

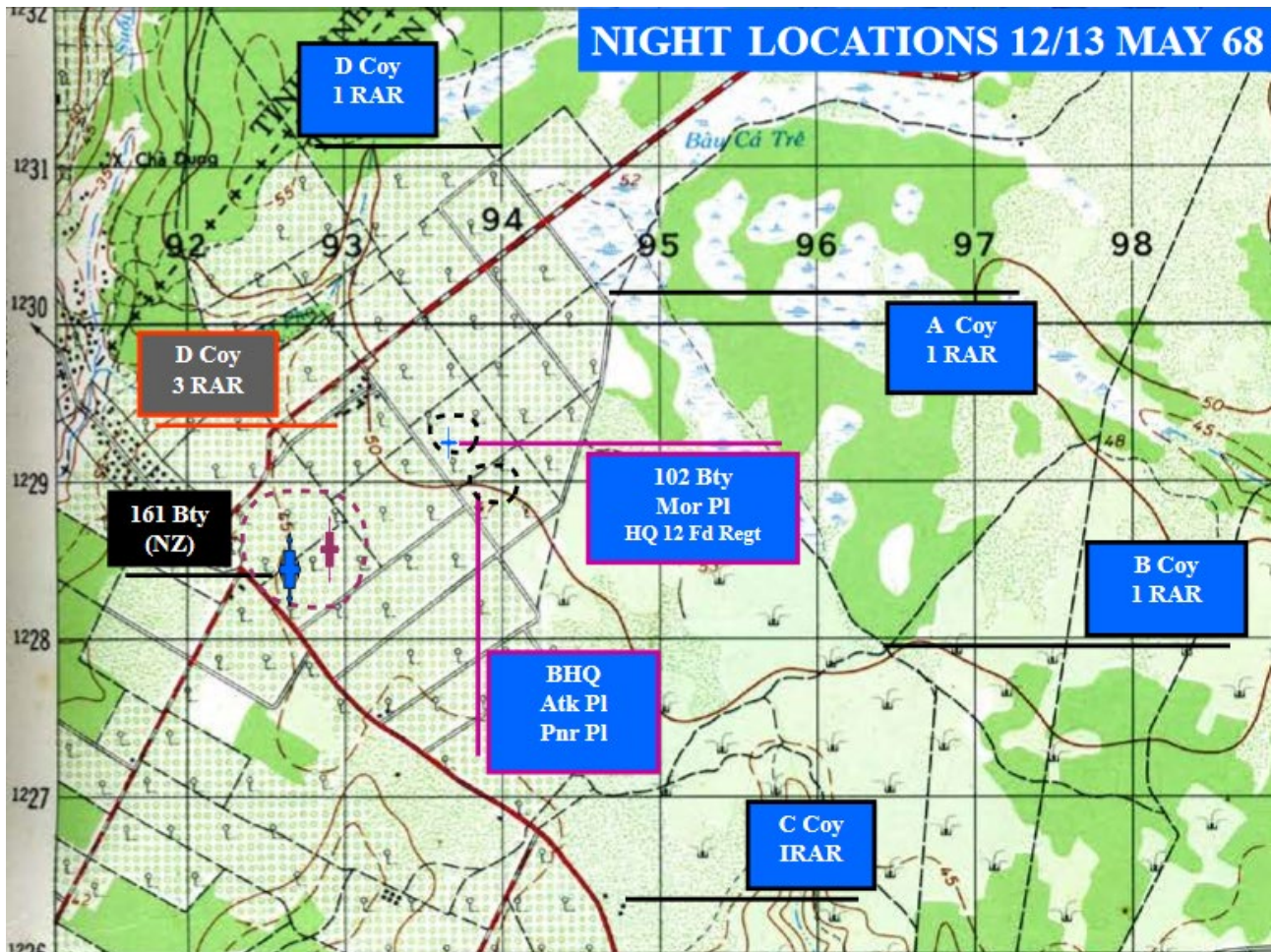
FSPB 'CORAL' & 1RAR MORTAR PLATOON – 12MAY68

On 12May68, I was serving my second day with the US Army 135th Assault Helicopter Company, a combined US Army/Australian Navy outfit for the fly-in to Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB) CORAL north-east of Saigon. About 10 9SQN pilots did short one week exchanges to observe their operating practices preparatory to formally accepting primary trooplifting responsibilities for 1 Australian Task Force (1ATF) which eventuated in August 1968.

