

Command in Vietnam: Reflections of a Commanding Officer

Colonel F. Peter Scott, DSO

Reviewed by Brigadier John Essex-Clark

Amongst the many writings and well-illustrated histories about Australian infantry battalions serving in Vietnam, too few commanding officers have expressed their emotions, background influences, motivations, and feelings about leading Australian 'diggers' in that country and that war. This crisply written and straightforward, compressed autobiography, concerning Peter Scott's command of the Third Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment, does just that.

Not one to wax lyrical about his personal achievements, Peter Scott succinctly covers his fascinating developmental experiences in both Korea and Vietnam in only 160 pages, including interesting appendices and an adequate glossary and index. He describes the extraordinary pressures on him when commanding an infantry battalion in what we now are wont to term asymmetric warfighting. Scott recounts these experiences in an easily readable, chronological story supported by pertinent illustrations, but the book would have benefited by the inclusion of more maps and diagrams than the lone one of Phuoc Tuy Province.

Obviously a very sensitive yet pragmatic man, and with an occasional dry sense of humour, Peter Scott manages to take his reader smoothly with him through his formative years as a Duntroon cadet and his initial experiences as a young officer in the occupation force in Japan after World War II. The professional focus then shifts to his combat experiences in the cauldron of Korea after the North Korean and Chinese invasion of the South; and then finally into Vietnam.

Peter Scott's command of 'Old Faithful', 3RAR, on their second tour of Vietnam in 1971, was for only seven months, a relatively short period compared with the twelve-month tour of duty of the other battalions and their commanders. Also, enemy activity in Phuoc Tuy Province during Scott's time there had been much reduced by the aggressive efforts of the many battalions preceding his unit's deployment. So, the enemy was not the threat it had been in the 1966-1970 period of 1st Australian Task Force operations.

Nevertheless, Scott's 3RAR was constantly on operations from the time they arrived until the moment they left, and he well describes his thoughts about the major operations of PHOI HOP through BRIAR PATCH and OVERLORD, to the final run-down period ending Australia's combat involvement in South Vietnam. During his time in Vietnam, Scott was faced by few tactical problems as a CO because, as he states, it was then a platoon commander's war. His major tactical task was retaining a mobile reserve should things go awry.

The major and enduring command task facing him in Vietnam was administering and provisioning his men, and maintaining their morale. In doing this, Scott also shows a special admiration and a respect for the quality of National

Servicemen in his battalion, as he does also for his battalion's supporting artillery, armoured, engineer and aviation elements.

Peter Scott also describes the many problems he faced with the training and administrative preparation of his battalion before they deployed to Vietnam. He even covers the tricky complexities of forming the battalion's pipe band. Most of the key players in his battalion team and his senior commanders are mentioned. They appear to have all been a very cohesive and happy group compared with some other battalions who experienced frictions from within and without their number. This was probably due much to Scott's previous experience and what comes across in the book as his sensitive and understanding leadership style.

To students of leadership in war, Scott provides a telling and pertinent analysis of the differences between his command in the unconventional low-intensity war of Vietnam compared to that of his commanding officer in the higher-intensity conventional war in Korea. This is based on his very close observations of the then CO 3RAR, the redoubtable Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hassett (later to become General Sir Francis Hassett and Chief of the Australian Defence Force Staff). What Scott leaves unmentioned is how politically-inspired rules-of-engagement, and an end-of-the-war withdrawal syndrome, may have hamstrung his tactical options in Vietnam to an extent that Hassett's never were during Operation COMMANDO in Korea.

The author's analysis of his application of the principles of war to his thinking and his battalion's activities in Phuoc Tuy Province makes most interesting and challenging reading, especially his assessment of the application of offensive action. This chapter could prove to be the most controversial in the book.

This is a straightforward, no fuss, interesting and educative book written by a steadfast but quiet and unemotional warrior of the old school. It is not a history but is very much, as the title indicates, his 'reflections'. As David Thomson states in his foreword, it should be recommended reading for all aspiring young officers. To which I would add, especially those who aspire to command an infantry battalion in politically-inspired, rules-of-engagement-restricted, modern asymmetrical warfare.

My simple criticism would be of the uncropped cover photograph. This depicts the happy and dog-tagged, pistol and pack-carrying warrior-commander going to battle holding an aluminium folding stool, with a naked soldier in the background – all rather disconcerting. This, however, would probably not have been the decision of the author and in no way reflects the contents of this cameo of command. ♦

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