FUN FEAR FRIVOLITY

A tale of the Vietnam War by an Aussie Grunt

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Nearly 50 years ago, Ian Cavanough was at the very tip of Australia's involvement in Vietnam. After volunteering for National Service, he endured almost 12 months of tortuous training which melded him and his section mates into a finely honed anti-guerrilla force. For the next year plus, they patrolled Phuoc Tuy Province, driving the enemy out. The effort was mentally and physically draining but carried out with typical Digger camaraderie and spirit. All these years later, Cav brings his vivid memories to life with this down-in-the-dirt account where Aussie larrikinism is shattered by sudden, brutal violence.

It was a very personal war for many young Australians. This is a very special account by one of them.

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FOREWORD 1

BY

LT COL (RET) PL CAMERON BA MSc psc

FUN FEAR FRIVOLITY is the story of a young infantry soldier and his training for, participation in, and return home from, the Vietnam War. It is a unique, yet universal story. Unique, as it is autobiographical in context. Universal, in that it indelibly captures the fear, the friendship, the horror, the humour, and the trust experienced by all young infantry soldiers embroiled in that conflict, together with the psychological burdens they have carried thereafter.

Ian Cavanough has penned his story after more than 45 years of reflection. He apologises, for reasons he explains, that his story is written in words that lack emotion. I disagree. The incredible precision and clarity with which he recalls his experiences, from his first day as a recruit, through his training for war, his feelings and fears when confronting the enemy, his forays on leave, his mental anguish at the loss of his mates and his eventual discharge and return to a hostile and alien civil environment, are in themselves an expression of deep and meaningful emotion.

The Infantry Platoon is a unique organisation, comprising a broad range of individuals brought together and trained to act in unison, in difficult situations. As an entity, the Platoon relies upon the qualities of trust, discipline, courage and selflessness in its soldiers, to conquer seemingly insurmountable challenges. In times of crisis, some Platoons are fortunate enough to have within their ranks an individual who is able, somehow, to lift himself and his fellow soldiers above the trauma and devastation of war. This individual is invariably a character of strength, who also possesses an unwavering sense of purpose and an indestructible, though sometimes cynical, sense of humour. *FUN FEAR FRIVOLITY* is confirmation that, for 2 Platoon, A Company, 2 RAR, 1970-71, Ian Cavanough was, and still is, that man.

Pat Cameron

FOREWORD 2

BY

LT COL (RET) TH O'NEILL (MOON)

Ian Cavanough has described his time as a National Service soldier preparing for, and participating as a member of 2nd Platoon, A Company 2nd Royal Australian Regiment/New Zealand (ANZAC) Battalion in South Vietnam (1970-71). He has described his experiences with humour and balance, and he has awakened forgotten memories for all of us who were there. More importantly, I think his account describes to anyone who wasn't there, how Aussie mateship and humour can bond individuals thrown together in tough conditions.

It is nearly half a century since our tour in SVN when, as a young infantry 2nd Lieutenant, I took over command of the platoon from my classmate and good friend, Pat Cameron, after he was severely wounded in a mine incident. I knew that Pat was an excellent platoon commander and well respected by his soldiers and superiors. The circumstances were distressing for everyone. I knew the platoon would be unsettled and unsure after losing him, and that it would be potentially difficult as a reinforcement officer taking his place. I found that Pat had built a strong and effective team, held together by the three highly capable section commanders. Those three men were the backbone of the platoon.

I was particularly impressed with how well both regulars and national servicemen worked together seamlessly as an effective team. They were all decent young men who didn't necessarily agree with the war or our involvement but they knew that they had a job to do and that they were doing their duty for their country, their unit and their mates. I didn't realise at the time that some of those young men would not adapt well on their return to Australia.

Operationally, there was no distinction between Regular Army and National Serviceman (NS) as we all relied on each other and trusted each other unreservedly. Not many people realise that even though NS could

be jailed if they refused to comply with the Government enlistment notice (which was therefore compulsory), every NS serving in our unit was given the option not to go to SVN. Most did commit to SVN because they considered it their duty, and they were there for their mates.

Most of us understood the reasons for the anti-Vietnam war movement in Australia, however we were stung by the unfair public and political condemnation of our servicemen who were doing their duty. On return to Australia in 1971, we all tried to put the Vietnam experience behind us. I didn't realise until years later how badly some of our National Servicemen and regulars had struggled. There was no post-war counselling then and NS were discharged within weeks of return to Australia and came back home into a climate that was far from conducive to resettlement and repatriation. Regular soldiers at least had their regimental life and comrades.

Many of us missed the first welcome home parade in Sydney in 1987 as we felt it was purely for political show and far too late. I did eventually attend the Australian National Vietnam Memorial Dedication and Parade, which was held in Canberra on 3rd October 1992. Ian and a number of members were instrumental in rounding up most of the platoon to be there.

Until that point many of us didn't realise how badly our NS (and regular soldiers) had been left to resettle without support, and how difficult it was for many of them to adjust back into normal life in Australia. Since the reunion, the platoon now regularly meet and support each other, particularly if someone is having a rough time. This is the strength of the platoon.

Last year I went to a dedication ceremony for Killer at his old school, Padua College in Brisbane. His mother, Erika and sister, Sabina were there. The whole school was involved and the service was well organised with maximum participation by the staff and students who had obviously put a lot of genuine effort into the preparation and conduct of the service. The school genuinely honours its former students who died for their country, and we all found it moving and sincere. Quite frankly, it was far more moving and meaningful than I think any military ceremony could have been at the time or since. Private Peter Kowalski's name is now proudly immortalised on the school's memorial plaque where his school will remember him every year on Vietnam Veterans Day. Erika will never get over losing her son but at least now we feel that after all this time Killer has finally been put to rest with honour and where he is at home.

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Ian in writing this book and telling his story on behalf of most of the diggers in our platoon and in particular bringing the platoon together long after the war was over. This was an extremely important achievement particularly for our National Servicemen who must have felt totally betrayed and bewildered by a Government which conscripted them, then abandoned them.

We are now at the stage in our lives where we can put the old demons to rest, have a laugh about old times and get on with what is left of life.

Well done, Ian!

Quote by Lt Col Fred Fairhead, author of *A Duty Done* which is a summary of operations by the Royal Australian Regiment in the Vietnam War 1965 - 1972: *"Vietnam was very much a Platoon Commander/Junior Leader's war and in the immediate aftermath and the years that followed this was not fully recognised."*

Terry O'Neill

From the Author

People ask me how did I remember so much detail for stuff that happened forty something years ago. It was easy. Just a couple of rums and away I'd go.

There are some people I need to thank.

Bob Whittaker was the first person to encourage me to write my story and he was very generous with some tips and stuff which I took no notice of.

Brian Hartigan published chapters in Contact Magazine. This generated a lot of interest in my story. Many chicks wrote to Brian requesting more pictures of me, preferably with my shirt undone.

David Murphy was the final impetus for me to complete my story. He spent quite some time editing and getting it into eBook format. Apparently he is ugly and doesn't have many friends so he has plenty of time on his hands.

And finally I want to thank Paula Cavanough. Every morning she gets down on her knees and thanks god she is married to me. I dunno how she puts up with being married to a total idiot. I think my good looks may

have something to do with it.

I hope you enjoy my story and you get something out of it. If you have some friends (unlike Murph) and you think they would like my story then get them to send me an email. That way we keep generating some $$$$ for IVES to help them continue with their advocacy work for war veterans and war widows. In the 9 years I was with them I taught them everything I know, and they know nothing.

Cheers

Cav

iancavanough@gmail.com

How to stop future wars

If politicians want to start a war then they must state the following:

1. *Mission: "General, go over there and win the war."*
2. *Resources: "I will give you everything you need."*
3. *Management: "I will not interfere. Come back to me when the job is done."*
4. *Repatriation: "I promise to look after you and your soldiers."*

Oh, and most important of all, they must agree to this condition:

Any politicians who send troops to war must also send one of their own children to the front. If it is OK for them to send your child off to war, then they must surely be willing to send one of their own.

Ian Cavanough

18 August 2017

Chapter 1

One small step for a boy and one giant leap to manhood

On a cold windswept train station in Cootamundra one winter's morning in July 1969, I waited.

I was beginning a journey that would not only be the start of a momentous change in my life that day, but it would also be the beginning of something that would continue to have an impact on my life well into the future.

High above me in space were a group of men heading to the moon. We shared a similar fate, heading into the unknown and none of us knew whether or not we would survive our journey alive.

Cootamundra Railway Station was very familiar to me. My father worked there as a shunter so I had visited it many times to see him and his workmates. But that cold day I was standing there alone reflecting on life as best one could at 19 years of age.

I had my hair cut, I was in clean clothes, and in my bag were just a few things but no personal items. They were not allowed where I was going. Around me I could see a couple of others waiting, just like me. I hope the look on my face wasn't as bad as the look on theirs. The train arrived and as we boarded, I noticed other young blokes on board with that same look.

All us blokes with 'the look' disembarked at Wagga Wagga. On the station stood a majestic figure in an Army Battledress uniform. We sort of gravitated towards him, ever so gingerly. He never moved. He stared straight ahead. His uniform was immaculate. I'd say he was in his forties, a sergeant with a perfectly manicured moustache. He stood at attention. His left arm was pressed along the side of his body, ending in a clenched fist with the thumb leading and covering the end of his fingers. The thumb was in line with the seam on his trousers. His black boots shined like glass. In his right hand was a cane, his fingers stretching forward together in a straight line, the thumb tucked underneath. The other end of the cane disappeared under his armpit.

I was impressed.

He spoke in a low moderate tone without moving. “Those gentlemen wishing to go to Kapooka, please move to the outside to the left of the station and wait on the footpath beside the Army bus.”

We did what he said.

The immaculate sergeant somehow got to the bus before us. He waited. We waited. He spoke again in that low modulated tone that wanted you to follow him anywhere. ”Those gentlemen wishing to go to Kapooka, please board the bus.”

We did what he said.

We were nearing our objective just like the guys in space above us. Suddenly the Kapooka gates appeared and we were in. Just like that! Some bloke said, “Hey, have a look at that dickhead and the way he's swinging his arms!”

I looked. His arms swung on an arc from front to rear. Each time the arm rose and fell from a height that was equal to his shoulder.

The bus stopped.

A uniformed person with a mouth for a head burst through the bus door and yelled, “RIGHTO, YOUSE FUCKING BLOKES, GET YA FUCKING ARSES OFF THIS FUCKING BUS AND FORM TWO RANKS ON THE FUCKING ROAD! MOVE!!”

We did what he fucking said, real fucking quick.

Houston, the fucking Eagle has landed.

Chapter 2

The Doc and the Psych

At the RAP (Regimental Aid Post)

We had only just arrived and the first thing they did was to give us a medical.

"Next!"

“Did you get on the wine last night?” as he pumped away on this thing around my arm.

“No.”

“No, what?”

“No, I didn’t get on the wine last night.”

“No, I didn’t get on the wine last night, SIR!”

“No, I didn’t get on the wine last night, SIR!”

“Go and lie down over there.”

“Yes, sir!”

Apparently my blood pressure was high, and is it any bloody wonder? After I lay on my back in my undies for 10 minutes, he retested my blood pressure.

“Shit, it’s even higher! Go on, piss off!”

Thirty years later I saw that medical report. The blood pressure reading was 140/90. Not bad for a skinny 19 year old on his first day in the Army.

Next, the Psych Centre

What a motley crew we were, a group of gangly teenagers who seemed to be all arms and legs, standing in two ranks outside a red brick building somewhere in the bowels of Kapooka Army base, wondering what on earth we were in for. I was worried for the bloke with shoulder length hair - he was certainly going to cop it. At least the rest of us had sense enough to get a haircut.

We were ushered into classrooms with plenty of paper sitting on the desks. For the next few hours we were required not only to write our names a zillion times, but they actually gave us a number of tests. I recognised them from my school days. They were called aptitude tests then and they were used to help us decide on a vocation for when we left school. They suggested I do engineering or printing as apparently I was good at maths and fitting things together.

I became a clerk.

Based on my results for the Army testing (although I didn't know it at the time), I was selected for officer assessment so I think it is important to share with you how I conducted the tests because anyone who knows me will wonder how the Army got it so right.

You see, I left Cootamundra High School in 1967 with an average pass in the Higher School Certificate. That was the first year of this certificate. I did not matriculate. For the next 18 months I worked with the Forestry Commission as a clerk, first in Wagga Wagga and then in Tumut. My job was issuing royalty accounts to sawmillers for timber extracted from the forests. It involved a lot of calculations, additions, checking and rechecking of accounts. Each log was measured and I had to calculate the superfootage, grade the timber into its various categories, apply the current rates, total it all up and Bob's ya uncle. Although we had tables to use I still remember the formula for calculating the superfootage of a log ... *¼ of the centre girth in inches squared, multiplied by the length in feet/12*. I think they just weigh the semitrailers loaded with logs now.

So how did that help? Well I must have developed above average clerical skills, enough to wow these Army dudes.

Lemme give you an example. In the Army tests we had to check a sequence of numbers that were listed down the page. A normal person would check list A with list B one digit at a time. Because of my clerical work experience I was able to go down five digits in list A then check the five digits against list B. I'd then check five more digits in list B and check them back against list A, and so on. In effect I was only moving from one list to the other after every 10 digits, not for each single digit as most people do. Neato, huh?

No wonder the Army thought I was a genius.

They took us to lunch.

Imagine the biggest dining hall you can and double or triple it. I dunno, maybe the mess halls were the size of a football field and were packed

full of hungry, green clad, noisy recruits. It was chocka! Into this cauldron of overblown bravado and bodies full of testosterone we went, still dressed in civvies. I was behind the guy with the long hair. A corporal took us in. As we burst in through the door, the hall fell silent. The recruits started to hoot from a very low tone which slowly raised in pitch and crescendo until they were all banging on the tables. "You'll be sorry, you'll be sorry, you'll be sorry" was the catch phrase.

The corporal did his best. One NCO (non-commissioned officer) against a few thousand recruits. He shouted at them: "SHUT YA FUCKING MOUTHS! SHUT YA FUCKING MOUTHS!"

They did fucking quieten down eventually.

Chapter 3

Ninety Day Wonders

Those first few days at Kapooka are a bit of a blur now. I was in 22 Platoon. We were all Nashos. Two of my school mates were with me in my platoon. Darcy who bunked next to me, and Ian whom I would catch up with again in Vietnam some 12 months later. Before I get on with all my wonderful stories about basic training, I'd better tell you how the officer selection ended up.

In a word, it didn't.

I was called out with a group to see if we had the aptitude for officer training. Nasho officers were known as *ninety day wonders* because that's how long it took to churn out Second Lieutenants at Scheyville, west of Sydney. The last thing they taught them out there was how to walk on water.

We were given a few teamwork-type activities to solve problems as a group. There wasn't any shortage of blokes trying to take over and dominate the group. I felt it was a little artificial with blokes trying to outdo each other in front of all that Army brass. So I adopted what they call in the Army *a low profile*.

It worked. When it came to an impromptu five minute talk, they selected me to go first. I should mention that all of the other blokes were in their early twenties. Their Nasho service had been deferred due to their university studies. So the young skinny 19 year old clerical whiz kid eventually got his time in the sun.

I spoke about the lunar mission. Those guys up there in space hadn't landed on the moon just yet but I knew all about it. Some months earlier I was in Sydney as part of the audience for the Tommy Leonetti Show, a forerunner to the Don Lane Tonight Show. They had a guest on the show who explained the whole lunar mission. I was able to dazzle those uni guys and the Army brass with such things as it was Johnson who had the responsibility of fulfilling the promise made by Kennedy. Getting to the moon wasn't a problem. They could do that easily. The hard part was getting them home. The scientists wanted to construct a space wheel in orbit around earth and then go to the moon from there. That saved a lot of energy because the craft did not need to free itself from earth's gravity. The scientists of course were not really interested in going to the moon, they wanted to explore the planets and the space wheel would

certainly help them to achieve that.

Then some bloody engineer came up with the idea to jettison. As fuel cells were used up, they were discarded. The scientists fought this radical idea because they could see that such an exercise would mean there was no need for a space wheel and their real plans of interplanetary travel would be done and dusted. Anyway, the politicians thought it was a great idea and the rest, they say, is history. I also explained the orbits, about how the lunar module remained on the moon, blah, blah, blah. I had them eating out of the palm of my hand.

Next day, the numbers of potential ninety day wonders had halved and we had to do some written stuff. I recall one scenario where we were told we were stranded on an island and although it was uninhabited there was evidence that it was frequented by cannibals. The island was also visible to passing ships as it was on a main shipping lane. We had a map and we had to indicate what we would do and where we would do it.

Well, as it turned out I put in another sterling effort. You see in 1968 I saw a television series made by the French on Robinson Crusoe. All I did was write about what he did, saying this is what I'd do. I would set up camp near fresh water and select a base protected from the elements where the cannibals would have to come to it across open ground so they couldn't sneak up on me. The back of the camp area had large cliffs so the cannibals would have a hard time coming up that way. I'd build log dumps and set them alight so that any passing ship could see my smoke signals. If the cannibals tried to climb the cliffs I could set the logs alight and push the burning logs down onto them.

And on I went with my grandiose plans.

Just call me Monty, OK?

Day three and our ninety day wonder numbers had dwindled even more. That day we had to front the Selection Board. Someone said if you didn't step on your dick you'd be in!

I stepped on my dick.

I had prepared a speech for them. It went something like this. "Gentlemen, I am not like the rest of the group. They are much older than I am and they have tertiary studies under their belts. I am a clerk with a high school education with very little life experience. I don't feel I would be able to command a platoon in Vietnam effectively."

The top brass were clearly taken aback. One old codger cleared his throat

and said something about how they believed I had the necessary attributes and all I needed was some confidence, training and channelling of those skills. I'm pretty certain he used the word channelling.

I went on to tell them "I volunteered for National Service for one reason: to go to Vietnam. I want to experience war and I believe the best way to do that would be as an Infantry soldier. If I went to Officer Training there would be no guarantee that I would go to Vietnam and I believe that the chances of my commanding an Infantry Platoon in Vietnam would be very slim indeed."

That silenced them.

They thanked me for my candour and wished me luck.

I went back and joined the boys at 22 platoon.

So now you know. I was a volunteer Nasho. My parents had to sign a paper which they were reluctant to do at first, but they could see I was serious so after a bit of ranting and arm waving from my mother, they signed.

My brother was a Nasho who had served 12 months in Vietnam so I knew what I was letting myself in for.

So why did I do it? Why volunteer for war? Well I don't think I ever explained it properly to my mother but I think it had something to do with my wanting to achieve manhood status. There I was, 19 years of age, living in a small country town and going nowhere. I felt I had to do something with my life, I had to test myself, to prove to myself that I could do anything, no matter how hard it was. The reason I didn't apply to be a regular soldier was because as a Nasho I only had to do two years' service and my job would be waiting for me when my time was up. The shortest time for a regular soldier was three years' service and then you were looking for a job.

I once read a story called *A Man Called Horse*. It was written by a woman, surprisingly enough. It was about an Englishman who didn't like the class structure as he believed all men were equal. He wanted to go somewhere where this was so. He went to America looking for it there. Eventually he was captured by Indians and not only did he survive but he became an Indian brave and married an Indian girl. It was a helleva story. He experienced a lot of great things with the Blackfeet tribe and he used to say to himself, "Wait until I get back home and tell the people all the things I have done." Finally when he did return to England and people

asked him what he did in America he simply said he lived with the Blackfeet tribe for a few years and told them nothing more.

His story is my story. I joined the Army. I went to war. I came home and I said nothing about it for a very long, long time.

That is about to change.

