

106 FIELD WORKSHOP
ON
FIRE SUPPORT BASE (FSB) ZIGGIE
By 243317 Major F.R. Pallas (retd).

The narrative that follows is based on my recollections of some incidents that occurred while on FSB ZIGGIE. I have also drawn on the recollections of other members of the platoon whom I contacted in 2005/6. Where they are available, I have referred to the official records at the Australian War Museum to confirm details.

BACKGROUND

Between the 28th July and the 5th August 1971, a platoon of RAEME soldiers from 106 Field Workshop, took over responsibility for the defence of Fire Support Base ZIGGIE (often spelled ZIGGY.) In this role, the members of the platoon performed all of the functions of the infantry who had previously been defending ZIGGIE. The 106 soldiers carried out an intensive patrol programme, which will be discussed in detail later.

A company of infantry from 3rd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment and a battery of artillery had defended FSB ZIGGIE until the morning of our arrival. At the time we occupied ZIGGIE, all that remained of 3 RAR was a section of mortars and a headquarters element. The Mortar Platoon Commander, who I believe was a National Service Lieutenant (?), was the base commander.

I believe that the following personnel were members of that platoon: Lt. Geoff Hopkins; Sgt Frank Busby (Welder, reinforcement); Sgt Tony Tratt (storeman technical); Cpl Fred Pallas (vehicle mechanic); Cpl Robert Ricketts (vehicle mechanic); Cpl Noel Newton (armament fitter); L/Cpl John Compe (welder); Cfn Kerry (Blue) Drew (vehicle mechanic); Cfn Vince Iannuzzi (electrician); Cfn Brian Carter (armament fitter); Cfn Joe Vranjic (vehicle mechanic); Cfn Roy Crowell (welder); Cfn Terry Vize (vehicle mechanic); Pte Garry Bessel (storeman technical); Cfn Melvin (Mick) Snaith (driver??); Cfn Robert (Bob) Chenery (vehicle mechanic); Cfn Wilfred (Will) Simpson (armament fitter); Cfn Leon Lord (armament fitter); Cfn Gaetano (Tony) Arlotta (vehicle mechanic). This is not a complete list.

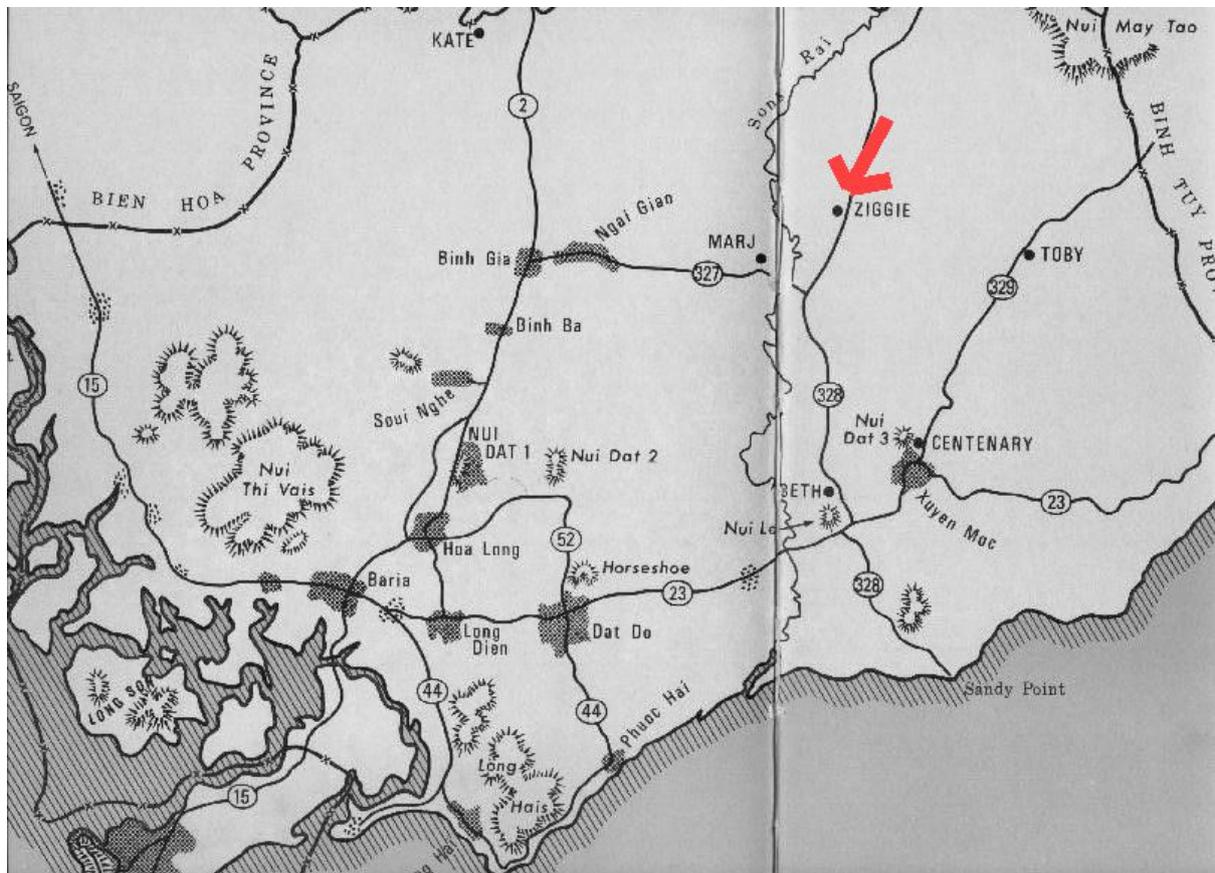
We were a motley mob, but good mates.

