

ARTICLE No. 38
A BOOK REVIEW OF
'MENTIONS IN DESPATCHES'

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Book Review.

*Mentions in Despatches:
An Infantry Platoon in Viet Nam;
June 1966 – June 1967*

by

Dave Sabben, MG

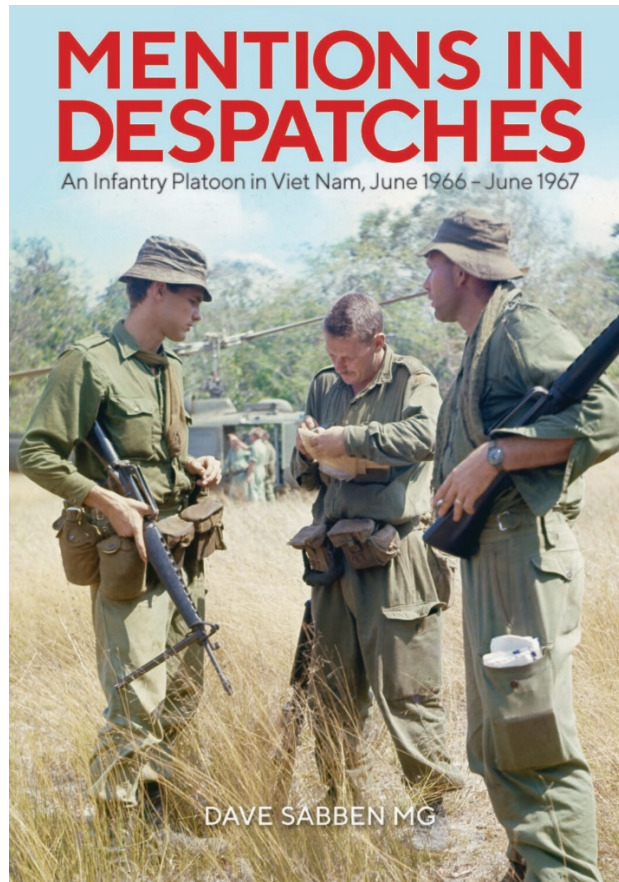
Reviewed by

Lt Col Alistair Pope (Retired), psc, CM

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Overview

Mentions in Despatches is an oversize book, too big to fit comfortably on any bookshelf. It is magnificently produced and easily qualifies as a ‘coffee table’ book that displays well and, like a magnet, will attract visitors and readers to it. It is a very visual book as it contains hundreds of photographs that I found myself irresistibly poring over. It is also a thoroughly readable book that I leisurely read a chapter or two at a time, while resisting the temptation to skip ahead to the centrepiece Battle of Long Tan.

Context

Because the author used as the basis for the book the almost daily letters he wrote home he is able to build a highly descriptive picture for those with no military background as he describes the equipment, training and development of his infantry platoon, as part of the 6th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment. One of the interesting aspects I found was the hierarchical ‘swarming’ behaviour of the soldiers. Their primary level of loyalty was to their fellow soldiers in their Section. Then each Platoon bonded in a friendly rivalry with (and against) the other platoons in the Company. Finally, each company viewed itself as the elite one within the Battalion as a whole. Nobody is trained or compelled to think and behave in this way, but the military has both consciously and unconsciously exploited this bonding psychology that has been at the core of armies for millennia.

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After the training phase the battalion moved to Vietnam, settled in and established itself. Almost immediately the routine of clearing and patrol operations began. Improving and maintaining the base defences (and living conditions), patrolling, convoy and base protection goes on as required, when time is available – with the daily routine punctuated by night ambushes and sentry duties.

By early August, operations further afield have commenced, so far without incident.

Long Tan: 17th – 20th August 1966

The description of the mortars fired into the base is followed by the D Company patrol sent out to find and deal with the attackers. The story of the epic battle at Long Tan is well known and is well told in first-hand detail here, with their survival being wafer thin at several points. You can feel the tension, even though the result is known.

The victory has been achieved by a superb feat of arms. The difference between the regular army professionals and the fact that almost half of those involved were National Servicemen (and therefore supposedly reluctant soldiers) is indistinguishable. They were simply a well-lead and highly trained company of professional soldiers. In war, even for the victors the cost of success is counted in lives lost and in damaged bodies. Friends, mates and compatriots were killed or wounded, but it is a testament to the quality and stoicism of the Australian Digger that they all held their ground and did their duty. In his diary of events, reflected in his letters that follow the battle there are no histrionics and no outward signs of the trauma about how close they came to disaster. Not quite just another day at the office but when replacements refilled their ranks, they went into the danger zone once more.

