forward momentum. In 1965 Hai went to 5 VC Division headquarters and during this time there were many clashes with the American forces and also with the Australians who were at that time attached to the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

When the Australians came into Phuoc Tuy in 1966 and established the base at Nui Dat, 5 Division thought that their plan was to form a protection line on Highway Two that ran almost due north from Baria to Xuan Loc. At Xuan Loc was the South Vietnamese 18th Infantry Division and, later, the American 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment. With forces based at Nui Dat and Xuan Loc, it seemed that the plan was to cut the VC forces from moving east to west unhindered.

There was much apprehension about this at first as the bases of the 275 Regiment were in the Nui May Tao area to the east. The 5 VC Division thought that the Australian unit was to be an independent, highly mobile strike force, operating with its own support of artillery, armoured personnel carriers and helicopters. They could also see that the Australians had situated themselves at Nui Dat with the intention of destroying the forces of the D445 in Phuoc Tuy. From Nui Dat it would be possible to strike out at the local force units in an attempt to cut them off from the people of the villages. There was a worry about what Hai described as the Australian "commando tactics", but they were not concerned about big unit operations as they felt capable of handling these.

At that time decisions about plans of attack were taken at divisional level, unless something specific was required from the higher commands. Five Division had moved forces into the Phuoc Tuy area in order to probe the American and Australian units and had been successful in some of these encounters. On Operation Abilene near the Courtenay rubber

plantation in Phuoc Tuy, elements of 5 Division and the local D445 Battalion had attacked an American unit and inflicted heavy casualties.

I have confirmed this episode from American documents. In the action C Company of the 2/16th Battalion of the American 1st Infantry Division were badly hit on the night of 12 April 1966. There were 34 Americans killed and 71 wounded from C Company and other companies racing to relieve them. The VC body count from this action was 42.

An indication of the aggressiveness of the VC 5 Division is seen in the after action report from Operation Toledo in northern Phuoc Tuy and southern Long Khanh provinces in August 1966. It is recorded that "Ninety-five contacts were made with VC forces. Fifty-eight of these were VC initiated." This is despite the fact that the VC forces in the area were not massed. The largest force encountered was platoon size.

The 275 Regiment of 5 Division was also in Phuoc Tuy during the initial Australian move into the province. This was the unit that inflicted heavy casualties on the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Long Phuoc during Operation Hardihood. American casualties during that operation were 23 killed and 104 wounded for a VC body count of 48. Hai was not sure whether the D445 or the 275 Regiment were responsible for the attack on B Company of the Australian 6 RAR in July 1966, but thought that it was one of their units with some D445.

By August it had been decided that the time was right for an attack on the Australian force, not only for military reasons but also for political reasons. The decision, he said, was made at divisional level, as they were able to decide their own objectives. For 5 Division there were compelling political reasons for an attack on the Australians. One was the impact a major confrontation, with heavy casualties, might have on the resolve of the Australian government to continue the commitment of troops. The second line of political thought was from their own side: the Australians had destroyed the town of Long Phuoc and shifted the people from Long Tan, as well as many more people from the country around the base, and

there was a need to show support for these people. It was necessary to demonstrate to the people that the Revolutionary Forces cared about their plight and were ready to avenge them.

Hai said it was left to him to plan the attack. He decided upon what he described as “the luring of the tiger from the mountain”. This tactic would not only test the Australians in battle, he reasoned, but also give him a clue to the “characteristics of the Australian commanders’ thinking”. By this, he said, he meant the reaction that the Task Force would take to provocation by the VC.

The plan was for the 275 Regiment to move close to the Task Force and to mortar the base. This occurred on the night of 16 August 1966 and Hai said that elements of the 275 as well as some members of the D445 were responsible. Over a hundred rounds of mortar fire were fired into the Task Force area and 21 Australian soldiers were wounded, several of them losing limbs. The aim of this action was to draw out a force from the base into the area of Long Tan, which had been selected as the killing area. The VC had their heavy machineguns set up in the bush area to the north of the plantation. The plan was to leave pieces of equipment so the Australians would pick up some sort of trail.

By the day of 18 August the forces were now in position. Hai was in a small deserted hamlet just on the eastern side of the Long Tan plantation called Ap Phuoc Hung. He had with him there the third battalion of the 275 as a reserve element, while the other two battalions were forming a screen to the east and the north of the plantation. Elements of the local D445 Battalion were on the south near the deserted village of Long Tan. One unit of the D445 had been placed on the south-western edge of the plantation with several rocket launchers; the intention was to slow down any reinforcements and cut off any Australian retreat. When I asked him why they had been placed there he looked me straight in the eye as if it was a stupid question and said that was the only place armour could cross. He said, “That period was the wet season. The river was very full. Because of the steep banks of the river

the only place tracks could cross was the old disused ford” He was quite right.

On the small feature of Nui Dat 2, just to the north of the plantation edge, were the headquarters of the attacking force of the 275 Regiment under the command of Senior Captain Ut Thoi and the executive officer Major Du. They had several heavy machineguns there. If as hoped they were able to lure the Australian force out of the plantation into the bush area under Nui Dat 2, the Australian force would be restricted in movement and find it difficult to maintain contact. And the machineguns could pour fire into the area from the high ground. If, however, the Australians moved east instead of north, the plantation itself was to be the killing ground.

When I asked why there had been no plan to attempt to neutralise the guns at the Task Force, Hai said there was considered to be no need. This seemed a funny thing to say as it was the guns that actually turned the course of the battle. But Hai said that at that time their policy was not to let a confrontation develop any longer than two hours. He considered there would be such confusion in the Task Force in the early stages of the battle that they would have the job over and be away from the area by the time the guns could start doing any major damage.

His recollection is supported by the *American Quarterly Report for Period Ending 30th April 1966*, from 11 Field Force Vietnam, which states:

The VC avoid large units such as Brigades and Regiments, but seek to attack isolated battalions and companies using great numerical superiority. In these attacks, they use a hugging tactic as a means of protecting themselves against artillery fire and airstrikes.

The plan was to hit the Australians very close to their base where they would least be expecting it, and move out of the area quickly. Hai does not know whether the small patrol (34 men) originally sent out from B Company was seen, but said that quite possibly it was and was allowed to go by. They knew that the Australians sent out small parties in advance of

their larger units (they may have been referring to SAS patrols). On this occasion, however, they were wondering whether any Australians would arrive at all as it was over 36 hours since the mortar attack had been launched.

When D Company 6RAR moved into the rubber plantation the company moved through to the east in single file. They then found the track split in two and the company moved into a formation of two platoons up and one platoon and Company Headquarters back around 100 to 150 metres. In this formation there was Ten Platoon on the left, Eleven Platoon on the right and Twelve Platoon and Company Headquarters behind. The two forward platoons followed each track and the other platoon and company headquarters spread out to link with them, 100 metres back. The right-hand platoon of the advance had a contact with six VC who fled to the east. The platoon, on the right, continued to advance to the east in steady pursuit of the fleeing VC.

Hai is not sure what happened next, but the action began against Eleven Platoon. It must be assumed that the commander of 275, Captain Ut Thoi, initiated the action at that place because Eleven Platoon was heading directly toward the headquarters of Hai, at Ap Phuoc Hung.

Once the action had been initiated there was no turning back. The enemy attack against the Australians in Eleven Platoon built up very quickly and a force of at least several companies were attacking within about 20 minutes. The platoon was completely cut-off and could not move backward because of the heavy attacks coming in on them. This is when confusion must have set in on both sides. The rain began pouring down, which decreased visibility to perhaps 100 metres.

Ironically, it was Eleven Platoon being cut off that saved the day for the Australians, because it caused a lot of movement from the rest of the Australian force. First Ten Platoon, on the left, near the edge of the plantation, was swung to the right in a hook to relieve Eleven Platoon. As they moved, they ran into a large group of VC heading round to encircle Eleven Platoon. They managed to break up this attack but

then came under withering fire from VC in the plantation and the guns to the north on Nui Dat 2. This stopped them in their tracks and eventually Ten Platoon withdrew to the Company Headquarters position. As they were coming back, the Australian company commander sent Twelve Platoon off in an attempt to reach Eleven Platoon by a different route. They were also stopped, but happened to be pinned down in a position where another large unit of VC were moving to attack the Company Headquarters position. They managed to inflict substantial casualties on this VC group.

Meanwhile, the trapped Eleven Platoon had left their position in an every-man-for-himself attempt to reach safety and the survivors had been able to get back to Twelve Platoon. They then managed to get back to the Company Headquarters position, just after a helicopter had flown in a much-needed ammunition resupply.

By the time the company had come together in the one position Hai's two-hour time limit was well past and the artillery barrages were taking a fearsome toll. From then on it was a case of Hai saying that they would have to start the withdrawal and Ut Thoi and Ba Du saying that, with the Australians now in the one spot, all that was needed was a bit more time.

Viet Cong forces then pushed into assault lines and began to bear down on the Australian position, being stopped close to the perimeter each time by small-arms fire and the fearsome artillery barrage. Hai sent the D445 Battalion elements from Long Tan village to attempt to close the gate on the Australian position by moving around to the west between the trapped company and the Task Force base.

By then it was almost dark and he knew that there would have to be some sort of relief force on the way. He knew that as soon as a relief force was in sight they would have to break off the assault and begin the withdrawal. The relief force crossed the river at the ford and found the small group of D445 waiting for them with the rocket launchers. Luckily they managed to break through, but then ran into the other unit of the D445 moving around the back of D Company's position.



Ho Chi Minh's glass-encased body before being moved to the Mausoleum in Hanoi. Left: General Dung; Right: General Giap. (Photo courtesy Archives, Hanoi)



Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, Hanoi



Dedication square in Kham Tiem street. The statue is of a woman holding a dead baby in her arms.



Kham Tiem street after the Christmas bombing of 1972 (Photos courtesy Archives, Hanoi)





Bomb victim, Hanoi (Photo courtesy Archives, Hanoi)



Rescue workers rush to aid bomb victims, Ha Nam Ninh Province May 1972 (Photo courtesy Archives, Hanoi)



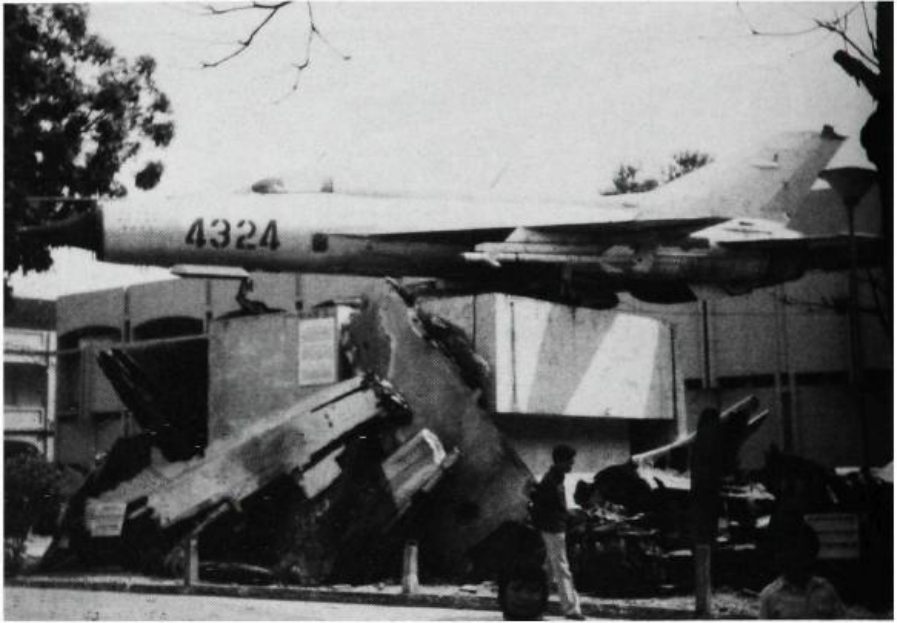
Rescue worker helps bomb victim, Hanoi, 1972 (Photo courtesy Archives, Hanoi)



Bach Mai hospital, Hanoi, 1980 (Photo courtesy Archives, Hanoi)



Hanoi's Bach Mai hospital after the December 1972 bombing (Photo courtesy Archives, Hanoi)



MIG Fighter at the Hanoi War Museum — note kill stars on nose. The wreckage at the base is an American plane.



The Nui Dinh mountains, Phuoc Tuy province, Vietnam, 1987. These mountains were only five kilometres from the Australian base at Nui Dat in 1966 and were covered with forest. Today they are barren — a result of chemical spraying during the war.



Colonel Bao, 1987. From 1966 to 1969 Bao was an officer of the VC D445 battalion.



A photo of a painting of two American prisoners being taken away after the battle at Binh Gia, 1964



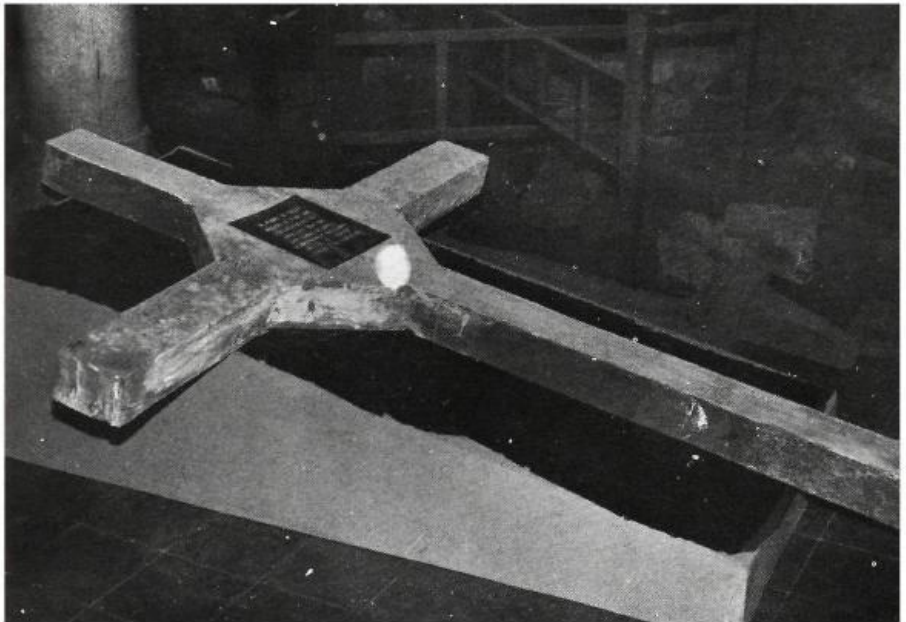
Author Terry Burstall on a wrecked American tank near Cu-Chi



A group of entertainers perform for VC troops in the Song Rai forest, Phuoc Tuy province, 1967 (Courtesy Bien Hoa War Museum)



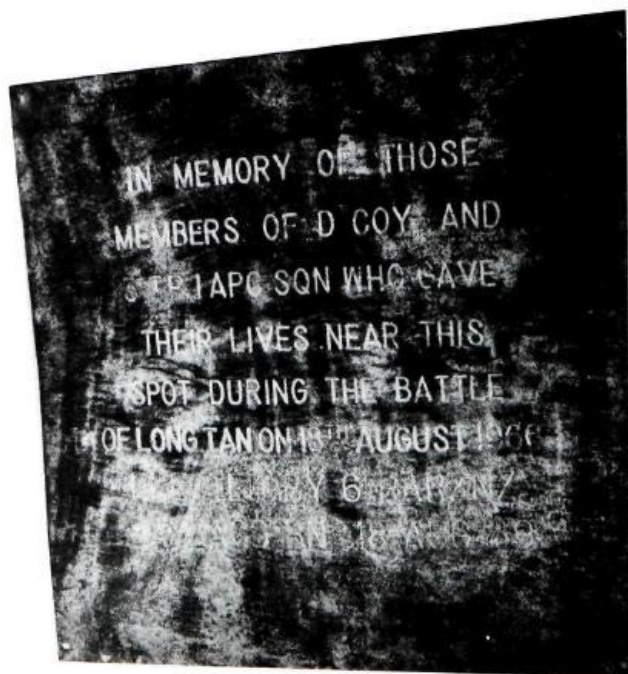
Terry Burstall and Le Tranh in the Long Tan rubber plantation. Tranh, a member of the D445 battalion, fought and was wounded in the Battle of Long Tan. Tranh made sure the replica cross was placed in the exact spot where the original Australian cross was placed in 1969.



The Australian cross, now housed in the War Museum, Bien Hoa City



The plaque from the Long Tan cross when first found. Holding the plaque is Tran Tan Huy, Chairman of Long Dat district. (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



The plaque when cleaned (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



Colonel Nguyen Thanh Hong (Hai), commander of VC forces at Long Tan battle, checks references on a map with Terry Burstall (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



Hai at his home in Ho Chi Minh City



Terry Burstall in front of Nui Dat hill, 1987. In 1966 the hill was covered with trees. (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



In the Task Force. The blocks are situated near the southern end of the Nui Dat base. (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



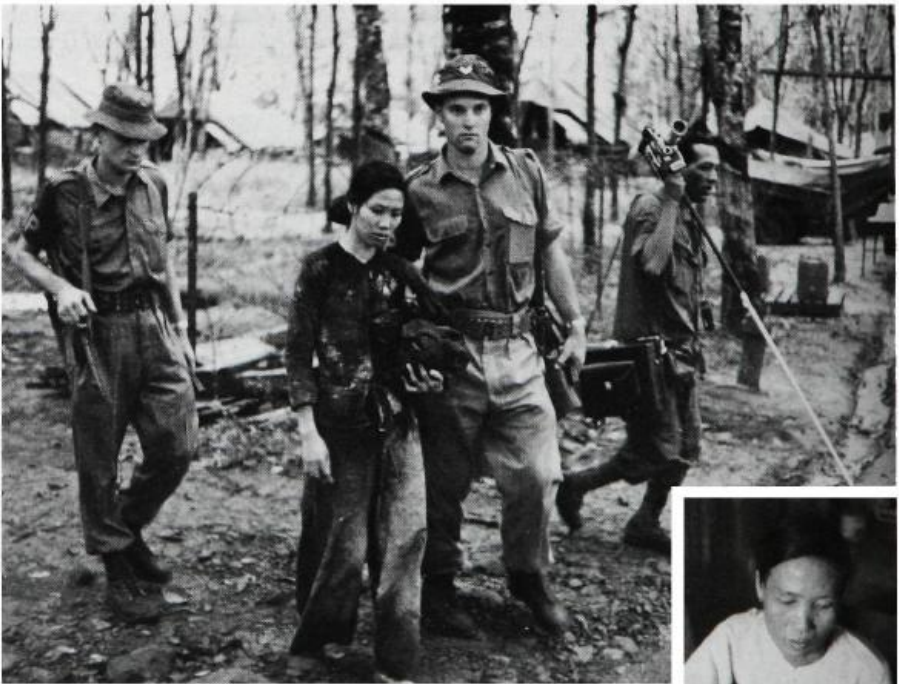
Dang Van Ba with his wife and children outside their home near Hoi My. Ba was the commander of the Hoi My guerillas and was wounded by the Australians in 1968. (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



Mrs Trinh from Phuoc Loi village. Her son's body was dumped in the market square in Phuoc Loi in 1969. (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



Mrs Nau momentarily breaks down during the interview with Terry Burstall in 1989



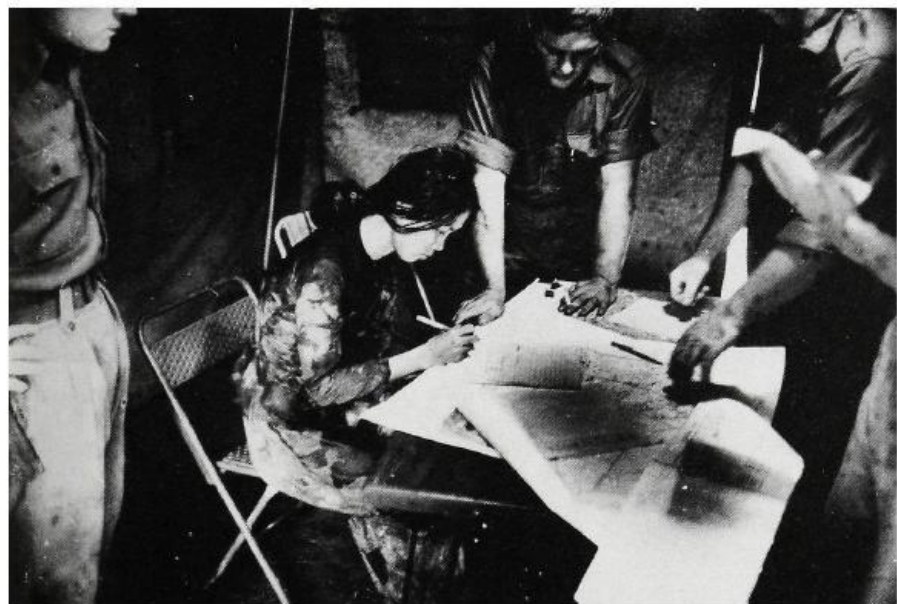
Captured, 1966 (Photo courtesy Gabriel Carpay)

(Inset) Mrs Nau. This woman was water tortured by Australian Military Police in 1966. She is looking at photographs of herself, taken in 1966, when she was first captured.