Fire Support Base ZIGGIE was located to the North East of Nui Dat in the vicinity of an old market garden at Thua Tich. The grid reference was YS 615 612. It was isolated and remote from other elements of the Australian Task Force.

Capt. Bryan Coolahan provided this information in 2006.

"ZIGGIE was a FSB well across to the North East of the Province, there was no direct route to it, you had to drive South then East then North. It was the most remote of all the FSBs and in an area well held by the VC. I had been in that vicinity very early in my tour when a carrier was mined up there.

Just before I came home (Aug 71) I commanded a platoon sized fighting patrol to the West of the TF and we were recalled at short notice, airlifted out and returned to the TF. Geoff Hopkins then took this group to assist in occupying FSB ZIGGIE while the RA.A Battery and Inf Company that normally occupied ZIGGIE were deployed elsewhere. The FSB was then occupied by a Inf Mortar Pl and the 106 patrol/platoon. Frank Busby was the Pl Sgt. It was isolated, exposed, under normal strength and you and I were concerned." (Referring to a conversation with OC Maj John Sinclair.)



HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Our involvement with FSB ZIGGIE had its beginnings with a TAOR patrol to the South West of Nui Dat. Including the HQ element, the patrol strength was approximately 16. The Adjutant, Captain Bryan Coolahan commanded this patrol. Platoon Sergeant was Frank Busby. I was section leader of one section. I do not recall who the second section leader was, but it was probably Cpl Robert Ricketts.

It was to be a four-day fighting patrol. Our role was to ambush by night, patrol and lay-up by day. The patrol departed Nui Dat at 08.00 on the 26th July 1970.



Fred Pallas and Joe Vranjic on the way to the “Warbies”

We patrolled throughout the first day. Going was medium, but given the weight of the gear that each of us was carrying, we all found it a bit tough. Late in the afternoon, Capt. Coolahan conducted a reconnaissance and selected an ambush position. Unfortunately, one of the sentries believed that some locals observed us as we were moving into the ambush. Not wanting to risk being counter ambushed, Capt. Coolahan found an alternative ambush site some distance away. Shortly after dark, we vacated the first position and moved to the new location.

Being RAEME rather than infantry, we had never conducted a night move before. Going was very slow, but we made it without mishap. Capt. Coolahan individually placed each person in the ambush. Sentries were sighted, and then the machine guns and riflemen covering the selected ground. The rear-

protection screen was established. Communications cords were laid out. It was late in the night when the move was completed.

It was not long after that when the artillery from Nui Dat began lobbing rounds in our general direction. We could hear them pass overhead and impact in the valley behind us. Some rounds hit the top of the hills behind us and began to 'drop short'. The impacts seemed to be 'marching' down the hill towards our rear. After a time, the fire mission ended. I had always assumed that there had been some communication between the artillery at Nui Dat and us.

At first light next morning, we withdrew from the ambush and set up our platoon harbour some distance away. Clearing patrols went out and returned and sentries were located. We then settled into our morning routine. Weapons were cleaned, (50% at a time) and breakfast was eaten. Section leaders were briefed on the day's activities. After completing our administrative tasks, the sentries were withdrawn, and we saddled up for another lovely day back-packing through the "Warbies."

Late in the day, the skipper called an 'O' group. My section was tail-end-charlie. I made my way to the HQ. Capt. Coolahan advised us that we had been re-deployed. We had a very short time to cover a considerable distance to a pick-up point. Speed was now the essence. Records show that this distance was 2,500 metres. During the briefing, Capt. Coolahan also advised that a number of enemy had been seen in our direction of travel. Given the enemy situation, I expected that we would continue to move stealthily in an 'advance to contact.'

I returned to my section, briefed the men and saddled up. We began to move out at patrol pace. Quickly the pace changed to a trot, then to a flat out gallop as we tried to maintain contact with the HQ group and the lead section. Prior to this, we had been moving slowly, making little noise. Now caution was 'thrown to the wind' as we tried to keep up. There was a great deal of noise and absolutely no semblance of stealth.

As we rushed towards the RV, I could see that my section was losing contact with the troops in front. I had no idea where we were heading and could not afford to be separated. I urged more speed, but given the loads we were carrying, I had to accept that each man was going as hard as he could. I recall breaking out of the scrub into a clearing. I do not recall seeing the lead section at all.

Bryan Coolahan has provided me with this recollection:

"We were picked up from the fighting patrol by Iroquois, it was not a secure LZ and their gunships suppressed the area while we boarded, as I had informed them of a sighting only moments before. We did have to move quickly and a little distance to the LZ because the whole TF operational situation which had the Inf and guns relocated from ZIGGIE had become a priority and that stick of Iroquois were needed elsewhere."

