

## OTU

A band of intrepid travellers gathered in Changi Airport, Singapore in early October wondering what they were likely to experience over the following 9 days. Hardly anyone on the group knew each other, but it was interesting to see people quickly relaxing and humour starting to creep in. After 24 hours the group had bonded very well.

This was the tour of some of the battlefields in the South of Vietnam organised by Dave Sabben MG and Di Sabben through National Network Travel.

My inclination is usually to think about things and weigh them up before making a decision, but as soon as I heard about this venture, I knew immediately that I wanted to be part of it. I think the main reason was that, having had the Scheyville training and then not having an opportunity to put it into practice, I was interested to learn much more and to see the actual conditions around Nui Dat and Long Tan.

Dave was a knowledgeable and eloquent leader of the group. He gave fascinating insights into the wider strategy of the whole intervention – not only the specific tactics of the main Battle of Long Tan.

There were detailed briefings with PowerPoint presentations several evenings before we went out to particular locations, which gave us a head start on understanding all the information given the next day.

There was also a lot of history and background of Vietnam both in the 1960s and also today. The two Vietnamese guides arranged by the Sabbens were excellent – very knowledgeable with great senses of humour.

I will concentrate on the Long Tan day as that was the most dramatic day, but every other day of the tour was filled with interesting experiences and an article could be written sometime about those other days. On the evening before the Long Tan day we had a two hour briefing on the Battle. In the morning we endeavoured to follow the course of the patrol in real time. We went to Nui Dat and walked around there near SAS Hill for some time understanding the layout of the fighting force. We then walked part of the way to Long Tan (partly by rubber wheeled APC!). What contributed enormously to the impact of the day was that we walked the last few kilometres to Long Tan across some moderately difficult terrain, including through a paddy field (not everybody managed to jump the flowing water channel successfully!). A reality check was that we were carrying light day packs rather than the 60 pound packs carried by the Australian soldiers, as they had been setting out on a 3 day patrol.

As we came over a rise on this trek, we saw a group of Vietnamese ahead through a row of trees in a rubber plantation. I fleetingly thought that the Sabbens had organised something to be realistic (coming across enemy or something), but quickly dismissed that and then thought as they were standing in a circle that it might be a cock-fight – it was. Cock-fighting is illegal in Vietnam now and they were perturbed to see a group of people emerge over the rise, but quickly realised we were not Vietnamese police! I went to take a photo, but their gestures made it very clear that would be unwelcome.

We walked on for some time and then came to a man-made lake which was not there during Australia's engagement in Vietnam. On the slope down to the lake in a beautiful location someone was building a house partly out of shipping containers. A guy emerged from around the corner of the house. He was so dark skinned that at first glance he appeared to be

Vietnamese, but obviously his physical build was not. As soon as he spoke he was clearly Australian. He walked up to Dave and said "Are you Dave Sabben?". I was walking a bit ahead at that stage and turned around because I could see this looked like being an interesting meeting. He called Dave "Sir" until Dave immediately disarmed him. He was delighted to meet Dave because he had heard that Dave had passed by this place in previous years and had never seen him and this time it was a coincidence that he happened to be working outside the house on the corner nearest the track. After a bit of discussion, he asked if he could join the group walking to Long Tan and Dave, after checking with everybody whether it was ok, said that was fine. He was Jason, a soldier who had been with 6RAR and had served in East Timor. Jason was meant to be teaching English at the local school that afternoon, but despatched someone to say he could not make it.

He went back inside his semi-completed dwelling and returned with a very yellowing copy of a book on the "Battle of Long Tan" and asked Dave to sign it. Dave wrote a long inscription.

So, with our expanded group, we moved on.

The nightly briefings and the explanation on the battle site itself covered the full range from strategic analysis of the tremendous significance of patrolling to the survival of the Nui Dat base to the horrifying details that the average age of D Company was about 21 years, that rubber trees provide no protection from rounds and curious facts such as the only choppers available for the crucial ammo resupply in the fading light were the Huey choppers which had brought the entertainers to the Nui Dat base. Also, interesting were the explanation of issues like the interplay of command between the New Zealand, Australian and the US artillery batteries and the chain of command relating to the unleashing of the APCs.

A bit of monsoonal rain appeared almost on cue during the walk through the rubber plantation, but it was very light and short lived – I went to pull out a parka from my backpack and then realised that my shirt was already saturated with sweat, so just put the parka away – I obviously had been carrying it unnecessarily every day!

After we moved through the Long Tan rubber plantation over a couple of hours tracing the movements of the three platoons, we held a vigil at the Long Tan Cross, which was a very moving experience. Some words were spoken and joss sticks were lit for all soldiers in the conflict and then there was instinctive silence. After a short silence people were just starting to raise their heads and think about moving when as clear as a bell the Last Post sounded through the plantation. It had significant impact. I said to the Sabbens as we moved off that they had really planned everything down to the last detail by having the Last Post played and they said that it wasn't them – apparently Jason had the Last Post on his mobile phone and had the great idea of playing it. He also chose the perfect moment to do it.

Another emotional part of the trip was that we did not know what motivated all the various participants to come, but one of our participants said at the end of the Long Tan day that the main reason he came was because his best mate was killed in the Battle and he had never been to Vietnam and 47 years later he decided it was time to do that for his mate. Sadly, he was the very last person to be killed in the Battle.

For two of the most "sensitive" days of the tour – the visit to Long Tan and the following day to the mined areas and the Viet Cong tunnels, we had a government "observer" (to use a neutral word) travel with us. Maybe they wanted to make sure that we didn't do anything insensitive.

She looked as though she had her normal work day clothes on, including light sandals which were completely covered in the red mud very early in the day, but she followed us through the whole adventure over those two days.

There is a photo of the Scheyvilleans who participated in this Sabben trek in this edition of the magazine. Most of the other participants had direct military experience (and one had been in military intelligence and had several tours of Vietnam). There was one non-military person - a military history academic.

My focus is on the Long Tan day because obviously it was the most intense, but every other day was active and fulfilling, including visiting a kindergarten and a dental clinic which various veterans had raised funds for, built and, most importantly, still maintained. We gave presents which were gladly received.

The OTU Scheyvillean published good articles on Dave's 2012 trek, by Barry Hester 1/72 (No.3 2012 edition) and by Graeme Chester 2/67 (No. 1 2013 edition) which go into much more detail and I have sought it to avoid duplication.

The great physical exercise of the trip was superbly counterbalanced by the top quality and interesting hotels and restaurants. Good land and water transport and the cyclos and the ferry added great variety to the action filled tour.

Rick Thomas 1/69 thought of having some humorous awards on the last night and asked me to assist. It was an enjoyable but meaningful way to recognise each other's characteristics and to thank the Sabbens.

The trek will happen again in 2014 and I highly recommend the experience. I had high expectations and they were exceeded. It was moving, interesting, varied, good value and also a great deal of fun.

Frank Paton 2/70