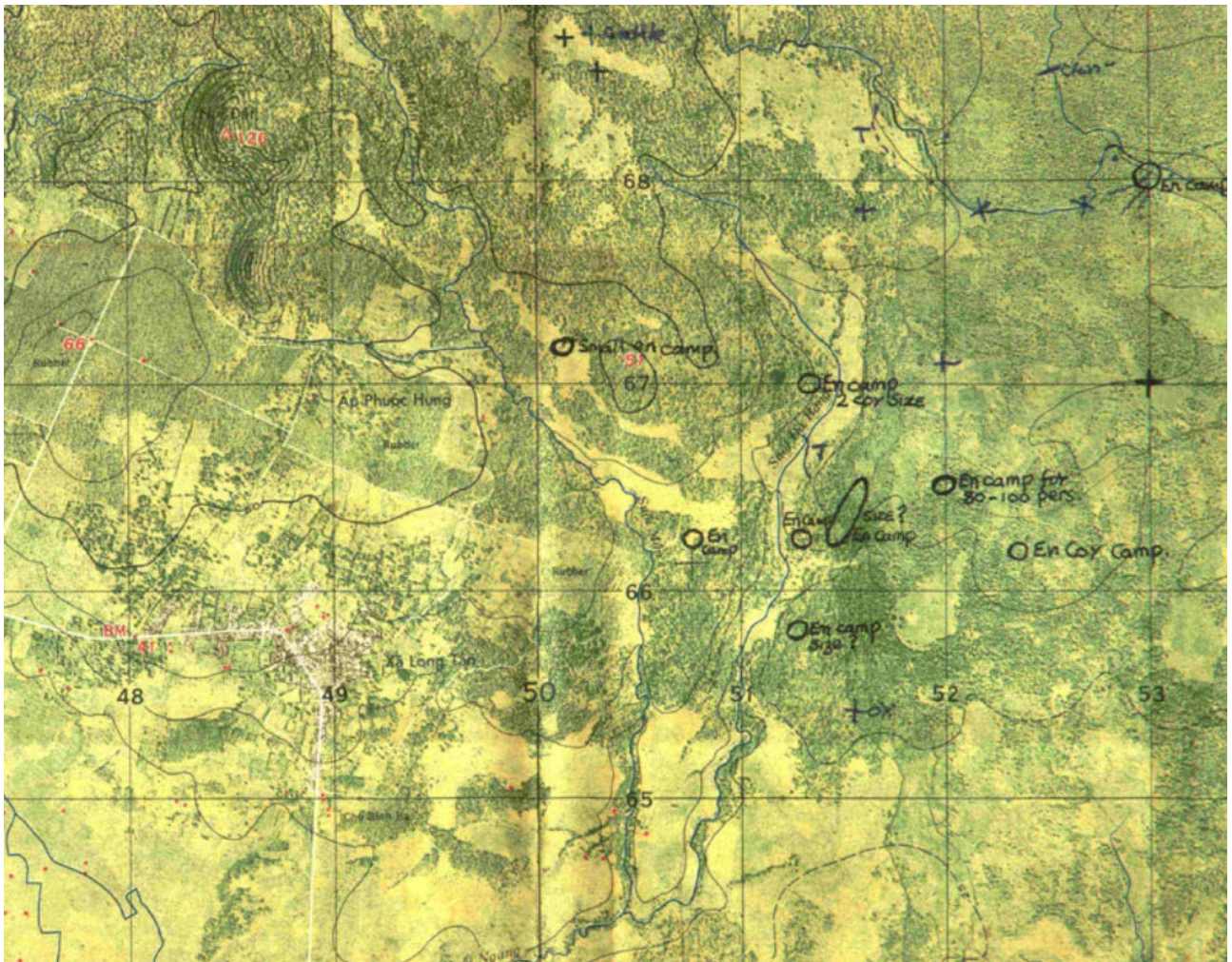
The deployment of 1ATF elements became a planning fiasco after the guns of 102 Battery were deployed about 1,500 metres from the intended location of FSPB CORAL.

The 1:50,000 map illustrated was a series commonly used by the Australian Army, but quite deficient in features compared with the 1:25,000 Pictomap series that 9SQN used generally for operational purposes.

The light green speckled shading on the 1:50,000 map shown indicated rubber plantation but some of that was cleared open ground during FSPB CORAL related operations.



Picto maps (1:25,000) were compiled directly from aerial photography and printed in colour, pretty accurately depicting all physical features and vegetation parameters. Wet season growth of course slightly altered the shape of foliage covered areas over time, but these maps were still essential for tactical purposes.



1:25,000 Pictomap (Xa Long Tan area)

1ATF was really snowed with air support resources but seemingly made little use of an invaluable tool that was very readily obtainable, that being aerial photography for operations planning.

The customary practice for larger scale trooplifting was for ground and air commanders to jointly involve in pre-mission planning to ensure crystallization of suitable landing zones and for the relevant ground and air commanders to be airborne together in a command and control (C&C) aircraft during an airlift operation.

Reputedly, standard airlift planning practices did not transpire pre-CORAL insertion and some post-action accounts have claimed preliminary aerial reconnaissance was ineffective because flown too high. But the scope and detail of the prospective battlefield was easily viewed in clear weather conditions from whatever height.

During the progressive fly-in of infantry elements throughout the afternoon of 12 May 68, we separately sighted 2 or 3 NVA soldiers, uniformed with webbing, just observing proceedings and conveyed these sightings to the C&C aircraft. However, not known whether the 1RAR Battalion Commander was on board or the sighting information was passed to sub-units.

