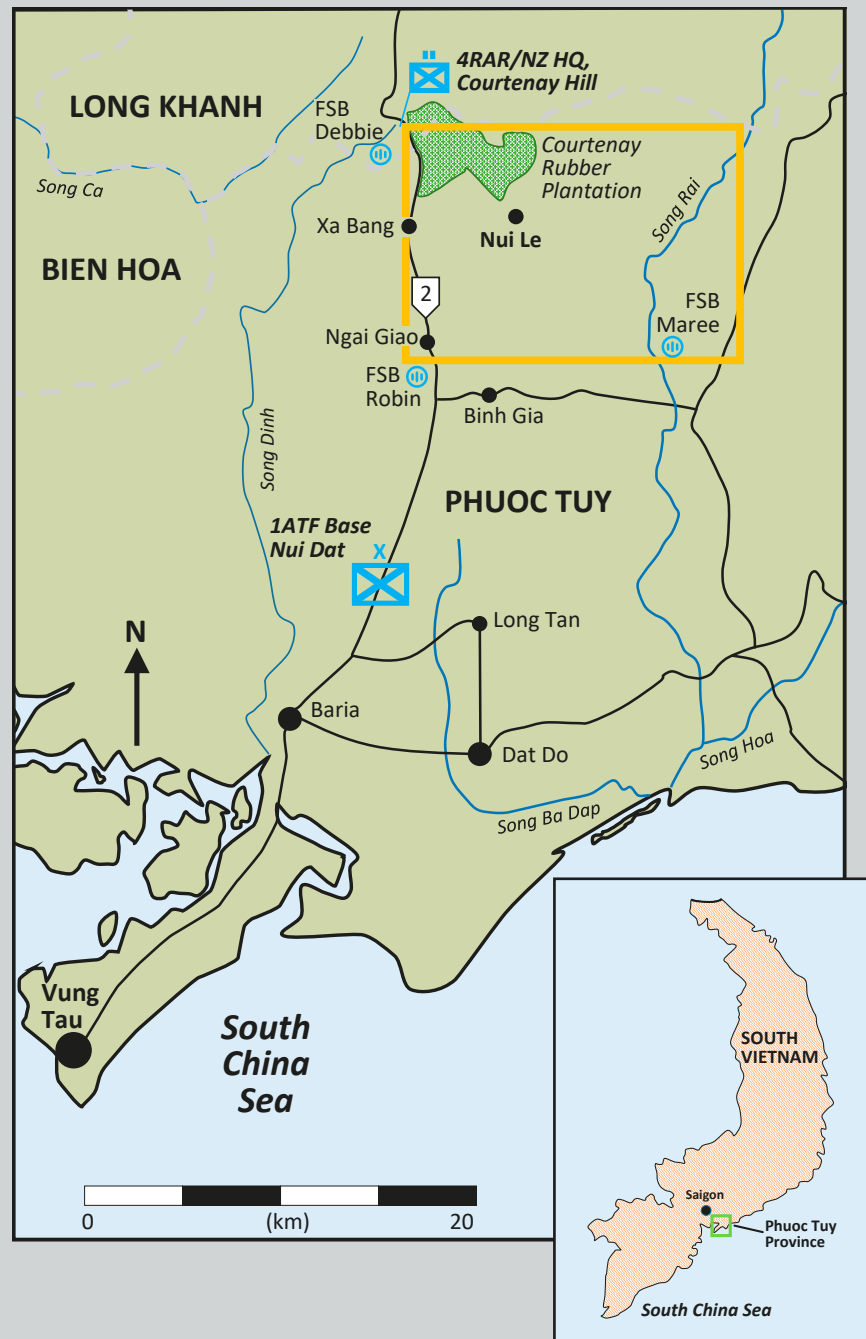National Service for the 50th anniversary of
Operation Ivanhoe and the Battle of Nui Le

The Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial, Anzac Parade, Canberra
Monday 20 September 2021

ABOVE: The area marked by the yellow square is the approximate area in Phuoc Tuy Province where Operation Ivanhoe was undertaken between 19 September and 2 October 1971. **INSET:** South Vietnam.

