

**Vietnam Veterans, Families of Vietnam Veterans, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls.**

**What a privilege it is for me to be asked to present to you. ..may I ask at the start for your forgiveness if emotions overcome me, it means a lot for me to be here.**

**I am not a soldier, nor have I been a soldier. In fact I have no member of my direct family who has served in the forces. But I do have an Uncle....Uncle Gary.... who is the only member of my extended family to have served.... and the only member to have been called up to war! I can't begin to explain how proud I am of him, his service, and how he has coped since his return, although I know he's been through significant difficulty at times.**

**Every day is an important day, and every Vietnam Veterans day is an important commemoration, but there seems to be something about milestone numbers that lead us to slow down a little more and reflect upon the events that the day represents. This is one of those days where some of our reflection is of the Battle of Long Tan, fought on the afternoon of this day 50 years ago!**

**Many of you here will be familiar with the events of Long Tan but on such a significant occasion, I feel it's important for me to describe the lead up and battle events as I understand them to be.**

**The Battle of Long Tan saw 105 men from D Company 6<sup>th</sup> battalion, Royal Australian Regiment and 3 New Zealanders from an artillery forward observation post, pitted against Viet Cong of between 1500 and 2500 soldiers, a reinforced regimental unit! One significant point I will refer to again later, is that this battle took place just under 5 kilometres from the Australian task force base at Nui Dat. It is generally considered that the Viet Cong intended to attack and destroy the entire Australian base.**

**There were enemy contacts in the days leading up to the 18<sup>th</sup> August, in fact the Australian base itself was under mortar attack at 2.43 am on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>. Patrols were sent out that morning to locate and harass the Viet Cong responsible. B Company 6RAR and A Company spent the day sweeping the area, finding the mortar base plate position but nothing to suggest a large force in the area. On the 18<sup>th</sup> August, D Company under the command**

of Hobart born Harry Smith, then Major Smith, left Nui Dat with orders to relieve B Company and follow up tracks leading from the base plate position. Just as D Company was leaving the base, B Company reported the discovery of a dug in position with weapon pits. They also found signs of another Mortar position and signs of at least 2 wounded Viet Cong.

At 1pm the 2 Company's met and information exchanged. B Company set out to return to Nui Dat and Major Smith decided to follow the trail east into the Long Tan rubber plantation. D Company included 10 Platoon, 11 Platoon and 12 Platoon and each were placed into patrol formation to suit the environment.

At 4.08 pm 11 platoon was engaged in heavy fire to their left flank. Mortars also began falling onto where Major Smith set up D Company Headquarters so he moved headquarters a little further north to what would become the final defensive position. The Battle of Long Tan had begun!!

10 platoon was manoeuvred in support of 11 platoon and reached within 100 metres before being ordered back to Company headquarters due to large casualty numbers. 12 platoon tried to reach 11 platoon from the West and reached within 200 metres before they too came under heavy fire. Back at base the constant thumping of artillery suggested to everyone there that someone was in trouble. The fighting was intense!! All in what was now torrential rain!!

This intensity never let up for 3 hours. I have read an account by account report where it details almost every aspect of the battle at each minute. It is intensity overload! In fact it's almost unbelievable! It has left me with an incredible understanding of how courage and leadership is defined!. During this 3 hours, the Australians forced back wave after wave of attack, all with artillery rounds fired from back at Nui Dat, to a range within 50-100 metres of 11 platoon and also Company Headquarters. Ammunition resupply is conducted by helicopter in treacherous flying conditions, B Company has been turned back to help and A Company is on its way back, transported in Armoured personnel Carriers. The APC's arrive in the rubber plantation at 6.25 and are in immediate contact with the enemy. This is about the time that the larger Human Wave Assaults begin on D Company headquarters. Two lines of between 60 to 100 Viet Cong attacking at a time. The artillery is called to drop fire within 30 to 50 metres of the headquarters position. Can you believe that, shells fired from nearly 5 kilometres away, falling between where I stand and the other side of the road before me!! Ironically, the

request is refused as it was deemed unsafe!! However, without using the colourful language of Major Smith, it is fair to say the request was granted!

In the next half hour wave after wave of Viet Cong attack, all the while with the APC's and B Company trying to get to D Company's position. They got there., the APC's swept through the major concentration of Viet Cong at 6.55, B Company arrives at D Company's position at 7pm, 3 APC's reach D Company at 7.08, the firing stops, the battle ends.

What a feeling it must have been at that time. 105 soldiers from D Company and a 3 man New Zealand Artillery Party had held off a regimental force of 2500 preparing to wipe out the Nui Dat base. With great support from the Artillery who's accuracy was nothing short of remarkable, and the arrival of B Company and the APC's.

However, it wasn't without cost, they had suffered terrible casualties with the loss of 18 men, 17 from D Company and 1 from 1APC Squadron. 24 were wounded. That's one third of D Company

But it was not until the next morning that they realised the extent of the defeat they had inflicted on the enemy, 245 Viet Cong bodies were recovered and buried on the battlefield, however the death count was estimated to be in excess of 800 as the VC removed many of their casualties. Over 1000 were wounded.