Interrogation, 1966 (Photo courtesy Gabriel Carpay)



Signing a statement, 1966 (Photo courtesy Gabriel Carpay)



Blindfolded and ready for the South Vietnamese authorities, 1966 (Photo courtesy Gabriel Carpay)



Terry Burstall and Le Tranh
at the house of Mrs Ngo Thi
Loc, Long Tan village, 1989

Le Tranh (centre) and Nam,
listening and reflecting during
their first meeting with
Terry Burstall in 1987 (Photo
courtesy Normella Pictures,
Kieran Knox)





Terry Burstall interviews Long Tan residents, 1987 (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



Terry Burstall with Ba Lien a former political officer of the D445, at his home in Bien Hoa City, 1989

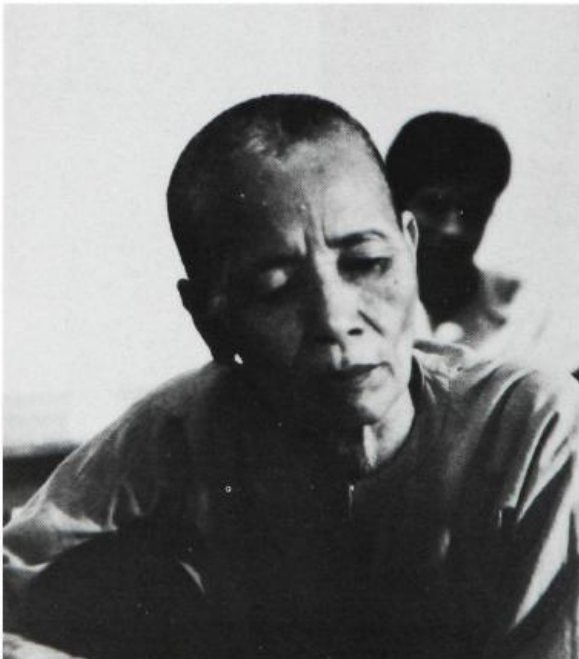


Terry Burstall meets with Ba Du (wearing hat) and officers of the Vietnamese Army at Military Headquarters, Ho Chi Minh City, 1989



Ba Du and Terry Burstall after the meeting

Mrs Nam, a "resettled" refugee from Long Phuoc in 1966 (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



Mrs Su, who was also forced from Long Phuoc. Her daughter was killed by an Australian patrol in 1967. (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



Houses in Long Phuoc, 1989. These are the types of substantial dwellings destroyed by Australian troops in 1966.





Mrs Nau's house in Hoa Long village, 1989



A street in Long Phuoc, 1989



The school at Long Phuoc, 1989



Tran Tan Huy, Chairman of Long Dat district. Beside him is his mother, Mrs Ngo Thi Loc, and other relatives. (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



Inside Mrs Ngo Thi Loc's house. The house is on the same spot in Long Tan village as the old house she was forced to leave in 1966. Note the polished logs supporting the roof and the fine furniture.

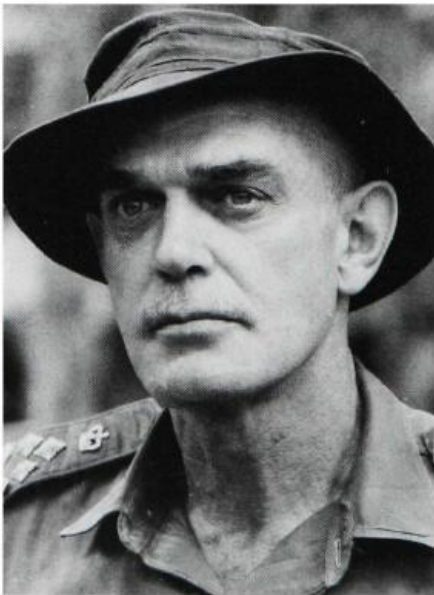


A stone stencilled with names in the old Australian Task Force base. Blue paint once covered the entire rock but is now wearing off, revealing the names underneath.





Village children recoil at the sight of VC bodies being dragged behind Australian APCs near Xuyen Moc, Phuoc Tuy province, 1969 (Photo courtesy Australian War Memorial)



Brigadier Jackson, Task Force commander from April 1966 to January 1967 (Photo courtesy Australian War Memorial)



Brigadier Graham, Task Force Commander from January 1967 to October 1967 (Photo courtesy Australian War Memorial)



Australian soldiers destroy the town of Long Phuoc, June 1966. This and another similar photo are the only remaining photos in the Australian War Memorial's Collection relating to the destruction of Long Phuoc. (Photo courtesy Australian War Memorial)



Terry Burstall and Barry Peterson, author of *Tiger Men*, drink beer in a street cafe in Hanoi, 1987 (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



Terry Burstall and Barry Peterson at the War Museum, Hanoi, 1987 (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



Terry Burstall points out areas of the Task Force to Thang the interpreter (centre), and Thao, a VC soldier from Xuyen Moc, 1966 (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)



Nam and Terry Burstall in the hole with the block of concrete that held the Long Tan Cross, in the Long Tan rubber plantation (Photo courtesy Normella Pictures, Kieran Knox)

By then the order was given for withdrawal and the units all started to pull back. Hai was very worried about being cut-off and moved all his men into their predetermined withdrawal routes. His headquarters and the other battalion of the 275 Regiment moved north to the Long Khanh/Phuoc Tuy border to Ap Suoi Cat where he said they prepared another ambush in the hope that the Australians would follow them out of artillery range. But this did not happen.

Several companies were left at the battle site to retrieve weapons and the wounded during the night, but much of the cleaning up and collection of weapons had been taking place while the battle was being fought. The majority of 275 moved out that night, as did the D445 people. The badly wounded from the 275 Regiment and the D445 went to the north to the Nui May Tao mountains. Those not so badly wounded had their wounds treated at the many aid posts stationed around the battle area.

Hai concluded this part of the discussion by saying:

The plan at Long Tan was flexible and when we could not destroy your troops in the required time frame and beyond, we decided to withdraw. The artillery was hitting us hard and we knew reinforcements would be arriving and we did not have the strength to stop them. We were disappointed that we could not have overrun your troops in the rubber plantation, but the weather was a factor that created many problems with our communications. We were hoping you would follow us to Ap Suoi Cat where you would have been out of artillery range, but it seems you were not prepared to fight unless you had the advantage.

The Australian reinforcements Hai had been nervously awaiting had only been seven armoured personnel carriers and one infantry company of around 110 men. He had the forces to stop them if only he had known it. Fortunately for us and unfortunately for him, he assumed that the relief force would be much larger and so ordered the withdrawal before it could be ascertained what the force consisted of.

The other ironic part of the aftermath was the statement that Task Force commander Brigadier Jackson made to me in an interview on 19 February 1988:

I can still hear Colin Townsend (CO 6 RAR) on that radio to me, "May I proceed?" I said, "Yes, one thousand metres only," because I was very worried, not about what we had been fighting, but the others. They could have been sitting at the back of us just a few thousand metres away, just waiting for us, and they knew where our guns were. All they had to do was pick a fight out of gun range and if we were stupid enough to go into it [out of artillery range] we were in real trouble — real trouble.

A fact little known in Australia about this action was that at the time of the battle at Long Tan the Americans were conducting a large operation called Toledo in northern Phuoc Tuy, Long Khanh and Binh Tuy provinces. The records from 11 Field Force Vietnam report that the concept of the operation changed following the battle at Long Tan: the American units swung south in order to attempt to make contact with the VC 275 Regiment on its move north; but they were unsuccessful. American documents do not support the Australian claim that 2500 VC troops were involved in the battle. One states that the Australian force "encountered what was estimated to be one of two reinforced VC battalions. These forces were determined to be elements of the 275 regiment and 860 local force battalion [D445]."

Another document that supports Hai's claim that his force moved to Ap Suoi Cat is an after-action report of the 173rd Airborne Brigade from Operation Toledo. It is recorded there that: "At 1950 hours [on 25 August 1966], an ambush patrol observed 75-100 VC at YS 563848. They were wearing black pyjamas, soft caps and carrying large rucksacks and at least one (1) 81 mm mortar. They were moving north and remained in observation for 45 minutes. No action was taken because of radio difficulties." Grid reference 563848 is approximately 18 kilometres in a direct line from Long Tan to Ap Suoi Cat, which is only another 22 kilometres further north. This is not to say that Hai's story is correct. There were times when he seemed hesitant about answering questions and there is always the political angle to be thought of, even after all this time, as I have also found out in Australia. It seems that both participants of the Long Tan battle know things that they would rather leave unsaid.

Hai's observations on the battle were contradictory in parts but he did admit that the Long Tan battle was not good for them militarily because they did not achieve their aim of wiping out the Australian unit. However, he thought it was a good political victory in that it won them much support from the people of Phuoc Tuy, especially those displaced from their villages. He felt that it made the Australian military leaders look at the Australian position in a different light, but he was amazed that Australians could look on the battle as a victory. "How can you claim a victory when you allowed yourselves to walk into a trap that we had set? Admittedly we did not finish the job, but that was only because time beat us and your reinforcements arrived. I mean, you did not even attempt to follow us up. How can you claim a significant victory from that sort of behaviour?"

Hai also disputed the Australian body count. He wanted to know how it was, if the 275 were decimated, they were able to launch an attack on the ARVN 18th Division only seven days after the battle. I am doubtful about this claim as there is nothing about an attack on the 18th ARVN in any of the American documents I have looked at. His recollections are also questionable because there is no one willing to quote any casualty figures. The count of 150 is acceptable and the fact that only 53 weapons were picked up could also be telling, were it not for the fact that there were VC in the area all night and part of the next day.

The question that has always been in my mind is, Did the Australian military commanders inflate the figure to make the action appear an Australian victory rather than have to face the questioning of why they allowed a force to become involved in such a situation with no readily available back-up organised? This question is the more pertinent because there were many indications that a VC attack on an Australian unit was imminent. Just one of many documents recording the likelihood of an attack on the Australians is the 11 Field Force Vietnam operational report. This records that in early August,

2. Reports of VC battalions in the 1st ATF TAOR had been received. These reports were partially confirmed by reconnaissance and minor enemy contacts. The contacts were believed to have been with reconnaissance elements of main force units probably located in the May Tao area.

This warning is one of many warnings that were available to the Australians before the battle. With the knowledge of the Binh Gia battle, the intelligence reports indicating the movement of the VC 5 Division toward the area, and the inadequate defences at the base, it is a major military blunder that no back-up was on hand and organised at that time. Yet the Army has never had to answer these questions publicly because the battle was a resounding victory, according to Australian accounts. From one who was there, all I can say is that if it was a victory it was not because of good planning. It was so close to a disaster of huge proportions that it does not bear thinking about. Looking at the forces Hai had in the area and their disposition, one can thank the boys of Eleven Platoon, the rain, and the accuracy of the artillerymen that we survived the day.

The other big factor in the battle from the Australian point of view was that the company had a good commander. Major Harry Smith may not have been the most liked officer in the battalion but he was certainly one of the most competent, which he proved in the Long Tan rubber plantation on 18 August 1966. Without the cool leadership of Harry Smith the story could easily have been different and Hai may not have had to tell me about the event.

Another interesting point to come out of my talk with Hai was the Australian interpretation after the battle. If what Hai said was correct about the planning and the lead-up to the battle, then the only one who got the interpretation of events right was subsequently told that he was wrong, the commander of B Company 6 RAR, Major N.E. Ford. He went in to the rubber plantation on the first patrol before D Company and wrote his interpretation in his after-action report:

a. *Enemy Intentions.* Despite the statements by VCC, [Viet Cong Captured] it is thought that the enemy plan was:-

(1) A mortar and recoilless Rifle attack from east and west.

(2) An attack on IATF forces following up the trail of the withdrawing Mortar and Recoilless rifle detachment.

b. Evidence and opinions to support this view is:-

(1) It seems unlikely that VC would alert IATF with a mortar and recoilless rifle attack *before* an infantry assault. I ATF could be expected to call in all forces (as it did with 5 RAR) and to look to its defenses.

(2) A fairly clear trail was left, leading to the "trap" sprung by D Coy. This trail was admittedly broken for about 500 yards, but VC could expect that it would be found in a fairly short time.

(3) A 445 Bn POW stated that his unit was in Long Tan on 18 Aug and that his orders were to march to the "sound of the shooting". This sounds like part of a plan to close a trap.

This interpretation by Major Ford is the same as Hai explained to me. It is also substantially the same as a VC defector told the Battalion Intelligence officer on 20 February 1967. According to an intelligence debriefing of a prisoner dated 23 February 1967, the situation Hai outlined in 1987 was given to the Task Force in 1967. The record of the interview with the defector states in part:

A. The version of the Long Tan battle that he knows is as follows. D445, minus heavy weapons and a small protective element, were ordered out of the area and went into the vicinity of YS 5668. Both 5 and 9 Divisions came into the area and the plan was to mortar the IATF base and lure a battalion out into their area. They would then annihilate this battalion. The mortaring took place but the plan did not eventuate as thought . . .

B. The reasons for not attacking the Australian base were that they would lose too many men in capturing it. When they had done this the Americans would surround them and they would be trapped.

Of course this information cannot be relied on but it does give food for thought.

I would suggest that the Army at that time could not afford such an interpretation as it would show a lack of planning and organisation.

The commanding officer of 6 RAR completely discarded the analysis by saying

I do not agree at all with OC B Coys [Major Ford] of enemy intentions (mainly for reasons given in para 3). His evidence to support them are very weak. Why the enemy bombarded 1 ATF on the night 16/17 Aug is not yet clear but it is most unlikely to have been part of a trap. Major Ford states in para 7a (3) "A 445 POW stated that his unit was in Long Tan on 18 Aug and that its orders were to march to the sound of the shooting" etc. This is true but the POW also stated that this order was given, not as an anticipatory order, but after the battle began.

I feel that it is the colonel who has the weak supporting arguments not the major and I believe Hai's story vindicates the analysis of Major Ford and the conversation with the returnee.

The Australian interpretation of the battle at Long Tan has always been that the VC force was moving toward the Nui Dat base and were contacted by D Company. This story has always let the Australian commanders off the hook; they have not had to admit that they allowed their forces to be lured into an ambush situation and that their subsequent reactions left a lot to be desired.

According to Hai, there was never any plan to attack the Australian base. For the VC in 1966 the war had entered a new era of military tactics and they saw no value in attacking defended positions if they ran the likelihood of being trapped by the mobile American forces — hence Hai's plan to lure the Australians from the base and "hit them under the heart where they were least expecting it". It was intended to be so close to the heart that there would be confusion, initially, at all levels hence the two-hour time limit.

For Hai there were several significant after-effects of the battle he wanted to mention. One was that 5 Division forced the Australians always to be aware of the security of their base area. This restricted them geographically and Long Tan did inflict a substantial number of casualties on the Australian force. When I told Hai that the Australian casualty figure from the battle had been 18 killed and 26 wounded, he did not dispute the figures but obviously disbelieved them. He thought the casualties would have caused a rethinking of the Vietnam commitment in Australia.

Another significant factor for the VC was that the battle brought their troops up against the Australians for the first time and gave them confidence and experience. The VC wanted to test the tactics of the Americans and Free World allied forces to see how they would respond to different scenarios. He said, "You must remember that . . . this was a new era of military tactics and both sides were still experimenting with which was the correct line to follow."

One of the lessons learned from the battle, Hai said, was the nature of the Australian command. It appeared to them that the Australians were willing to respond to provocation without looking too far behind for the motivation. Therefore they were easy targets to draw into situations of advantage for the VC. Hai used a similar tactic to lure Australians into another ambush near his home hamlet of Hoi My. This was

when we attacked the outpost at Phuoc Hai [February 1967]. There were two reasons for this. One was to cause casualties to the Saigon Army and the other was to hit the Australians who we thought would try to cut off our retreat. I had my forces make a defensive position to the east of Hoi My and then we waited for your troops who we were sure would land in that area.

According to Hai, there were only about 60 men at the prepared site of that battle. They were not the group who hit the South Vietnamese at Phuoc Hai — those had been the D445 and they had moved back to the Long Hai base area. Hai's force had dug extensive positions and had men in trees and also rocket launchers and heavy machineguns. The position had been formed in the shape of a U and the Australians had come into the mouth of the U. He thought his men had destroyed several armoured personnel carriers, as well as killing many Australian soldiers. When I asked him how he had decided on that position he said. "Did I not tell you before that I was born near Hoi My. That was my country. Where else would you have landed a force if you were to cut off our forces from the Phuoc Hai attack if you thought they were moving east?" If one looks at the map of the area there are not many other places that a landing could have taken place if it was to be effective.

An indication of the care taken in the siting and defence of the position is given in the statements of the commander of 6 RAR in the battalion's after-action report:

The enemy position was a very strong one and generally well dug in. Although not a defensive position it was sited for good all-round defence. Individual pits were sited very skilfully and with very good fields of observation and fire. They were camouflaged with leaves, sticks and local vegetation, and because of the nature of the light-coloured sandy soil, spoil heaps blended in naturally with the background and were difficult to see. I was unable to pick out individual pits from low air observation, even when I knew exactly where they were, when I flew over the area subsequently.

Hai's men moved out of the area as soon as the Australians pulled back. They checked out the destroyed Australian armoured personnel carrier to see if there was anything of value in it, but it had been burnt out. They then moved to the area of Xuyen Moc because there was a plan to hit at the South Vietnamese forces in the area in an attempt to discredit the coming elections and disrupt the Hearts and Minds Campaign of the ARVN battalion around Dat Do.

The Long Tan battle also gave the VC better understanding of Australian tactics and so they could make plans to counter them. They also learned that the timings set for the attacking forces on large ambush positions were crucial and had to be adhered to. The co-operation between the main force units and the local force D445 had been a very good experience for all concerned. Hai went on to say that the 275 Regiment of 5 Division, being a mobile division, only came into Phuoc Tuy, and contact with the Australians, when there was a job to be done. Some of the significant actions involving the 275 from his recollections were:

1. Feb. 1967. Battle with 6 RAR at Hoi My
2. June 1967. Attack on the American 9th Division at Kim Long
3. During Tet 1968, attack on the American base at Long Binh
4. Early 1969. Attack on the American 25th Division
5. May 1969. Attack on 4th Regiment ARVN 18th Division.

There was one last question that I had to ask Hai before he left and I held my breath as I waited for the answer. Did he hear of the two Australian wounded picked up by VC forces in the plantation during the battle? He shook his head at me and looked bemused by the question.

I spent the afternoon in the room writing up the interview. The meeting with Hai had been most important and there was no doubt that a lot of what he said was correct and could not be disputed. However, there were many things that could not be substantiated and many of my questions he either did not answer or answered hesitantly, as if thinking of the best thing to say. In general what he had said was correct and it certainly made me think hard about the people who had been my enemy 20 years before.

I was later to meet another three ex Viet Cong officers whose stories were as interesting and illuminating as the interview with Hai.

Meetings with Three VC Officers

Colonel Hai added a new dimension to my perspective of the war from their side. The interview with him certainly convinced me that the forces against us were professional, dedicated soldiers and not the indoctrinated puppets many people led us to believe of communist soldiers. I was lucky to find another three officers who were involved in actions against the Australians. Although I met and interviewed them on a later trip to Vietnam, it is useful to relate what they told me here.

The first officer, Ba Lien, reminded me of everybody's favourite uncle — slightly round and cuddly, with an infectious smile, and exuding friendliness and hospitality. He kept making sure that there was tea in my cup and that I took cigarettes from the packet he left for me on the table. Even when he started talking about his early life, it was in a good-humoured way. His nature was complemented by the cosiness of the front room of his house in Bien Hoa City where we sat talking.

