



INFANTRY OPERATIONS IN THE VIETNAM WAR

VOLUME I

**OPERATION HUMP: 173RD AIRBORNE
BRIGADE (1/503 and 1RAR): NOVEMBER 1965**

**OPERATION NEW LIFE: 173RD AIRBORNE
BRIGADE AND 1ST US INFANTRY DIVISION:
NOVEMBER – DECEMBER 1965**

**OPERATION SMASH: 173RD AIRBORNE
BRIGADE DECEMBER 1965**

Lt Col (Rtd) Fred Fairhead

Cover: Regimental Badges of, left to right – 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate); 503 Airborne Infantry Regiment; the Royal Australian Regiment

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PREFACE

This book is the first in a series of books on Infantry Operations conducted mainly by Battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) in the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was primarily an Infantry War. The Infantry had most of the contacts and actions with the enemy and suffered the majority of casualties with most of the action occurring at a rifle company level or at company subunits i.e., platoon and section/squad.

It must be said however, that the integral support by artillery, armour, combat engineers and air support was essential to the prosecution of the war.

This book tells the story of three operations conducted in late 1965, i.e.:

- ***Operation Hump: 5-9 November 1965*** was the first major battle in the Vietnam War involving US Forces i.e., the 173rd Airborne Brigade to which the 1st Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) was attached. The 1st Battalion 503rd Airborne Infantry had an encounter battle lasting two days with a NVA Regiment which was forced to withdraw with heavy losses. It was also the first operation when an Australian Battalion had a set piece battle with the Viet Cong and the only operation in Vietnam when men from the Royal Australian Regiment were missing in action.
- ***Operation New Life: 21 November – 17 December 1965*** was a unique operation in that it involved brigade plus size forces securing a rice growing area in order it could be harvested without interference from the Viet Cong.
- ***Operation Smash: 18 -21 December 1965*** was mounted to locate and destroy a large enemy presence in the northern regions of Phuoc Tuy Province.

Note: Whilst recognising the correct terminology for the two main types of enemy force faced in Vietnam i.e., the *People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN)* and the *National Liberation Front (NLF)*, this book uses the terminology of the time i.e., *North Vietnamese Army (NVA)* and the *Viet Cong (VC)* respectively.

This book commemorates the 60th Anniversary of the operations and is dedicated to all those American and Australian men who served in the tragedy that was the Vietnam War – they all did their duty, some at great personal cost.

***Fred Fairhead
Erindale, South Australia
August 2025***

CHAPTER I: HISTORY OF THE MAJOR PARTICIPATING INFANTRY UNITS

173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate)

The 173rd Airborne Brigade's origins date back to 1918 when as the 173rd Infantry Brigade it was part of the US 87th Division. It saw no action in World War I and between the wars was in the Army Reserve. In World War II the US Army had eliminated Brigades from its Divisions and thus 173rd did not in name exist during the War.

On 26 March 1963, the 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate) was assigned to the Regular Army and activated on Okinawa. Brigadier General Ellis W. Williamson took command of the unit, which was chartered to serve as the quick reaction force for the Pacific Command. Under Brig Gen Williamson, the unit trained extensively, making mass parachute jumps frequently in Taiwan. The paratroopers were given the nickname *Tien Bing* (Chinese: 天兵), literally *Sky Soldiers*, by the Taiwanese paratroopers.

The 173rd was the only separate brigade to have support formations permanently assigned to it, though other separate brigades would receive support elements of their own later. The Brigade was also the only separate brigade to receive its own tank company, in the form of Company D, 16th Armor. Consistent with regimental combat teams activated before them, these separate brigades were given their own shoulder sleeve insignia. The soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade created a patch with a wing on it to symbolize their status as an airborne unit, along with red, white, and blue, the national colours of the United States.



503rd Airborne Infantry Regiment.

The 503rd was raised in World War II as the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment. It played a major part in the capture by the 7th Division 2nd Australian Imperial Force of Nadzab and Lae in New Guinea in September 1943. Three Battalions of the Regiment landed simultaneously in the Markham Valley, parachuting from 90 C-47 Dakota aircraft.



A battalion of the 503rd landing at Nadzab on 5 September 1943. In the foreground is another already on the ground.



**Paratroopers landing on
Corregidor 16 Feb 1945**

It was also awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for its parachute landing by the 503rd Regimental Combat Team on 16 February 1945 to recapture the Island Fortress Corregidor in the Philippines. It had been captured by the Japanese in April 1942 and retained as a fortress guarding the entrance to Manila Bay.

Against heavy odds the Paratroopers captured their objectives on 16th February and then on the night of 18th February fought off an assault by 500 Japanese Marines. For his courage during both actions Pte Lloyd G McCarter was awarded the Medal of Honour.

The shoulder patch of the 503rd symbolizes the action at Corregidor by the inverted triangle with parachutes terminating in the fortress and hence also its motto “The Rock”.



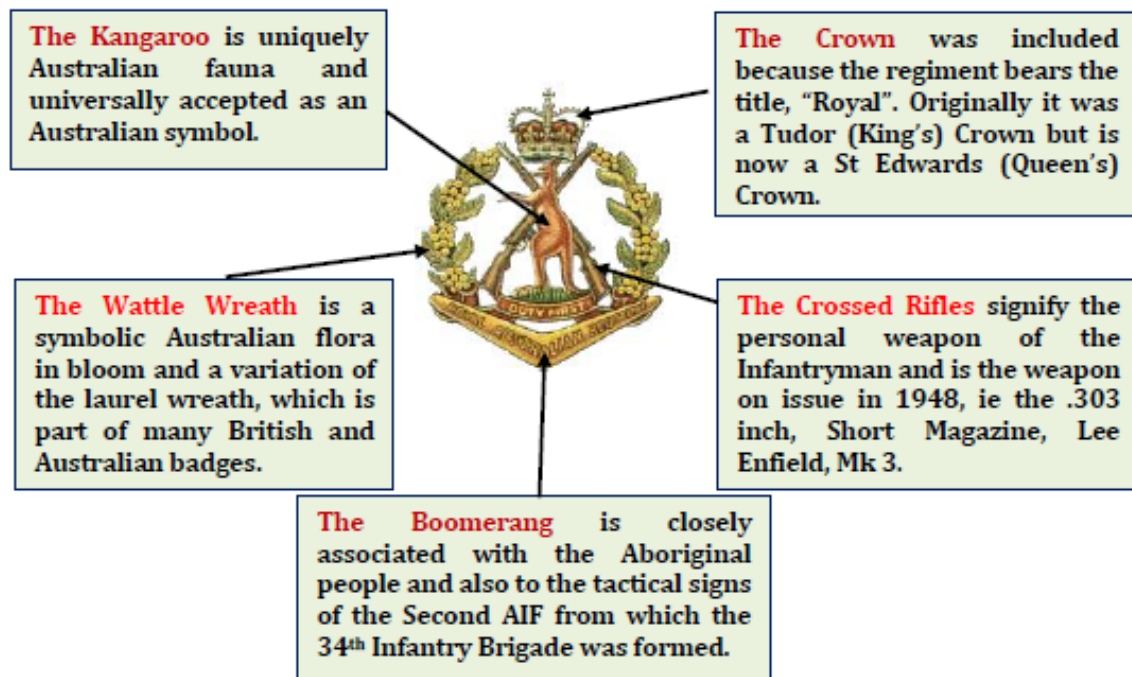
1st Battalion the Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR)

The Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) was raised on 23rd November 1948 as Australia’s first regular regiment of infantry from battalions of the 34th Australian Infantry Brigade which had been sent to Japan after World War II as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF). Three battalions were raised as the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Australian Regiment from the 65th, 66th and 67th Infantry Battalions respectively. The prefix “Royal” was formally granted by HM King George VI on 31st March 1949. As a new regiment, it did not adopt any existing battle honours.

A motto for the Regiment was needed which was original, short and in English. “Duty First” seemed appropriate and was selected because, “the unhesitating and unquestioning performance of his duty is the fundamental requirement of a soldier”.

The Regiment first saw operational service in Korea (1950-56) when 3RAR deployed from Japan in September 1950 to join the 27th Commonwealth Brigade near Pusan. 3RAR was to remain in Korea until November 1954 and from April 1952, was joined variously by 1RAR and 2RAR with 4RAR being raised as a Depot Company in Australia. After Korea the Regiment served in the Malayan Emergency (1955-60) and in Borneo (1965-66) alongside other Commonwealth forces with 4RAR being raised as a full Battalion in 1964. In 1965, 1RAR was deployed to Vietnam to join US Forces and 5RAR and 6RAR were raised and in 1966 deployed to Vietnam with the 1st Australian Task Force. The Regiment expanded to nine Battalions during the Vietnam War with all Battalions completing two, twelve months tours of duty except for 8RAR and 9RAR which had one twelve-month tour of duty. The Regiment’s involvement in the Vietnam War ended in 1972.

Badge of the Royal Australian Regiment



CHAPTER II: THE SKY SOLDIERS GO TO WAR

In June 1963, the 173rd Airborne Brigade was deployed to the Japanese Ryukyu Islands and based on Okinawa. The Brigade's mission was to provide the US Army with a rapid response force in the western Pacific.

