

ANZAC Day 2019

Dawn Service

Major Lachlan Slatyer

This time, 104 years ago, Australian and New Zealand troops rowed slowly into the darkness from the safety of their ships as part of the British plan to clear the Turkish defences from the Dardanelle Straits.

All Australian's well know that the Gallipoli campaign did not go as planned. There were over 8,000 Australian deaths and a further 18,000 casualties for a campaign that lasted just 239 days. Whilst the campaign is considered a military failure, Gallipoli became a household name in Australia and with it, the ANZAC tradition was born.

There is a newspaper article from the New York Times dated the 26th of April 1916 about an ANZAC Day march in London that occurred the day before, to commemorate the landing of the ANZACs at Gallipoli, and "the soul of the ANZAC".

But what was the "soul of the ANZAC" that the article from 1916 referred to?

In his book ANZAC to Amiens, Charles Bean described the evacuation of Anzac Cove in 1915 as follows,

"... Anzac stood, and still stands, for reckless valour in a good cause, for enterprise, resourcefulness, fidelity, comradeship, and endurance that will never own defeat."

Today we may refer to the ANZAC spirit as courage, initiative, loyalty, mateship and a stubbornness to never accept defeat.

I am personally grateful for the sacrifice of all men and women in every conflict since the Boer War, that have helped make Australia what it is today. Whilst there are still World War 2 and Korean War veterans with us today, I would like to reflect on a battle that occurred a few years before I was born.

Having flown military helicopters, being in Long Tan company at the Royal Military College Duntroon and having an immense amount of respect for my instructors from 30 years ago who fought in the Vietnam war, I would like this morning to talk about the battle of Long Tan, which occurred on the afternoon of the 18th of August 1966, and relate what occurred that afternoon, to the traits of the ANZAC spirit that have arguably not changed since 1915.

When the 1st Australian Task Force established its operating base at Nui Dat in Vietnam, the Viet Cong were determined to inflict an early defeat on the Australians.

A few days before the battle, Australian Forces detected radio traffic that suggested a large Viet Cong force were closing in on the Australian Base at Nui Dat.

On the 17th of August, at 0243 am, the base at Nui Dat was attacked by the Viet Cong using mortars and recoilless rifles wounding 24 Australian soldiers. The following morning, Bravo Company, 6 RAR was directed to locate the VC's firing positions from the night before.

In the early afternoon of the 18th of August, Delta Company, under the command of MAJ Harry Smith, met up with Bravo Company who had found the VC firing positions. Delta Company is ordered to follow the tracks leading from the VCs firing position towards the Long Tan rubber plantation, approximately 4 kilometres to the east of Nui Dat. As the Company commences its move, they hear the sounds of a concert starting at the base with Little Pattie and Col Joye.

Delta Company starts moving through the rubber plantation and at 3:25 pm, 11 Platoon run into a small group of seven VC who are walking down a track. 11 Platoon immediately engage the enemy, killing one and causing the remaining enemy to flee. Despite reporting the enemy are wearing green uniforms, no one in the Platoon comprehends that the enemy are not village-based VC but in fact regular soldiers from the North Vietnamese Army.

11 Platoon is given permission to chase the fleeing enemy, which they do at a quick pace. As they approach a clearing in the rubber plantation all hell breaks loose. 4 Section on the left is engaged by a large force with heavy machine guns. In the first minute or so of the engagement, four Australian soldiers are killed and another two are wounded. As the battle continues, 11 Platoon defends against waves of enemy VC attacking them.

The platoon commander, 2LT Sharp immediately radios the Company's attached NZ Forward Artillery Observer, Capt Stanley, requesting immediate artillery support from 161 Battery, Royal New Zealand Artillery. Within a few minutes, 2LT Sharp calls for more artillery saying on the radio that the enemy force is bigger than he initially thought.

CAPT Stanley realising the quickly developing situation, requests all 24 guns be placed under his control, including 103 and 105 Batteries of the Royal Australian Regiment and also the larger 155 Howitzers of A Battery, 2/35th Howitzer Battalion, US Army. This request is initially denied, however is subsequently approved when MAJ Smiths urgently requests all the guns.

Back at Nui Dat, the performers at the concert are starting to become alarmed as the firing of the artillery guns is increasing and more and more men are leaving the seating area. Soon the concert is stopped.

10 Platoon is ordered to move towards 11 Platoon's position where they come across approximately one hundred VC who are preparing to attack 11 Platoon. 10 Platoon engages the enemy and disrupts their assault however, 11 Platoon is still being attacked on another two fronts, by hundreds of VC.

