



## Bad moon rising.

## FINANCIAL REVIEW

NEWS WEBSITE OF THE YEAR

### How Australians avoided a massacre at Nui Le.

Greg Dodds

In the battle of Nui Le the North Vietnamese 33rd Regiment came within a whisker of destroying an entire Australian infantry company. If they'd been successful it would have been the greatest loss for the Australian army since World War 2. But what could have been a rout was turned around. In the end six Australian and 18 North Vietnamese lives were lost.



*Members of "A" Company, 2nd Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment, cross a paddy field south-east of the Australian task force base at Nui Dat, in 1967.*

*AWM Photo*

Colonel Nguyen Van Thuong – one of the brightest stars in the

North Vietnamese Army – pronounced himself satisfied with their work. The last of his 1100 men had arrived at Nui Le, 100 kilometres east of Saigon in Thuoc Tuy Province, at 5am. The hike from the base area in the May Tao in South Vietnam had been uneventful but it was heavy going given the load of ammunition and heavy weapons they were carrying. Nevertheless, they got to work immediately digging defences and offensive positions – work that included all the refinements developed by experienced infantry soldiers over years of war: fire lanes, tunnels linking bunkers and a network of spider holes.

People often thought of the Vietnamese enemy as guerillas who got around in black pyjamas. They were wrong. North Vietnam had a professional army made up of well-trained soldiers, organised in standard military units. The appearance of the [North Vietnamese Army](#) (NVA) units on a battlefield usually inspired dread among Allied soldiers and the 33rd Regiment was among the best of the best.

By contrast, the Australian army usually operated in companies of about 120 men. This was more than enough to deal with Viet Cong units but an unexpected encounter with NVA regulars could test their abilities to the limit.



As Thuong surveyed the scene, it was still just short of noon on September 20, 1971.

Thuong stood atop a small hill and watched as his soldiers systematically turned the bunkers and trenches into a zone of death for any force that stumbled into the area. Lesser troops would have just gone through the motions, they were the reserve battalion after all, but these people really put their minds and souls into it. As Thuong continued his inspection, he noted a deep creek bed several hundred metres away from the main NVA position. The soldiers had paid no attention to it and, after brief reflection, he endorsed their decision. It could be significant in other contexts but not for the defence of his headquarters.

### **Trap for the tiger.**

Thuong's background was in military intelligence and he had built his reputation on an uncanny ability to predict enemy reactions. He had never fought the Australians but had heard they were not as brutish in their behaviour to the local population as the Americans. No matter; he had been ordered by Hanoi to inflict severe damage on the Australians before they withdrew their troops to Australia. He was going to use the 3rd Battalion of his the 33rd Regiment to do just that. Apart from being up to full strength of 400 men, that battalion had deep experience of ambushes in the past.



Of particular interest to him was the total absence of Australian artillery. Several reports from Viet Cong spies had reported that most of the regiment's artillery was being towed off and packed into crates in Vung Tau before being shipped back to Australia. This would be a fight between infantry alone and Thuong was confident that his own troops would not be found wanting.

Since it would be insane to attack the Australians in their main base at Nui Dat, Thuong had decided to "lure the tiger from the mountain" and kill it on ground of his choosing. In other words, he had ordered his 3rd Battalion to prepare a major ambush just off Route 2. These days, Route 2 is a major north-south highway in Vietnam. Then it was more of a goat track. He would stage a serious incident on Route 2 near Ngai Giao and then, when the Australians sent a reaction force (likely to be a company of soldiers in armoured personnel carriers), he would annihilate them in an even bigger ambush. He had done this successfully to US and South Vietnamese forces dozens of times. He could not see why this wouldn't work with the Australians.



## Deep sense of unease.

About five kilometres away, Colonel Jim Hughes, commander of 4 RAR/NZ, sat on Courtenay Hill, just off Route 2, and about 10 kilometres from the Australian HQ at Nui Dat, and wondered. Around him, his support and administration companies sat in their well-prepared bunkers and trenches; the place was better defended than even Nui Dat but he was haunted by a deep personal unease. There was little more than one month to go before his battalion withdrew from Nui Dat back to Australia, yet he was in the very north of Phuoc Tuy patrolling for "enemy activity". There had been brief sightings of lights in the deep jungle to the East and isolated gunshots.

There were also "unofficial" Special Air Service reports of large and recent NVA tracks (boot prints by the hundreds) through the jungle heading towards Route 2 but personal checks with intelligence officers and his own staff had drawn a blank. Clearly nothing was being kept from him deliberately but he still felt ill at ease.



South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu presents a gift to the Commanding Officer of the 4th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment/New Zealand (ANZAC), Lieutenant Colonel Jim Hughes, aboard HMAS Sydney prior to the unit's departure from Vietnam for Australia. December 16, 1971. *Australian Army Public Relations Picture*

Australian infantry fought in companies of about 120 soldiers. Hughes had three companies at his disposal.