Commencing on 5 May 1965, the 173rd Airborne Brigade (*Brig Gen EW Williamson*) became the first US Army ground combat formation committed to the Vietnam War. Over the next two days 160 C-130 sorties and 11 C-134 sorties, deployed the 1st Battalion 503rd Airborne Infantry (1/503) to Vung Tau while the 2nd Battalion (2/503) flew into the USAF Air Base at Bien Hoa. 1/503's task was to protect the Vung Tau Port in readiness for more US Army units to arrive in-country. On 7 May, the remainder of the Brigade sailed from Okinawa embarked on the Troop Transport USS General Mann. By 13 May, the whole Brigade had concentrated in Vietnam. A month later the Brigade was joined by the 1st Battalion the Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) Battle Group - See also End Note 1, on the Brigade's Order of Battle in 1965.

The Brigade Commander had been previously informed by the Commander of US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (USMACV), (*Gen William C Westmoreland*), that the Brigade's mission of securing base areas for the arrival of several US Army Infantry Divisions would last no longer than 60 days. In fact, the Brigade was to serve in Vietnam until mid-1971, by which time it had suffered 1,533 men killed and about 6,000 wounded.

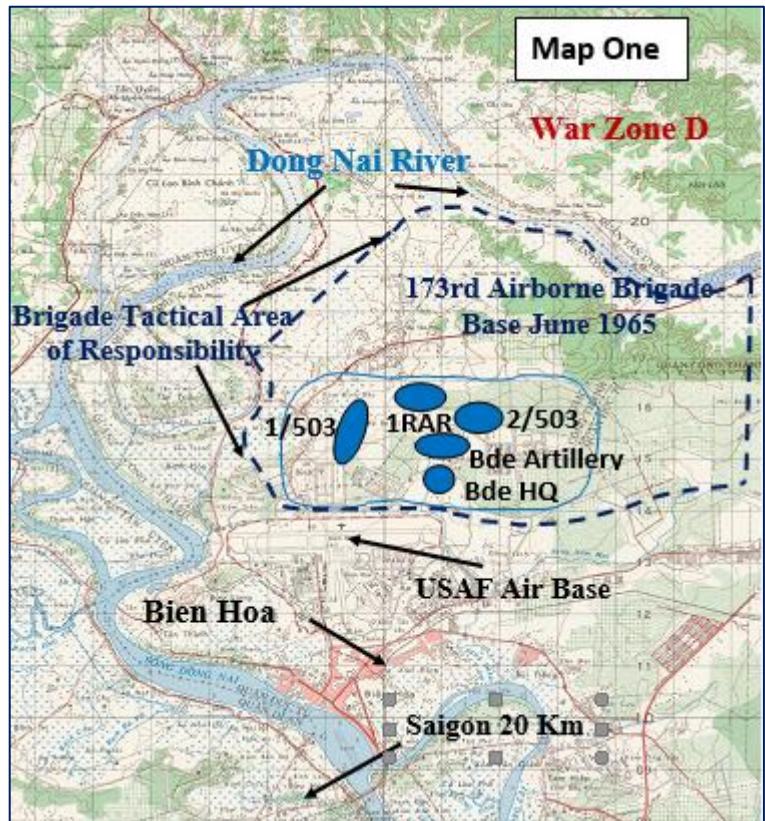
This gross error of misjudgement by the US High Command (see also End Note 2) was a manifestation of a lack of understanding of North Vietnam's strategic objectives and more importantly that the enemy capabilities in the South were inferior and thus would be no match for US Army units such as 173rd Airborne Brigade. This misconception that the war would be won quickly was to continue through to 1968 when the Tet Offensive had cause for the US High Command to rethink the way ahead!

In June 1965, the Australian Government first committed ground forces to the Vietnam War when the 1st Battalion the Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) was deployed to Vietnam. In March 1965, while training at Holsworthy, NSW, 1RAR was warned for service in South Vietnam. After rapid preparation, including a ten day exercise (Sky High II), 1RAR (*Lt Col IR Brumfield, CO and WO1 JD McKay, MM RSM*) deployed to Vietnam by five Qantas charter aircraft (1 to 10 June) and with B, Support and Administrative Companies departing on *HMAS Sydney* on 27 May 1965 and arriving Vung Tau on 8 June.

By 10 June, 1RAR had joined the 173rd Airborne Brigade (173 Abn) at Bien Hoa with the Brigade then occupying the positions as shown on Map One. In addition to its own integral supporting arms (see End Note 1) the Brigade was also supported by 161 Battery RNZ Artillery, an APC troop of Prince of Wales Light Horse, 3 Troop 1 Field Squadron RAE and later in 1965, by 105 Field Battery RAA.

The Brigade immediately set out to secure its Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) and the security of the USAF Base at Bien Hoa; this extended to the Dong Nai River which separated the Brigade area from War Zone D (see Map One). This was the enemy's designation for a major base area of about 100km by 50 Km which was on the front door of the Bien Hoa Base, now defended by 173 Abn. War Zone D had gone unchallenged by the French in the First Indo China War and was now considered impregnable by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

Over the next few weeks Brigade operations gradually extended out from the TAOR and then in August – September the Brigade deployed temporarily out of Bien Hoa for specific missions e.g., the relief of a Special Forces Camp on the Cambodian Border in Kontum Province.



In October 1965, the US high command in Saigon decided to establish a buffer zone around Saigon and commenced operations to wrest control from the enemy in the areas north of Saigon such as 'Iron Triangle' and the 'Ho Bo Woods'-see Sketch One (1) and (2).

In these areas, the local population was generally sympathetic to the cause of the enemy; they were also adjacent to the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail from where supplies and NVA reinforcements entered South Vietnam.

It had been used extensively by the Viet Minh during the First Indo China War with many fortifications constructed including a maze of underground tunnels extending some 20 kilometres north of Cu Chi. In 1963, the Viet Cong (VC) added several hundreds of kilometres of tunnels, which in 1966 had become important staging areas for operations against Saigon.

In addition to the tunnel complex, the *Iron Triangle* (1) was an area of about 50 square km, heavily defended with mines, booby traps and snipers, which together with heavy undergrowth made a very dangerous environment for infantrymen. It was attacked from 8-15 October 1965 when the whole Brigade swept through the hitherto VC dominated area – see **Sketch One (3)**. The operation supported by B-52 strikes cleared the enemy from the area, albeit temporarily.

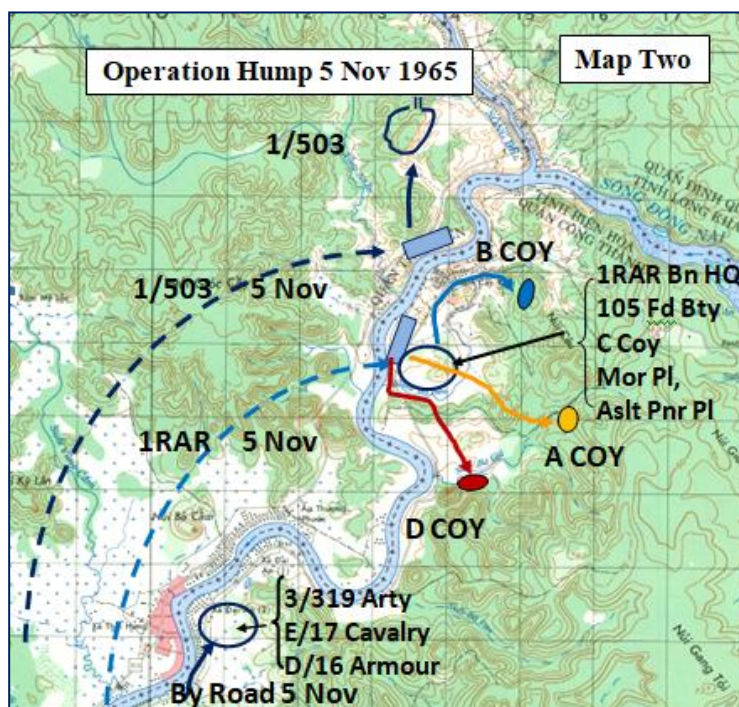
After the success of *Operation Iron Triangle* in broaching a major VC base area, a more serious task was given to 173rd Airborne Brigade i.e., to penetrate War Zone D and especially in the area where the Song Be and Dong Nai rivers joined. This was where VC logistic routes connected War Zone D with War Zone C and then to the Ho Chi Minh Trail -see **Sketch One (4)**.

Given its strategic importance the area was the base for at least two Main Force Units (*Q762 Regiment and D800 Battalion*) which, as 173rd Airborne Brigade was to find out, were prepared to stand and fight to defend the base area.

CHAPTER III: OPERATION HUMP: 5 – 9 NOVEMBER 1965

The operation, so named because it was the halfway mark of the first 13 months tour for 173rd Airborne Brigade, involved two Infantry Battalions: 1/503 (*Lt Col JE Tyler*) and 1RAR (*Lt Col IRW Brumfield*), supported by the 3/319 Artillery Battalion (*Lt Col LE Surut*) comprising two field batteries, E/17 Cavalry and D/16th Armour. 2/503 with 161 Battery RNZA remained at Bien Hoa.

The operation commenced on 5 November with a road move by 3/319 Artillery Battalion which together with tactical air provided fire support for the air assault by 1RAR, led by D Company (*Capt DP Rothwell*) – see **Map Two**. The battalion moved in three lifts and established a fire support base with 105 Field Battery (*Maj PNO Tedder*). This was the Australian Battery's first operation, though A and C Companies retained Forward Observer Parties from 161 Field Battery. B Company (*Maj ID McFarlane*) moved from the LZ to secure ground opposite the LZ for 1/503 while A Company (*Maj JB Healy*) moved to the east.