Chapter 4

Darcy has balls

Picking a site for an Army base is really quite easy if your objective is to piss diggers off. Pick a place where it is freezing cold in winter and stinking hot in summer, oh and make sure it is hilly as well. Place it near civilisation, but not too close. Design the layout so that no matter where you want to go within the camp, it is always uphill.

Welcome to Kapooka, the Army's first recruit training base, located just outside Wagga Wagga in southern NSW. The RAAF were so impressed, they have a base there too, but it is on the other side of Wagga Wagga of course.

Kapooka was filled to capacity in 1969 when National Service was at its peak. The accommodation facilities were good unless you were expecting heating in winter and cooling in summer. The old Second World War buildings were replaced by modern full brick accommodation blocks which were three storey. Each floor had a number of rooms that housed four diggers on either side of a central aisle. At the end of the aisle were the ablutions facilities located just outside the corporal's room, known to us as the *jack room*.

Each room had a central divider with two diggers on either side. Each had a bed, a locker and a small side table. If you visited the accommodation block during the day you would swear that no one lived there, such was the level of cleanliness and austerity. There were no personal items to be seen anywhere, no pictures of family, nothing. And thirty soldiers lived there. The only giveaway would be an immaculately made bed and a wet towel drying over the rail at the end of the bed. There would be nothing else to see except for the gleaming shiny floor and a nicely polished brass fire hose end. Oh, and the ablutions were spotless as well.

The diggers maintained this during their own time. Training was conducted from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon. The quicker you got the jobs done, the sooner you had time to yourself. You were lucky to get to bed before midnight even though lights out was given at eleven. You rose at five thirty, pulled the sheet off your bed and took it out onto the parade ground for roll call. The idea of taking the sheet was to ensure you didn't sleep on the floor beside your bed to save you precious time by not having to make your bed.

Beds made, rooms cleaned, ablutions cleaned, rifles stripped and laid out on your bedside table, you stood beside it each morning in time for inspection before breakfast. The contents of the locker had to be laid out a certain way and it seemed like they found something wrong each day. Stuff was thrown out of your locker or your bed was pulled apart so that you had to fix it before going to breakfast.

If you stuffed up too much you would be given extra duties which meant you had even less time to prepare your stuff each day. That's when your mates helped you out. You quickly learned that the only way to survive was to work together as a team to get the jobs done.

Everything had to be done to the finest detail.

One day we had a Major inspecting us along with the CSM (Company Sergeant Major). We could hear the guys in the next room being hollered at. We could hear their footsteps in the hallway and then they burst into our room with big scowls on their faces. Darcy and I stood at attention shaking in our boots. Well I was. I dunno about Darcy, he was a tough bastard. The Major glanced at my locker and said something about fixing something up. He muttered something about Darcy's locker and then inspected our weapons which were laid out in a set sequence on the small desk. We had only received preliminary instructions on how to strip and assemble the weapon for cleaning and inspection. We had never fired them.

The Major was showing us how good he was by examining the gas plug. This is usually the dirtiest part of the weapon and it is the hardest bit to keep clean after firing. He then picked up the weapon, looked down the barrel, turned it over and spotted the gas wheel. He glared at Darcy with furrowed eyebrows, wrinkled forehead, steely eyes and he thundered, "Is this your weapon, recruit?"

"Yes, sir!" said Darcy fidgeting about a bit.

"The gas setting is incorrect for inspection!"

He turned and grabbed my rifle, "And the same goes for you too, digger!"

Shit, we're in trouble now.

Darcy cleared his throat and asked, "What setting should they be on, sir?"

Both the Major and CSM answered at the same time.

"Four."

“Five.”

They paused, looked at each other and slunk out of the room.

Darcy and I stood to attention for another minute or so. We were not game to react for fear that they would come back in and spring us having a great old silent laugh at their expense. We did have a great time sharing it with the others later though, many times. We never saw the Major again.

Chapter 5

Wah, Two Free, Wah

“Tonight the barber cometh. Youse will all get a haircut.” That was the great order of the day from the platoon sergeant. “It’ll cost ya four dollars.”

“But sarge, I got a haircut just before I got here,” said someone from the back.

“Read my fucking lips, dipshit: EVERYONE will get a haircut. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sergeant!” was the chorused reply.

We were getting quite good at these chorused responses because, and I may be letting you into a little trade secret here, that’s how we soldiers get to do things together at the same time. You know, all that drill stuff where we did the same thing together at the same time.

Lemme explain.

Say the platoon was on parade and they wanted us to do a left turn. The command was ‘left turn’, with a precautionary before it, in our case ‘platoon’. So the deal was the NCO dragged out the precautionary word of command so us little recruits knew he was going to tell us to do something so *let’s not stuff it up, guys and have me look bad and my peers find out and I have to shout at the mess.*

"Plaaatoooooon (a pause) **llllleeeeffffffttt, TA!"**

We then got to have all the fun of swinging our bodies through an arc of 90 degrees to the left (or 1600mils in Army speak but I’ll tell you about that later). At the same time we all yelled out “WAH!” Then we yelled “TWO, FREE!” (that was when we didn’t move, but we all simply paused mid turn) followed by bringing our rear leg forward in line with the other one and stamping our foot as hard as we could on the ground, yelling out “WAH!” We would all be facing in the new direction except those guys from Canberra who didn’t have a clue. When the 30 of us stamped our feet on the ground it would be heard as one big stomp, if our timing was right. If someone stuffed up, we did it again. We knew we'd stuffed up when the NCO said, “ASYAWUR!” (as you were).

In summary, we moved on the “WAH” and paused on the “TWO, FREE.”

There were some other words too, so I'll run through a few examples.

Attention: "WAH!"

Halt: "CHECK HALT!"

Right Turn: "WAH, TWO FREE, WAH"

Fall Out: "WAH, TWO FREE, WAH"

Shoulder Arms: "WAH, TWO FREE, WAH"

For the next few weeks or until they said otherwise, we were yelling "WAH, TWO FREE, WAH!" all over Kapooka along with dozens of other platoons, so naturally 22 platoon had to yell louder than the others. We didn't want them to think we were pussycats.

Meanwhile down at the barber shop ...

It wasn't really a barbershop, just four commercial barbers visiting our lines to make our heads 'Regimental'. We all lined up and the barbers did their thing. I couldn't believe some of the haircuts the guys were getting. Were they real barbers?

Finally, I got to the front of the queue.

"Hi, digger."

"Yeah, hi, mate."

"How are you finding the Army, son?"

"I think I made a big fucking mistake."

"Ha. Ha. Ha. Too late now, boy. Now, do you want a crew cut or a college cut?"

"Gee, I didn't know we could have a choice, I'll have a college cut, thanks!"

And with that the barber placed the cutting shears at the start of my hairline and made a blow right over the top of my head and then he worked his way down either side. I suddenly realised that he had no comb in the shears. It was operating on zero and he took all my bloody hair off!

I had thick dark hair as a result of my Chinese ancestry and now my head looked all bumpy, lumpy and ... white!!!

I never did get to see the guy with shoulder length hair lose his. That would have been something to see. Back at the platoon lines we started to introduce ourselves to each other again as we couldn't recognise each other. Boy what a transformation.

We were real Army recruits.

Chapter 6

Day Six (Or is it Day Ten)

Day six (or was it day ten?) and I was rooted. Every muscle in my body ached, it hurt to even lie in bed. A human body was not built to withstand drill, PT, weapons lessons, marching everywhere uphill and yelling WAH TWO FREE WAH while suffering the effects of Army medical experimentations. We had so many needles I lost count. I had swollen glands under my armpits from the smallpox injections. I had a cough that threatened to drown me in phlegm if my lungs survived being turned inside out each time I coughed. And they also fed us Bromide.

Bromide?

“The bastards put Bromide in the food.”

“Someone said they put it in the milk, I’m gunna stop drinking the stuff. I haven’t had a fat since I’ve been here.”

“Hey, I noticed that my urine is dark and it has a pungent odour.”

“Does Bromide make ya piss stink?”

No matter how sick we were, none of us went to the RAP (Regimental Aid Post). The reason was quite simple. The NCOs had discouraged us from doing that by implicating that they were all a bunch of idiots down there, they’d give us an Aspro and tell us to stop wimping out and get back to our platoon. In addition, if we were sick and needed a break for a couple of days then we could not train with our platoon. That meant being BACKSQUADDED to another platoon and we would not graduate with 22 platoon but with some other bunch of geezers some time later. Worse still we could end up in a Reg platoon. Heaven forbid!

Enter ‘The Professor'.

The professor was my other school mate, Ian. He worked out that by making a hot drink out of cold tablets, and drinking it before you went to bed, you felt much better in the morning, particularly if you slept with extra blankets. His theory was that you ‘sweated’ the cold out.

It seemed to work, except for the guy who collapsed with pleurisy and ended up in hospital. He was back a couple of days later. He was skiting that he got a root while he was at the hospital.

“Yeah, he got a root at the hospital alright, his arse is still sore.”

He wasn’t backsquadded at all because he didn’t miss any crucial training sessions. We did lose one bloke. He took off! He said he had had enough shit. Maybe we all should have left with him. He was back the next day. He hitched a ride quite easily, he said, and ended up at Albury when he realised that he could end up in jail for not meeting his National Service commitment, so he came back. I think they charged him and docked him a couple of days’ pay.

Lectures after lunch were the worst. Getting up at 5.30 am and continually on the go until after lunch, we found ourselves in a nice warm lecture room with full stomachs and a comfy chair to laze in. It wasn’t long before we were all starting to doze off. This must be where the term ‘dozy digger’ came from. Only the coughing kept us awake, along with some threatening remarks from the instructors that our bodies would meet some irreparable damage if we didn’t switch on.

We got threatened a lot by the NCOs when we didn’t do what they said or to their required standard. Being on the receiving end of continuous yelling really messes with your brain. I saw it as a contest. I didn’t let them get to me, especially during drill lessons.

“Do you like me, recruit?” said the big burly corporal with a megaphone for a mouth. He was inches away from my face and the blast of air from his oesophagus straightened my eyebrows.

“Ah ...” my mind was racing: *if I say no, I’ll be in deep shit*.

“Yes, corporal!”

“Oh, you like me do you, recruit? Maybe you want to fuck me? Do you want to fuck me, recruit?”

“No, corporal!”

“Well then, don’t look at me, lad. Keep your fucking eyes to the front. If I see the smallest flicker from your eyes, I’ll break your bloody arm off, shove it through your ears and ride you ‘round the parade ground like a fucking motor bike. Is that clear?”

Panic started to set in. I couldn’t laugh and I couldn’t even show the slightest smirk at his joke. I had to keep a poker face and stare to the front.

“Yes, corporal!”

I think I passed the test. I didn't look at him anymore and he didn't straighten my eyebrows again.

The Army was teaching me to be observant. I noticed for example that when you want to holler at someone you need to open your mouth really wide. You can only drop your jaw down so far, so you have to tilt your head back. This really opens the mouth up nice and wide and deep.

When the drill instructor has his face in your breath zone, you don't look at him. You stare into the distance so that his face is out of focus. If you focus on his face, all you see is that little pink thingy hanging from the back of his throat. It vibrates when he hollers. You can visually check his sinuses through his nostrils at the same time.

It was a good thing he couldn't read my thoughts.

Actually despite the aches and pain, I thought I was starting to dig the soldier gig thing.

Chapter 7

We bin shootin' as well as marchin', marchin', marchin'

I am familiar with a .22 rifle. I did a little bit of shooting as a lad in the hills around Cootamundra. We used to shoot rabbits, spiders, birds, snakes and anything else that moved. But the Army issue SLRs were something else. They are long and heavy and they give you a fair kick in the shoulder when you pull the trigger.

Before you begin any activity, the Army gives you a demo. This can be from a dedicated 'demo squad', or guys plucked out of your platoon, or a simple one man demo. Our first demonstration of the hitting power of the SLR was on our first visit to the firing range. A 20 litre drum full of water was placed on the mound and an NCO hit it with a 7.62 round fired from the SLR rifle. The drum flew 5 metres into the air and crashed back down with water spilling everywhere. We moved forward and examined the drum. There was a smallish hole in the front where the bullet went in. On the other side was a large open split where the back of the drum just opened up. Gee, imagine what it could do to a man's chest. I was very impressed with the hitting power of the weapon. It can kill a man at 300 metres.

We did a lot of lead-up training on the SLR. This involved stripping and assembling it again and again, in Army sequence of course, with all the little bits laid out a certain way in front of you. We could do it blindfolded. Maybe we were overtrained.

We were drilled on the various states of 'weapon readiness' (Load, Action, Instant, Unloaded), which we practised over and over again in a set sequence. In addition, we carried out stoppage drills where the weapon failed to fire and we did a series of drills to get it operating again as quickly as possible. When the enemy is coming over the hill and your weapon stops working, the practised drills ensure you fix the problem without thinking. I could do anything with this weapon, blindfolded, in my sleep, 100 metres under water whilst being attacked by a shark and having my gonads massaged by a mermaid. Such was the efficiency of the drills.

But hitting the target was a different matter.

People think a good shooter is one who can hit the bullseye, but it is more complicated than that. It is all about the group. By keeping the

same aiming mark, you fire three rounds at the target from 100 metres. On the target you draw a circle around where they hit the target. A small group is the measure of a good shooter. Hitting the bullseye is related to how your weapon is zeroed in (what you are aiming at through the sights is where your weapon is pointing) and good luck.

So each weapon must be calibrated to each shooter. That's why soldiers are allocated their personal rifle. You must never have your rifle more than an arm's length from you, even when you are sleeping. This is in the field of course. Not in barracks. They searched us after each firing session to ensure we had no rounds left over. We could get a lot of our own back on those instructors if we were armed and dangerous.

"Do you like me, corporal?"

Oops, I'm daydreamin'.

My body was getting used to the demands placed on it, the aches and pains were still there but they subsided quickly after strenuous activity such as PT. Our coughs dissipated thanks to the professor, our boots had softened up and marching was much easier.

Marching? We marched everywhere under the direction of an NCO who made sure we got to where our next lesson was and we got there on time. Well ahead of time, actually. Better to be early than late. Consequently we rushed to our next location then we waited around. It's called 'hurry up and wait.'

And the NCOs must have felt left out with our yelling WAH, TWO FREE, WAH because they got into their routine with EFF, ITE, EFF. Those words were yelled in cadence with a low guttural tone so that we all marched in step and it went like this...

EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EEEFFF.

EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EEEFFF.

HEAD UP, SHOULDERS BACK, EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EEEFFF. SWING DEM ARMS FRONT TO REAR.

If you got out of step you probably came from Canberra.

They taught us to double tap one foot to get back in step. We had a couple of wags in our platoon and even though we might be all marching in step when the NCO started to call the time, they would stamp their feet as if they were out of step. That got the NCO going, and it sounded like this ...

EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EEEFFF (suddenly sounds of feet stamping). *GET IN FUCKING STEP, YOUSE BLOKES. EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EEEFFF.*

EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EFF, ITE, EEEFFF.

And so on he would go, calling the time over and over again because he thought some of us couldn't march in step. It must have wreaked havoc on his vocal cords.

Ha, ha, sucked in, Dickhead!

Chalk one up to 22 platoon.

Chapter 8

22 v The Crayfish

Just who were these guys in 22 platoon with whom I was sharing my journey to soldiering stardom?

It seemed we were the local platoon. I've already mentioned that we were Nashos, so we were all good lookin'. There were no banana benders, crow eaters, Mexicans or boys from the west in our platoon. We had a couple of blokes from Canberra - I think the long haired bloke came from there. We had a few from Albury, including twins, the Joss brothers. Call-up for National Service was decided by ballot based on birth dates, so that's how the twins ended up with us. There were a couple of boys from Temora. I used to go to the local dances in Temora so I knew the sister of one of the blokes. We also had guys from Wagga, Batlow and Tumut.

We bonded pretty well and helped each other out. Some coped better than others with the demands on our bodies and we all pitched in and helped one another. This in essence is the goal of recruit training, to change you from an individual to a member of the group, and more importantly, to be an effective member of the group. To do your own thing and only look after yourself is to be a 'jack man'. There can be no worse label to put on a soldier than to call him a 'jack man'. Everyone must contribute to the group to ensure that the group finished its task together as a group. The group of course was 22 platoon.

The PTIs (physical training instructors) took us for PT every day. They were extremely fit and looked immaculate in their short shorts and tight singlets so we could all see their rippling muscles. By contrast we were all skinny.

"Bloody crayfish."

"Crayfish?"

"Yeah, body OK, head full of shit."

We never called them crayfish to their faces though. We had more sense than that.

We often did circuit training where a number of activities were conducted until the word "change" was given and we would rotate to the next activity. One activity was a simple summersault. One of the

Canberra connection decided to try it on and each time he went to do a summersault he would do it sideways and roll off the side of the mat.

The crayfish pounced. “What the fuck are you doing, recruit?”

“A summersault, Bombardier.”

The crayfish then helped him do a simple summersault by guiding him over with a hand on his back. This enabled the rest of us to slow down and take a breather while still appearing to be engaged feverishly in our activity. After a couple of goes at trying to get our guy to do a summersault, the crayfish smelled a rat.

“Righto, stop bludging and let’s get into it, men. Bash those bodies. And you, sunshine, if you can’t do a summersault, get down and give me ten.”

So every time he came around to the summersault mat he’d spear off to the side, get up, do ten pushups and move on, much to our amusement and delight, although we couldn’t show it. He was a heatseeker, taking the flak from the PTI so the rest of us would be left alone.

The worst part about PT was getting changed back into our uniform at the end of each session. We had two minutes to do that and I hated it every time although it is surprising how quickly you can do it. You’d leave your shirt buttoned up and still attached to your jumper and take it all off at once. This saved buttoning everything up. One guy was always dressed first. He said he had plenty of practice back in civvie street getting dressed quickly while climbing through a window at the same time. Skite.

So we would dress as fast as we could, form three ranks on the road, do a bit of WAH, TWO FREE, WAH, march quickly to our next period of instruction ... and wait. Hurry up and wait.

There is another Army saying: ‘Greatcoats on, greatcoats off’. This happens when there is a change of plans nobody was warned about, particularly when a decision has just been made to change something at the last minute.

So the NCOs had to adopt an attitude. They couldn’t go around spitting the dummy each time there was an unscheduled change, you know, standing with their hands on their hips listening to an officer tell them how the 20 minute march up to this location was in vain and the platoon was now required 2 kilometres away, 10 minutes ago. They could grab their hat and throw it on the ground and jump up and down on it to show their displeasure or they could simply come back over to the platoon and

say, “Righto, men, fucking greatcoats on, fucking greatcoats off. We are going over there!”

“22 platoon, quick march, EFF ITE, EFF ITE, EFF ITE, EEEFFF.”

There would be no stamping of the feet this time, feigning being out of step. The NCO was pissed off enough. We knew when to behave ourselves.

Chapter 9

Yippee - We get local leave

We were fairly well into the ten week course to turn us into soldiers. While there were lessons all day and some lectures into the night, 22 platoon had settled into the routine and we were finally getting on top of the soldiering stuff. Our hair was growing back and starting to look presentable; and our dress and bearing resembled that of fully trained soldiers.

The course was quite challenging both physically and mentally, with no let-up and no down time. Although we were allowed up to the boozer in those first few frantic weeks, none of us went there, we were too busy getting our gear ready for the next day's activities. This involved starching our uniforms and polishing our boots and brass attachments. We also honed our skills in the fine art of spit polishing. But eventually we were getting our jobs done with time to spare, so we had the odd beer. Odd is right, the only beer available at the boozer was Old Kent.

We were acclimatised to the cold bracing weather and could do PT, fire our weapons or carry out fieldcraft activities no matter what weather Huey decided to throw at us. I quite liked fieldcraft where we learnt to read maps and navigate by day and by night. It is a very powerful thing to be able to navigate over close country at night and to know exactly where you are, after some initial teething problems of course.