Ba Lien probably had more to do with the Australians than any other officer or ex-officer from the revolutionary forces alive today. Born in the north of Vietnam in 1924 in Ninh Hoa village, Hai Hung province, near Hanoi, his real name was Dong Van Chuong. He joined the revolutionary movement in 1944, and fought in many places during the French

war although his unit was not involved at Dien Bien Phu. In 1955 he came south with what he described as the "volunteer forces" to the vicinity of Baria. Baria, to Ba Lien, is not the town of that name but the province of Phuoc Tuy so I will use Baria to mean the province and Baria Town to distinguish the two.

The nucleus of the D445 Battalion was formed in 1957 when Ba Lien and others formed two local force companies, the C40 and the C44. These two units amalgamated and in 1965 became the D445 or the 860 Battalion (the units were known by various names).

During the period 1957 to 1960 these units were concerned with political activity. They had at their disposal quite a few arms caches which had been hidden after the 1954 Geneva Agreements, but at that time the units were trying to achieve their aims through political means rather than armed struggle. It was not until 1960, as the regime of Diem in the south became more arrogant and repressive, that they had to resort to the armed struggle. This created problems because, even with their arms caches, they were no match for the well-equipped forces of Diem, who was being supplied with equipment by the Americans.

Ba Lien believes that the battle his unit was involved in at Binh Ba in March 1960 was one of the first major confrontations in the south. He had been concentrating his activities around the rubber plantations in Baria and Long Khanh from 1957 because the rubber workers were then the only organised workers outside the urban areas and were a rich source of revolutionary potential. They already had their own leaders and their own grievances which could be sheeted home directly to the plantation owners and the Saigon government. Their political consciousness, therefore, was already fairly advanced.

In 1960 industrial unrest at the Binh Ba plantation had got to the point where the plantation manager had called in the police. With their arrival the confrontation turned even uglier. The police fired on the rubber workers, and Ba Lien thought several were wounded. In response to this the

C40 and the C44 companies attacked and overran the Binh Ba police station on the night of 3 March and gained much support from the rural workers as a result.

By 1962 the American Advisers coming into the country were causing a lot of difficulty, as they were stiffening the forces of Diem. They also set up many strategic hamlets in Baria and Long Khanh provinces, which created problems for Ba Lien's forces responsible for those provinces and also part of Bien Hoa province.

In December 1964, when it was decided to attack the Catholic town of Binh Gia, Ba Lien's forces were given the task of guiding other units to the area and then mounting the major assault on the town. These other units were independent main force units from the 275 Regiment, sometimes known as 5 Regiment in those days. Some other units also participated which later became part of VC 9 Division. When they took the town they ran into some fierce pockets of resistance but overcame them very quickly. Many Catholic residents of the village were opposed to the revolutionary forces and remained indoors, but Ba Lien's forces were helped by the poorer people of the town.

Once the objective had been taken the main force units moved into position around the town in order to trap the expected reinforcements of the Saigon Army. The first South Vietnamese (ARVN) forces sent against them were stopped and then the main force units ambushed several larger ARVN units in some particularly ferocious night fighting. Ba Lien's people moved out of the area and he heard later of the ambush in the rubber plantation at Binh Gia where the ARVN lost some tanks. When I asked him about the American prisoners, reported in American documents as having been captured, he looked up quickly as if he had forgotten all about them, and then said in a pleased way, "Yes, I heard later that we had captured two Americans. I do not know what happened to them, although I think that I heard they were sent to Tay Ninh."

Ba Lien's forces then moved throughout the area and made big propaganda about the defeat of the Saigon Army at Binh

Gia. He laughingly said they even held a political meeting in a Catholic church with the priest present. He knew all about this aspect because he was the unit's commissar in charge of Political Affairs at that time.

With the advent of the American troops into the south, all the forces there were reorganised. Ba Lien's two companies became the D445 Battalion in May 1965. They were to be the local force for Baria, Long Khanh and part of Bien Hoa provinces, much as they had been before. Ba Lien realised that the war could not be won without the support of the people and so always endeavoured to bring his forces close to them by remaining in touch as much as possible.

When the Australians moved into Nui Dat, Ba Lien thought that their purpose was to help pacify Long Khanh and Baria. He said that they knew of the intended arrival of the Australians before they came to Nui Dat. They did not know what strength the unit was to be, but thought at least a regiment. Because of the Australians' reputation as guerrilla fighters they knew they would experience difficulties in the early stages. When the Australians destroyed the villages of Long Phuoc and Long Tan it came as no surprise to them — they were expecting moves of this nature. Although the loss of the villages made it difficult for Ba Lien's forces, it gave them a huge political advantage because the people never forgave the Australians for their treatment of them.

The D445 Battalion made many probes of the Australian Task Force position in the early stages and then got the chance to bring them to battle in late June 1966. This was actually July, and it was the battle that occurred during Operation Hobart. There were two companies involved in this attack on B Company 6 RAR and Ba Lien, who was the commander on the ground, said they used hugging tactics to get in close to the Australians in order to avoid the artillery. The after-action report confirms that the VC attacked very close — close enough to hurl grenades into the Australian perimeter. The Australian commander had to bring in the artillery so close to his own position that several rounds fell inside his own line of defence.

When I asked Ba Lien about his losses during that engagement he said there had not been more than 6, but one had been a company political commander. The 6 RAR after-action report states a body count of 9 VC for 3 Australians killed and 19 wounded during the five-day operation.

Ba Lien was also involved in the Long Tan battle. He and the commander of D445, Sau Chanh, co-ordinated with the 275 Regiment and the element of 5 Division Headquarters. Part of the D445 were guides for the units who mortared the Task Force on the night of August 1966. He was not directly involved in the fighting but, as he understood it, the plan was to draw a large unit into the area of the Long Tan rubber plantation and then attempt to break up the Australian force into smaller units as the battle progressed.

He is not sure if the small unit of B Company was seen, but thought it may have been and was allowed to pass as they waited for a larger unit. He had heard the story of the two wounded Australians being captured but could not confirm it any further. He said that they especially wanted to take prisoners.

When their forces withdrew, Ba Lien's part of the D445 went to the area of the Song Rai forest and then moved around the area telling the people all about the big battle in the rubber plantation. They did not go anywhere near the Nui May Taos. He said that after every big action it was his policy to move into the villages and tell the people about the battles. When questioned about the Australian force, he said he thought there had been several battalions, meaning, in VC terms, about 750 men.

When I asked him about the battle near Hoi My in February 1967, he said that he could not remember it. He thought it may have been a 275 attack but he knew nothing about it. This confirmed Hai's story of the action. It seems strange that the only people who seem to think the D445 were at that engagement are the Australian Army.

During Tet in 1968 the D445 were unaware that most of the Task Force was away at Long Binh in Bien Hoa province, but Ba Lien said that it would hardly have mattered. He said that

Tet was a good and a bad time for them. They took Baria Town and held it for a day and also Dat Do and Long Dien. Dat Do, he says, they held for four days and Long Dien for eight. Even though the offensive crumpled, they gained much from it politically because of the behaviour of the ARVN forces in these towns. The South Vietnamese forces were later accused by the American Advisers in Phuoc Tuy of looting and open cowardice, according to the MACCORDS advisory reports held in Washington DC.

In 1969 Ba Lien was promoted to deputy director of Political Affairs in Military Region 7. In 1970 he was promoted again and went back to Baria and Long Khanh provinces as deputy political commissar. There was a big reorganisation at this time of all forces in the south. In 1972 there was another major reorganisation, before the Nguyen Hue Campaign, named after the legendary Vietnamese hero. In 1973 Ba Lien, then a lieutenant-colonel, was again deputy director of Political Affairs in Military Region 7.

On leaving the Army in 1978 he became director of the Department of Disabled Veterans and Social Affairs in Dong Nai, and retired from public office in late 1988. He now lives with his family in Bien Hoa City.

Looking back on the Australian presence in his area, he said he thought that the Australians were harder opponents than the Americans, but still they did not worry them too much. The constant patrols were a worry, but these were only small groups. They were very fearful of the Australian ambushes, however, but again he emphasised that these were only small-scale affairs, a worry only to their small groups, not their main force units.

As we said our goodbyes it was still hard not to see him as that favourite uncle. He stood there waving and smiling and I wondered what ghosts he would confront when he closed the door and sat down alone in that comfortable sitting room.

Ba Du was the second officer I met. The meeting took place at the Military Headquarters in Ho Chi Minh City and I was surprised at how it developed. Though retired, Ba Du arrived in military uniform. We sat at a large table with fruit, drinks

and cigarettes and a group of junior officers joined us to sit in on the experience of two former enemies sitting down to talk.

His real name was Vu Duc, born in 1925 in the north of Vietnam in Thai Binh province. He had been brought to the south in 1937 by his elder brother after his parents died. The brothers joined the revolutionary forces in 1945, and the other had been killed fighting the French in Baria province. Ba Du had also been part of Baria unit Number 2 during the French war.

After 1954 this unit moved to North Vietnam and remained there until 1962. They then came south and went to Can Tho in the Mekong Delta. Then called 2 Regiment, the unit became part of the 275 Regiment of 5 VC Division in 1965, when the regiment operated in the Baria and Long Khanh areas.

In 1966 Ba Du was the executive officer of 275 Regiment with the rank of major. Part of 275 Regiment had been at the battle at Binh Gia in 1964, but they were only one of several independent units brought together for that attack. At Ba Du's level he had only his job to do and said he was not aware of the overall plan. He did not know that Americans were captured during that battle, but admitted that it may have slipped his mind.

During 1965-66 his unit had several major clashes with the American 173rd Airborne Brigade. He did not know of any specific instances where his people had come up against the Australians while they were operating with the 173rd.

In 1966 when the Australians arrived at Nui Dat, he and the other commanders were aware that there were at least two battalions and the support of New Zealand artillery. They realised that a base at Nui Dat could control a large area and caused their forces a lot of trouble. They were expecting the force at Nui Dat would be larger and more mobile, and were pleasantly surprised when the Australians seemed to be restricted in how far they could go.

There was a need for their forces at that time to attempt to maintain pressure on the new American units arriving in Vietnam, with the result that little notice was taken of what was

happening at Nui Dat. It soon became clear, however, that the Australians would have to be taught a lesson; their policy of saturation patrols and ambushes, and the destruction of the people's homes and livelihoods required some action to be taken. The destruction of Long Tan and Long Phuoc villages called for retaliation, as these villages had always been considered "theirs". "Our orders were to attack the Australians in order to halt their policy of destruction in the province," said Ba Du.

The 275 had moved down to Long Tan and Ba Du's forces had been positioned to the north of the rubber plantation just to the west of Nui Dat 2, from where they could move in any direction when the attack started. He said that the purpose of mortaring the base at Nui Dat was to bring out a large group into a killing area. As Hai had already explained to me, the whole of the plantation was screened by VC forces.

Ba Du was the first person who said unequivocally that the small patrol of B Company was seen and allowed to pass in expectation of a larger group. When the battle started the rain caused much difficulty and he sent out his units to try to separate the Australian force. Any of the soldiers in D Company that day will shudder at that recollection, as VC soldiers seemed to be moving all through the area. I would not say there is conclusive proof, but it certainly seemed so on the day that the VC forces were trying hard to separate the Australian force into smaller groups.

When the reinforcements arrived at the river in armoured personnel carriers, the VC forces had decided to withdraw, lest they become trapped should the battle go on too long. They had also heard on the radio that American forces were being rushed to the area. The VC had left forces to clean up in the battle area and many of the forces withdrew to the vicinity of grid reference 4971, which is three kilometres north of the battle area. They then moved north and then east to the Song Rai forest area, north-west of Xuyen Moc. Ba Du knew nothing of the other forces moving to Ap Suoi Cat.

He said that after the Long Tan battle they came to realise that the Australians were a more difficult opponent than the

Americans. The Australian fighting spirit was very high, he thought, even though they had no real reason to fight in Vietnam. He said that in discussions among themselves they said that the Australians would be a formidable foe if they were fighting for their own country and their own families. They thought that the Australian soldiers could stand more hardship than the Americans and were more like the Vietnamese in this respect. They did not need their rations and ice-cream and they could live in the bush quite easily for long periods. Ba Du also said that his men had noticed and respected the way the Australians supported each other. It seemed during the battle in the Long Tan rubber plantation, that whenever an Australian was wounded there was always another who tried to help him, sometimes at great personal risk. "When we had withdrawn from the battle we had a greater understanding of the Australians and their tactics, and a greater respect," he said.

There were four objectives in bringing the Australians to battle at Long Tan, according to Ba Du. These were: to try to lift the fighting spirit of the local people; to attempt to stop the destructive Australian activity; to make the Americans realise their allies could be endangered; and to prove to themselves that they were capable of engaging and defeating any of the large mobile American and allied forces.

Ba Du said he was not involved with the action near Hoi My in February 1967. He was not directly involved with the Australians again very much after that, as before Tet in 1968 he had been promoted to Military Region 7, Department of Supply, and so missed the fighting at Long Binh.

He said that it was hard for him to think clearly of specific battles because he had been involved in several hundred battles since 1946. It had been a difficult time for him and all his comrades as there was no way that they could look after their families. The life had been very hard, but in his opinion the sacrifices had all been worthwhile. He shook his head sadly at me and said that the Americans and their allies had no hope from the start in the war. The Americans had no understanding of the Vietnamese and could never understand the

motivation of his people. They kept talking about some sort of freedom that meant nothing to the people of Vietnam.

Ba Du remained in his position as supply officer until he retired in 1984 with the rank of senior colonel, having been stationed in Kampuchea from 1979 to 1982 and involved with the supply bases at Siem Riep and Kompong Cham. He now lives in Ho Chi Minh City and is married with five children.

Ut Thoi was a man I had been trying to meet for four years. When the time arrived it was a hurried meeting and not really productive. Ut Thoi is now Lieutenant-General Nguyen Thoi Bung, Commander in Chief of Military Region 7, which includes Ho Chi Minh City. He is still a serving officer and so the conversation was more general than specific, and was not as open as the talks with the retired officers.

We met at the Military Headquarters in Ho Chi Minh City and the meeting was very formal. He was a slim, hard-looking man in a very neat, starched military uniform. His aide accompanied him to the meeting and we sat side by side sipping tea. To my eternal disappointment the hurriedly taken photographs did not turn out.

Ut Thoi was born in 1927 in Tay Ninh province and had joined the revolutionary forces in 1945. He rose through the ranks to regimental commander of the 275 Regiment of 5 Division in 1966. He had also been with the 275 forces at the battle at Binh Gia in December 1964. He confirmed that the units at Binh Gia were all independent units, and said that the American Marine history had been partly right when it mentioned 9 Division being at Binh Gia, as some of the units there were the nucleus of 9 Division, as 275 was the nucleus of 5 Division.

He commanded the 275 Regiment at the battle at Long Tan and said that the reason for the battle was that the local forces had called for 5 Division to try to halt the Australians' policy of destruction in the province. As allies of the Americans the Australians had all the power and they had very little, so they had to manoeuvre the Australians into a position where their tactics could be employed effectively. The plan was to mortar the base to draw out a unit into the area of Long Tan. They

would then ambush this force close to the base and quickly withdraw in order to avoid being trapped by the mobile American forces they knew were operating to the north near the Long Khanh border.

Ut Thoi was directly in charge of the forces during the battle and there were two battalions and one in reserve plus some of the forces of the D445. When the battle started in the rubber plantation it was a small space and they pushed very hard to isolate and split the units, hugging to avoid the artillery. They found it hard to maintain communications because of the heavy rain and the lengthiness of the battle. They heard over the radio that there was an American unit coming toward the area and they decided to withdraw the majority of their troops when the Australian relief arrived, by which time it was almost dark. Although they had not overrun the Australians, he felt they had inflicted substantial casualties on them and had achieved their aim. In doing so, he said, they had responded to the request of the local forces and people, their effort being instrumental in slowing down the Australians' destruction of the province.

After the action the forces moved to the north and there was no mention of an ambush at Ap Suoi Cat. My previous thoughts of Ut Thoi being admonished over the Long Tan battle were discarded, as in late 1967 or early 1968 he became the commanding officer of 9 VC Division, one of the most ferocious and respected units in the south. I am not entirely certain whether he remained as the commander of 9 Division until 1975.

The information I have gathered on the first two D445 leaders, given below, is unconfirmed, being based only on the recollections of various people. The local D445 Battalion was based in Phuoc Tuy and was the main opponent of the Australians. Its first commander was Sau Chanh, who assumed the office in 1965 when the battalion was formed and remained until the end of 1966. He was then promoted and became the deputy commander of the Baria-Long Khanh-Bien Hoa area. He became ill in 1972 and died the following

year. The second battalion commander was Tu Chanh, who was ambushed by the Australians and killed by a mine (most likely a claymore) during the engagement in 1967.

The Village People Remember

The meetings with Ut Thoi, Ba Lien and Ba Du reinforced the feelings I had had after meeting Hai. These VC leaders were not mere puppets as we had been led to believe — they were thinking, caring human beings who were just as distressed by death and injury as the Australians were. I did not meet them until 18 months after my meeting with Hai and it is to that part of the story that I now return.

The day, after the meeting with Hai, we went from Bien Hoa to Long Dat again to do some more research on the Australian involvement. The day was heavily overcast, showery and humid. I had by now become quite used to this trip but still looked in fascination at the sights and sounds of Vietnam. The town of Long Hai looked sleepy and forlorn as we drove in and went to the old hotel. From there we went again to Dat Do and arranged some interviews.

The next day, Huy, the Long Dat chairman, accompanied us as we drove down toward the Long Hai mountains from Dat Do. He pointed out the house of old Mrs Xiu and I acknowledged that I knew where I was. We went across to the area of Hoi My and there our car stopped on the side of the road in the silent deserted countryside. The day was sunny but with a hint of rain to come. There was a gentle breeze blowing from the coast only several kilometres away and it was hard to imagine all the killing that had taken place in the area not

many years before. Where we stopped the country was flat and clear except for the odd shade tree. There were some paddies, but the grey loamy soil in this area is not good for rice.

About 100 metres in from the road stood a thatched cottage in a paddock of about 3 hectares. Young trees were planted which appeared to be struggling to grow. Outside the paddock fence was a new small dam where four water-buffalo were cooling off. As we walked toward the house, several children came out and approached us shyly. The house was larger than that of Mrs Xiu but even more basic.

A Vietnamese man came out of the house to greet us and I was introduced to Mr Dang Van Ba. Ba was wearing a light shirt and pair of long pants that evidently were his best. He was a very quiet person and his face was drawn and tired-looking. His wife, an attractive woman of perhaps 40 years of age, was wearing the black, light peasant pyjamas.

We went inside and Mrs Ba made some tea. The cottage had a dirt floor and almost no furniture, except for a table and chairs, several wooden beds and a little nook for cooking. There was very little else. The cottage had no stove and all the cooking was done over an open fire on the floor. The thatch on the roof was broken in several places and slivers of sunshine came through.

We sat at the table near the entrance where the slight breeze was not enough to dry my sweat. When we were settled I began to talk to Ba of his days as a soldier. This is the record of conversation and it is not for me to make a judgment on the accuracy of all he said.

He was born near Long My village in 1937 and was now a farmer with a wife and 3 children aged from 8 to 12. He had joined the army in 1960 and his wife had also been a soldier in what he described as an artillery unit. They married in 1966.

Ba's mother and father were shifted from their home in the outlying areas and had been forced into Hoi My by the Saigon Army. Ba thought that this was an attempt to restart the strategic hamlets. There was much opposition to these forced removals of people from their homes and land, and it created much hatred toward the Saigon government and the

Australian Army who were supporting them. The move into Hoi My caused great hardship for the people as they were only allowed to tend their fields during certain hours of the day. There was never enough time because of the distances they had to travel (at the speed of an ox cart). Their homes were no longer there having been destroyed by the Vietnamese and Australian forces. Some houses were physically dismantled and others were blown away by aircraft and Australian artillery. Ba's parents and the rest of the displaced people had to build homes with whatever material they could find as they had no money to buy any.

Ba said that he was involved in many actions with the Australians and was wounded in 1968 when his reconnaissance patrol walked into an Australian ambush. He was hit in the chest and his comrades managed to get him out of the ambush and take him to the Long Hais where the D445 had their bases. His wound took a long time to heal and he had been very ill with it. He said that the bases in the Long Hais were well stocked with medical supplies and there was at least one doctor on hand most of the time. Altogether it took one year for his wound to completely heal and even then he was still troubled by it.

