

Return to Vietnam October 2005

A Pilgrimage and a bit of R&R

(This article by Roger Wainwright recounts the highlights of a visit to Vietnam in October 2005 by a group of 5RAR 1st tour veterans. The article will principally focus & reflect on observations of Phuoc Tuy Province following the initial deployment of 5RAR on Operation Hardihood on 24 May 1966. Many village names and route numbers in contemporary Vietnam have now changed, but for familiarity, names that existed in the 1960's will be used. The article also relies on readers being broadly aware of the geography of Phuoc Tuy Province).

In October 2005, a group of 5RAR veterans from the 1st tour returned to Vietnam for a two-week visit. The genesis of the trip was in April 2004, when members of that tour met at Kapooka to witness the laying-up of the Tiger battalion's Queens and Regimental Colours. On that occasion we decided that almost 40 years down the track we should return to Vietnam to remember our service and commemorate those who did not return. Essentially, we planned a "pilgrimage" of about 4 days in the old Phuoc Tuy Province followed by a bit of R&R in central and north Vietnam.

The group comprised Paul & Wendy Greenhalgh, Ron Shambrook, Fred Pfitzner, Peter Isaacs, Roger & Tina Wainwright, Dr Tony & Doffy White with son Rupert, Dr John Taske & Tina Coco, Ben & Jennie Morris, and Dr Ted & Joy Heffernan. We were accompanied by author Gary McKay (4RAR veteran) and Libby Stewart, a historian at the Australian War Memorial. We agreed that Gary & Libby could interview us during the visit to provide information for a book to be written by Gary titled "Going Back" and to assist Libby with a major research project conducted for the War Memorial.

The October timeframe for the visit was chosen because it was close to the end of the Vietnam wet season, but more importantly, it coincided with a peak period of sequential operations conducted by 5RAR in Oct-Nov 1966 in the west of Phuoc Tuy Province. These comprised two search & destroy operations in the Nui Thi Vai (Warburton) mountains, a convoy protection task, a cordon & search operation along Route 15, and a search & destroy operation on Long Son Island (Operations Canberra, Robin, Queanbeyan, Yass & Hayman).

After arrival in Saigon a day was spent sight seeing, including the Reconciliation (formerly Presidential) Palace, the Cholon markets and the War Remnants Museum. We didn't see anything in the Museum that was particularly untruthful, but it does portray a totally one-sided view of the "American War".

Some had a few drinks at the Caravelle Hotel that housed the Australian Embassy during the war and was a well-known spot for journalists and others who were able to visit Saigon to observe the night war from a roof top position.

The next day was dedicated to visiting the battlefields of Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral that involved 1RAR and 3RAR, with supporting artillery and armoured elements in May 1968. These battlefield areas have changed considerably and are now working rubber plantations. Whilst Coral & Balmoral were not part of the 5RAR war, it was interesting to gain a detailed insight into these major battles fought by our infantry brothers and which resulted in battle honours that are now emblazoned on the colours of the Regiment. We admired their tenacity, bravery and achievements against a strong enemy force.

We then travelled to Vung Tau on a Russian built hydrofoil via the Saigon River. It was an eerie feeling when we first sighted Cap St Jacques and the still prominent Little Hill (Nui Nha) & Big Hill (Nui Lon) on either side of Front Beach.

When the first elements of 5RAR arrived at Back Beach in April 1966, it was just a stretch of sand dunes and scrub, with the initial hub being an 11 x 22 tent. Today, it is a built up area with four-lane good quality roads extending north to Baria and north-east along the coast towards the Long Hai Hills; expanding commercial activities and tourism. Oil and gas industries are key contributors to the growing prosperity of the area.

We located the area where 5RAR lived under hootchies before Op Hardihood, but it is now prime residential accommodation. We also wet our feet on Back Beach and recalled the mortar, 106 RCL and small arms range practices we conducted out to sea. Prior to deployment on Op Hardihood on 24 May 1966, a photograph of bare chested 5RAR officers was taken at Back Beach. The re-enacted photo by some in the group provides an interesting comparison 39 years later!! We were also shown the sites of swimming pools and other R&C facilities that had been constructed, but we reminisced that these had not been available to us in our time. Most 5RAR platoons spent their R&C under hootchies on the sand dune edge of Back Beach.