COVER: An unidentified member of 4th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment/New Zealand (4RAR/NZ – the ANZAC Battalion) on patrol in Phuoc Tuy Province, 1971. (AWM P07256.017; photographer Brian Wood)

Operation Ivanhoe and the Battle of Nui Le

In September 1971, Australian forces were entering the final stages of their decade-long involvement in the Vietnam War. With elements of the Australian Task Force already returning home, enemy forces – particularly the battle-hardened 33rd North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment – sought to establish themselves in Phuoc Tuy Province, the scene of Australian operations since 1966.

NVA units were reported to be concentrating south-east of the Courtenay rubber plantation, astride the border between Long Khanh Province and Phuoc Tuy. In the early hours of 19 September some attacked a South Vietnamese regional outpost and a nearby village. The Australian Task Force Commander faced a difficult decision. Knowing that he must respond to prevent enemy forces from establishing themselves in Phuoc Tuy, he nevertheless faced the strong likelihood that Australian lives would be lost and that such losses would be viewed against the background of the Task Force's imminent withdrawal from Vietnam.

Aerial view of the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) base amongst the rubber trees, Nui Dat, Vietnam, 1971. (AWM EKT/71/0648/VN)

Operation Ivanhoe, a search-and-destroy sweep of the area south of the Courtenay rubber plantation involving infantry, armoured personnel carriers (APCs), artillery and engineers, along with air support, was launched that day. Unlike previous operations, this time there were no tanks to provide support. They had left South Vietnam to return to Australia less than a week before.

The beginning of Operation Ivanhoe saw three companies of the 4th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment/New Zealand (4RAR/NZ – the ANZAC Battalion), and one company from the 3rd Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR) deploy in stages into thick jungle between the area where the NVA regiment was thought to be and Phuoc Tuy's border with Long Khanh. They intended to force the enemy to move southwards towards blocking positions and cut them off from their sanctuaries in Long Khanh.

Tragedy struck almost immediately. 4RAR/NZ's D Company had come straight off another operation when they were briefed for Ivanhoe. After a resupply, they began searching for signs of two enemy battalions thought to be less than a kilometre away. About half an hour into the patrol the lead section of one platoon ran up against the rear section of another, failing to recognise them as Australians in the gloom of the thick jungle. In the ensuing exchange of fire an Australian serviceman was killed and another wounded. It was a day 'I would rather forget' remarked one officer.

Early the following day, a section of four APCs from A Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment was ambushed en route to Courtenay Hill on the fringe of the Courtenay rubber plantation, just inside Long Khanh Province. More than 20 enemy soldiers opened fire with rocket propelled grenades and small arms, from a well-concealed and thoroughly-prepared position, wounding one Australian. The APC crews returned fire with their vehicles' heavy machine guns before charging into the enemy, killing one and driving the others off.

Meanwhile, infantry were finding signs that hundreds of enemy were moving through the patrol area. An Australian platoon commander reported a track 'about a foot and a half wide and at least six inches deep', crossing at right angles to the one on which his platoon was moving. This was a sure sign of recent heavy foot traffic from the enemy. Sawn logs and concealed tree stumps also indicated recent bunker construction. The atmosphere had become 'decidedly spooky'. D Company's 11 Platoon experienced Operation Ivanhoe's first infantry contact that afternoon when they opened fire on a party of 15 enemy moving along a jungle track, killing two.