At that time Ba was the commander of the Hoi My guerillas. By 1972 the wound he had received was troubling him very much and it was decided that he could no longer carry on as an active soldier. He had moved back into Hoi My village and had done what work he could during the remainder of the war until the liberation in 1975.

He described his unit as the Hoi My local force guerillas. They were at most times 25 in strength and were all local people who lived in their bases in the district and seldom moved from their area. They did not go to the Long Hais unless it was required. The area around Hoi My is mainly open rice paddies with areas of light bush on the gently rolling hills. This made it very difficult for them to find good places to store food and equipment and also very dangerous for them to move around, especially during daylight. They received a lot of help from the local people and were able to get into the

Hoi My hamlet at night, even though there was a Saigon Army outpost on the edge of the village. Ba thought the strength of the unit was about a company. He and his men had been able to get into the hamlets almost at will because of the help they received from the local people. He described moving into the hamlets as dangerous, mainly because of the mines and grenades that were placed as defences. However, he said, they were able to overcome these obstacles because the local people would come to meet them outside and guide them through the obstacles.

It was also dangerous because the Australians made many cordon-and-searches of the village, which, he said, were very thoroughly executed. The Australians did little damage to the people's possessions, he said, unlike the Vietnamese or the Americans. His unit of 25 men was quite well equipped and had AR 15s and one machinegun. Much of their ammunition was captured, but the administration as he described it, would send them supplies. They had no radio communications and would decide for themselves which actions to take. Although there were times when they were required by the main force units to participate in actions with them or to carry out special missions, mostly they were an autonomous unit working closely with the political cadres. They dug shelters in many places and also had many food caches. When on the move they would divide into two groups, but no smaller, except on reconnaissance missions.

They did not ambush directly themselves, but would leave mines on tracks and wait close by. If the mine exploded, they would put in a quick attack on the disoriented troops and quickly leave. "We would place mines in front of your advancing troops, and we also put mines down if we were moving away from being ambushed," Ba said. The fleeing group would always send men back to place mines or grenades. "We set mines around our base areas that we had recovered from the Australian minefield." This was when he told me of the Australian operation into the Long Hais in 1970. "We would set mines in front of your line of advance. Sometimes we would lay mines actually in sight of your people."

We sat talking for over an hour, while the children played outside and his wife and several other women chatted quietly among themselves. The time passed very quickly and there was still much that we could have discussed but we ran out of time.

We said our goodbyes and Ba and his wife and children stood waving as we walked over their small dry field to the car. The buffaloes had moved from the waterhole and were grazing near the road. They snorted at us as we moved closer to them. Well at least that had not changed. The buffalo distrusted Europeans before and it seemed they still did. I wondered what Ba would tell his children about our meeting. The eldest was only born when the war was almost over. Would they be like the children in Australia who couldn't care less about the war and do not want to hear about it at school? Or will the pride and the heritage of the people like Ba carry on? He gave all he could for the revolution and now he has peace, but very little else.

I sat looking at the small cottage on the empty fields as we pulled off and slowly travelled along the bumpy, neglected road. Good luck, my friend. You deserve it, and you certainly need it.

From the home of Dang Van Ba we moved to Hoi My and met three members of the People's Committee. This was a general discussion and we sat around talking and drinking tea. All three of the people in the room had been members of the Hoi My local guerillas, the group headed by Dang Van Ba. According to them, their war had started in 1956. They said that after Diem refused to unify the country, they started much of what they described as political fighting, which was difficult, as they were not well armed. The Diem regime soon became very oppressive and began harrasing and imprisoning anyone who spoke out against it. The decree 10/59 gave province chiefs the right to arrest and imprison or summarily execute anyone who spoke out against them and also anyone who had been a member of the Viet Minh. They and many others became involved in the struggle against Diem and were encouraged by the uprising in Ben Tre, where almost unarm-

ed the peasants took over most of the province and started to redistribute land. This was a good sign for them and it was after Ben Tre that they started to consolidate their weapons and equipment. In the early 1960s they had only a few weapons, but they became stronger very quickly. The more organised they became, the more weapons they captured from the Saigon Army. By the time the Australians came in 1966, they were well armed and had good supplies and equipment.

But there was great disturbance for the people when the Australians moved into the province in 1966 and all the villagers from Long My had to move to the village of Hoi My. The Australians did not physically shift them — this was done by the Americans on the operations helping the Australians when they first came into the province.

My check on this shows that the American 173rd Airborne Brigade conducted an operation codenamed Hollandia in the Long Hai/Hoi My area while the Australians were setting up at Nui Dat. In May they had conducted Operation Hardihood which involved the clearing of the Task Force base area, and 5 RAR had been involved in that operation. When 6 RAR moved to Nui Dat from Vung Tau that move was also part of Operation Hardihood. As far as most of the Australian force knew, that was the end of the American role at that time. That was not the case. The 173rd completed Operation Hardihood on 8 June 1966 and commenced Operation Hollandia on 9 June 1966. They carried out their first night parachute landing in the Long Hai area and concentrated to the north of the Long Hai range around the area of Long My. For the Americans it was a very low-key operation and the after-action report states: "This operation met only small guerilla elements who apparently were intimately familiar with the terrain." Nine Americans were killed and 68 wounded for a VC body count of 4. Although the operation was low key, the report states that the Americans still managed to fire off 3244 artillery rounds, plus mortars. Planes also dropped a total of 3210 tons of ordinance (bombs, rockets and the like) during the operation.

The Hoi My committee people said the heavy American

bombing by planes and artillery had almost destroyed Long My and had killed 10 people. The people, in fear for their lives and with their homes destroyed, had no option but to go to Hoi My for safety. They said that in early 1967 Australian troops had come to Long My and destroyed the remaining houses and shelters. Troops were then stationed at Dai Quai (the Horseshoe position) and at times there were many in the area of Long My. The Saigon Army also had many troops in their military posts along the mined fence.

In 1968 the people suffered again as American B 52s came and destroyed many areas around Hoi My when they dropped bombs on the area. This bombing destroyed many gardens and paddies and killed a lot of cattle.

I produced a photo of one of the windmills the Australians had put in around Hoi My and there was great excitement when they saw it. Yes the windmill was still there but it was not working — it had been out of action for many years. Well before the “Liberation”. According to Frank Frost, who wrote about the Australian involvement in Vietnam, many of the windmills had not been working from as early as 1969, especially in the Hoi My/Phuoc Hai area, because they were unsuited to the soil there. The sand in the soil was so fine that it remained in the water when the windmill was working and got into the pump system, causing the windmill to break down.

Another good Australian idea gone down the tube. I have no doubt that everything of this kind that was done in Vietnam was done for the best motives. The failing seems to have been that we did not look deeply enough at the problem in the first place, and could never come up with a balanced, workable strategy — this applied to explaining the reasons we were there right down to putting in a windmill. Insufficient analysis led to wrong conclusions and therefore wrong policies.

From Hoi My we went on to the village of Phuoc Loi and I was introduced to Mrs Dong Thi Trinh. Mrs Trinh was a wonderful little wizened up old lady who sat crossed legged on the table while we were talking. She said that she was 76 years of age and had been born in Phuoc Loi. She chattered at

an amazing speed and would get very cross when someone interrupted her or tried to contradict what she said. I sat through the whole of the meeting trying not to smile as she scolded this one, or threw her arms around in frustration when someone said she was wrong about a certain point. She must have been almost deaf, as she spoke in a very loud voice that seemed strange coming from such a tiny little old lady.

Mrs Trinh had lived in this spot before the Australians came but not in this house. Her other house had been destroyed by the Australians, as had many other houses in Phuoc Loi. I have been unable to find evidence of any Australian destruction in Phuoc Loi, but Mrs Trinh was adamant that many houses were destroyed, mainly by artillery.

When I asked if she had a family, she said that she had been married and had three sons. Her husband had been killed during the French war right in the town of Phuoc Loi. He had been part of the revolutionary movement in the village and she had tried to carry on his work after his death. Her life had been very hard and she had worked at many jobs to survive, but mainly she had existed by trading in fish and seafood. She would go to the coastal village of Lang Phuoc Hai to buy fish which she brought back and sold to the villagers and farmers.

When the Australians came she continued with her political work. When she said this, the others nodded their heads and confirmed that Mrs Trinh had been very involved in the political movement of the village. Many times she obtained food and supplies and took them herself or organised others to take them to the local forces. Once she organised and led the local people to demonstrate against the Saigon regime (no date). She was arrested by the Saigon Army many times: they knew her husband had been with the Viet Minh, they found out one of her sons was with the local forces, and they were aware of her own political activities.

Of her three sons, one had been killed fighting with the D445 local battalion and the other two were still alive. The son killed had been her second son, his name Duong Van Lau. His revolutionary name had been Nhat. She said he had joined the revolutionary forces in 1962 and was with the local

battalion. He was killed by the Australians in October 1969, aged 34. She said he was in charge of a reconnaissance unit, but I am unsure whether that was his unit, or whether he was on a reconnaissance patrol when he was killed.

She said that Australian troops brought his body into the village and dropped it in the market place early in the morning. Neighbours had come to tell her and she had gone to claim the body of her son. The Saigon Army had told her she was to take the body and bury it that day. This was impossible for her to do, so she had left her son there while she made the funeral arrangements. After the funeral the next day the Saigon Army came to her and wanted to know why she had not obeyed their orders. She tried to explain that it had been impossible for her to make all the arrangements for the funeral in such a short time, but they refused to listen. She was taken away and very roughly treated in jail for that day and night. Now she thumped the table with her hand and said contemptuously that the treatment she received did not worry her as she had been in jail many times and had suffered at the Army's hands before. The jail did not worry her but the loss of her son was the most difficult thing of all to accept.

When asked about her other two sons she said that one was in the Saigon Army and the other was with us in the room. She called forward her eldest son who looked to be about 50. He appeared to be slightly retarded, which was probably why he had not been in the local forces. He said that he did work for them at times and had to move around the area because he was frightened of being conscripted by the Saigon Army. Huy, the Long Dat chairman, confirmed that her son had worked for the revolutionary forces at times. He did small things like bringing food and doing reconnaissance work. The other son still lived in Phuoc Loi and there was no animosity toward him. He had no choice, the Saigon Army took him. The strange part of this story was that her daughter-in-law, married to a conscripted soldier in the Saigon Army, had been wounded in the chest and head while she was carrying out "political work" in the local area. What a war.

When it came time for us to leave, half the village must

have been outside. There was much laughter and joking and all the children came crowding around to have their photographs taken. It was a good feeling to have them there even though it made talking to people very difficult. We got into the car and made the slow journey back to Dat Do.

In Dat Do, Huy informed me that the next day we would go to Long Tan village. He had a surprise for me there he said. I hoped he wasn't going to be like Thang when he said he had a surprise and kept me in suspense all night. He didn't. He had found the Long Tan Cross that I had asked about on the trip in August. He did not elaborate on how he found it or where it had been. When I asked about the plaque that had been attached to it he said that he did not have it then, but he hoped that it could be found in the next few days. I was at a loss to know how to take this news as there was no way that I could do anything with the cross. It was almost three metres high and solid concrete. How much it would weigh was anyone's guess, and there was no way that I could take it back to Australia. Huy asked if the cross was important, and I said I thought it was, but could not be sure. I was certain that 6 RAR would be interested and possibly the War Memorial in Canberra, but it was only a guess on my part. I certainly could not make any guarantees about it.

After some thought I decided that perhaps the best thing to do would be to approach the War Memorial in Canberra and try to get something in exchange for the people in this district. God knows they were short of just about everything. When I asked Huy what they needed most, his eyes lit up. We hurried out to his car and drove to the hospital at Long Dat. I had met Dr Hong on the last trip and Huy asked him to draw up a list of medical supplies that he badly needed. This was how I would approach the problem. To help the people, we would see if Australia would give some much-needed aid to Long Dat in return for the cross.

Thang, Kieran and I sat in the hotel at Long Hai that night talking of the events of the day and wondering what the next few days may bring.

The following morning we were up early and away to Long

Tan village, which is only three kilometres from where the Australian Task Force was established at Nui Dat. It was not then, and is not now, a large village. In 1966 there were approximately 1200 people living there and in 1987 approximately 5000. In 1966 it was a very beautiful place with well-constructed houses, all with their own little plots of land with gardens and many fruit trees. Long Tan had always been very helpful to the revolutionary forces and was classed as a liberated village by the VC forces and the province chief, Colonel Dat. Almost all the people who lived there had relatives in the local army and helped in any way they could.

The people were shifted from the village before the Australians arrived in the province by the American 1st Infantry Division during Operation Abilene. Although there is no proof that this occurred at the request of the Australians, the evidence does point to that conclusion. The Australian Chief of the General Staff, General Sir John Wilton, had flown to Saigon in March 1966 for discussions with General Westmoreland, the American commander in Vietnam, about the placement and role of the new Australian Task Force. They decided on Phuoc Tuy on 17 March 1966. The Australian policy from those early days was to create a buffer zone 4000 metres around the Task Force that was free of villages and civilians. As noted, Long Tan was 3000 metres from the base, well inside the proposed buffer zone. It was also classified as a centre of resistance to the Saigon Army and in fact was designated a fortified VC village.

When the Americans came to Long Tan on 6 April 1966 during Operation Abilene they shifted the people from the village and told them they were no longer allowed to live in Long Tan. The Americans did not actually do this themselves. They surrounded the village and then sent in units of the Saigon Army. The after-action report for Abilene states: "The battalions took up blocking positions north and east of the town while ARVN elements completed evacuation of Long Tan village." Many people went to Dat Do and some to Long Dien — they became the forgotten ones. When the Australians arrived, there were no people in Long Tan; if

there had been, they would have been the responsibility of the Australians. When people tried to come back to Long Tan several months later, the Australians stopped them from coming in even to work the fields. Several months after that, in late 1966, they did allow the people back to work their fields but the curfew was so restrictive that there was little work that could be done. Long Tan was not actually destroyed house for house as Long Phuoc had been, but the effects of artillery and neglect soon turned the village into a derelict village shell. I cannot remember going into Long Tan village during my time as a soldier in Vietnam, but another member of D Company 6 RAR, Barry Vassella, did. He said that when he went through the village in December 1966 it was a sad, broken area. The villagers were not allowed to return to live there until after Liberation in 1975.

In 1987 Long Tan was a thriving little community again. The streets were rough but clean, and many of the houses had been rebuilt in the original style. Many were made from hollow bricks that were then cement-rendered. There is a kiln in the district to supply bricks. The roofs are tiled, and so are many floors, using products made in Long Dat district. The striking thing is the quality of the workmanship. In Ho Chi Minh City the workmanship is rather slipshod. In Long Dat the tiling and the timber work is superb.

The progress of the building has been rather slow as there is a shortage of materials. There were still a lot of houses made of thatch when I was there but the work was progressing steadily. In the centre of the village is a community rice mill and a large agricultural storage shed was almost completed. The people are exceedingly friendly and several young ones called out "Uc dai loi" meaning Australian. This friendliness actually impeded the work I wanted to do, as the whole village turned out for the visit and there were children, dogs and people hanging out of the doors and windows of the council house where we went to talk.

Before going to talk to the village people we went into one of the sheds where, on the ground, lay the cross. I stood there looking at it but it really did not mean a thing to me. It had

been broken off from the concrete that had been poured around the base to hold it in place and there was a large fracture about 30 centimetres from the bottom. Two pieces of round reinforcing rod protruded from the end. We stood it up against the wall to take some photographs and I found out how heavy it was. Now that they had found it, what was I going to do about it? The question worried me then and does now. It is still in Vietnam. The Vietnamese are willing to give it back to the Australians if they want it. On another trip in 1989 I saw the cross again at the War Museum in Bien Hoa City and was also privileged to see the replica cross erected in the plantation at Long Tan.

When we went to the other council house there were 15 people all sitting around a long table waiting for us, and at least another hundred outside. Many were standing at the doorway and others were leaning through the window openings. One thing I did not see in Long Dat district was glass. No one seemed to have glass windows, only openings and storm shutters. During our talks there were probably five dog fights that caused a great deal of hilarity outside and had all the people inside looking around and making ribald comments. It was good for me because I had decided by this time that interviews with more than one person needed to be conducted in a way other than just by a general discussion. Unfortunately, when interviewing members of a group one by one, a lot of spontaneity is lost and it also means a lot of waiting for the others in the group who, in this case, sat staring out the window, waiting perhaps for the next dog fight.

The many interviews all told much the same story of a life of fear, deprivation of basic human rights and personal suffering because of the war. A selection of them is presented below. While I was unable to verify any of the precise incidents the people reported, certain dominant themes within all the stories have been verified from Australian and American sources.

The first person to speak was Mr Phan Van Hong who said that he was 69 years of age and had been born in Long Tan village. Hong was small and wiry, with grey hair and a neatly

trimmed Ho Chi Minh goatee. In 1966 he was married with two sons and two daughters. During the French war he had been with the security forces in Phuoc Tuy and when the Australians arrived in 1966 he had again gone into the bush, remaining with the revolutionary forces until liberation in 1975 and relying on his family to help support him.

When the Australians came, his family had to move to Dat Do and their house had been destroyed. His sons and a son-in-law had also been in the local forces, which made it very hard for his wife and daughters to survive. No compensation was given for the loss of land or the destruction of their home. As he remembers it, the Saigon Army came about March 1966 and told them they would have to live elsewhere, with no assistance given. If they stayed in the village, they were told, jet fighters and artillery would kill them.

In June the people tried to come back to Long Tan, but they would not stay because of the Australian artillery that fell on the area at all times of the night and day. This was obviously a reference to Australian harrassing and interdiction fire. In late 1966 the people asked the Australians if they could return to their homes and were refused. The people could come back to work in their gardens and fields during the day, but there were severe time restrictions on when they could come. They were allowed in the Long Tan area only between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., which was not enough time to work the land, considering the hours of travel each way. Hong said this made it very difficult for his wife and daughters who had to work for other people like serfs.

He proudly pulled up the sleeve of his shirt and displayed his upper arm. It was quite a sight and was obviously a bullet wound that had gone in one side and out the other. He said that when he had been in the rice paddies close to Long Tan in 1969 he had been chased by a helicopter. While running to evade it, he was hit in the arm just as he reached the edge of the paddies. Bleeding badly and in pain he managed to get clear of the area before he became too weak. He met up with his own people who treated him. Both his sons who had been with the D445 were killed, as had his son-in-law. His

daughters were still living in the village, as was his wife.

Mr Nguyen Van Nhom was about 70 years of age and had also been born in Long Tan village. In 1966 he was married with five sons and two daughters. Aged 50 then, he did not join the revolutionary army, but his five sons had all been soldiers with the local forces. When the Saigon Army shifted the people from the village he had gone to Dat Do. He estimated that there were over 1000 people living in Long Tan at the time of the evacuation.

Life in Dat Do was very hard for him and his family — the only way to survive was to work for other people. They were exploited because of their plight and worked for very low wages. On many occasions they had no food or money. When the Australians did allow the people back to work their land, there was never enough time to be able to do much, and sometimes the Australians closed off the area for a week or a month and then the gardens and fields were worthless again.

Nhom remained in Dat Do until 1975 when he returned to Long Tan to reclaim his land and rebuild his house. He now works for the Long Dat district committee and is a member of the Long Tan village committee. Two of his sons were killed and one lost an arm. Two still live in Long Dat district, as do his wife and daughters.

Mrs Nguyen Thi Con, 69 years of age, was born in the Dat Do area and her husband who died in 1975, had been born in Long Tan. In 1966 the couple had four sons, the eldest two being away in the local forces. As her husband was very ill, she and her two sons had to work for other people in Dat Do to survive. They rented a small shack.

In late 1966 the older of the two boys still with her was conscripted by the Saigon Army and sent away from Phuoc Tuy. In 1968 her fourth son, then 15, lost his hand when he was hit by Australian artillery while working in their garden at Long Tan.

She called him forward, and he was very embarrassed by the attention. He was good-looking and about 30 years of age, and his arm ended about 5 centimetres above the wrist. He repeated what had happened in the incident. The son who

was conscripted into the Saigon Army was still alive and was back living in Long Tan. There appears no animosity toward him and the situation keeps coming up all the time.