The patrol flew back to Nui Dat. We arrived at approximately 17.30 on the 27th July 1971. Overnight we were reinforced and our number increased to approximately 25-30. Lt. Geoff Hopkins assumed command; Sgt Tony Tratt took over as platoon sergeant. Sgt. Frank Busby has advised me that he remained at Nui Dat and did not go out to ZIGGIE until much later.

THE OCCUPATION of FSB ZIGGIE

On the morning of the 28th July, the patrol members attended a briefing in the Borlace club. During the briefing, we were told of our new deployment. We were to take over the defence of Fire Support Base ZIGGIE. I had some idea of the area to which we were being deployed. Some days before this, I had a number of conversations with a RAEME Cpl Mechanic attached to 3 RAR. In one conversation, he told me that the infantry never patrolled in less than platoon strength in the North East because their half platoon patrols were getting into strife. I was not overly concerned however, as according to our brief, we were being deployed to defend ZIGGIE.

On the 28th July 1971, at 08.00, the platoon left Nui Dat by CH47 Chinook helicopters. After a noisy but uneventful flight, we arrived at FSB ZIGGIE.

We arrived to find the base occupied by a Section of Mortars from 3 RAR. Apart from the HQ element and the mortar crews, we appeared to be the only other occupants.

According to the 3 RAR Operational Order for Operation IRON FOX the remainder of the force that had previously occupied FSB ZIGGIE had moved out by 09.00.

On FSB ZIGGIE

The Base was well established. The weapon pits were dug below ground level with a fighting area and a sleeping area. There were two separate pits in each location although they were joined at the forward end. Each weapon pit was covered with an Armco half pipe and was well sand bagged up the sides and roof. Hootchies covered both pits. In all, quite comfortable, but you did sleep with what-ever fell into your pit. There was a fair bit of 'surplus' ammunition in each pit, it was just a matter of getting the right kind of ammunition for each weapon type. This was relatively easy as we only had 7.62mm, 5.56mm and linked 7.62mm for the machine gun.



Our Home away from home on FSB ZIGGIE



Another view of our home on FSB ZIGGIE



A View of FSB ZIGGIE from outside the base

After being allocated our sector, we set about settling in. FSB ZIGGIE was a large base. It is difficult to remember how large it was. Given that a company of infantry and an artillery battery previously occupied it, it must have been of significant size. In my section, I was only able to allocate troops to 50% of the weapon pits on the perimeter and only one in three in reserve. In front of us was an array of barbed wire obstacles. In places, the grass growing through the barbed wire was quite high and restricted visibility when in a weapon pit.

Later that day, we were called to the rear of the mortars to watch them fire a number rounds into the jungle some distance away. I think they were trying to reassure us. For many of us it was the first time we had observed mortars in action. The target was a single tree standing out from the line of the jungle. Several rounds impacted around the tree, but none close enough to satisfy the Mortar Platoon Commander (Plt Comd). The Plt Comd aimed one tube and the next round appeared to strike the tree.

Several more rounds were discharged from each tube until one round was clearly heard to 'misfire'. It tumbled at the top of its trajectory and impacted a short distance outside the wire. Naturally, we all obeyed the 'take cover' command. After this shoot, we were told that it was not uncommon for the U.S. sourced ammunition to malfunction like this and that as a result, the mortars could not and would not fire a mission across the base.

THE PATROL PROGRAMME

In the afternoon, section commanders were called to the Command Post (CP). There we were briefed on what our role was to be. In addition to the normal morning and evening clearing patrols, we were to conduct an intensive patrol programme. Therefore, far from simply being an occupation force, we were to undertake daily patrols as if we were infantry! The purpose of these patrols was three fold. Firstly, to detect any movement of the enemy towards FSB ZIGGIE. Secondly to identify likely locations of the enemy and thirdly to engage the enemy when the opportunity presented itself. Given our prior assumption that we would only be involved in defensive operations, this was a most disturbing development to say the least.

Each section only had ten men and there was a need to leave at least three men for base defence, so every patrol consisted of only seven or eight men. At least two patrols were undertaken every day. The patrols would leave in the morning and return by last light.

A corporal commanded each patrol. Weapons carried on the patrol included an M60 GPMG; at least one M16 and the remainder carried the L1A1 SLR. We carried at least 200 rounds of ammunition per man and each man carried 100 rounds of link ammunition for the GPMG. The gunner and the number two carried two hundred rounds of link each. On some patrols, an M79 grenade launcher was also carried. The M72 LAW was available, but rarely carried.

In addition to this load, the delegated radio operator also carried the radio, an AN-PRC 25 that weighed an additional 7 kilograms. We were required to make a location statement (locstat) on the hour and half hour. All locstats were to be transmitted in code. This proved to be an area where the lack of experience showed.

Most patrols were uneventful. Leave early in the morning, march on a bearing, report every half hour and hour, turn right or left for a 1000 metres, then back to FSB ZIGGIE, arriving before last light.