"Where the fuck are we?"

"This map is fucked."

"Fuckin' compass."

Our platoon was growing in confidence. One morning we were having lessons in *challenging* procedure. Some of our guys were the demo squad and it was their big chance to star in front of another couple of platoons.

The *challenging* procedure was carried out in a set manner. The incoming patrol is stopped. One member is asked to step forward to be recognised. There is an exchange of passwords, and then the patrol is allowed to pass through. Our guys were the demo patrol coming back to base.

"Halt. Hands up. Who's there?"

“22 platoon coming back from patrol.”

“Advance one and be recognised.”

This was all done in front of the platoons which were seated on the grassy hill. One of our guys moved up to the NCO and passwords were exchanged. This is done quietly just in case Nigel the enemy is lurking about and we don’t want him to overhear our secret password.

The instructor was a vaudeville act, as most of them were. They were animated, excited and spoke loudly with plenty of arm gestures. It kept us awake.

“Now,” said the NCO. “If you’re still not sure about these guys then ask them a question.”

I’ve seen American movies where they ask somebody’s batting average in baseball.

The NCO continued in a loud voice, “What has a pouch and jumps around on two legs?” At the same time he mimicked a kangaroo jumping up and down with his hands together at the front.

As quick as a flash, the lead guy in the patrol, one of our boys from Canberra said, “A sheila!”

The grassy hill erupted into raucous laughter with plenty of knee slapping and hooting, even the instructor was lost for words.

And speaking of sheilas, we forgot what they looked like.

But things were looking up. We’d just been informed that our first local leave would be on Saturday.

“I’m going to get a root.”

“What about the bromide?”

“Fuck the bromide, I won’t drink anything they supply us with at mealtime. No milk, no tea or coffee and no jube juice.”

Saturday arrived and we were standing on the company parade ground in our best battledress uniform. Our shoes were spit polished. The Wagga sheilas were really going to be impressed.

“Now men, a word of caution, you are no longer civilians. Whilst you wear that uniform you are the Army on display. So don’t go silly in town.

The MPs will be patrolling about to keep an eye on you. If you get pissed, get in a fight or make an arsehole of yourself, I'll have you thrown in the slammer. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Your leave is restricted to the Wagga main street and the Wagga Leagues Club. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

"A bus will be waiting opposite the Astor pub. It will leave at 1530 hours. If you miss the bus, you must present yourself back to the guardhouse no later than 1600 hours. If the MPs find you outside your restricted area they will bring you back here. They are not a taxi service. If they pick you up, they will lock you up. If you are late, you will be charged AWOL. Are there any questions?"

"Dismissed."

"Well, there goes the root then."

We went by bus into town and strolled around in small groups. We did a bit of shopping for personal supplies and visited a few of the pubs. The sheilas wouldn't even look at us, let alone allow us to get close to them; we couldn't even smell them. Maybe it was because we were looking at them with bulging eyes, gaping mouths and dribbling saliva. We hadn't seen a civilian for a few weeks, let alone talked to one. We were soldiers, we talked like soldiers. Is this how to chat them up?

"What's a nice fucking girl like you doing in a fucked up place like this?"

We ended up at the Wagga Leagues Club. They allowed Army recruits from Kapooka into their public bar. I ran into one of my cousins at the club and I mentioned to him how great it was that they allowed us in. His response was, "The Leagues Club put it to the vote of members. If you blokes are good enough to go to Vietnam to fight for the country then you are good enough to drink in our club."

We were not allowed into the RSL Club. What a pity that an organisation of returned servicemen, those who have experienced war, did not support the troops from their local Army training establishment, many of whom would be posted to Vietnam within a matter of months.

Chapter 10

Football

Cootamundra in the 60s fielded very strong football teams in three codes: Rugby League, Rugby Union and Aussie Rules. Like so many small towns, sport was the done thing. I played rugby league all through my school years and in my last year at high school, I also played with the Cootamundra town side. It was easy as most of my mates played football as well.

We were part of the Murrumbidgee Rugby League, a breakaway group from the Country Rugby League at the time. Many locals were worried for years about the drain of our players to the city and there was very little support from Country Rugby League back to towns like ours who nurtured future champions in Sydney. It was all one way to the city. So Cootamundra, and the local towns formerly known as Group 9, formed the rebel league along with teams from Wagga.

We were warned that playing with the MRL would jeopardise our chances of representative play. Big deal. All I wanted to do was play football with my mates, and besides I knew my limitations. I was only an average player. I was reasonably fast on my feet but I couldn't sidestep and my ball handling skills were not great. I couldn't kick the ball very well either. The only thing I could do well was in defence, I was an effective tackler. We tackled around the legs in those days, a shoulder into the guts, arms around the waist; and then slide down the legs. The ball carrier would go down like a ton of bricks.

So it is no surprise that I was a forward, the guys that do all the hard yakka during a game while all those pansies in the backline get all the glory from scoring tries. At the end of the game we'd be covered in dirt and grime whilst the backline boys were still in their freshly ironed shorts and jerseys. Bloody posers!

It is important for you to know this because of what happened next at Kapooka.

You see as part of our training we had lectures about life, or something like that. I wasn't really paying attention. They were delivered by the padres. As part of the deal we had one-on-one sessions with them, a sort of counselling session, to see how we were coping with the Army gig.

For some reason that my memory fails to justify, I found myself big-

noting my football playing ability to the padre. In essence I told him what I described above and how good a tackler I was. “I could stop anyone,” I boasted.

The padre stood up. “Do you reckon you could stop me?”

I should have had a rethink then and there. Why would the padre ask me that? I checked him out. He was in his 30s, of stocky build and thinning hair. He was staring at me. I met his eyes and said, “Yeah, I could stop you.”

I don’t have to tell you that he played representative football (Rugby Union) for the Army and he was one of those pansy type backline posers I derided earlier.

Me and my big mouth. Maybe this Army caper was making me a little bit too cocky.

Come Saturday, with borrowed football boots, there I was playing football for the Army. Rugby union is similar to rugby league except as the player is tackled, he releases the ball and the forwards form a ruck around him. The ball is contested by the sheer weight and grunt of the scrum of forwards. It helps if you have a thick forehead and an oversized neck. I was quite skinny and I paid the price by being mauled, pushed and battered. Those guys were crazy.

Tackling in rugby union is the same as in rugby league only it’s different. The backs were pussy cats. As soon as it looked like you were about to tackle them they would collapse. The forwards were a different kettle of fish. They just kept coming at ya. They were hunched over, the ball lost somewhere in their giant hands, their eyes were like slits and they had no necks. I worked out that if I crouched down I’d just grab hold of them as they rampaged by me. I’d hang on as if my life depended upon it and that’s when I learnt another lesson in rugby union. You see in rugby league a tackle around the ankles is equivalent to those posers scoring tries. You held the ball carrier’s legs just a little bit longer so you could bask in the applause from the crowd. Not so in rugby union. If you hung on a bit too long in the tackle you suffered the wrath of the marauding forwards I told you about as they formed a scrum over the top of you. There was no escape. They didn’t care what was on the ground, including you, as they pummelled your body with their boots searching for the ball. Football boots have sprigs on the soles to help you grip the earth on those wet and soggy days. There are seven sprigs on each boot as evidenced by the marks on my back.

However I did survive the encounter. I don’t think I even touched the ball

during the whole game. I was quite dirty and in addition to the Welcome-to-Army-Rugby message on my back, my ears were bleeding at the top on the inside edge where they were ground against my skull by those crazy marauding feral forwards. By contrast, the posers in the backline looked like they hadn't even played, yet they had scored the tries and there they were poncing around with their entourage and hangers on. There is no justice in the world.

After a shower and a change into civvies, I ended up at the Sportsmen Club, a clubhouse for the backline to tell their warries about how good they were during the game. There weren't many recruits there - you could tell by the haircuts. They had short hair on the side of their heads but it was quite long on the top by Army standards. For a moment I thought they must have let some RAAF boys in. Most seemed to be officers. You could tell by the smug supercilious smirk on their faces.

I had a couple of beers and chatted to a few of the *chasps* - the older officers were interesting but the younger ones were up themselves. I didn't belong in that group. Sport is a good leveller in the Army but I felt out of place. I was glad I missed out on officer selection and I couldn't wait to get back to the boys at 22.

Back at 22 and some of the boys said they watched the game. There was a bit of affirmation from the group.

"You played good, Cav."

"Thanks, mate."

"Yeah, you were always there."

"I don't think I even touched the ball."

"Doesn't matter, mate, it's a team sport. You were there for all the rucks."

"Yeah right, have you seen my ears and my back?"

So that was my one and only football game in the Army. I promised myself that in future I would keep my big mouth shut and not be so cocksure about myself.

Maybe that's what the padre wanted to teach me. I remember his name. He was Father Tink.

Chapter 11

Duties

It seemed the Army had a system for recruit training at Kapooka. The daily routine of room inspections, lectures, PT and soldier training included a rotation of drill, fieldcraft, and weapons but with duties overlaid on top. So for a week the concentration was in one of these areas. What you didn't see in the 'Join the Army' brochures was duty week.

That was where we'd get a behind-the-scenes look at how things operate. Essentially it's all about working hard and getting no sleep. Kitchen duty is probably the worst. Those kitchens are huge. They need to be. How would you like to be feeding a frenzied mob of recruits?

So 22 was behind the scenes in the bowels of the kitchen. We were split into teams to carry out certain tasks.

"I'm gunna check out that Bromide stuff and see how they put it in the food or the drink."

"Don't be silly, they are not going to leave the stuff lying around for us blokes to see, and besides they probably put it in everything."

"This Bromide thing is just a joke, they wouldn't be allowed to adulterate the food, it would be against the law. Otherwise they would be giving it to prisoners in jail, wouldn't they?"

I'll pause here and bring you up to the present for a moment. A mate of mine, Big Al, was in Catering Corps and he is adamant that Bromide was not used, that it was all a myth. He told me that they were well aware of the rumours and they used to have a lot of fun with it. He said one day they printed the word 'Bromide' on some boxes and then unloaded them in front of the kitchen when some soldiers were nearby. We both had a hearty laugh. What a bastard act that was. I still chuckle to myself just thinking about it.

But back to 22 in 1969 ...

I got the job of peeling onions. There were two big tubs full. The mess supervisor was telling us how to do stuff. "Fill the tubs with water and peel the onions under water. That way your eyes won't water."

Hey, he was right. My eyes hardly watered at all. Wait until I tell my

mother about that. What the corporal didn't tell me was that my hands would stink of onions for the next three days!

I also learned that the best way to clean hot plates is by using vinegar. The Army must go through gallons of the stuff.

The rest of the boys were cutting up vegetables, washing dishes and mopping floors. I dunno what time it was when we finished but it was late and we had to prepare our gear for guard duty the next day.

Guard duty? Luckily we never got attacked. It seemed an exercise in futility, something that the Army has honed down to a fine art. The most important thing was our uniform, it had to be immaculate. Spit polished boots, freshly starched greens and gleaming shiny brass.

We lined up for inspection. The duty officer, a second lieutenant, was neatly turned out. He marched along the line and halted in turn in front of each soldier. When he halted in front of me, he swivelled his head and eyes to the left. You could hear his eyeballs click in their sockets. His eyes were inches away from mine. I knew to stare through him and focus into the distance. He had nasal hairs protruding from his nostrils. He was lucky I was not inspecting him. He stared at my boots. Surely he could see his protruding nasal hairs in my ultra-shiny spit polished boots. His eyes rose up along my trousers and lingered at the brass on my belt. He then checked out how well I ironed my shirt as well as checking that the alignment was OK. He checked out my sleeves and then he started to lean forward. I thought he was trying to see the bloke behind me, but he was checking out my hat badge to see that it too was nice and shiny. He paused and straightened up. His head and eyes clicked to the front. He took a couple of paces, halted and checked out the bloke beside me in the same manner.

At the end of the inspection he marched to the front and turned to face us. "You blokes are a bag of shit." And with that the inspection was over.

Later that night we got to sleep in our nicely starched number one greens. We weren't even allowed to take off our spit polished boots just in case Kapooka was attacked and they had to call out the guard, you see.

But we had duties to perform before we could go to bed.

Most duties involved being a member of a squad which was rostered on a couple of times during the night. I was on the main gate which didn't involve any walking. Some guys got to patrol the accommodation area and they practiced their lines a few times before they set out. "Get dem fuckin' lights out!" After a couple of efforts to get the guttural tone just

right they finally stopped yelling. They were issued with axe handles, one each as they were required to patrol in pairs. I dunno who briefed them but I wondered in what circumstances they would use them.

Another squad did the rounds of the transport compounds and a few other places. They didn't know about the extremely large ferocious German Shepherd in one of the compounds. The dog would wait at the end of a building, just where the wire fence joined the wall. Sure enough, as a sleepy digger walked along the building (there was a set route they had to follow), the dog lay in ambush. As the digger passed the end of the building, the dog opened up with a barrage of barking and gnashing teeth, which frightened the living daylights out of the soldier. The dog was behind the fence, mind you, but the digger leapt about 10 feet into the air; and it took a few minutes for the heart rate to settle down. No one warned him about the dog. At the end of his stint, he didn't warn the next guy either.

Back at the main gate, it was a bludge. They gave us a clipboard and we had to write down the number plates of all cars that entered or left the base. Ezy. The only instruction I recall was "Make sure you salute the officers."

On my first stint, a car approached the main gate to leave the base. I stood there in my best gatekeeper stance, resplendent in my number one greens with pen and clipboard in hand. The car slowed as it approached me. I wrote down the rego. The car stopped, the driver gave his name and I wrote that down too, even though there was no column for it. The driver gave me the Kapooka stare. I haven't mentioned it before but it is a bit like your mother's stare when you know you are in big trouble, but this was ten times worse.

"Your fucking name tag is crooked, Cavanough. Fucking fix it!"

"Yesssir!"

He was not in uniform so I didn't know if he was an officer or an NCO, but I quickly stood to attention and gave him a boxer (a salute) then choked on his dust as he drove away.

A couple more cars went through without any hassles. I had this shit down pat.

My second stint was in the middle of the night. It was bloody freezing and I had to sit in this little box thingy. I grabbed a blanket and had it wrapped around me. Maybe those blokes patrolling around didn't have it so bad after all. At least they would be warmer than I was.

A car approached. I quickly threw off the blanket and went into gatekeeper mode: gatekeeper stance, gatekeeper clip board, gatekeeper pen and gatekeeper scowl. I noted the rego details and as the driver eyeballed me with my straightened name tag, I could see that the car was full of blokes and they were pissed.

“Did you see my mate in the back?” said the driver.

I moved forward and peered into the rear seat. There were three blokes in there and one had his dick in his hand. It was huge! After what seemed an eternity, I closed my mouth, nodded and stood back. I didn’t salute them but I think they were officers. NCOs are not that crazy. And besides they all have small dicks ... so I’m told. They drove away laughing hysterically.

About 10 minutes later another car approached. The driver said, “There’s a mate in the back.”

I wasn’t going to get caught again so I just nodded.

“That’s not fucking good enough, lad!”

It was then I realised he said he had a Major in the back. I jumped to attention and threw another boxer.

“Sorry, Sir!”

Will this shit never end?

At sunrise the ace guard team regrouped in their number one greens that were now creased and wrinkled. Our spit polished boots were faded and scuffed. We really did look like a bag of shit as we marched back to our lines, showered and changed into clean work clothes to begin another day.

I was well and truly rooted, it was 7.00am and I didn’t even know what day it was.

Chapter 12

The downhill run

We got a haircut so I guess we were finally getting close to the end of the 10 week recruit course at Kapooka. Some grew their sideburns down to, and in line with, the bottom of their ears as per the limit imposed by Army regulations, I had nothing but bum fluff.

The NCOs had noticeably backed off on the yelling, maybe they had finally brainwashed us. We didn‘t have to call the time any more. No more WAH, TWO FREE, WAH, but some of the newer platoons with guys in short hair could be heard singing it out across the rolling hills of the base. Poor bastards.

We had weekend leave and then we got into the business end of the course, the final tests that we must pass to graduate on our march out parade, the culmination of our course.

The weekend leave was a bit of a blur. I got home on the Friday night, hopped into my chick magnet vehicle, a Ford Zephyr ute that fired up instantly because it was a Ford. I drove to the Albion Hotel in downtown Cootamundra where my mother was working as the waitress in the dining room. I had told her I'd be home early Saturday morning even though I knew I was coming home on Friday. I wanted to surprise her. There I was in the main street of Cootamundra in full battledress uniform with spit polished shoes and Army beret. I parked opposite the pub and strode confidently across the road and inside. I was ten feet tall and bulletproof. I felt a million bucks in uniform, a rare sight in Cootamundra. I’ll never forget the look on my mother’s face as I burst into the dining room. Her eyes lit up and I could tell she was very proud of me, her number four son, standing there in my immaculate uniform. She introduced me to her work colleagues and all the civvie losers were staring at me. And why not? I was a soldier. Take that, you peasants.

All too soon I was back at Kapooka. How many times had we done the confidence course? A number of obstacles to negotiate, sometimes as a team, sometimes individually; and true to form we were running uphill all the time. Clambering over a 15 foot wall? Ezy. Crawling under barbed wire obstacles in the mud? No problem. The bayonet assault course? Yell until your voice disappeared. There was nothing that 22 platoon couldn’t do. I think we were the best the Army had ever seen. No risk.

The 20 click forced match was coming up, followed by a night in the field

on rations, and a few of us were nervous, especially me. I'd never walked that far, let alone doing it carrying a weapon and pack and stuff that the Army makes you carry with you. Why couldn't we be like those African hunters who have porters to carry all their gear? I'd seen the movies.

The 20 clicker was ezy. Well, it wasn't, but our platoon sergeant, a very caring guy in his forties whom we would have followed anywhere, knew what he was doing. We had to do the march within a certain timeframe and we came in with ten minutes to spare. I learned that at the rest stops it was easier to stay standing with all the gear on as the effort required to stand up and get moving again after a rest made us look like old guys in their sixties.

That night we got to camp out in the bush using issued field gear. It was really something. There was a horse blanket that wouldn't keep you warm on a mild night let alone a freezing night in the depths of winter, but the 24 hour ration pack was terrific: lollies, cereal, meat, fruit and toilet paper. (Or was it notepaper to write home with?) We didn't have a tent but rather a piece of plastic type material that we clipped together to put a roof over our heads. Think of a tent with no sides and you get the idea. We camped in pairs.

I slept on a mattress cover with blowup inserts that went down during the night. To add to my discomfort the NCOs decided to do a raid on us by shooting blanks, setting off flares and yelling a lot. I was scared shitless. Is this what war is like?

Next morning I awoke to a nightmare, so to speak. My body ached from the 20 kilometre forced march in full battle gear. My feet were sore and my legs and back ached every time I moved. I froze all night. I think I needed about another three horse blankets to keep warm. The blowup inserts were a waste of time as two out of the three deflated which meant I slept crooked on my back. We are going to look like a bag of shit for graduation rehearsals in the arvo.

The graduation parade was pretty simple. March on the parade ground, listen to some speeches, march around the parade ground twice, the first time in slow march and the second time in quick time; then a march in review order (I think that's right, it was a long time ago).

We had a couple of practice runs and sorted out any problems that developed. All us diggers had to do was to carry out the commands given to us. By then we knew the parade format as good as the parade commander, whoever he was. Then came the final practice. As we marched past the dais in the advance at slow time, our platoon commander gave the 'eyes right' and as we turned our heads, you could

hear our eyes click in their sockets. Up on the dais was some big ugly bloke with a microphone and a deep voice. “Looking good, 22,” he said in a low modulated tone as we marched past. Suddenly a voice thundered across the parade ground startling the cockatoos up in some nearby gum trees, “Get dem fucking mouths closed, 22!”

