

Jump TO Article



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership



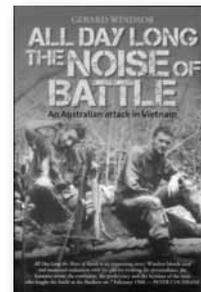
Jump TO Article

BOOK REVIEW

All day long the noise of battle: an Australian attack in Vietnam

by Gerard Windsor

Pier 9 Murdoch Books: Millers Point, NSW; 2011; 254 pp.; ISBN: 978 1 74196 918 4;
RRP \$29.95 (paperback)



This book is about the action of C Company, 7th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (7 RAR), against a bunker system while on Fire Support Base (FSB) protection on Operation *Coburg* during the Tet Offensive in February 1968.

The author, an experienced writer with no military background, became interested in the battle after a throw-away line by Major General Mike O'Brien suggesting that a school chum of the author's, Mark Moloney, was deserving of a Victoria Cross as a result of his actions during this 60-hour battle.

The background is meticulously constructed with early chapters on the company, the commanders and the soldiers. I knew the commanders personally, but was unaware of the organisational upheaval C Company had gone through in the lead up to *Coburg*, getting two new platoon commanders and a new second-in-command, amongst others.

The author deals sympathetically with the differing memories soldiers have of particular incidents nearly half-a-century after the events. The battle itself is dealt with in detail and what comes through is the fortitude, determination and skill of the soldiers concerned.

The author does not fully appreciate that Vietnam was a company commander's war. He asks why the battle of the bunkers had to be fought at all. The answer is simple: 'because it was there!' Throughout the war in Vietnam, Australian soldiers aggressively sought out the enemy with a view to destroying him. We did everything to disrupt the Viet Cong, and forcing them to relocate or rebuild their hidey holes was just one essential element of that disruption. This action was no exception.

The command set-up was flawed from the start. If C Company had been under the 7 RAR commanding officer from the outset, greater battalion support may have been available. That said, the FSB needed protection, and the bunkers and potentially a battalion-sized enemy, were located almost within mortar range of the FSB. They could not have been left unattended and there is no way either the 7 RAR commanding officer or the Task Force commander would have done so despite the author's musings to that effect.

It was hardly the Pyrrhic victory suggested by the author. The Viet Cong's base and his harbour were destroyed, he was forced to withdraw and we have no idea how many casualties he suffered. The suggestion that one should only attack when the attacker has an advantage of 3:1 is to misunderstand the concept of relative strengths. That concept is based upon all other things being equal; they weren't – we had overwhelming

artillery and air superiority.

To add to the confusion there were anecdotes around after *Coburg* that, at one stage, every company in the two deployed battalions of the Task Force was in contact at the same time in quite disparate locations. While that is hard to verify, I do know that, in the period immediately before 5 February, the 7 RAR command radio net was so frantic that some contacts were reported through the administration net.

The book began with the author wondering about lack of recognition for Moloney, so it is unsurprising that he dwells on the issue towards the end. My recollection is that not long after *Coburg* the company commanders were asked to submit recommendations for awards. I believe Moloney's recommendation and others could only have come from Chapman and Chapman's from the 7 RAR commanding officer. It is inconceivable that the adjutant, who was not deployed, would have initiated and written the citations as claimed by the author.

To most soldiers, the greatest injustice over the whole war was the ratio of awards to numbers deployed and casualties suffered by the Royal Australian Air Force when compared to the soldiers on the ground. Nevertheless, I believe Chapman and Moloney have moved on, unlike some others. At no stage in later times did I detect any resentment from Moloney about the action. He would have got far more satisfaction from knowing that he had earned the admiration and respect of his platoon.

The author's comments about Chapman's operational reports are unwarranted. He wrote factually and told it like it was – today's journalism might translate 'concern' as 'outrage'; 40-odd years ago 'hazardous' meant 'hazardous', and after nearly nine months in country we had all developed a good knowledge of enemy weapons which needed no elaboration.

Finally, 274 and 275 Regiments were Viet Cong Main Force, not North Vietnamese Army, units. There is a very poor edit on the first full page of the photographs with the photo printed backwards. The diagrams are adequate, but in a book such as this which is about people, they are largely irrelevant.

This is a good, if poignant read, in that many of the original surviving characters have since passed on and those left are all in their twilight years. I strongly recommend it.

Peter A Stokes¹

¹Peter Stokes, a Royal United Services Institute of Victoria member, was Second-in-Command/Officer Commanding B Company, 7th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, in 1967/68.