On 6 and 7 November 1/503 made steady progress through ever increasingly difficult terrain to the north-west while the 1RAR companies patrolled to the south-east – see **Map Three**. Both battalions were headed toward major engagement with the enemy, especially 1/503 which had closed on a feature called Hill 65 that Signals Intelligence had indicated was held by the enemy in some strength.

At about midday on 6 November, 9 Platoon (2Lt RD Loftus) was dispatched to investigate reports of enemy firing at helicopters east of the battalion base. At about 1 pm the platoon had halted when two sentries (Ptes RB Payne and AJ Rehder) saw 4 enemy and opened fire at about 20 metres range (1); not for the first time and certainly not the last the M16 rifle of one jammed after the first round

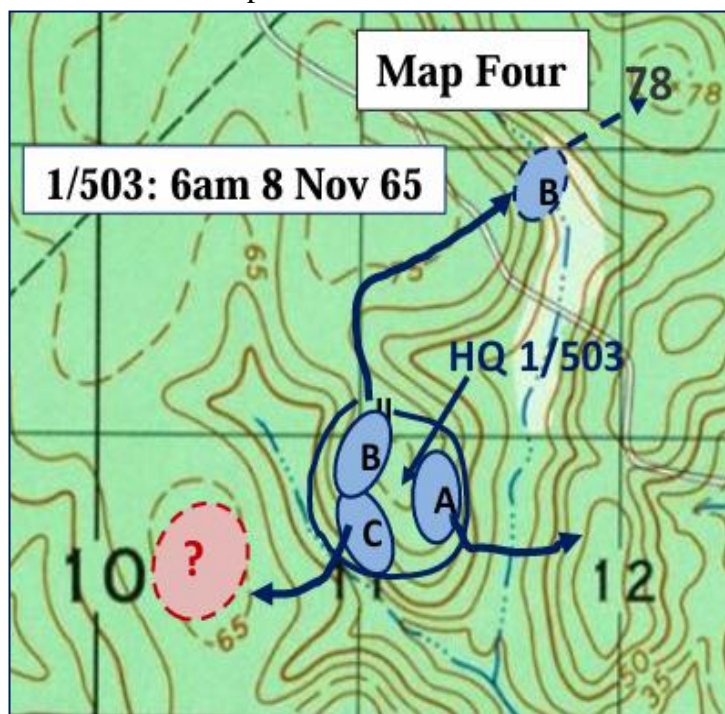
and most M79 grenades fired by the other failed to explode thus allowing the enemy to escape. At about 4.30 pm, A Company was in a harbour when three enemy fired at a 1 Platoon (Sgt GH Peterson) sentry post (2). Two men were wounded when a round deflected off the barrel of the machine gun (Ptes AJ McIvor and GB Woodward). A few minutes later the same enemy were contacted by 3 Platoon (2Lt COG Williams) which killed two by machine gun fire; the third was then shot and killed by 1 Platoon (Ptes PC Diamond and BG Webster).

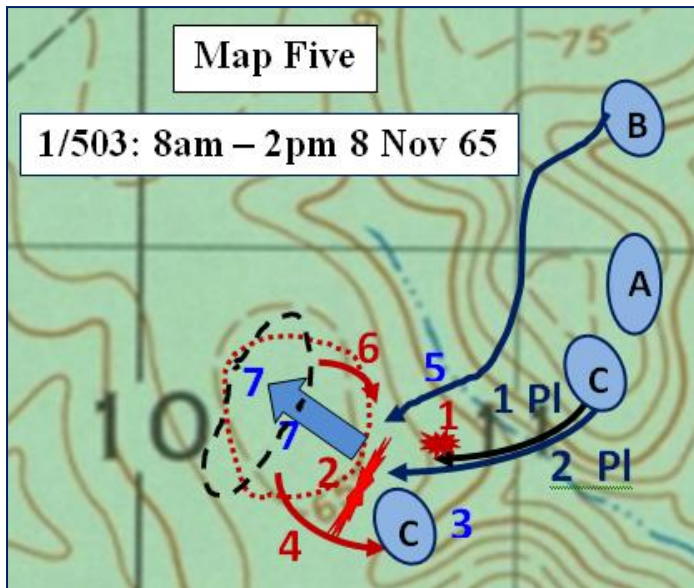
8 November: 1/503 Battalion

1/503 Battalion had established a base with all three rifle companies to the east of Hill 65 on the evening of 7 November; B Company (Capt LD Bittrich) and C Company (Capt HB Tucker) faced west, and A Company (Capt WB Daniel) faced east. Patrols had been sent out and found some evidence of the enemy, especially the sound of chickens which usually indicated some form of enemy camp.

At first light on 8 November patrols from each company moved out to search for the enemy. The A Company patrol headed east, B Company moved north-east with the aim of searching Hill 78 while C Company moved to the west and south-west headed for Hill 65 - see **Map Four**.

At about 8am, the right forward platoon of C Company, 1st Platoon (2Lt SW Russ) was clearing through a deserted enemy village when about 16 enemy approached and were





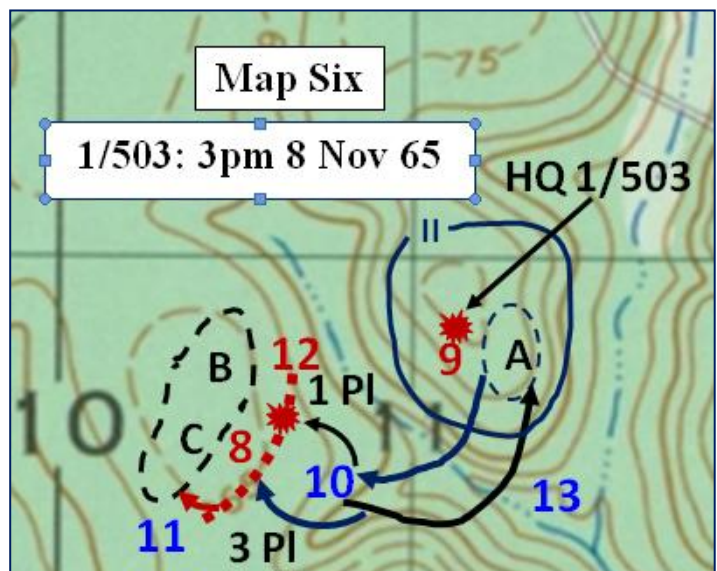
engaged by a Squad Leader (*Staff Sgt A Matosky*) who killed or wounded most of them – see **Map Five (1)**. At that moment, enemy located in a well-established defensive position opened fire with small arms, machine guns and claymores on both 1st Platoon and 2nd Platoon (*Lt B Waller*) which was on the left flank **Map Five (2)**. Although the platoons had detected signs of an enemy presence (fish traps, latrines, fresh cut timber) it would appear their movement was steady and bunched and not fire and movement because substantial casualties were caused in the first exchange of fire. HQ C Company with 3rd Platoon (*Lt L Hurst*) then moved to reinforce the stricken platoons **(3)** but was in danger of being overrun on its flank as the enemy

attempted to outflank the beleaguered company **(4)**.

B Company, which had been ordered to reinforce C Company's right flank, had now arrived and was able to roll up the enemy's left flank **(5)** but was then attacked **(6)**, suffering many casualties including nearly all of 2nd Platoon (*Lt B Frakes*) and the Commander of 3rd Platoon (*2Lt CH Thurston*) who was killed when he charged a machine gun. Eventually B Company fought through to the top of Hill 65 supported by artillery and joined the remnants of C Company **(7)** which had 18 men missing. During this fierce combat the Senior Medic in C Company (*Spec 5 L Joel*) who, although seriously wounded moved constantly over the battlefield treating the wounded and saving many lives.

Both companies were then subjected to several enemy attacks – **Map Six (8)** and the Commanding Officer 1/503rd (*Lt Col JE Tyler*) decided to deploy A Company to relieve the pressure on B and C Companies and to allow casualties to be evacuated. As A Company (*Capt WB Daniel*) was preparing to move, it and Battalion Headquarters were hit, initially it was thought by mortar fire but subsequently shown to be booby trapped mortar rounds strapped to trees **(9)**. Several staff at the headquarters were wounded, while the Platoon Sergeant of 2nd Platoon (*Sgt L Hill*) was killed and the Platoon Commander (*Lt B Biedleman*) was wounded.

A Company moved forward up the hill **(10)** with two platoons forward 3rd Platoon (*Lt AJ Conetto*) on the left and 1st Platoon (*2Lt DL Ugland*) on the right. As the company approached the hill the Company Commander stopped the company and had each of the forward platoons send out reconnaissance patrols. The 1 Platoon patrol located an enemy machine gun while 3 Platoon's patrol contacted troops from B and C Companies on the left flank. **(11)**.



As the company continued it was initially able to bring effective fire onto the enemy position which was threatening B and C Companies. However, the enemy quickly changed its direction of attack and engaged A Company particularly 1 Platoon with machine gun fire killing the Platoon Commander (12). As the company was in danger of being surrounded it was ordered back to the Battalion Base. (13).

The enemy then concentrated again on the beleaguered companies on Hill 65, but with great determination and heavy artillery and air support they were able to repel the enemy. At about mid-afternoon, the enemy (3rd Battalion 271 Regiment) having suffered severe casualties, withdrew from the battlefield leaving some 400 bodies behind. 1/503 had won the day but at great cost with 49 Americans killed, 19 from each B and C Companies, five from A Company and three from Headquarter Company and 83 wounded. The Battalion remained overnight and by 11am on the 9th had evacuated all the dead and wounded, including the 18 missing from C Company, only one of whom was still alive.

