

CENTURION BATTLES BIG CAT IN VIETNAM 1968

The Prelude

This is a true story about a fight between a big Cat and an even bigger Centurion during the Vietnam War in 1968. Sound strange? Well, let me explain.

Notwithstanding my thirst for blood, and the associated looting and pillaging, I wasn't a volunteer for jungle clearing operations but rather my appointment came as a result of administrative action. Reported to higher authority as 'a threat to discipline', I was banished to the jungle for three months in the hope that I would not return. But, to the disappointment of my seniors, I did return – but that is another story.

First, I was sent for 're-education' somewhere north of Saigon with a US Army Land Clearing Battalion equipped with about **100** Caterpillar D7 dozers. Despite my initial shock and awe, I soon stood out in field.....mainly because, as this photo shows, I was about the only white man there.



Next came two solid months clearing a trail 30 km long by 200 m wide in thick jungle between the Nui Dinh and Nui Thai Vai mountains. The Official History *Fighting to the Finish* pp 20 – 21 and p 718 gives passing mention to Operation LYREBIRD 1 August to 2 October 1968. On the first day of the operation, a D8 dozer was destroyed by rocket fire – see photo next page. Another D8 was damaged by a 10 kg mine on 4 August.

Protection for the month of August was provided by a New Zealand infantry company (W Coy, 4 RAR/NZ) supported by APCs and mortars. The Kiwi's pathological fear of snakes was confirmed when a very large python came uninvited into a Kiwi ambush position. A furious burst of M60 machine gun fire halted clearing operations but failed to halt the monster reptile and a Cat D8 dozer was dispatched to convert the intruder into grouser-sized steak fillets. A second infantry company (B Coy 4 RAR/NZ) was deployed when it became clear that the VC weren't happy about our encroachment into their domain. Just as well B Coy joined us because they found 17 x 75 mm RCL rounds probably intended for us.



A Coy 3 RAR provided protection for most of September, a month marked by monsoon rains and increasing problems with our tired machines and exhausted operators. A Coy 1 RAR filled in during the 4 RAR/3 RAR changeover phase. Twenty-two kilometres of trail were cleared before the wet season and unhealthy enemy interest conspired to bring the operation to an end on 2 October 1968.

Trouble Brews

On 31 August, during the move to FSB Hokinui, an APC hit a mine with two WIA. On the same day, a D8 failed and we whistled up a Centurion Armoured Recovery Vehicle (ARV) to recover it. Disregarding our advice for a rear tow, the recovery crew hooked up via the lifting lugs on top of the D8's blade and began the tow forwards. It was obvious to us that the dozer would belly whenever the blade and A frame rose and fell under tow. Sure enough, soon after the tow commenced, the Centurion with its engine screaming, ripped the bull blade, A-frame and hydraulic rams clean off the dozer, and was last seen heading off at speed back to Nui Dat. We had to pick up the pieces and recover the dozer ourselves.



This unfortunate series of events led to some disaffection between brothers-in-arms and much discussion ensued between Tankies and Sappers over whose machine was the most powerful. And so, the idea of a Great Tug-of-War (Cat vs Cent) was conceived.



The Fight to the Death

The contest was organised as a tug-of-war between a D8H dozer and a Centurion ARV using a length of ship's anchor chain. It took place at Nui Dat in late October 1968 without the knowledge or blessing of those with more sense and/or authority.



Much roaring, straining and sliding ensued as the two steel monsters fought in the dust for the honour of their masters. The Centurion ARV never had a chance – while the D8 was lighter and it had a smaller engine, its drive train and tracks were designed for

maximum power and tractive effort. The ARV was designed to travel at 35 kph and therefore its design sacrificed pulling power for speed and mobility.

To prevent the Caterpillar D8 from ripping the Centurion apart, the event was called off by a very angry 1 Armoured Regiment Warrant Officer who happened upon the scene by chance, but not before the Centurion's clutch was burnt out. The Engineers retired to their canteen to celebrate while the hapless Tankies were sent off to repair their crippled Centurion.

While the Cat D8H could produce only 280 hp against the Centurion's 650 hp, the D8H incorporated the latest 1960's technology including powershift transmissions and turbochargers. The Centurion represented 1940's technology. Dozers are designed solely for pushing/pulling whereas tanks trade-off power for mobility. The contest was all about engine torque, tractive effort and new technology. The unfortunate tankies were seduced by the Centurion's big Rolls Royce Meteor engine and got sucked in by the Engineers who knew that tractive effort would win the day.

The Finale

The Land Clearing Team NCOs are now dead and so are many of the plant operators. So, the time has come to tell this little story before it is lost to the mists of time. While of little significance in terms of the big picture, the story reinforces the legend of the larrikin Digger and pays tribute to the Kiwi soldier Killed in Action and to the 11 soldiers wounded during Op LYREBIRD. It also acknowledges those Sapper plant operators who worked in difficult and dangerous conditions for a protracted period in the jungle during the monsoon season. Being one of the few men left standing, I feel obliged to relate this little story while I still have access to some diaries and photos.

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A Cat D8 comes to the rescue