Back at lines the platoon sergeant had our corps posting. That's when we learnt our trade in the Army. If you wanted to be a cook, you went to Catering corps. If you wanted to be a tanky, you went to Armour. That kind of thing. The postings were based on our preferences, that is, whatever you said you wanted to do, the Army sent you to where the numbers were required. I volunteered for Infantry - they needed the numbers to feed soldiers to the battalions in Vietnam.

We stood there as the sergeant read out our names and corps. He came to my name, “Cavanough, Infantry.” He paused and looked up at me, “Is that OK, Cavanough?”

I hesitated. Was this a surprise to the sergeant? Did he not think I would make an effective Infantry soldier? Did he think I would be better suited to another corps perhaps?

“Yes, sergeant,” was my reply.

I got to put the Infantry ‘crossed rifles’ badge on my beret. Darcy got Armoured corps and Ian, the professor, got Service corps (he was going to be a driver). Up at the boozer, Darcy and I stowed our berets in the top pocket of our smocks so the badges were clearly visible. We felt we had graduated already. We had survived Kapooka, we were super fit and a bit overconfident as we sat there grinning like Cheshire cats. Over in the corner I noticed a couple of nervous looking blokes with sad faces and very short hair drinking Coke and coughing continuously.

A few weeks was a long time at Kapooka.

Chapter 13

Graduation and starting all over again

It was graduation parade day. My parents, my Vietnam veteran brother and his girlfriend came to share the day. There were seven platoons graduating so the viewing area was packed.

What a buzz. I loved all the pomp and ceremony and as the Kapooka Band played we literally floated across the parade ground. The parade went off without a hitch. We practised so much we could have done it in our sleep. Afterwards I met my family over a BBQ. Darcy also popped over to say g'day.

I thought it was the proudest day of my life and like all the others I was 10 feet tall and bulletproof! It is simply amazing the changes in young men that 10 weeks in the Army can achieve. An outsider who has not experienced this first hand may have a differing view. There are those that say it is nothing but bullying and brainwashing. That may be so, but how do you turn a person from an individual who is only concerned about himself, into a person who understands the bonding and power that one can achieve as part of a group? A power so strong that individuals are prepared to put themselves at risk in order for the group to achieve its task.

The recruit course challenged me in ways that I never thought possible. I couldn't wait to tell my mates about some of the things I did. I have to thank the NCOs for that. Their encouragement, if we can call it that, enabled the inner man in me to keep going even when I thought I couldn't go on; and then to keep going ... and going some more. But more importantly, even though I was buggered, they instilled into me a sense to look around the group, disregard my own problems and help others who were not doing so well. It was all about getting the group to finish the task, not as individuals but as 22 platoon. For that, I am indebted to them, even if I can't remember their names.

That night it snowed in Wagga Wagga, a very rare event indeed as we boarded a train. There were about 15 of us from the graduating platoons and only Warren, one of the boys from Temora, and I were from 22 platoon. We were heading north under the control of a second lieutenant. "Just call me Skip."

Was I dreamin' or is he normal?

We travelled overnight to Brisbane in a normal rail carriage with civilians. We were in battledress uniform. A couple of old blokes came up to us and for most of the night we were singing those old songs that people of my generation, raised on listening to the wireless, know very well. Nobody complained.

Normally recruits were sent to Ingleburn, another hellhole, for their Infantry training but we were heading to Townsville to do our corps training at 2 RAR (2nd Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment).

We stopped at Brisbane and had a few hours to spare before boarding a Queensland train with its narrow gauge to complete the journey to Townville. We were about one third of the way on our 2,000 kilometre journey.

We went to a barber with Skip and we all had a shave, except me. I only had bum fluff. We strolled around Brisbane. Someone mentioned something about 'The Valley' but I am unsure if we went there. Is that where the Chinese restaurants are located? Then it was onto the train and more window watching as the Queensland countryside flew by my window. I noticed when we were in the buffet car that the train was riding quite smoothly despite the narrow gauge; then I looked out the window and saw that we were doing about 20 kilometres an hour. They must slow down while meals are on, ey? (Notice, I'd already started to talk like a native?)

After completing 2,000 kilometres by train, all I wanted was a shower and a lie down. Do you think the Army would allow that? We were trucked into Lavarack Barracks just out of Townsville. It was sited at the base of a rather large hill that dominated the landscape. What an impressive Army base! It was brand spanking new and set out as only an Army base can be by having all the buildings in regimental order. We were waiting to see the Movement's Officer in 30 degree heat, still in our winter Army dress.

"Next!"

I marched smartly into the office.

"Number?"

"2793237."

"Name?"

"Ian."

“Hello Ian, my name is Dwayne, welcome to Lavarack Barracks.”

Gee, I could get to like this place.

“What is your fucking surname, dickhead?”

“Oh, sorry, Cavanough, C-a-v-a.....n-o-u-g-h.”

“A-g-h?”

“O-u-g-h.”

He went on to ask me my next of kin and the address where I would be spending Christmas.

“How do you want to travel to Cootamundra?”

“Well, I’m not going by train, that’s for sure. I just spent more than two days travelling by train and I’m standing here still flexing my knees because I can feel the floor moving as if I was still on that blasted train.”

“Righto, we can fly you to Sydney and you pay the difference between the rail fare and the air fare. You’ll catch a train from Sydney to Coota ... what was that place again?”

“Cootamundra. It’s where Sir Donald Bradman was born.”

“Never heard of it ... fucking Nashos ... next!”

Chapter 14

We Settle In To Infantry Stuff

They called us the Cadre Company, 100 Nashos to be skilled in the fine art of infantry soldiering. The stakes were high of course. 2 RAR was to deploy to South Vietnam in seven months and we were needed to round out the Battalion.

The role of the Infantry is clear and unambiguous:

To seek out and close with the enemy, to kill or capture him, to seize and hold ground and to repel attack, by day or night regardless of season, weather or terrain.

Gee, would we be really moving around the bush in the dark? I was getting a bit apprehensive. As a kid I was scared of the dark and our home in Cootamundra had an outside toilet. My parents bought me a lantern to help quell my fears. On reflection what I really needed was an AK-47, but I was getting ahead of myself.

Our accommodation was excellent, if you don't regard air conditioning as mandatory. Each building housed a platoon of 30 men. It was two storeys with rooms upstairs completely surrounded by a covered balcony. Each room had a central divider that didn't go quite to the roof. Each man had a bed, a desk and chair and a locker; the same as at Kapooka. There were a couple of innovations. The outside wall was a mixture of slatted windows and aluminium slats; the whole wall could be opened up to let the breeze in. Insect screens kept out 90% of the insect life which we would soon know all about. To assist airflow the wall dividing us from the guys on the other side of the building did not go fully to the roof either. In addition there were ceiling fans. The ablutions were sited at each end of the building.

Downstairs were laundry facilities at each end leaving a large uncluttered space in the centre, for training purposes, I guess.

Our staff were all highly experienced NCOs who were veterans of Korea and/or Vietnam except for the platoon commander, a second lieutenant who looked like he was about 15 years of age. The NCOs were tough and imposed on us the rigours of infantry training with a dash of humour. The platoon sergeant was standard Army fare, wider than he was tall with a loud guttural voice. When he yelled he opened his mouth so wide you could see his uvula rattling, sometimes back and forth, sometimes

left to right. He didn't get close enough to affect my eyebrows though. His problem was he was a mortar man and there he was teaching us Nashos all he knew. It would be a short course.

A normal day started at o'early hundred with a PT session. That involved going for a jog up the road past the other accommodation buildings. We jogged in columns of three and were supposed to be in step. Sometimes those blokes from Canberra got an exception. The NCO called the time: *EFT ITE EFT ITE EFT ITE EFT*, just like at Kapooka. They are taught that at NCO school. We didn't have to call the time, so no WAH, TWO FREE, WAH, but we did have to do some yelling. That was to strengthen our vocal cords for the bayonet assaults against the Viet Cong.

The NCO said, "This is A Company."

"Good morning, A Company!" we yelled at the top of our voices, all 30 of us.

"Shut the fuck up, Fuck off, Fuckin Nashos," were some of the responses.

"This is B Company."

"Good morning, B Company!"

And so on down the road. The responses were the same.

The rest of the day and night would be filled with weapons training, fieldcraft and lectures. They were long days but at least we got the weekends off. I think the NCOs needed the break.

They were quick to spot an undone button. "You, digger. Button undone. Gimme 20".

The digger would assume the position and do 20 pushups. Sometimes the NCO would count them, pausing the digger at the 'down' command where he was holding his body just inches off the deck without being able to rest his body against it. Sometimes they would get you to clap. As you rose up, you clapped your hands while your body was suspended in mid-air, then onto the next pushup and clap, and so on.

Warren from Temora was in a bit of strife. I think they started to pick on him a bit. They gave him a nickname - 'Jungles.'

"Why 'Jungles', Corporal?"

"Because you are 'dark and dense'. Now get down and give me 20."

Warren from Temora was henceforth to be known as 'Jungles.'

The wide-bodied, ginger-haired, he-of-mortars sergeant sprung him one day. "Jungles, 20."

"Why, sarge?" queried Jungles, patting himself down, checking for undone buttons.

"Button undone 20, back chat 40," grunted the uvula in full swinging mode.

Now Jungles was a fit and muscley bloke so he quickly reeled off 60 pushups. A few of us were watching the spectacle.

"Another 20, this time on fingertips," ordered the uvula.

Jungles struggled a little bit. As he slowly got to 16, sarge hollered, "Now clap."

Jungles dropped to the ground, rolled over onto his back and clapped.

"You'll do me, Jungles," said the sergeant helping him up.

They left Jungles alone after that.

No, wait a minute. They got him again. We needed to be able to strip and assemble weapons with our eyes shut. You can only strip and assemble those things a few times before getting bored shitless, so the NCOs would come up with ingenious ways to keep you working.

Competition is the best developer of skills, so they would lay out tracks of weapons, the SLR, M16 and M60. If you don't know what those are don't worry, they are designed to frighten the enemy. They can only kill the enemy if you actually hit them. So imagine a line of various assembled and disassembled weapons. We'd break into teams and race to see who could get to the end first. This is fun stuff when you see guys breaking under the pressure of losing to their mates. It's also great fun egging them on with words such as … well, you should know them by now.

"OK, who reckons they can strip and assemble the M60 blindfolded? ... You, Jungles!"

Jungles moved forward. He was blindfolded and set before the M60. Stripping went quite well and he laid the parts out in the set sequence we were taught. With the weapon fully stripped, Jungles stepped up and with outstretched arms, he received our applause.

“Good work, Jungles, now put it back together.”

This is a little harder as you have to find the parts, pick them up and arrange them into some sort of weapon entirely by feel. Jungles was doing well at first, because of our encouragement of course.

The NCO stood up, put his finger to his mouth to signal us to be quiet. He moved away, picked up another M60 and quietly removed a small part, then returned to give Jungles more encouragement. “Come on Jungles, you should have the weapon together by now. Just imagine the enemy are coming over the hill and you have to assemble the weapon in the dark. Get a move on.”

“Who’s the silly bastard that stripped it in the dark when the enemy were coming over the hill in the first place?” some digger asked.

That digger received a steely eyed stare from the NCO.

Jungles only had a couple of bits to go when the NCO stepped forward and placed the part from the other M60 on the ground. It wasn’t long before Jungles’ hand brushed across it. He picked it up and examined it with his fingers. “Shit!” he exclaimed, “I’ve fucked it up.”

We tried to contain our laughter, but Jungles twigged that something was up and took off his blindfold. We all had a hearty laugh.

This Army stuff was not too bad. I wondered if the Viet Cong had a sense of humour?

Chapter 15

Day/Night Navex

I mentioned before how powerful it can be to navigate in close country particularly at night. What I didn't tell you is that the power usually eluded me, and soon you will understand why. After plenty of lead up training on navigation theory, they took us out into the bush for a navex (navigation exercise) by day, and by night. Eek!

The 15 year old platoon commander showed up in his immaculate new greens. He was of slight build and he wore a cravat. It was actually a sweat rag that most blokes draped around their necks to soak up the sweat and to stop small leaves, twigs and other debris from falling down the back of our necks when negotiating thick country, but he crossed his in front of his neck and tucked it into his shirt. Maybe he thought he was Audie Murphy. Come to think of it he looked a little bit like him, only younger.

"OK, men, today we put our navigation theory into practice. You will be dropped off at 500 metres intervals with a list of checkpoints you must find. If you get lost, move south to the road and wait, someone will come along to pick you up. The navex will finish at 1600 hours, if you are not at a checkpoint at about this time, move south to the road and wait. Are there any questions?"

Are there any fucking questions?

We were in teams of three. We had water and a ration pack but no radio or panic alarm to summon a chopper if things went belly up. This was life or death stuff but we could handle it. They gave us some maps and a compass; and dropped us off in the middle of nowhere. Stretch, a tall guy from Tasmania should have gone to officer training because he tried to take control of our group by suggesting that someone should climb a tree to see if we could see anything. We agreed, and he was outnumbered. Soon Stretch was clambering up a tree trying to catch any clues as to where we were. All he could see was trees. We all agreed that the map was fucked or the bastards had dropped us off somewhere that wasn't on that map. So we moved off the road into the scrub, sat down, had a brew and a bite to eat.

An hour or so later we decided to move north because it was too early to go south. It was a beautiful day and there were plenty of kangaroos around. Soon we spotted another group of soldiers about 100 metres

away. We could see they had their maps out and were following their compass bearing. Were they from our course? Then we spotted the checkpoint so over we went, looking really confident. The sergeant asked to see our checkpoint list. He studied it for a minute and said, "Did you boys have any trouble finding us?"

"No not really, sarge. Stretch here is officer material, we gave him his head."

"This checkpoint isn't one of yours," the sergeant informed us. "You boys have come too far north. This is where you are," as he pointed to a spot on our map.

We chatted for a few more minutes and set off.

Bewdy, we were on the map, and more importantly we knew exactly where we were. How good's that? We may have this navex thing licked. We headed south for a couple of hundred metres and stopped for a brew, some food and a snooze.

This navex is tough shit.

We made a group decision: we'd better show up at one of our checkpoints or they'd think we were a bunch of idiots. Wait a minute, they probably think that already. Anyway, the last thing we wanted was for them to worry about us and initiate a search party only to find us taking it easy, so we studied the map. We measured two hundred metres south from the other platoon's checkpoint, checked the co-ordinates of our closest checkpoint and we quickly realised that it was only 400 metres away on a small knoll. We calculated the grid bearing, did the adjustment for grid to magnetic variation, set our compass and off we strode.

Soon we were at one of our checkpoints. We can't show the NCOs we are enjoying this so we stagger in as if we are buggered and really pissed off.

"Aha, who said team number seven was lost? Hello boys, been having a tough day, have we?"

"We would have been here sooner but Stretch was too scared to come down outa the tree. He's scared of heights."

"OK, Boys, well done. Have you worked out your nav data sheet for the next checkpoint?"

"Yes, corporal."

We strode off quickly before he asked to see it. I dunno in which direction we went, the compass was still set at the old bearing and we pretended it was telling us the way to go. At 300 metres we stopped for another brew and snooze. We were getting low on coffee.

At just after 1500 hours we moved south to the road. A couple of the other teams were on the side of the road. In all we probably walked only a couple of kilometres, and by the look of the others they hadn't walked much further.

"You blokes got any coffee?"

"No mate, we're all out."

Soon a truck came by and took us to our night location. They had a fire and we were given a hot meal. We laughed and joked as we were in high spirits. The NCOs thought we were idiots.

"Youse blokes can't even find a couple of checkpoints in fairly open scrub. What will you do when we get to the really thick stuff?"

"That's easy, corporal, we'll follow you."

More laughter.

Soon the boss showed up. Maybe I was a little off about his age, 17 was probably closer to the mark.

"OK, men," he said with his best Audie Murphy stance, hands on hips, "I see some of you had a few problems finding the checkpoints today. I guess navigation is not as easy as you blokes thought, ey?"

He's a bloody Queenslander!

"Tonight will be harder. You will combine three teams into one group, each of nine men. You will be allowed to carry a torch for safety but use it wisely; I don't want to see any Batman signals going up into the night sky, ey?"

He's definitely from Queensland.

We chuckled to give him some confidence.

He went on, "You will be taking a route either west or east of this main road, if you get lost all you have to do is go east or west back to the road and wait. Are there any questions?"

Are there any fucking questions?

Soon we were into it, literally. It was so bloody dark I couldn't see my face in front of my hand. To save us from getting lost we tied ourselves together. We were expecting the fairly light terrain we had during the day, but in the dark, it was hilly and we faced a veritable wall of vegetation. Imagine a chain gang of soldiers tied together trying in vain to navigate through impenetrable jungle. We bashed our way along on some bearing according to the compass that someone up front possessed. Bearing? My guess is it was set to 'find thick jungle'. We were falling over and laughing while trying to be quiet. It was impossible. After about an hour we had covered 100 metres. The laughter was gone and we were sweating profusely. Someone shone the torch around. Nothing but thick shit everywhere, it was less scary with the torch off.

Smithy let out a scream. Have I told you about Smithy? He was from the Central Coast of NSW. He drove to Townsville in his lowered white HD Holden wearing out both back tyres in the process. In the lowered car with a couple of blokes and their Army gear on board, the tyres were rubbing on the inner guards every time the HD bottomed out on those undulating Queensland roads. He was a larrikin.

"Shit, Smithy's been bitten by something."

The torch went on, "It's a bloody stinging tree, ey."

Another bloody Queenslander.

"When you brush up against the leaves they leave tiny thingies on your skin that can be really painful, ey?"

"I've heard that there's a flower at the base of the tree. You squeeze the flower and rub the juice onto the sting to ease the pain."

"I bet you're from Canberra."

We went east or west to the road, and then back to the big fire at the night location. Another team was already there. They had completed their task. We didn't believe them. The medic put some stuff on Smithy's arm. We stood around with our hands in our pockets, told a few lies about how good we were in civvie street; and then we went to bed.

Day/night navex completed. Box ticked.

Chapter 16

Nearing the sharp end of corps training

Someone said that soldiers expend more ammunition in training than they do in actual combat with the enemy.

Someone said that if you take the rounds expended during the Vietnam War and compare it to the number of enemy killed, it takes on average 80,000 rounds to kill one Viet Cong.

I bet you never knew that.

There is one person responsible for snippets of information like this. His name is Sum Wun.

We were entering the tactical phase of our Infantry Corps training that week and Sum Wun said we were going to have our rings hanging out (that means it would be tough).

Tough? That was us. We regularly hit the confidence course, jogged over to the rifle range and scared the bejesus out of the targets, jogged back to our lines, had a shower and completed a day's work of lectures and other stuff. We were supermen, the tactical phase would not be a problem.

Do you think we were a tad overconfident?

Anyway we had the weekend off so we had better make the most of it.

In a rush of blood I befriended a guy from Canberra. His name was O'Connor and he had his car with him in Townsville. It was a Renault station wagon thingy with a 1600cc motor, the seats were nice and comfy. I was really impressed by this car but I didn't tell him that. I'm a Ford guy. I don't think I told him about my old Ford Zephyr ute which I gave to my brother prior to my coming to Townsville.

We had met a couple of chicks the previous weekend and had a date with them that weekend. OK, so O'Conner charmed this sheila and I was the friend that hooks up with her friend. Still she seemed nice. She was of slight build with long wavy dark hair. She was about my age and she talked a lot. O'Conner's girl was blond with big tits. I forget their names.

We pulled up at the dark haired girl's place. I strode up to the front porch very confident with a skip in my step, just like you see in the movies. I rang the doorbell and after a minute or so a woman opened the door part

of the way. She stood so that half her body was still behind the door. She told me that her daughter was not feeling well and that she wouldn't be able to go out with me.