Corporal Carl Guy of 3RAR on operations in Phuoc Tuy Province, April 1971.
(AWM PJE/71/0232/VN; photographer Philip John Errington)

The last major battle fought by Australian forces in Vietnam, known as the Battle of Nui Le, took place on 21 September. During the day 4RAR/NZ's B Company had several minor contacts and came across fresh tracks and other signs of the enemy. When some men found an insulated telephone wire, their platoon followed it. They encountered two enemy, killing one before finding another rolling up the wire. He escaped and soon afterwards the Australians were hit by a mortar barrage that wounded 15 men, including the platoon commander and all the non-commissioned officers. Retaliatory artillery fire soon began bursting in the enemy positions beyond the Australians, and helicopter gunships, whose crews could see large numbers of enemy troops below, joined the battle. As they hurried to the scene of the mortar strike, one platoon had several running fights with North Vietnamese soldiers.

Four kilometres to the north-east, D Company were also engaged in heavy fighting. One Australian was killed and two more were wounded when their platoon came under fire from an enemy bunker just 10 metres away.

Trooper Denis Thompson aboard an APC of 3rd Cavalry Regiment RAAC, ready to move from a tactical position during Operation Ivanhoe 1971. (Robert Cox collection)

The infantrymen called in artillery and air support; and here, too, the men coming forward to assist found themselves engaging other enemy along their route. For the next two hours the Australians fought off a series of attacks. On the ground it was difficult to determine the nature and extent of the enemy position, but from above, airmen thought the Australians had run up against the edge of a large bunker complex. United States aircraft and helicopters from No. 9 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, piloted by both Australian and New Zealand airmen, provided substantial and effective air support. Artillery burst among the NVA positions as infantry prepared to assault through the bunkers if the enemy began a withdrawal. Overhead, helicopters from 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight dropped urgently needed ammunition, and continued to monitor activity on the ground below. By battle's end, one pilot had spent more than 11 hours in the air providing direct support to the troops on the ground.

After four hours of intense bombardment, airmen reported that large numbers of NVA were pulling out and heading north. D Company prepared to attack. With the enemy fleeing the Australians expected to meet only light opposition, but they covered just 50 metres before heavy fire from the front and flanks killed three members of the leading machine-gun teams and wounded others. One platoon commander remembered: 'The noise was unlike anything we had encountered in our previous six months in South Vietnam ... I was unable to shout orders to my section commanders only 10 metres away'. Two men, including this platoon commander, braved the enemy fire to retrieve the machine guns, allowing the lead section to withdraw under covering fire. But it was too dangerous to retrieve the dead. The wounded were evacuated with one dying before reaching hospital. As the Australians pulled back, groups of North Vietnamese soldiers, taking advantage of thick jungle canopy and high ground, began firing at D Company's flanks and at the helicopter gunships and control aircraft overhead. One of the wounded recalled his fraught evacuation under fire: 'We were choppered out through the canopy; it was the scariest part because I was lying in the basket and there was still shooting – a sitting duck'.