About dusk, we were spat off as a single aircraft to fly in the 1RAR Mortar Platoon to an awful smallish LZ on a vegetation covered ridge where we had difficulty touching down among fallen timber on sloping ground. The Mortar Platoon of 18 men required 4 or 5 sorties to insert them with their base plates, tubes and ammunition.

This location was remote from the gun battery that I cannot recall sighting during these sorties although I was probably somewhat focused on looking for signs of enemy activity considering our sightings throughout the afternoon. US Army aircrew with whom I was flying queried: '**Why are they putting these guys away from the main grouping?**'

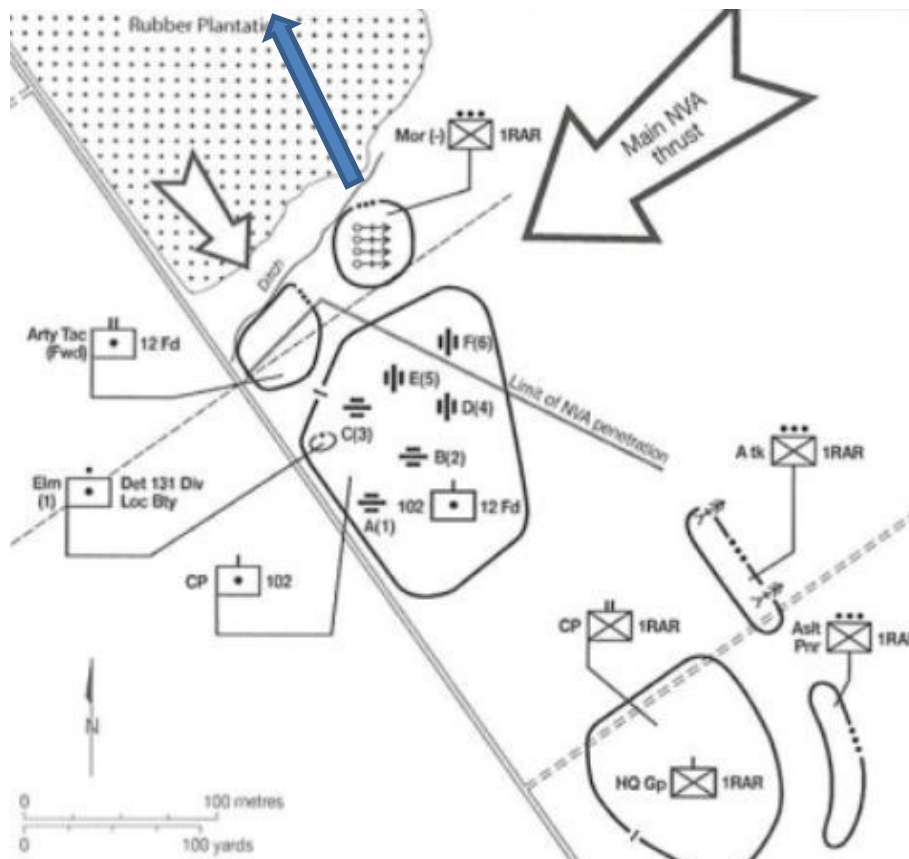
The question arises was the actual Mortar Platoon LZ just selected as a grid reference from the inadequate 1:50,000 map? If it was intended to locate the platoon adjacent to 102 Bty, then why not select a nearby LZ in cleared terrain, as was obviously available in the image?



1RAR Mortar Platoon were inserted in vegetation beyond top-centre of the image, northwards of 102 Bty location

On approaching the LZ on maybe the final sortie, we sighted a uniformed NVA soldier standing under a tree observing happenings within about 300 metres of the Platoon location. I grabbed one of the members (with two rubber bands on an epaulette) before he disembarked, advised him of the sighting and to tell his OC to get some defences organized ASAP. **Sadly, the platoon suffered 5 killed and 8 wounded when later overrun.**

The Mortar Platoon was not initially located in a cleared area but undoubtedly inserted deeper into the northern vegetation. Other elements already near 102 Battery location could not have seen 1RAR Mortar Platoon members disembarking.



It would have been very difficult for the Mortar Platoon to relocate by foot after dusk, transporting their weaponry and ammunition over pretty undulating timbered terrain to position adjacent to the gun battery.



Presumed overnight 1RAR Mortar Platoon location 12May68
Deployment location was further northwards in vegetation

Some senior Australian Army Officers were disinclined to involve AIR in planning. Commander 1ATF at time of CORAL apparently did not convey intelligence to subordinate commanders and the whole fly-in fiasco reflected inadequate joint ground/air co-operation, even though the AIR component was US Army.

9SQN got on well with the men of 1RAR, but ultimately, CO 1RAR as CDF drove the helicopter transfer decision that eventuated in 1989, which was somewhat a paradox.



BRIAN DIROU, DFC

85 Penlington Street

The Range, Qld. 4700

Tele: 07 4819 1513

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