

Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force Association Reunion
Caloundra 16TH October 2016

RECOLLECTIONS OF A 66'er

Distinguished guests, Caloundra RSL members, Ladies and Gentlemen, Children and fellow Vietnam Veterans.

I am Norm Austin and today I have been asked to provide some recollections of a "66er". One of those who originally went to Vietnam with the 1st Australian Task Force in April & May 1966.

HQ1ATF consisted of about 150 men. The core units were Operations, Administration, Intelligence and Civil Affairs. Supporting this core were - signals, cooks and stewards, transport, quartermaster, company administration, provost, mapping and hygiene.

And of course, Defence and Employment Platoon which in addition to defending headquarters, provided manpower to construct defences and utilities. They participated in operations, and undertook daily perimeter defence including: manning machine gun pits, listening posts, patrols and ambushes.

I was an Operations Clerk, working mostly in the Tactical Operations Centre - the TOC. In the early days this was housed in a World War Two marque - erected and sandbagged by D&E Platoon.

We prepared all operations orders, monitored their execution and provided controls over artillery and aircraft to ensure safety. The TOC was the nerve centre of the Task Force operated 24/7. We clerks did 12 hour shifts.

Yes - I have many recollections from 1966 and would like to share some of the most vivid with you today.

My first recollection is of our living conditions in those early days.

We arrived at Nui Dat at the beginning of the monsoon -

THE WET

Every afternoon saw thunderstorms that continued into the night. Lightening punctuated the pitch black under the rubber trees.

We had a complete blackout for the first two months.

We slept under ground sheets on blow up's and got soaked.

We had mosquitoes, flies, scorpions, cockroaches and rats as bed mates.

We became the colour of the rich red of the basalt soil - Nui Dat mud.

In the dark we couldn't move at night without fear of being shot - by our mates.

We ate from American C packs.

We dug weapon pits, everywhere.

We didn't get mail.

We developed rashes called Nui Dat Balls and discarded our underwear. Nightly, the enemy probed our defences.

We drank water that seemed to come from an over chlorinated swimming pool.

Nightly we were awakened by the "crack" and "boom" of our own artillery which was only 100 meters away.

Life was not "very pleasant" but we had a job to do!

My second recollection is of Arthur Ruduss - RUDI. Who's is one of the fallen comrades we remember today.

RUDI

Rudi was the radio operator in the Defence and Employment Platoon. He was also the Company Canteen Manager. He was born in Latvia where his father had been killed during WW2.

In early June 1966, 5 RAR and the main task force elements occupied the Nui Dat rubber plantations. On 5th June 1966 Task Force Headquarter took control of operations in Phuoc Tuy Province.

On 12th June D&E Platoon was attached to D Company, 5 RAR, to execute Operation Parkes which was a cordon and search of the area immediately south of the base. This

was the first Task Force operation.

Unfortunately there was a horrible mix-up. D&E was spotted by surveillance aircraft and thinking it was enemy, 5RAR cleared an artillery mission, which without warning resulted in a direct hit on D&E Platoon. Rudi was badly wounded and died in the MEDIVAC helicopter.

The news of his death devastated us! You were supposed to be “safe” in Headquarters.

It was not until years later that I learnt that Rudi had been buried in a Second World War military cemetery in Malaysia. A concerted effort by Vietnam Veterans eventually resulted in the Australian Government bringing home Rudi, and 31 others home in June this year.

Some of his D&E comrades who are here today and his family, were finally able to lay Rudi to rest: in the soil of the Nation for which he gave his life. Today we honour his memory.

On reflection I realise those killed in Vietnam were never “seen off” by their mates. They just disappeared.

Thank goodness that today, this appalling practice has ceased and our military casualties are now honoured by their comrades and then brought home, with great dignity and buried as heroes.

My next recollection is the enemy’s bombardment of the Task Force Base on the morning of 17th August 1966.

BOMBARDMENT

Obviously the enemy had done a thorough reconnaissance of our base and in fact had prepared a major plan to attack it. As a preliminary just after 2am, in a period of 20 minutes, they fired about 120 rounds of mortar bombs, recoil rifle rockets and artillery shells. Their target was our Headquarters.

I was on duty that morning when suddenly there were explosions all around.

In hindsight I realised that we only had a meter high wall of sandbags (thanks to D&E Pla-

toon) and canvass to protect us.

With the assistance of bearings provided by perimeter listening posts we identified the firing positions near the Long Tan rubber plantation and mounted a successful counter-bombardment.

About 25 rounds landed in the Headquarters area with the rest falling short of that target in the Special Air Services and Engineers lines. There were a number of casualties. However, this was only a preliminary to the main event: the Battle of Long Tan.

THE BATTLE OF LONG TAN - 18TH August 1966

I was on duty in the Tactical Operations Centre during the whole of the battle and all of that night. I have many recollections but think that you might be interested in this one.

Most people here today would be aware of timely and heroic ammunition resupply mission flown by RAAF Iroquois helicopters during the Battle.

I have a very vivid recollection of the Task Force Commander, Brigadier General O D Jackson, entering the TOC fairly late in the battle, with a flushed face and cursing that "Apparently I can't order the RAAF to any fucking thing!!"

He had just come from a confrontation in the briefing tent with the Commanding Officer of 9 Squadron, who advised him and insisted that RAAF helicopters could not operate in the appalling weather, nor could they operate in close contact with the enemy.

We were about to lose the remainder of D Company, about 100 men. Jackson rang Headquarters Vietnam and couldn't get the decision reversed. He was fuming with frustration!!!

However, it transpired that at the time there were two RAAF Iroquois helicopters on the helipad. Officers of 6RAR took ammunition to them and were able to "convince" the pilots of the extreme plight of D Company. Thankfully, the pilots agreed to do the mission, without seeking approval.

The mission which was completed successfully, in near darkness and in the worst imaginable weather conditions, probably "saved" D Company.

I think that this is a wonderful example of the Australian the "Can do!" attitude and in the

spirit of the men we honour today.

I would like to draw your attention to the Iroquois helicopter suspended above me. This is one of the two helicopters that flew that afternoon.

Standing here today it makes me shiver to think of what that aircraft and its pilot achieved.

50 YEARS ON

Finally, I am proud to see so many here now, “50 Years On” to honour our comrades, who, whilst serving with Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force Vietnam, gave their lives, in the service of Australia.

"Lest we Forget"

Norm Austin
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HQ1ATF