In the fading light D Company tried to break contact and withdraw to their night harbour position about half a kilometre away, but the fighting continued as they were pursued by North Vietnamese troops. When the Australians' southern perimeter ran up against another bunker system, they found themselves coming under fire from several directions. There was now fighting to the Australians' rear while at the same time others were still trying to extricate themselves from the bunkers which had been the scene of the afternoon's fighting. The Australians were forced into a defensive circle about 35 metres across as fire also came from an enemy observation post high up in a tree.
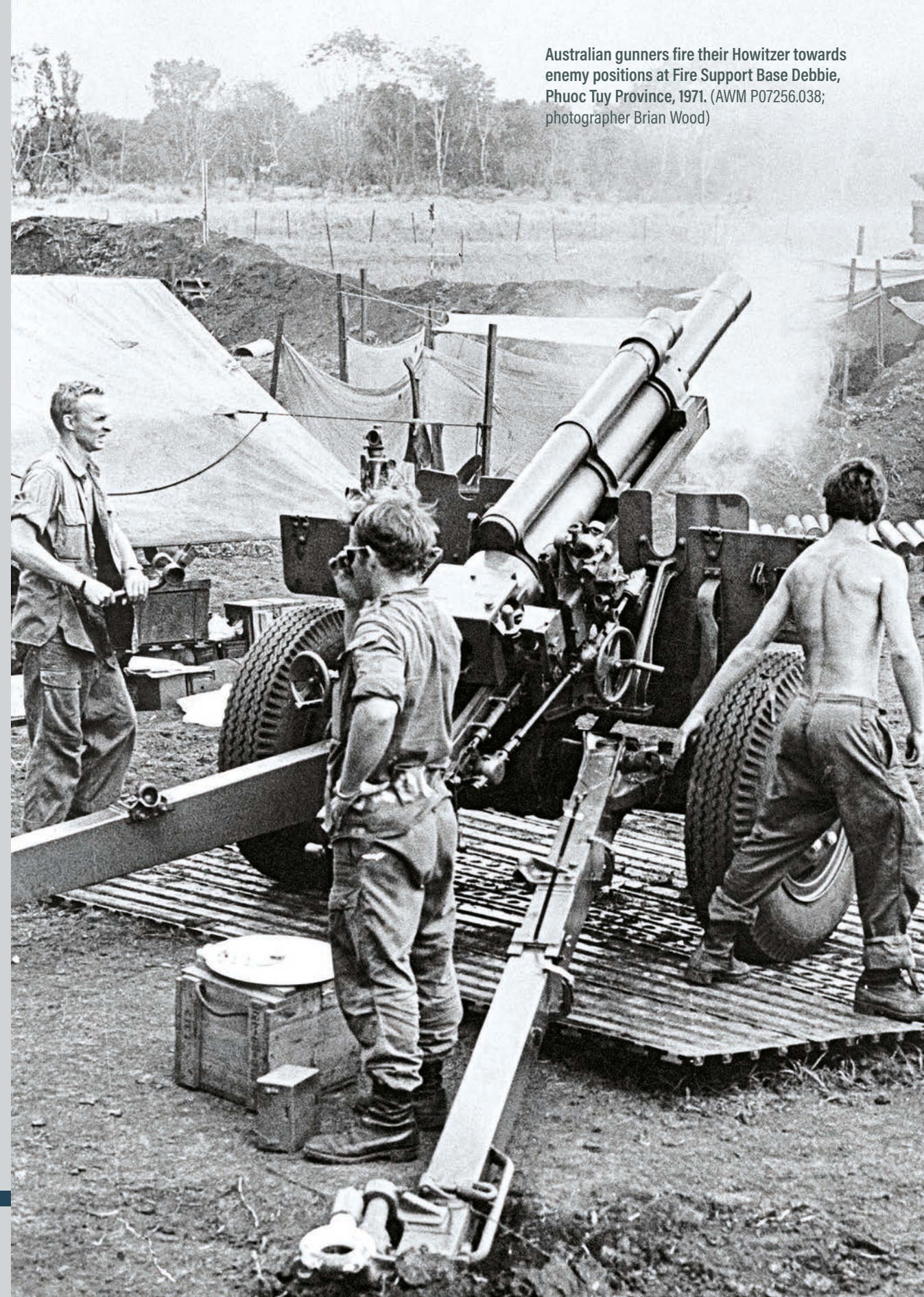
4RAR/NZ receives a resupply from an Iroquois helicopter of No. 9 Squadron RAAF, 1971.
(Chris Burgess collection)

Running low on ammunition, with little cover, unable to dig even shallow shell scrapes for protection and in danger of being surrounded, they called in artillery support.

Crouching in the jungle's darkness and unable to read his map, an artillery forward observer, despite the intense pressure and enormous danger, recalled the grid references, mentally calculated the distances and angles, and called down artillery rounds to within close proximity of the Australian position. 'We ringed them with artillery for the next five hours,' remembered one officer, but the enemy continued to lay down fire and throw grenades at the encircled Australians until eventually being forced to pull back. Clearing patrols went out at dawn the following day but the enemy had left during the night.