In the aftermath and in the years following, Brig Gen Williamson was to say *“it was not the smartest fight and the enemy had set a trap. In the hope of destroying an American unit he had lured us into a battle in an area of his own choosing”*. At the time however, the American Press was full of the battle, heralding it as the biggest and most successful battle fought so far by US Forces – well that was to last only a few days, i.e., until the 1st US Air Cavalry Division and a NVA Division had a much more torrid encounter in the Ia Drang Valley in the Central Highlands, commencing 15 November.

1/503rd Battalion (Airborne) awards for Operation Hump were:

- **Medal of Honour: Spec 5 L Joel.**
- **Silver Star: PFC RH Reddy.**
- **Presidential Unit Citation: 1/503rd Battalion**

Right: The President of the United States, Lyndon B Johnson presenting the Citation for the Medal of Honour to Spec 6 L Joel, the first living African American to receive the award since the Spanish-American War in 1898.

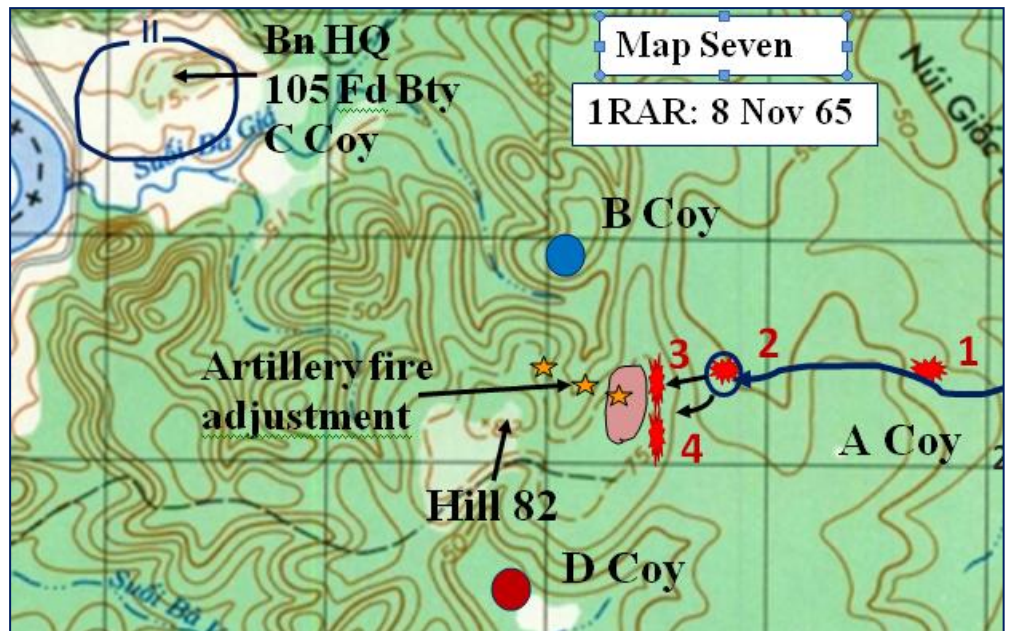


8 November: A Company 1RAR

On the morning of 8 November, A Company (*Maj JB Healy*) was ordered to return to the Battalion Base via the feature known as the Gang Toi Plateau where it was thought a VC Headquarters was hidden on Hill 82 – see **Map Seven**.

At about 10.30am the rear section (*Cpl RD Seipel*) saw an enemy soldier attempting to creep up on the rear of 3 Platoon (*2Lt COG Williams*) (1). He was engaged with a bullet striking and detonating a hand grenade he was carrying.

At about 2.30 pm, 2 Platoon (*Lt IM Guild*) was investigating a VC camp of 6 bunkers dug into anthills when it was fired upon by an enemy scout (2).



By 4 pm the Company had harboured at that location and as the rear section (*Cpl CF Webster*) of 3 Platoon was leaving the harbour, two enemy approached and were promptly killed but not searched because by now 3 Platoon was urgently needed to assist 1 Platoon.

At about 4.30 pm, the Company had commenced to climb the leech infested rainforest slopes of the *Gang Toi Hills*. The lead platoon was 1 Platoon (*Sgt GH Peterson*) which was seriously undermanned with only two sections each of seven men. As the lead section (*LCpl RH Parker*) reached the crest of the ridgeline it was engaged by three machine guns, rifles and grenades from enemy bunkers (3), fatally wounding the Section Commander and seriously wounding the Forward Scout (*Pte EJ Townsend*). The reserve section deployed but the Section Commander (*Cpl DG Hayes*) was immediately seriously wounded however, the machine-gunner (*Pte CR Prior*) was able to bring fire to bear on the enemy position. The machine-gunner of the lead section was also wounded (*Pte GW Cave*) and a soldier at Platoon Headquarters seriously wounded (*Pte TG Baxter*); however, the Platoon managed to withdraw from the killing ground.

3 Platoon was ordered to move up on the left of 1 Platoon and had advanced some 50 metres when its left flank was engaged by three machine guns from another part of the enemy defensive position (4). The Platoon was advancing by fire and movement when the lead section's machine-gunner (*Pte PR Gillson*) was hit several times. The Platoon Sergeant (*Sgt C Fawcett*) moved forward while under intense enemy fire and confirmed Gillson was dead but could not retrieve his body as it had wedged in tree roots. The Platoon Commander redeployed his sections to cover the Platoon Sergeant and to protect the left flank which was under threat.

Meanwhile, the Forward Observer (*Capt BA Murphy RNZA*) had directed fire from 105 Battery onto the enemy position. Given the guns, the enemy and A Company were in a virtual straight line and he couldn't observe the fall of shot, he had to walk the rounds in onto the target by sound. This was both skilful and courageous because he was also constantly under enemy fire.

By now it was 6.30 pm and, as the enemy position had been occupied by at least a company, A Company withdrew, reluctantly leaving the two dead soldiers on the battlefield as Missing in Action.

The Commanding Officer 1RAR (*Lt Col IRW Brumfield*) sought to return to Hill 82 in order to destroy the bunker system and to recover the bodies of Parker and Gillson, and he and the Operations Officer (*Maj J Essex-Clark*) began planning a battalion attack. However, with American casualties rising and all available helicopters required for casualty evacuation, the planned operation was cancelled.

Brig Gen Williamson also decided to stage the 1/503rd casualties through an area secured by D Company (*Capt DP Rothwell*) at Landing Zone Princess. Operation Hump concluded on 9 November, with the US 1/503rd Battalion and 1 RAR being extracted by helicopter and returning to Bien Hoa in the late afternoon. Following 1 RAR's return to Bien Hoa, *Lieutenant Colonel Brumfield* continued to petition for permission to conduct the operation to retrieve the missing men. A battalion attack was subsequently planned for 15 November; however, *Brig Gen Williamson* later deferred it dependent on the availability of air and helicopter support, and the start date of the upcoming Operation New Life. Ultimately it was never conducted.

*“A giant bird lands, its tail flops down, tumbling,
stiff bundles of dead into the ground
the lap of a weeping princess
The sleeping princess, a cross on a map, a paddy field bare, nobody knows,
except those who were there “*

Extract from ‘Landing Zone Princess’ by the late Peter Rothwell (The Jesus Nut Poems, Wentworth Books 1973)

The following awards were made for the A Coy action on 8 November 1965:

- **Military Cross: Capt BA Murphy, RNZA**
- **Medal for Gallantry: Maj JB Healy, 2Lt COG Williams**
- **Military Medal: Sgt C Fawcett**

Right: 2Lt COG Williams (right) briefing a patrol at the 1RAR base at Bien Hoa. Left is Cpl J Pearce and centre Cpl CF Webster.

AWM CUN 66/0162



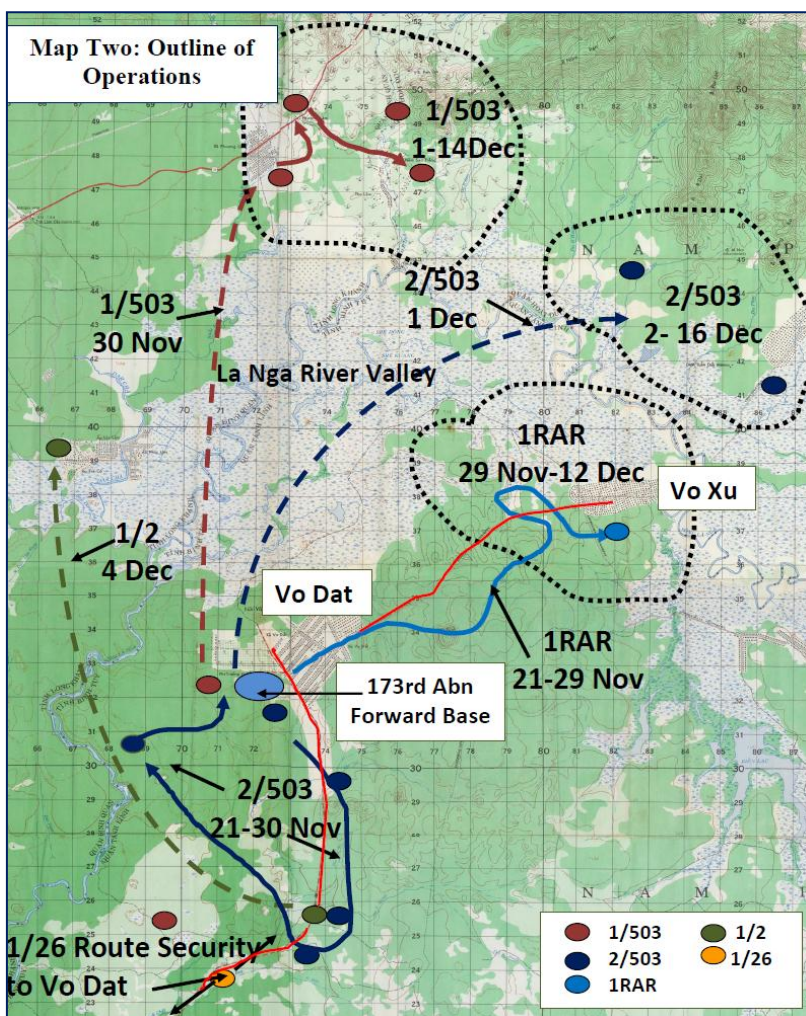
CHAPTER IV: OPERATION NEW LIFE: 21 NOVEMBER – 17 DECEMBER 1965

