

# Battle of Long Tan

## Intelligence Background

**This is an extract from the book:**

*'To Long Tan: Australian Army and the Vietnam War, 1950-66 (Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts, 1948-75)' Ian McNeill. Allen & Unwin Australia, 1993*

*(The following information was not available to the Long Tan veterans or Lex McAulay who wrote the first book on the Battle of Long Tan until 25 years after the battle due to secrecy. We also had no time to cover it in our documentary but it will be included in the movie storyline.)*

The Australian Army Signals Intelligence radio intercept troop (547 Signal Troop) was stationed at the Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat. It was a secret radio signal tracking, intercept & intelligence unit.

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A police agent had reported 300 Viet Cong carrying crew-served weapons and wearing green uniforms (suggesting main force troops) one hundred metres to the north of Nui Dat 2 on 1 August. But that day D Company of 6RAR had patrolled within 200 metres of the alleged sighting and they might have been mistaken for enemy. An aircraft saw 150 civilians south of Long Tan on 11 August and on the same day an agent reported a Viet Cong battalion and two separate companies in the rubber between Long Tan and Nui Dat 2. Yet the substance of these observations was denied by 6RAR patrols. Since returning from Operation Hobart on 29 July the battalion had been searching the whole area of Long Tan and disclosed 'no unusual activity'. As a task force report noted:

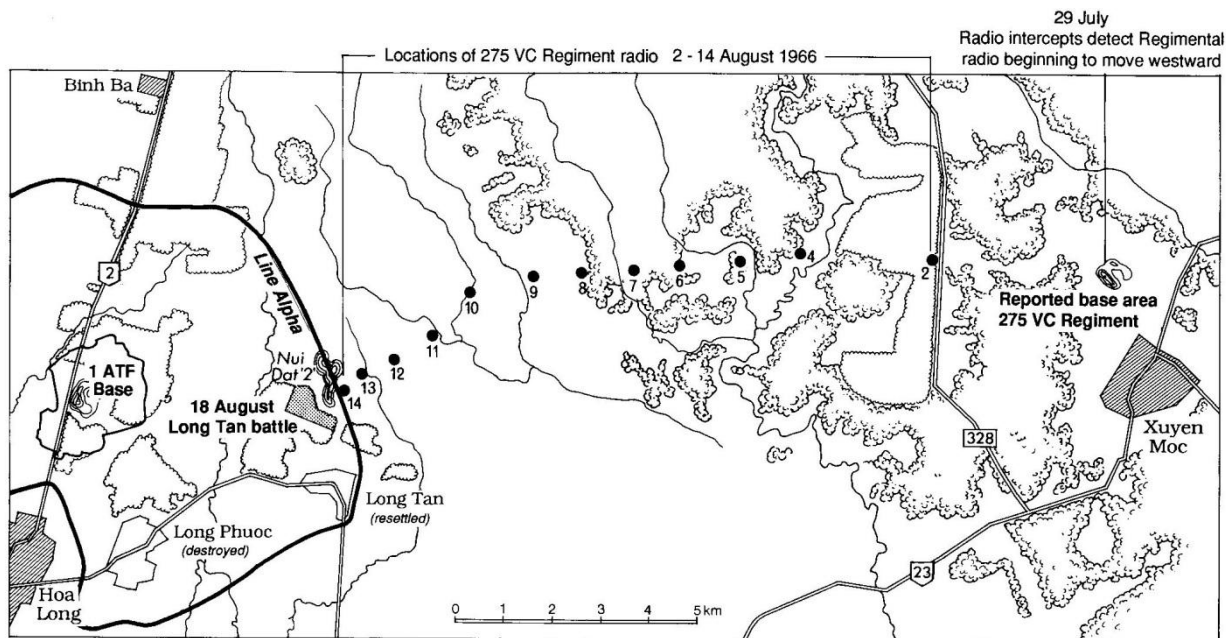
with the exception of the enemy mortar and artillery attack on 17 August ... there was little in these reports during August which differed from previous indications of enemy activity in this area [vicinity of Long Tan] or many others in other parts of the Task Force area of operations.