New Zealand's V Company moved up to reinforce D Company and on 23 September 4RAR/NZ returned to the bunkers. In pouring rain they retrieved the bodies of the three Australians killed two days earlier, with the New Zealanders forming an impromptu honour guard as they were lifted onto waiting helicopters. Later, their platoon commander, who had been wounded on the night of the battle and was now in the hospital, watched sadly through the window as their caskets were being moved to the airport for return to Australia.

Over the following days infantry continued patrolling, largely without incident, but on 25 September four more Australians were wounded when two APCs were badly damaged by anti-tank mines in the Courtenay rubber plantation. Ivanhoe ended seven days later, on 2 October 1971. It was to be the last major offensive operation of Australia's war in Vietnam. Twenty-nine Australians and one New Zealander were wounded during the operation. Sadly, six Australian servicemen were killed. They were the last Australians to die in combat in Vietnam, including the last national serviceman. Fifteen North Vietnamese soldiers were believed to have been killed.

At least five Australians received decorations for their role in Operation Ivanhoe with a further three Mentioned in Despatches.

Operation Ivanhoe succeeded in repelling an enemy incursion into Phuoc Tuy, but with the province's defence soon to pass to poorly equipped and often poorly-led local forces low in morale and serving an unpopular, corrupt government, the future seemed very uncertain.

For the people of Vietnam the war continued until April 1975, when the South finally fell to the North. For Australia's veterans and the families of those tragically killed, it has remained an enduring presence, even as the controversies and division that shadowed the country's involvement have faded with time.

Private G Murphy, a New Zealand tracker with 4RAR/NZ, patrols through thick scrub in Phuoc Tuy Province, 1971. (AWM P07256.018; photographer Brian Wood)

An APC of 3rd Cavalry Regiment RAAC which was damaged by a mine on 25 September 1971 while on patrol in Phuoc Tuy Province. (AWM P07256.026; photographer Brian Wood)

Trooper Brian Mercer (front left), Maxwell Mooney (front right), and an unidentified member of 3rd Cavalry Regiment RACC on Route 2, near Cam My 1971. (Robert Cox collection)

Order of Service

The music for the commemorative service is provided by the Royal Military College Band.

Captain Shane Gillard
Band of the Royal Military College Duntroon

Commemorative Service commences at 10.30 am.

PLAYING OF THE DIDGERIDOO

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION
Master of Ceremonies

CATAFALQUE PARTY AND COLOUR PARTY ARE MOUNTED
Members of Australia's Federation Guard and the Standard, Guidons, Regimental Colours and Corps Banners of the units involved in Operation Ivanhoe.

CALL TO REMEMBRANCE
Lieutenant Colonel Gary McKay MC (Retd)
Officer Commanding 11 Platoon, Delta Company
The 4th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment

COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS
His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd)
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

MUSICAL PIECE
Lean on Me

READING

Lieutenant Colonel Greg Gilbert DSM (Retd)
Artillery Forward Observer, 104 Field Battery, 12th Field Regiment with
Delta Company, 4th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment

PRAYER OF COMMEMORATION

Chaplain Sarah Gibson

Welcome to a time of reflection and prayer. We gather together as people of many faiths and none. Please join in this time as fits your own understanding and add your thoughts or prayers to the ones I speak. Together may our own thoughts and prayers commit our hearts and minds to continue to work for peace and hope.

Gracious God, we give thanks for the chance to gather here today, to meet with those dear to us and to recognise the events of our past. This year especially, we are thankful for this time to be present with friends and family, with mates old and new, and with those with whom we served.

We recognise the effect of war on many, and hold up all who have suffered and died as a result of war. Today we especially remember those who served in Operation Ivanhoe and the Battle of Nui Le 50 years ago. We think of those who died, those who were injured, and all affected on that day. We recognise the effects on loved ones, those who grieved and those who still grieve today. Grant comfort to all who mourn, healing to those who suffer and courage to all to support each other.

We recommit ourselves on this day to work for peace. We recognise that peace does not come easily, but know too well the pain that comes of war. May we honour those who died through our actions to work for peace and hope, and pass to our descendants a world with hope.