An old man, Mr Tan Van Mau, was also born in Long Tan village. In 1966 he was 57, married, and with one daughter. When the Australians came and the people were moved, he also went into the bush with the revolutionary forces. He had been a soldier during the war with the French. His wife and daughter had gone to Dat Do where they were lucky enough to have relatives. They were accepted by these relatives but life was hard and they had no money. They supported themselves by working for other people — there were very few ways to make a living and so many people displaced. In 1968 his wife became ill and died. He worried about his daughter being on her own, but there was little he could do. She was helped as much as possible by the cadres but this was not very much. He managed to see her occasionally but there was little he could do to help her financially.

He was not a soldier but was involved with political work with the cadres. This was a dangerous existence as they had to move from village to village, rallying and encouraging the people. They could never stay too long in the one place and spent most of their time in the bush. There were times when he went to the base areas of the Long Hais and several times he had been as far away as the Nui May Taos.

He was wounded by artillery near Xuyen Moc in about December 1966. When he pulled up his shirt there was a long raised scar running from his armpit almost to the centre of his back. He now lives in Long Tan with his daughter and has rebuilt his house, which was destroyed in 1966.

Mr Tran Tan Vui was 76 and born in Long Tan village. In 1966 he was married with five sons and a daughter. He recalled that the Saigon Army forced the people to leave and, when they attempted to return, the Australians stopped them. There was always artillery coming into the area, and troops, and the villagers were afraid to go back.

He and his family moved to Dat Do where he managed to eke out a living. When they left Long Tan in 1966 they had a

good house but when he came back later in the year to work, the home had been destroyed.

Four of his five sons were in the local forces, and three of them were killed; the other son died of an illness in 1968. Mr Vui said that he remained in Dat Do until liberation because the Saigon Army had continued to keep all the people away from Long Tan after the Australians left in about 1972 (November 1971). He has since rebuilt his home in Long Tan and lives there with his only surviving son and daughter.

The other stories were all much the same and I sat there fascinated by the sound of the voices and the looks on the people's faces as they spoke. The solemnity and the sadness, interspersed with anger, was interrupted several times by the dog fights, but it was a sombre time of remembering things that are probably better forgotten.

Throughout these interviews, the man sitting beside me had been quiet and reserved. When I had finished with the others, Thang said, indicating this man, that there was one more person I had better speak to. Thang and his sense of humour again. We shook hands and I was introduced to Mr Le Tranh. Thang looked at me slyly and said that Tranh had been the deputy commanding officer in the D445. He had also been at the battle with the Australians in the rubber plantation. I looked from one to the other and they were both smiling as if they had just pulled off a huge joke on me. I had to sit a moment collecting my thoughts in preparation for this encounter. If what Thang had said was correct, then this would be very important. In spite of all his jokes, I never doubted Thang by this time.

Tranh was a small wiry man with a pleasant demeanour, beneath which lay a lot of confidence. It was easy to see that he was held in respect by all those in the room. He was born in Long Tan village in 1945, he said, and joined the army in 1959. In 1961 he was transferred to the local D445 Battalion, which was then only two companies, and by 1966 he had risen through the ranks to a deputy platoon commander. He said that he had been involved in many actions against the Australians in the Long Hais, Baria, the Nui Dinh Hills and

in Long Khanh province. In 1969 he was promoted to company commander of C3 Company of the D445 and in 1972 became the deputy battalion commander.

In June 1974 he was transferred to the Staff Military School in Binh Long province for promotional training. When he finished his training course the following year, he became the battalion commander of Battalion 2, Regiment 3, new northern units. His unit took part in the final offensive on Saigon in April.

After the liberation his unit was based in Ho Chi Minh City until May. The army then began to implement major reforms and cutbacks, and Tranh's battalion became part of the Army Economic Division, based in Phuoc Long province; they engaged in all sorts of economic work, from building roads to farming. Tranh was promoted to senior captain and became a staff officer at Divisional Headquarters, where he was welfare officer for his division.

He voluntarily retired in December 1976 and went back to the village of Long Phuoc. When the border war with Kampuchea broke out in 1977 he tried to re-enlist but did not pass the medical test as he had been seriously wounded four times since 1960. He came back to Long Phuoc and then to Long Tan where he now lives and works.

According to Tranh the D445 was only a local battalion in 1966 with a strength of only 200 to 250 men. This was broken down to platoons of 10 to 12 men, but with some of the mobile platoons containing 12 to 15.

Tranh was at the battle of Long Tan and was wounded by artillery in the closing stages of the action. His was an interesting story and confirmed what Colonel Hai had told me in Bien Hoa. The other fascinating side was that one part of his story was exactly the same as an incident related to me by Sergeant J. Miles (and described in my previous book, *The Soldiers' Story*). There was no way the two stories could be so closely alike when the Vietnamese knew nothing of our side of the story, except the little bits of information they heard from me. Jimmy Miles had this to say:

The thing that sticks in my mind from that time was that one

group of Viet Cong were either carrying or dragging a 57 millimetre recoilless rifle, which is an anti-tank weapon. One group of them looked back and saw the carriers, and I don't know whether they stopped to try to mount the gun to fire it at us or whether they wanted to drop it and get away, as we were fairly close to them at this stage. The gun was put on the ground and one of the armoured personnel carriers put on a great burst of speed and headed directly for the gun. I think the carrier ran straight over the top of it and the crew.

Tranh said that his platoon was given the job of trying to hold the APCs on the edge of the rubber plantation. He said there was no way they were capable of stopping them as their unit only had several anti-tank weapons (no specific number) and two machineguns. They were there only to slow down the reinforcements. Tranh thought there had been 11 APCs in the advance across the river (there had been seven). He said that he and his men had tried to stop the APCs on the edge of the rubber plantation, but they had been too strong for them. In fact one had advanced quickly and run over one of his gun crew after they had fired a round and were trying to reload. They had lost one B40 anti-tank rocket and one DKZ (his description). Tranh said that he heard later that one of his crew, his friend and companion Thom, had been captured by the Australians but he was not sure whether it was that day or in the morning. Thom had never been heard of again.

When Tranh moved away from the APC advance, he was wounded in the side and leg by Australian artillery. He was unable to walk so his companions carried him to the edge of the plantation out of the battle area. They then took him to one of their many aid stations where he remained for the night. Early the following day he was carried by his comrades to their bases in the Nui May Tao mountains — they were quite secure there and had a lot of medical supplies.

His wound was not as severe as he had at first thought and he recovered well enough after about four months to participate in active work again. He went on a reconnaissance mission with two others near what he called the Big Pagoda, in the vicinity of grid reference 460660. Here they ran into an

Australian patrol and there was a brief fire fight. Tranh managed to escape, but the two men with him were wounded and he had to leave them. He assumed they were captured. He became most distressed when telling of this incident for, as far as he was concerned, the two are Missing in Action (MIA). Whether they were killed in the ambush or sent to a prisoner of war compound run by the South Vietnamese is really irrelevant — they have not surfaced since 1975 and it seems unlikely they would still be alive. Again, this story of “the missing ones”. There are literally hundreds of thousands of stories like this waiting to be told all over Vietnam. It really makes the American MIAs seem almost a very small chapter on the war. For every American MIA there are at least ten Vietnamese.

I brought the subject back to the Australian presence and the tactics used by the Australians in an attempt to relieve the situation. When I asked what he thought of the Australian troops he said that even though they were puppet troops they had fought well. They had much better discipline and tactics than the American units he had encountered. However, with each encounter with the Australians their forces had learned lessons and developed tactics to foil the Australian units. Their counter-attack tactics became better and they would use the counter-attack to move out of ambush positions. One of the tactics they developed was to move groups with three men ahead of main columns. This way, if the first group were attacked, the following group could counter-attack very quickly before artillery could be brought down; and the close tactics inhibited the effectiveness of artillery. They trained for different scenarios in their base camps although much of it was general training, not special tactics.

He asked me if I knew of the two Australians who had been captured during the battle. I said that I had heard the story, but there was no confirmation of it from our side. I then asked him if he had seen the Australians and he said no, he had only heard the story that two wounded who had been captured were killed by Australian artillery as they were being carried from the plantation. I asked him to show me on the

map where he believed the Australians had been and he pointed to the Eleven Platoon position and said he heard they were killed toward where the Ten Platoon group had been stopped. He was a very competent map reader and had no hesitation in pinpointing any area. I asked whether the D445 people had been the ones who were supposed to have picked up the Australians but again he was unsure. He had only heard the story.

We sat at the table talking and laughing and discussing this and that aspect of the war in Phuoc Tuy. The time had come to depart and I was again reluctant to go. There was a feeling of camaraderie between us and I was to find that this is very strong among old soldiers in Vietnam. That I fought on the opposite side to *Tranh* does not matter: I had experienced some of the things he had experienced and this created a bond. Who but a soldier can know of the adrenalin pump during an action? Who else knows the moments of degrading fear, and the moments of elation and personal power when an enemy soldier is in your sights? These things are not common experiences and are spoken of only to those who are kin to the group, whether they be former friends or foes.

Tranh asked me could I not stay in Vietnam. I replied that it was not possible. His eyes twinkled as he made a joke and said that if I decided to stay then perhaps I could work for him in the rice paddies at Long Tan: "You are a big strong man *Terry* and there is much work you could do here. I will feed you many chickens and perhaps we can find you a young wife." The chickens had become a standing joke since my trip in August as I had developed a liking for the way they cooked their chickens in Long Dat. I always devoured the whole lot and *Huy* and *Thang* always commented on it. It seemed the story of the chicken man had spread.

I felt there was a good feeling when we left and for that I was very thankful. I had not known what to expect and the reception was something I will always be grateful to the people for. Before we went back to Long Dien, *Huy* said that he wanted me to meet his mother and to see the house that he had built for her. I was touched by this and accepted gratefully.

We went to a house set 20 metres back from the road. It was on about two hectares of land and surrounded by banana and fruit trees. There were several heaps of building material around and the house looked quite large. When we left the car and walked to the house, I began to see how nice it was. There was a large verandah on the front, the floor of which was tiled. Inside, I was introduced to Huy's mother and his grand-aunt. I stood looking around, impressed at the interior of the house.

There was no ceiling and this made the walls seem very high. A gable roof was supported by full logs standing possibly 4.5 metres high. These had been adzed to almost the same circumference and then stained and polished. The house was all one space as most Vietnamese houses in the provinces are, but several "rooms" were formed by bamboo screens. The floor was tiled with beautiful ceramic tiles. The atmosphere felt friendly and comfortable. Huy asked how I liked the house and I replied that I would like to have it in Brisbane, which was true.

We sat down to tea with his mother. She is probably the person from those trips who remains with me most. It became very obvious quite quickly that Huy was very proud of his mother and that they were very close. She had a quiet and gracious air about her that immediately made her stand out. After arranging the tea, she sat at the table and we sat sipping and talking while the sky grew dark and the rain clouds banked ominously for the afternoon rainstorm.

As related by Huy, she had two sons and her husband had died fighting the French in 1953. When the people were shifted from Long Tan by the Saigon Army and then denied access by the Australians, she moved to Long Dien where she had relatives. She came back later in 1966 as often as she could to work on the fields and the gardens, but this was very difficult as Long Dien is a long way from Long Tan. The house they had at Long Tan had been destroyed and had stood on the spot where we now sat.

When the people had to move, no explanation was given to them. They attempted to come back soon after the Americans

had gone, but the Australians had forced all the people to go back to Dat Do or Long Dien.

Huy's mother was fearful for the safety of her sons and she was afraid for them the whole time. Having sons in the revolutionary forces made it very difficult for her, as the Saigon Army knew of the family situation. They would often come and take her away and question her but she was never imprisoned. The Saigon Army also sent her many letters telling her to call back her sons to the government. She thought this was very funny that they should think that she would call back her sons to support the American puppets. "Vietnam belonged to the Vietnamese, not the government in Saigon who danced to the American tunes and who allowed the women to become whores for the GIs," she said. When I asked if she had been in prison she said quite calmly that she had. As it turned out, it was not the Vietnamese who had imprisoned her, but the French. While her husband was with the Viet Minh and during her involvement with the movement, she was imprisoned several times between 1950 and 1953, the last time for 18 months.

Her quiet way and the strength that she exuded made it seem all so casual when she spoke of her life. Even when she spoke of the death of her son it was with an air of acceptance and quiet dignity. She did not see her son's body after he was killed in Long Hais, but she learned of his death very shortly after the event. She said there was no shortage of information about their families during the war. The local people knew very quickly who had been killed and who had been wounded.

She came back to Long Tan in 1975 and the family built the house. She was happy to work in the garden and we went outside where she proudly showed me her plots of corn and introduced me to the fruit trees and the pepper vines growing around the trees. The simple words she spoke as I was leaving had more impact on me than any of the other meetings I had in Vietnam: "I wish for no more war. Life is very hard and very lonely when you have lost a husband and a son. I have cried long and often at night for them, but they are gone and I will not see them or hear them again in this life."

When we got back to Dat Do that afternoon there was great excitement as we stopped the car. One of the officials spoke to Huy and he hurried into his office leaving Thang and I standing beside the car not knowing what to do. Huy came to the door of his office and beckoned to us excitedly.

Inside he pointed to a square brass plate on the table. The plaque from the Long Tan Cross. I had looked at the cross with no emotion but I could not say the same for the plaque. It was covered in scale and there was no way that anyone would know what it was, but sitting there on the table it had a strange and haunting presence about it.

The plaque was really something I did not expect to see. When I had returned to Australia in August I had mentioned the cross and the plaque to several of the ex-members of my old company. Chiko Miller had gone back to Vietnam for a second tour in 1971 and had been at the training area at Van Kiep just east of Baria. He had been involved with the training of Cambodian troops and during a training exercise had gone back to the Long Tan rubber plantation. He had intentionally diverted the patrol to look at the cross and told me that the plaque was gone then. He had naturally assumed that an Australian soldier had taken it, as by that time it was apparent that the Australians were about to end their Vietnam commitment.

Yet here it was sitting on the table in Huy's office. By this time I was excited myself and we set to work trying to clean the plaque without damaging it. After 30 minutes of careful work we could read the writing. It was the original plaque and we rubbed chalk into it to bring up the writing and then took several photographs. Huy asked me if I wanted to take it back to Australia with me and I said no. I am extremely sorry now that I refused the opportunity. My intention was to leave the cross and the plaque together, with the thought that it may help in getting the medical supplies for the Long Dat hospital. To date this has not happened.

We sat down in Huy's office later and talked of the last two days. He was extremely pleased that all had gone off so well. As in Hanoi, there is no way that officials can say with any

certainty that they can arrange something productive. It all depends on how the people view the person they are to meet. I thought later that was probably the reason Tranh sat through all the talk with the other people before he decided to speak.

The next day we were to leave Long Dat and go to Chau Duc, which has been renamed again and is now Chau Thanh district to talk to the people there. We said our goodbyes and arranged to meet with Huy before we went back to Ho Chi Minh City. The two days had exhausted us all and when we got to the hotel we sat with the sea breeze blowing over us and drank several bottles of beer with no labels. The thought of going to Chau Duc excited me because that was where the Task Force had been. Perhaps this time I would get to see the base at Nui Dat after all these years.

“Mother, I Die” Long Phuoc and Hoa Long

The next morning was an early start. Huy came to meet us and decided that he would also go to Long Phuoc and Hoa Long. As we drove toward the village I sat looking at the countryside and wondering what I was doing here. There were so many questions, but was it really worth the effort? Was I imposing myself on these people in an attempt to justify myself or was it an ego trip for me? Who really cared about the whole damn mess anyway. It was too late for those academic questions as the car moved closer to the old town of Long Phuoc.

Long Phuoc had been a large thriving village of over 3000 people in 1966, before the Australians came, and was situated about 1500 metres from where the Task Force was established at Nui Dat. It had been a centre of resistance from the time of the French and was looked on as a liberated village by the VC, according to one of the local histories. This of course was no different from most villages in Vietnam at that time. Long Phuoc, however, was unlucky enough to be just where the Australians wanted to locate their base camp and so it had to go.

The Australian journalist Pat Burgess had been to Long Phuoc in 1965 and has since written several articles about the destruction of the village. When I became aware of how many times Burgess had written of Long Phuoc I knew that I was

not the only one who had been concerned at the destruction of the town. I was not appalled at the destruction of the town as such — that was a part of being a soldier — but what began to worry me about the exercise over the years was the rationale behind it. There was no logical connection between the destruction of the town and the purported aim of helping the South Vietnamese people. The two concepts were incompatible. How can you help the people by destroying everything they own? Of course this was not the way that the military mind worked. The choices for a military thinker were simple and very straightforward. “We are here. Our security is important. That village could be a threat, therefore it has to go. The people will understand because the issue is so simple.” It may have been simple to the commanders of the Task Force but it lacked logic to the locals whose houses and property were destroyed, whose means of livelihood were taken away, and whose lives were placed in jeopardy.

Burgess wrote an article about Long Phuoc in the *Bulletin* of 21 August 1976, ten years after it had been destroyed by Australian troops. He wrote:

Camped among the groves of durian, banana and lime I wrote in a despatch, “You could spend the rest of your life here, if the Australians and ‘they’, the Vietcong would let you”.

Long Phuoc was a village of deep, cool wells, of fishponds shaded by flowering shrubs, of verandahs made for the children to play around and to shade the old from the Phuoc Tuy sun.

In almost every yard there were wood shavings. It was a village of craftsmen who made their own furniture, who carved even their own candlesticks. It was also, it turned out, a village of riflemen . . .

But they [Australians] still burned it. Onto the flames they still had to throw the hand-carved candlesticks, the old exercise book, the flimsy parasol, the tiny rubber thong.

When the American 173rd Airborne Brigade mounted Operation Hardihood they shifted the people from Long Phuoc while they searched the area and cleaned out any resistance in the village. In one corner of the village they encountered strong VC resistance. On day one of the operation,

according to their after-action report, two of their companies lost 11 killed and 21 wounded on the north-east corner of the village. The report makes no mention of refugees from the operation, so it must be assumed that the Long Phuoc people were not considered as such. They were shifted from the village in order to keep them away from any fighting that might occur. In fact they attempted to return as soon as the Americans had moved away.

Long Phuoc was a large sprawling village of well-constructed houses surrounded by fruit trees and gardens. The job of destroying the town was given to 6 RAR and it was done with a vengeance in two weeks. I was on the operation myself and can attest that very little remained of Long Phuoc when we left. I can also confirm that at least one civilian was killed during the operation while she was collecting fruit. The 6 RAR Battalion History records that "Some months after the operation the Government of the Republic of South Vietnam gazetted that Long Phuoc no longer existed, and its name was removed from the official record of existing communities". Official battalion records report that 537 dwellings were destroyed.

The people were told to move and not come back. They went to Dat Do, Long Dien and Hoa Long, and received no compensation for the loss of their homes or their livelihood and no help with any sort of resettlement. They were just told to move and were then forgotten. There is no doubt that this move was an Australian initiative — Australian documents confirm it. *A Current Civil Affairs Policy*, paper dated 14 June 1966, states:

Comd 1 ATF has requested the Province Chief to arrange the complete evacuation of all civilians from the 1 ATF base camp area out to a radius of 4000 yards (excluding Hoa Long). See Annex P. This request has been met and the Province Chief has advised that all civilians will have conformed by 21 Jun 66.

The Task Force at that time had only a very small Civil Affairs unit and could do little to help these people. When questioned by me during an interview about the destruction of

Long Phuoc, Brigadier Jackson, the Task Force commander at the time, said that because of all the tunnels in the village the villagers had to be forced out. He said, "We were forced literally to move people out to destroy the diggings underneath their houses. We rather preferred to go do that than kill the villagers." When I asked about the word "resettled" used in all the Australian documents and many books, he commented:

Well I wouldn't say we had a resettlement program at that stage, it was too early in the piece for that. We had a civil aid unit to help these people and generally help the local populace. That was what our civil aid was all about. So from that point of view, yes we helped resettle them. But I wouldn't say at that stage of the game we had the resources or the knowledge or the ability to do a resettlement program. On the question of compensation I think the Province Chief helped. But there was nothing that I know of from Australian resources. Unless you would say medical supplies, but no actual, we'll build a house for you. We talked to the Province Chief, but his resources were limited too. The fact was that when you had civilians on a piece of terrain that was important to you, you get rid of the civilians first and get on with the job and destroy what you have to destroy, and don't destroy the civilians. That is the thing we did right. I think we could have done more.

