

THE VIET CONG EASTER OFFENSIVE PHUOC TUY PROVINCE, SOUTH VIETNAM APRIL – JUNE 1972

By Derrill de Heer*



Sgt Derrill de Heer just prior to a parachute descent in Phuoc Tuy Province 29 July 1970.

Prologue

The conflict in Vietnam was lost in many ways. The withdrawal of all foreign troops after the peace agreement was reached in Paris in 1973 was in vain. The communist north re-grouped, re-armed, re-trained and invaded the south in large formations in 1975.

The promise of assistance from the United States in the form of economic aid was severely reduced or it never arrived, and the promise that United States forces would return if there was aggression from the north did not materialise.

Richard Nixon, President of United States of America, wrote a letter to South Vietnam president Nguyen Van Thieu on 5 January 1973 and this letter was released on 30 April 1975. The letter said 'Should you decide, as I trust you will, you have my assurance of continued assistance in the post settlement period that we will respond with full force should the settlement be violated by North Vietnam'. When the North Vietnamese were attacking Saigon in 1975 President Thieu wrote to the President of the USA, after it became obvious that US forces would not return, and said 'If the Americans do not want to support us anymore, let them go, get out! Let them forget their humanitarian promises!'

Some observers might say that the Americans sold out the Vietnamese because the United States population was tired from the war and the politicians looked for new domestic directions.

Easter Offensive in Phuoc Tuy Province

The 1972 Viet Cong Easter offensive in Phuoc Tuy province lasted from April to June in the months following the withdrawal of the last of the Australian Task Force soldiers from Vung Tau in March 1972.

The following comments are based in the main on a briefing to the US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in October 1972. The majority of Australian combat and logistics forces had already

been withdrawn from Nui Dat to Vung Tau in October and from the war zone by December 1971.

A company of combat soldiers from D Company 4th Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment/New Zealand (ANZAC) remained and was withdrawn in March 1972. These soldiers were stationed in Vung Tau for the protection of the logistic units who were back loading stores and equipment to Australia. By coincidence, 4 RAR was the last infantry unit to leave Borneo during the Indonesian Confrontation and fought the last major battle, the Battle of Nui Le by 1st Australian Task Force in South Vietnam.

The situation in the province deteriorated and by April 1972 units of 5 Viet Cong Division returned 'in-force' to the province to reassert their military and political authority through major attacks on villages and South Vietnamese military units - now called the Easter Offensive of 1972.

The old Australian foes of 274 NVA Regiment, 33 NVA Regiment, 74 NVA Artillery and D 445 Battalion were re-armed, re-trained and refreshed with replacement NVA soldiers and returned to the province in force. The re-supply of recruits, arms and ammunition had again begun to flow through to Viet Cong units from the Cambodian side of the border to the eastern provinces of Military Region 3 after the major disruption to that process with the ARVN and US military incursion into the 'Parrots Beak' area of Military Region 3 in 1970.

Starting in April, battles raged until the NVA were repulsed in June. The complacency and peacefulness of the province that was hard won over five years by the Australians, through their aggressive patrolling and numerous battles had been shattered.

A number of the civil action projects built by the South Vietnamese government agencies and by 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit were damaged or destroyed. The complacency of the Regional and Popular Force units to remain in close contact in and around villages and their failure to take offensive military operations to the Viet Cong in their safe areas in the jungle contributed to the successful return to the province of the enemy units.

Additionally the failure of Dong Khoi operations against the Viet Cong Infrastructure, added to the South Vietnamese government woes. The communists were a well-developed and multifaceted enemy - no rag-tag band lurking in the jungle, but rather a combination of guerrillas, political cadre, and modern main force units.

At the time of the Australian forces departure from Phuoc Tuy province Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Van Tu was the province chief. The province had begun to slide away from South Vietnamese government control.