We ask all this in the name of God.

Amen.

OFFICIAL WREATH LAYING

ODE OF REMEMBRANCE

Lieutenant Colonel Philip Lawrence (Retd)
Troop Officer (Second in Command), 1 Troop, A Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.

Response:

We will remember them.

All:

Lest we forget.

LAST POST

ONE MINUTE OF SILENCE

ROUSE

NATIONAL ANTHEMS

GOD DEFEND NEW ZEALAND/AOTEAROA

Māori

E Ihowā Atua,
O ngā iwi mātou rā,
Āta whakarangona;
Me aroha noa,
Kia hua ko te pai;
Kia tau tō atawhai;
Manaakitia mai
Aotearoa

English

God of Nations at Thy feet
In the bonds of love we meet,
Hear our voices, we entreat,
God defend our free land.
Guard Pacific's triple star,
From the shafts of strife and war,
Make her praises heard afar,
God Defend New Zealand.

ADVANCE AUSTRALIA FAIR

Australians all let us rejoice,
For we are one and free;
We've golden soil and wealth for toil;
Our home is girt by sea;
Our land abounds in nature's gifts
Of beauty rich and rare;
In history's page, let every stage
Advance Australia Fair.
In joyful strains then let us sing,
Advance Australia Fair.

FINAL BLESSING

Chaplain Sarah Gibson

Go out into the world in peace,
Be of good courage,
Render to no one evil for evil,
Support the weak,
Help the afflicted,
And in all things give thanks,
And may the blessings of God, Father, Son and Spirit
be with you and those you love now and forever.

Amen

CATAFALQUE PARTY AND COLOUR PARTY ARE DISMOUNTED

PUBLIC WREATH LAYING

Members of the public are invited to lay floral tributes.