John Donohoe, the civil affairs commander in 1966, also interviewed, looks back on the plight of the people from Long Phuoc with a great deal of regret.

All those people from Long Phuoc were the ones who went into Hoa Long. Well a lot of them went into Hoa Long and there was no work for them. They weren't starving but they were bloody hungry and they were dirt poor. As for the compensation. The only money I knew of was when I came across a family that I knew had been kicked out, had nothing and was really battling. I would personally give them money or goods. Brigadier Jackson just had too many things on his plate. He had a big Task Force and there were just too many things on the operational side without worrying about civil affairs.

The people of Long Phuoc certainly had no reason to be

joyful about the Australian presence in their province twenty years ago and I felt trepidation as the car turned into the main street.

The town had been rebuilt and everywhere there were signs of construction and progress. Many of the houses had been built in the traditional style and the area looked the same as the day we had driven in to begin the destruction, except that now there were people about, many people on the streets, and children who came running when they saw the car. They followed us to the council hall, running and laughing behind us. At the hall a large crowd of people were standing outside, all smiling and very polite. When we went in there were at least 20 people to meet us and those outside hung in through the windows and the two doors.

Introductions were made and tea was brought. I then had to explain to the people why I was there and what I would like from them. When I had finished there was silence in the room as they all digested what was said. One of the men had been delegated as spokesman and quickly we began to get down to the serious issues. His name was Mr Le Van Hon and I did not get to find out his position in the village hierarchy. He was about 55, with a Ho Chi Minh beard and a very confident air. He wore clean peasant clothes.

In a very forthright manner he began by saying that, as I was an Australian, he had two things to tell me of the Australians in Phuoc Tuy. One, he said, was bad and the other good. The bad point was that the Australians came to Nui Dat and created much destruction in Phuoc Tuy and especially Long Phuoc. They destroyed many things, the town and the houses. They destroyed many productive paddy fields and gardens, and many local people were killed by the Australian artillery and troops, as were many cattle. The good thing he had to say about the Australian troops was that they were orderly and disciplined. They never molested the women or the young girls and they did not steal from the people as the Saigon Army and the Americans had done. For this he was thankful, but in no way excused the policies that were adopted and the harm that was done to the people and the district.

As Hon remembered, in 1966 the Americans had come first and shifted the people from Long Phuoc. They had forced all the villagers to move to other places. Then they bombed and used artillery on the town, and many houses were destroyed. After that operation the province chief, Colonel Dat, in charge of the Saigon Army in Baria, had said that if Long Phuoc remained then Baria would fall. After the Americans had left, the people tried to come back, but were prevented by the Australians. The Australians then completely destroyed Long Phuoc and the people were arrested if they went into the area. Hon said he thought it was an American plan, completed by the Australians. During the first few months after the removal and destruction of the town at least 10 people were killed by Australian troops and the Australians paid for the funerals, but there was never any money paid as compensation for the loss of their homes and livelihoods. A small quantity of supplies was given to some people but it was not enough. It consisted of rice and dried fish. Many people were very hungry and were not allowed on to their own land to grow food. They also ran the risk of being killed if they went back to retrieve building material. This created much resentment toward the Australians.

There was a period of some months when the people were absolutely forbidden to go back to their land, and after that the Australians allowed them to go back during the day to work their fields and gardens. During the restricted periods several people went back into the area to retrieve possessions or to find strayed cattle. They were killed by the Australians. He also said there were several people killed while the Australians were completing the destruction of the town. Much destruction was also caused by the armoured vehicles running over the paddies and destroying the bunds, the gardens and the fruit trees.

Many people had to squat on any vacant land they could find and build themselves small huts of straw and thatch. Most of their furniture and equipment had remained in Long Phuoc and was destroyed. Hon claimed that all the people dispossessed were so poor afterwards that their children

received no education because the children had to work to help support the families. He said, "there were only several schools in Hoa Long, and we were the outsiders".

They had only returned to Long Phuoc since Liberation and are now trying to build again all they had lost from that time. They may be able to rebuild, but he said there was nothing that could repay them for the wasted years and the loss of pride they had endured, or the innocent people who had been killed during the period.

I sat listening to all he had to say and kept watching the changing emotions on his face. He went from sadness to resignation to anger and back to resignation. His voice had remained calm and controlled but by the time he had finished it was apparent that he was emotionally drained. He was not alone because I was feeling drained myself by that time. He gestured around the table at the people and invited me to speak to whomever I liked for verification of what he had said. Perhaps I am naive, but I did not require any verification from the people. Still, I needed their personal accounts and so I began a round of interviews that left me shattered and depressed. Again they have the common theme of suffering and hardship caused by Australian policies. Blame the war or blame the Australian Army, in the final analysis it makes no difference, the suffering remains and the memory will never be wiped away.

All the interviews are similar stories to those of the Long Tan people except that many more of the Long Phuoc people had relatives killed or wounded by artillery or Australian troops. This is because of the fact that many of them moved to Hoa Long, less than two kilometres from the Task Force, and tried to save their possessions and crops in the 1966 period. I have only included one interview here because it has haunted me ever since.

Mrs Tran Huu Su was 65 years old and was born in Long Phuoc. In 1966 she was a widow with two daughters, aged 13 and 16. She lived in the family house in Long Phuoc and worked the family ricefield and gardens. At that time her house was a large timber dwelling, a very good house, she said.

When the Americans and the Australians came and forced all the people out, she went with many other Long Phuoc people to Hoa Long. She had no relatives in Hoa Long, which made it very difficult for her and her daughters. There was no compensation given for the loss of her house and livelihood and so with the help of her daughters she built a small thatched house on a piece of vacant ground on the outskirts of the town. They found enough timber to make a small wooden bed and they all slept together in that. She said the hut was very small and there was hardly room for anything else once the bed was inside.

For the first few months no one was allowed back into the area of Long Phuoc, so there was no way they could work their land. They had to work for low wages for other people when they could in order to survive and received no help from the Australians. At times they barely had enough to eat. Mrs Su's brother was killed during this time when he returned to Long Phuoc to salvage some of his possessions. She said, "My brother, after we were forced to move, went back to Long Phuoc in order to salvage some building material in order to build another house. We heard that he was killed by the Australians. We recovered his body and buried him in Hoa Long."

In late 1966 the Australians allowed the people of Long Phuoc to go back and work their land, but there were restrictions that made things very difficult. She and her daughters began to work their paddy and garden, as well as working for other people in order to live. In Long Phuoc by this time there was nothing left of the town. It had been completely destroyed.

In early 1967 she and her eldest daughter were returning to Hoa Long from Long Phuoc after working in their garden. They heard the sound of shooting close by and were very afraid, so they ran to get away from the area. She had been in front of her daughter and heard her call out, "Mother, I die. I die". When she turned her daughter was on the ground bleeding badly from the chest. She ran back to her but before she reached her an Australian patrol had emerged from the

bush and surrounded them both. The Australians attempted to attend to her daughter and bandaged her wound but she died while they were doing this.

Mrs Su carried her daughter back to Hoa Long and attended to the funeral arrangements. There was no help from the Australians.

She and her surviving daughter continued to live in the small shack and to eke out a living as best they could. In 1968 she became very ill, which made life even more difficult for the daughter, who then had to try to help her mother as well as do heavy work in the fields.

After 1975 mother and daughter rebuilt their house in Long Phuoc and they now live there along with the daughter's family.

When all of the interviews were finished, we went outside to the car and said our goodbyes to the people. Driving away from the town was a relief as I had been deeply disturbed by what I had heard. I kept telling myself that even though I knew what they were saying was basically correct, the lack of respect accorded to these people from the Australian military machine could not have been so bad. There must have been some compassion on the part of the military toward these people. I was to find out later that what they had told me had an even more sordid side to it.

As we drove from Long Phuoc to Hoa Long the thought of Mrs Su telling of the death of her daughter kept coming back to me. "Mother, I die. I die." If she was telling me lies she was the most convincing liar I had ever met.

One of the people I had been trying to find was the woman who had been at the centre of the infamous "water torture" allegations that had received much publicity in Australia in 1968. I really had not expected her to be alive, but had persistently shown her photograph to every official from Ho Chi Minh City to Long Tan. When I showed it to one of the Hoa Long officials he looked at me in surprise and informed me the lady was his cousin and that she lived in Hoa Long village.

A meeting was arranged and we went to her hamlet and stopped the car on the edge of the dirt road. Everyone

alighted and we walked down a narrow shaded track until we came to the house of the lady. The house was made of straw and mud approximately three metres square. A small crowd of villagers stood around outside and children were chattering excitedly about this unusual happening. As I made my way towards the crowd at the house, a woman, quite tall for a Vietnamese, stepped out of the doorway and came to greet me.

Her face was instantly recognisable from the 1966 photographs of her that I had with me in my briefcase. As I took her hand which she offered in greeting, a small, strained smile pulled up the corners of her mouth and she turned and ushered me into her small, impoverished home.

I had been trying to trace her since 1986, and now I was at last meeting her. She had no idea that twenty-years back she had become quite well known in Australia. The water torture case was widely reported in the media and there had even been a poem written about the woman.

She sat me down at her small table and an old woman sat near her and her husband behind. The skin on her face was stretched taut from the strain of the meeting and she said quietly and with great dignity, “It was a terrible time for me”. Barely perceptibly, she shuddered as the memory returned. Her small brown hands were clasped tightly, the knuckles white, as she stared abstractedly at the table.

The story of this woman has remained to this day one of the most controversial events concerning Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam conflict. Different versions of what actually happened abound and no-one, at the time, or since, seems to have been able to complete the picture accurately. Pat Burgess in his book *Warco*, stated that the woman had been captured by D Company 6 RAR, but I had been in D Company myself and could not recall the incident. I did some checking and found that the unit that captured the woman was in fact B Company 6 RAR, the date 24 October 1966. Robin (Spike) Jones was a section commander in B Company and remembers capturing her in a cave on the southern side of the Nui Dinh hills mass while on a three-day patrol. The com-

pany also found a radio and other equipment in another cave. According to Jones's recollections, it was almost dusk when the woman was found and too late to call in a helicopter, so she had been bound for the night and flown to Nui Dat the next day. That was all he knew of the incident until the story broke in the papers in March 1968.

Interpretations of the events that followed including the water torture, vary in severity according to who is telling the story. But the important thing is that it was admitted by the minister for the Army at the time that some form of water torture was used, contrary to the spirit of the Geneva Conventions, in order to make the woman talk. In his statement to parliament Lynch admitted that the incident did happen, but that it was not severe. The matter was closed.

I was now going to hear the story from the woman herself. As she began to speak, she seemed to be experiencing a dreadful vision. She spoke quietly, and as she did so, her eyes moved slowly from her hands to my face and then to the others in the room and slowly back to the hands, tightly clenched. It seemed as if she was fighting desperately to stop the hands from moving, but knew she was losing the battle. She stopped struggling with them only once during the whole time, when the pain of the memory overwhelmed her and two small tears welled up in her eyes. Blinking valiantly to hold them back, but to no avail, she quickly wiped the palm of her hand across her eyes and continued speaking as if the momentary loss of composure had never happened. The words of the Warrant Officer administering the torture, as reported in a newspaper article, came back to me, "The bloody bitch is tough. I can't break her". What the soldier had failed to appreciate was the dignity of the woman.

The following is her account to me of what happened. I have also included the recollections of Lieutenant John O'Halloran, the patrol leader who captured her.

Her name was To Thi Nau and she was born in the village of Hoa Long in 1943. She joined the revolutionary movement in 1964. In 1966, at the time of her capture, she had been part of the Chau Duc District Company and had been serving in a

Women's Propaganda and Medical Unit. The company's main job was to move around the Saigon Army (ARVN) units and try to influence the soldiers to desert to the Viet Cong. They also assisted the Chau Duc Company in many ways and acted as couriers and information gatherers.

The day she was captured she had been in the Nui Dinh, which she described as the Nui Thi Vai hills, and had been there to report to a small unit of the VC Main Force 274 Regiment which was operating in the area. When the Australians were seen, the small unit of the 274 quickly left the position and moved further up into the hills. She moved from the camp into a small cave, hoping that the Australians would not find her. They did, however, and brought her to the surface. By then it was almost dark and she accompanied them until they stopped for the night, when she was tied up until morning. She was then flown out by helicopter, by which time she had lost all hope and did not know where she was taken or how long it took.

John O'Halloran remembers that 5 and 6 Platoon of B Company 6 RAR saw one of the VC soldiers and attempted an assault on the camp. About 30 shots were fired and there were no casualties from either side. They then searched the camp and saw a wire leading into a small cave in the rocks. O'Halloran's company commander ordered him to send two men into the cave; two privates, Kerry Rooney and Mick Birchell, volunteered for the job (both were later killed during the battle near Hoi My in February 1967). O'Halloran said Birchell and Rooney told him they found the woman stretched out on the roof of the cave looking down on them like a cat. He cannot remember whether the radio was in the same cave as the woman or not but assumes that it was.

O'Halloran was ordered to take the woman further up the hill to a helicopter landing area. He thinks, although he is not quite sure, that the whole of his platoon went with him. The going was heavier than anticipated, and as he could not make it to the landing zone before nightfall, he harboured for the night. He kept his men on full alert and tied the woman's arms to one of his arms and her legs to one of his. Captor and

captive, and an interpreter, spent a very uncomfortable night trying to keep the rain out of their small shelter. In the morning the helicopter arrived and the woman was taken away. O'Halloran recalls that when the smoke grenade went off to signal the helicopter the woman did not flinch, but when she was blindfolded and taken to the helicopter she started to tremble and shake violently and could hardly stand.

To Thi Nau said that during the night she spent with the Australians she was treated well and was not hurt or abused in any way, except that the Vietnamese interpreter told her that if any Australian were shot by her people that night she would be killed.

When she was taken, blindfolded in the helicopter, she was almost sick with fear. At Baria, where she believed she was taken, she was tortured by Australian soldiers. When I told her she was taken to Nui Dat, she was adamant that she had never been there. I had to show her the photographs to convince her, and then she shook her head in bewilderment. She was taken into a room or a hut (tent) and Australian soldiers began to question her. They said she had been a radio operator. She knew nothing about radios — the radio had been left behind by the 274 Regiment soldiers and she thought it had been found in a cave about 50 metres from the one she was found in. She said she had never been able to speak or understand English. She was then questioned about the VC units in the area. When she said she knew nothing of the VC units, the Australians became angry and poured water down her throat. They were shouting at her in English and the interpreter was shouting at her in Vietnamese. By this time she was ill from fear and the water, and was close to fainting.

When she kept saying that she knew nothing of the VC units, one of the Australians threw her on the floor and two others held her arms out while she thinks a Vietnamese held her legs. She was blindfolded but thought from the feel of the hands that Australians were holding her wrists. An Australian then started to pour soapy water down her throat until she was choking. She thought she was sure to die. The soap and water were making her sick and she was scarcely conscious

but the Australian and the Vietnamese still kept screaming at her. Then she fainted. When she came around the treatment started again. She has no idea how long this went on as she had lost all track of time — it might have been one hour or four hours, she said. Her words were that when she was close to death they finally stopped. She was then forced to sign a document but she had no idea what it was. She thought it was in English and the Vietnamese told her what it supposedly said: that she had been captured in the Nui Dinh hills with a radio, that she was a Viet Cong, and had been questioned. After she signed the statement, she was blindfolded again and taken away.

A journalist eyewitness to the incident, John Sorell, wrote an article describing the event in the Melbourne *Herald* on 8 March 1968, after the Army minister had denied the allegations in parliament.

I first heard of the girl when I was tipped off that an Australian patrol had captured a girl operating a transmitter in the hills east [west] of Nui Dat.

The girl was brought back to the Task Force by helicopter for questioning.

She arrived gagged, blindfolded and wearing a loose black jacket and long black pants. She had been ill several times in the helicopter flight and had to be half dragged, half carried to the interrogation tent.

The girl was very thin and obviously had not had much food in the last few days.

She was terrified. When they took off the gag and the blindfold, she started to cry hysterically.

The questioning was under the control of a warrant officer.

He was a big blond man.

He dragged the girl into the tent and bound her by rope to a chair.

I watched from outside the tent.

I remember him saying, “Don’t worry, mate, this little bitch will talk by the time I’m finished with her”.

Then he asked a soldier to get him a bucket of water.

An interpreter asked the girl to give information about the Viet Cong units.

The girl refused to talk. Then the torture began.

The girl's head was held back over the top of the chair and the warrant officer began to pour water down her throat. Another soldier prised open the girl's mouth. The girl immediately began to choke. Tears poured from her eyes.

The water was poured into her mouth from an army field pannikin. After several minutes the torture was stopped. The girl was close to fainting. She was asked in vain to give information.

Again she refused and the water treatment started once again.

Then I was noticed in the group around the tent. The soldiers were obviously embarrassed that an outsider was witnessing the torture.

I was asked to move away as the girl started to scream. The soldiers lowered the tent flap as the "questioning" continued. I watched five yards away.

After about half an hour, the tent was opened and the warrant officer walked out.

He was angry. I can recall him saying: "The bloody bitch is tough. I can't break her. But give me half a day and I'll have her talking. There are better ways than using water".

The girl who had fainted was then carried to the POW compound at the camp.

To Thi Nau thinks she was taken to the prison at Bien Hoa, but she said it could have been anywhere. Wherever it was she was in a small solitary cell and was tortured twice a day every day by Vietnamese while Americans watched. For days she was tortured by water and was sexually abused using electricity. During this "very terrible time" she had to sign many statements, but by then she neither knew nor cared what they were.

After something like 10 days at Bien Hoa she was transferred to what she thought was the General Department of Police in Saigon. There she was taken to a room and beaten so severely that she was unable to move for several days. By then the questioning had stopped, but the beatings continued regularly for six months, after which they became less frequent.

After 12 months she was transferred to Thu Duc prison in Saigon where thankfully she was treated like an ordinary

prisoner and never beaten. She spent twelve months there, too, after which she was released and returned to Hoa Long. When she came back she had to go to Baria to show her release certificate, promise she would stay in her village and never follow the Viet Cong again. The police watched her closely and often came to her house to check on her movements. When I asked if she had ever followed the VC after her release she shook her head fearfully and her eyes grew wide at the thought.

In 1971 she married and later had two children, but her husband died of an illness in 1976. She married again in 1984 and her life now is very hard. She lives in Ap Tay hamlet in Hoa Long village and the family makes a living from the few fruit trees they own and from doing whatever work they can find for other people. Their tiny mud hut home has a straw roof and a dirt floor. There is very little furniture except the small table and chairs and several ornaments.

I sat looking at her, her husband, and the people crowded around the entrance to the small hut. I thought again of old Mrs Xiu looking at the blood-stained hootchy and thinking of her son. Once again I had to confront the fact that we were supposed to be the good guys, and yet we let ourselves slip over the edge. We can make the excuse that the treatment meted out to Mrs Nau was not really excessive and if anyone should be blamed then it is the South Vietnamese. But we were the ones who handed her over to them and then we relinquished responsibility, knowing that something very severe would happen to her. We knew all about the brutality of our ally and anyone who says we didn't is not telling the truth. Pat Burgess in his book *Warco* (1986) quotes journalist John Sorell as saying, "We all knew the Vietnamese used torture — the enemy, as well as the army of Thieu and Ky". Yet we handed over literally hundreds of people to the South Vietnamese and never even asked what happened to them after that. If they were butchered or tortured or thrown in the "tiger cages" of Con Son island then that was nothing to do with us.

I closed my notebook and walked away from Mrs Nau's

tiny decrepit little house and cursed myself for coming back to this place and having to confront these issues. I could never change them, so what the hell was I doing here. As I drove through Hoa Long, the question kept running through my mind.

At the Hoa Long council house we were met by several of the village committee. Hoa Long was the nearest village to the Task Force and was the only one allowed to remain inside the 4000 metre area the Task Force had declared forbidden to civilians. Hoa Long was made up of four hamlets spread over a wide area. Pat Burgess, in the *Bulletin* article of 21 August 1976 compared Hoa Long with Long Phuoc, saying, "Hoa Long was as ugly, as mean a village as you would find anywhere in the so called Republic". It certainly did not improve in the twelve months I was in Vietnam. According to other writings and the recollections of Australian troops who served there later, it remained a mean and ugly place and offered resistance to the Australians till they left in November 1971.