BASE ROUTINE

Due to the reported enemy activity in our area, and what we experienced over the coming days there was at least 50% stand-to every night. This meant that at least half the section was awake and alert at all times. The role of the section corporal was to ensure that the machine gun was manned at all times and half of the remaining men were alert. Over time, this became a demanding task, which added significantly to fatigue.

Before first light, the base went to 100% stand-to. Then clearing patrols were sent out, returned and the base settled down to its daily routine. Weapons were cleaned on a 50% down basis. Breakfast, such as it was, was eaten and those nominated for patrol activity checked their loads and prepared to be briefed by the patrol commander.

On most nights, there was some degree of enemy activity somewhere on our wire. Our orders were abundantly clear. DO NOT FIRE unless the wire is breached. We were told that to respond to noises on the wire with gunfire would almost certainly result in a hail of fire aimed in the direction of the muzzle flash.

One of the responsibilities of the MG piquet was to report the incidence of enemy activity in our sector. This was done on an as required basis or on the hour and half hour.

Despite whatever had transpired during the night, the allocated patrol commander was required to attend the early morning briefing, pick up codes and prepare his troops to move out. It would be an understatement to say as time passed, lack of sleep became a significant issue for all troops.

ON PATROL **THE LOST COMPASS**

Before this patrol, I was briefed at the CP. I was reminded that the mortars would not fire over the base, and not to get in the shit out that way. (The way we were going). This was not very comforting!

I made it known to the Mortar Plt Comd that I had never been trained in directing fire support anyway. Despite the fact that the tubes would not fire in our direction, I was given a quick lesson and sent on my way. At this briefing I was also advised that there were no friendlies in the area and to stay alert and to stay out of trouble.

Sergeant Tony Tratt accompanied me on this patrol. I believe Tony went out with a patrol on most days. We were short of numbers on the ground and another weapon within the patrol was most welcome.

On this patrol, we were required to move through heavy bush, which surrounded land that had apparently been cleared in the past for market gardens. Going was very hard and progress was very much slower than anticipated. Our location statements (locstats) indicated that progress was too slow to satisfy the CP, so we moved out of the bush into the elephant grass.

Cfn. M.G. Snaith was my second scout. After a short time, he indicated to me to close up. When I did, he told me that he had lost the compass I had given him at the start of this leg. The compass had apparently fallen from a shirt pocket that had been torn as he negotiated some 'wait a while' bamboo. We backtracked some distance and attempted to locate it. We searched for some time without success. It seemed incongruous to me that we were stomping around in enemy territory looking for a bloody compass. It became obvious that we would not locate it so I ordered a stop to the search and we moved on. This incident put us further behind schedule.

We did have a second compass, so we were able to continue the patrol and not simply follow our path back to ZIGGIE. There were no further incidents, although we were moving very slowly in very tough terrain.

THINGS THAT GO BANG IN THE NIGHT

AN UNAUTHORISED DISCHARGE

As we approached FSB ZIGGIE, I saw that we were a considerable distance off course. We were approaching about 180 degrees away from our own gun position which was our intended re-entry point. It was also getting very late. The troops and I were tired and we just wanted to get inside the wire.

I made radio contact with FSB ZIGGIE and I was ordered to stand off in the jungle and await instructions. Light was fading fast and there was discussion on the radio that we might stay outside the base all night. For us, this was a most undesirable situation. There were only seven or eight of us, and our ability to defend ourselves if attacked, was very questionable to say the least. After a long delay, and well after last light, I was cleared to approach and enter through one of the infantry strong points.

I think we had about 600-700 metres to travel through tall grass before we would reach the wire. We were all very tired and our nerves were on edge as we approached FSB ZIGGIE. This was a new experience for us all. We maintained constant radio contact with the gun position, which was to be our point of entry.

As I approached the infantry gun position I was challenged. I was ordered to advance. I approached the strong point, identified myself and advised the number of people in my patrol. We were ordered to advance, one at a time.

As each member of my patrol passed through the gun position, I stopped him and prepared to clear weapons. It was very dark and when I thought the last man had arrived, I quietly ordered 'inspect weapons'. I was just about to check the first weapon when a rifle was discharged. The round impacted not far from where I was standing.

My initial thought was that the enemy had followed us in the dark and had shot one of my patrol. Then I had the horrifying thought that I had not counted my men through the strong point correctly and the piquet had shot the last man in.

Through the confusion and the darkness, I found three of my patrol huddled over a weapon. I could see that a weapon was being stripped. I quickly made sure all my men were accounted for. I am sure that there was a string of muttered expletives from the 3 RAR piquet. I then became aware of a number of people approaching in the darkness. It was the base commander and some others.

The base commander checked that there were no casualties, and then ordered me to report to the CP with the offending weapon and its owner. The two of us duly reported. The offender (whose identity I cannot recall) pleaded that he had cleared the weapon correctly, but the round must not have ejected. There was much profanity directed at the owner of the weapon and it was snatched from his grasp.

The weapon was unloaded, stripped and inspected. It was clear, even in the dull light of the CP that, despite the weapon having been cleared correctly by the Plt Comd, there was still a round in the chamber. This round was manually extracted and was found to be a spent round. The breechblock was scrutinized and it was noted that the extractor was missing.