I dunno what happened after that, I think O'Conner dropped me off at Louth's Hotel where most of the other blokes were and I probably told them I got a root. It wasn't a bad pub, Louth's. It was quite modern and it was located in the main street of Townville. They had a downstairs bar where they played music. It was called Louth's Downstairs Lounge and they had a dress code to keep the riff raff out. You couldn't get in without a tie but you could hire one for $1.

We went to some pubs in town and we avoided others. The reason we avoided them is because some Army units treated them as their own and it was quite easy to get into a punch up; you know what Army boys are like. Just ask Jungles. He had a punch up with some Artillery boys and he managed to mangle a few faces before his own succumbed to a bit of punishment. His left eye was quite swollen for a couple of days. As luck would have it, this occurred when the Army introduced those new-fangled ID cards. They were small plastic cards and they included a colour ID photo. Jungles' ID card featured him wearing a black and swollen left eye. Seems fitting really, Jungles' nickname, I mean.

We ate a lot at the Hong Kong Chinese Restaurant - it was licenced so you could get a beer with your meal. The girls wore a long golden top that was close fitting, with black pants underneath, but I'm sure we ate there because they served good food. Burke, from Adelaide, always had the same meal. He was well looked after. The beer waitress would drop off a VB stubby as he was in the process of sitting at the table. A minute later his meal, sweet and sour braised king prawns with fried rice, was placed on the table in front of him together with a bottle of soy sauce. How's that for service?

Monday was looming and I wasn't worried, I was ready for whatever Audie and the ginger-headed mortar man had in store for us. At least our new boots were broken in. We were issued those new beaut GP boots, the kind that lace up your leg a bit. They also had a metal plate under the sole as protection against punji stakes or really big bindi-eyes. To break the boots in, you fill them with water to get the leather nice and wet and then wear them around until they are dry. The boots then fit your foot like a glove, so to speak. Rick from somewhere in NSW broke in his boots this way one weekend. A bloody RP (Regimental Police) spotted him wearing GPs with civvies around the barracks and tried to have him charged. The crime? Mixing civilian and Army dress. It must have been a slow day for the RP. Rick had moved around NSW a lot because his old

man was a senior copper.

It was Monday and we were set to go. We had the latest gear. I've already mentioned the boots, but I didn't tell you about our packs. They were WWII Pattern 38 packs. If you dunno what they are then think of an olive coloured canvas bag with a flap on the top and two canvas straps with metal ends that fit through a metal catch to tie it down and stop it from exploding its contents all over the forest floor. It has two fatter straps that go over your shoulders. It was big enough to hold about two reams of paper. In it we carried enough stuff to survive on for a week and in the process lose about a stone in weight. The ration packs we were issued were cannibalized and most of the stuff was thrown out. We carried 'jack rations': usually a jar of vegemite to put on the dog biscuits; and a couple of packets of Maggi soup satchels. We also managed to squeeze in a spare uniform and a spare pair of socks. There was no need to put in a spare pair of jocks as we didn't wear any. I also stowed some shaving gear somewhere, I could usually clear the bum fluff away with just the razor and no foam or water. A toothbrush and toothpaste rounded me out.

In our webbing, made of the same canvas material that was a bastard when it got wet and started to dry out, we carried all the fighting gear, you know ammo and stuff as well as water in canteen bottles. Water was at a premium so we had to adhere to water discipline. In effect, we were nearly dying of thirst in the bush - that's what Army training is all about, how to cheat death.

The convoy set off with us guys jammed in the back like sardines. I love those rides in the back of Army trucks. They tie the flaps down to keep the dust out and to keep the cigarette smoke in. To get to Army training areas they follow winding roads at breakneck speed. After a couple of hours the truck stops and the flaps open. "OK, youse cunts, get outa the fuckin' truck."

I was covered in dust, I reeked of cigarette smoke, I felt nauseous from the ride of death, I had no idea where we were or what time it was or what was happening except we had to get off the fucking truck. Did they think we liked being on those monsters?

Ginger mortar man was in his element. Looking refreshed after his ride in the front of the truck where he was able to snooze in a dust and smoke free zone, he started cranking up the volume, "Why are you cunts standing around like stale bottles of piss? One grenade and you are all finished. Fan out and get down on ya guts! You, dickhead. Is that a rifle you are holding? Get a hold of it man and take up a firing position!"

I should have chundered on him then and there, that'd shut him up. I had a throbbing headache to add to my list of ailments. I wondered what my face looked like? Probably really, really pale, except no one could tell because of all the cam cream on my face.

We all dived on the ground, no sooner had we done that when Audie calls out for our platoon to go to him. (Hang on a minute, were we tactical or not?) We got back up, grunting under the load of our gear that shifts every time we got up or down.

"Hurry up, hurry up. Geez, you blokes had better get a sense of urgency about yourselves. We have a lot of work to do."

We gathered round the platoon commander but we kept our distance. Because of the grenade throwing bad guys, we stayed spread out, some of us went to ground again.

"Fuck me, youse blokes are idiots. Get up and get over here, NOW, for fuck sake!"

We were 5 minutes into a 5 day tactical exercise and all I wanted to do is shoot the platoon commander and the platoon sergeant.

Chapter 17

In the bush

“Righto men, all here?” said the platoon commander, “Follow me.”

We exchanged glances, shrugged our shoulders and rolled our eyes and followed him. I knew where we were going, up towards that hill in the distance. It was easy going at first along a disused fire trail and as the incline increased so did ours. We hunched over so that our chins were closer to the ground then before, a bit like a motor cycle rider tilting against similar but different forces of nature. Although we thought our packs were heavy I hadn’t experienced ‘heavy’ yet.

We’d stop every now and then and just stand there for a while, then we’d take off again. I was simply following the guy in front. I had no idea how long the trek was going to last, it just seemed to go on and on. Then as we gained height we stopped again, this time for what seemed to be quite a long while. I decided to sit down and take the weight off my back. In front of me, to the left of our direction of travel, I could see down the hill along a little valley; it looked quite nice and peaceful. Off to my right I could see a couple of guys up ahead, they too were sitting just like me. It was hot and the ground was dry, sending heat thermals up towards my face. I took my hat off and mopped my brow. I noticed cam cream on my sweat rag so I wondered how much was still on my face. I heard the platoon commander‘s voice as he spoke to the bloke next to me.

Then he was at my feet. “And the same goes for you too, Private Cavanough!”

“What’s that, sir?” I asked.

I must have seemed surly. The platoon commander responded with a threatening gesture. He was standing in front of me, slightly bent over, his feet were apart and he was gesturing at me with his finger. His face was contorted.

“You are a big target if anyone was down there,” he said as he pointed down the little valley. “Get down on your guts and take up a firing position.”

I rolled upwards, stepped forward to the edge of a small cliff and adopted the prone position, my rifle pointing down the valley.

“Get back from the fucking edge, you idiot!” he shouted.

“Sir, if I move back from the edge I won’t be able to see down the valley, I won’t be able to see anything.”

“Just once, just once more, Private Cavanough ...” His voice trailed off as he stepped away and took his contorted face with him to berate the next soldier down the line.

Where were the corporals, I thought, the guys with combat experience? This was turning out to be a circus.

We had form, the platoon commander and me. Maybe he was still upset with me over a rifle range incident. We were doing a shoot where we had a few magazines filled with a certain number of rounds. The idea was for us to listen for the fire control orders and fire the required rounds into the targets. Sometimes the target went up and down a few times, sometimes they were exposed for a set time. The idea behind this was to ensure that we had a stoppage during one of the set exposures, that is the weapon would not fire because the magazine was empty, forcing us to carry out an immediate action drill where we replaced the empty magazine with one containing rounds and continue firing. It was a good idea to put a bit of pressure on the shooter to get the weapon working again as fast he could.

Well, during the practice, I ran out of ammo and I carried out the unload and laid my weapon down. This is normal procedure at the end of a practice. Somehow I had ran out of ammo while the others were still firing.

Audie noticed me and he turned towards me with the megaphone and said, “What’s the problem with you, Private Cavanough?”

“Out of ammo, sir.”

“Did you carry out my instructions and only fire the required number of rounds?”

“Yes, sir.”

He gave me THE LOOK as he turned away. You know THE LOOK - the slight smile, the lips stretched open across clenched teeth, the head turning from side to side and exhaling of breath so the chest and shoulders give a kind of shrug.

After that practice we moved forward to another mound. “During this practice you will fire two rounds each time the target appears.” He turned and aimed the megaphone in my direction. “Have you got that,

Private Cavanough, two rounds each time the target appears?"

I gave him a wave and a nod of my head. He knew what I was thinking - bloody dickhead - because he was thinking the same thing.

But I digress. Soon we were at our night location, a platoon in all round defence and still no corporals. We were set down in pairs and told to face out. I was paired with Smithy, the larrikin from the Central Coast of NSW. We had to prepare our position: put in track plans, man the machine gun, post sentries and dig in.

Smithy showed me the best way to dig a shell scrape (essentially a trench), as protection from being hit by small arms fire. First dig out enough for your feet, then stand in the hole and dig out the trench by using the shovel (the Army call them *tool entrenching*) as a pick, breaking up the soil easily as it fell in on your feet. Pretty soon we were down about a foot and then used the same procedure to go another foot deeper. I was sweating profusely - it was hard yakka. Gloves and a proper shovel and pick would have been nice. Our digging was interrupted by us having to spend time at the various duties of sentry, gun and work parties for the platoon sergeant.

It was getting dark. Just before dusk we stood-to and changed to night routine and rostered blokes behind the machine gun. I managed to get a bite to eat but Smithy was out on sentry duty. He would be brought back at stand-to, so I got into his gear and got a meal going for him as well as a hot brew. At stand-to, the platoon commander usually came around to check up on us. Luckily Smithy was able to have a brew and a meal without being sprung as all our gear should have been packed away. The shell scrape was great for hiding stuff.

Thus began a friendship between me and Smithy. Me, a simple naive country kid, and Smithy, a seasoned larrikin. Did I tell you he was a bikie?

A list was prepared showing our turn on the gun for the night. I knew where the gun pit was and I knew whom I had to wake and where his pit was; it was next to ours. At stand-down, I just sat there, in my farter spot, motionless. I was fucked. The nauseating truck ride, the hump up the hill and then the digging really took its toll on my body. No sooner had I lay down than someone was prodding me for my turn on the gun. I staggered up, wrapped the horse blanket around me, grabbed my rifle and headed to the gun pit. I sat there for the next two hours and talked in whispers to the two other guys who were on the same time as me. The shifts were staggered. When I came on picquet, the other guy only had an hour left of his stint and he got the other guy who then did two hours, one of which was with me.

The night was uneventful. No probing enemy, no checking from the platoon staff, no possums, no nuthin'.

The next morning after our morning routine we filled in our pits and moved off. The day was filled with normal infantry shit, patrolling, contact drills, patrolling, contact drills, that kinda thing. At 1600 we harboured up and did exactly what we did the previous night, at least the ground was softer and the digging was easier. Everything was OK until I stopped. It was then I realised how wet I was from perspiration, how my legs and feet were sore from walking and, worst of all, my hands were blistered from digging.

At some time after midnight I was sitting in the gun pit. I had Smithy to my right and another digger to my left. We were doing single picquets because we lost a few blokes due to injury and fatigue. I had the horse blanket around me and I was sitting there quietly. Strangely enough I was enjoying the solitude. My aching body was testament to the fact that we had been working hard and I got a certain satisfaction from knowing that I was handling it all OK. The air was quite still, there was no breeze, I couldn't hear any animals, let alone see much in the dark. Then I spotted him. No, not the enemy, you dickhead, the platoon commander, Audie Murphy. He was walking slowly along the track plan. I recognised him instantly.

Bloody hell, I knew it was him but I guessed I had better do the challenging procedure otherwise I'd be in more shit.

"Halt, hands up, who's there?" I said in a low voice. Audie froze mid-stride, his legs apart and his hands stretched out slightly to his side. He was not carrying a weapon, as a matter of fact I never saw him with a weapon ever, maybe he was too young to have one.

"Platoon commander," was his response. My guess is he said it with that smirk he got on his face, his head moving slightly to the left and right. I couldn't see if he was wearing his cravat though. Next was the password bit, but I was feeling a little tired and I couldn't be bothered, after all I knew who it was.

"Pass through."

He came up to me and with his finger he shot me. "Bang. You are as good as dead, Private Cavanough. Why didn't you use the password?"

"I recognised it was you, sir."

"Bullshit, you're nothing but trouble, Cavanough, switch on man. Do you

want to get your mates killed? Do as you have been trained to do."

Maybe I should have thrown a rock at him rather than botch the challenging procedure.

"Yes, sir!"

And off he stumbled to annoy the blokes in the other gun pit.

Things were not going well and they were about to get worse. Later that night the platoon sergeant was hollering at us. I looked up and he was shining a torch into my eyes.

"Who's on picquet here, youse cunts?"

It took me a couple of seconds to realise that we were all asleep, no one was awake behind the gun. I couldn't recall if I woke Smithy or not. The watch and picquet list was on the ground between Smithy and me. We'd fucked up, we were asleep on picquet, a chargeable offence. I might have gone to sleep without waking Smithy, but I had no recollection. None of us said anything except give old ginger-head some blank looks. We're good at that.

"From now on, all three of you will stay awake until stand-to. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sarge."

"I'll be checking on you. Fuck it up and youse cunts is on a charge!"

"Yes, sarge."

So we stayed awake the rest of the night. No one complained, no one blamed anyone else. We took the blame as a group because the group fucked up, it was as simple as that.

It was such a stupid punishment, caught asleep so stay awake. But the platoon sergeant was a strange fellow. He was always telling warries which is unusual for a combat veteran. They know what combat is like, they don't feel the need to big-note themselves. None of the corporals said anything about their combat experiences except to tell us the funny stuff. But the sergeant was different. His definition of the role of the Infantry was to 'kill cunts.'

He was unpredictable, dangerous even. He carried out a dangerous practice involving a mortar simulator. We were out bush doing some night training when we were called by the sergeant to gather in close.

Suddenly I heard a whistling sound just off to the right. As I looked towards the sound there was an explosion. Everything stopped. I was stunned. My ears were ringing and my night vision was gone because my retinas were seared by a full view of the blast only a few feet away. In addition there was a lot of yelling, "Get down, youse cunts, hit the deck, you're under attack!" I dunno how many simulators he used, maybe two or three, but it was chaos, chaos that he wanted and which he created by being irresponsible with the mortar simulators.

It took a good five minutes for us to calm down. We knew he had fucked up, badly. He put the soldiers at risk by this stupid stunt. The man was a loose cannon. It was very bad, one of the corporals was wounded by the blast. The corporal had served as an Infantry soldier in Vietnam, he was due to be promoted to sergeant. We liked and respected him, we would have followed him anywhere and here he was lying on the ground. A piece of shrapnel from the simulator had hit him just above the left eye. He was very lucky not to lose an eye.

I don't know if there were any investigations into this incident. I think it was all just let be, just like our going to sleep on picquet, I guess.

Things picked up over the next couple of days which were without incident. No incident, apart from no sleep, very little food, limited water and intense physical activity. Soon we were on the racing trucks heading back to Lavarack Barracks. Whilst waiting for the trucks I finished off the last of my rations, a can of camp pie. It wasn't long into our journey when I thought the camp pie was taking on a life of its own and wanted to depart my body. The rear flap of the truck was rolled up so I edged my way to the tail gate. I signalled to the other blokes that I felt sick and they cleared a spot for me. I sat there waiting for the big chunder. It never came. Not chundering is worse than chundering. At least when you release the contents of your stomach, even when it comes out through your nose, you tend to feel better afterwards. I felt sick all the way to Lavarack Barracks.

Later when we got stood down, had a shower and changed into civvies, we felt better even though we were knackered. We were pleased it was over and soon we would join the battalion. We had a couple of beers at the canteen and had an early night. We slept like the dead. Most of us lost half a stone in weight and I never touched camp pie again.

Chapter 18

5 Section 2 Platoon A Company 2nd Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment

Woo hoo, I am an Infantry soldier posted to an Infantry battalion. I have earned the right to wear the skippy badge.

I dunno what happened to the second lieutenant from the Cadre Company, maybe they sent him south to a retraining camp. I never did see him again and he was probably glad to see the last of us Nashos.

Sum Wun said the mortar sergeant got married and none of us got an invitation. He also said that he was still married to his other wife, but as I didn't see him again I dunno if that was true.

The 100 guys from the Cadre Company were split up all through the Battalion. I would see them often.

“Howsitgoin’, mate?”

“Good mate, yeah. You?”

“Yeah, good.”

“OK, catch ya later, mate.”

“Yeah, seeya, mate.”

Now you know why they call us dumb grunts, this is about as serious a conversation you can have with a grunt. Oh, I haven’t explained the grunt bit. When carrying a heavy pack through the scrub you are continually ducking and weaving around bushes, trees and especially BLOODY VINES!!! In addition, Infantry never moves on level ground, we were always going uphill. As the pack shifts your body has to compensate, eliciting a ‘grunt’ from your body. We were grunts. We didn’t call ourselves grunts, others did. We wore the name as a badge of honour. Were we dumb? A lot of people thought so.

We were standing around the A Company headquarters building. The NCOs were there with lists calling out for us new guys to join their sections. I was expecting a tall bronzed Anzac to be our section commander, a corporal to lead us into battle. I got Davo.

Davo was a veteran of the Vietnam war. He had already served there for 12 months as an Infantry soldier. I guess he knew his shit. He was neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin, neither brilliant nor stupid. He had one

distinguishing feature, he had snow white hair; and if you looked closely enough you could make out his snow white moustache. His ears were quite big as well. Maybe I should have called him big ears when he called out my name to see how he reacted.

I heard him call out, “Kavanak.”

Silence.

“Kavanak?”

I stepped forward and announced myself, “It’s Cavanough, corporal.”

“You’ll do me, Knackers.”

And so henceforth I would be known as Knackers. (This is nearly as bad as my nickname at high school. There I was called Nutz!).

“You’ll be number two on the machine gun, Knackers.”

Thank goodness for that. The machine gun, I’d be part of the machine gun group, the firepower of the section. It could have been worse, nobody wanted to be number three rifleman, you know, the last guy to get picked from a group when captains of a football team take turns selecting a player. They always pick the best ones first and leave some until last because they are, well, shitty.

We drew bedding from the Q store.

“Sign here,” said Boris.

I signed. We were shown to our lines. We knew where they were because of all those early morning greetings we gave them. It was exactly the same design as our previous accommodation. I made the bed and realised I had no bedspread. I reported it to our section 2IC LCPL John S who seemed upset, like it was another problem. “Bloody Nashos!”

We confronted Boris who also seemed upset, busy and annoyed. He’s big, Russian I thought, so I just stood there hiding behind John S.

“He didn’t get a bedspread,” said John S.

“Well, did he sign for one?” Boris retorted. His face gave the impression he was in pain. He looked at his paperwork, “Cavanough, yes, you signed for a bedspread. Where is it?”

“I never got one.”

Silence.

I thought I should tell him a few facts. Listen you big ugly cunt, you didn't give me time to check the items, I trusted that they were all there, and besides, if 30 blokes checked everything before they signed you'd miss out on lunch, you dumb cunt. But I said nothing.

"Here," said Boris, throwing a bedspread at me.

Back at our lines most of the platoon was milling about, helping us new guys make our beds and sort out our lockers and stuff. We were a mixture of Nashos and Regs. I was bunking with Digger, Killer and Ian C. Digger was from WA, he was tall and lean. Killer was from Brisbane but recently he was working at a bank on the Gold Coast. For some reason his callup was deferred, so he was older than we were. He was of solid build. Davo told me later that's why he made him the machine gunner. As I was his number two, it meant that Killer and I were together 24/7. We even slept together, but in different beds, you understand.

