

This is a rough transcript of an interview done for Australian Infantry Magazine around Aug 2006.

Of Subbies and Snakes.

Dave Sabben has often been the public face of the Battle of Long Tan in documentaries, videos and interviews. Dave, as a platoon commander during the battle, has the increasingly rare position, in 2006, as being a formerly junior officer who has survived a pitched battle against the odds and is still around to tell the tale. Commanders today look to lessons of the past, as Dave did in 1966, as did our brothers in arms in Korea, WW2 and WW1. His reflections of the relationship between Platoon Commander and Platoon Sergeant is as relevant now as it was in the Boer War.

Can you describe the roles, as you perceived them, of Company level officers and Company Non-Commissioned Officers (SNCOs)?

Company and Platoon Commanders have a job to do and it's pretty much this: In peace time the focus is training for the fight. In an Operational Deployment the focus is tactically 'fighting' their units and coordinating support.

SNCOs are generally far more experienced than Company Commanders (OCs) and Platoon Commanders, and as well as admin and discipline, they carry the burden of the unit and team spirit.

In Platoons, anything that is not training or fighting lands on the Sergeant's shoulders – administration; discipline, food/water/ammo, casualties, Prisoners of War. Basically, everything else that leaves the Commander free to concentrate on training or fighting.

The WO2 (less so) and the Sergeant (more so) also needs to be able to DO the Company and Platoon Commander's job - at least for a time.

How should a Platoon or Company Commander utilise his SNCO's experience in Training?

Although the Commander SETS the training, he would be wise to consult with the SNCO because it is the SNCOs that not only GET the task done, but monitor, and to a large extent control, the ethos of the Company and Platoon as they are actually DOING the task.

In Delta Company 6 RAR, the OC set the training standards and the methods (with his WO2), and the Platoon and Section Commanders DID what was required. But it was the WO2 & Sergeants who ensured that the Diggers were motivated to DO what their officers demanded.

All the officers had to do after setting the standards was to DO what they expected the Diggers to do.

In your experience, what was the role of the SNCO in combat?

The Platoon and Section Commanders do the tactical fighting, but how well they do is only the result of how well they were trained, which gets back to the WO2 & Sergeants influence during training.

The burden on Corporals (CPLs) is the training and the fighting of the Section. Incidentally, I never underestimate the value of a Lance Corporal (LCPL), the Section Second in Command (2IC). This is where your SNCOs come from so the early experience is invaluable.

The job of the LCPL, Sergeant and WO2 is to clear everything off the desks of the Section, Platoon and Company Commander to let them get on with either training or fighting.

Can you explain your perspective on the SNCO/Officer relationship?

The professional relationship between SNCO and junior officer is pretty complex. While the book defines a strict rank and courtesy hierarchy, the reality is that mutual respect is a must.

Like it or not, the relationship of Sergeant to Platoon Commander should be one of mentor and aide. The Sergeant knows more and has more experience than the Platoon Commander, and is there to assist him.

This is less apparent with the WO2/ OC relationship, since there is a Company Second in Command (2IC) in the picture. However, since the 2IC was normally a rear details job in Vietnam, the WO2 was the one who cleared the obstacles from the OC's plate in the field. This is much less mentor and aide as per the Sergeant's role, but more of a support and running interference role.

How did these relationships coalesce in the battle of Long Tan?

Long Tan exemplifies all roles and training.

The OC was left to 'fight' the Company. WO2 Kirby looked after the CAP, ammunition distribution and Company Head Quarters defence. The lack of distraction ensured that Major Smith was able to focus entirely on the fight for 3.5 hours. This allowed him to track three platoons, four batteries, a troop of Armoured Personnel Carriers, a half-Coy of B Company nearby and still give his commanders a hard time over delays, artillery and airstrike capabilities!

Oh, and a few enemy probes and assaults!

Sergeant Buick assumed command of his Platoon seamlessly, taking over command and control, making decisions, calling in artillery etc.; all the functions of a Lieutenant in battle. Had he not known the Platoon Commander's job, the Platoon would have failed its task.

My Sergeant was wounded and administration responsibility flowed to a LCP. Several CPLs were killed or wounded, yet all Sections functioned correctly. This is what the Americans could not understand about Long Tan - they were incredulous that not one man cut and ran.

The difference at Long Tan was that Delta Company was very well trained. It had chains of command drilled in and every man knew his job and the next man's job. Further, every man

knew that the next man knew his job, and so could rely on that next man. Also, fire discipline and mutual support were drilled in.

Every Digger knew what he was doing, how and why. This would not - could not - have come from the officers alone. It came from the SNCOs, with the officers' help.

Can you differentiate the old cliché of “wars and stores”?

The older and more experienced Sergeant must respect the younger and less experienced Lieutenant for the ability the Lieutenant must demonstrate in one narrow field - tactics. (I include in 'tactics' all the skills necessary to produce a combat victory - radio procedure, map reading & navigation, field-craft etc.).

In this way, the Sergeant is often the bridesmaid - he is master of all skills needed to support the Platoon Commander, but it is the Platoon Commander who does what the Army exists for - win combat.

The Platoon Commander must respect the expertise of the Sergeant because, without a good Sergeant, the Platoon Commander would be so deep in admin-pooch that he would never be able to train his Platoon and therefore never win combat

I looked to my Sergeant for the administration and discipline of the Platoon, and expected that the LCPLs would assist at the Section level.

By far the biggest task in the Platoon belonged to the Sergeant. I made his task difficult because he had to execute his task without interfering with mine. In our training, all the skills of 'fighting' at Section and Platoon levels took the bulk of the days. The Sergeant had what was left to do the administration, but more importantly, to monitor the Diggers emotions, take and give advice and to simply get to 'know' the platoon.

Can you describe your own experience of this relationship?

When I first met my platoon, each Digger to me was first and foremost a unit of power - a rifleman, a gunner, a scout etc. For the Sergeant, each Digger was a man with a family and a stomach and a personality. It wasn't until much later in training that I started to 'know' the soldiers.

Thus it was the Sergeant who held the Platoon together and got them to cooperate with their new Platoon Commander during the early training. He would have done that with a mix of assurance to the Diggers that 'sir' knew what he was doing (while out of sight of the Diggers, making gentle suggestions to 'sir' about what he was doing well and wrong, encouraging and correcting, and offering suggestions at all levels).

The professional relationship from Sergeant to me was respectful because the book demanded that, but helpful and encouraging because he was a good Sergeant.

The professional relationship from me to the Sergeant was respect for his experience and gratitude for his tolerance and guidance.

And a final word...

Sabben on Sergeants:

In my opinion, the aim of the Sergeant is twofold. He needs the Platoon to be good enough to follow their Platoon Commander into fairly difficult circumstances, and do well in those circumstances. This enhances his own chances of survival.

He also needs to ensure that his Platoon Commander is good enough to not lead the Platoon into unnecessarily difficult circumstances, or, if necessary, do whatever he can to minimise or mitigate those circumstances. Again, this enhances his own chances of survival

Thus it can be said that the Sergeant is really out to ensure his own survival (smiles).

The best way for him to do this is for him to ensure that he has the best Platoon Commander and Platoon around him at any given time. And the best way to ensure THIS is for him to clear away from the Platoon Commander all distractions and let him get on with training the Platoon before going on an Operational deployment.