Content

A book about real events stands or falls on the quality and precision of its content. Guided by his daily letters Dave is able to build an accurate picture of the daily routine, the administrative work on the defences, the living quarters and of course, the operational patrolling, guard duties, etc. As has often been said: ‘war is endless boredom, punctuated by short periods of intense action and terror’. Dave has a real author’s skill in making both the mundane routine of life in the base and the adrenalin rush and tension of an enemy contact. This is what the infantry do, so both are treated about the same. If he was ever flustered, fearful or frightened it does not show as he was determined to describe all events truthfully, but probably without alarming those at home too much.

Quality

A good book is one that is built to last. Dave has spared no expense in his use of high quality, glossed paper, well bound and indexed. It is therefore not cheap, nor should it be, because this is a ‘record of note’, not a rushed job to catch a passing market. The Long Tan battle is now-timeless as it is etched into the legends of Australian military prowess, so it will appeal to those serious about their military history. By the recording of routine details as well as ‘great events’, Mentions in Despatches will also appeal to those who like to share the experience by getting a feel for ‘what it was like’ from a first-hand account.

Rewards

If there is a single sour note recorded by the author it concerns the rancour felt by the soldiers at allocation of medals and awards after the Long Tan battle. I will not dwell on the issue though readers of the book will become well acquainted with the disgrace of what happened. Harry Smith fought the ‘rewards’ battle as he would any other military operation and, as at Long Tan, his 40-year campaign succeeded and Dave (among others) received his Medal of Gallantry.

Current events have once more brought to the surface that senior military officers are more concerned with their own medals preening than in caring and appropriately rewarding those who do the fighting, take the risks and die or are damaged in the line of duty. I will say that Dave was far more restrained in dealing with events, both then and now, a trait that stood him in good stead where it counted most: when commanding soldiers in contact with the enemy on the battlefield.

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Nobody serves their nation (at risk of their lives) for a pay rate in 1966 of about \$63 per week including \$5 per week “Vietnam Allowance”. What they do it for is their sense of duty to the Australian nation. In today’s new world Mentions in Despatches may be an anachronism of a world long gone. If it is then Australia has lost its soul.

Dave’s book is well written, well researched, well-illustrated, well edited & well published and should be read to remember the finest of Australian military professionalism as we may very well need such men (and women) again.

Ordering Information

Before ordering a book, please ensure that your postal delivery address will keep the delivery dry and will cope with a 2Kg package about the size of four A4 writing pads (for 1 book). Please order your book(s) by going to website www.sabbenmidbook.com and clicking on the book cover.

AU\$82.00 per book, plus postage, packaging and handling Standard Australia Post Parcel Post \$13.16 (as at 1st Jan 2023) (4-5 -day delivery within Australia only, includes tracking)

Standard Australia Post Express Post \$16.58 (as at 1st Jan 2023) (1-2-day delivery within Australia only, includes tracking)

For overseas deliveries (all including tracking):

Air to New Zealand: AUD\$30

Air to S E Asia/Pacific: AUD\$40

Air to Japan/India/Africa: AUD\$50

Air to USA/Canada/UK/Europe: AUD\$60

References

US based Strategy & Tactics Military History Magazine #242 ‘The Battle of Long Tan’ published 15th May 2015

The Battle of Long Tan as told by the Commanders to Bob Grandin

Through Enemy Eyes, A&U. 2005 – David Sabben

Long Tan – The Start of a Lifelong Battle”. BigSky Publishing: 2015, by Major Harry Smith, the D Company Commander at Long Tan.

Other books on their Vietnam tour of duty are:

‘Down from the Mountain: The Path of a Baby Boomer’ by Brian Vickery Published by Xlibris (2020) - 296 pages - by a fellow OTU graduate.

STARLIGHT: An Australian Army Doctor in Vietnam by Tony White

I also recommend:

The WW1 “The Western Front - an Australian Perspective” by Dwyer, Duffy and Postle (Affirm Press, 2015).

Fear Drive My Feet: Peter Ryan’s War in New Guinea in WW2 - by Peter Ryan, MM, MiD, Published by Duffy & Snellgrove and distributed by Pan MacMillan. First published in 1959 (Reprinted 2001, 2002), ISBN 1 875989 87 0