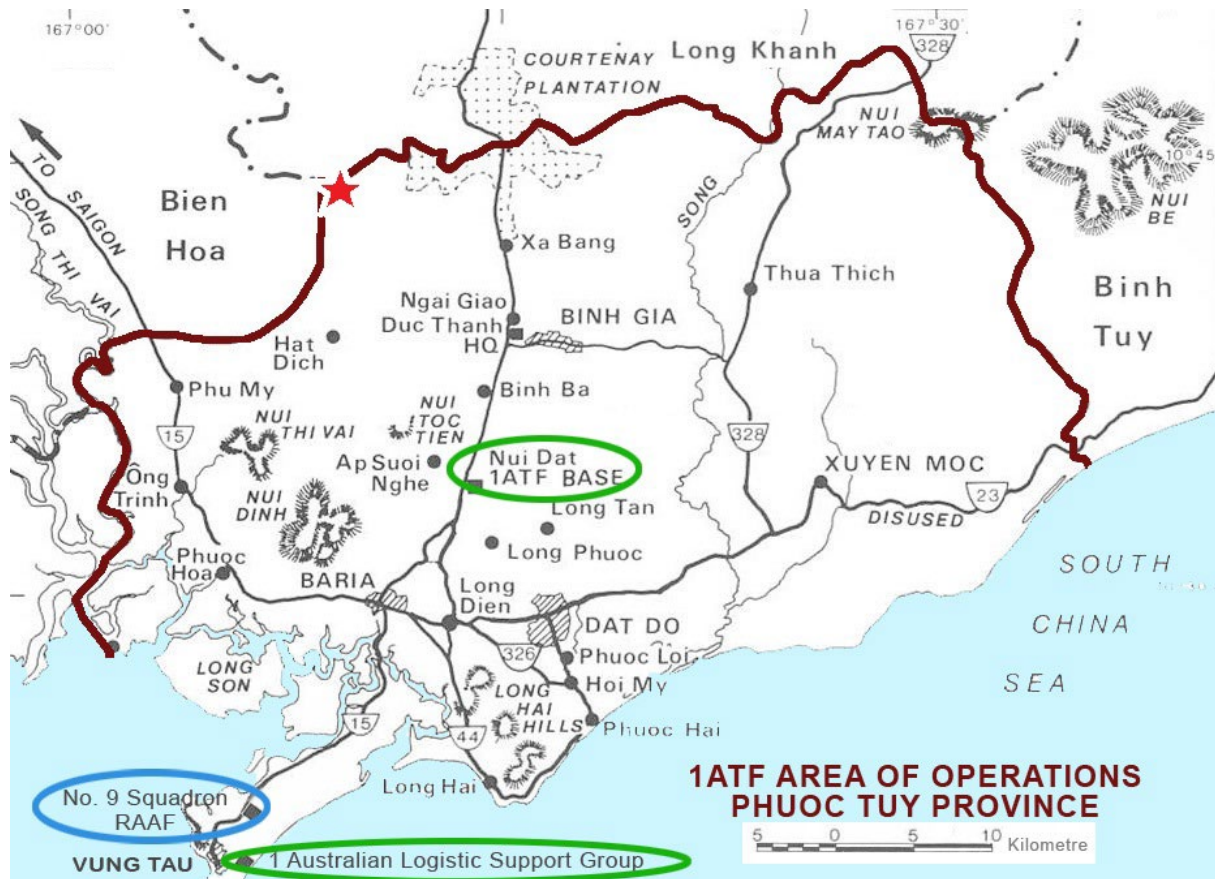


# A SUCCESSFUL BUT NEAR DISASTROUS AIR STRIKE

By  
**BRIAN DIROU, DFC**

On 24Oct68, we were Albatross 01 in A2-382; BD, Mike Tardent, Rod Ranger and George Schubert. According to my logbook, we were involved in 2 x SAS extractions, one of them involving RPG and groundfire with a gunship being hit. I cannot recall the specifics of that event, but the other involved potential extraction of a patrol near the old Fire Support Patrol Base 'Dampier' on a network of trails.



When contact with the patrol was established, they whispered they had just been passed by 50 heavily armed enemy who had decided to rest near the planned extraction point. The SAS patrol was able to quickly move a few hundred metres unobserved.

I opted to hold off the extraction and requested an airstrike via Eagle Heights, the HQ 1ATF Command Post, which was speedily agreed. USAF fighter ground attack aircraft were always on armed standby at Bien Hoa near Saigon and reaction time was usually pretty prompt depending on operational demands

In this case, 2 x F100 Super Sabre aircraft were on station perhaps within about 5 minutes, but no USAF FAC (a Forward Air Controller) had yet appeared on the scene from Nui Dat or Vung Tau to control the airstrike. I had previously trained as a FAC in Australia when serving on fighters before being posted to helicopters and was able to get the fighters to call me on UHF to give them an overview of the scene of action while awaiting FAC arrival.



We were remaining well clear of the potential target area so as not to alert the enemy re intentions. **When the FAC arrived, I briefed him on the situation, recommended a 090M attack heading for the fighters and emphasized that after I had marked the target with a WHITE smoke (signifying enemy), we would be holding at about 1500 feet AGL around 2,000 metres NORTH of the target area.** He may have moved the fighters to another UHF frequency before I communicated that information.

When the FAC advised that fighters were ready, we ran in at about 1,000 feet toward the enemy location that had been advised by the SAS patrol, dropping a smoke canister that began emitting WHITE smoke on the way down before landing right where we wanted the ordnance delivered. As I called: '*Clear of the target*', the first F-100 rolled in with his bombs hitting the smoke and his No. 2 did likewise; then they each did a second 090M bombing pass with similar results.

We were doing an East-West racetrack holding pattern a couple of clicks (2,000 metres) north of the target. Then I heard a terrified: '**DOWN, DOWN!**' from Mike who was looking ground-wards. I dumped the collective, which really achieved nought for a couple of seconds due to aircraft inertia. **An F-100 flashed past the opposite cockpit window going vertically upwards at 400 plus knots. He was so close I glimpsed the nuts and threads on his now bare bomb racks!**



**The FAC had opted to change the attack direction for 20mm cannon strafing passes forgetting that we were holding NORTH of the target. This was a serious breach of operating discipline that nearly had disastrous consequences.** I meant to follow up with the Oi/c of the USAF FAC Detachment at Vung Tau based adjacent to the 9/35 hangar, but again got swept up in the maelstrom of operations so that did not transpire.

But a fundamental problem lay within No. 9 Squadron. Our SOIs (Signals Operating Instructions) were then bereft of details enabling communications with USAF air elements.

**1ATF was snowed with overwhelming Offensive Air Support and I always felt extremely uncomfortable operating in an air environment where a high volume of airstrikes was usually ongoing and being unable to easily communicate with FACs.**

After the airstrike, I resumed scene of action command and we pounded possible escape routes with 155mm artillery from the US Army Camp BLACKHORSE about 12 clicks north-east. At some stage, we recovered the SAS patrol uneventfully.

Sometime after that happening, 1ATF elements moved through the airstrike target area and according to feedback from our Army GLO (Ground Liaison Officer), found about 30 fresh graves.



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November 2025