There was a long silence. After a tense wait, we were gruffly instructed in the correct method for clearing a weapon in the dark, booted in the bum and sent on our way.

At the time, I thought that we had come very close to a major stuff up. Thankfully, there were no casualties. During the night, as I stared into the blackness I reflected on the day's events. The lost compass would mean a loss and damage report. 'No worries,' I thought. This is war; it will be public expense. After all, it was a lot less expensive than the mortar rounds, which were fired earlier. (More on this later - see footnote.)

THE GAS ATTACK

I believe it was as nightfall approached on the 2nd August that the troops closest to the wire in my section, began to feel the effects of an airborne agent. There was considerable anxiety and even some panic as the troops were coughing, experiencing breathing difficulties and eye irritation. It was clear to me that we were under a gas attack. I put the troops into their weapon pits at 100% readiness and reported to the CP.

There I found that the troops manning the CP were beginning to experience similar symptoms, but to a much lesser extent. I was ordered to keep my men on 100% stand to. The effects of this gas were experienced for a considerable period. It was a traumatic and fearful time for us all.

At the 'O' group later that night, I was told that intelligence at HQ 1 ATF had advised that whenever the enemy used gas, they attacked the location that night. I was also advised that the agent was possibly CS gas. Because of this intelligence, we were to remain on 100% stand to all night. We were also told that HQ 1 ATF was trying to locate enough gas masks for us. (This was ironic as each of us had a gas mask hanging up in his tent back at Nui Dat).

The order not to fire, unless the wire was penetrated, was again stated most forcefully. Throughout the night we were aware of enemy activity on our wire. There were a number of flares initiated by the enemy and sappers penetrated the wire almost completely in a number of places to our front. Flares were launched across the wire a number of times. I spent the night crawling from weapon pit to weapon pit, gathering information and making sure that everyone was aware of what was going on in our sector. I was also making sure that no one fired, even when the location of the enemy was obvious.

Tension was high. The troops were very nervous and we expected the enemy to launch a full-scale assault at any time.

Will Simpson recalls:

"That afternoon-night, the enemy circled the F.S.B. and C.S. Gas was released by the enemy which drifted on the wind into our base area causing great discomfort in breathing and also burning of skin and eyes. The platoon was carrying no gas masks and had to endure this trauma for some time till masks were flown in by helicopter from Nui Dat

During the night the enemy could be heard moving around the perimeter of the base and they fired flares. Therefore (sic) the base STOOD TOO (sic) all night in anticipation of an assault. "

Sgt. Frank Busby was back at Nui Dat at this time. Frank sent me this recollection:

"One night after the platoon had occupied ZIGGIE I was told to report to the unit HQ with my gear. When I arrived there was an officer and other unit members. We were informed by the Adjutant Capt S. B. Coolahan, that FSB ZIGGIE was under a gas attack, which could be a prelude to a ground attack and if this happened we were to form part of the relief force. "

The next morning I was flown into FSB ZIGGIE with other unit members and supplies, part of those supplies were gas masks. "

FIRST REINFORCEMENTS ARRIVE

On the morning of the 3rd August, Frank Busby arrived with a shipment of gas masks. He was accompanied by a few members of 106 Field Workshop who could be spared from the technical responsibilities. Later in the day

(while I was outside the wire on patrol), another small group of soldiers arrived.

PATROL 3RD AUGUST, 1971

On the 3rd August, I commanded another patrol out of FSB ZIGGIE. Also on this patrol were Sgt Frank Busby, Cpl Noel Newton and Cfn. Will Simpson. I cannot recall the names of any of the other participants. This patrol was, once again, certainly less than section strength.

Going was very hard as we were moving through heavy jungle. I found that map reading was next to impossible, as there was no way to identify features. We had been moving this way for some time when I called a rest break in situ.

During this break we heard chopping sounds and then there was a sustained burst of machine gun fire from our left front. My initial thought was that the two scouts were taking fire. I did not hear any outgoing fire and I was certain the scouts had been hit. I located the second scout and together we moved up to the forward scout. It became apparent that no one was hit. While the scouts were certain of the direction from which the MG fire came, it was impossible to see any movement in the undergrowth. We could not determine the exact location of the source of the fire, so we waited. This happened in vicinity of YS 601807.

Frank Busby recalls:

“During the course of the patrol the scouts reported that they had found footprints in the dust of approx 2-3 people. Cpl Pallas ordered the patrol to follow the footprints into the jungle, a short time later we heard chopping sounds followed by a burst of machine gun fire, I distinctly remember hearing the rounds go through the trees overhead.”

We established all round protection, well, as much protection as seven men can achieve. To say that we felt vulnerable would be a gross understatement.

I reported the gunfire and our locstat back to ZIGGIE. Even though it was obvious that the enemy was aware of our location, I decided to encode our grid reference. We waited for direction as to what actions we were to take. I was hopeful that we would be ordered to withdraw back to ZIGGIE, but this was not to be.

