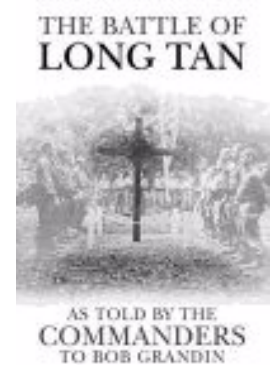


# The Battle of Long Tan: As Told by the Commanders to Bob Grandin

**Robert Grandin**

**Reviewed by Dr Alan Stephens**



The victory won by some 100 Australian soldiers against more than 2000 enemy troops in a rubber plantation at Long Tan on 18 August 1966 was by any measure a magnificent feat of arms. The battle started when patrols from 6RAR were sent out to probe the source of a heavy mortar and recoilless rifle bombardment of the Australian Task Force camp at Nui Dat in the early morning of 17 August. Commanders anticipated at worst an engagement with perhaps 40 members of the local militia but, late in the afternoon of the 18th, D Company unexpectedly stumbled into what turned out to be a powerful regular Viet Cong formation, 275 Main Force Regiment, reinforced by a North Vietnamese Army battalion and supported by the regional Viet Cong (VC) D445 Battalion.

Shortly after the soldiers of D Company began a fight for their lives that was to last all night and into the next day, torrential tropical rain began pelting down, making relief and support operations exceptionally difficult.

Wonderfully led by their commander, Major Harry Smith, D Company's three platoons (10, 11 and 12) and headquarters displayed professionalism of the highest order as they instinctively fell back on tried and true Australian Army tactics, while always remaining ready to improvise when the opportunity arose. On numerous occasions they were perilously close to being overrun; each time they succeeded in defying the odds. Massive, highly accurate artillery support from the Task Force at nearby Nui Dat was crucial and undoubtedly saved D Company from being annihilated; while an ammunition resupply flown by RAAF helicopter pilots in appalling weather and fading light was also vital. And after hours of desperate combat it was only the arrival of a relief column of armoured personnel carriers and A Company 6RAR that finally broke the enemy's resistance.

Eighteen Australian soldiers died in the battle and twenty-four were wounded. Official enemy casualties were 245 left dead on the battlefield and three captured, but it seems probable that many more bodies were removed by the retreating VC.

There has never been any question about the magnitude of the achievement of 6RAR and its supporting units at Long Tan. Furthermore, the battle has been the subject of many books and articles, with Ian McNeill's splendid official history, *To Long Tan* (Allen & Unwin and the AWM, 1993) setting the benchmark. The question might therefore

be asked: Why another book? The answer is that, for all of the scrutiny to date, several important issues remain unclear. By presenting the first-hand accounts of the six men who commanded the units that actually did the fighting (the company OC, the two surviving platoon commanders, the platoon sergeant from the other platoon, the company artillery forward observer, and the commander of the APCs), Bob Grandin (who was co-pilot of one of the RAAF helicopters) has provided a different and thoroughly engrossing perspective of the battle.

Reflections on the battle are complemented by biographies and a 'where are they now' section, which might seem a little indulgent, but which on the contrary throw a good deal of light on the individual personalities. It may be noteworthy that, post-Long Tan, several seem to have been professionally restless.

Clearly the most important memoir is Harry Smith's. Smith was a soldier's soldier, tough, professional and respected by both his superiors and subordinates. While Smith was interviewed by the official historians, gave them access to private papers, and answered their questionnaires, it can be argued that his opinions were not given sufficient weight. His account alone makes this new book worthwhile.

