

## FOREWORD

*General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove  
AK, CVO, MC, former Governor General of the  
Commonwealth of Australia.*



What a remarkable book!

Leading soldiers in combat, in any place and at any time must be one of the most daunting, challenging propositions any human can perform. In the chaos and danger there is always of course the personal risk but overwhelmingly the welfare of those entrusted to that person, relying on that person. Readers of this magnificent work might ponder on the influence of natural instinct, intuition, inspiration on the leader's action and performance. There is no doubt that there is always an element of that and you can see from this brilliant commander David Sabben's account that he was indeed very gifted in this regard. But, and this resonates on every page of this gripping story, so much of what he and his men did was the result of enormous training before Vietnam and experience (amounting to further training) while in that theatre of war. Apart from the tremendous insights into that year-long episode in 1966-7, we are brought to understand the ceaseless application of Australian jungle warfare and its refinement in the hands of David and his men. Simply put, David has endowed the Australian Army with a magnificent guide on combat leadership at the foundation level, where the toughest fighting gets done. The fact that the conflict was in a tropical, jungle warfare environment against a seasoned, often elusive and brave opponent only added to challenge.

Key to the fascinating nature of David's story and wholly supporting its great credibility, is the ceaseless correspondence home that David undertook throughout his tour of duty. It's my experience that soldiers by and large are rotten correspondents – loved ones are lucky to receive every now and then something like 'Dear Mum, Hope you are well – I am and I'm still counting the days till I get home. Please make sure Dad's got a cold beer in the fridge. Give my best regards to the family, your loving son xxxx'. Perhaps it's a little different in these days of digital communication but I doubt whether such personal and prolific correspondence is the norm. In any event I found it absolutely fascinating to read the day-by-day account of professional behaviour intertwined with vigilant and often boring repetition and always with the possibility of deadly encounters. Such is the life and often life-and-death of the infantryman.

One of those deadly encounters was the Battle of Long Tan on 18th August 1966 – which has become emblematic of Australia's entire war in Vietnam. David and those other heroes swept up in that action would be the first to acknowledge the other significant battles of Australia's more than a decade of commitment there and indeed the countless smaller actions that are part of that historical fabric.

Equally though in so many ways the Battle of Long Tan illuminated that a new generation of Australians and their Kiwi cousins, were true inheritors of the Anzac legend. To think that this overwhelming challenge occurred in the middle of a patient, exhausting and often frustrating litany of patrolling, searching, guarding, digging and just enduring, only underscores the way we expect our infantry to perform.

David Sabben has written powerfully and eloquently of the life and times of a young officer and his precious soldiers in a war over five decades ago. His letters home brilliantly record and signpost that time in a forensic and invariably wry account that will fascinate any reader. It is intimate, raw in places, sometimes shocking, always authentic.

To those who would aspire to lead that part of the Nation's treasure, our men and women in military uniform, read this book: it will help your understanding of junior command in the most testing of circumstances and thus to learn your trade.

David, congratulations and thank you.

Peter Cosgrove  
Infantry Platoon Commander, Vietnam – 1969/70