

THE BATTLE OF LONG TAN

South Vietnam: 18 August 1966

Biography

MAJOR MAURICE 'MORRIE' STANLEY, MBE (Retired):

Royal New Zealand Artillery (RNZA) Forward Observer (FO)

161 Battery, 16th Field Regiment RNZA attached to D Company, 6RAR at Long Tan

I was born in March 1931 in Christchurch, New Zealand, but I grew up in Napier on the east coast of the North Island. In the same year, much of Napier was devastated by a major earthquake and was rebuilt in its present Art Deco style.

It was a good area to grow up in, and I was able to spend many hours swimming, sailing, fishing and cycling. During my last couple of years at high school, winter meant rugby union with practice midweek and competition on Saturdays. During the war years, a few warships called into the port and many cargo ships came in to load meat, wool and fruit for Britain. My friends and I used to swim out



Major Morrie Stanley MBE (Retired) - February 2005

past the wharves and sometimes it seemed we were very close to their huge propellers. For a period, my father was a weapon-training instructor at the local drill hall, and I enjoyed helping him with his 'homework', stripping and assembling small arms.

My years at high school—until the end of 1948—were quite pleasant. I favoured science, technical subjects and mathematics and do not recall getting the cane very often. Out of the classroom I was in the second rugby team, captain of the shooting team, prefect and RSM of the school cadet unit. At that time, I did have thoughts of being a technical-school teacher. However, I suspect that some of my schoolmasters and others, such as my favourite uncle who had returned from active service a few years previously, had an influence on me and I decided to apply for the army.

In January 1949 I enlisted in the only option available at my age, the Regular Force Cadet Unit. This was a special unit established at Trentham Camp, Wellington, to educate and train young men between the ages of 16 and 1/2 and 18 years to provide tradesmen and instructors for the Regular Army. Most of the cadets were in effect completing their final year or two of high school, and the

program was generally school in the mornings and military training in the afternoons. As I had matriculated, I was given the opportunity to attend Victoria University, Wellington, to study pure and applied mathematics, part-time. Unfortunately, for each of the four lectures and one tutorial per week, I had to travel 90 minutes each way. Usually I returned to camp just in time for a quick lunch, and then had to prepare myself for the afternoons of 'square-bashing', weapon-training, PT and so on. While I did not do very well at my university studies, I was in the first rugby team and a qualified marksman with the rifle and the Bren gun.

Later in 1949 I attended a selection course for entry to the Royal Military College, Duntroon. I heard nothing of the matter until just before Christmas, after I had already graduated as a sapper in the Royal New Zealand Engineers. In typical style I received an order to go to the Orderly Room, where the OC had something to tell me—what had I done now? Consequently, I felt quite relieved when told that on returning from my Christmas holiday break I should be ready to go to Australia for the four-year course at RMC with nine other New Zealanders.

We were all about nineteen years old when we sailed on the MV Wanganella to Sydney. As we were the juniors we supported each other during this adventure and were guided by the senior classes, who were returning to complete a further year of their courses. On board, I met Don Kenning, who was to become my first battery commander at Bien Hoa, Vietnam. Don was returning to graduate at the end of 1950.

Some readers may know something of the initiation ceremony that was conducted at RMC in those days. It is sufficient here to say that the trial was strenuous and stressful. When I was instructed to sing 'Waltzing Matilda' during the ordeal, I took exception and persisted in singing 'Maori Battalion', a well-known New Zealand marching song. After all, how could I be expected to know the words of an Australian song? No doubt I received some attention for my impudence.

Four years of a 6.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m. routine of academic and military studies followed.

'Pango' Watson, the famous Duntroon RSM, selected me to stand in front of the whole unit on many occasions as a drill demonstrator to assist in our preparation for the many ceremonial parades which were conducted. Also for a couple of years, I was the RMC member of the Armed Forces Catafalque Party when one was mounted at the Australian War Memorial. As a result of these activities I received more than my fair share of 'Pango' yelling orders and sweet words in my ears.

While at RMC I still wanted to be an engineer, and in my third year the academic work was focused in that direction. In my final year, however, I transferred to specialise in artillery and graduated into the Royal New Zealand Artillery. Incidentally, one of the infantry instructors at RMC in my time was George Chinn. Would you believe it! When I was attached to 6RAR in 1966 he was the RSM, and he was in one of the helicopters that resupplied D Company with ammunition during the Battle of Long Tan.