The Viet Cong Phuoc Tuy Easter offensive began on 26th April 1972 with numerous attacks by fire (ABF) and other ground activities in Duc Thanh district and spread later in the month to Xuyen Moc in the east of the province. The 274 Viet Cong Main Force Regiment joined with 33 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment and returned to the province unopposed. The Viet Cong D 445 Local Force Battalion joined them. US CORDS Advisory Team 89 reported that all of these enemy units had received replacements and were well supplied and rested. The 74th North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Artillery Regiment supported these three infantry units.

Initially the Viet Cong units scored large successes against the poorly directed South Vietnamese forces in the province. The Regional and Popular Force (RF and PF) soldiers were missing the might of the Australians who had withdrawn from the province five to six months earlier. The Territorial soldiers were plagued by poor leadership and weakened by the lack of numbers of serving soldiers due to corrupt activities that involved units having 'shadow' soldiers.

By the end of April, the Viet Cong had blocked Highway QL 2 running north from Baria to Long Khanh province. It was cut at the southern edge of Galia Rubber Plantation near the village of Binh Ba. Highway QL 23 between Dat Do and Xuyen Moc to the east of the province had no government forces protecting it; thereby it effectively isolated the districts of Dat Do from Xuyen Moc. This made re-supply by air (helicopter) the only means of movement and re-supply to the government forces and civilians in those areas.

Lt Col Bich assumed the position of Province Chief after the Viet Cong offensive had begun.

The new province chief uncovered a systemic problem of 'shadow' soldiers in the Regional and Popular Force units. This was the illegal process of soldiers being on the payroll but surrendering their pay to others (presumably to their officers or noncommissioned officers) in return for not attending and serving, which was manifest in a number of units.

Earlier, the US District Advisory Teams for the districts of Duc Thanh, Xuyen Moc and later Dat Do were removed as part of the American phased withdrawal from Vietnam. The critical security situation that existed in those districts during the 1972 Viet Cong offensive necessitated the Americans to reinsert advisory teams.

Prior to this Viet Cong offensive in 1972, the development of the province was progressing satisfactorily. People benefited from the security the Australian forces had won in the province from 1966 to their withdrawal to Vung Tau in October 1971 and their return to Australia in December 1972.

This could be seen everywhere throughout the province by the work carried out by the Australian Civil Affairs Unit and from increased South Vietnamese government investment. People participated in local and national elections and this was measured by higher turnouts to these events. Commerce was increasing as the peace enabled the citizens to move freely around the province to different market places. Prosperity could be seen everywhere. The citizens of the province were seen busily constructing permanent new homes of concrete and brick.

The fishing industry was expanding and the resort industries centred in Vung Tau and the village of Long Hai were bringing increased revenue and work to the province. Plans were put in place for two 'Return-to-Village' hamlets in northern Dat Do and a completely new fishing village had been planned for the coast in the eastern portion of the same district.

The only area of the province that remained static or had regressed at this time was the eastern district of the province, Xuyen Moc. The village of Xuyen Moc was on a road that was dangerous and subjected to frequent interdiction by the Viet Cong and was largely ignored in the face of more pressing problems for the Province Chief.

On 20th May 1972, the Viet Cong D445 Local Force Battalion occupied the town of Dat Do. This unit knew the village well. This was nineteen days after the US District Advisory Team had been withdrawn as part of the general American planned withdrawal from Vietnam. The populace of Dat Do fled westward to Long Dien. The Commander of the 18th ARVN Division from Long Kahn province assumed operational control of all government forces.

On The 24th May the South Vietnamese 5th Ranger Group supplemented the government Tactical Force 48. It was tasked to recapture Dat Do. On the 29th May an estimated enemy Battalion infiltrated into the Long Le District village of Hoa Long just south of Nui Dat.

Swift reaction by the Vietnamese Government Task Force and the local Regional and Popular Force units forced the Viet Cong unit to withdraw by the 31st May. At the same time, a Viet Cong unit launched the last major attack of this offensive on Duc Thanh Sub Sector (District) Headquarters, which was successfully repulsed. The casualties for this Viet Cong offensive were South Vietnamese government forces, 241 soldiers killed and 712 wounded in action and 17 missing in action. The known Viet Cong figures by body count were 1182 killed in action, 10 captured in action with 13 who surrendered under the Chieu Hoi amnesty program.