The battle of Long Tan was a decisive Australian victory and a major setback for the Viet Cong, indefinitely stalling movement against Nui Dat. It also increased the confidence of the Australians in their ability to defeat the Viet Cong and significantly enhanced their military reputation.

As a mere civilian, I hope you have not minded me describing the events of 18<sup>th</sup> August 1966, I have tried to be as accurate as possible, but of course it's difficult to describe the full extent of over 3 hours of battle intensity in just a few minutes.

Australian soldiers were involved in many other battles and skirmishes during the Vietnam war, but it's the Battle of Long Tan that most Australians are familiar with and the importance of commemorating the battle on this day, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, is not lost upon me, nor to you I'm sure.

Personally, I feel it is very appropriate that Vietnam Veterans Remembrance day was chosen to be linked to the battle of Long Tan. It allows my reflection to include all of the 60,000 men and women who served during the 10 year period of Australia's involvement. 521 killed, more than 3000 wounded and many, many soldiers deeply scarred not only by their experience in Vietnam, but also due to their reception on return to Australia

If I can now split my address to you into 2 parts:

Firstly ...To all of us civilians here today, can I ask:

- do you ever think we will really understand what these men have been through?
- Will we ever understand what it is like to be out on patrol and then return to base at Nui Dat, BUT STILL be in danger of losing your life through mortar or gunfire into the base. Imagine having to take your rifle even when going to the toilets or mess tents. This bit is a real struggle for me.. I feel that in WW1 or WW2, the further back from the front I would have been, the safer I probably felt, but there was no such feeling in Vietnam as Nui Dat was fair smack in the middle of a Viet Cong stronghold. These men did not know this minute whether they would be here the next!!
- Will we ever understand how it would feel to be the one that steps over a mine only to have your mate 10 yards back trip it, and to see that same mate being airlifted up through the jungle canopy,,, or an even worse outcome.
- Will we ever understand what it was like patrolling through a village and having the people smiling and waving, only to have those same people trying to pick you off after darkness when you made camp
- Will we ever understand what it is like to be dropped from a helicopter into open ground many metres from cover, fully exposed to enemy fire.
- Will we ever know how stressful it must have been to be a forward scout,, or any part of a patrol formation. Spare a thought for who the diggers refer to as 'tailend Charlie', the chap at the rear – the first target if the enemy decided to wait until the patrol was through their position before attacking!

Of course we never will understand. I have travelled to the Western front in Europe, I have visited Sandakan in Borneo and other military sites within Asia, all in the hope I could gain an understanding of what it was like for the soldiers. But it was when I walked Kokoda track that I thought I might really be able to gain the understanding that I sought. But I was just kidding myself, the short answer is that it was impossible...and I'm pretty sure I knew that to be the case before I tried. The only hope I had of ever understanding was to be there with these men. So now my efforts to understand extend to gaining as much knowledge of the environment and conditions that they experienced.

If I could direct the second part of my address to the Veterans here.

Gents, I have been to Phouc Tuy Province. I was privileged to accompany Uncle Gary and Debbie on their trip back in May of this year. I have visited Nui Dat, I have stood by the artillery site, the base camp, the airstrip and I could even see remnants of the concert area. I have stood on SAS Hill, driven by Horseshoe Hill and entered the caves on the Long Hai's. It was a hugely emotional experience for me and still is. Before leaving for the trip I tried to learn as much about the area as I could. I studied maps of the camp so I could picture your environment even though there is little remaining. It helps me understand but as I mentioned, I won't suggest that I have an understanding of what you went through, only your fellow veterans can understand that.

I also know of the reception you received on return and it saddens me greatly. Rightly or wrongly I feel that today is not about whether Australia should have been there or not, today is all about the fact that you were there, and you deserve our honour and respect as much as any other person who has contributed to Australian campaigns abroad. You were contributing to a cause. We know the outcome of the war, but what we don't know, and never will, is what the outcome may have been without your contribution. The region may well be quite different to what we know it as today.

Permission has only been granted for 2 foreign memorials in Vietnam, one is French and the other is at Long Tan. We visited the memorial site at Long Tan on 6<sup>th</sup> May. It was a hugely emotional moment, particularly when I was shown where 11 platoon was first engaged. We were also able to conduct a private service which broke me to the core. I was an absolute mess! Thinking about that moment since, I know my reaction was not only for the men of Long Tan, but for all who served, in particular for my Uncle Gary.

Since returning home I have sat and reflected every day. There is much that I didn't understand before the trip and I am grateful to my Uncle for all that he shared, knowing how difficult it would have been to have me reminding him of things he would rather forget. I now consider myself as the custodian of that knowledge, tasked with doing everything I can to ensure my family and friends have a greater understanding of our Veteran's experience and sacrifices. I know I can't change the world, but I am a firm believer that chipping away at the edges DOES make a difference. Again to the veterans, I have already passed this knowledge onto a large number of friends and I can assure you that their care factor and respect is significant.

In closing, Thank you to each and every one of you for being here today.... It is a very important day. To the veterans and their families, offering thanks just doesn't seem enough.... but I know many people that feel as I do, and I know many more will do so as I and others continue to share the knowledge about your experiences . So I am hoping our support and thanks do offer you some form of comfort and peace.

Thanks very much.