The other guy in the room, Ian C, was also a Nasho but he was two call-ups before us so he would not serve a full tour of Vietnam because his two years would be up before our tour ended. He lived not far from my home town of Cootamundra, at a little place called Rye Park.

Killer, me, Ian C and Digger. Lavarack Barracks, Townville 1969

Our platoon sergeant had a nickname, Tojo, but we never called him that. He was a big guy with a big voice, not gruff like a lot of sergeants, but he possessed a very clear speaking voice. He was a confident soldier. He too

had served in Vietnam and he was a strong disciplinarian. He was hard but he was fair. I guess you can't ask for more than that.

All us new guys were interviewed by the platoon commander. I walked in and saluted. He motioned to me to sit down. He initially had me confused with Peter J, another West Australian, a Reg who had been in his platoon for some weeks. I didn't think we looked alike, but others said there were some similarities.

"How do you feel about going to Vietnam?" he asked.

"Can't wait to get amongst them, sir." What else could I say?

"That's what I like to hear. Are there any problems at home that I should be aware of? Problems with wives, pregnant girlfriends, problems with the Police?"

"No, sir."

Pat, the platoon commander, was a man of few words, I don't recall his giving me a pep talk about the upcoming training and how we must give 100% as would normally be the case. That's what I would have done, but then I failed officer selection. He wasn't much older than we were. He was of slight build with ginger coloured hair. He spoke quietly, he seemed very natural. He was not the gung-ho type, but his steady manner gained our confidence even though he, like us, had never been tested in battle.

Chapter 19

Training

Dum, dum, dum, dum, dum.

That was the sound in my brain. It was from the pounding of our boots on the hot asphalt, running at double time along the back road of Lavarack Barracks. We had been running for 20 minutes nonstop, it was late morning; the heat and humidity were oppressive. My feet were burning up. Was it the metal plate in my GPs heating up? My brain had switched off, just dum, dum, dum, dum, dum.

We were minus our shirts and we were carrying our weapons. To ease the burden on the machine gunners, every few minutes, the NCO would call 'change' and the three blokes at the back had to sprint forward, swap weapons and keep running at the same pace. Machine guns up front, all we had to do was keep in step and keep up.

The NCO called, "Right wheel..... continue the wheel." Bewdy we are heading back. About 100 yards down the road was Ian C. Even at that distance, I could tell he was buggered. He was expanding his chest trying to get more oxygen into his lungs as he bent over and straightened up. He was staggering more than he was walking, but he was still moving forward. We ran past him. Dum, dum, dum, dum, dum.

"Right wheel ... continue the wheel." Ian C was up ahead again, still trying to recover. We all knew what was about to happen. If he didn't join on to the end of the platoon as we ran past, we would run another hundred yards and wheel around again and we would keep doing this until he joined the platoon.

As we got level with Ian C, someone grabbed his rifle. A couple of others grabbed each arm and helped him back into the group, assisting him with the run. We ran another 100 yards or so and the NCO dropped us back to quick time. A little further on and we took a break in some shade. We had no water. This was part of our training – water discipline.

What I'd have given for a nice cold, chocolate milkshake right then. One that is so thick that it makes your cheeks ache as you suck it up through the straw.

It was a mental thing like most of our training. We were super fit, we recovered quickly from any exertion, but there was still a bit of

apprehension on my part. Sum Wun said that before Christmas we would complete an exercise up at Mt Speck (read thick jungle) and four weeks at Canungra (read holy shit!). It seemed everyone else did two weeks at Canungra, but Infantry Battalions did four.

It wasn't so much the training that worried me, but rather how I would react to actual combat with the enemy. I was a little uneasy thinking about it as our deployment was only six months away; not a lot of time for us to get our shit together.

A few days later we were heading to Mt Speck in those bloody racing trucks. I found it was better to get near the rear of the truck. That way I could see out with the back flap rolled up. The only problem was sitting just above the rear wheels where the ride seemed especially harsh. There were no padded seats, just timber slats to sit on.

Mt Speck was covered in bloody thick virgin rain forest which we were expected to negotiate our way through with webbing, rifle and pack. The jungle fought us every inch of the way and the design of our gear also assisted the jungle in its fight to impede our progress. As you moved forward every vine in your vicinity came over and latched onto your gear and you then dragged half the jungle with you. The ground was uneven because we were moving uphill, the earth was soft. You held your rifle in one hand and wrestled with vines, branches and rock ledges with the other. To release the snagged vines you had to dip down, bend your knees and rotate your upper torso back at an angle so that they would slide off. Sometime you had to back up to release the tension on the vine. There was plenty of grunting going on.

Branches were another matter. As you pushed forward, the branch would bend with you, impeding your forward motion until you passed by. The pent up energy in the branch would release and it would snap back into position taking out the guy behind you in the process. The solution was to push down on the branch so that it didn't spring back and flatten your mate.

If it was raining, the rain water would have collected on the branch, so you would gingerly bend it back as you moved forward and then let it go, releasing the water and drenching your mate. That was good fun.

Another good trick was to release rocks with your feet when climbing steep inclines and watch them hurtle down towards your mates.

Some blokes coped with this environment better than others. John H from Victoria was hopeless. He didn't earn the nickname 'Tangles' but he should have. If there was a vine at foot level then John H would find it,

trip, stumble and cartwheel to the ground. He was normally a quiet, softly spoken type of bloke but the vines turned him into some sort of monster.

On one occasion we were told to be on our best behaviour as the Army brass were going to be on some rocks to watch us move through the scrub. John H must have forgotten about this. In full view of the Army brass, and on cue, he cartwheeled for the umpteenth time. He had had enough at that stage. He got up, grabbed his rifle by the barrel and started to attack the scrub with it. He then threw the rifle a few yards in front of him, muttered some words (he never swore), picked it up again and continued on his way. Nobody said anything.

John H didn't make it to Vietnam. He was the eldest child in the family and his father was quite ill. His mother was determined to stop him from going to Vietnam. She contacted her local politicians to have him remain in Australia due to family problems. Then a couple of months later a request was made for him to take leave to attend to a family crisis, his father was to have major surgery and he might not survive. Leave was not granted. I'm not sure who refused his leave application, maybe it was the company commander, Red Fox. Yes, that's right, another red-head person in authority. Red Fox was a Major. He had bandy legs. Sum Wun said he was a desk Johnny.

One night when Pat, our platoon commander, was the duty officer and I was battalion runner, an urgent call came in from some high ranking Army guy in Victoria. The directive was to get him on a plane pronto. I think his father had died.

Previously, John H had expressed his frustration to me. He said his mother was putting a lot of pressure on him to get a posting in Victoria but he also felt compelled to stay with his mates. He didn't want to let his mates down. I remember his asking me, "What should I do, Knackers?" I did what any dumb grunt would do, I shrugged my shoulders. I really felt for John H, he was such a nice bloke.

He was despatched south very quickly and I never got a chance to say goodbye. We never saw him again. Maybe I'll catch up with him one day to see how things turned out for him.

In the meantime we were busy with our lead up training to Vietnam.

Chapter 20

JTC Canungra

Canungra is where the Army's Jungle Training Centre is located not far from the Gold Coast. You may have heard stories about the place. Sum Wun said some Yanks were killed during training – the place is that tough and dangerous.

We lived in old tents with a concrete floor, slept on stretchers – real flash stuff – but it was dry and better than sleeping on the ground so there were no complaints. There was plenty of food, and plenty of hot water. It was better than being out bush.

The two weeks at Canungra was a mixture of normal Infantry type training with a couple of nights in the bush and then the real mental challenges – Heartbreak Hill and the confidence course. Oh, and the section attack where they fired a Vickers machine gun over your head. It was going to be an interesting couple of weeks.

Bush work was not as hard as I thought it would be. We had been training in virgin rainforest up around Townsville some 1200kms further north into the tropics, whereas the Canungra training areas were heavily used, consequently the undergrowth was fairly well worn. Movement through the scrub was much easier.

Take the navex for example. You arrived at your checkpoint and set your compass for the next leg, checked the bearing and followed the thinned out undergrowth where thousands of soldiers had trodden before. Ezy.

BTW we had new packs. They were divided into an upper and lower section, bedding in the bottom and food and stuff in the top. The shoulder straps were padded. Sum Wun said the bigger the pack the more shit you carry, the more weight you hump, and the more you grunt.

We were in the bush for a couple of nights. On the first night, as darkness approached there was no direction as to whether there was a picquet or not, so we set up our hoochies and rolled out our farters expecting a good night's sleep. When it was dark the order came for the guns to be manned. We had no track plans in place and no cord along the track plan. That's how we moved silently at night in our harbour position - move to the cord and follow it along to the gun. The track plan allowed the

movement to be done silently.

However blokes were hoochied up all over the place and it was a battle to find the guy you were supposed to wake up. It turned out to be a big schmozzle during the night as blokes got lost trying to find the next guy for gun picquet. Sum Wun said a digger was so lost he slept with the 3 platoon sergeant because he couldn't find his own farter. It wasn't our platoon sergeant, Tojo. He would have told the digger in no uncertain terms where to go!

I understand why it was done, to show us that track plans, comms cord and a picquet list as well as knowing where your replacement was sleeping were essential elements to square away before last light. We had been doing that stuff for months. It might be a good lesson for the cooks and drivers who didn't do bushwork normally, but it was our bread and butter. It just stuffed us Infantry guys around. We already knew that these things were essential.

Anyway the possums were quick learners. While checking out the bloke to replace me (we could use torches because we were not tactical), I heard a noise and shone the torch on a possum that was into a packet of biscuits he just pulled out of the fancy new backpacks. The biscuits were sealed pretty well so they didn't get wet, so he must have had a history of getting into diggers' stuff. The biscuit bag was well and truly ripped open. The digger was sound asleep and oblivious to the night time thief so I left the possum to enjoy his dog biscuits. If I chased him away he may have attacked my pack and taken my biscuits.

The one thing we were all dreading at Canungra was the confidence course. It was a series of obstacles that you negotiate through, under or over. They walked us through the course from the finish back to the start to ensure we understood what each obstacle looked like and to figure out the best way to tackle it.

Take for example the bear pit. It was a high wooden wall and a pit of water. Because the wall was so high you needed to attack it at speed, place one foot on the wall and leap into the air, grab the top of the wall and then swing over and drop down into the bear pit. The instructor asked for a volunteer to jump in to show everyone how deep it was. Someone obliged. The water was waist deep.

The rope obstacles were better suited to someone with gorilla arms - that'd be the Artillery guys; I bet they had no problems with the obstacle course. Some really warped bastard designed the course to ensure every muscle in your body got a complete workout. Soon we were at the start and a couple of us got released every 30 seconds. It was game on.

I soon discovered that once a couple of diggers went through the obstacles, everything was wet and slippery. That made most of them really hard to negotiate and it quickly sapped your energy. Soon you were covered in mud and breathing hard. You had to run all the way - walking was forbidden - and you can't zip around any obstacles. There were plenty of NCOs to make sure you didn't cheat and they offered plenty of encouraging words - most of them swear words.

Half way through I was ringing wet and covered in mud. My heart was pounding and I was breathing heavily, my arms had no strength left in them. In fact, I was rooted. I saw the wall and bear pit coming up, I increased my speed, one foot on the wall and I leaped up and grabbed the top of the wall. My arms were shaking from the exertion of the previous obstacles. Ow, my stomach muscles were shot as well as I heaved myself up with the help of my boots fighting for traction on the wet wall. I managed to scramble up. I swung over the top and remembering the pit was only waist deep, I pulled my legs up as I hit the water. The cold water hit me like a sledge hammer. As I sank down I could smell the putrid water...and I kept sinking. The bloody pit was about 10 feet deep and I went right to the bottom with no oxygen in my lungs! I pushed off the muddy floor and leaped back up to the top. I burst through the surface, sucking in air noisily. The NCO was there just looking at me. I swam away from the wall as other blokes were coming over the top. I got to the end of the pit where it is waist deep. That's where the digger dropped in during our familiarisation, but the rest of the pit was bloody deep.

A big disappointment was the last obstacle where you jumped off a tower into the river. That washed off the mud and grime. But because of recent heavy rain, the river was swollen and the jump was deemed unsafe, so it was cancelled. What a pity. We had to clean up as best we could in the showers. You can imagine what they looked like after we had finished.

The section attack was next. This is where they fired a Vickers machine gun over your head to simulate battle conditions; maybe that was where the Yanks stuffed up. Five section, with Davo as our section commander, was working pretty well as a team. We had done countless contact drills and section attacks. Davo knew his shit, so all we had to do was follow his lead. There are two distinct reactions when a shot rings out up front where the scouts are. Firstly we activated a contact drill. We moved to rehearsed positions. I was in the gun group with Killer and our job was to get the gun working as soon as possible to return fire to the enemy. We ran forward then moved out to the right so we could lay down suppressing fire in the direction of the enemy without hitting our own guys. In the jungle you can't see anything so you rely on sounds to work

out where everyone is.

The second phase was when Davo took over. He assesses the situation. If he thinks we can take out the enemy, then he starts the attack by moving the section forward by fire and movement. Every time he called, "Gun, go!" Killer and I got up and moved forward a few paces and hit the deck and kept firing the gun as he was moving the other groups (scouts or rifles). The pattern was random, so we had to be on the ball and move as soon as Davo called out. Sometimes he might move us twice in a row.

For the section attack under live fire they gave us blanks, so we were harmless and the Canungra staff were safe. We patrolled along and a shot rang out. We carried out the contact drill and Killer and I moved forward and to the right, level with the scouts and started shootin'. Davo started giving his orders, and then pandemonium broke out. That Vickers gun opened up. Bullets were whizzing inches above our heads; all I wanted to do was hug the ground. It was impossible to hear Davo's orders so I had to keep watching him and read his body language. Each time he faced our way we couldn't hear his voice but we understood his gestures. Killer and I got up and moved forward. It was going OK until we hit the barbed wire which slowed us down. To add to our problems there was plenty of water about and Killer and I had to swim under the wire while trying to keep the gun dry. At least the water was warm. All the while that Vickers gun was shooting above our heads.

Then I realised that they were shooting way above our heads. I could see the fall of shot against a cliff face off to our right. That meant they weren't shooting at us. The bullets may well have been way up high, we had no chance of being hit, but it sounded like the bullets were inches away from us with that very unique sound: crack, crack, crack, crack, crack, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump. The crack was the bullet going over our heads as it broke the sound barrier and the thump was the sound of the primary, where the weapon was actually firing.

But what a buzz! And clearly all that training we did for fire and movement needed a bit of revision because battle noise made communication by voice practically impossible. Who says you can't teach dumb grunts new tricks?

After the two weeks at Canungra, we spent two weeks in NSW at Wiangaree State Forest doing the normal Infantry stuff and nothing remarkable happened. I can only tell you so much about patrolling and contact drills and stuff. Soon we were back at Lavarack Barracks and onto Christmas leave.

As usual I told a lie to my mother when I would be coming home so I

could surprise her by a couple of days. I flew from Townsville to Sydney and caught the train to Cootamundra. It arrived at some ungodly hour in the middle of the night. I got a taxi to my parents' place but I asked the driver to stop at the corner and I walked up to the house and around the back. My parents never locked the house. We never had burglars and besides the only thing of any value was a black and white TV set, and it was bloody heavy.

I entered via the laundry door. Jimmy, the black Labrador, slept in there and he only stirred a little bit; what a hopeless guard dog he was. I entered the house and dropped my bag at the bedroom door. Inside the bedroom I switched on the light. The room was a mess as my mother was getting it ready for me and she thought she had a few days left to do it. The bed wasn't made so I looked around and managed to get some stuff and make myself comfortable.

Note to self: don't surprise my mother any more and come home when you say you are coming home. It's easier that way.

I received a Christmas card from my civilian employer, the Commissioner of Forests. I sent him a 2RAR card and told him that I had a nice time visiting Wiangaree State Forest.

And so Christmas 1969 came and went, Christmas 1970 would be very different.

Chapter 21

Coming Back

Cootamundra is a small country town located on the South West Slopes of New South Wales. In those days, it had a population of about 6,500. It was hot in summer and cold in winter. My father worked there on the railway. Before that, we lived at Junee and before that we lived at Tocumwal on the Murray River where I was born. Those places were all railway towns. I spent most of my schooling at Cootamundra and as happens in most country towns when you finish school, you leave town. I worked in Wagga and Tumut, both only an hour's drive away so still being a teenager, I went home most weekends.

I had a good bunch of mates and in addition to schooling we played football together and did a bit of drinkin' together as well. Our entertainment was mostly going to pubs and attending dances at the town halls of Cootamundra, Temora and Young. That's where all the chicks hung out. Later when they dropped the age to enter clubs, we used to spend a fair bit of time at the Ex-Servicemen's club and the Country Club in Cootamundra.

So it was inevitable that during the Christmas break I would catch up with these guys. I liked the Country Club because there were two ways you could go to the toilet: near the front entrance, or down past the bar and out the back. This was important to me as I was never a big drinker - it made me piddle a lot - so I would alternate between the two routes to the toilet saying g'day to blokes along the way.

So there we were at the Country Club sitting and chatting and having a great time, just like the old days. A couple of the blokes had girlfriends with them, so it was not unusual for the boys to get up and dance. And for those of us who didn't have girlfriends, after a few beers we got enough courage to wander over to the girl with the big tits and ask her for a dance. I was young then and I now realise it is a mistake to stare at a woman's tits while asking her for a dance. No wonder I got a lot of knockbacks. That didn't deter me though. I'd wait until the Barn Dance and pick on the most desperate girl there and ask her for a dance. You'd only dance with her for a few seconds anyway as partners changed in the Barn Dance (in case you didn't know that).

We were having a good time and I was getting plenty of exercise going to the toilet. Then 'Chook' shouted and placed the beers on the table. "This is yours, Cav," he said, and handed me a beer. The others had to grab

their own. Fatal mistake, Chook. He forgot that I was almost a fully trained killer. I noticed things. Why would he hand me a beer, yet not hand the others their beer?

"Aha," I said. "You can't fool me, I'm not drinking that beer, it's full of slops!"

They all burst into laughter. "No Cav, the beer you've just finished was slops," said Chook. There was plenty of laughin', hollerin' and leg slappin'; all at my expense.

You see, I had form in drinking slops. Prior to my Army service, when we were out together and the boys would get up and dance, I'd finish off their beers. They'd come back and ask me where their beers were. I'd respond that the waiter came around and took them away, but the empty glasses on the table were evidence that I was lying. To get me back they got the barman to pour a middy of slops from out of the drip tray. I'd drink it, not knowing there was any difference until they couldn't contain themselves any longer and blurted the truth!

So they managed to get me again. How stupid am I? Ha, ha, bloody ha.

Bastards. I'll get them back, one day.

Pretty soon I was heading back to Townsville. I got the train to Sydney and then on to Sydney Airport. I was a seasoned air traveller by then. I had flown in an aircraft once before, on my trip home. Prior to that I'd never set foot in an air terminal, let alone flew in a jet aircraft. But travelling with the Army is easy. You just turn up at the MCO (Movement Control Office) at the terminal and they are very helpful.

"Yeah? What's up?"

"Ah, mate, I'm Army, I'm flying to Townsville. Where do I go?"

"Are you a Nasho?"

"Is it my good looks that gave me away?"

"Have you got your ticket?"

I show him my ticket.

"Just head down to the TAA terminal. See that sign over there with the big letters, T-A-A?"

"Yeah. Do the hosties have big tits?"

“Fuck off!”