Apart from the military work and academic studies, a most significant event for me was meeting a lovely Canberra girl at church! During the first few weeks at RMC, local leave was not granted, except that after a period, we could go to church. It was simply a matter of getting onto a bus heading for the denomination of your choice; amazingly, many of us identified as Presbyterians, and went to St Andrew's. Later, we could go out to lunch in Canberra, provided that we had a written invitation. After four years of relevant manoeuvres, Alva and I became engaged on the day I graduated as a lieutenant in December 1953, and we were married six months later. We are still together today with three sons in their forties and we have seven grandchildren.

My first real job came in 1954 at Waiouru Military Camp, which is located in the mountainous centre of the North Island, where there can be harsh winters with heavy frosts and frequent snowfalls. It is a great place for military training and I suppose I was fortunate in that regard, although I do not think my Canberra girl was very impressed with the isolation. While I was there I was first attached to the School of Artillery for three months' training, after which I was appointed to the Compulsory Military Training (National Service) Depot as an instructor and later became Staff Officer—Training. I was to learn a great deal during those three years through teaching and from the experienced officers and NCOs in the unit.

Even at Waiouru, the army trained for jungle warfare, and I was one of four officers sent to the Jungle Training Centre, Canungra, for an officers' jungle tactics course. What a change in climate! The outdoor part of the course was tough work, but I enjoyed it. The war veteran instructors were not there to play and said that some sections of the course would be made as close to battle conditions as permitted during peacetime. On one occasion, a few of us chickened out and asked that some explosive charges, which had been placed only a few feet above our heads, be moved. On the other hand, the confidence course, firing the Bren gun from the hip, the rum and prawns in the mess, were all great fun.

In 1957 I was posted to the HQ of an infantry brigade in Christchurch. The brigade comprised three large Territorial (CMP) battalions. My job was staff captain and I took a liking to the operational administration, particularly when all the units were in the field.

Still as an artillery officer, I landed the job of mortar officer in a Regular Force infantry battalion in 1959. That unit was destined to proceed to Malaya and trained for a year at Waiouru. During that period I developed a great respect for the infantry as I shared many of their experiences.

Following this time in which I was virtually in the infantry, I at last scored an artillery appointment to Auckland as adjutant of a Territorial light anti-aircraft (Bofors) regiment. As two of the batteries were based a couple of hours' drive away, I was able to become familiar with another part of the North Island.

In 1962 I was battery commander of a Regular Army field battery at Papakura, just south of Auckland, and although the battery was under-strength it was almost ready for overseas duty. Soon after I took up my next appointment as battery captain of a medium (5.5 inch) battery in Hamilton and shifted my family there in 1964. I was then selected for a contingent to go to the UK. A total of 150 troops from the Artillery and Armoured Corps were to travel to England courtesy of the RAP to perform public duties by providing guards for Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London and the Bank of England. In addition, we were able to exercise with British Army units on Salisbury Plain. Our ceremonial training was conducted in New Zealand under the guidance of a drill sergeant from the Welsh Guards, and we received further training at Woolwich. I did four duties as Officer of the Tower of London Guard, which involved 24 hours on duty followed by 48 hours off duty, which gave me some opportunities for sight-seeing around London.

Fifteen months later, I was in a completely different military environment.

In January 1966 I received a telephone call in my Hamilton office from Army HQ inviting me to get ready to go to Vietnam at short notice because another officer from the first contingent had to return to New Zealand. Initially, that meant a rushed job to get myself inoculated as protection from all manner of dread diseases.

Although I had been in Papakura with 16 Field Regiment two years earlier, I was not in the original 161 Battery when they began training for Vietnam. They deployed to Bien Hoa near Saigon in mid-1965. Because I knew most of the men in the battery very well, having worked with them for some time, I felt as if I was just re-joining the old team when I arrived at Bien Hoa as the replacement battery captain.

At that stage, the battery was in direct support of 1RAR, and we were attached to 173 Airborne Brigade. When I arrived I could see how much work the men in the battery had already done during the six months they had been in the theatre. The area was quite well established with guns, the command post dug in, a few buildings for stores, and tents for messes and accommodation. Provided that the generator and the projector were working, we even had movies to enjoy on some evenings and the sight of tracer and flares in the night sky did much to enhance the realism of the Audie Murphy films that were shown.