Apart from the above, however, one further source of intelligence was available whose nature and substance could not be revealed. The task force account of this period refers guardedly to there being: other indications of increasing enemy interest to the EAST of the Task Force base area which resulted in our attention being directed towards this area in order to locate any sizable enemy force.

These 'other indications' referred to information provided by radio direction-finding. This source could be revealed only to Hannigan (the operations officer), the two intelligence officers on the task force headquarters, and Jackson himself. Information arising from these measures was available to battalion commanders, but they could not be told its source. Such security was maintained to prevent the enemy deducing that their radio traffic was being monitored. But the habitual secrecy also meant that officers other than those of the Intelligence Corps had no experience in interpreting, evaluating or even understanding the strengths and limitations of this form of information. Jackson, for one, had not been exposed to signals intelligence before. As a result his ability to use it, as far as the signals intelligence officer was concerned, was 'very limited'. Commanders who had to act on the information were not able to assess its reliability for themselves.

What the battalion commanders were not told was that signals intelligence began revealing unusual activity to the east as early as 29 July, when the task force false alert was at its peak. At that time radio direction-finding had picked up what appeared to be one Viet Cong main force regiment beginning to move towards Nui Dat. The information came from the Australian 547 Signal Troop attached to the task force headquarters. Commanded by Captain Trevor Richards, Corps of Signals, the small group of fifteen experienced radio operators monitored enemy radio traffic and so assisted in locating and tracking enemy units and formations. The team became so expert that the radio set normally associated with a specific unit could be located to within 400-500 metres.

547 Signal Troop had fixed the radio sets of 274 Regiment in the north-west of the province, 275 Regiment east of the Song Rai immediately north of Xuyen Moc and 22 kilometres east of Nui Dat, and both reporting to 5 VC Division in the Mao Tao mountains. Corroborative information indicated that the regiments had been in rest and retraining, which explained the routine radio schedules. Then around 29 July, 275 Regiment stepped up its radio activity with more traffic and longer messages. At the same time other intelligence sources indicated the regiment was being brought up to strength with forces from North Vietnam. It was apparent to Richards that something important was happening.



Map 14.1 Movement of 275 VC Regiment radio transmitter towards Nui Dat as reported by 547 Signal Troop, 29 July–14 August 1966

Richards fed this information to the task force staff through Captain Bob Keep, the intelligence officer subordinate to the chief intelligence officer, Major John Rowe. Richards found himself an outsider; he could discuss his work with very few people, Jackson appeared to take little notice of him, and Rowe had shown himself sceptical of the reliability of radio direction-finding (a legacy of his experience with II FFV, thought Richards). But Keep had a natural feel and empathy for Richards's work. It seemed to Richards that Keep understood what it was about, and its limitations, and was able to draw informed deductions where others did not. The two captains spent a lot of time considering ramifications and comparing the indications from radio direction-finding with other information which was available. Richards knew he had 'hard\* evidence. He claimed nothing other than to be able to pinpoint positively the location of an enemy radio set, and the enemy had so few radios they were rarely found below regimental level. If you were getting this kind of information, said Keep,

*You knew ... it wasn't a ten-man foot patrol and it had to be—the least it could be was regimental if it was North Vietnamese. If it was Viet Cong ... it was something equivalent or perhaps a bit less but certainly it wasn't a ten-man foot patrol and you'd better take notice of it.*

Keep took special notice when the radio station started to move west towards the task force. Richards tracked the radio set associated with 275 Regiment approaching Nui Dat at the rate of a one-kilometre grid square each day. The map markings looked like a string of beads stretching from right to left across the sheet. Richards kept passing the information to Keep. Keep in turn tried to convince Jackson of the seriousness of the situation. He thought he had to counter the advice of Rowe, who appeared to take the revelations too calmly—Rowe himself admits that he considered this was not a cause for particular alarm as the reports were just part of the plethora of intelligence being received.