Soon I was waiting to board the aircraft when I spotted Ian C and a few other blokes. Because of the controversy surrounding the Vietnam War, we travelled in civilian dress. We were not allowed to travel in uniform but our short hair and lack of mutton chops were a dead giveaway for us Army blokes. We boarded the aircraft and started ordering beers so we could check out the hosties’ backsides as they rushed up and down the aisle. Sum Wun said that if you sit in the aisle seat and lean out a little bit they brush up against you as they move past, leaving a trail a perfume in their wake.

The way they were smiling at us, I knew they thought us Army blokes were hot but they couldn’t say anything as the other passengers would get jealous.

We landed at Brisbane one hour after leaving Sydney. We had to exit the aircraft, go to the seat allocation counter where more good lookin’ chicks wanted to chat us up, then reboarded the same aircraft to Townsville. More of us Army blokes hopped on at Brisbane so the hosties were even busier running up and down the aisle delivering beers.

In Townsville we fronted up to the MCO in a right state and were ushered onto a bus heading out to Lavarack Barracks.

The NCOs were waiting. “PT 0600 hours.”

Shit, I hadn’t had a run since we left. All I did was drink piss and eat. The bastards would kill us with PT.

And they did.

A few chunders during PT cleanses the mind, so to speak.

It was great to be back.

Chapter 22

Boots

I had two pairs of boots: AB and GP. There is some conjecture as to what those letters mean. Some say AB stands for *ankle boot* whereas others say it stands for *ammunition boot*, a hangover from WWII. They do indeed only come up to the ankle and my ABs were issued to me at Kapooka. To ease the transition from boot to leg, the top of the AB was covered by a gaiter, a canvas thingo that wrapped around your ankles. Sum Wun said they were to stop snake bites.

In Townsville we used the ABs for parades, or when on duty and you were required to wear number one greens. Number one greens were a heavily starched short sleeved shirt and shorts. That's right, shorts. We didn't wear gaiters with shorts, that would look silly, so Sum Wun invented the puttee. That was a thin strip of woollen material in olive drab colour that wrapped around the ankles to cover the gap from your AB boot to your socks. The hard part was aligning the end of the puttee to the outside of the ankle. So tying it on was like doing up a tie, sometimes a tie would be too long and sometimes it'd be too short. It was the same for the puttee, sometimes it would end at the front of the ankle and sometimes it would end at the back. The solution was to wrap it slightly loose on your ankle so that when it was fully wound it could be adjusted into place. The danger of course was that while marching on parade the bloody thing would unravel and all the boys behind you would trip over it and come a gutsa.

I don't think the RSM would have liked that.

Oh, I forgot to mention that the toe of the AB boot had to be spit polished; you know, it had to have a brilliant shine much like a mirror. In the hot tropical Queensland sun they lasted about ten minutes before they went dull. Sum Wun said to use "One Go", a commercial liquid polish which put a protective layer onto the spit polish - it lasted about twenty minutes before it went dull. In addition, when your foot started to sweat and the sweat seeped out through the stitching, it turned the polish white.

I don't think the RSM would have liked that either.

Still the AB boots were comfortable, but they were hopeless in the jungle. That's why we had the GP, the General Purpose boot. They laced a couple of inches up your ankle and that allowed us to do away with the gaiter.

We laced them differently to the civilian equivalent. We tied a knot in the end of the lace and threaded it under the first eyelet. We then continued to thread the lace across the tongue, down through the eyelet, out through the next eyelet above and then threaded across the tongue; and so on. Once completed there was a rather neat single lace across each eyelet. Sum Wun said that was so a bayonet could easily slice one lace and the whole thing would come apart if we injured our ankle and they wanted to get the boot off quickly.

But we liked to lace our boots this way for another reason. As we were using a single lace, when we wanted to take the boot off we'd simply loosen the lace back up through some of the eyelets. None of the eyelets were unthreaded. That was great at night in the bush as we could easily and quickly get our boots back on by simply tightening the lace – no threading of eyelets was required. Bewdy.

The GPs were water resistant rather than waterproof. When they were new, or had plenty of polish on them, a digger could step through a puddle and no water would seep into his foot. However after a couple of days in the bush, the toes became scuffed and water seeped in, particularly from wet grass while walking in the early morning dew. My father always drummed into us boys the need to polish our shoes. Before school every morning I would polish my shoes. My father said it protected the leather and preserved the stitching, so I cleaned my boots every day in the bush whereas a lot of blokes didn't bother. So mine tended to be more water resistant than their boots.

On non-ceremonial duties where we were wearing the GPs with shorts we simple curled the socks over the edge of the GP for about an inch. The boots were heavier than their commercial equivalents because of a metal inner sole that protected diggers from punji sticks. I dunno if they worked because I dunno anyone who tested them, but besides making the boot heavier they were also hotter when marching on tarred roads because the metal plate seemed to trap the heat. In addition, you tended to swing your foot rather than lift it, so you modified the way you walked and marched in GPs.

Overall, diggers were quite happy with the GP boot because it was new. There were two types: Dunlop and Seal. I liked the Dunlops. I had a wide foot and a high instep and I found them to be the most comfortable. The Seal boots tended to have a rather bulbous toe I thought and they didn't look as good as the Dunlop boot. I think Regs, Artillery, blokes from Canberra and other dickheads liked the Seal boot.

But enough of this esoteric bullshit, let's board those racing trucks and head out to High Range.

I don’t have to tell you that High Range was hilly, that’s a given; but it didn’t have quite the intensity of jungle as Mt Speck and in some places it was quite dry. It was a good place to invoke more water discipline.

We had more new blokes arriving and others leaving as the platoon sorted itself out in readiness for Vietnam. We worked hard and we were a well-disciplined group, or so I thought. I dunno if Tojo, the platoon sergeant, would agree. But each day seemed to be getting tougher and tougher. By then we were super fit. Fitness to me still meant that I puffed and sweated a lot, the difference was that after a minute’s rest, I was rearin’ to go again.

We still carried Maggi soup packets in our side pockets because the Army rations, although nutritionally sound, were impossible to carry intact if you had more than a couple of day's supply. That meant we culled much of the rations, and because we were subject to extremely physically demanding work, and we were not getting enough fluids, nor were we getting enough sleep; it affected us mentally as well as physically. We lost a lot of weight.

But still we soldiered on. My job as number two on the machine gun meant that I was essentially a pack mule. I didn’t get the glory of being the machine gunner and to be quite honest I didn’t think I could carry the M60 for long anyway; my role was to support Killer. During contact drills he would be in front of me and when we had to run forward and then to the right, I tried to get past him to clear a way for him and the gun to get into a good and effective position to return fire as quickly as we could. Sometimes Killer thought I was getting in his way.

He and I got on OK most of the time with a little bit of bickering here and there as we sat behind the gun together while the rest of the section went about the normal routine of preparing track plans and work parties. In essence that freed up the rest of the section to do other stuff as Killer and I stayed on the gun all the time. The other sections didn't work like that, they had a roster system where the gun team would take a break, but we felt sitting behind the gun was a pretty good deal for us. There were no interruptions and we weren't called away for other duties or water parties or anything else like that. We sat behind the gun. That was our job.

Most exercises followed a similar pattern. Move the soldiers into an area, let them get squared away with the way they work together, then go tactical and give them tasks such as patrolling, ambushing, recce parties etc. to contact the enemy; and then finish in a blaze of glory with a large attack where we get to fire off all the ammo we were carrying around.

Now no one likes to get shot, but we had to have make-believe casualties in training so that others could get to practise their duties. Platoon sergeants do battlefield clearance of the dead and wounded, so they must get exposed to that. Soldiers in waiting - the section 2IC and the number two on the machine gun - must take over the roles if the main guy, the section commander or machine gunner, got killed or wounded.

That's where the DS came in. It doesn't stand for dead shits. Sum Wun said they were Directing Staff. They were usually officers or senior NCOs who were not part of our establishment. Usually we never saw them before as they came from other units. So during the big battle at the culmination of an exercise, Killer would get killed off. That meant that I had to retrieve the machine gun and ammo and I had to get the gun working as quickly as I could. That really pissed Killer off, he would have lugged the machine gun and ammo around for days on end and when the chance came to really get stuck into firing the thing, the DS would kill him off.

So we developed a strategy. When Killer was made a casualty I would leave my rifle with him and take the gun and charge off like a man possessed, runnin' and jumpin' and shootin' in a manic state. The DS would be taken off guard and would try to catch up with me. This was in stark contrast to most machine gun groups who would argue with the DS. Killer would drop to the ground without protest and I was gone with the machine gun with the DS in total shock and then trying to keep up with me, leaving Killer behind by himself.

Killer would wait a few moments and then he would start to move forward in leaps and bounds like a real trained digger. The DS moved about a fair bit and because they didn't know us, Killer would catch up with me unchallenged and we'd swap weapons back so he could start blasting away with HIS weapon. No DS ever caught on.

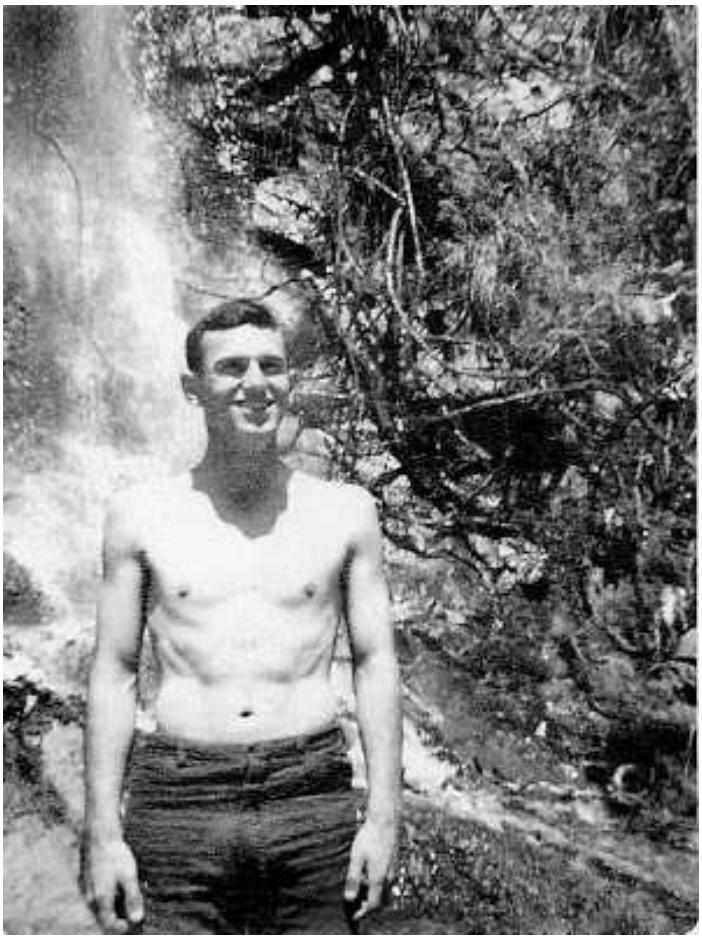
A couple of the boys were in trouble during the exercise. Digger from WA had to get winched out by helicopter due to heat exhaustion. They took him back to rear echelon somewhere and threw him in a tub with iced water. He said a few blokes went down with the same thing. I dunno if he got a root or not back there.

I haven't mentioned Browny yet, another Nasho from WA. One of nature's gentlemen. He was a forward scout, one of the best. He missed nothing. When he got a bee in his bonnet he would take off and we'd have a hard time trying to keep up. The dentist removed all his teeth just prior to the exercise, so he was out at High Range with no teeth. It was quite funny really, but he was suffering as he could hardly eat anything. He had to soak the dog biscuits for some time before he could eat them. Poor

bastard.

The final part of the exercise would require us to W-A-L-K to the racing trucks. They were a long way away and you guessed it, it was usually uphill. Our spirits would be high because the exercise was over but the toll on our bodies was immense: we were tired, hungry and thirsty but waiting at the racing trucks was the Sally Man, the Army's Salvation Army officer. On board his Land Rover were gallons of jube juice, flavoured water, and it was ice cold. He was a life saver.

Vietnam was going to be a cinch after what we were going through.



Polaroid picture taken by that lank bastard, Rick

I survived High Range.

Chapter 23

Bit and Pieces

I spoke about the Red Fox, our company commander, earlier. Others were not so kind and referred to him as the Red Rat. I can understand why. You see, so I could attend his wedding, my brother, a Vietnam veteran living in Cootamundra, brought his wedding plans forward because of my imminent deployment to Vietnam. To get to Cootamundra in time, I needed to catch the 2pm flight from Townsville on the Friday afternoon. He sent me a wedding invitation as proof of the wedding and I handed it to Pat, my platoon commander, with a request for the leave on Friday afternoon. I didn't think there would be a problem.

That same weekend, Killer, Digger and a few others were organising a trip up to the Atherton Tablelands to have a look around. I of course was fully expecting to head to Cootamundra that weekend so I opted out.

Some time went by and I hadn't received approval for my leave. Pat followed it up and told me the Red Rat had refused my leave. He didn't call him the Red Rat or the Red Fox of course. The reason my leave was refused is that we would be on exercise at High Range and it would be difficult to get me back in time to catch the plane.

Prick.

As it turned out, we got back from High Range mid-morning on the Friday and although we had a fair bit of post-exercise admin to complete, surely leave for me was a formality? But ... my leave was denied by the Red Rat again.

Fuckin' prick.

So I spent the weekend in Townville while my mates, whom I sweated and toiled with, and who also lost a half stone in weight, were whooping it up, up north. I did get to see the slides that Digger took. The Atherton Tablelands looked like a nice place, for Queensland, you understand.

Digger and I had the same camera, a Kodak Instamatic 104. It was quite small and required no operator input except to press the shutter button. It was my kind of camera. The film came in a cartridge, once the film was fully exposed as demonstrated by the fact you couldn't wind it on any more, you simply opened the back of the camera, took out the cartridge and loaded in another. Those cartridges were sealed so no light could get

in. In fact nothing could go wrong with the camera. In a word, it was soldier proof.

It even had a flash facility for taking pictures in the dark. Kodak had a cube that fitted onto the top of the camera. It contained four flashes and as you wound the film the cube rotated ready for another flash. Magic! We used slide film and we were careful not to take silly shots as the processing was prepaid. We sent the films away to be processed and they returned as slides in a nice little box. I had a keen interest in photography from an early age but I never had a decent camera. Maybe I could get an SLR in Vietnam, duty free.

I already knew how to set a manual camera for a nice sunny day. My mother had a bellows type camera with large negatives about 6 x 4. It had no built-in light meter. My parents didn't really know how to operate it and I was only allowed to play with it when they didn't know I was playing with it. One day my father sent me down to the camera store to get the fellow to set the camera for a sunny day. He set it on F11 @ 125. I never forgot that.

I needed to find out more about that photography stuff so one day in Townsville I spotted a small camera book in a book store. In it was a lot of information about depth of field, rule of thirds, ASA settings; that kind of thing. I bought it and read the whole book cover to cover. I didn't understand any of it and neither did my dumb grunt mates.

The Kodak Instamatic 104 was soldier proof, but was it bulletproof?

There were plenty of things to do in Townsville. There were the pubs: Loths, the Winterson (I think that's where you got a free plate of fried rice so they could stay open later) and the one near the hospital, the Allen hotel. There were other pubs but that's where Army dickheads from other units went, so unless you were looking for a punch-up, you stuck with the ones our guys went to. I've already mentioned the Hong Kong Restaurant and the lovely ladies who waited hand and foot on Burke. We also went out to Magnetic Island a few times but I never did get a photo of the bikini tree.

We went swimming at the pool where Dawn Fraser trained. The water was warm. I think it was the only time I ever worked up a sweat while swimming. There was a pool at Lavarack Barracks but the chicks were at the pool in town. My mate Rick (who nearly got charged for wearing his GPs with civvies, remember) had a Polaroid camera which took black and white pictures that developed before your very eyes. Not far from us was a sheila with big tits and he worked out a strategy to take a photo of her without her knowing. I got up and moved a little in her direction. Rick

aimed the camera at me, and at the last moment he traversed the camera right and snapped away. Her eyes didn't move from the book she was reading.

I must check with Rick to see if he still has the photo.

Of interest was a place that sold coral lamps. A large shell with painted coral set into it and the whole shebang was lit by a low powered light globe. I sent two home to my mother. The store was building a coral display. The paint on the coral was the same that glowed under those black fluorescent tubes. I remember those lights at our local dances. They'd switch off the main lights and put on these black ones. People looked kinda funny, their white teeth glowed; but what made them especially popular is that on some fabrics the light enabled the girl's bras to be clearly seen underneath. The girl's underwear glowed in the dark! It's no wonder the lights were popular with the guys. The coral display was only half completed but the guy showed us how it would look. It was quite spectacular. Is it still there?

Some days we were not allowed into town because of the moratorium marches. People were demonstrating against the Vietnam War and large rallies that attracted thousands of people were held in most capital cities. I dunno how big they were in Townsville, or indeed if they held any demonstrations against the war. Lavarack Barracks was on the outskirts of Townville and there wasn't much of the city around the base. Some housing was getting closer at the western side of the barracks near the rifle range, but outside the barracks, to the south, it was deserted except for the university up the road.

Someone painted ***"RESIST!"*** in big letters with bright red paint on the sandstone rock at the entrance to the barracks. A couple of days later the following sign appeared on the roadway at the entrance to the university, also in bright red paint: ***"DON'T RESIST, ENLIST!"***

Oh, I nearly forgot. The Queen paid us a visit although I didn't get to shake her hand. In the days leading up to the visit we did plenty of area maintenance. We sweated and toiled to have everything spick and span. Even shrubs and stuff in the creeks were ripped up so that the view along the back road at the barracks would be nice and, er, sterile.

Charlie Company had the honour of being the honour guard, and was it any wonder. The company commander was Major Peterson who successfully led the Montagnards, the hill tribe in Vietnam, on a previous tour. Frank Walker wrote about him in *The Tiger Man of Vietnam*.

The day the Queen arrived I was on steward duty at the Sergeants' Mess.

That meant I did plenty of cleaning and washing of dishes and stuff, then donned a white coat and served the sergeants their meals. I saw Tojo there and I'm pretty sure he gave me a nod of recognition. I learnt something important that day: sergeants like green ice cream.

I knew the Queen would be passing by the mess after the ceremony as the theatre was just down the road. I waited outside with my Kodak Instamatic 104. The car carrying the Queen sped past at a zillion miles an hour. I managed to get one picture - it was blurry. I hope the Queen and Prince Philip noticed the nice clean, but bare creeks as they raced past.

I haven't written about any of my stuff-ups lately, maybe you think I'd been a good boy and I hadn't been getting into trouble with my superiors. Well, that's not quite right, I did manage to upset the big cheese, the grand poobah, the commanding officer of the battalion, Johnny Three Fingers. Sum Wun said he got one of his fingers shot off during the Korean War but I didn't get close enough to him to check it out for myself so I dunno if that is true or not.

One morning I was on my way to company HQ. I was following the path that parallels the road. Up ahead, the path I was following turned 90 degrees (1600mls for us Army dudes) to the right. Further up ahead, walking in a bandy legged swagger towards me was Johnny Three Fingers. My mind calculated that I would turn right before I entered his saluting zone based on his current rate of advance. I dunno what the saluting zone actually is; I figured that I didn't have to salute an officer until I could see the whites of his eyes. To complicate matters he was wearing sunglasses.

I had to keep the same walking pace. Well, I wasn't walking really, it was more of a march although not as pronounced as the march that recruits at Kapooka were forced to do. If I increased my tempo it would telegraph to Johnny Three Fingers that I was trying to avoid saluting him.

I turned right.

"I say, soldier," Johnny Three Fingers called out.

Oh, no, I was in trouble. I bet he quickened his stride to trap me into his saluting zone, or maybe his saluting zone is different to mine. Note to self: look up the saluting zone in ROs.

