

Battle of Long Tan: American SIGINT Assists the Australians

CCH, over the years, has written much about SIGINT in the Vietnam War (1965-1973). It has not written that much however about the use of SIGINT by battlefield partners, especially when Americans were assisting them. Today's HT is about the Australian 1966 battle at Long Tan, which involved a handful of American SIGINTers. One of those is now inscribed on the NSA Memorial Wall.

On 18 August 1966, North Vietnamese Army regulars and their South Vietnamese-based allies, the Viet Cong, attacked an outnumbered company of Australian soldiers near the village of Long Tan, very close to the Australian base camp. Thanks to reinforcements and American air power, the Australians would carry the day. It was an impressive victory, with enemy casualties well into the hundreds as opposed to just 18 killed for Australia. Long Tan was the greatest battle Australia fought in the war.

A small handful of Army Security Agency (ASA) personnel were already assisting the Australians with mobile direction finding. ASA, now INSCOM (Intelligence and Security Command), was the SIGINT component for the U.S. Army. PRD-1 teams, i.e., 3-man jeep mounted units, had been assigned to assist Australian forces in Nui Dat, Phuoc Thuy Province. These jeeps carried an AN-PRD-1 receiver and antenna.

These teams were set up at three sites. The primary enemy target, at least for one of the teams, was codenamed DODO. Thanks to team location fixes, DODO was "Arc Lighted" (bombed by American B-52s) on 17 August, the day before the Long Tan attack.

For the Long Tan battle itself, these teams were the first to actually identify and locate the enemy, discovering that they were just right outside the base camp. Upon notification by the Americans, the Australians then brought in their Signal Intelligence Unit, which agreed with the teams' findings.

One of those Americans who assisted the Australians in the battle, serving as a liaison, was 1st Lieutenant John Cochrane. In fact, he received an Australian medal for the battle. A few weeks later (24 October 1966), Cochrane, at his next ASA assignment, was killed by a sniper while checking PRD-1 sites. He is one of those listed on the NSA Memorial Wall.

This story comes from Jan Walters, who informed CCH of his time as a PRD-1 member assisting the Australians. Obviously, certain aspects of the story are difficult to verify. We thank Jan for telling us his compelling story. Future CCH articles will include other topics coming from Jan's letter.

The author of this article is Gregory J. Nedved

Sources: Information provided by Jan Walters to CCH

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