During this engagement, 2LT Gordon Sharp is killed leaving SGT Bob Buick in command. With the desperate situation developing, SGT Buick calls the artillery even closer to their position just before his platoon's radio antenna is shot off. At the same time, the radio operator in 10 Platoon, is shot and the bullet, after passing through his body, destroys the radio on his back, leaving both Platoons without vital communications.

10 Platoon, after engaging the VC who were preparing to attack 11 Platoon are again quickly pinned down and three soldiers are wounded. Despite the heavy fire fight, the Platoon Commander manages to send his wounded back to the Company position along with a message that their radio has been destroyed.

Pte Bill Akell on learning that the 10 Platoon radio is broken, tells the Company CSM Warrant Office Jack Kirby that he has a spare radio. Not knowing exactly which direction 10 Platoon

is, PTE Akell runs out through the Australian perimeter towards 10 Platoon. On his way he comes across three enemy and kills them with a burst from his sub machinegun.

The Coy medic CPL Phil Dobson sets up a makeshift company aid post in a small reverse hollow at the centre of D Company's main position. CPL Dobson, at times during the battle, ventures out under enemy fire to carry wounded back from the front. Eventually, he would care for 23 wounded Australian soldiers. After the battle, he said he was proud that he didn't lose any of the wounded soldiers under his care that day.

Around 4.50pm, a very heavy monsoonal rain storm moves over the area. The effect of this torrential rain was described by soldiers as causing a "mud mist" that affected their ability to clearly see anything above the ground to about 1 foot high. This affected their ability to see the enemy, yet at the same time helped to afford them some protection as the enemy couldn't see them either. Within a few minutes of the first rain drops, the ground becomes extremely muddy, making it that much more difficult to fight.

When 11 Platoon's radio is restored with a new antenna, SGT Buick contacts MAJ Smith, advising him that 2LT Sharp has been killed and updates their deteriorating situation that they are running out of ammunition from being attacked by a relentless VC. This causes MAJ Smith to contact Battalion Headquarters requesting an airstrike as well as an urgent ammunition resupply.

As luck would have it, two Australian Iroquois helicopters from 9 Squadron are still in Nui Dat having flown the singers up from Vung Tau earlier in the day. However, an argument brakes out between the 1st Australian Task Force Commander, BRIG Jackson and the Australian Airforce Commander GPCAPT Raw when the helicopters are requested for the ammunition resupply. There is a question as to whether the RAAF helicopters can be sent into a hot landing zone. It is later reported that Jackson is heard saying during the argument, "We'll I am about to lose a company, what the hell's a few more choppers and a few more pilots."

The four helicopter pilots, who have been listening to the battle unfold on their radios, enter the command post and become involved in the heated discussion. FLTLT Lane, who is the most experienced pilot, insists that whilst dangerous he believes the mission can be completed if both aircraft are sent, at least one would get through and get the desperately needed ammunition to Delta Company. Eventually, GPCAPT Raw gives the approval for the helicopters to conduct the dangerous resupply.

At 5.09pm, MAJ Smith advises SGT Buick of 10 Platoon to throw smoke to allow three U.S. F4 Phantom jets to identify their position. However, with the heavy monsoonal rain, the smoke won't rise and just hangs under the tree canopy. With the low cloud and being unable to clearly identify the position of the Australians, the fighter pilots can't accurately drop their bombs, so they are directed to drop their bombs on suspected enemy rear areas and vacate the area quickly to allow the artillery to recommence.

By now, 11 Platoon's situation is desperate. They are almost completely surrounded by the enemy; half of the Platoon is either wounded or dead and they are fast running out of ammunition being told to make each shot count. MAJ Smith requests battalion headquarters for reinforcements to be sent in by helicopter, however, he is immediately advised there are no helicopters available. 10 Platoon is ordered to withdraw back to the Coy position as they cannot get to 11 Platoon without risking significantly more casualties.

Around 5.25pm, a large group of around 200 enemy appear in front of D Company's position. The Australian soldiers hear whistles and bugles and are then hit by two waves of assaulting enemy troops. Again, the artillery takes a pivotal role in disrupting the enemy's assault allowing the Australian soldiers to shoot at the VC that get through the artillery barrages.