Background

In late 1965, the US High Command developed a strategy to deny the rice harvest to the VC while at the same time returning the farmland population to Government control. One such area was the La Nga River Valley north of Vo Dat in the north-east of Long Khanh Province see **Map One**. The area had been originally settled in 1954 by displaced people from North Vietnam who with great industry had turned the area from a wasteland into the fifth largest rice production area in Vietnam. In 1963 and 1964 however, the VC moved in and confiscated the crop, hence the reason for the 1965 operation.



173rd Airborne Brigade (*Brig Gen EW Williamson*) was given the task of securing the area and the rice harvest while returning some 37,000 people to the security of government control. The Brigade was reinforced by two Battalions from the 1st US Division, the 1st Battalion 2nd Infantry Regiment (1/2) (see **End Note 3**) and the 2nd Battalion 26th Infantry Regiment (2/26) (see **End Note 4**).



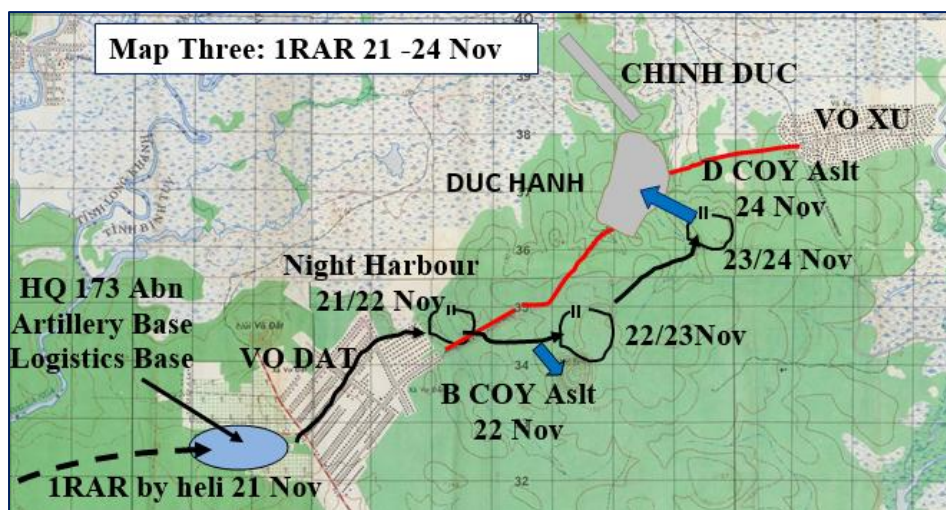
The outline of operations - see **Map Two**, was that after establishing a Forward Base at Vo Dat, the Brigade secured the major villages and roads. Battalions were then redeployed in quick order into individual areas to secure the rice harvest and to eradicate enemy elements.

The Brigade Deploys

On 21 November 2/503 (*Lt Col GE Dexter*) air assaulted Vo Dat airstrip and the Brigade then moved by air and road from Bien Hoa to Vo Dat and established a Command, Artillery and Logistics Base as well as an Airhead for various aircraft including C-130 (Hercules), C-7 (Caribou), CH-37 (Mojave – recovery of downed aircraft), CH-47 (Chinook) and of course troop-

carrying Iroquois helicopters.

The three infantry battalions of 173rd Airborne Brigade were heli-lifted into the area by 600



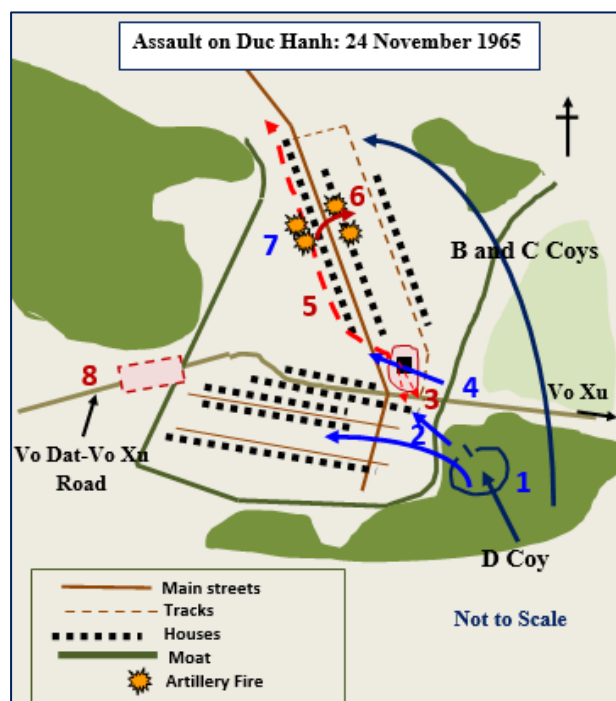
helicopter sorties while 35 C-130 sorties and 15 Caribou sorties brought in four batteries of artillery, E/17 Cavalry and the Brigade Forward Command Post.

1RAR's mission was to secure and develop the road between Vo Dat and Vo Xu, secure and control Vo Xu and the surrounding AO around Vo Xu. It was supported by 161 Battery RNZA,

an APC Troop from PWLH and 3 Field Troop RAE. A Echelon (*Maj BJ Harper*) was established in the 173rd Airborne Forward Support Base adjacent to the Vo Dat Airfield, whilst B Echelon remained at Bien Hoa under the command of the Adjutant (*Capt RA Ducie*). On 21 November, the Battalion, commanded by the Battalion 2iC (*Maj HN Lander*) moved in two lifts to Vo Dat (**see Map Three**) and then moved to a night defensive position on a feature to the north-east. The following morning A Company (*Maj JB Healy*) secured the Start Line for B Company (*Maj ID McFarlane*) to assault a hill suspected to be held by the enemy, though it turned out to be unoccupied. On 23 November, the Battalion moved in single file to a defensive position adjacent to the village of Duc Hanh, straddling the Vo Dat to Vo Xu Road. The village was a former product of the South Vietnamese Government's 'Strategic Hamlet Programme' so called and thus was surrounded by a moat (now overgrown), Panji stakes, barbed wire and by now VC booby traps.

D Company (*Capt DP Rothwell*) was given the task to assault and the company commander in an aerial reconnaissance had recognised the layout from his experience in the Malayan Insurgency and had also identified a concealed approach to the perimeter (**see sketch**). Early on 24 November, D Company moved to the assault position (1) and 12 Platoon (2Lt JR Bourke) moved to breach the Moat (2) to be followed by Company HQ, 11 Platoon (2Lt WJ Giles) and 10 Platoon (2Lt OS Lind). As 12 Platoon was forming up it was fired on by a single weapon which was engaged by machine gun fire and as the Platoon moved across the road and into the village it received automatic fire from an enemy position (about 20 VC) around the church (3).

The Platoon then formed up to assault the enemy position (4) however, the assault sections became separated from the platoon commander and were then led by the Platoon Sergeant (*Sgt JW Carnes*) into and through the position forcing the enemy to withdraw (5). As the Platoon followed the

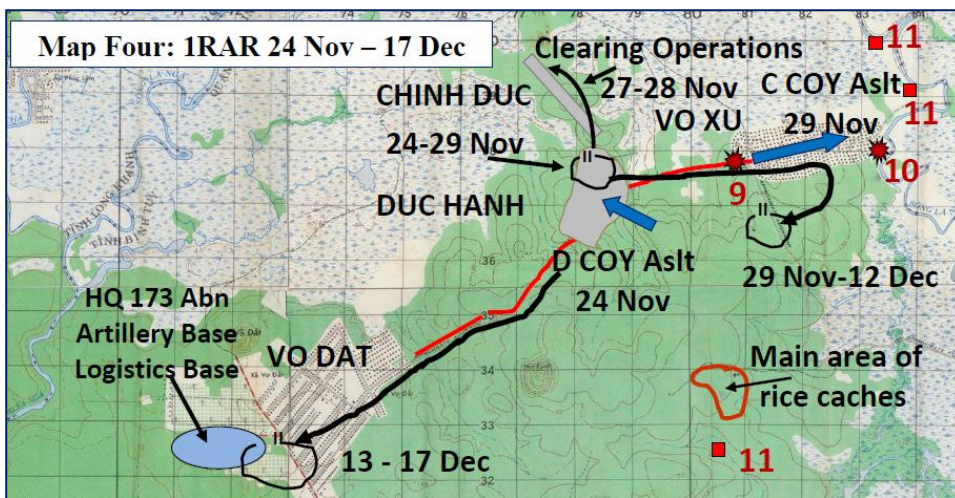


withdrawing enemy a small group attempted to occupy a new position (6) but was stopped by artillery fire (7). Over half the enemy's numbers were killed or wounded in this action.

