

Battle of Long Tan



Long Tan Action by Bruce Fletcher

Date 18 August 1966

Location Long Tan, Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam

The Battle of Long Tan (18 August 1966) took place in a rubber plantation near Long Tan, in Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. The action was fought between Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units and elements of the 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) shortly after its lodgement in Phuoc Tuy.

1 ATF began arriving between April and June 1966, constructing a base at Nui Dat which was located astride a major communist transit and resupply route and was close to a Viet Cong base area. After two months it had moved beyond the initial requirements of establishing itself and securing its immediate approaches, beginning operations to open the province.

Meanwhile, in response to the threat posed by 1 ATF a force of between 1,500 and 2,500 men from the Viet Cong 275th Regiment, possibly reinforced by at least one North Vietnamese battalion, and D445 Provincial Mobile Battalion, was ordered to move against Nui Dat.

For several weeks Australian signals intelligence (SIGINT) had tracked a radio transmitter from the headquarters of the 275th Regiment moving westwards to a position just north of Long Tan; however, extensive patrolling failed to find the unit.

By 16 August the communist force was prepositioned east of the Long Tan rubber plantation, just outside the range of the artillery at Nui Dat. On the night of 16/17 August, Viet Cong mortars, recoilless rifles (RCLs) and artillery heavily bombarded Nui Dat from a position 2 kilometres (1.2 mi) to the east, damaging the base and wounding 24 men, one of whom later died.

The Viet Cong positions were then engaged by counter-battery fire and the mortaring ceased. The following morning B Company, 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (6 RAR) departed Nui Dat to locate the firing points and the direction of the Viet Cong withdrawal. A number of weapon pits were subsequently found, as were the positions of the mortars and RCLs.

D Company took over the pursuit around midday on 18 August. After clashing with a Viet Cong squad in the afternoon and forcing them to withdraw, the Australians were engaged by small-arms and rocket-propelled grenade fire from a flank.

Numbering only 108 men, D Company was facing a much larger force. Pinned down, they called for artillery as a monsoon rain began, reducing visibility. Heavy fighting ensued as the advancing battalions of the Viet Cong 275th Regiment attempted to encircle and destroy the Australians.

After several hours D Company was nearly out of ammunition, when two UH-1B Iroquois from No. 9 Squadron RAAF arrived overhead to resupply them. Heavily outnumbered but supported by strong artillery fire, D Company held off a regimental assault before a relief force of cavalry and infantry from Nui Dat fought their way through as darkness fell and forced the Viet Cong to withdraw just as they appeared to be preparing for a final assault.

Withdrawing to establish a landing zone to evacuate their casualties, the Australians formed a defensive position overnight.

Returning in strength the next day, the Australians swept the area and located a large number of Viet Cong dead.

Although initially believing they had suffered a major defeat, as the scale of the Viet Cong's losses were revealed the Australians realized they had actually won a significant victory.

Over the next two days they continued to clear the battlefield, uncovering more dead as they did so. Yet with 1 ATF lacking the resources to pursue the withdrawing force, the operation ended on 21 August. Eighteen Australians were killed and 24 wounded, while the Viet Cong lost at least 245 dead. A decisive Australian victory, Long Tan proved a major local setback for the Viet Cong, indefinitely forestalling an imminent movement against Nui Dat.

Although there were other large-scale encounters in later years, 1 ATF was not fundamentally challenged again. The battle established the task force's dominance over the province, and allowed it to pursue operations to restore government authority.

Casualties and losses

Australia: 18 killed 24 wounded

North Vietnam and Viet Cong: 245 killed 350 wounded (estimate) 3 captured

