



A story from the history of Australian Artillery:  
Commemorating 150 years – 1871-2021  
**Lance Bombardier Peter "Blue" Maher, MM**  
**The Battle of Long Khanh, South Vietnam 6-7 June 1971**  
**'Shielding Bravo Company'**



Lance Bombardier Peter "Blue" Maher, 12 Fd Regt and his signaller Gunner Bayne "Gus" Kelly, were attached to 5 Platoon, B Company, 3 RAR during Op Overlord, a three-battalion operation north of Phuoc Tuy Province. Towards last light on the 6th of June, 5 Platoon located a large occupied bunker complex. 5 Platoon were directed to withdraw to a night defensive position to allow the artillery to engage safely and Blue adjusted the fire onto the position with his direct support battery. Blue then planned a DF (Defensive Fire) fire plan to protect them that night.

At first light on the 7th of June covering fire was adjusted by Blue onto the bunker system, prior to the understrength 5 Platoon's assault. The infantry soon came under heavy fire from a range of 15 metres due to the dense jungle and took a number of casualties. Asked, years later, about what his reaction was at this point, he replied, "We just focussed on our job [of bringing in fire support] and had faith in the infantry." Blue engaged the bunkers again with fire "very close" to 5 Platoon from 'A' Field Battery and 104 Field Battery RAA, as well as from US 155mm medium guns.

Later that morning, the remainder of B Company closed up to reinforce the platoon. The Company FO, 2nd Lieutenant Ian Mathers was sent forward to take control of the artillery fire, but was mortally wounded as he advanced. Lance Bombardier Maher again found himself coordinating artillery as close as 100m, pausing to allow RAAF Bushmaster and US Cobra gunship strikes.

A RAAF Iroquois resupply helicopter laden with 20,000 rounds of 7.62mm, was shot down and burst into flames 30 metres to their rear. Gus Kelly had been moving wounded under fire to the Landing Zone and rushed to the crash site, rescuing wounded from the helo. For this, he would receive the US Army Commendation Medal for Valour over 20 years later.

D Company and Centurion tanks from 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Regiment joined the fray that afternoon, and swept through the bunker complex. A total of 47 bunkers were uncovered. Three Australians were KIA and 12 WIA. Enemy casualties were difficult to determine due to destroyed bunkers but later evidence suggests many more were incurred.

Lance Bombardier Maher was awarded the Military Medal for his steadfast coordination of sustained and accurate indirect fire and gunship support over almost 24 hours.

**Sources:**

Personal Interviews, WO2 S. Wilson

Australian War Memorial, [Collection](#), accessed 15 August 2021

Australian War Memorial, [Collection](#), accessed 18 August 2021

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