CONCLUSION OF SERVICE

OFFICIAL PARTY DEPARTS

ROLL OF HONOUR

PRIVATE MAXWELL LACHLAN RHODES

4th Battalion
Royal Australian Regiment
19 September 1971
Aged 22 years

PRIVATE JAMES DUFF

4th Battalion
Royal Australian Regiment
21 September 1971
Aged 21 years

PRIVATE BRIAN CHARLES BEILKEN

4th Battalion
Royal Australian Regiment
21 September 1971
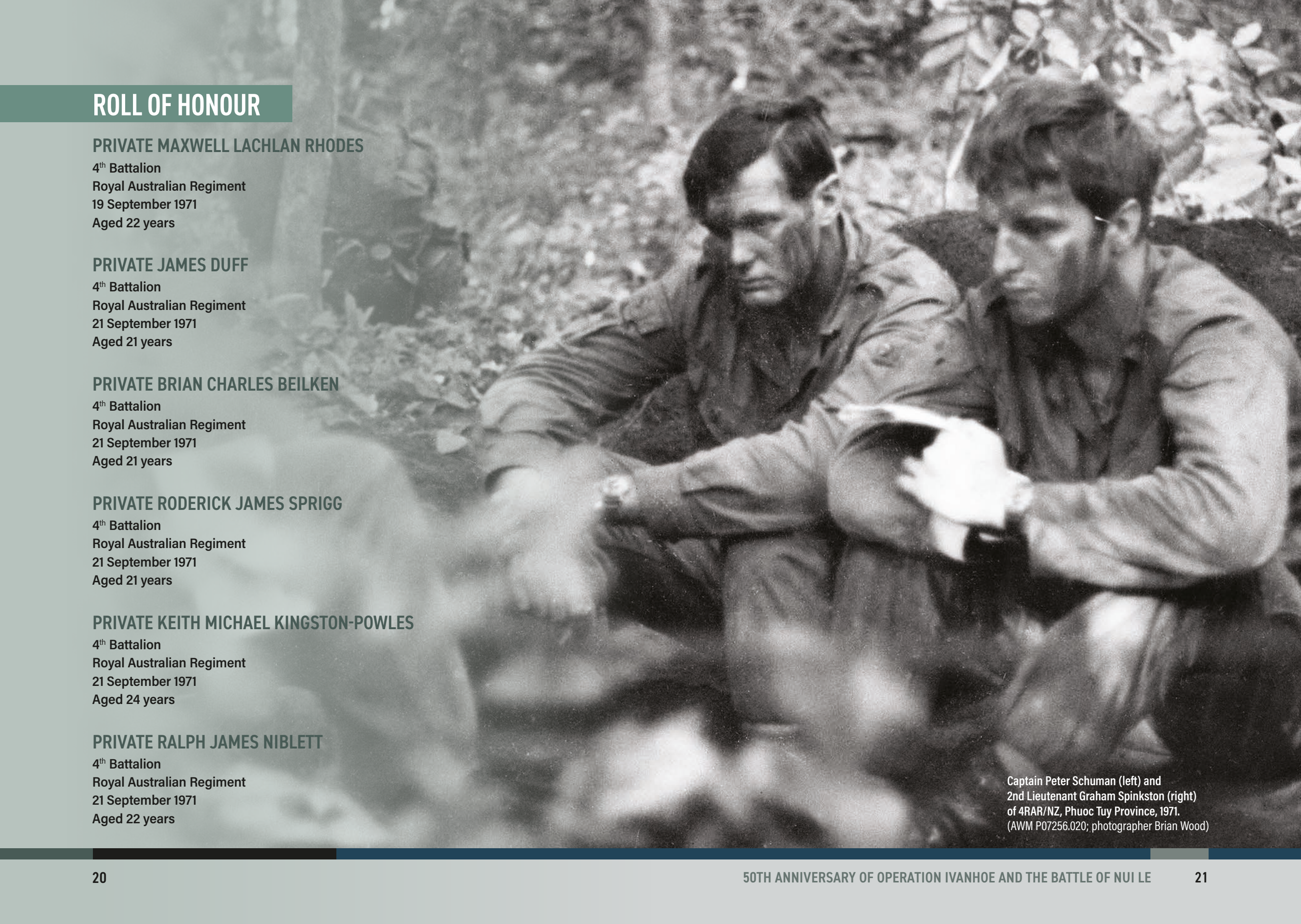Aged 21 years

PRIVATE RODERICK JAMES SPRIGG

4th Battalion
Royal Australian Regiment
21 September 1971
Aged 21 years

PRIVATE KEITH MICHAEL KINGSTON-POWLES

4th Battalion
Royal Australian Regiment
21 September 1971
Aged 24 years

PRIVATE RALPH JAMES NIBLETT

4th Battalion
Royal Australian Regiment
21 September 1971
Aged 22 years

Captain Peter Schuman (left) and
2nd Lieutenant Graham Spinkston (right)
of 4RAR/NZ, Phuoc Tuy Province, 1971.
(AWM P07256.020; photographer Brian Wood)

Private Ronald Greagen (left), Captain Paul 'Doc' Trevillian (centre) and Corporal Wayne John Langford (right) of 4RAR/NZ. (Brian Wood collection)

CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS AND PROTOCOLS

PLAYING OF THE DIDGERIDOO

The didgeridoo (or as it is known by the Traditional Custodians of the Yolngu clans of north-east Arnhem Land, the 'yidaki'), is not traditionally played in Ngunnawal or Wiradjuri country, however it is played here today with the permission of the Ngunnawal people to acknowledge and pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have contributed to the defence of Australia in times of peace and war.

AUSTRALIAN ARMY UNIT COLOURS

The practice of carrying symbols into battle has existed for centuries, with the Eagle Standards of the Roman legions being perhaps the best known. In the 13th century, the nobility went into battle with their entire body and most of their horse hidden by defensive armour, and displayed distinctive badges or crests on their equipment and banners to aid identification. It is from these banners carrying ensigns of heraldry that Regimental Colours are directly derived. Colours are no longer carried in battle, but they remain a strong focal point for a regiment and are treated with great respect.

