

Through Enemy Eyes

Dave Sabben

Reviewed by Lance Collins

The Battle of Long Tan took place in mid August 1966 near the 1st Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat in South Vietnam. The world was different then. The accepted US, Australian and New Zealand belief was that communism would expand south if not stopped and the states of South East Asia would fall like dominos in its path. This was the height of the Cold War, before President Nixon's 1969 Guam Doctrine prescribed that US allies would have to do more for their own defence, and before the 1971 British strategic withdrawal from 'east of Suez'.

As a second lieutenant, Dave Sabben commanded 12 Platoon, D Company, 6RAR throughout the battle and is uniquely placed to record the events of that period. He has written a vivid and immensely readable 'faction' account of the events leading up to the battle – and the fight as it developed, through the fading light and darkness, in a rubber plantation, during a severe monsoonal storm. His modest inference of the undoubted bravery and professionalism of the Australians is one of the novel's great strengths, as is the understanding of the problems and valour of the Viet Cong (VC).

What is known of the Battle of Long Tan is that the VC 5th Division was concentrating its (regular cadre) 275th Regiment, comprising three North Vietnamese Army battalions, and elements of the locally-recruited D445 VC Battalion, for operations against the Australians in Phuoc Tuy Province. The main Australian base at Nui Dat was not fully developed when it was mortared on the night of 16/17 August. Task Force elements commenced searching for the mortar firing area the next morning. At about 4.00pm on 18 August, D Company 6RAR engaged a VC patrol in a contact that rapidly escalated into a full-scale battle. Allied artillery played a vital role in breaking up the enemy attacks as D Company regrouped under great pressure and received resupplies of ammunition by helicopter. The beleaguered company, suffering 17 dead, was relieved several hours later by A Company 6RAR and 3 Troop 1APC Squadron. The VC/NVA force withdrew during the night leaving around 250 dead to be buried by the Australians.

Some controversy surrounds the battle. The VC/NVA claimed that the Australian force had been ambushed and sustained heavy casualties. Some Australian accounts support the Vietnamese story to a point – that an ambush had been planned, but not successfully 'sprung' because D Company did not blunder into it. A key tenet of Sabben's narrative is that the North Vietnamese had a plan to overrun and annihilate the Australian base in order to politically shock Australia out of the war. Sabben's hypothesis is a believable 'might have been', particularly if D Company had been quickly overwhelmed at Long Tan. The evidence indicates that the 'planned ambush' hypothesis seems more likely. The mortaring of Nui Dat on 16/17 August denied surprise and the notion of luring the Australians out would have conformed to

the oft-used VC brand of classical 'offensive-defensive' tactics that are not described in Australian military manuals.

An answer to the riddle might be found in the intelligence records. Sabben describes the tension between the senior intelligence officer and his subordinate, Captain Bob Keep, who was more pessimistic in his assessments of VC concentrations around Nui Dat. Keep gave

considerable credence to the signals intelligence from 547 Signals Troop. In an episode eerily reminiscent of the removal of Major Brian Urquhart before the disaster at Arnhem in World War II, Keep was medically evacuated from Vietnam with supposed 'mental problems' a few days before the battle. Sabben records that SAS and infantry patrolling were finding 'no evidence at all to support evidence of a threat.'

In a perhaps unintended footnote on more recent Australian deployments and a salutary warning for the future, Sabben describes logistic shortcomings as another vulnerability. Defence stores, including picks and shovels, were in desperately short supply and earth-moving machinery was kept at the logistic base at Vung Tau, some 25 kilometres away.

An imbalance in the novel is its portrayal of the Vietnamese, who come across as zealots with a view to their own advancement – as though careerism and re-writing history only occur in communist states. They do not carry photographs of loved ones or allow their thoughts to dwell on home (when we know from dead and captured VC this was often not the case). When describing the sort of war fought in Vietnam it is difficult to separate the human effects on the civil population from the tactics of the combatants. In terms of 'hearts and minds', the relocation of villagers is only mentioned briefly. By contrast, another Long Tan veteran, Terry Burstall, has noted that the Australians displaced around 8000 inhabitants by destroying villages to create the secure defensive zone around Nui Dat.

Dave Sabben has employed fiction as a vehicle to construct hypotheses about enemy intentions and methods. Notwithstanding this, he has written a book that is a fascinating introduction to the battle and a worthy commentary on Australians at war. It is highly recommended for its description of the friction caused by inadequate information, weather, breakdowns in communications and the recurring Australian shortfalls in intelligence and logistics. ♦

Dave Sabben, 'Through Enemy Eyes', Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2005, Softback, 380pp., RRP \$A29.95.

