

PATHFINDER

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THE RAAF AT LONG TAN

'I am also proud and thankful to those who supported us—all the artillery, the RAAF, the USAF, the APCs, our A Company and the B Company platoon, and others.'

Major Harry Smith, SG,
OC D Company, 6RAR (2006)

Late in the afternoon of 18 August 1966, the Australian Army fought what was arguably its most famous battle of the Vietnam War. While patrolling through a rubber plantation just north of the derelict village of Long Tan—situated four kilometres east of the operating base of 1st Australian Task Force at Nui Dat, in the centre of Phuoc Tuy (now called Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province)—D Company of the 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR), came into contact with a vastly superior enemy force and mounted a desperate defence lasting more than three hours.

The Australian group of only 108 men (105 infantry and a three-man New Zealand artillery observer team) found itself pitted against an enemy force believed to number 2500 plus, comprising a Viet Cong Main Force regiment reinforced by local provincial units and at least one North Vietnamese regular battalion. Yet the Australian force survived with one-third of its strength as casualties, including 17 killed in action. Bodies left on the battlefield confirmed enemy losses had been at least 245 killed, but casualties estimated in the hundreds—both dead and wounded—were removed under cover of darkness after the action ended.

Long Tan was an outstanding battle fought against overwhelming odds, a triumph of arms which owed everything to the military skills, discipline and determination of the small band of Australian soldiers and the junior leaders who commanded them. Yet this is

not the whole story, by any means. As acknowledged by the D Company commander, Major Harry Smith, in an article written to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the action, the successful outcome was also a tribute to other supporting elements within the Task Force organisation, including the RAAF, and even Australia's allies in the field.

About an hour after the battle commenced at approximately 1600 hrs, Major Smith realised the enormity of the situation he and his company were in. With one of his three platoons pinned down and unable to withdraw, yet unable to relieve the pressure on this group because of the sheer weight of enemy numbers and volume of fire from automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars, Smith naturally called on the supporting arms that were available to him—not just the 18 105mm howitzers from the Task Force base and US 155mm medium guns that were within range, but also air power.



MAJ Smith thanks FLTLT Dohle for RAAF support at Long Tan, while GPCAPT Raw looks on.

Smith's requests were for combat air support from United States Air Force (USAF) fighter aircraft, and ammunition resupply and reinforcement by an airborne insertion by helicopters. Unfortunately, these demands could not be immediately met. At almost the precise start of the action, the whole area had been subjected to a torrential monsoonal downpour. This meant that the coloured smoke grenades used to mark the position of friendly

troops on the ground could not be recognised from the air, and the aircraft heard circling overhead could not be called in to safely deliver their fire power.

The weather factor also presented a dilemma in responding to the Company's urgent request for ammunition resupply. As it happened, there were two Iroquois helicopters of No 9 Squadron, RAAF, sitting on the landing pad at Nui Dat that were available for the task, these having earlier in the day transported a party of entertainers from Vung Tau who

were giving concerts for the troops during the afternoon. But when the Task Force Air Support Commander, Group Captain Peter Raw, received the request for a mission to be flown, he was initially doubtful that it was feasible due to the severe conditions.

This prevarication in the face of obviously desperate circumstances understandably upset the Task Force Commander, Brigadier O.D. Jackson, who commented that the possible loss of a couple of helicopters hardly seemed to matter against the likely loss of an entire company of a hundred men. Raw sensibly conferred with the pilots of the helicopters to determine whether the mission could be flown with any prospect of success. The four pilots (two aircraft captains and two co-pilots) represented various levels of operational experience, and opinion among the group was, not surprisingly, split equally.

It was the advice of Flight Lieutenant Bruce Lane, probably the most experienced of the four, which appears to have settled the matter. He told Raw that with two aircraft making the attempt there was at least a chance that one might get through, and from what was known of the dire situation developing outside the base there was no doubt that the attempt simply must be made, regardless of the risks involved. This advice was accepted by Raw, who was a bomber pilot by training with no special knowledge of helicopter operations, and the flight was duly authorised.

The decision taken at that point was for the ammunition to be loaded into one helicopter (flown by FLTLTs Dohle and Lane), which would then be guided by the other Iroquois (FLTLTs Riley and Grandin). When it came to getting the ammunition on board, it was soon realised that the packaging of the load (rounds still in boxes, wrapped in blankets to cushion the impact of free-dropping) meant that it was too heavy for a single aircraft to carry. Accordingly, some of the load was placed aboard the lead ship. An Army warrant officer was also taken on the second aircraft, to speed up delivery once in the drop zone.

Fortunately, at the time that the helicopters departed shortly before 1800 hrs, the heavy rain eased off for the few minutes that it took to travel at tree-top level to reach D Company's position. Although rain clouds, mist and lingering smoke from shell-bursts still veiled the battlefield, the Company was not totally surrounded and by coming from the west the Iroquois did not directly overfly enemy positions. Each aircraft was able to hover directly above the

Company and drop the boxes from barely 30 feet. None of the crews believed that they came under fire, and no aircraft was found to be holed on return to base.



FLTLT Lane after flying two wounded VC captured at Long Tan to Vung Tau on 19 Aug 66

Although ultimately found to have been not unduly risky, the mission was not without danger. But whatever the risk was assessed to have been, there was no question that the ammunition resupply delivered at this point in the battle—which still had an hour to run—came at a critical juncture. It has been stated that there was probably no more than 100 rounds available in the whole of D Company when the RAAF arrived overhead. It takes nothing away from the courage and tactical skill of the officers and men of 6RAR to say that, without the assistance of 9 Squadron, the outcome of Long Tan might have been very different. This was an instance of the air force effectively integrating with the ground forces to ensure success on the battlefield.

- *The contribution of the RAAF helicopters to the battle was small, but was absolutely critical to the final outcome.*
- *Without the benefit of a range of supporting elements, Army as well as Air Force, American and New Zealand as well as Australian, D Company was unlikely to have survived against the odds they faced.*
- *The 9 Squadron mission to resupply ammunition to D Company was fully authorised by the Task Force Air Support Commander.*



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