The Australian soldiers reported after the battle that as the lines of VC assaulted their positions, other VC who had been wounded in previous assaults and hidden by the mud mist, would stand up like ghosts as their fellow soldiers passed them; it was an eyry sight. Other VC would slowly crawl forward under the protection of the mud mist and shoot at the Australian soldiers as they exposed themselves from close range. It is likely that many of the Australian casualties were from these hidden enemy soldiers.

Back at Nui Dat, LTCOL Colin Townsend the Battalion Commander, is still trying to convince BRIG Jackson to allow the Armed Personnel Carriers of 3 Troop, loaded with Alpha Company to go to the aid of Delta Company. Whilst, BRIG Jackson is concerned that it is a ploy by the enemy to draw out extra Australian soldiers from the base, he realises that it is the only option, otherwise Delta Company will be completely destroyed.

Again, back at Nui Dat, the artillery has been firing pretty much nonstop. But now, the sheer physical exertion of manning and firing the artillery is being compounded by a difficulty in breathing as a lethal haze develops around the artillery guns, as the fumes cannot disperse because of the monsoonal weather. In addition, a lightning strike hits the artillery position at 5.40pm knocking out the speaker system which is used to communicate orders to each gun. This results in the shouting of orders through a daisy chain of men to the guns. By now, most of the spare Nui Dat personnel such as cooks, drivers and admin staff are helping to keep up the critical supply of ammunition to the artillery.

Just before 6pm, the helicopters with the ammunition loaded, depart Nui Dat in the middle of a thunderstorm, though they struggle to get airborne due to the sheer weight of the ammunition on board. The two helicopters have to fly just above the tree tops at a reduced speed due to the poor visibility. As the helicopters fly towards Delta Company's position, they request smoke to be thrown to identify where to drop the ammunition. 12 Platoon, not knowing of the inbound helicopters, throw smoke towards 11 Platoon's position to allow them to move back towards 12 Platoon's position. The pilots advise that they see red smoke, which is the wrong colour and have to abort the drop. It is likely that they saw the smoke thrown by 12 Platoon, instead of the smoke thrown by the Headquarters.

Sgt Paddy Todd from 12 Platoon had been wounded through both ankles earlier in the battle when a VC mortar exploded beside him. When 11 and 12 Platoons start to move back to the Company position, SGT Todd tells them he is okay, but after they leave, when he goes to get up, he realises he cannot stand due to his injuries. With no other option, he starts crawling through the mud towards Delta Company's position.

The helicopters turn around and call for smoke to be thrown again as they approach for a second time. This time, the correct smoke is identified and the lead chopper flies to the position of the smoke and they push the ammunition out of the two helicopters with pin point accuracy, right beside WO Kirby.

It is not until nearly 6:15 pm that 12 Platoon and the survivors from 11 Platoon reach Delta Company's position. For the first time, in nearly three hours of fighting, Delta Company is finally all together in one place. As the helicopters vacate the area, the artillery recommences

and WO Kirby begins running around distributing ammunition to everyone, occasionally under fire, but frequently joking with his young soldiers keeping their spirits up. At one point he notices the enemy setting up a heavy machine gun that will decimate their position. Without hesitation, he attacks the machine gun post, killing the enemy before returning to the Company.

The APC's with Alpha Company loaded are now enroute and reach a swollen creek that they are barely able to cross. As they cross, the APCs spin and turn, but the drivers persist and eventually get across the creek as they know that time and options are running out for Delta Company. Charlie Company is also ordered to move to Delta Company's position by foot.

As the APC's enter the rubber plantation, they approach soldiers in the pouring rain that they think are Australians, however as the APCs approach, these soldiers open fire with machine guns. The APCs return fire with their 50 Calibre machine guns and one of the platoons from A Coy dismount from their APC's and attack the enemy. The infantry is ordered quickly back on board as they need to keep moving to Delta Company's position. The APCs would again come across more enemy contacts enroute to Delta Company.

As SGT Todd continues to crawl towards Delta Company's position, he is fired upon by the Australians thinking he is enemy. He waves his hat and shouts, "Don't shoot, it's Paddy Todd!". PTE Buddy Lea runs out with another soldier and carries him back towards the Company Aid Post when they spot some enemy. PTE Lea drops SGT Todd and engages the VC killing both of them, but is shot himself through the shoulder. LCPL Jack Jewry sees PTE Lea is hit, but as he comes over to help his mate and kneels down to bandage PTE Lea, LCPL Jewry is killed instantly by an enemy bullet.

The conditions on the battlefield are so bad now that many of the soldiers are having to manually put rounds up the spouts of their weapons as the rifles and machineguns are jamming up as the mud, water and dirt start to seize their working parts. Many of the Australian soldiers begin to think they won't get out of this alive.