During my early weeks at Bien Hoa the place was at times strangely quiet, except when the guns were firing, because the battery commander and FO (forward observation) parties were out on operations with 1RAR. When they returned I would see how tired they were and that their tents were festooned with laundry while they rested in the sun or in their tents out of the rain. I learned a lot from them and later I was to get first-hand experience.

In late February my battery commander offered me the opportunity to join Operation Rolling Stone as an FOO with 1RAR for a couple of days. 161 Battery had already been deployed near 1RAR as part

of a protection force for a US engineer battalion base and its road construction task near Ben Cat, about thirty kilometres from Saigon. During one of the nights with the rifle company I heard conversation between the Company HQ and a listening post and was informed that VC were passing in front of the company. Some were allowed to pass and then the small arms fire started, causing me to consider what might develop. In the end there was no call for fire support, but I got a hell of a fright and next morning I saw bodies being buried with the aid of a bulldozer.

1RAR was engaged in Operation Denver in April, near Song Be, about a hundred kilometres north of Saigon and 161 Battery had moved in by air from Bien Hoa in support of the operation. During this period the battery commander returned to New Zealand for a short period and I took over his role for a few days. After walking with Battalion HQ and wondering what was going to happen next and what I



Captain Morrie Stanley surveying a dead Viet Cong soldier the morning after The Battle of Long Tan. 19 August 1966

should do about it, I was relieved to find that I was not personally involved in any contacts. When I returned to the nearby battery area I found it necessary to cool down a situation which arose when a padre who was learning how to play his guitar commenced playing at last light 'Stand To'. An irate (large) gunner had told the guitarist what he could do with his instrument and was about to assist him. At about the same time, unfortunately, a soldier suffered a nervous breakdown and had to be extracted for medical attention and eventual return home.

Near the end of April the battery commenced dismantling the base camp at Bien Hoa in readiness for the move to Phuoc Tuy Province to form part of 1ATP. A friend of mine, 'Red' Potts, had arrived from New Zealand to take over the position of battery captain and a month later, the battery commander, Don Kenning, commanded the Task Force set up for the movement of units by road from Bien Hoa to Vung Tau and Nui Dat. The force included 161 Battery RNZA, 105 Battery RAA and several ordnance, transport and police units. I found that rather than moving by road, I was to move by air to Vung Tau and join D Company, 6RAR as their artillery Forward Artillery Observer (FOO), at the ripe old age of 35 years.

Battle of Long Tan

For more than three and a half hours, in the pouring rain amid the shattered trees of a rubber plantation called Long Tan, Morrie Stanley radioed in more than 61 artillery fire missions and corrections in support of the 108 besieged soldiers of D Company 6RAR. Unable to see in the rain and murk exactly where the 3,500+ rounds of high explosive rounds were falling, working entirely by radio communication with the forward platoons and the artillery units back at Nui Dat, from a folded map held in his hand, constantly wiping off the mud and running rainwater, this New Zealand officer was calling in every ounce of his experience and training. His M16 rifle lay unattended next to him in the water despite the repeated reminders of his radio operator, fellow New Zealander Willy Walker to keep it in his hand.

Many, including the Long Tan veterans and military historians credit the skill, professionalism and gallantry of Morrie Stanley in keeping much of the enemy at bay whilst the front lines soldiers fought off the foremost attacking waves of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers. At critical points during the battle Morrie was directing artillery to within 50 metres of the Australian front line positions.

The Artillery being controlled and directed by Morrie in support of D Company during the battle comprised eighteen 105mm howitzers from 161 Field Battery (New Zealand, 103 Field Battery (Australian), 105 Field Battery (Australian) and six 155mm M109 self-propelled howitzers from 2/35th Howitzer Battalion (US Army).

After Long Tan

While I was in Vietnam, my wife and three sons aged eleven, seven and four were moved by the army from Hamilton to an army house in Papakura Gamp, to where I returned. POP my first few months back in New Zealand I was posted as second-in-command of 16 Field Regiment, after which my substantive appointment was on the HQ of 1st Infantry Brigade Group as DAA&QMG (senior administrative staff officer).

In my opinion, my experience in Vietnam made me a better officer. I was more self-confident and had a better understanding of the military and the needs of soldiers in combat. As a result, I really enjoyed my brigade appointment, especially during exercises where we deployed three battalions and all the supporting arms and services. During that period I was fortunate to participate in an exercise in Singapore and northern Malaya for a few months to practise cooperation between British, Australian, Singaporean, Malay and New Zealand units. My role was generally to ensure that the administrative services were operating effectively.