The northern edge of the village was situated only 800 metres from the southern side of the Task Force. It was to be the model village that would succumb to the benevolence of the Australian presence and would see the error of their ways in supporting the VC forces. This did not happen. Hoa Long continued to be a village of women, children and old men and always supported the VC.

Australian policy continued the harassment of the village by continual cordon and search operations, putting the people in cages and always apprehending some people as VC suspects. As the Australian frustration at the lack of results in Hoa Long began to grow, the policies toward the people became harsher. Bodies were left for public display and on 29 February 1968 it was reported in the *Australian* that "Australian Task Force officers urged a tougher pacification policy in the villages which persistently harboured Vietcong".

The discussion got off to a good start and there was much amusement that an Australian soldier should be there asking their opinions of the time. We started off by me asking what

help the Australians had given to the people of Hoa Long. There was much laughter at this: according to these people, no help was given. The work the Australians did in Hoa Long was never what the people really needed, they said. I asked about the market the Australians built in Hoa Long and again there were peals of laughter. They said the Australians had built what they described as the "big house", which had been used as a re-education centre by the Saigon Army. At night it was a detention centre. The people who had known links with the revolutionary forces were forced to go there at night. They had to bring their own food and bedding and were guarded by Saigon Army soldiers from dusk until daylight.

They said the Australians made life very hard on the people of Hoa Long because there were many cordon and searches of the area. Many times the Australians would send a light plane over the village during the early morning hours to tell the people there would be a search of the village and to remain indoors. All the people then had to go to one area where they would be kept all day behind wire enclosures. During these searches there was always someone arrested and taken away to Baria for questioning. This made it very difficult for the local VC forces to come into the hamlets, but nevertheless their people did many times.

They said the Australians were hated more as time went on because of their behaviour toward the Hoa Long people. First they destroyed many houses in Long Phuoc and Long Tan and displaced the people with no compensation. Later they started the village searches and the curfews. Then they started to drop the bodies of the local VC soldiers in the market place. The families were allowed to claim the bodies to bury them, but the Australians then made much trouble for the relatives because of their obvious VC links. Members of the family were usually arrested and sent to Baria and held sometimes for up to six months. They claimed that many were badly treated during this confinement. Many relatives were consequently afraid to claim the bodies of their relatives. The local people then set up a committee which they called the "Good Friends Committee", members of which would then

request permission to bury the bodies on humanitarian grounds, so shielding the relatives from any recriminations by the Australians and the Saigon Army. They also said bodies were left in the rice paddies close to the village and some people were killed attempting to retrieve them for burial. They also said that sometimes mines or grenades were left under the bodies.

They were angry at the Australian involvement in the province. Australian and Vietnamese people had never hurt each other, they said, so why did Australian troops come and cause so much hardship and suffering? The people of Hoa Long did not hate the Australian people but they hated the Australian troops very much. Many local people were killed and injured by Australian troops, artillery and mines, and only about 30 per cent of the rice paddies could be worked. Only the paddies close to the village could be worked because of the curfew, which was from 5 p.m. to 7 a.m. They said that anyone who came back late was arrested and questioned and also ran the risk of being killed in an Australian ambush.

Most of the people killed in the 8 RAR ambush in August 1970 were from Hoa Long. After the ambush the Australians cordoned off the area and no one was allowed in. They then buried all the bodies in a big pit that they dug in the paddies with a bulldozer. (There is a photo in the 8 RAR History of a small bulldozer at the site.)

We then talked of the incident of the ARVN training group who went out on a night exercise without ammunition and were ambushed by the VC. They all laughed at this incident. Australian records show that there were 11 killed, 27 wounded and 184 missing from this exercise. I remember being on several patrols into the area near the base of the hills trying to pick up any of these people who might be hiding, waiting for relief. As far as I know none of them was ever found. Mr Thuan who was an ex-D445 member said that they had all been captured and had all become VC soldiers. In fact one of them was the party secretary in Chau Pha village.

Mr Thuan from then on did most of the talking. He was evidently very well respected by the others in the room: he was

never interrupted and the others seemed to hang on his words. He spoke with a quiet authority and was very open in his comments. He also had a great sense of humour and had all the Vietnamese laughing and shaking their heads in amusement at some of the things he said.

He commented that the local people did not have any warning of the Australian Task Force setting up at Nui Dat. The Australians just moved into the area and took over. There were several farming families at Nui Dat who were ordered to move off their land where they grew pepper and coffee. Thuan's parents were one of these families. He said that his father was told that he would get compensation but the Saigon Army got most of the money. The procedure was that the people had to make up a document which would then be stamped by the Saigon Army and then present it in Vung Tau for payment. There was much laughter and shaking of heads when he related this incident. "My father made the paper and was told to take it to Vung Tau. My father had never been past Hoa Long and did not even know where Vung Tau was". He said that many people were in the same predicament.

Many months later when the people did get to Vung Tau, the Saigon Army made much trouble for them and they finished up receiving only several hundred *piastre* where they should have received several thousand. According to Mr Thuan the people from Hoa Long did not receive any compensation from the Australians directly. Those people who had property resumed or damaged along Route 2 were paid compensation, but only through the Saigon Army in Baria.

His recollections are that after the Australians left the base in late 1971 the Saigon Army then used the area. He then turned to the defoliant spraying and said that after 1968 the Americans sprayed Nui Dinh at least once every two months. In Hoa Long area there were many birth deformities and many people, especially ex-soldiers, had skin diseases and cancer. Two of his friends had died recently from skin diseases.

His sense of humour came out again when I asked if the list I had of D445 leaders was correct. He looked at the list of the four main officers and said they were correct. He asked the

date on the list and I said it was 1966. He then had all the people laughing when he said that the Australians had not achieved much in six years, as all except one were still alive and the one who had died, Sau Chanh, had died of illness.

When we finished the meeting we went outside to go to the Task Force at Nui Dat. I had felt uncomfortable about the Hoa Long meeting for some reason and the lack of good will towards me was made obvious at the end when one of the people refused to shake my hand. I was left no doubt about how the people of Hoa Long felt about the Australian presence in their area.

The northern edges of Hoa Long looked no different from my memories of twenty years before. There were still many families who appeared to be living in very poor conditions and there were very few signs of any building work in progress. We came from the outskirts of Hoa Long and the Nui Dat rubber plantation stood silent and forlorn in the mid-afternoon heat, waiting for the rain. At the edge of the old Task Force area were two white-brick columns that had evidently been gateposts.

The Nui Dinhs stood sad and forlorn, bare of any foliage, looking like a plucked chicken carcass.

It was depressing to look at them and stand in that deserted rubber plantation surrounded by the memories of the splendid vision that had gone terribly wrong. I remembered the same 1976 article by Pat Burgess already mentioned in which he spoke of the 5 RAR commander's dream for Phuoc Tuy when the Australians first arrived: "The colonel's dream had taken in even Hoa Long. It might be a dirty war elsewhere in Vietnam but here in Phuoc Tuy it was going to be different" (*Bulletin*, 21 August 1976). Different? How could it be different. We were the same as the Americans. We walked into a war we didn't know a thing about and tried to use old lessons on a new foe. The Vietnamese were rewriting the rulebook, while we continued to use our tired old methods in the hope that we could intimidate the people instead of giving them something to follow. We may have caused them to suffer and to be afraid, but a lot of ordinary people in Phuoc Tuy had

convinced me that we could never have broken their will if we had stayed in Vietnam for twenty years.

The silent Task Force rubber plantation was a symbol of broken ideals and shattered dreams and in the sombre afternoon light it appeared as if the plantation looked mournfully at the bare, decaying, polluted slopes of the Nui Dinh. There was nothing there. The signs of the thousands of Australian troops who had passed through were erased from all but the memories of those who had been there. In places the plantation was overgrown and the trees were rough and had not been thinned. We came to the intersection where the rubber stopped and there in front of us stood the small insignificant treeless feature of Nui Dat. There were several houses on the slopes and it seems that the coffee and pepper farmers have returned. The road down to the old 6 RAR area was broken and overgrown and at the creek the erosion had washed away half the road. The driver pushed on only because of my urging. When we started up the slope, there were tracks that had been roads, but I was slightly disoriented. We finished up at what had been the C Company, 6 RAR lines in 1966 and I could look over to the old D Company area.

We walked over the area — there was nothing there. The driver wanted to return to Baria and I agreed, as there was nothing in that silent lonely place to make me want to stay any longer. Why had I wanted to come here anyway? I knew why, but did not want to admit the fact to myself. It was because Nui Dat had been the place where I had experienced something good and something bad. The good was the memory of the mates I had served with and the bad was the folly of our commitment. Nui Dat had shattered long-held assumptions and ideals, for myself, for the Australian Army and for the government who had sent us there. Nui Dat was the symbol of misplaced trust in our "great and powerful allies" and of our inability to see that there were legitimate aspirations other than our own.

I had seen Nui Dat again and the short visit was more than enough. As we moved back to Baria it really was at last left behind me. There was no doubt in my mind about that. I had

finally purged myself. I had clung to the false hope for over twenty years that "they" had not died for nothing. Now I could squarely face the fact that they had, and for some reason it lifted a weight from my shoulders. No more ifs or buts. At last my perspective was as clear as I could ever hope it to be. For the first time it was unclouded by false hopes and uncertainty.

A week later as the plane lifted off I said goodbye to Vietnam for what I thought would be the last time. An alien land and an alien culture that had pulled and pushed at me for so long. No one can hope to come to terms with that strange and beautiful country and that even stranger war which served up good Australian manhood. But at least I could now look inside myself without being confused and afraid by shadows that I could not understand. Although the faces of the village people would disturb me, at least they were out of the shadows at last.

"Mother I die, I die", said Mrs Su as she stared into a vision somewhere far behind me. And the only thing she could not understand was why. Silly ignorant woman. It's all so simple. Why can't you understand? You stood in the way of more powerful interests and you were supposed to stand aside, as others have had to do for centuries. Even though your people refused to stand aside and won, you've still really lost. Those powerful interests will never forgive you and will keep you in poverty for the rest of your life to appease their own egos. You are still "the missing ones".

A Time for Reassessment

The flight back to Australia was not a good one for reflections. Remembering what the village people had to say made it difficult to think of anything else. Surely what they had said to me could not be entirely correct. Surely there must have been some help or compassion on the part of the Australian Army toward these people, the innocent victims of the war. Even the military mind must have made some effort toward restitution and help for all they had lost.

Not only were the stories from the villagers proven to be correct, but there was an even worse side to the Australian presence which I was to discover later from documentary evidence released for the Agent Orange inquiry. A war atrocity, by any definition, was committed on the people of Phuoc Tuy. There is much hard evidence to support the claim that the policies adopted by the Australian Army there resulted in the deaths of many civilians. There was also considerable destruction of the villagers' private property with no compensation or genuine "resettlement".

Added to this were the deaths of many villagers who walked into ambush positions or who were in the wrong place at the wrong time; and the Army acted in all too many cases in an arbitrary manner that actually forced the local people into the arms of the VC.

The Long Phuoc and Long Tan people told the stories of

the destruction of their homes and the deprivation of their livelihoods because of Australian policies. They also told of the shelling of innocent people. Although I have not been able to verify particular instances in Australian documents I have been able to verify that these things did in fact happen to these people. The disturbing fact of the matter is that it appears Australians fired artillery on to civilians carrying out their daily tasks in order to survive. It was a feature of the war in Vietnam that such bombardments might be used as a way of delivering a message to the people in "no-go" areas. When soldiers fired the guns they often had no idea of their target. The rounds left the guns and exploded out of sight and many times out of sound of the gunners, leaving them to wonder what they were firing at and what were the results.

The question must be asked whether the firing of artillery on to the peasants was at odds with official policy. The *Division in Battle Pamphlet No. 11 Counter-Revolutionary Warfare 1965*, concerning Civil Military Action states: "The principles of humanity prohibit the use of any degree of violence not actually necessary for the purpose of the war. War is not an excuse for ignoring established humanitarian principles." The following records of the Task Force signal-log messages are difficult to reconcile with this principle. These records are available at the Australian War Memorial Archives in Canberra (AWM.181. Message Forms. HQ 1 ATF, Commanders Diaries, 1-30 September 1966, Box No 2). The following are for the month of September 1966 only. There are many more of similar notations throughout the period of Australian involvement.

Serial Date Time From Message

| | | | | |
|----|----|------|-----|---|
| 48 | 12 | 0730 | AVN | Two buildings under construction in Long Tan 488659.489657. Arty to fire some rounds. |
|----|----|------|-----|---|

| <i>Serial</i> | <i>Date</i> | <i>Time</i> | <i>From</i> | <i>Message</i> |
|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---|
| 111 | 13 | 1105 | ALO | 3 people at Long Phuoc heading north on trail 50 metres from road. They are carrying baskets on poles. GR 452651. Arty [artillery] engaged. Smoke followed by HE. |
| 113 | 13 | 1120 | ALO | 3 cattle 461659 North of road, west of river between Long Tan and Long Phuoc. 470654 people (2) working fields. Engaged by artillery. |
| 114 | 13 | 1132 | ALO | Herd of cattle at 465653. Engaged by artillery. |
| 789 | 25 | 1242 | ALO | Numerous people in Long Phuoc on main road travelling both east and west. Arty engaged. |
| 923 | 28 | 1209 | ALO | People walking east into Long Phuoc YS 438639. 15 cattle and one man at 469654. 8 people/cattle south of Long Tan 485652 moving north. Remarks. Arty engaged. |

ALO stands for the Air Liaison Officer, which was the small army spotter plane that flew over the area reporting movements. These messages clearly refer to civilians. I would suggest that even if VC were mixed with them it is against all humanitarian principles to act in this arbitrary manner. Even the people in the villages did not suggest that the Australians knowingly fired artillery on to civilians, and yet the records suggest they did. I kept thinking of the young man with his hand missing and his story that he was working in the rice paddies and was hit with artillery. Also the stories from Long Phuoc of the fathers and brothers who were killed by artillery

while minding their cattle, or going back to Long Phuoc to collect things from their old homes.

The disturbing fact is that it was the Australian policy that made these people attempt to go back to their own areas. If there had been some help for these people then they would not have needed so desperately to go back, but there was no help given to them. The only means available to these people to live was their gardens, fruit trees and rice paddies. Yet it was the Australian Army who adopted the policy of refusing them access. A "Civic Action" document dated 14 June 1966 states:

Access to the recently destroyed fruit growing village of Long Phuoc (YS 4464) is prohibited to civilians. At a time which is tactically suitable, 1 ATF will allow limited access for the harvest of fruit crops. Vietnamese police will make a strict check on all civilians (and their ID documents) wanting to visit the area.

These people had no choice, their homes were destroyed, their means of livelihood forbidden them and no help with resettlement was ever given. As Brigadier Jackson stated in the previously recorded interview, "I wouldn't say at that stage of the game we had the knowledge or the resources or the ability to do a resettlement program". When I asked the first civil affairs commander, John Donohoe, if he was aware of the extreme hardship the Task Force had imposed on these people he said, "Was I ever. I cried tears for them, believe you me". When questioned if the Task Force was aware of the plight of these people and whether any specific aid or compensation had been given to them, he said, "Only when we came across them and we saw their plight. The civil affairs didn't know much about them."

When asked in 1987 how he felt about the use of the word "resettled" in describing their treatment Donohoe had this to say.

They were just given a pat on the bum and told to go and look after themselves. They certainly weren't resettled as we know it. Resettled is supporting someone until they are able to support themselves and that certainly was not done to my knowledge. It

may have been done in a few minor cases by the Vietnamese bureaucracy but not to my knowledge.

The Long Phuoc people were never to receive any help from the Australian Army in Phuoc Tuy. They and the Long Tan people remained "the forgotten ones". Even the visible ones in Hoa Long, right at the door of the Task Force were not given help.

When the Task Force finally did get a separate Civil Affairs unit, they also forgot the Long Phuoc people under their very noses. John McDonah, the commander of the Civil Affairs unit arrived in Vietnam around the end of June 1967, 12 months after the people had been moved and their homes destroyed. He said he knew there had been a village at Long Phuoc and he thought all the people had gone into Hoa Long. When I said only 1450 of them had gone there he expressed surprise. He did not know where the rest of them were. He said: "The sad part was that by the time I got there the Long Phuoc thing was out of the road." Perhaps "swept under the carpet" would have been a better expression. He went on to say:

Up until the Tet Offensive, [1968] nothing was done specifically to help the Long Phuoc people. I certainly knew they were there somewhere. It does sound like they were all forgotten. And of course this is one of the problems of changing the force. If we had continuity then someone would have said that we should be doing something for these people. But we were just sort of setting up so that the next blokes could get on with the job.

Even when the people were allowed to go back into the area to work, the curfews made life impossible for them. Another Australian document "Population Control Hoa Long", dated 17 September 1966, further supports the stories of the people I had interviewed. It states in part:

- (1) Access to Long Phuoc will be permitted only on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
 - (2) Civilians will be permitted in the area on those days only between 0730 hrs and 1600 hrs [4 p.m.]
- c. Construct a double danner perimeter fence around Hoa Long.

- d. Co-ordinate and control the movement of civilians out of Hoa Long.
- e. Ensure civilians moving out of Hoa Long are issued with a pass agreed to by 1 ATF.
- f. Ensure civilians moving out of Hoa Long are not in possession of foodstuffs, medicines, money or other supplies valuable to the VC.
- g. Prevent civilians moving from Hoa Long to Long Phuoc except on authorized days.
- h. Take punitive action against civilians found disobeying regulations.

Another problem that the Long Phuoc people I spoke to in 1987 seemed to be unaware of was the fact that defoliant had been used on the area just after the village had been destroyed. John Donohoe stated, when I asked him how he felt about the policies toward the people:

Well in fact I did have a bit to say about this. It was obvious to me that it was going to create problems because Vietnamese work funny hours and they don't own watches and they only travel at the pace of a bullock cart. And in many cases it was useless as they had started to use defoliant on a lot of the area even at that time. You couldn't explain to the people that even if they did go back there was nothing that would grow there probably for the next five or six years. It was pretty sad for them . . . It was stupid . . . stupid. They don't work that way. They all knock off at lunch time, but they start at daylight and then do a few hours in the evening.

The Task Force was well aware of the suffering caused to the people because in early 1967 a survey report was received from a specially trained team of Vietnamese. The report, dated 25 February 1967, is 22 pages and details the hardship of Hoa Long. Just two of the responses show the problems of the people concerned but there is page after page of such comments.

One 60 year old male respondent said: "Australians forbid people to go to work in the field. If who (sic) goes there secretly, he will be frightened by the helicopter then be captured and brought to the district town. Here we only live on agricultural produce, now

we are forbidden to go working in the rice field. What do we live on? On these days we are allowed to go working in the fields twice a week, but we must come back by 4 p.m. If he who comes back late, will be blamed and his identity card will be seized and he will be on fatigue for two three days. This harvest is only obtained 3/10." One 24, 25 and 60 year old female respondent said that since Australian Army stationed here people and cattle are in hunger, agricultural labour is forbidden.

Toward the end of the report it is stated: "One 40 year old female respondent, complained, 'People from Long Phuoc moved here in great number. Wells are too little, I think that in the dry season, people will die of thirst.' " One of the conclusions in the report written by the team states: "We find that the residents are longing for trading and cultivating freely, for the defence and aids of the GVN and army. *Especially Long Phuoc refugees they still have no dwelling.*"

The italics are underlined in the original report. Most of this report was ignored and the people of Long Phuoc never received any substantial aid from the Australian Army that I can discover.

On the killing of civilians, there is no record I can find about the killing of Mrs Su's daughter. However, there are many examples of civilians being killed; for instance, on 14 August 1966: "Contact report 140625.GR 395660 3 VC ? States not sure whether civilians or not. None were carrying weapons". Another disturbing one is the Special Air Services patrol who killed three civilian woodcutters on the sole evidence that they ducked for cover when a plane came over. Considering the way that planes and helicopters fired on anything that moved, it was really no wonder. Yet this was the reason for their killings. A situation report on enemy forces from 6 RAR dated 13 December 1966 states: "8 Oct YS 275745 SAS killed two unarmed men cutting wood who were thought to be VC as they hid whenever a plane went overhead, a third arrived and was killed also." Tenuous evidence on which to take three men's lives. And just how were they killed? They must have been knifed or garrotted,

silently, or else the other man would not have come back to them. The report clearly states they were unarmed.

