



Interview with Second Lieutenant, Platoon Commander, Dave Sabban – Battle of Long Tan

(By Jamie Mason Age 15 – 2013)

Jamie: How old were you when you joined the army?

Dave: I was in the National Service and was called up when I was 20 years old and served for 2 years.

Jamie: Where was your training?

Dave: All the New South Wales National Servicemen did their recruit training at Kapooka Army Base near Wagga Wagga and all Victorian and other National Servicemen did their training at Puckapunyal Army Base.

Jamie: What years were you involved in the battle of Long Tan?

Dave: 1966.

Jamie: What rank were you?

Dave: In the National Service they allowed you to put your hand up for officer training if you had your leaving certificate but they only picked what they considered to be the best people. They went to an Officer Training unit called Scheyville in Windsor where they underwent a six month course that trained National Servicemen to become Second Lieutenants, Platoon Commanders and I completed that course and graduated as a Second Lieutenant, Platoon Commander. I was then posted to an Infantry Battalion.

Jamie: Why did you leave Nui Dat on the patrol that your group did?

Dave: The enemy had fired mortars on the base very early on the morning of the 17th of August and about 2:30 in the morning we were shelled which resulted in 24 casualties. The next day they sent a company of infantry soldiers to find those who had shelled our

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men and that group found where the weapons had been fired from but they didn't have time to follow it up so on the morning of the 18th they finished their job and came back. My company went out and took over the job. We searched for the people who had bombarded the base on the morning of the 17th and met a whole mass of enemy that was coming in, to have an attack on the base.

Jamie: What role did artillery play in the battle of Long Tan?

Dave: Artillery played a vital part in the battle of Long Tan. If it wasn't for artillery we would've lost the battle and the enemy would've come back through where we had stopped them and probably would've taken the base. The good thing about artillery from our point of view is that because we had radios we could just tell them where to drop the ammunition. Artillery was the absolute number one feature of the battle.



Jamie & Dave Sabban.



Jamie: What do you think was the enemy's strategic plan for taking you on at Long Tan?

Dave: Everything in the Vietnam War particularly from the enemy's side was political so everything that they did had a political motive. What they looked at was, here is Australia and New Zealand, very small and very weak forces compared to the South Vietnamese and the American Army, what a great political coup it would be if we, the enemy could knock out all the ANZAC forces. When they found out where we were, their thinking was if we get in early before they establish themselves and we absolutely knock them out, completely eradicate the base then apart from the amount of soldiers we kill which might be 1000, politically we've knocked out two whole countries' contribution to the war.

Therefore the South Vietnamese will look at the Americans and say if you couldn't even protect New Zealand and Australia you certainly can't protect us. That was the enemy's intention, take over the base, knock Australia out of the war and then that would weaken the result of the South Vietnamese.

Jamie: What was some of the great challenges that you and your mates had in the battle of Long Tan?

Dave: Most of the Army's average age was around 20 years old and two out of the three officers were 21, who had never been to war before and even in Vietnam we had never even been in a major fire fight so we had no experience whatsoever and the enemy that was looking for us were citizen soldiers who had been fighting for four or five years. Our challenges were just to stay alive, to be able to communicate with each other, to learn what to do in a completely new environment, to come up with solutions, to counter what we were doing without necessarily knowing what all the rules were and to put our training into use in a way we were never expected to do so. Throughout our training we were expecting to have difficulty finding the enemy and suddenly we were in the Rubber Plantation and the enemy was looking for us; so instead of going and looking for the enemy we had to hide from them, keep quiet, lie down and wait until the enemy came to us and then bring the artillery in. It was a total reversal of what the training was.

Resupply of ammunition was also a challenge. People who carried rifles had only 60 bullets. They had to think in the way we were trained to fight, that it would be sufficient but now people are running at us and there's 20-40 of them and if I shoot all of them I won't have any ammunition so you had to conserve your ammunition and wait for the

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best shot instead of missing. I was responsible for 30 men in a platoon but I only had one radio and that was back to my Company Headquarters, so I didn't have radio contact with my men that were all lying out there. Passage of communication was a challenge, how do I get them to know what I want them to do and still not reveal my presence to the enemy by standing up and shouting or walking over and tapping them on the shoulder?

We also didn't know when the referee was going to blow the whistle. The first hour went by and there was a fight over here and a fight over there and we thought that was enough, there can't be that many of them but there was. Then there was twice as many and twice as many as that again - they just kept coming. After the second hour we were thinking, well wait a minute I don't know who the referee is but he's not playing by the rules, not the rules that we know anyway.

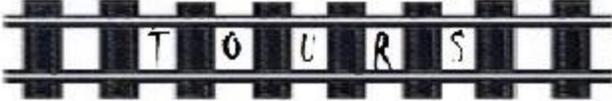
We had to always keep thinking how much ammunition are we expending? What's the possibility of getting more ammunition and how can we get more soldiers from the base to us. We asked for air strikes and wanted airplanes above to drop bombs but we were in the middle of the storm so they couldn't see down through the clouds to where we wanted the bombs to drop. Everything was a challenge, everything except: when's our next meal? We didn't have to worry about cooking a meal or having a brew or anything, but everything else from just what was happening, how we knew what was happening and how we tell the person next door what was happening. Nothing was comfortable or convenient or rehearsed in our minds for that whole battle. It was like someone was changing the rules and we didn't have any say.

Jamie: Another big part of the battle was the enemies' coordination of the attack. Did they attack at the same time?

Dave: They had problems as well. First of all they were quite happy to come and attack our base because they knew where they were attacking and they knew that if this group came up this way then that group would come up this way, they wouldn't clash. That was their training but then out in the bush everything that they had trained for changed as well, fortunately for us.

They were now no longer putting in an attack on a place they knew because they had built a little model and in their minds they knew first we'll come to a creek, then we'll see a road and then we'll see a fence and then we'll see the trenches, but all of that went

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A graphic of a railway track with the word 'TOURS' written on the rails. The track consists of two parallel horizontal lines representing rails, with several vertical bars representing sleepers. The word 'TOURS' is written in a stylized, hand-drawn font across the rails.

out the window. Now they had to say: “Well somewhere up ahead someone’s firing at us but we have no idea, so now we have to find them”.

They didn’t have radios between themselves either. So if there was a company to the left and a company to the right they might have been able to see each other but they couldn’t talk to each other. Their lack of coordination helped us, particularly towards the end, they were becoming uncoordinated.

The advantage was ours not theirs and between their lack of radio communications, (dis-coordinated activities) and artillery on our side and on theirs the confusion – in between those two things, that saved the day for us.