After the village had been secured an enemy ambush position was discovered on the road at the western entrance of the village (8) which had been vacated the previous night. Clearly the enemy thought 1RAR would advance along the road from Vo Dat (as ARVN troops probably would) and had been caught by surprise when D Company emerged from the jungle.

On 26 November, C Company (*Maj JJ Tattam*) in APCs was tasked to clear the road between Duc Hanh to and through Vo Xu. At about 8am as the lead carrier with the 9 Platoon Sergeant (*Sgt GA Smith*) and a Section Commander (*LCpl GE Bland*) approached the village gates it was engaged by small arms and machine guns **Map Four - (9)**. Sgt Smith and LCpl Bland quickly moved to the gates and opened them to allow the carrier through. Because of the speed of their action the enemy was wrong footed and failed to detonate two large booby traps as they fled.

After clearing operations from 24 to 29 November though the hamlet of Chinh Duc, on 29

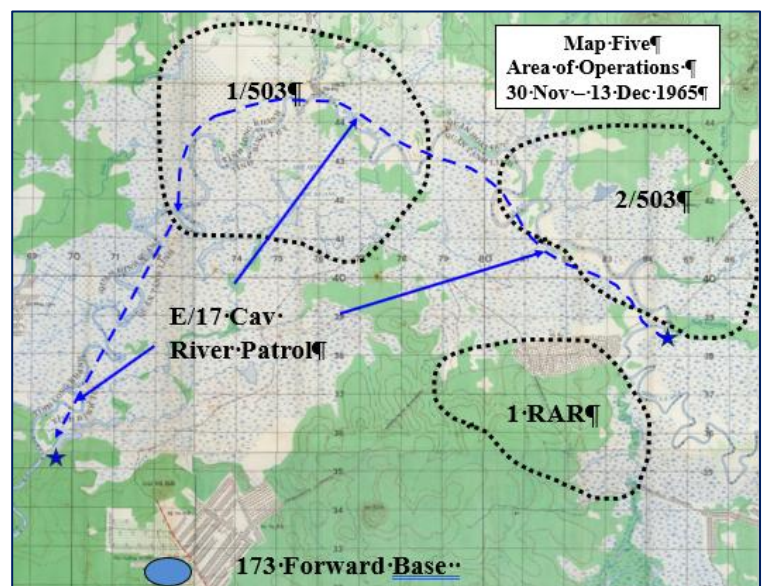


November, C Company with the Troop of APCs cleared through the village of Vo Xu, supported on the flanks by the other companies. Little or no opposition was encountered however, 4 Platoon (*2Lt GE Bolitho*) which was covering the Song La Nga River at the eastern end of the village was engaged by an estimated

enemy platoon, including two machine guns, from the east bank of the river (10). Two soldiers were wounded, one fatally (*Cpl RH Hillier*). The enemy was engaged by two sections, artillery, mortar and armed helicopters destroying the machine guns and their crews and highly likely others.

From 30 November to 13 December, the Battalion occupied a firm base and the companies patrolled in and around Vo Xu, while the Field Engineers repaired roads and destroyed fortifications. Several unoccupied VC camps were located (11) and some 100 tons of rice recovered from caches located some 3 Kms south of Vo Xu.

In the meantime the other battalions had gradually moved into the “Rice Bowl” in the La Nga River Valley – see **Map Five**. The 1/503 and 2/503 maintained the security of the rice harvest by aggressive day and night patrolling. There were only minor contacts with the enemy but they were sufficient to keep them away. The E/17 Cavalry also conducted a unique river patrol in motorised assault boats along the La Nga River from north-east of 1RAR to the north-west of the



base at Vo Dat. A distance of some 55 kilometres. Several caves, tunnels and hidden sampans were discovered and there was one contact with the enemy.

On 13 December 1RAR, now under the command of *Lt Col AV Preece*, moved to Vo Dat to defend the Airhead in preparation for a new 173rd Airborne operation commencing on 17 December, i.e., Operation Smash. This operation would take the Brigade to the north of Phuoc Tuy Province to the enemy base area where battalions of the 1st Australian Task Force would conduct many future operations, i.e., the *Hat Dich*.

Much was said in the Brigade After Action Report on the success of the operation in securing the rice harvest however, it was, as in many cases in the Vietnam War, only temporary in nature, because a few weeks later the VC returned in strength and razed Vo Xu to the ground.

The following awards were made for Operation New Life:

- **Military Medal: Sgt JW Carnes (see 24 November), Sgt GA Smith (see 26 November).**

B Coy troops disembarking from a PWLH APC during Operation New Life.



A patrol crossing the Song La Nga River near Vo Xu led by Pte JH Harrap.



UH 1H leaving Vo Dat in a cloud of dust after dropping off soldiers (left bottom).

Photograph courtesy of Lex McAuley



Above: D Company HQ in Vo Xu. L-R: Capt DP Rothwell, LCpl PT Fleming, Pte PJ Doody.

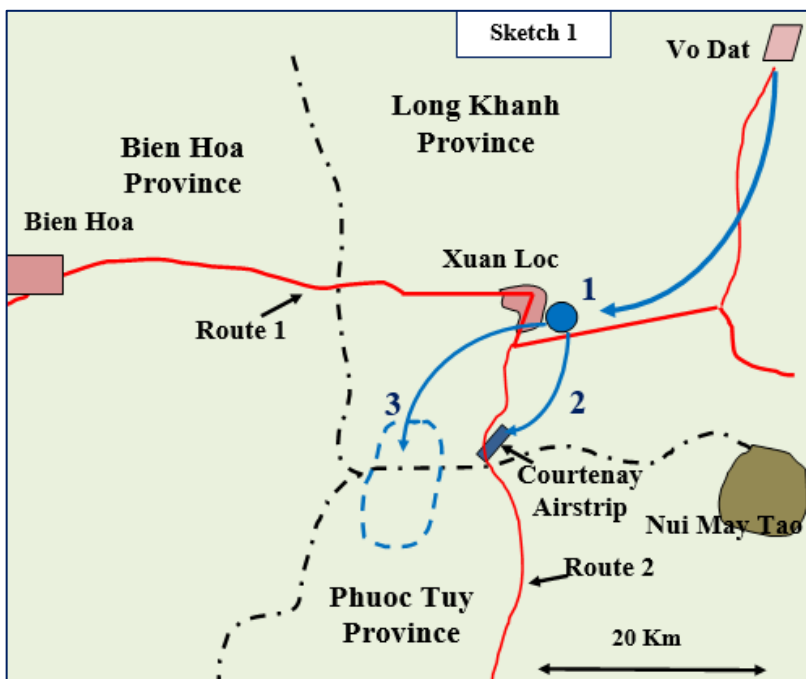
CHAPTER V: OPERATION SMASH: 18-21 DECEMBER 1965

The concept of this operation (see **Sketch 1**) was for the Brigade to move from Vo Dat to a concentration area at Xuan Loc (1) and then for a battalion (1/503) to air assault Courtenay Airstrip (2) to allow the artillery base for five batteries of 3/319 to be established. Following that, two battalions (1RAR and 2/503) would air assault into LZs to the west to conduct search and destroy operations (3).

On 18 December, 1RAR moved first from Vo Dat to Xuan Loc by Chinook Helicopters and then after air strikes, artillery fire (three batteries) and Light Fire Teams, the Battalion led by A Company

(*Maj JB Healy*), air assaulted the Landing Zone (LZ).

Before that at Vo Dat, the assault Pioneer Platoon (*Sgt CG Evans*) was destroying enemy ammunition when a grenade exploded prematurely killing a Section Commander (*Cpl AH Fotheringham*).



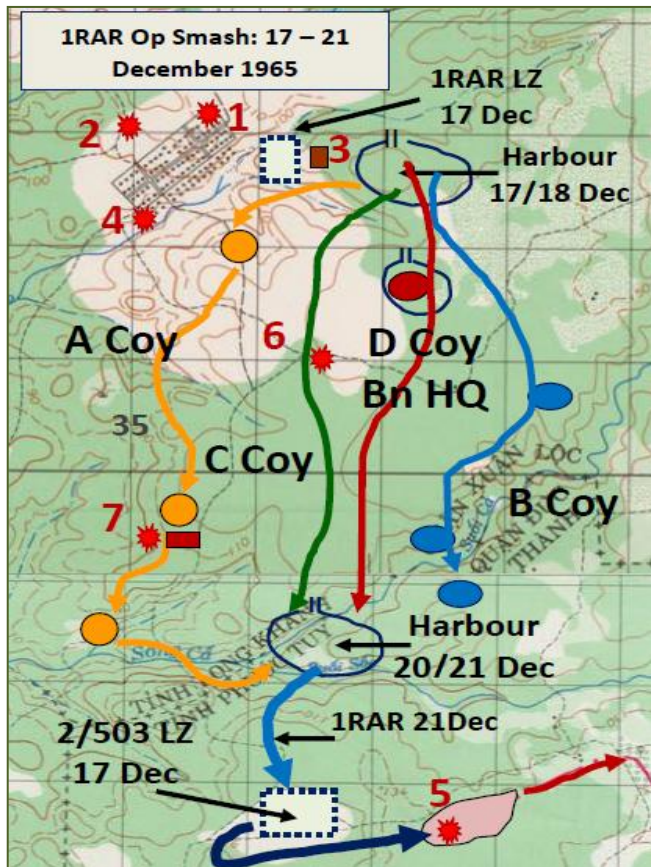
Some two hours later, the 2/503 air assaulted to a LZ 6 Kms to the south. This would become the Pickup Zone (PZ) for 1RAR on 21 December. The second company in the air assault, B Company (*Maj ID McFarlane*) immediately moved to clear the village to the west of the LZ. C Company (*Maj JJ Tattam*) gave protection to B Company's left

flank and the Assault Pioneer Platoon (*Sgt CG Evans*) to the right flank.