Nevertheless on 13 August task force headquarters notified AFV who in turn advised Army Headquarters that 'visual sightings and enemy radio interception again indicate the presence of possibly company-sized forces in the vicinity of Nui Dat YS4868' (Nui Dat 2,500 metres east of the task force base). The next day, two days before the mortaring, Captain Trevor Richards of 547 Signal Troop

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informed Jackson and Piper at II FFV that enemy radio traffic indicated 275 Regiment to have reached 5000 metres east of the base. Richards was always at pains to explain he was only tracking the movement of a radio, not intercepting transmissions. It could even be a deceptive measure. But at least it was the radio of 275 Regiment. 'To me this was pretty important stuff, you know', said Richards. 'It was the one grain of gold amongst all the crap. It appeared the regiment, or its reconnaissance party, had arrived at a point just beyond the Long Tan rubber plantation.

A factor had emerged which may have placed doubt on Keep's credibility at the time. He had become ill shortly before leaving for Vietnam. Not then long with the task force headquarters in Sydney, Keep was a very capable young officer and would have been difficult to replace at short notice. His superiors gave him the benefit of the doubt, believing that he would soon shake off the affliction, and left him on the draft. But the illness recurred in Vietnam and since late July Keep had begun to feel its effects more strongly. He seemed to be losing his sense of reality and was succumbing to personal neglect. His teeth were going green, he was appearing around the headquarters in sandals and a sarong, and he was not washing. All the while he was painting a picture of impending catastrophe. Keep later admitted his condition besides which, he said, 'I had this tremendous feeling of responsibility that all these people around me were in great peril and I could do nothing about it'. The situation was becoming bizarre.

Yet Captain Keep was not being ignored. While Jackson had not been prepared to seek help again from II FFV, he did send company patrols out specifically into the area where 275 Regiment was reported by 547 Signal Troop. On 15 August D Company 6RAR patrolled out to Nui Dat 2 and back through the Long Tan rubber plantation. The following day A Company from 6RAR was dispatched on a three-day patrol following a route which led around the Nui Dat 2 feature. In the same manner as the searches around the base in late July, A Company was required to establish a company base in the suspect area and send out patrols of not less than one platoon. They were to scour the Nui Dat 2 feature and ridge to the north-west. Any sizeable enemy force in the vicinity should have been found, but all patrols drew a blank. A Company had been out only one day and night when they heard the mortar attack on the base but they were instructed initially to continue their task.

Keep was sent to the 2 Field Ambulance hospital at Vung Tau on 9 August, unaware that Jackson was ordering out the patrols. 'The thing that really finished me', related Keep, 'was when the [task force base] was mortared ... I just disintegrated totally... So in some ways it was, you know, a personal tragedy that I wasn't able to get the message through. But then it was too late for me. Indeed Keep's time was up. Two days before the mortaring he was transferred to the RAAF Hospital at Butterworth, Malaysia, believing fervently that somewhere outside the base, close, 275 Regiment lay waiting. Only the day before, 16 August, Rowe had been evacuated to 2 Field Ambulance with hepatitis. The headquarters had then lost its two intelligence officers.

Information from radio direction-finding techniques had alerted Jackson to the possibility of enemy in strength approaching the Nui Dat 2 feature; but, as happened with the agents' reports during the July alert, follow-up patrols found no sign of major activity. Regular patrolling had indicated nothing unusual. Consequently task force staff inferred no ulterior enemy intention associated with the mortaring. Nor, it seems, did anyone else. The accepted explanation was that D445 Battalion mounted the attack on orders from the Viet Cong provincial headquarters possibly in retaliation for the recent search for the headquarters by 5RAR. Alternatively it could have been in response to A Company patrols

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engaging three small parties of enemy in the general area of the Nui Dat 2 feature on the afternoon of 16 August. A Viet Cong ground attack on the task force was thought to be unlikely.

There seemed no reason either to alter or to reinforce the last general assessment of the enemy strengths and capabilities which had been issued on 31 July and reproduced to the companies of 6RAR on 3 August. Apart from local guerrillas, this had allowed for the possibility of D445 Battalion and one enemy main force battalion within or adjacent to the TAOR. As the possible main force battalion was thought to be from 274 Regiment, its location, if it was present at all, would have been to the west of the task force. D445 Battalion was associated with bases to the east. From the point of view of 6RAR, their constant patrolling of the east and north-east quadrants of the TAOR without significant result suggested little was to be feared from that direction. When B Company of 6RAR departed from the base at 6.30 a.m. on 17 August to look for the nearby mortar positions, it did not expect much opposition.