

The Battle at Ngok Tavak: A Bloody Defeat in South Vietnam, 1968

Bruce Davies

Reviewed by Bill Deane

In a month when US and Vietnamese forces suffered their highest casualty rate, apparently no Australian media reported the May 1968 battle at Ngok Tavak. Only three Australian army advisers were involved and none were killed or wounded, although a total of 31 Americans and South Vietnamese died. The overrunning of a small, isolated outpost by a force made up of North Vietnamese Army and local Viet Cong, with no Australian casualties, was unlikely to rate a mention.

Yet the circumstances surrounding the battle had certain features that aroused the curiosity of Bruce Davies, himself a decorated former member of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam and the joint author of an AATTV history *The Men Who Persevered* (reviewed in the Summer 2005/06 *Defender*). What was such a motley group – an Australian Army captain who commanded a Mobile Strike Force company of three platoons commanded by one US Special Forces sergeant and two Australian Army warrant officer advisers with 122 Nung (an ethnic minority) Civilian Irregular Defense Group mercenaries, four other US Special Forces, three Vietnamese Special Forces, three interpreters, 35 Montagnard (mountain people) CIDG reinforcements, one US Navy medic and 43 US Marine Corps artillerymen with two 105mm howitzers – meant to achieve when ‘seemingly dropped in the middle of an enemy-infested wilderness?’

The Ngok Tavak deployment began with Captain John White, the company commander, receiving a briefing at Da Nang to take his force to reconnoitre an area about eight kilometres south of a major Special Forces camp at Kham Duc, and 20 kilometres from the Laos border, to gather intelligence on enemy movements. From thereon, the narrative gets a sharp edge as, unsurprisingly after 25 years, accounts of who did what, said what and achieved what differ among the various combatants and from official reporting – Davies has cast his research net far and wide – but the general flow of events is clear.

White had hoped to establish, in an old French earthworks fort close to Little Ngok Tavak Mountain, a patrol base that, if endangered, could move at short notice. Having artillery suddenly foisted on him restricted his flexibility. Pointing this out to his Da Nang headquarters resulted in the unsolicited arrival of 35 Montagnard CIDG reinforcements – shortly afterwards wires to mines and telephones were cut. Several patrolling contacts also indicated not only that the Nungs preferred flight to fighting but that a strong attack could be expected.

It took place at about 0315 on 10 May 1968, heralded by the Montagnard CIDG killing a marine and several Nungs guarding a gap in the perimeter wire, followed up with a mass attack by North Vietnamese and local Viet Cong guerrillas that overran the howitzer positions. In darkness

lit by exploding ammunition, both sides fought a confusing, tenacious, close quarter battle. Air fire support arrived, and at dawn the two Australian warrant officers, Frank Lucas and Don Cameron, managed to coax some Nungs into taking part in a counter-attack that drove remaining enemy beyond the perimeter wire but still able to direct fire on to the defenders. Medical evacuation helicopters were not shot at but two large helicopters with reinforcements were hit and disabled on the helipad, blocking it. With ammunition running low and anticipating a further assault, White told headquarters he was evacuating the position and, ignoring orders to remain, led the survivors out on foot, to be picked up later by helicopters and having evaded an ambush.

US and Australian relations in Da Nang were soured by subsequent dissension in relation to Ngok Tavak and other claims, but particularly because eleven marine corpses remained at the site. The three Aussies were posted to a different Special Forces unit. Later official lies told to relatives about fictitious measures taken to attempt to recover the remains led some to believe for years their loved ones were prisoners. Eventually, after political infighting, efforts by a dedicated band of Vietnam Veterans of America members saw a February 1995 visit to Ngok Tavak by a nine member Australian/VVA team that included White, two other Ngok Tavak survivors, the NVA battalion commander who led the attack and two of his superiors. War stories were swapped, joss sticks were burnt, feelings expressed, White thanked his former enemy for not firing on the medevac choppers, a Native American VVA member held a ceremony for the unburied fallen, and all felt ‘an obvious emotional freedom’.

The Ngok Tavak aftermath saw both Australian warrant officers rightly receive gallantry awards. But the rejection by an Australian general of a recommendation by the AATTV commander that White receive a military cross for bravery and leadership, and instead get a Mention in Despatches, on the grounds that White’s elder brother had also been recommended for the same award elsewhere, still rankles AATTV and other veterans.

Davies’ narrative is non-judgemental and some elements partly contradict the publisher’s claim he brings resolution to questions surrounding Ngok Tavak. Such questions – concept of operations, tactics used, etc – make his book worthy of study as a discussion/training manual, given that Australian forces in Afghanistan are apparently operating in not wholly dissimilar circumstances. But one combat principle is inviolate – superiors should supply the ground commander’s stated needs and then stand back. ♦

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