About an hour later 4 Platoon (2Lt *GE Bolitho*) was fired on by a VC sniper **Map One - (1)** wounding one man (*Pte AP Ling*) who was evacuated. Two hours later 5 Platoon (2Lt *WF Hindson*) was establishing a firm base west of the village when it was engaged by a single VC (2) who quickly withdrew when he received return fire from an M60 machine gun and an M79 grenade launcher. That evening a Company located a rice cache near the LZ (3).

At about 1pm on 19 December, 2 Platoon (Lt *IM Guild*) was in a harbour next to the creek running to the south-west of the village when a Machine Gunner number 2 (*Pte KA Benier*) spotted two VC moving into the creek; shortly after more enemy were seen and the Platoon engaged them catching them by complete surprise causing several casualties (4). Artillery was then used in depth and 1 Platoon (2Lt *EJ Culpitt*) then cleared the area locating two bodies and two German 7.92mm Mauser rifles.

Meanwhile further south, the Reconnaissance Platoon of 2/503 unwittingly entered an enemy defensive position and was engaged on three sides by automatic weapons and machine guns (5). The platoon, joined by C Company 2/503 held their nerve and used artillery and air support to break up the enemy's defences; later B Company 2/503 supported by C Company assaulted the enemy position from a flank. Over 50 enemy dead were found in the position which had been most likely occupied by a Main Force unit from 5VC Division. C Company lost five men killed (*Sgt RA Gray, PFC S Griffin, PFC DJ Guilmet, PFC RW Peterson and Lt JP Yatsko*).



At about 2pm, 8 Platoon (2Lt KW Lunny) was the lead platoon for the C Company advance when a forward scout sighted and engaged a single enemy without result (6).

At about 10am on 20 December, 1 Platoon (2Lt EJ Culpitt) was leading the A Company advance when it came across very fresh sign (footprints) and a bunker which was spotted by the Platoon Commander; he immediately began deploying the platoon when a Chicom Claymore Mine was detonated followed by enemy small arms fire (7). After calling in artillery fire the Platoon assaulted through the enemy position which was a VC camp complete with a large kitchen.

The Battalion regrouped that night, and the following day crossed the Suoi Ca River to the PZ. It was then flown first to the Courtenay Airstrip and then back to the base at Bien Hoa.



2/503rd Company Commander and Signaler at LZ on 17 December 1965.

Photograph by courtesy of 173rd Abn Association

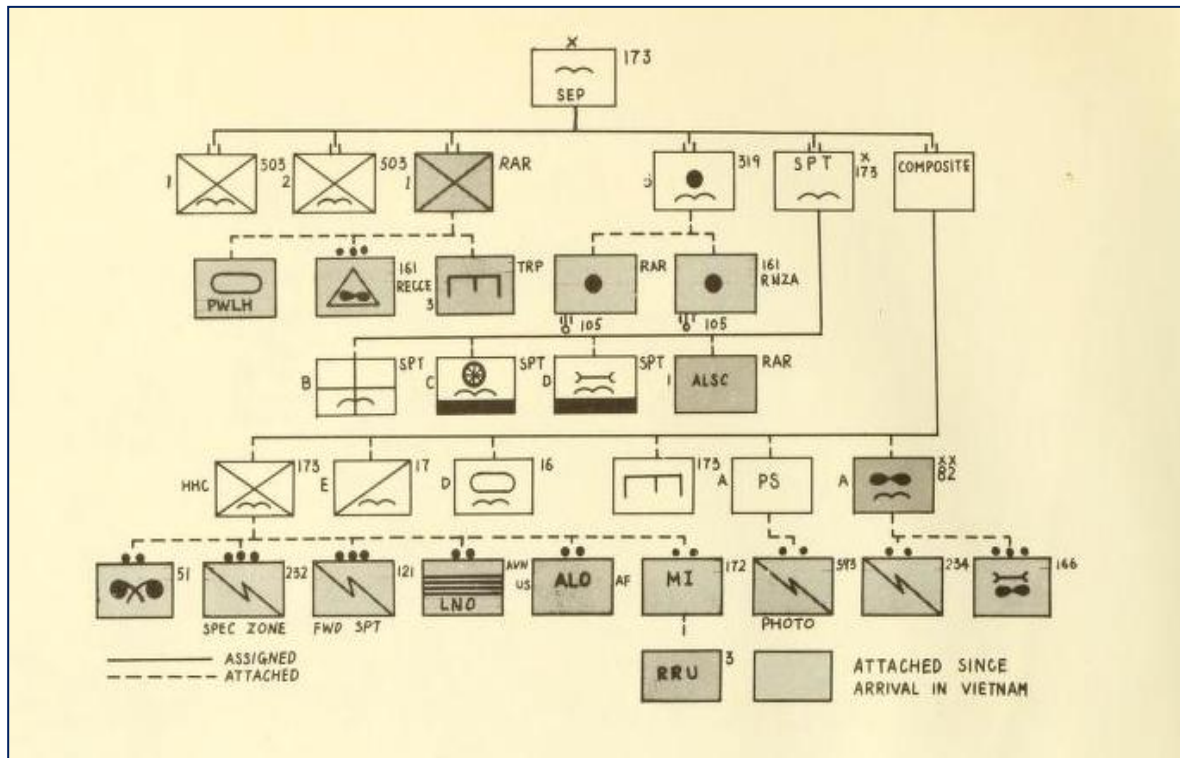


Troops from Company C, 2/503rd at LZ on 17 December 1965.

Photograph by courtesy of 173rd Abn Association

END NOTES

1. 173RD AIRBORNE BRIGADE ORDER OF BATTLE 1965



173 Abn Combat Support Arms included: two batteries of the 3rd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment (3/319) plus 105 Field Battery RAA and 161 Battery RNZA; the 173rd Support Battalion; 173rd Engineers, Troop E/17th Cavalry (in 1965, equipped with Jeeps mounted with 106mm Recoilless Rifles below right), Company D/16th Armour, (in 1965 equipped with 11 APCs, four 4.2inch mortar carriers and 5 M56 Self Propelled Anti-Tank carriers with 90mm guns, below left).



There was also 13 APCs in a Troop of the Prince of Wales Light Horse (PWLH) and a Troop of Combat Engineers of 1 Field Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers.

In addition to its own helicopter support, 173 Abn was supported by the 145th Aviation Battalion which had three Helicopter Companies with a total of 70 UH troop carrier helicopters plus armed gunships and fixed wing aircraft (C-123 Providers).

2. . The 2nd Infantry Regiment is one of the oldest in the US Army having been raised in 1812. In the 19th Century it fought in the Indian Wars, the American Civil War in the Army of the Potomac and the Spanish-American War. In WWI the Regiment was on security duties in the Hawaiian Islands and was readied to deploy to France when the war ended. In World War II, the Regiment was assigned to the 5th Infantry Division, landing in Normandy in 1944 where it became part of the Third Army (Patton).The Regiment secured the crossing for Third Army over the Rhine and was spearheading the advance into Czechoslovakia when the ceasefire occurred on 7 May 1945. In Vietnam the 2nd Infantry, with two battalions was assigned to the 1st Infantry Division, arriving in country in October 1965 via Vung Tau. Its unit patch (1920) has symbols representing wars fought in to at that time. The motto can be translated as ‘Do not touch me’ which is rather sweet for an Infantryman to say but of course it may have originated from the Bible’s take on the meeting between Mary Magdalene and the risen Jesus. Currently (2025), the Regiment’s Second Battalion is assigned to 10th Mountain Division’s 3rd Brigade Combat Team at Fort Polk, Louisiana.



3. The 26th Infantry Regiment was raised in 1901, beginning its operational life in the Philippines. Known as the ‘Blue Spaders’, it joined the 1st US Infantry Division in France in June 1918. In 1941 it was again assigned to the 1st Division and fought in North Africa, Sicily, Normandy and the battle for the Rhine before serving in the occupation forces in Germany. In 1965, the Regiment’s First Battalion again joined the 1st Division, serving with the ‘Big Red One’ until 1970. Currently (2025), the Regiment’s First Battalion is assigned to the 101st Airborne Division’s 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.



4. US HIGH COMMAND

In 1965, the US High Command in Vietnam had a somewhat convoluted organization with US MACV (*Gen WC Westmoreland*) being a Joint Service Command of the US Department of Defense but part of US Pacific Command in Hawaii (Commander In Chief Pacific – *Adm USG Grant*), while also reporting to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (*Gen EG Wheeler*) and responsive to the US Ambassador in Saigon (*Ellsworth Bunker*).