“Bare Chested Veterans on Back Beach”



The following day we travelled north from Vung Tau along Route 2 to visit Baria, Nui Dat, Binh Ba and other villages in our old operational area. The route to Baria and Hoa Long was barely recognisable due to the urban sprawl and commercial development that has occurred. The town centre of Baria is still obvious with the water tower and other features still intact. Whilst in Baria, we visited the orphanage managed by the Australian Vietnam Veterans Reconstruction Group where the ladies in our group spent some delightful time with the young orphans. AVVRG appears to be doing some excellent work in the province. It is currently involved in the construction of a dental facility and has recently received an Australian government grant to build upgraded sanitation facilities. Both of these projects are aimed at the village of Long Tan.

We approached the Nui Dat area via a bypass road from the west that was non-existent in 1966-67. The stone pillars that used to mark the entrance to the 1ATF base on the Hoa Long side are still there and we also located the remains of a command post bunker in the Artillery Regiment. Nui Dat Hill has been partially excavated due to mining activities, but is still easily recognisable. Regrettably, we could not get to the top but we could observe it closely from a vantage point near the old Kangaroo Pad adjacent to HQ 1ATF. We did reflect that the Nui Dat feature had been the home for Paul Greenhalgh's D Coy from the early days of Op Hardihood for 10 months until the company moved to occupy the Horseshoe in March 1967. It was after that re-location that Nui Dat became known as "SAS Hill".

Luscombe Field, the 1ATF airstrip, is now much narrower and is the main road through the village of Nui Dat. "Luscombe Bowl" excavated at the eastern end of the airstrip where concert parties were held is overgrown. Many will remember the roars of those young men encouraging the entertainers to greater deeds. We walked from Luscombe Field into the 5RAR area and memories came flooding back as we approached "Tiger 5", the battalion landing zone. For some reason "Tiger 5" is still intact and has not been planted with new rubber trees like the rest of the 5RAR area. The LZ had been the location where the battalion paraded to hold memorial services for our fallen comrades. In recognition, we held a simple memorial service to remember our mates and read the names of the 50 members of both tours of the battalion who did not return. Our prayers were the same used at the 5RAR plaque dedication service at the Australian War Memorial last February. A floral



Ceremony at "Tiger 5 LZ"

tribute was laid by a rubber tree on the edge of "Tiger 5".

We then moved to BHQ for a picnic lunch, a quiet beer and a wander around sub-unit locations. Some dormant map reading skills surfaced to help identify past tent sites and bunker locations. The 5RAR position is still easily recognisable, although covered with new rubber that is planted much closer together than the trees in our day. The track from the LZ to BHQ is still there. The narrow east to west road from B Coy, past the mortar line and BHQ to the A Coy position astride



At “BHQ 5 RAR” Site

the old Route 2 is still the same. Ben Morris checked this out when he and Jennie visited his old platoon location. The clearing that was the home of the mortar platoon is still there and is now a cemetery.

Ron Shambrook & I went to C Coy where we identified the positions for CHQ, each platoon, the Mushroom Club and Paddy Cahill's kitchen. I personally found my old tent position that I shared with Shorty Mavin and then Rowdy Hindmarsh. I also sat down at the site of the 50 Cal MG bunker in front of 8 Platoon. The fields of fire across B Coy and down to the Song Cau are still excellent. I found this a unique time to spend a few moments reflecting upon those fine men that I had the privilege to share those experiences with in 1966-67.

A special thing about the day at Nui Dat was that it rained and the red mud clung to our shoes. Nothing had changed. On departing Nui Dat we passed the old 6RAR area, which is now the home of a Vietnamese Army unit, apparently the old D445 Mobile Force Battalion.

We then travelled north to Binh Ba, Ngai Giao (Op Crowsnest Oct 1966), and Binh Gia. Again, infrastructure and housing development made a lot of these areas difficult to recognise. Binh Ba will forever remain a fundamental part of 5RAR history. On the 1st tour, this strategically important village was the focus of Op Sydney 2 and Op Holsworthy, two very successful cordon & search operations. The first of these opened Route 2 and allowed villagers to the north access to the markets at Baria. On the 2nd tour, the Battle of Binh Ba (Op Hammer) in Jun 69, principally involving D Coy with armoured support was one of the major battles of the war and resulted in another battle honour being awarded to the Regiment.