After what seemed like a very long delay, a radio message was received ordering me to locate the source of the chopping sounds and the machine

gun fire. We saddled up and prepared to move out. This was not a happy time, but the troops did what was required. Finding the going in the jungle almost impossible, we located a track and began to follow it.

A short time later we located footprints. This was reported to FSB ZIGGIE along with our locstat. Again, the grid reference was encoded. This all took time. Firstly, to determine (or rather guess) where we were. Then establish a grid reference then encode and transmit it. Following this contact, I was ordered to follow the track and footprints in the hopes that we would locate the source of the machine gunfire and chopping sounds. I believe the footprints were located in the vicinity of YS 595805. I could not help but feel we were being drawn into an ambush or booby trap.

(Note the difference in my recollections of the sequence and those of Frank Busby.)

A radio message was received from FSB ZIGGIE advising me that my grid reference was incorrect. Either my grid was wrong or the encoding was not correct. Either way, another locstat was required. I made another assessment, encoded it and sent it off. Clearly, someone was not impressed. Soon after, the Battalion Commander, Lt Col Peter Scott, was hovering overhead in his Bell Sioux helicopter. He transmitted in clear, what he said was our correct grid reference.

There was then a lengthy discussion between the CO and ZIGGIE. The CO had located what he believed was a bunker system some distance away from our location. It was his intention that we should patrol to this location and carry out a reconnaissance.

There was a strong caution transmitted from ZIGGIE advising the CO that we were BLUEBELL (RAEME) and not FOXHOUND (infantry). Apparently, there was a concern on ZIGGIE that we were not the appropriate troops to be undertaking this task. However, the CO was not to be deterred. He simply asked if we had a machine gun, and on receiving confirmation, ordered us to carry out the task.

I was concerned about several issues here. Our location had been transmitted in clear, the location of the 'bunker system' was transmitted in clear and I felt that we were being tasked well beyond our capabilities.

(Note: I was to learn many years later that the reason grid references were given in clear was because a set of codes for that day had been misplaced by an Inf patrol. So as not to compromise future codes, all grids that day were sent in clear. No one told me this at the time.)

We cautiously followed the footprints for some distance. Progress was very slow and we became even more cautious as we moved. No doubt, our

inexperience also contributed to our slow rate of progress. It was clear that everyone was on edge and expected to make contact at any moment. Eventually we lost the footprints. I reported that we had lost the trail in our next locstat. The option to proceed on a bearing directly to the 'bunker system' was canvassed with ZIGGIE. Thankfully, we were ordered to return to base.

During my debriefing at the CP, the incidents were discussed in some detail. There was considerable mention made of my inability to map read in close terrain, and my apparent inability encode the grid references correctly. There was no discussion about our capability to undertake the allocated tasks. There was no question about our inadequate patrol strength, nor about our level of infantry skills. I felt that we had literally 'dodged a bullet'.

THE 'TIGER' INCIDENT

Each morning's patrol brief covered a variety of matters including any intelligence available to assist us. Prior to the patrol mentioned earlier, I was briefed on the presence of tigers in the area we were to patrol. Apparently, they were fairly common in this area. I briefed my troops and we set out.

I believe this incident also occurred on the patrol of the 3rd August as we made our way back to ZIGGIE.

On the return leg to ZIGGIE, the patrol was moving through elephant grass. It was tall and visibility was quite difficult. On this leg of the patrol Sgt Frank Busby was acting as forward scout.

After a time, Frank stopped and called me forward for a reconnaissance. I put the troops on the ground and closed up on Frank. He pointed out that we were at the top of a narrow but steep re-entrant. It was a slightly convex slope and the bottom was difficult to see. To the right, the re-entrant narrowed steeply and was covered in very dense scrub under a high canopy. Frank and I discussed how best to deal with this obstacle. To go around would take a considerable time. After discussion, Frank volunteered to move down the slope and check out the valley floor.

I brought the machine gun up to cover the obstacle and placed the rifle group to cover the left flank and rear. Frank slid quietly and slowly down the slope. I saw him reach the valley floor and enter the area under the canopy. I lost sight of him at this point. I sincerely hoped Frank would back out if there was anything of concern visible.

I next saw Frank rapidly scrambling back up the slope. I could hear the clicks of change levers being slipped from safe to fire. Frank joined me at the top and in a panting whisper informed me that an animal, most likely a tiger, had flattened the grass under the canopy. Frank also added that he had seen tiger paw prints in the soft earth but he could not see very far under the canopy because it was too dark. The amazed look on Frank's face was something to see. Relieved that it was not the enemy, I decided to accept the additional distance and time and skirt the obstacle. We eventually made our way back to FSB ZIGGIE.

PATROL 4TH AUGUST, 1971

On the morning of the 4th August, I commanded another patrol out of FSB ZIGGIE. The only other name on this patrol that comes to mind is Sgt Tony Tratt. The aim of this patrol was to relocate the footprints and then locate the bunker system that had been observed by the Battalion CO during aerial reconnaissance the day before. (The same one we were ordered to locate the day before.)

The patrol was uneventful until at approximately 08.42, when a hootchie was located in the vicinity of YS 606 803. The hootchie was lying on the path of tank tracks that crossed the foot track we were following. It appeared to Tony, and to me, that the hootchie had become dislodged from the tank and for whatever reason, they had not stopped to retrieve it.

