

TRAGEDY AT AN NHUT

A concealed mine delivered a painful blow to C Company in Vietnam. By Elizabeth Stewart

About 9 am on 14 February 1967 a group of Australian soldiers was gathered near the southern end of the small South Vietnamese village of An Nhut. They were making last-minute arrangements for the day's activities. The men were from C Company, 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR).



WO2 Norm Goldspink (R) directs those carrying the wounded from the mine blast to the dust-off helicopter. LT Roger Wainwright can be seen talking to the helicopter pilot. AWM COL/67/0148/VN

Among the group were three men from the company headquarters. Major Don Bourne had just taken over command of C Company and was on his first operation with the battalion. He was a graduate of the first class of the Officer Cadet School (OCS), Portsea, who had served in both Malaya and Korea before being sent to Vietnam. It was his 35th birthday.

Captain Robert Milligan was 30 years old and also a graduate of OCS. He had been dux of his year, and won the Governor General's Medal. He was second in command of C Company and had two weeks of his 12-month tour to serve. He was engaged and planned to marry on his return home.

Captain Peter Williams was a 28-year-old New Zealand officer, serving with 161 Field Battery, RNZA. He too attended OCS, graduating with Robert Milligan's class in 1961. He was a last-minute replacement for C Company's forward observer, who was incapacitated owing to injury. Williams volunteered to take part in the operation and, like Milligan, had only a short time left to serve in Vietnam.

Just after completing the orders group, a large blast shattered the morning calm. As they dispersed, a member of the group had triggered a well-concealed mine. The effects were devastating: Major Bourne, Captain Milligan and Captain Williams were killed outright; five other men were wounded. An urgent call was made for a medical officer and "dustoff" helicopter, which arrived soon after to carry the dead and injured to hospital. The devastation caused by such a sudden and severe explosion came as a great blow to C Company, and to the battalion. 5 RAR was taking part in Operation Beaumaris, a cordon-and-search of An Nhut, which was a village of nearly 1,000 residents about six kilometres southeast of the Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat. The operation involved throwing an early morning cordon of troops around the village, then moving the inhabitants into a confined space while the village was searched, and enemy suspects rounded up for interrogation.

The practice of cordon-and-search had been particularly successful for the battalion, which considered it to be the most effective way of "removing the enemy's claws" from the local population. Cordon-and-search operations thus far had yielded the greatest numbers of enemy in the shortest amount of time, usually with minimal Australian casualties. A search of An Nhut was considered important because although the majority of the residents supported the South Vietnamese government, Australian intelligence had discovered that several men from the village were members of a local guerrilla unit. Other village members were known to be part of the locally-recruited Viet Cong battalion, D445.

Late on the afternoon of 13 February troops from 5 RAR began to move into position. The village was easy to isolate as it stood in a sea of rice paddies, and after a few hours sleep the soldiers were easily able to put the cordon in place. This was done by about 4 am, in order to prevent Viet Cong suspects escaping from the village.



One problem company commanders were aware of was the danger of mines previously laid around the perimeter of the village by South Vietnamese forces. The location of these mines was not recorded and the safety of troops could only be guaranteed by staying outside the minefield's perimeter fence until the area had been checked with mine detectors.

There was some reassurance from the American adviser located at the district headquarters which controlled An Nhut. He had told battalion intelligence officer Captain Robert O'Neill that the mines had

been taken out during the previous wet season. Nevertheless, caution was still applied as the cordon spread out.



Major Bourne can be seen rubbing the back of his neck ,whilst Captain Milligan rests a leg on the barbed wire and Captain Williams stands between them. Brian Budden is at left in brown jacket and John Bilston is bottom right; Bruce Schmidtchen is sitting left of the picket and Bill Czekai (now Crystal) is kneeling behind the picket .

By 9.15, when the blast occurred, the search of An Nhut was underway. C Company had reached their cordon position and a quick search of the area revealed no hidden mines or booby traps. Remnants of the old village perimeter fence remained and it was around this feature that the group of soldiers were standing for their final briefing. After the blast, it was assumed by those nearby that the device triggered had been located at the base of one of the fence pickets. The device itself was blown to pieces and never properly identified.

Although distracted by the blast, the men of 5 RAR continued with the operation. Most of the population were questioned and as a result, six Viet Cong cadre members were captured, and 14 Viet

Cong suspects and five Viet Cong sympathisers were detained for questioning. At a personal level, the accident left its mark. C Company member Lieutenant Roger Wainwright remembers that in order not to allow the men to dwell on the event they were sent out almost immediately on another operation to the north of Nui Dat. Another soldier, Second Lieutenant David Harris, had known Don Bourne well when they worked together at task force headquarters. He kept a detailed diary of his Vietnam tour and his entry for 14 February reads: "Operation Beaumaris is over and at last we are back - Poor Don Bourne, Bob Milligan and Peter Williams were killed by a mine. I just sat down and cried my bloody eyes out. Those poor blokes."

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