He had C Company patrolling to the west of Route 2 in real "tiger country", and he had therefore given them three guns from the artillery battery to support them. D Company was on the east side of Route 2 and should have had the easier time; the jungle there was dense but appeared to be largely unoccupied. B Company was to the south near Binh Ba, with the other three guns and a troop of armoured personnel carriers. It was all standard stuff but he still had



that feeling of unease that he had missed something. He ordered each company to consolidate and patrol in company groups only and then settled down to wait.



He didn't have to wait long.

Enemy weapons, ranging from an assassin grenade to a 107-millimetre rocket with a range of 15,000 metres, are inspected at the 1st Australian Task Force, Nui Dat, by Private Des Morris, of Bogan Gate, NSW (left), and Corporal Jeff Millhouse, of Campbelltown, SA. The captured rockets and grenades were presented to the Australians by American Army Explosive Ordnance Demolition experts. August, 1971.

### **An unwise move.**

The first step of the tiger lure came at about midnight when NVA soldiers attacked the hamlet of Ngai Giao. This was occupied by mainly Vietnamese farmers but quick thinking by the village-militia commander turned

it into an expensive fiasco for the attackers. The second attempted lure came not long after. The following morning, a troop of Australian armoured vehicles returning from a supply run to Courtenay Hill was ambushed by an NVA squad. Fortunately for the Australians, a rocket grenade failed to go off when it hit the first vehicle and the small convoy just continued on its way to Nui Dat.

At this point, Colonel Thuong must have been more than a bit annoyed. His troops had staged two serious incidents that should have had an Australian reaction force barrelling out of Nui Dat, heading up Route 2 and right into his ambush. But the Viet Cong spies around the Australian base reported no activity. It was as though the Australians were all asleep. There



was no particular animus towards the Australians among the people of Phuoc Tuy Province. But there was the real fear of an American B-52 bomber strike; unusually, Thuong's entire regiment was concentrated in one spot and a single bombing run could kill them all. No, he would not take that chance, so he ordered the 3rd Battalion to lift the ambush and the entire regiment would return to their base area in the May Tao Mountains.

Mid-morning of September 21, D Company discovered the wide tracks left by the 33 Regiment as it had moved to its ambush positions two nights earlier. Unwisely, it decided to follow the tracks. Thirty minutes later, it exchanged fire with the security elements of 33rd Regiment's headquarters. The battle of Nui Le had begun.

### **Caught in the kill zone.**

The initial NVA reaction was aggressive but relatively light. Their main purpose was to defend their regimental headquarters against direct attack. The Australians pulled back to a position from where they could resupply and evacuated their wounded. But what the Australians did next must have struck the Vietnamese as insane. Instead of withdrawing down their path of approach and getting out of trouble, they headed off on a bearing that may have been intended to find a flank but actually took them into the killing zone prepared by Thuong's 2nd Battalion the day before. And, unlike the surprised elements of the NVA security force encountered first by D Company, the troops of 2nd Battalion were alert and waiting for them.

About 30 minutes into their new course, the soldiers of D Company were hit with a wall of fire as Thuong's 2nd Battalion opened up at point blank range. Because they had held fire until the last moment, they had most of the company pinned down and unable to manoeuvre. The Australians could not fight their way out of this one and would have to be rescued.

The Task Force Commander ordered B Company mounted in APCs to assist them but a highly effective NVA mortar barrage put paid to that idea. Next the Australian Task Force Commander called on the US Airforce to help. The various items on their menu may have thrilled the Allied audience but did not concern the NVA very much. The thumping of the NVA's massive 12.7 heavy machine guns reminded the American pilots of what awaited them if they flew too low.

Whatever impact the napalm strike may have had on the rest of the regiment, it did not lift the crushing pressure on D Company one iota. But when the aircraft returned to their base, D Company received a report that the pilots had seen NVA soldiers pouring out of the rear of the bunker system. An aggressive company attack now would see D Company storm an almost empty bunker system and break free of the NVA that was slowly crushing them.

Unfortunately for the Australians, this was an NVA "false flight" strategy – which deliberately sent soldiers running from the scene of an attack, to mislead aerial observation – and when D Company went to attack, it faced the full and undiminished firepower of the entrenched NVA battalion. Four dead and a dozen wounded Australians later, the attack was abandoned and



the exhausted Australians hunkered down in an area the size of an average Australian backyard. Darkness began to fall.

### **'I thought I'd be dead in five minutes'.**

At some point in the afternoon, while waiting out the airstrikes, Colonel Thuong devised a plan that would destroy the entrapped D Company at no great risk to his own soldiers. He had the Australian Company just where he wanted them (surrounded and with no chance of relief) and now there was nothing they could do to save themselves. When the sun came up the next morning, the 33rd Regiment would be back in its base area in the May Tao Mountains. Only the 120 or so dead bodies of D Company's soldiers would show that there had even been a battle here.

Thuong called the battlefield director and explained his plan, and the thinking behind it. This largely rested on the existence of the creek bed in front of the NVA battalion position. D Company was pinned down between the entrenched 2nd Battalion and the creek bed. If he could get enough soldiers into the creek bed, they could assault D Company from the rear and it would all be over in a few minutes.

