



JOHANNES (HANS) FLEER



Operation Gisborne.

On the 28 February 1970, 6 RAR prepared to engage the enemy (Viet Cong - VC), by conducting a sweep along the SUOI GIAU creek. This operation came somewhat of a surprise at first as intelligence reports (provided by a VC defector) had indicated that the area had been infested with the enemy. Numerous sightings of the enemy equivalent to a battalion had entrenched themselves into a well dug bunker system. A Coy had been tasked with being the cut off group, while the remainder of the battalion swept and came down from the North. (It is important to note that A Coy platoons were below strength and some had only 23 men).

During an extremely hot and very dry afternoon, 2 and 3 platoons of A Coy 6 RAR were flown in by choppers into the area east of the SUOI GIAU, and approximately 12 kilometres east to north east of Nui Dat. At approximately 2.00 pm, A Coy contacted the D4445 battalion base which was 1500 metres south of where it was expected. 2 Platoon had followed fresh signs after leaving the landing zone (LZ). They came across a creek which had a rock dam, upon which a the imprint of a wet human hand was observed and a bar of soap. They also found water about one metre by one metre which was milky white with soap.

Whilst on the opposite bank of the creek the scouts could see a track with so many tracks that it was too many to count and the section commander decided to go to the left of the creek.

Moving along the creek they came across a track leading off at right angles upon which they found further evidence of human habitation and fresh sightings. These included, a chicken in snare, fresh cuttings, hear people talking, coughing, a transistor radio to the right and to the left a command was heard to turn the radio off. The platoon dropped to the ground and doing so the forward scouts were able to pick out the fire lanes that had been carved out in the foliage.

2 Platoon having estimated that they had locate a main enemy base, withdraw so that they could bring 3 Platoon to plan an assault for the next morning. 3 Platoon who were patrolling 300 metres further to the North and south along the axis of the SUOI GIAU came under fire from an enemy sentry. During this engagement the enemy sentry who shot and wounded the forward scouts was killed. Whilst a dust off was completed for the wounded soldiers, all hell broke loose and the bulk of 3 Platoon came under heavy 50 calibre machine gun and RPG fire upon which during a short space of time, 3 Platoon suffered nine additional casualties, including the Platoon commander and platoon signaller.

During this action, one of the battalions youngest non commissioned officers, 20 year old Corporal Hans Fler, who had already served one tour of Vietnam with 4 RAR, took charge of the situation. Assessing the hazardous position, Corporal Hans Fler skilfully directed fire onto the enemy position and reorganised his section. With complete disregard for his own safety he moved out from under covering fire from his section to initiate the recovery of the wounded men. Once the wounded men had been extracted from their dangerous position Hans Fler directed the withdrawal of the platoon. During the withdrawal one other section came under heavy fire, Hans skilfully used fire and movement and was able to withdraw that section and managed to extract the platoon.

While 3 platoon had sustained heavy casualties, 2 Platoon received orders to move to the assistance of 3 Platoon who were in danger of being overrun during the night. As 2 Platoon moved forward, they made contact with the enemy who fled along the creek bed. Not knowing where 3 Platoon were located, they came under a heavy volume of 50 calibre machine gun, small arms and RPG fire from the enemy who were entrenched in their bunker system. 2 Platoon soldiers then deployed to fire positions and attempted to sweep to the right flank which was unsuccessful because of the heavy 50 calibre machine gun fire.

Any movement forward was also engaged by enemy RPG fire, which now came from the front as well as from the flank. While both platoons were hugging the ground, the enemy 50 calibre machine gun to their front which was mounted above the enemy bunker was like a scythe, cutting straight great swathes through the leaves and foliage at 50 centimetres' above the soldiers, pinning them down. Had the enemy the foresight to take the machine gun off its mount and fired lower, both platoons would have been decimated.

It was during this intense period that Corporal Hans Fler on stabilizing 3 Platoon, made his way through enemy fire (calling out to 2 Platoon members) to find 2 Platoon. At 8.00 pm after two attempts Hans Fler was instrumental in linking 2 Platoon with 3 platoon who were located on the west bank. During the night the two platoons reorganised and spent the night listening to the enemy calling out "Och to lai" (Australians) surrender as we have you surrounded. Around 4.00 am, the enemy were heard to be packing up and moving out as they knew that come morning the area would be destroyed.

During the battle the Platoons had held their positions whilst the platoon artillery adviser (bombardier) called in light fire team (Gunships) which flew man missions across the enemy positions as well as artillery and mortars were fired as close as 20 to 30 metres from the platoons positions This supporting barrage which began at 3.00pm (others thought it was after 4pm) continued well into darkness and ceased near sunrise which assisted in the extraction of both Platoons.

Post Operation Gisborne. After the battle it was noted that the two platoons had face an enemy strength of more than 600 total. It was also observed that in that short space of time, (few days) two of 6 RAR.NZ junior commission officers, one a regular soldier (Hans) and the other a national service man had been awarded a decoration for bravery that for Other Ranks, ranked next after the Victoria Cross. Traditionally, the Distinguished Conduct Medal was awarded to Warrant Officers and senior Non Commissioned Officers. The award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal who are junior ranking soldier was an exceptional occurrence.

Many who had witnessed Hans Fleer in action on that day believed that he deserved the Victoria Cross, had it been under the current Australian awards system and not that of the outdated British awards based on quotas. (see below).

It is important to note that at the time, adherence to an outdated British system of awards and the rigid quota system applied to allocating those awards meant that many actions went either unrewarded or were given awards which underrated the action which earned the award

Peter Adamis
A Coy 6 RAR Association Representative

Sources:

We too were ANZACS - Lt Col Brian Avery
6 RAR/NZ (ANZAC) History 1967 – 1970

Oral histories: Mick Angell, Bill Cane & Gary Adams A company 1969/70