The situation at Delta Company's position is now so dire that CAPT Stanley calls for a danger close fire mission, which will drop artillery dangerously close.... only 30-50 metres from their position in order to break-up the waves of attacking VC. However, the Fire Support Co-ordination Centre back at Nui Dat refuses the request saying it is too unsafe. MAJ Smith immediately gets on the radio and using some colourful language, convinces them that if they don't, the whole Company will be lost. The incoming artillery rounds fall exactly where they are needed as the first major assault begins on their position with an estimated 200 enemy soldiers. Four more Australians are killed and several more wounded during this attack.

Around 7.00pm elements from Bravo Company arrive at Delta Company's position, quickly followed by the APCs with Alpha Company causing the enemy to disperse, bringing the battle to an end, some three and a half hours after the first shots were fired.

18 Australian soldiers were killed during the battle and 24 soldiers were wounded. The official Australian record states 245 enemy bodies were found, though it is estimated, the total body count was significantly more. It was also estimated that over 500 enemy soldiers were wounded; though all these figures are contested by North Vietnam. The artillery guns in support of D Company fired in excess of 3,500 rounds. To put that into perspective, on average, that is over 16 artillery rounds a minute!

D Company was awarded the United States Presidential Unit Citation and in 2011, the Australian Unit Citation for Gallantry. In addition, there were a total of twenty-five gallantry, service and conduct medals awarded as a result of the three-and-a-half-hour battle; a large number of medals for a relatively short, but intense battle.

So how did the actions in this battle relate back to the ANZAC spirit I discussed earlier?

Courage. I don't think anyone this morning would disagree that all those men in the rubber plantation displayed exceptional courage. The courage began at the top with MAJ Smith and cascaded through the officers down to each and every soldier, including those of 3 Tp APC and the RAAF aircrew who flew the resupply mission.

Initiative. There were many instances of initiative during the battle such as PTE Akell running forward to get a new radio to 11 Platoon, WO Kirby attacking the enemy setting up a machine gun without thought and CAPT Stanley calling early in the battle for all 24 Guns to be at his call.

Loyalty within any military unit is strong and during this battle there were many examples of soldiers' loyalty being displayed, with some paying the ultimate price for their loyalty to their mates and Unit. There was also great devotion shown by the aircrew towards the "guys on the ground" where they knowingly flew their aircraft in extremely poor weather, risking their aircraft to ground fire and possibly in contravention to their rules of employment as they would not let their fellow Australian soldiers down. MAJ Smith would later state that without the resupply, there is little doubt that they would have survived. Another example was the incredible effort of the artillery units that fired continuously during the battle, for without the artillery, the outcome of the battle would no doubt have been different.

Mateship. Just like the soldiers from Gallipoli, the descendent soldiers of Delta Company displayed true mateship, sticking together and relying on each other during a ferocious battle, in appalling conditions against a numerically superior enemy, whilst thinking they may not make it out alive as their mates lay wounded and dying around them. Etched on many war memorials around this country is a verse taken from the Bible, John Chapter 15 verse 13 "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends". This verse is definitely reflected in the story of what happened in the rubber plantation that day.

Lastly, I think you would agree that this battle clearly showed a determination to never accept defeat. In logical terms, Delta Company should not have survived. In simple numbers, Delta Company comprised of 108 Australian New Zealand soldiers. In contrast, the enemy amounted to between 1,500 and 2,000 soldiers, placing the enemy at somewhere between 14 and 18 enemy soldiers for each Delta Company soldier.

When I asked my military friends as to what I should talk about today, I was constantly told speak about what ANZAC Day means to you. That was a hard question to answer, as like many of my generation, I do not feel I have the right to march and am more comfortable watching from the side lines, expressing my gratitude to those who have gone before, and after me, who have seen and done things that I have never had to endure.

As an operations officer during Peace Keeping in Bougainville and as an aviation commander in East Timor working with the United Nations, I have had very different experiences to those who have fought on the front line. I have never had to put on my body armour, load as much ammunition as I can carry and walk out a gate of an operating base into the unknown. I have

never been shot at and I have not experienced the hardships of many front-line Australian soldiers, so I do not stand beside them on days like today.

Look around you now in the light of the day and you will see many service personnel wearing their medals or their returned from active service badge. Please take the time to give them a smile and may be even say “thank you” for their service to our country.

Thank you.