In addition to the military casualties there were 20 Vietnamese civilians killed with a further 39 wounded. For an action as long and intense as this was, the civilian casualties can be described as light.

The US Advisory Team failed to report if those civilians were killed as a result of VC targeted assassinations or reprisals. In previous major VC offensives, this has been the case when deliberate actions were taken against government officials, and therefore it could be presumed that some of these civilian deaths may have been government officials or known outspoken South Vietnamese government sympathisers.

The Regional and Popular Force territorial forces having survived the offensive, was in military terms a positive sign about their potential capability. This newly found esprit de corps would allow the newly appointed Province Chief to build upon this new confidence by the regional forces. The discovery of the shadow soldiers allowed the Province Chief to take steps to rectify this in the territorial forces. This was the first major series of battles in the province since the departure of the Australians. The South Vietnamese fought mainly on their own (in addition to the South Vietnamese Air Force and US air assets employed in the defeat of the Viet Cong in this province) and this would allow the Province Chief to capitalise on the upgrading of the province regional forces.

The US Province Senior Advisor reported that 'Lt Col Bich exhibited exemplary leadership and energy in reorganising the Territorial forces.' He also indicated that the expectation for the South Vietnamese government considering the level of enemy activity in the province was that the government forces would be able to retain the areas that it won back during the offensive and continued to control those areas.

Concluding Remarks

The report by the US Province Senior Advisor after the Easter offensive indicated that although there were problems with the Regional and Popular force soldiers, they were able to repel the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units from all villages of the province.

Although the removal of the Province Chief and other senior officers for corruption was seen as a positive step, the corruption elsewhere in the province would have been hard to control. After the American withdrawal in 1973, the Americans promised large financial and military support to the South Vietnamese government. The financial support promised was severely reduced by the US Congress, as was the military equipment.

The South Vietnamese government had no other option, but to reduce the numbers of military and government officials, as they were unable to pay all of them. This reduction allowed the North Vietnamese to attack in force in 1975 and the reduced military forces in the south were unable to stem their advance. The war was lost and the country was reunified, even though it was under a communist led government.

The Australian soldiers who served in Phuoc Tuy province from 1966 to 1972 should feel proud of the hard work they performed during combat operations conducted by 1 Australian Task Force and the pacification projects conducted and controlled by 1 Australian Civil Affairs Unit. It changed the province from being Viet Cong controlled to a South Vietnamese government pacified province. The Australians left the province safe and secure.

In retrospect, maybe the Australian soldiers should have started working with and training the province Regional and Popular Force soldiers much earlier under the 'Vietnamisation' phase of the war. The failure of the South Vietnamese forces to take the war to the enemy outside of the village precincts into the jungle areas that was previously dominated by Australian combat soldiers eventually sealed their fate.

I have returned to the province twice since the conflict ended. It was a positive experience for me and I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of progress in the province since the war. It was much more than I had envisaged.

It was interesting to see two schools in the Nui Dat Base area. Our old foe D445 has its base at Nui Dat near Rowles Lagoon not far from where the task force headquarters was located.

If you haven't thought about going back to Vietnam for a trip and you are able to, I highly recommend it, and for many it will be a cathartic and healing experience.

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Derrill served in the Australian military from 1961 to 1983 and has served overseas in Malaya and Vietnam. He served in Malaya with 2 RAR and 3 RAR and served two tours in Vietnam, first with 8 RAR, 1 Psychological Operations Unit and a second tour as Intelligence Sergeant with 4 RAR/NZ (ANZAC) Bn.

Prior to his ARA service Derrill served in 2 Cdo Coy, and is an Association member. Derrill also served on the cadre staff at 1 and 2 Cdo Coy and was posted to the Royal Australian Navy Mine Warfare and Clearance Diving School at HMAS Penguin as a Diving Supervising Officer.