At the end of 1970 I was asked whether I would like a fairly 'tough' job as defence liaison officer in Melbourne for four years. I was to be accompanied by my wife and family and we did not need to consider that offer for very long. The New Zealand High Commission, including the head of the New Zealand Defence Staff, was in Canberra and until I was posted, New Zealand Air Force officers had filled the Melbourne position. As I was the first army officer to be appointed it was necessary for me to attend briefings at Defence HQ, Wellington, before I took up the appointment.

I was to be responsible directly to Wellington for the location, ordering and delivery of material and services required by the NZ Navy, Army and Air Force from Australia. Purchases covered a wide range of commercial and military items and included orders for the overhaul and repair of major items such as aircraft engines. My duties also involved the exchange of information with Australian services and the administration of uniformed and civilian members of the NZ Defence Department in Victoria plus, occasionally, in other States. My appointment as a diplomat in Australia, where I had carried out

my officer training and had met my wife, was very satisfying. It meant that I spent eight years living and working in Australia while I was in the NZ Army.

During the Melbourne posting I had to make a decision about my future service. The choice was between a posting to Wellington or to Auckland and then retirement. We chose the latter and I was appointed to HQ Field Force for the last year of my service until my 45th birthday in 1976. I decided to retire because I expected there would be better prospects for another career while still relatively young. Even so, many people in this situation experience a period of concern about what they are going to do and what sort of a job they would like or could obtain. The first job I applied for in Auckland was in the education area. I duly attended for an interview by a board and having been asked what I considered to be a stupid question, advised the receptionist later that I was withdrawing my application. A poor start indeed.

My wife noticed an advertisement in the daily paper of a vacancy in a major hospital. What the hell could I do in a hospital? Well, after inquiring, I found that hospital systems were similar to those in the military, and consequently I applied for the job as an administrative officer. The manager and two other senior people comprised the interview panel and after some introductory chat, I was asked whether I smoked. I thought this was a trick question, but even so I said, 'Yes I do, thank you.' Well, imagine my relief when a member of the panel offered me one and we lit up. I felt quite comfortable with those people and the feeling must have been mutual because I got the job. That appointment was very enjoyable and set me on the path of hospital administration.

After nearly three years in the hospital, I was appointed to the Personnel Department in the head office of the Hospital Board, which at that time employed about 13,000 staff. Later, I was promoted to other positions, including personnel manager, and I specialised in organising appointments to senior positions and to medical posts. I continued to work in the health service for nearly sixteen years until 1995, when I retired. I still have an association with the service through my appointment as a director of an association that offers medical insurance for health workers.



From left to right: Morrie Stanley, Producer Martin Walsh and Harry Smith

I meet many returned servicemen and when they or anybody else express interest in the Vietnam War, I do not withhold my views or avoid discussion, and I will never be ashamed or embarrassed at having served. My parent unit and the one to which I was attached served with distinction. 161 Battery

RNZA was awarded the United States Meritorious Unit Commendation and the Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm Unit Citation. Delta Company, 6RAR and my FO Team were awarded the most prestigious United States Presidential Unit Citation for extraordinary heroism.

In 1986 I attended the Special Commemorative Parade at Enoggera that marked the twentieth anniversary of the battle. Before I travelled to Brisbane, I had thought deeply about my Delta Company flag and where it would be best placed for the years to come. There was no doubt in my mind that it should return to Australia and I was pleased to present it to the OC 6RAR for preservation and permanent display in the unit museum.

Of all my military experiences, therefore, the one that will always be uppermost in my mind is when I was the artillery forward observer with Delta Company, 6RAR at the Battle of Long Tan, 18 August 1966.

In May 2010, Morrie Stanley along with his former radio operator at Long Tan, fellow New Zealander Willy Walker, were presented with the Australian Unit Citation for Gallantry (UCG) at a surprise service in New Zealand attended by his former Long Tan comrades Harry Smith, Bob Buick and Dave Sabben. In an unprecedented move, both the Australian Government and New Zealand governments fast tracked the offer from Australia of the Australian UCG to Morrie and Willy and within a few hours of receiving the offer, the New Zealand Prime Minister approved it in time for the surprise presentation on Saturday 29th May 2010.

After a short battle with cancer, Morrie Stanley passed away peacefully at his home in Campbells Bay, New Zealand on 16th September 2010. Morrie is survived by his wife Alva and two sons.

Media please contact:

Graham Cassidy
Cato Counsel
+61 (0) 419 202 317