The worst case I have found to date was the 2 RAR ambush that went horribly wrong in October 1967. A platoon from A Company had laid an ambush outside the restricted 4000 metre area — the civilians must have thought they were allowed to move there. The timing was 7.36 a.m. and was late for civilians to be going to work. This is related directly from the after-action report by the platoon commander and the company commander.

The pltn had laid an ambush on a track when noise and talking were heard. Subsequently a group of 16 people walked into the ambush. The leading Vietnamese saw the machine gunner and pointed at him with his shoulder carrying stick. The machine gunner took the stick to be a weapon and opened fire. The remainder of the patrol then opened fire, catching most of the group as they ran back south. After 2-3 minutes firing I ordered cease fire when I heard a woman cry out. I moved forward and found that what we had all thought to be weapons were in fact shoulder carrying sticks. We then evacuated all dead and wounded.

Terrain. Thick bamboo and old paddy fields with grass 4-5 metres high. Visibility 25-50 metres.

En. First sighted 50 metres. 16 civilians. First fired at 15-20 metres

En cas. 4 dead. 6 wounded. 3 captured.

Docs and weapons captured. Nil.

Lessons learned. The great difficulty identifying civilians from VC in close country.

Coy. Commanders comments. 1. The ambush was well laid and executed. The actions of the pltn commander were entirely correct, unfortunate as it was for the civilians concerned.

2. Pltn commander is to be commended for his control of the situation and his rapid evacuation of the wounded.

“Unfortunate as it was for the civilians concerned” — the woodcutters did not even get that much sympathy.

The Task Force knew all about the suffering they were causing to the people but continued to ignore the ones who needed their help the most, the Long Phuoc and the Long Tan

people. I can only imagine the rationale was they were supposedly VC supporters so why help them. But who could tell VC in Vietnam. If they were VC they certainly remained so as a result of Australian policies. Why would they not support the VC? Why on earth would they support a government and a foreign military machine against their own people when they were subjected to such treatment?

Another decision in 1967 that caused great hardship was the movement of over 1000 people from an area designated Slope 30. This was to the north-west of the Task Force near the Hat Dich area, home of the 274 Regiment. The people were told by loudhailer they were to stay indoors for a census. They were then herded on to trucks as their homes were destroyed and forcibly taken to a refugee village that the Australians established near the Binh Ba plantation. This was Ap Suoi Nghe, which was to become supposedly the best refugee village in Vietnam. I have never seen this village or spoken to the people but it became a hell-hole of a slum, according to the reports and soldiers I have spoken to about the place.

A glowing press release was put out to explain this marvellous project in Australia: "In appearance the model village set out on a ridge line south of the French-owned rubber plantation at Binh Ba is not unlike a neat Australian housing subdivision." Someone has handwritten on the copy of the release available from the Archives the notation, "who's kidding who". Photos and a video I have seen of Ap Suoi Nghe give stark evidence which contradicts the press release.

Two village chiefs and their deputies were murdered by the VC in quick succession despite the proximity to the Task Force. Crops would not grow because of defoliant used and the poor ground. The people were abused by their own government officials and money supposed to help them was taken by corrupt administrators. The land they were supposedly given they could not sell. Hardly land ownership, as the press release quotes Brigadier Graham. People who could not read or write were required to fill in many forms and for this they had to pay the officials to do it for them.

The Task Force was officially not responsible for the village even though it was an Australian initiative. The blame for the failure was always put down to the inefficiency of the South Vietnamese. This, legally, absolved the Australians of blame but hardly helped the people who had lost their homes and livelihoods.

In April 1971 a survey report by a team of Americans and Vietnamese described Ap Suoi Nghe as "a village of the poor". After 10 pages the report concluded: "The attempt to move people to a 'western' type hamlet structure is depressing for those who visit Suoi Nghe. It is virtually a hamlet without a soul". Lieutenant Colonel Gratton, the CO of the Civil Affairs unit, wrote on 10 April 1969: "1 ATF has no official responsibility for Suoi Nghe, but we have lingering moral responsibility, and a military interest."

Another facet of Australian policy where the wrong information was recorded was the confiscation of the rubber plantation at Nui Dat. Ian Hutchinson, writing on "The Red Rats of Phuoc Tuy" in the *Australian Army Journal*, April 1968, stated: "Neither the Nui Dat plantation nor other plantations which are located in Viet Cong controlled areas are at present being worked by rubber tappers, and subsequent loss of income to owners is reimbursed by war claims payments." This statement is utterly wrong. The owners of the plantation at Nui Dat received no payment for the loss of the plantation during the whole time of the Australian presence in Phuoc Tuy. When the Australians left in 1971 they had not been paid one cent.

According to a file of over 200 pages that I have obtained from the Australian Foreign Affairs Department, the struggle for the claims of these people went as high as the prime minister of Australia. Demonstrations were held in Saigon and several vitriolic newspaper articles sought to help the four owners of the rubber plantation at Nui Dat. The case started out with four people claiming compensation for the confiscation of their land and eventually ended up as 55 people who had land confiscated or destroyed around the Nui Dat area and who received no compensation from the Australian Ar-

my. Legally the army was within its right under the Terms of the Penlateral Agreement of 1950, but this did not help the people who had lost their livelihood. To say, as Hutchinson did, that the people were compensated is absolute nonsense.

The case of the compensation for the Nui Dat plantation gives the lie to the official reasons we were in Vietnam. The public declarations by the Australian government at the time were that we were there at the invitation of the South Vietnamese government. This was not actually so. We were there because of the Americans and we gave little thought to the Vietnamese. When Australia decided to station troops in Phuoc Tuy, it was after discussions with the Americans, not the Vietnamese. This was why the people had so much trouble trying to claim their compensation.

According to the legal position of the Australian Army, the confiscation of the land at Nui Dat was covered under the Terms of the Penlateral Agreement of 1950, which was extended to the Australian forces in Vietnam by the ministry's notes of 7 June 1963 and 30 June 1964. In March 1966 a decree was issued by the government of South Vietnam setting up an Inter-Ministerial Committee to look into land compensation acquired for military installations (IMREC). But the Vietnamese government claimed the Australian Army had moved on to Nui Dat and began clearing the area for their camp before approval had been given. A letter from Brigadier General Dong Van Khuyen, dated 7 April 1969, states: "The Australian Army has occupied, made use and cleared properties of land owners at Nui Dat Phuoc Tuy, before the RVN Government grants them permission."

An indication of the sort of thinking by Australian government officials and the army towards the ordinary people of Vietnam is highlighted by the comment of Lt Colonel K.L. McPherson, who wrote in December 1970: "All the petitioners were VC sympathizers at the time." What bearing does that have on a compensation claim? How do you class a sympathizer? The classic example is a handwritten note, dated 25 February 1971, in which a bureaucrat accused an

Australian Embassy official of being biased in his attempts to help the people obtain their rightful compensation. The note, written on the back of correspondence, states:

Mr Timmins. It appears from all your notes on file that you bear a biased sympathy for the landowners. This is a problem for GVN *not* for the Australian Government. The owners (probably VC) know this quite well and are only trying to blackmail us. (hand-written signature unreadable)

By 1971 there was still no compensation and the heat had been turned up considerably. So much so that a cable was sent to the Australian Embassy in Saigon telling them to get the prime minister "off the hook". "The Prime Minister's Department has asked for a memorandum which would get the Prime Minister 'off the hook' and leave it to you to provide the landowners with their reply." This was dated 8 February 1971 and signed D.J. Kingsmill, for the secretary.

The extent of damage to the local people's property and the economy is shown in the minutes of the Vietnamese Inter-ministerial Committee of Real Estate and Provincial Committee of Investigation, dated 31 January 1969.

When arriving in the spot the Committee recognized that the whole area of 950 hectares had been levelled by Australian troops to build their military camps and structures, so that there were no longer fruit trees or other properties belonging to the owners. Nevertheless, the Committee has made inquiries with villagers living in the area, the latter said that before the action, this area of 950 hectares had been all plantations of industrial and fruit trees, on which there had been buildings.

So much for Robert O'Neill's statement that the Task Force had been placed so as not to "dislocate the economic life of the province by taking up agricultural land".

One of the extraordinary things about my trips back to Vietnam and the stupidity of the Australian Army's attitude to the people was finding out that it had been written about in 1968. John Rowe, the Task Force intelligence officer during 1966-1967 wrote a novel called *Count Your Dead*. There are striking similarities between aspects of this novel and the

Australian Task Force in Vietnam in 1966–1967. Rowe resigned from the army after the publication of the book.

The story is about a fictitious American Brigade but follows the first twelve months of the Task Force very closely. The setting of the province is without doubt Phuoc Tuy and the positioning of the American base is the same as Nui Dat. He describes Route Three which runs through the province. “Through my rice basin, then through all the rubber plantations until it reaches the main highway north”. Route Two ran from the province capital of Baria north to Xuan Loc. Around Baria were the rich ricefields and north were the rubber plantations of Nui Dat, Binh Ba or Gallia plantation and then the large Courtenay plantation that ran into Long Khanh province. The opposing VC forces were also the same as those facing the Australian Task Force.

As I see it we’ve got one, sometimes two Main Force VC regiments basing up in the province; one mainly up here near the Vinh Duong province boundary and the other up in the corner here in the Duc Binh war base area. We’ve got the usual VC province battalion, VC district companies and guerrillas.

In Phuoc Tuy there were two regiments of the VC 5 Division. One base was in the north-east corner of the province in the Nui May Tao mountain range. The other base was in the north-west of the province in the Hat Dich area and both of these regiments regularly moved into War Zone D. There was also the local D445 Battalion and the district companies.

Close to the fictional base was the village of Dong Tuy which the Americans, after talking with the province chief, decided to destroy. This was a village with strong VC links going back to the days of the Viet Minh and contained 3000 civilians. “We fire artillery in there to frighten VC but they escape into tunnels. We must destroy all the tunnels.”

Close to the Task Force was the village of Long Phuoc containing 3000 people. The Australians decided to completely destroy the town, because of its VC links going back to the days of the Viet Minh and because it was designated a “fortified village”. It was also full of tunnels.

In the novel the Americans sent one of their companies out to decoy the VC main force into a battle. The Task Force sent one company out into the rubber plantation at Long Tan, knowing intelligence reports indicated large concentrations of VC in the area.

Rowe also has the Americans inflating the body count from his fictional battle. "They were surprised to discover how readily the grossly exaggerated body count figure had been accepted by the battalion". He also had a piece that closely paralleled the previously mentioned thoughts of my own of the body count jumping very quickly.

"Hell with the firepower we've applied and the firefight you've been in, you must have killed hundreds of VC".

"Yes sir I'm damn certain we must, but about twenty-three bodies is all —"

"Well you'd better organize a more thorough and comprehensive count pretty damn quick."

How did the body count at Long Tan go? From twelve to fifteen at 9.40 a.m. to 100 by 10.20 a.m. when we were only securing the area.

The fictitious American junior officers wanted to follow up the enemy, but were told no. Colonel Townsend of 6 RAR wanted to follow up, but was refused permission to advance more than 1000 metres.

The main character in the novel was an officer who became the intelligence officer in charge of civil affairs. Rowe was the Task Force intelligence officer and had a lot to do with John Donohoe the civil affairs officer.

Rowe brought in a Frenchman who managed the plantation very close to his fictitious Brigade. The Binh Ba or Gallia plantation house was only 5 kilometres from Nui Dat and was managed by a big Frenchman who often entertained the Task Force officers.

The most striking similarity is when Rowe reveals that his fictional intelligence cum civil affairs officer had been given a report by The Census Grievance Team. The report was made after "153 interviews with Province villagers and refugees".

That really is an amazing coincidence because the report on Hoa Long was carried out by a "specially trained team of Vietnamese". They interviewed "111 respondents : 87 local residents and 24 refugees". Rowe then quotes 6 of the interviews all of which are amazingly similar to the passages quoted early in this book from the report given to the Task Force dated 25 February 1967.

The fictional American forces fired artillery into the fictional village of Dong Tuy.

Even though Dong Tuy had been declared a forbidden twenty four hour zone, many of the ex villagers had returned there, attempting to harvest what they could of their ripened fruit crops, before the rot destroyed them . . . The artillery may have had some deterrent effect, but the only demonstrable result had been the discovery by a patrol of a badly wounded old woman with her right arm blown off, together with the corpse of her husband and grandson of perhaps ten years of age. Understanding the compelling reasons of lost homes and hunger that drove the villagers to return, Morgan felt strongly that the best solution would be to allow them to do so, but under stringent control and curfew restrictions.

It seems that this bears too close a resemblance to interviews with the village people of Long Phuoc and the Army documents supporting other actions to be a mere figment of Rowe's imagination.

The Australian Army in Vietnam followed policies that created enormous hardship and suffering for the local people of Phuoc Tuy. Granted, war itself is an atrocity, but there was no need for the mindless brutality toward the civilian population. Our war was to fight the VC, not the people. If we say the VC were the people, we are then admitting that we were fighting against our own beliefs, as our rationale was to help the people. In fact the war could never be won without the support of the people. Yet by our first actions in Phuoc Tuy we alienated — directly — over 8 per cent of the province population — permanently.

When we moved into Phuoc Tuy we were going to do the job differently from the Americans. We thought we had the

experience from Malaya, but this was a false assumption. In Malaya the British were the government as well as the military. When government action was required to consolidate military gains or soften the brutality of the army's actions, then it was done. In Vietnam there was no way that anyone could control the corrupt government in Saigon.

The government we were supporting continued to alienate its own population and the allied forces supporting them became locked into an ever-increasing spiral of frustration and violence. The people became the enemy and the merry-go-round went faster and faster until at last we had to say, STOP. We could not even pacify Hoa Long, right on our doorstep. When the frustration got to the point of dumping bodies in the market place or dragging them through the villages in sight of the children, then we really had no option but to leave. Whatever military gains were made were lost very quickly by the Saigon government. It really was a no win situation, and 500 Australian boys paid with their lives for the stupidity.

If people questioned what was going on, they were branded as Communists or accused of being unpatriotic. The Army even imposed strict censorship so people in Australia would not be aware of the situation. Denis Warner, the respected war and Asian correspondent, wrote an article in the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* of 6 January 1971 under the heading "Army's Bamboo Screen on the Task Force". It was a scathing attack on Army policy.

I was instructed that I had no authority to talk to any Australian servicemen, on duty or off.

Such restrictions gravely complicate, though they do not entirely prevent, the collection of information.

They also constitute the most blatant attempt to impose censorship at source that I have ever encountered in any Army in any war at any time.

This I might add includes World War II, the Korean War, the Indo China War, the Vietnam War, the wars in Laos and Cambodia, the Malayan Emergency, Confrontation, the Colonel's Revolt in Indonesia, the September 30 incident and some sundry other revolts and upheavals over the past quarter of a century.

The Australian Army in Vietnam antagonised the local people it was supposedly trying to help, journalists trying to report the war and even the supreme commander of Allied Forces in Vietnam, General Westmoreland. Westmoreland had a healthy respect for the Australian fighting man but became exasperated at the performance of the Task Force in Phuoc Tuy. He flew to Nui Dat in February 1967, six months after the Long Tan battle and let the Task Force senior officers know of his displeasure at their performance. This has never been admitted by the army and in 1988 when I interviewed Malcolm Fraser, who was the minister for the Army from 1966 to 1968, he bluntly told me that he did not believe me. The following is from Westmoreland's official diaries, dated 3 February 1967, obtained from the National Archives in Washington DC.

I then departed for the Australian Task Force where I called on Brigadier Graham, the new commander, for the first time. The Australians are very inactive and I learned that they are about to rotate their two battalions which means they will be virtually ineffective for over a month. Out of a 4600 man task force they are able to put only six companies in the field. They have a large base to defend which requires two companies. I expressed to Brigadier Graham my disappointment and subsequently in talking to the Australian Ambassador and General Mackay on his departure, and to General Vincent on his arrival, I expressed my concern that very little combat power was being generated by the 4600 man force. Furthermore I suggested that they might want to change their rotation policy which I thought would allow them to increase their combat power with the same total number of troops and at the same time have them in a fighting posture for twelve months. The Australians were a little shocked by my comments but I explained that in all fairness to the command and to their reputation, this observation should be known.

If the ambassador and General Vincent were told personally of Westmoreland's displeasure, then it seems unlikely that Fraser, the minister for the Army would not be informed. Yet Fraser told me he did not believe the fact. If he did not know of Westmoreland's comments, then the Army must stand accused of not keeping the minister informed. As this

information has never been related for over twenty years we can only assume that those who knew were not about to publicly disclose the fact.

So what did it all add up to for myself and all the others who served in Vietnam? For me there is still the contradiction. There is anger and shame that I could have volunteered to be a part of a policy that inflicted so much suffering on a small and struggling country and its people. Yet there is still a certain amount of pride that is really the knowledge that I was not found wanting, and the thought of all the people I met and served with. That bond holds even to this day and probably always will.

What I am hoping for from this work is further questioning within the Army itself about the course of action it took in Vietnam. To look at our mistakes and admit them is not something we should try to hide from. If we made mistakes, let's bring them out in the open so there can be a lesson for the future, because there really is no guarantee that we may not be embroiled in something similar again. If we are, then perhaps we can mix some compassion and common sense into the turmoil. Compassion is not a dirty word and it certainly is not incompatible with the Army as an institution.

This is the reason I have mentioned the killing of the wounded VC after the Long Tan Battle. The Army has vigorously denied this claim from the time it was first publicly made in a book in 1968, yet the proof is there in the Army's own records. There is nothing vindictive in me mentioning this. If it is there in the records it will be found by someone else at a later date. I do not condone the killings, but I understand how they happened and I will state here that I would have done the same thing at the time. I was only 15 metres from the men who pulled the triggers on two helpless VC wounded and at that time I wanted to kill every VC or Vietnamese in Vietnam. However, when the heat of the moment has passed, the soldiers who pulled the triggers have a long time to reflect on their actions. We must make sure this sort of thing will never happen again, not only for our future enemy but for the peace of mind of our veterans.

The strange part about things is that although in many ways I blame the Army and its bureaucracy for the policy decisions they made, in others I can see the difficult position the Australian government placed them in. The Army did not choose to go to Vietnam, it was an Australian government decision. When they arrived in Vietnam there was little help in policy direction from the Australian government and so the Army virtually had to make their own rules as they went. Yet they were constantly tied by the political constraints imposed on them from Canberra. Here again is another contradiction in my feelings about the Vietnam experience. But the sympathy I might have for the problems faced by the military command is overridden by the stories of the peasants of Phuoc Tuy.

So what are the main issues of importance? For me, as is obvious, the important issue is the effect of the Australian Army role on the people of Phuoc Tuy, the people we were supposedly in Vietnam to help. But it seems we are missing the point and are beginning to glorify events out of all proportion to their importance. We are looking at Vietnam as a military campaign, which it was not. A military campaign is to destroy your enemy. Our war was to help America gain the political settlement it wanted. This does not mean that the war was any less vicious, it only means the outcome could never be clear cut. So now we are concentrating on the battles, rather than the policies in order to justify and glorify our own position. But false glory is as bad as false pride and can give a distorted view of history.

Let us admit our shortcomings as well as our good points and strive for the honesty and integrity that are the catchcries of our society. The honest man who can stand up and admit his mistakes is a respected person; and so is a nation. General Phuong said to me in Hanoi that "perhaps Australia too, will have to confront its own image". Perhaps the time is now, while Vietnam veterans are still lucid enough to speak.

As I finish this work I look back on an array of memories and the words of my friend Dy keep coming back, "We had no choice. The choices were imposed on us." Next time, let's

give some choice to those we are supposedly fighting for, because by our actions in Phuoc Tuy we took away the right of the people to choose. We gave them only one option and that was an impossible one for them to accept.

I will always remember the calm and dignified Mrs Ngo Thi Loc when she said that she wishes for no more wars — the death of her husband and son was a heavy price to pay. In Vietnam today her life will never be easy, but I hope that she sees no more wars and can enjoy her grandchildren in peace, in the land afflicted by killing and injustice for so long.

An old Vietnamese fable concludes with the words, “Violence rarely shows true strength”, something for us to ponder in the future.

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Interviews with Author

These interviews were recorded and transcribed and sent to the interviewees for them to make deletions as required.

Brigadier David Jackson, 19 February 1988.

Lt Col. John McDonagh, 20 February 1988.

General Alan Stretton, 16 February 1988.

Major John Donohoe, 23 March 1988.

Right Honourable Malcolm Fraser, 7 November 1988.

Main Interviews in Vietnam with Author

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