This find was reported to ZIGGIE. After a short delay we were ordered to establish an ambush on the hootchie. This we did. Seven men is not really a sufficient number to create any reasonable sort of ambush. Therefore, it was a case of gun group (2 men) and myself observing the hootchie. A sentry was located a short distance away on each flank leaving two men for rear protection.

I do not recall for how long we maintained the ambush, but apart from the feeling of vulnerability, it was a relief from the heavy going of patrolling. Eventually we were ordered to return to ZIGGIE. I do not remember if any one retrieved the hootchie.

ADDITIONAL REINFORCEMENTS

On my return from this patrol, I was allocated an additional number of soldiers to strengthen my perimeter. There was little time to get to know

these men, and from what I recall they were from the Task Force Maintenance Area units and comprised cooks, stewards, clerks and similar other callings. It transpired that most had even less experience in infantry activities than we had.

I set about placing the new troops in amongst my own. I tried to ensure that there was an 'experienced' 106er with each 'reo'. This was not always possible as I was not prepared to compromise my already limited capability on the perimeter.

Each reo was briefed on what to expect. They were told the weapon state was 'action.' That is, a magazine on the weapon, the weapon cocked, a round in the chamber, sights up and change lever on safe. They were also admonished in very strong terms that they were not to fire unless the forward pits were firing. They were also advised that it was extremely likely that in the event that they did fire, there would be a significant volume of incoming fire directed at the muzzle flash. They all appeared to understand the situation.

Once again we were on 100% stand to. 1 ATF headquarters had advised that an attack was possible and even likely. Throughout the night I crawled between the weapon pits to gain information and to ensure that the troops were alert.

There were several flares thrown in our direction and there were constant noises outside the wire. In the early hours of the morning, as I moved between weapon pits, I heard the distinctive sound of an SLR being cocked. My first thought was why the hell was the weapon not in the 'action' state before this. Then the horrifying thought crossed my mind that one of the reos had become overwhelmed by the enemy activity and was about to engage them.

As quickly as I could, given the need for stealth, I located the man in question. He assured me that he did not intend to fire, but he was just making sure that he had a round in the chamber! He clearly was very agitated about what was going on around him. I assured him that this was a common level of activity and it was very unlikely that it would progress to anything more significant. I wish that I could have felt as sure of that myself at the time.

It was an extremely long night, but then they all were.

WITHDRAWAL TO NUI DAT

On the morning of the 5th August, 1971, we departed FSB ZIGGIE for the last time and returned to Nui Dat. We arrived at 106 FdWksp at 09.30.

As we left FSB ZIGGIE, it was interesting to see that we were being replaced by 105mm guns and a company of infantry. We were flown out by Chinook Medium lift helicopters. It was fascinating to note that the fuselage of the aircraft I was in had a long crack in the roof. Part way along this crack there was a date. I assumed it was meant to indicate the progress of the crack. It did nothing to assure me that the aircraft was serviceable.



Our replacements arrive

EPILOGUE

The longer we remained on FSB ZIGGIE, the more obvious it became to me that the skill set of RAEME soldiers was significantly different from that of highly trained infantrymen. I was sure that we could defend our static defensive positions. However, I do not believe that we had the same skills as would have

been acquired by an infantryman in this situation. We had not even had the opportunity to practice those skills we did have. Each patrol comprised different people. The opportunity to work-up and become a cohesive section was never available. I do not believe that we were adequately trained nor of sufficient strength to be actively seeking out the enemy in his territory.

Each patrol we undertook was well understrength. Should a determined enemy have been encountered, the outcome would almost certainly have been disastrous.

Map reading and navigation was very difficult. Much of the time locations were guessed-at using paces and bearings. There were no discernable features in the jungle to aid navigation. Obviously, my estimates were often inaccurate. Encoding grid references took time and we seemed to be the frequent source of amusement for the radio operators at ZIGGIE. I was informed on one occasion that we were now located in the South China Sea!

Although we had all attended the Battle Efficiency Course at Canungra, very few of us had any prior field force experience. We were Tradesmen who had been employed in base units repairing equipment. The National Servicemen had even less opportunity than the Regulars to acquire the necessary skills.

After call-up, a National Serviceman completed his basic training. Then it was off to Corps training. Following this, a Tradesman would attend one or more specialised equipment repair courses. Once identified for Vietnam service, he would attend the Battle Efficiency Course at Canungra. There was little opportunity to become truly proficient in the skills of an infantryman. In fact, at Canungra, priority was always given to training the Infantry Corps and other arms soldiers, and rightly so.

On the other hand, an infantryman would undergo his basic training then more than likely, after Corps training, spend the remainder of his first year with his battalion prior to being deployed. A vast difference in skills development over that of the RAEME soldiers on FSB ZIGGIE.

Did anyone really believe that a three-week course at Canungra was the equivalent of the months of training that the infantry troops put in before their deployment? I very much doubt it.