Today, Binh Ba is unrecognisable apart from the water tower. The airstrip is not visible from the road, neither is the Regional Force Fort we constructed. The local authorities will not normally permit any movement by foreigners off the road into the village area where the Battle of Binh Ba was fought.

The area from Binh Ba north to Binh Gia and Ngai Giao is similarly built up and unrecognisable. Binh Gia was a catholic refugee village, fiercely anti communist, whose inhabitants had made the long journey from North Vietnam after the 1953 Accords. They were accompanied on this journey by a Father Anton who became parish priest, village headman and defence coordinator. He became well known to members of 1ATF. Father Anton's grave is in front of the church where Ted Heffernan and John Taske had conducted Medcaps. His grave shows his year of death as 1975, which coincidentally, is the year the south fell.



Playing with school kids at Bin Gia

Binh Gia was memorable for the interaction between our travelling group and the local school kids. The children appeared very happy, but were initially wary of these foreigners who started playing some odd games. After a while, they joined in and almost overwhelmed our group.

On our return to Vung Tau we saw further evidence of infrastructure development. There is now a new two-lane road that traverses the Hat Dich area. It leaves Route 2 north of Binh Ba and moves west across the northern edge of the “Warbies” reaching Route 15 near Phu My. Much of this road is now populated with the major centre being the thriving village of Hat Dich. Many will remember this area as being mostly jungle and was the operational base and logistic support area for one of our old foes, the 274 VC Regiment. It is also the area where 5RAR 2nd tour conducted several successful operations including Op Camden and Op Kings Cross.

Despite all these changes, the province is still dominated by its major geographical features such as the Nui Dinh/Nui Thi Vai Mountains, the Long Hai's, Nui Dat, the Horseshoe, Nui Dat 2 and Nui Nghe, which can all be seen from most parts of the province. These features will forever leave an indelible imprint on those who go back.



Group in front of “Nui Thi Vai”

The following day we travelled to eastern parts of the province. A poignant moment came at An Nhut on Route 23. This was the site where C Coy lost Maj Don Bourne, Capt Bob Milligan and Capt Peter Williams to a mine explosion during the cordon & search of An Nhut village. Six other members of C Coy were wounded by the blast. (Op Beaumaris 12-14 Feb 67). Unlike most other areas of Phuoc Tuy Province, this area had not changed. The southern perimeter of An Nhut was still bounded by paddy fields that were approaching harvest. The village of Tam Phouc was still visible across the paddies to the south-west. A photograph was taken on the exact spot (confirmed by GPS) where this tragedy occurred. Don Bourne's family have asked for a photo of the position and this has been provided. I was privileged to lay a floral tribute at the spot.



**Roger Wainwright
at site of "An Nhut"
incident holding
photo taken minutes
before explosion**

We then proceeded to the Long Hai's, that infamous mountain range in the south-east. Our bus took us up a steep road where we stopped at a small area that housed the Minh Dam Cache, a small museum of the Minh Dam Secret Zone. Here we met Capt Nahn, an ex-officer of

D445 Bn. Some reflected on the role he might have played given the large number of mine casualties 1ATF suffered in this part of the province. We then climbed several hundred metres on foot up a rocky track to a peak on the north-eastern slopes of the Long Hai's. The large boulders along this track were still showing the scars of multiple air strikes. At the top was a temple that had magnificent views to the north and north-east, over Lang Phouc Hai and the mouth of the Song Rai (river). Presuming that the VC had similar observation posts in other parts of the Long Hai's, they would have had excellent visibility of our movement over most of the central and eastern area of Phuoc Tuy.

Driving towards Dat Do, we stopped on the bridge near Hoi My where there is an excellent panoramic view back to the Long Hai's. We were able to identify the approximate position where B Coy was involved in a horrific mine incident on the lower slopes on 21 February 1967 which resulted in seven killed and 22 wounded. Regrettably we could not get close enough to pay our respects at the actual spot.