In the words of a Digger in the rear section of D Company, "I could only see two other blokes from my section and they both had just SLRs [self-loading rifles]. We were not even going to delay those blokes in the creek bed. They'd cut through us like a hot knife through butter. For the first time in Vietnam, I thought I'd be dead in five minutes."



### **Fortunately for him he was wrong.**

Although salvation came from an unlikely source. The attached artillery officer, lying on his face in the rapidly gathering gloom of the jungle, did the trigonometry in his head and then whispered some co-ordinates into the radio handpiece. The message was flicked to the three Australian artillery guns to the west of Courtenay Hill. Theoretically they were just out of range but the gunners had a go anyway. A minute after his radio message, the distant stuttering of guns to the west told him the shells were on their way. He held his breath – where would the shells land and would they be in time?



## The unsung hero.

Well, they were on time and right on target and they gave Colonel Thuong cause to reconsider. Accurate Australian artillery fire and the rapidly falling light had weakened his strong hand; the lives of his men were not worth the risk. That Viet Cong intelligence was wrong was bad enough but how wrong was it? There could be another 30 guns or so waiting patiently for the whistle blast that would get his soldiers to attack. His soldiers could be slaughtered by a blizzard of white-hot shrapnel. He just didn't know. He may, too, have reflected that while victory was almost certain, it was going to cost him; the soldiers of 4 RAR were not going down without a savage fight. Possessed by those ideas, Thuong made the most fateful decision of the day; shortly thereafter his assault teams were glimpsed going back out of the creek bed. By the next morning, the 33rd Regiment had disappeared. The battle of Nui Le was over.

The next day there were all sorts of visits to the battlefield by Australian and American generals (once it was certain that all of 33rd Regiment had really gone). Australian Brigadier Bruce McDonald murmured that the North Vietnamese advance at Nui Le was "politically motivated" (the Vietnamese presidential elections were a couple of weeks away) – as if this excused his staff and himself from inaccurate prediction and analysis. It was a view that suited his headquarters staff, particularly the intelligence officers, down to the ground. The political "explanation" survives in the final chapters of the official history published in 2014.

Several weeks later, the medals turned up with the rations, so to speak. Jim Hughes got a DSO that was a standard award for battalion commanders in Vietnam and the Commander of D Company received a Military Cross for enduring what must have been the worst afternoon of his life. And as for the artillery officer whose extraordinary skill and coolness kept D Company alive and well? He got nothing, nothing at all.



## Postscript.

A few weeks after the battle, I took an interrogation team to speak to a badly wounded North Vietnamese soldier, Sergeant Kot, from 33 Regiment who had been captured after an attack on a US Army position in Long Khanh Province. We hoped to get some information from him on what had happened at Nui Le.

It turned out we had the wrong man. As we made tracks back to base, I commented to one of our South Vietnamese corporals that I'd found one aspect of Sergeant Kot's behaviour quite odd: he kept staring at me. Staring at people is bad manners in Vietnam. It didn't seem to me to be right.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Sir," replied the corporal. "It's probably because you're the first one of you people that he's seen close up who's still alive."







Their guest speaker was Gp Capt (Retd) Adrian Morrison, who was introduced by the Association's President, Bevan Ford (right).

Adrian is the current director of the RAAF's Heavy Air Lift Systems Program Office (HALSPO). For the last 8 years, he has been the Director of the HALSPO department of the Defence Material Organisation. Its role is to monitor and improve the sustainment and capability of the RAAF's fleet of C17s.

HALSPO is located at Amberley with an off-shoot office at Robins Air Force Base in Georgia USA.



Adrian (right) served 31 years in the RAAF, retiring with the rank of Group Captain but remains a member of the RAAF Reserve. He spoke of the development of the C17 which first flew in 1991 and was introduced into the USAF in 1995. The RAAF acquired the first of 4 aircraft on order in November 2006, with the second and third in 2007 and the fourth in 2008. A fifth aircraft was ordered and received in 2011 and a sixth in 2012. Then in 2014, the Government placed an order for a further 2 aircraft, bring the total operated by 36 Sqn at Amberley to 8.

Australia was fortunate in acquiring its aircraft some years after the USAF had theirs. Like most new aircraft, the C-17 had some teething troubles. When first rolled out, it was found the wing would fail when loaded to just over 100% of its intended load. Millions of dollars were spent redesigning the wing and in 1993 the airframe was declared suitable to requirements. But that wasn't the end of it.

It was then found the aircraft did not meet weight, fuel burn, payload and range specifications and technical problems were found with the mission software and landing gear. Problems were so serious that the USAF considered cutting production to 32 aircraft. Out came the pencils and by 1995 most of the problems had been solved, production was ramped up and the USAF declared their aircraft operational. They ended up with 223 aircraft after having lost 2.

By the time the RAAF acquired theirs, all problems had been sorted and the aircraft has proven itself as a wonderful, serviceable and economical aircraft. It is actually more economical to operate than is the C130J.



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Vol 60

Page 13



Other countries that also operate the aircraft are:

Canada 5  
Kuwait 2  
UK 8

India 10  
Qatar 4

Nato 3  
UAE 6

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Vol 60

Page 13

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