Turning to the unanswered questions, two are of primary interest. The first concerns the objective of the attack, an issue given sharp focus by the unexpected presence east of Nui Dat of 275 Main Force Regiment and its North Vietnamese reinforcements. Specifically, was it the enemy's intention to overrun the Australian Task Force? If so, and had they succeeded, it obviously would have been an unmitigated disaster. Yet even though thirty-eight years have passed, Vietnamese officials continue to dissemble about Long Tan, maintaining among other things that their force was victorious. Until this manifestly false position is reversed and reliable evidence is made available, the truth will remain hidden. Grandin's book nevertheless chances its arm by speculating on the enemy's possible motives in a section written by platoon commander Dave Sabben. The piece is thoughtful and logical, but suffers somewhat from the book's lack of a bibliography and references; that is, there is insufficient context against which the reader can measure Sabben's analysis.

Grandin and his colleagues are on firmer ground when they address the matter of honours and awards. Suffice to say that there can be no doubt that the heroes of this

memorable victory were poorly treated by any standard, and especially so when compared with the excessive recognition (according to some commentators) accorded to rear-echelon officers (from all three services) throughout the Vietnam war. Smith's comments on the administration of honours and awards he recommended reflect little credit on a number of senior officers.

Other contentious subjects the authors tackle include prior intelligence, Army–Air Force relations, the use of armour, and American artillery.

Something of an attempt has been made by veterans' groups to place Long Tan alongside Gallipoli and Kokoda in the Australian military pantheon. This is stretching the point, with the preceding two operations occupying a unique place in the national psyche because of their profound and entirely different political and social contexts.

At the same time, as a feat of arms, Long Tan can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with anything any Australian warriors have ever achieved.

Grandin has done a good job with this project. In places *The Battle of Long Tan* is a real page-turner; and throughout, it enjoys the distinction of presenting first-hand the views of the handful of men who commanded, fought for, and ultimately won a great victory. At a different level, it could serve as a tactics guide for infantrymen. This unusual book makes an important contribution to our appreciation of the most significant Australian experience during the decade of the Vietnam war. ♦

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## True Believer: John Howard, George Bush and the American Alliance

**Robert Garran**

**Reviewed by Dr Hugh Smith**



John Howard, Garran argues, has almost single-handedly brought Australia's foreign policy into complete alignment with the views of the Bush administration in the United States. More than any previous Prime Minister, Howard is a 'true believer' not only in the benefits of the alliance to this country but in the values of the current Republican administration in Washington. According to Garran, however, support for the United States comes at too high a price. *True Believer* is a vigorous indictment, written in a readable style and with a good grasp of history and politics in both the US and Australia. Whether readers will agree with the charges laid by the author is another matter.

John Howard's commitment to the US alliance is explained in a number of ways: his upbringing and obvious admiration for Churchill as a leader in difficult times; his realist perception of international politics as a dangerous environment that demands vigorous efforts to maintain security; his strong personal 'bond' with George W. Bush who is also 'conviction politician' prepared to assert his 'moral rectitude'; his relative lack of interest in Asia which is seen more as a source of problems than of security; and his belief that Australia and the US are closely, inevitably and inextricably bound by democratic values and a shared history and culture. Howard, in short, has been impressed by America's hard

power and co-opted by its soft power.

All of the above help explain Howard's attitude towards the US. But it is more difficult to assess which factors carry greatest weight. Would Howard have gone all the way with President Clinton (with whom he had a strong and mutual antipathy) or even with President Gore? Would he have been less emotionally committed if he had not been in Washington on the day the Pentagon was attacked, which apparently influenced him to invoke the ANZUS pact for the first time? And without the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, would Howard have been able to show his true colours?

In Garran's view, Howard's support for the alliance not simply a foreign policy judgement, it is also part of his attempt to re-claim Australian nationalism for the Liberal side of politics. Only the Liberals, Howard claims, can and will pursue Australia's true national interests. They had originally negotiated the ANZUS treaty (albeit with some internal disagreement, as Garran notes) and only they can now be relied on to maintain it in good health. Likewise, only the Liberals, Howard has recently asserted, could have negotiated the free trade agreement with the US. At the same time, Howard's position allows him to denounce Labor for its dogmatic anti-Americanism and its failure to understand the need for