

The Battle of Binh Ba

A “baffling mystery and SIGINT failure”?-NO!

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After service in the RAAF, LT Chamberlain graduated from the Officer Cadet School, Portsea in 1964 and served in the South Vietnam Campaign in a number of appointments, followed by a range of linguist, training and intelligence positions in Australia and overseas.

BRIG Chamberlain was appointed Director of Military Intelligence in October 1988 and his last posting was as Head, Australian Defence Staff Jakarta from January 1996 to January 1998.

On 6 June 1969, the Australian Task Force's Ready Reaction Force (RRF) engaged the 33rd North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment at Binh Ba village, about six kilometres north of the 1st Task Force's (1ATF) Nui Dat base. The official Australian history - "Fighting to the Finish" (2012), contends that:

"(in) the enemy mystery...there seemed to be no clear rationale for their (NVA and VC) actions. Australian commanders and intelligence officers were baffled. During the initial occupation of Binh Ba, the 33rd NVA Regiment had apparently maintained strict radio silence, eluding task force signals intelligence." p.237

That account in the official history is incorrect and needs clarification.

With Presidents Nixon and Thieu scheduled to meet on Midway Island on 8 June 1969, and the communists' Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) to be formally announced on 10 June, 1ATF intelligence reporting from the period indicates that Hanoi planned a period of "high point" attacks in the South from early to mid-June 1969 "to emphasize the enemy's continuing capability to conduct offensive action." The Viet Cong's Military Region 7 established a 'Campaign Headquarters' to direct the activity in the Ba Ria-Long Khanh province, including a major attack against the village of Binh Ba and lesser attacks on both Hoa Long and Hoi My villages. The attack would include an ambush of any 1ATF Ready Reaction Force.

The SIGINT "fixes" of the 33rd NVA's movements towards Binh Ba village were declassified by the responsible Canberra-based agency in early 2011 and provided to the author. They demonstrate that by the end of May 1969, the 1,100-strong 33rd NVA Regiment

was "fixed" by signals intelligence direction-finders in south-eastern Long Khanh province, about 55 kilometres north-east of Nui Dat. The 33rd Regiment's principal radio station was intercepted and tracked by 1ATF's 547 Signal Troop, as the Regiment moved south-west into Phuoc Tuy province - crossing the Song Ray River on the 2nd of June and located just north of Binh Ba village near Duc Trung hamlet by the 4th June. The Task Force commander and senior staff were progressively briefed on the 33rd Regiment's movements.

The Viet Cong's D440 Local Force Battalion was initially scheduled to occupy Binh Ba village, with the 33rd NVA Regiment to ambush the 1ATF relief force as it moved north up Route 2 from Nui Dat. However, D440 was attacked by an Australian element while in its pre-assembly area, and the "occupation task" was re-assigned to the 33rd Regiment's 1st Battalion. D440 later played a limited "cameo" role in the Battle - losing several killed and a 75mm RCL captured.

Recently available Vietnamese material indicates that the 2nd Battalion of the 33rd NVA Regiment occupied ambush positions South of Binh Ba awaiting the arrival of the 1ATF Ready Reaction Force. However, the ambush was reportedly not "triggered" by the Regiment's Tactical Headquarters as "the Australians were too dispersed - in groups of two to three vehicles". It appears that the commanders of both the 33rd Regiment and its 2nd Battalion were subsequently chastised for that failure. In July 2003, the 33rd NVA Regiment established a memorial complex at Binh Ba as many of Regiment's soldiers settled in the South, post-war. Their monument lists the names of 53 of their soldiers who were killed in the Battle.

The conduct of the Battle of Binh Ba is described in the recently published official history "Fighting to the Finish" and in 5 RAR's "The Year of the Tigers" (2009), however contrary to the recently-published Australian official history, the 33rd Regiment was not on "strict radio silence" and the 1ATF intelligence staff had indeed processed the SIGINT provided by 547 Signal Troop and informed the Commander of the movements of the 33rd NVA Regiment.

Intelligence staff were not "baffled".

Regrettably, it is unlikely that the official history will be formally amended to reflect a more accurate record of the intelligence and SIGINT history of the Battle of Binh Ba. ■