We then moved along Route 23 to Xuyen Moc, the isolated district headquarters in the east of Phuoc Tuy. During our tour, Xuyen Moc had a well organised garrison that defended the village from the VC, but the village suffered from its isolation and was heavily taxed by the VC as its inhabitants attempted to get to the markets at Dat Do. The surrounding area was a well used VC supply route. The isolation of Xuyen Moc was not relieved until April 1967 when Route 23 was improved and opened during Op Portsea, 5RAR's final operation. The market place at Xuyen Moc is still thriving and like other places, the surrounding area has been totally built up with modern infrastructure.

Returning along Route 23, we turned north at Dat Do on the still existing road to Long Tan and stopped on the western side of the Horseshoe. As this feature is now a working mine, we could not walk over it to look at the defences and observe the spot where we commenced the construction of the fence for the minefield in early March 1967. Being the first company to occupy the feature, Paul Greenhalgh told the story about how he initially named it “Fort Wendy”, after his fiancé. This name only lasted for a short period after which it became known as the Horseshoe due to its obvious geographical shape.



**Paul & Wendy Greenhalgh
in front of “Fort Wendy”**

We reached the memorial cross at the site of the Battle of Long Tan in the late afternoon at about the same time as the battle started. It had rained recently and the area was very soggy. Our guide reminded us of the sequence of the battle and Paul described his company’s role in the battlefield clearance the following morning. We remembered those who had fought in the battle, particularly those who had died and laid floral tributes at the cross. The battle was the first during our commitment to Vietnam to be recognised with a battle honour emblazoned on our Regimental Colour. Interestingly, the memorial at Long Tan is one of only two in the whole of Vietnam that commemorates the former enemies of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The other is the French memorial at Dien Bien Phu.

We returned to Vung Tau for our last night. We had to have a drink in the Grand Hotel. Parts of the old hotel are still there but a new façade has changed its look and a new adjacent wing has been built. In reality, very few of us had spent much time in “Vungers” during our tour, just the occasional R&C. For those with a little more experience, the Blue Angel Bar no longer exists. There are a few bars that probably offer similar services and for interest, a few of us had a quick drink in one of them. We were under the firm control of our wives, so the current cost of a Saigon Tea remains a mystery!

Next day on the way back to Saigon via Route 15 (now Route 51) we went to Long Son Island where we had deployed on Op Hayman. An excellent quality four-lane road and bridge now traverse the wetlands from Route 15 to the island. Much of the central part of the island is still open terrain and used for crop production, but Long Son is to be the site of another gas production facility. From a distance we were able to identify the location of LZ Dagwood on the south-western slope of Nui Nua, the main mountain. This is where a helicopter crashed during the assault landing.



**Crocodile “Ron” Dundee
Eventually, the buffalo got
Ron to fall asleep**

Route 15 is now a four-lane major highway and is totally built up along its length. There were several locations where we could get a good view of both Nui Dinh and Nui Thi Vai. From a distance nothing seems to have changed, but we did recall the intensity of Ops Canberra and Queanbeyan in October 1966 as being two of the defining operations of our tour. Just looking back up at these mountains was sufficient to remind us of the casualties and the bravery that occurred in the space of a few weeks. Back on Route 15, Tony White and I were also able to fix the grid reference where the Sioux helicopter carrying Lt Bill Davies and SSgt ‘Sailor’ Mealing crashed outside the C Coy perimeter during Op Robin.

At various times in the preceding days we had reminisced about the role that 5RAR played in the early days of Australia’s commitment to Phuoc Tuy Province. Some of us feel that this has not been adequately recognised. We are proud but humble, that we were the first battalion in Australia’s history to deploy overseas on active service with conscripted national servicemen, most of who were from the very first intake. And what magnificent soldiers they were. We were the first battalion of 1ATF to deploy (initially under operational command of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade) and tasked with clearing and securing the Nui Dat area as the major operational base for Australia’s involvement throughout the Vietnam War. Regrettably, we were also the first unit to suffer the loss of a NSM on active duty – Pte Errol Noack. The early days at Nui Dat could best be described as primitive as we developed the defences of the position between operations and local security patrols. Facilities such as tents, duckboards, lighting and other basic facilities were only provided late in the tour. We were pioneers and (with 6RAR) secured the Nui Dat base for the subsequent build up of 1ATF

The return to Saigon completed the “pilgrimage” stage of our trip where we had a farewell dinner, as some of our group were to depart whilst the remainder continued on the R&R stage.

