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MEDALS FOR LONG TAN VETERANS NEW TRIBUNAL TO EXAMINE OTHER ISSUES

The Rudd Government has today announced changes to military awards in response to the independent review of Battle of Long Tan recognition. It has also announced its response to the review of service recognition for RAAF Ubon (1965-68).

Cabinet Secretary, Senator John Faulkner, Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Alan Griffin, and Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Support, Dr Mike Kelly, have carefully considered the reports of the independent review panel and a number of public responses to the reports.

Key decisions, approved by the Governor-General, are:

- Harry Smith, Commander D Company 6RAR, will be offered the Star of Gallantry (equivalent to the Distinguished Service Order), and Platoon Commanders Dave Sabben and Geoff Kendall, will be offered the Medal for Gallantry (equivalent to the Military Cross). This restores the original award recommended for Smith by his commanding officers, and accepts that the intention was to award Sabben and Kendall higher honours.
- The strength of D Company 6RAR in Vietnam on 18 August 1966 will receive approval to wear the former Republic of Vietnam's Gallantry Cross with Palm Unit Citation Emblem.

Any other unresolved concerns regarding individual awards for Long Tan will be referred to the independent Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal. The Government will consider itself bound by the Tribunal's recommendations on these matters.

Implementation of these recommendations will properly recognise the individual and collective gallantry of these men on 18 August 1966, provide an equitable mix of awards for the battle, and will confer considerable honour on all the men of D Company 6RAR in Vietnam who fought in the Battle of Long Tan.

The independent panel reviewing service recognition for RAAF Ubon found that that the close working relationship that Australian personnel developed with the Americans at Ubon, in Thailand, does not translate to an intention by the Government to deploy assets as part of the Vietnam War. The Government has accepted this finding. It is open for the Ubon Veterans to seek a review of this matter by the independent Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal.

The Government again thanks the panel for its work on these matters and supports most of its recommendations. On the matter of the South Vietnamese unit citation, we respect the panel's principled approach but have formed the view that the evidence of an intention by the former government of South Vietnam to offer this award is compelling.

Further details of the Government's response to the recommendations of the review reports are attached.

FOR COMMENT:

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REVIEW OF RECOGNITION FOR THE BATTLE OF LONG TAN AND RAAF UBON (1965-68): GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

<i>Review of Recognition for the Battle of Long Tan</i>		
Recommendation	Response	Comments
<p>1. Harry Smith be offered the opportunity to accept an award of the Star of Gallantry, the contemporary equivalent of the Distinguished Service Order (for gallantry) originally recommended to the Commander of Australian Force Vietnam (COMAFV).</p>	<p>Agreed.</p>	<p>The Government accepts the Panel’s findings that the documentary evidence supports the claim that the award was downgraded; that specific factors operating at the time the award recommendations were considered led to the downgrading, which is considered unjust; and that the proposed level of award was thoroughly earned in view of (then) Major Smith’s performance in the Battle.</p> <p>The Government has recommended to the Governor-General that he approve an award of the Star of Gallantry to Harry Smith, to restore the intentions of his immediate commanders. The Star of Gallantry has only rarely been awarded and is second only to the Victoria Cross for Australia. The award would confer considerable honour on Harry Smith personally and more broadly on D Company 6RAR.</p>
<p>2. David Sabben and Geoff Kendall be offered the opportunity to accept awards of the Medal for Gallantry, the contemporary equivalent of the Military Cross originally recommended to COMAFV.</p>	<p>Agreed.</p>	<p>The Government accepts the Panel’s findings that the testimony of key individuals interviewed by the Panel supports the claim that higher awards were initially recommended than are reflected in the surviving paperwork; that specific factors operating at the time the award recommendations were considered led to the awards being downgraded; and that the existing level of awards is inequitable, in view of the higher level award made to the other surviving platoon commander (a Military Medal, the equivalent of the Military Cross for other ranks, to (then) Sergeant Buick, who commanded 11 Platoon, D Company, after the platoon commander was killed during the Battle).</p> <p>The Government has therefore recommended to the Governor-General that he approve awards of the Medal for Gallantry to David Sabben and Geoff Kendall. The awards of the Medal for Gallantry would provide equitable recognition for the surviving D Company platoon commanders, and achieve a mix of awards for the Battle of Long Tan that more adequately recognises the gallantry of the participants.</p>

<p>3. No action be taken to make a contemporary award for any other participant in the Battle.</p>	<p>Noted.</p>	<p>The Government notes the recommendation and the principles adopted by the Panel which lead to the Panel not pursuing the review of other claims for awards. However, given the concerns that have been raised in connection with recommendation 3, the Government will refer the issue of claims for other participants in the Battle of Long Tan to the independent Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal for review. The tribunal's decisions will be binding upon the Government.</p>
<p>4. No action be taken to give retrospective permission for members of D Company 6RAR to wear the insignia of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm Unit Citation.</p> <p>Neither should any action be taken to award a contemporary unit citation for participation in the Battle.</p>	<p>Not agreed.</p>	<p>The Government considers that there is sufficient weight in the evidence for the foreign unit award to justify treating the claim in the same way as individual foreign awards for the Battle of Long Tan were treated in 2004. While an original offer of the unit award, including the citation text, has not survived, the Government accepts that there was an intention to offer the unit award to D Company 6RAR.</p> <p>The Government has therefore recommended to the Governor-General that he set aside the foreign award guidelines and approve the Government of the Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm Unit Citation Emblem for wear by all members of D Company 6RAR on the strength of the unit in Vietnam on 18 August 1966.</p>
<p><i>Review of service recognition for RAAF Ubon (1965-68)</i></p>		
<p>Recommendation</p>	<p>Response</p>	<p>Comments</p>
<p>No action be taken to offer further recognition, including by way of the Vietnam Logistic and Support Medal, for the service of RAAF personnel stationed at Royal Thai Air Force Base Ubon between 25 June 1965 and 31 August 1968.</p>	<p>Agreed.</p>	<p>The Government accepts the Panel's finding that, although RAAF Ubon provided <i>de facto</i> support to the United States Air Force air campaign in Vietnam, it cannot be concluded that RAAF Ubon was deployed as part of Australia's commitment to the Vietnam War. The Australian Active Service Medal 1945-75 "Thailand" appropriately recognises warlike service at Ubon.</p> <p>The Government notes that claimants may seek a review of this matter by the independent Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal.</p>