5. MISSING IN ACTION.

Vietnam like previous wars Australia has fought in had a poor government response to ‘post war needs’, especially consideration of repatriation requirements, including for the next of kin of those who died in the conflict. This was especially so for the four Army and two RAAF men who were listed as Missing in Action in Vietnam. Neither the Australian Defence Force nor the Defence bureaucracy had any interest in locating and recovering the missing men. It wasn’t until 2005 when the late Lt Col (Retd) Jim Bourke, MG, AM established an incorporated private body, ie, ‘Operation Aussie Home’ then things began to happen. After much searching in the area of Operation Hump, in April 2007 Jim Bourke’s team uncovered and partially recovered remains which were then examined by forensics experts. By 27 April, the team had recovered two sets of remains (from a VC weapon pit) including the men’s Identity (Dog) Tags which were identified as belonging to LCpl Parker and Pte Gillson. By the end of May 2007, Vietnamese officials had confirmed the identification and on 4 June they were placed on a RAAF C130 aircraft, together with a Bearer Party from 1RAR to return home. LCpl Parker was subsequently buried in Canberra and Pte Gillson in Melbourne.

ROLL OF HONOUR

8 November 1965 :1/503 and 173 Abn Support Units

A Company	B Company	C Company	HQ Company
PFC LE Carlton	SFC B Brayboy	PFC RR Aguilar	PFC H Goldman
PFC JE Hannigan	PFC H Brown	SP4 J Belton	SP4 JA Nathan
Pl Sgt L Hill	SSG M Campos	PFC GL Elmore	PFC DD Rutowski
PFC SS Tolliver	SFC HT Cannon	PFC BJ Foster	
2Lt DL Ugland	SSG SA Eidson	PFC JT Hamilton	
	SP4 EW Goias	SP4 RW Harden	
	PFC KE Graham	SSG CW Harrington	
	Sgt RL Holcomb	Sgt JA Hughlett	
	Sgt LP Howard	Sgt TR Jones	
	SP4WW Humphries	Cpl C Lockett	
	Sgt DL Keel	PFC V Marquez	
	PFC MM Medley	PFC MK Mathison	
	Pte CL Mitchell	PFC HM Smith	
	PFC JL Potter	PFC DJ Sobota	
	PFC MP Russo	SP4 C Spencer	
	SSG T Shamblin	SP4 S Tate	
	2Lt CH Thurston	SP4 TA Turnage	
	PFC DR Ward	SP4 G Vincent	
	PFC KE Whitaker	Sgt TB Williams	

3/319 Artillery Battalion

Sgt LV Greene
PFC S Orris

173 Engineer Company

PFC D Uptain

1RAR

LCpl RH Parker
Pte PR Gillson

Operation New Life

173rd Airborne

1 December SP4 RC Rodriguez B Coy 503
6 December SP4 DA Dickinson HHC 503
6 December SP5 DB Nerveza HHC 503

1RAR

30 November Cpl RH Hillier

Operation Smash

173rd Airborne

18 December Sgt RA Gray
18 December PFC S Griffin
18 December PFC DJ Guilmet
18 December PFC RW Peterson
18 December 1Lt JP Yatsko

1RAR

17 December Cpl AH Fotheringham

CHAPTER VI: SOURCE MATERIAL

AWM = Australian War Memorial Digitised War Diaries

1. OPERATION HUMP

A: Operation Orders, Logs etc

(AWM 7/1/39; AWM 7/1/43 Pt 1)

- I: 1RAR Op Order 15/65 of 3 Nov 65
- II: Extract from 1RAR Log 5-8 November 1965.
- III: Extract from 1RAR Duty Officer Log 8 November 1965

B: Written Reports

(AWM 7/1/45)

- I: A Company 1RAR Sub Unit Operational Analysis: 5-9 November 1965.
- II: 3 Platoon Contact Report 6 November 1965
- III: 9 Section Contact Report 8 November 1965.
- IV: 7 Section Contact Report 8 November 1965.
- V: 1 Platoon Contact Report 8 November 1965.
- VI: 3 Platoon Contact Report 8 November 1965.
- VII: B Company Operational Analysis dated 10 November 1965.
- VIII: C Company Operational Analysis dated 11 Nov 1965.
- IX: 9 Platoon Contact Report 6 November 1965.
- X: D Company Operational Analysis dated 11 November 1965.
- XI: 173rd Abn Critique dated 19 November 1965.
- XII: 173rd Abn After Action Report Operation Hump dated 19 December 1965

C: US Sources:

- I: "The Hump: A Soldier's Search for Peace". A Thesis submitted by Al Conetto, August 1993, provided by US Army Centre of Military History.
- II: "The Hump: The 503rd Airborne Infantry in the First Major Battle of the Vietnam War", Al Conetto 2016, McFarland & Co.
- III: Book review of "The Hump" (A Conetto) by Maj Gen RD Chegar (Retd). Provided by the 173rd Airborne Association.
- IV: U S Army Centre of Military History Publication 91-5-1, "Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide ", John Carland.
- V: "Battle on Hill 65", Lowell D Bittrich, OC B Company 1/503, paper presented to US Army School of Infantry, Fort Benning May 1966. Provided from the 'Virtual Wall' via the 173rd Airborne Association.
- VI: List of 173 Abn casualties on 8 November 65 from the 'Virtual Wall' via the 173 Abn Association

D: Citations

- I: L Joel, Medal of Honour
- II: KP Murphy, MC.
- III: C Fawcett, MM.
- IV: COG Williams MG

2. OPERATION NEW LIFE

A: Operation Orders, Logs etc

(AWM 7/1/40; AWM 7/1/47).

- I: HQ 173rd Abn Operation Order 22/65 (Operation New Life) dated 20 November 1965. Plus Annexes: B (Intelligence), I (Sequence of Events), and J (Route Map).
- II: 1RAR Operation Order 17/65 dated 20 November 1965. Plus Annex C (Admin and Log) and Annex P (TAOR Overlay).
- III: 1RAR Operations Log (Narrative) for 21 November – 16 December 1965

B: Written Reports

(AWM 7/1/46, AWM 7/1/48)

- I: 173rd Abn After Action Report Operation New Life dated 26 January 1966.
- II: 173rd Abn Critique of Operation New Life dated 19 January 1966.
- III: A Company 1RAR Unit Operational Analysis dated December 1965.
- IV: B Company 1RAR Unit Operational Analysis dated December 1965.
- V: C Company 1RAR Unit Operational Analysis dated 24 December 1965.
- VI: D Company 1RAR Unit Operational Analysis dated 25 December 1965.
- VII: 12 Platoon After Action Report for assault on Duc Hanh (notations (1) to (8)).
- VIII: 4 Platoon After Action Report for the action on 29 November (Notation (10)).
- IX: 1RAR Int Section INTSUM No 1.

C: Citations

- JW Carnes, MM; GA Smith, MM.

3. OPERATION SMASH

A: Operation Orders, Logs etc

(AWM 7/1/48).

- I: HQ 173rd Abn Operation Order 29/65 (Operation Smash) dated 15 December 1965. Plus Artillery Preparation for LZ Prancer (2/503 Battalion).
- II: 1RAR Operation Order 18/65 dated 16 December 1965. Plus TAOR Overlay.
- III: 1RAR Operations Log (Narrative) for 16-21 December 1965

B: Written Reports

(AWM 7/1/53, AWM 7/1/54)

- I: A Company 1RAR Unit Operational Analysis dated December 1965.
- II: B Company 1RAR Unit Operational Analysis dated December 1965.
- III: C Company 1RAR Unit Operational Analysis dated 24 December 1965.
- IV: Platoon After Action Reports for notations (1), (2), (4), (6) and (7).
- V: 173rd Abn SITREP for the period 151900 – 161900 December 1965.
- VI: 173rd Abn INTSUMS 215 (17 Dec); 218 (18 Dec); 219(19 Dec).
- VII: E Mail correspondence between F² and Ernie Chamberlain dated 16 and 18 February 2016 regarding enemy identification for the 2/503rd action on 18 December 1965.

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KIA = Killed in Action

WIA = Wounded in Action

DOW = Died of Wounds

USA = United States Army

(p) = photograph

The Author

Fred Fairhead was born in Wiluna, WA and educated at Guildford Grammar School (1955-59). He graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon in December 1963 and because he had been in the Engineering Class was posted to RA Signals. In 1965, while serving with the 2nd Battalion, the Pacific Island Regiment he transferred to RA Infantry. In July 1967 he joined 6RAR and commanded D Company as the Demonstration Company at the Jungle Training Centre, Canungra. When the company re-joined the Battalion in Townsville in March 1968, he became the Intelligence Officer, a position he kept until June 1970. During the 1969/70 tour by 6RAR/NZ (ANZAC) Battalion he also commanded all three of the Australian Rifle Companies when the Company Commanders were on leave. In the last few weeks of the tour he was also the acting Operations Officer.

Post-Vietnam his postings included: The Senior Instructor Advanced Field Training (Infantry Minor Tactics) at the Officer Training Unit Scheyville, the Senior Instructor Tactics at the Officer Cadet School Classes that were conducted at Scheyville; the Second-in Command of 8/9RAR and on the Joint Operations Staff. He retired from the Army in 1985 with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and then worked for several years with the SA Government mainly in the fields of Emergency Management and Counter Terrorism.

He is the author of:

- *A Potted History of the Royal Australian Regiment in the Korean War (2011).*
- *Old Guildfordians who served in the Korean War*
- *Old Guildfordians who served in the Vietnam War.*
- *A Duty Done – A summary of operations by the Royal Australian Regiment in the Vietnam War 1965-1972 (2014).*
- *Addendum to A Duty Done (2016)*
- *Long Tan: A Reappraisal (2019)*
- *History of 6RAR Volume I (1965-1970) (2021)*



**The author on the Landing Zone at
Fire Support Patrol Base Wilton - 28
February 1970**