The following morning the remaining group flew to Da Nang. After a quick look around the local sites, we went to adjacent Hoi An for a very relaxing two days by the hotel pool, enjoying the culinary delights and saving many dollars in the ample shopping outlets. It was a great way to wind down after the previous week. Hoi An should be a priority for those planning a visit.



Paul, our Shopaholic at Hoi An



**We've heard of Mud Crabs & Sand Crabs.
But, Presidential Crabs ???**

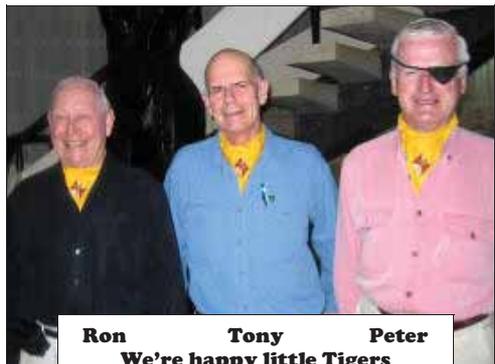
After flying to Hanoi we visited several attractions including the Old Quarter, the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, Presidential Palace, Ho's Stilt House, the Army Museum and the former POW prison, the "Hanoi Hilton". Some also went to view the renowned Water Puppet show. Hanoi still has a lot of French influence and does not have the commercial bustle of Saigon. We then drove through the expanse of the Red River basin to Ha Long Bay for an overnight stay, a cruise amongst the 2000 rocky limestone

islands and a walk in the grottoes. There are some brilliant sites. After a swim, we were fed a delicious seafood lunch washed down with a variety of French wines. It was a relaxing way to wind up our tour, prior to flying home from Hanoi the following day.

Several people have asked me "Did you enjoy the trip?" My brief answer - "Yes, I did. I am glad I decided to go back. I was able to reflect on some good and not so good times, and put them into perspective. Naturally, there were a few emotional moments, particularly in remembering our comrades who did not come home. The opportunity to share this visit with fellow Tigers was paramount. Just as important was having our ladies with us. They had to put up with our stories and are now battle hardened, but I think they were all glad to share the experience. Another 5RAR mission successfully accomplished" ■



The Group sitting with Uncle Ho at the "Reconciliation Palace"



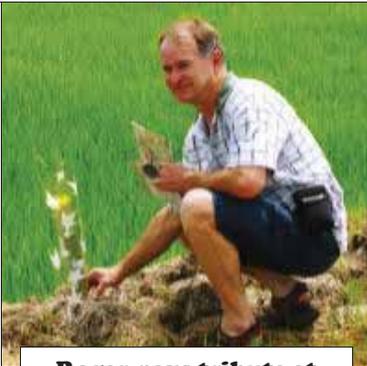
Ron Tony Peter
We're happy little Tigers
we're as bright as bright could be
we all enjoy our.....



Adjutant gathering Intel ???



**Tony & Doffy White, & Ben Morris
Long Hai's as background**



**Roger pays tribute at
An Nhut**



**Paul & Fred on top of Long Hai's
Lang Phouc Hai & Song Rai
in the background**



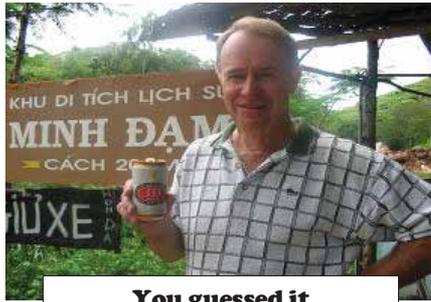
Nui Dat Hill



Ron on Luscombe Field



**Paul explains initial
occupation at the Horseshoe**



**You guessed it
Roger the "Ba Moui Ba Kid"**