Second Leiutenant John Sonneveld DFC of 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight aboard a Kiowa OH58A helicopter, 1971. (John Sonneveld collection)

CATAFALQUE PARTY

Historically, a catafalque was a support for a coffin, but it has come to represent a remembrance stone or a tomb. A Catafalque Party was originally appointed to guard a coffin from theft or desecration. Now it performs a ceremonial role, honouring the dead.

COMPLIMENTS TO COLOURS

Compliments are to be accorded to the uncased Colours when carried by a Colour Party, when on parade. When Colours are to be received on parade, spectators are to stand on the Senior Ensign's order: 'Colour Party' ... 'quick march'; and they should remain standing until the Colour Party is in position on parade, with the completion of the musical salute *Point of War.* Service personnel in uniform are to salute only for the playing of *Point of War.*

When Colours are marched-off parade, spectators are to stand on the order: 'march-off the Colours'; and those service personnel in uniform are to salute only while the band plays the musical salute *Point of War*. At the completion of the musical salute, service personnel complete the salute; however, they remain standing until the Colours have cleared the parade ground and the Catafalque Party returns to the attention position. The Colours are not saluted as they pass by service personnel during the march-on and march-off procedure.

Compliments are not accorded to cased Colours.

FLAG PROTOCOLS

Flags are an important symbol of nations, and should be treated with respect at all times. They symbolise the people of their nation, and at commemorations they represent those who have fought and died for the nation. Flags should always be flown aloft and free, and should not be allowed to fall or lie upon the ground. 'Flag draping' (wearing the flag as a cape or cloak), or defacing a flag by writing on it, are disrespectful acts which are discouraged at this commemoration.

When a flag is raised or lowered, or when it is carried past in a parade or review, all present should face the flag, remove their headwear and refrain from talking. Service personnel in uniform should salute.

LAST POST

The *Last Post* is a bugle call which signals the end of the day. It became incorporated into funeral and memorial services as a final farewell and symbolises that the duty of the dead is over and they can rest in peace.

Visitors should stand, remove headwear and refrain from talking during the playing of the *Last Post*. Service personnel in uniform are to salute.

NATIONAL ANTHEMS

Visitors should stand facing the flags, remove headwear and refrain from talking during the playing of *all* national anthems. Service personnel in uniform are to salute.

ODE OF REMEMBRANCE

Many ceremonies of remembrance include a recitation of the Ode. It is the fourth stanza of 'For the Fallen', a poem written by Laurence Binyon (1869–1943) in 1914. It can also include the third stanza. The Ode has been recited in ceremonies since 1919.

Visitors should stand, remove headwear and refrain from talking during the reciting of the Ode.

ONE MINUTE OF SILENCE

The practice of observing one minute of silence originated soon after the First World War and provides an opportunity for quiet reflection on the sacrifice of those who served and lost their lives.

Visitors should stand, remove headwear and refrain from talking during the period of silence.

ROUSE

After the minute of silence, flags are raised from half-mast to the masthead as the *Rouse* is sounded. Traditionally, the *Rouse* called soldiers' spirits to arise, ready to fight for another day. Today, it is associated with the *Last Post* at all military funerals and at services of dedication and remembrance.

Sapper John Schofield (left) and Sapper Brian Peters of 1ˢᵗ Field Squadron RAE handle an unexploded bomb, Vietnam, August 1971. (AWM PJE/71/0415/VN; photographer Philip John Errington)

Lowered for the last time. A simple ceremony
by a small element of 4RAR /NZ. The flag
lowering ceremony was carried out by
New Zealand Regimental Policeman
Private Tai Whatu and Australian Regimental
Policeman Private John Skennar of Grafton, NSW.
Nui Dat, South Vietnam. November 1971.

BACK COVER: An Iroquois helicopter of
No. 9 Squadron RAAF inserts 4RAR/NZ infantry
troops, September 1971. (Robert Cox collection)

Australian Government

Department of Veterans' Affairs

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