I think the concerns expressed by John Sinclair and Bryan Coolahan at the beginning of this article were well founded. Yet, despite the lack of training undertaken by the members of the platoon they all performed very well, without complaint, in very dangerous, trying and arduous circumstances. Interestingly, I do not believe that any of the diggers involved in this deployment was ever de-briefed.

RESEARCH FOR THIS ARTICLE

I began researching our involvement with FSB ZIGGIE in September, 2005. I wanted to fill the gaps in my memories and put some historical perspective into my recollections. I had also hoped to be able to identify all the members of 106 Field Workshop who assumed the role of Infantry and occupied FSB ZIGGIE during the period 28th July 1971 to 5th August, 1971. Regrettably, few 106 Field Workshop files have survived and apart from the Commander's Diary, none cover 106's Operational Activities.

Over a period of months, I sought information from the Australian War Museum. Regrettably, apart from the documents that are outlined below, there was very little available

OFFICIAL RECORDS

The only reference to Fire Support Base ZIGGIE that I was able to locate in 106 Field Workshop files was contained in the Commander's War Diary. Interestingly, this was also the only document that I could locate, which contained any mention of the gas attack.

Sources

106 Field Workshop
Commanders Diary July 1971.

Operations of Interest

Patrolling:

39. *On 26 Jul a sixteen man fighting patrol was deployed into the foothills of the WARBURTONS for what was to be four days.*
40. *On 28th Jul Operation Iron Fox commenced. In accordance with the Op order 106 Fd Wksp was to provide a rifle platoon headquarters and a rifle section to secure FSB ZIGGIE (YS 615812) to allow redeployment of 3RAR for the operation. It later became necessary for 106 Fd Wksp to provide a full rifle platoon. The patrol in the Warburtons was therefore needed for redeployment. They were extracted by helicopter after a forced march of 2500 metres to a suitable LZ.*

41. *Gunships flew cover. They arrived back at the workshop at 1730 hrs on 27 Jul. The rifle platoon for ZIGGIE deployed by Chinook at 0800 hrs 28 Jul. They returned to Nui Dat at 0930 hrs 5 Aug. Apart from some difficulties with a tiger, swarming bees, a small sapper attack and a light CS gas problem, they carried out the normal functions of infantry in a FSB with little to report except one recent track.*

Note: The “forced march” was a flat out run with heavy packs set up for a four-day mission. I doubt that any man was carrying under 40 kilos.

3RAR Combat Operations
After Action Report
Operation Iron Fox
280001 Jul 71- 052400 Aug 71

Annex C to
3RAR After Action Report
Op Iron Fox
Dated 7 Aug 71.

Sequence of Events.

Day 7 - 3 Aug

30. 030945 *A patrol from NDP ZIGGIE at YS 6080 heard a burst of automatic fire and chopping. A track of two people was located. NFI*

Day 8 - 4Aug

33. 040842 *A Patrol from NDP ZIGGIE located a hootchie and tracks, small footprints at YS 606803 and were ordered to ambush the area.*

1st Australian Taskforce Intsum No 215/71

Period covered from 03001H to 032400H

Ground Activity

(2) AO Glenelg.

(a) (031005H) At YS601807 a ptl from FSB ZIGGIE heard a burst of MG fire and chopping sounds due west from grid in vicinity YS595805. In vicinity YS595805 ptl found track used by 2-3 persons in bare feet in previous 24-48 hours moving Southwest. Ptl has now returned to base.

ITEMS OF ADDITIONAL INTEREST

During my research, I had occasion to speak with Col. Peter Scott, who was the C.O. 3 RAR in SVN. Naturally, Col. Scott could recall little of our small part in operation "Iron Fox." He did however, recall our involvement on FSB ZIGGIE. In an attempt to assist in identifying members of 3 RAR who occupied FSB ZIGGIE with us, Col. Scott suggested that I contact the MFO (mortar forward observer) who was with us during our patrols. When I responded that at no time did we ever have an MFO or in fact any other 3 RAR personnel with us outside the wire, Col. Scott paused, then said emphatically that such a situation was most irregular and should not have happened. He stated that an MFO should have accompanied us outside the wire on every patrol. Had he known that this was not happening, he would have been taken immediate action to rectify the situation.

CAVEAT

Many years have passed since these events. I have tried to record them accurately. I encourage others to contribute their recollections. I hope that in time, we will be able to record all of the events relating to our time on FSB ZIGGIE and identify every participant.

Footnote:

You may recall that earlier, I mentioned a lost compass. My assumption at the time was that it would be written off as an operational loss. Well, this was not the case. I still have a copy of the investigating officer's report. It recommended, "Members to pay."

The 'reasoning' was; because Lt Hopkins gave me the compass without a lanyard, he pays one third. Because I gave the compass without a lanyard to Cfn Snaith, I pay one third. Because Mick accepted the compass without a lanyard, and apparently was so "irresponsible" as to get his clothing torn to shreds as he negotiated 'wait-a-while' bamboo, he should also pay a third.

At the time, I thought this decision was ironic, as I had never seen those responsible for it patrolling in the conditions we did. Nor indeed, did I ever see them outside the wire on operations! Nevertheless, I may be wrong! However, sanity eventually prevailed. The task force commander rescinded the decision, and the compass was written of at public expense.