I turned around and faced the CO. I'm not sure how far away he was but I was unable to discern if he had any protruding nasal hairs. This I felt would be an alternative test to seeing the whites of the officer's eyes when the said officer is wearing sunglasses. I must make a note of that, I

thought, and advise the RSM so that ROs can be promulgated to that effect. I can visualise the RSM thanking me now.

I was abruptly brought back to reality when the CO asked, “Don’t you salute an officer?” He was standing at attention now, but his knees did not meet.

Fuck me, I’m outside your saluting zone, Johnny. “Sorry, Sir,” I said and I threw him a boxer. I quickly did an about turn before he asked me my name. I’m pretty sure that if you can’t see the CO’s nasal hairs then he can’t see your name tag. He knew I was coming from A Company lines so maybe I hadn’t heard the last of it.

Chapter 24

The Final Exercise

They have big ants in Queensland. Some are an inch long and they are very aggressive. As you pass them they rotate their bodies so they are ready to pounce. They also have big mosquitoes, big leeches and big spiders in Queensland. Luckily I didn't see any hairy-legged spiders. I'm really scared of them.

The Army issued us some stuff to defend ourselves against these creepy crawlies. It came in two coloured plastic containers: grey and green. The grey container stuff was to deter crawling things from crawling on you and feasting on your body. It was supposed to be super effective against ticks, but super ineffective was more like it. We didn't apply it to our skin but rather we squirted the stuff into the seams of our uniforms. Maybe I'm being picky, but I still managed to disturb a couple of ticks feeding on me. But who knows, without that stuff I may have had 10 ticks feasting on me.

I think they banned the stuff in the green bottle. It was not pleasant to use but it was essential against mosquitoes. As you rubbed it on your flesh, it applied instant warmth to the skin, or maybe it was just burning the layers off your skin! Instead, we smeared it onto our uniforms because it was pretty dangerous stuff. It made the glass in your watch go all funny and if you lay your arm on your groundsheet after having rubbed some of this goo on, it would melt parts of the groundsheet which would then stick to your arm. It was a powerful brew. It was really great on leeches though, they'd go all rubbery-like.

I mentioned it was in a squeeze bottle. By squeezing the bottle and lighting the stream of fluid, you had an instant flamethrower which was great for dealing with ants. The only trouble was more of their mates turned up so you had to move anyway.

I had a full bottle of the green stuff as we flew to Shoalwater Bay, somewhere between Townville and Brisbane, a training area that is still used by the Army today. That was to be our last exercise and most of it is a blur. When you are a dumb grunt, you do the same stuff in the bush all the time. It's called a routine. Is it any wonder then that my brain gets all jumbled up with what happened, where it happened and in what sequence?

Two things stood out in my memory of Shoalwater Bay: the DS and the

enemy. They had completed a tour of duty in Vietnam. They knew their stuff and we were there to learn from them.

I was impressed with Capt. Arsepaper. ("Arsepaper' was his response when a dumb grunt gave a silly answer to one of his questions.) He was very tall and had blonde hair. His lectures were very entertaining. He was a class act. We'd be out in the bush somewhere patrolling away, moving forward slowly, searching our arcs, and then suddenly I'd spot him leaning up against a tree just looking at me. He turned up everywhere.

Killer and I couldn't put it over the other DS either. When they killed Killer off, our manic routine with me haring off into the scrub with the machine gun to distract the DS so he would catch up with me later didn't wash with those guys. They knew all the tricks. Browny got caught out too. He was carrying an M72 rocket launcher sans rocket. He slung it over his shoulder and every time he went to ground the tube would bang him on the head. Whilst going through a creek during an assault on the enemy, he flung it away. At the end of the activity when the DS were debriefing us, the DS sergeant suggested to Browny that he go back and get the M72 he'd thrown away.

Our last big attack was spectacular. There was a creek line and the enemy were dug in with bunkers on the other side. The plan was to sprint towards the enemy while a simulated artillery bombardment was taking place. We would then fire and move through the bunker system and take it out. First up we all nearly got wiped out by the simulators. Apparently the DS were not expecting such a gung-ho start and we were on top of the simulators when they were going off – gee that certainly fired up the adrenalin.

Killer and I got separated and I recall there was just me and Davo, taking it in turns to crawl ahead and engage the enemy. He would cover me when I crawled forward and I would cover him. If you got up and ran, the DS would say you were dead. So we crawled all the way. The dead enemy were strewn all over the place and they had fake plastic wounds. One guy was holding his guts and it looked like all his guts had come out. Another had an eye poking out from his hand on his face. They looked great. I should have taken a picture but there was a battle raging, you understand, and we were in full attack mode.

The DS told Davo he was wounded in the leg. Any self-respecting digger would roll over and take a break from the proceedings, but not Davo. He kept going uphill, crawling and dragging his so-called wounded leg after him. He was still yelling out orders to our section. Go Davo.

But the DS hadn't finished with him. They told him then he was wounded

in the other leg. Davo simply kept crawling and yelling out orders while dragging both legs behind him. What a hero! Those VC had better look out when Davo and 5 section turned up!

2 Platoon. Lookout VC, here we come!

Soon we were on our last leave before deployment. The Army flew us home, but I elected to drive with Ian C so that he could get his car home, seeing as he lived at Rye Park, about an hour's drive from Cootamundra. He owned a Hillman Arrow, a similar car to the Hillman Hunter that won the London to Sydney marathon, but without the heavy modifications of course. We had so much gear in the car that the back was weighed down a bit, something we didn't notice until nightfall when the lights on high beam were only good for spotting possums in the trees.

Heading south for 43 hours was not easy. I vividly recall a comet in the southern sky. I'm sure the headlights beaming up at that angle made it brighter. The night sky was full of stars of course. During one of my night driving stints I thought I noticed something shining up ahead. The road was empty, quite narrow and flat, so I was driving down the centre, but red dirt was drifting in, making it hard to see the edge of the road. I hesitated for a moment and took my foot off the accelerator; then I jammed on the brakes. Standing in the middle of the road was a rather large black and white cow. The white patches were stained red from the red dust. The shining bit was the reflection from its eyes. Ian C was instantly awake as I sailed past the cow just hitting its tail as it wandered off the road. Boy, that was close.

We had a puncture. Ian C stopped at a servo near Sydney but we were unable to get it repaired so we pushed on. Just near Yass, only an hour or so from home we got another puncture. Ian C flagged down a car and got a lift to Yass to get it repaired. I stayed with the car parked on the side of

the road. I was having a snooze when another car pulled up. You won't believe this but the people had recognised the car as they knew Ian C.

In a week or so we were flying to South Vietnam.

Chapter 25

Goodbye Townsville

Lots of things happened in our last week at Townsville.

The girls from the Hong Kong Restaurant wore their uniforms: the gold top, but without the black slacks. We had been urging them to do this for our last night. We had built up a good relationship with the ladies because we were gentlemen; nobody put the hard word on them.

I was getting a haircut in town. The barber asked me the normal questions: what unit I was with, was I a Nasho, how did I find the Army, and so on. I mentioned that I was off to Vietnam in a week's time and he stopped what he was doing. He asked if I was concerned at all and I replied that no, I had been training continuously for about 10 months and that I felt very confident about going to Vietnam. Next minute he went to the back door and called out to his wife. He told her that I was off to Vietnam and she too showed her concern and they both wished me good luck. I was very surprised by their concern and thoughtfulness.

My parents came up to Townsville by train to see me off. They never owned a car, indeed they had never been to Queensland before. I met them at the People's Palace in town, and then my father and I set off to Avis to rent a car.

"Good morning gentlemen, how may I help you?"

"We'd like to rent a car for the weekend, please."

"Certainly, do you have your driver's licence?"

I handed her my licence.

"I'm sorry, sir but we cannot rent you a car, sir. You are under 21 years of age."

My father got a little upset. "We've travelled over 2,000kms to be with my son. He goes to Vietnam in a couple of days. We were looking forward to driving around and seeing Townsville. Why can't you rent us a car?"

"Sir, he is under 21 ..."

"He's bloody old enough to go off to the war but not good enough to rent your precious bloody cars ..."

“Dad, it’s OK,” I interrupted. “We’ll go somewhere else.”

Out on the street my father was still shaking his head. He couldn’t believe what had just happened. We headed down to a used car lot and asked to see the boss.

“Yes, gents?”

“You haven’t got a sale,” my father said. “I was hoping you could help us.” He then went on to explain what happened over at Avis. “Perhaps we could take a car for a test drive over the weekend?”

“Unfortunately the law in Queensland forbids that,” said the used car salesman, “But there’s a guy down the road, Sid’s Renta Trucks and Utes. He may be able to help you.”

So off we went down to Sid’s place to go through the whole routine again.

“Avis wouldn’t rent a car to us because I, as the driver, am under 21,” I told Sid.

“I’ll overlook that,” he said. Things were looking up. “I’ve got a Toyota 4WD out there at the moment. You can take that today, but tomorrow come back and I’ll have a ute ready to swap over.”

Bewdy. Back to the People’s Palace in this bloody great big 4WD, we picked up my mother and started to explore Townsville. First spot we went to was the hill above Townsville to take in the view of the place. Whilst there we noticed a double storey round house, just like the one at Kensington in Sydney. It was some sort of restaurant. We parked the 4WD and headed towards the entrance.

“Sorry, we’re closed,” came a voice as a chap emerged from the doorway. Now I should explain that I have the gift of the gab. I got it from my father who has a way of getting people on side, that’s why he was so upset about the episode at Avis.

“Yeah, hi mate. We’re here seeing off our son who is flying off to Vietnam in a couple of days.”

“Oh, where are you from?”

“Cootamundra, NSW. Where are you from?”

“I’m from Bondi actually ...”

“My eldest son lives in Bondi,” my father interrupted (he’s good at that

and so am I). “He lives on Campbell Parade.”

“Really? Ah, would you people like to come in and have a drink?”

So we went in and soon were up at the bar. The place was empty except for us. “Now what would you like, Coke, Fanta?”

“Coke would do nicely, thanks,” my mother said.

“Er, something a little stronger?” Yes, that was my father.

“Scotch?”

“Bewdy.”

That was a very pleasant moment and the bar owner didn’t seem to be in a hurry. My father took out his wallet and offered to pay but all drinks were on the house. After about 30 minutes we thanked him and moved on.

So where to eat? We ended up at a typical cafe, one I hadn’t been to. We ordered our meals and my father was chatting up the young girl who served us and asked about some extra butter. When we left, he paid the bill at the counter but he also left a few coins on the table for the young girl. We went back there the next day. The young girl was all smiles and brought my father extra butter even though he didn’t ask. My father was quite a charmer.

Unfortunately my parents had missed our march through Townsville’s main street a couple of days before they arrived. We were worried that nobody would turn up and those that did would throw stuff at us. That was at the height of the Moratorium marches, you understand. The Vietnam War was very unpopular and a lot of the demonstrators took it out on the soldiers. As it turned out the march went quite well. The Artillery guys (107 Battery I think) who would be supporting us in Vietnam also joined in. Even though they were down the back, we knew they were there as we could hear their knuckles dragging on the ground.

We were due to fly out at 2am and my parents were catching a train south at 8am. The People’s Palace closes at 10pm, so it looked like they would have to find somewhere else to stay. My father had discovered a pub not far from the People’s Palace. He went there a few times and charmed the publican so much that he offered my parents a room where they could stay at no charge. Can you believe that?

If anyone asked my parents about Townsville they would say what a great place it was and how friendly the people were.

As long as you didn't mention Avis.

Chapter 26

364 and Awakie and Some Other Shit

At about 2am, Alpha Company lifted off in a Qantas jet bound for Saigon. We seemed to be taxiing for a long time. Sum Wun said that the runway at Townsville is just long enough for those jets, 707s, to take off, if they were not heavily loaded. Heavily loaded? We were only allowed two bags each and the total weight could not exceed 50kg. I, like many others, wrote 20kgs on one bag label and 25kgs on the other. I had no idea what they weighed. The old girl was creaking and groaning as it barrelled down the airstrip. The panels above our heads were rattling, the engines were roaring. TAA was never like that, I thought; and then we lifted off. Phew!

They said going to Vietnam would be dangerous.

I dunno if they allowed us to have a beer on the plane. I don't think so. It was late and none of us had had any sleep. The mood in the aircraft was sombre, there was no laughing and joking as everyone tried to get some sleep. We were dressed in our polyester uniforms, which looked a mess after a few hours.

Davo had done well, he threw a BBQ at his place for the section, a sort of final party in Australia. Who knew what was going to happen to us on our tour? One thing was clear, we all wanted to get back in one piece. We got to meet his wife, Carol. She was the brains of the outfit. Davo had a mini keg of beer which I had never seen before. Attached to the keg was a pump, similar to a bicycle pump. You simply pumped air into the keg and the beer flowed. It was XXXX unfortunately.

Two hours later we stopped at Darwin, to refuel I think. I got out of the plane to stretch my legs. Shit it was hot. I was feeling tired and uncomfortable. You know, when you are travelling and you start to fidget a lot in your seat. We lifted off again, headed for Singapore and arrived there about 6am. I had a window seat but it was cloudy with some rain so I didn't get to see much. We got off the plane again and went into the terminal for breakfast. Because Singapore wasn't involved in the war, they said we couldn't wear our uniform, so we each had a civilian shirt to put on. Some blokes had garish Hawaiian style shirts.

We were herded to a dining area with us in our shirts-ridiculous and were given a reasonable feed. I didn't really feel that hungry. Lots of blokes ordered a beer so they could sample the local brew. It was called

Tiger Beer. I had a swig. It tasted like beer. After the meal we wandered about a bit. We had strict instructions not to leave the vicinity. Me and a mate walked towards the terminal entrance to get a glimpse of some of the local cars and stuff, just to see what was there. A big security guard stepped in front of us. What did they think we would do? A runner?

A couple of hours later and we were on the ground at Saigon. I'd tell you the name of the airstrip if I could spell it. We sat in our seats while they served us a meal. It was a typical Ronnie RAAF meal which meant it was pretty good. Outside the aircraft we could see Vietnamese people hanging about, many of the women were in coolie hats. *Hey did someone search these guys? Are they armed? How dangerous are they? Where are our weapons and ammo? We are sitting ducks!*

The doors opened and we stepped out into an oven. The heat hit us like a sledgehammer; we were sweating profusely before we even got to the bottom of the stairs.

"Shit, it's hot!"

Dumb grunts are always able to sum up the obvious succinctly.

We flew onto Nui Dat which would be our home for 364 days and awakie. As soldiers passed us they told us that. "364 days and awakie, eh boys?" They would then burst into laughter.

"What's this 364 days and awakie shit?"

"It's your time left in country. You're going to be here for 365 days, so you count them down."

"So what's awakie then?"

"Awakie is your last day in country. Awakie is when Sum Wun wakes you up and tells you to go home. It's not counted as a day. So you guys don't have 365 days before you head back home, you have 364 and awakie!"

"Oh."

Aha! So Sum Wun was also in Vietnam! I hope he knew more than his cousin back home.

The flight from Tan Son Nhut Airport Saigon, reported to be the busiest in the world at the time, to Nui Dat was by Wallaby Airlines. There were no hosties, no meals and no drinks; just a C123 aircraft (baby Hercules) flown by Ronnie RAAF.

We are herded onto trucks and taken from the airstrip at Nui Dat into the rubber plantation where our accommodation was located. There waiting for us was the Red Rat, our company commander. He had flown over earlier with the Advance Party.

The Red Rat took a packet of cigarettes out of his top left-hand side shirt pocket. He withdrew a cigarette from it, hit it twice against the packet, placed it in his mouth and returned the packet to his left-hand side shirt pocket. He took a Zippo lighter from his left-hand trouser pocket, flicked it open, thumbed the flint wheel and lit his cigarette. He closed the Zippo lighter with the flick of his wrist and placed it back into his left-hand trouser pocket. He took a long drag on the cigarette, removed it from his mouth and exhaled, an action that seemed suspended in time.

He speaketh, "Gentlemen, welcome to the war!" Tom Cruise couldn't have done it any better.

I tuned out after that.

Our accommodation lines were set in the rubber plantation. We were located in platoon groups about 100 metres from each other. That should keep the fights down. Each platoon had three rows of tents, a section to each row, four men to a tent. The tents were old, dark, dank and dusty. They were surrounded by sandbags. They were in disrepair. There was no air conditioning or TV. It was very depressing.

The first order of the day was to get it all shipshape, so to speak. That meant cleaning up the area and winding up the tent flaps to let in more filtered light from underneath the rubber trees. We had beds with inner spring mattresses. We had electricity connected with a 60 watt heater hanging from the centre of the tent. Sum Wun said it was a light, but it didn't give off much light and it was hot to the touch, so I rest my case.

If you have a weak stomach you had better not read what follows.

The ablutions were, well, they were there. If you wanted a piddle there was a pissaphone at the end of the rows of tents. When you had a piddle everyone could see you. You were only allowed three shakes of your dick to loosen the remaining drips. More than three shakes was considered to be a wank. The pissaphone was full of water … or something and there was some engineering feat going on that kept the mosquitoes away.

The toilet was great. It was enclosed in a flyproof structure that wasn't quite flyproof. Inside were six pedestals with no privacy screens. You had to lift the lid and take a seat real quick. If you lifted the lid and lingered a bit, the flies would be attracted to the light and they would fly up to tickle

your arse while you were trying to have a crap. You got used to that. The best thing about those communal toilets was that you could put shit on your mate, figuratively speaking of course, while actually having one.

I did warn you not to read this, but wait, there's more.

There were two problems faced by the intended user. First there was the problem of condensation which made the seat wet; or maybe your mate left his calling card like dogs do to trees. The second was when blokes were finished, they slammed the seat down real hard. That resulted in a rush of air (and flies) up your backside. You got used to that too.

The best time to go was at night when it was dark. The flies were less active then and it also gave you an opportunity to check out the pit's contents before you fed it some more, especially if you had one of them Big Jim torches.

The showers were great too. The water was gravity fed from an overhead tank that some poor bastard had to come around in a water truck and fill up.

"What did you do during the war, daddy?"

"Why, I filled up water tanks for dumb grunts so they could brush their teeth and wash their arses, son. It was dangerous work but somebody had to do it."

I'm nearly finished, honest.

There was a system whereby the water could be heated. It had something to do with diesel fuel being lit and a drip system to keep the fire going and the water hot. In the 12 months we were there, none of us figured out how to get it working. (Dumb grunts.)

Inside were a number of showers and some of them even had those fancy roses that distributed the water just like a proper shower back home.

Oh, I don't have to tell you that there were no privacy screens so we could easily compare each other's muscles.

Chapter 27

Being Edjumicated

Beer was 20 cents a can at our boozer. Two cans per man per day, perhaps.

We were taking a few days to settle in. We cleaned up our lines as best we could and a couple of us went outside the wire to collect some bamboo for the inside wall of the boozer.

Did I say outside the wire? What a strange feeling that was. All the local Vietnamese had been moved out to beyond mortar range - about four kilometres - and the base was surrounded by barbed wire and other wired obstacles, including mines and claymores, to a depth of 100 metres. Moving outside all this protection felt rather odd. I was on high alert just in case Nigel was out there planning to take a pot-shot at us.

We drove out by Land Rover along a dusty road looking for a clump of bamboo and it wasn't long before we found some. While we were hacking away at it, some Yanks came by in an APC. The guy up top, the vehicle commander, held up both arms with his fingers on both hands showing the peace sign (or V for victory). Peace brother. They stopped to have a look at our Land Rover.

"How do you Aussies drive these things?" one of them asked as he simulated changing gears in the driver's seat. "You wanna swap your Jeep for our APC?"

You could imagine the problem if we arrived back at the CQ in an APC.

"Where's my fucking 'Rover, you pricks?"

The Yanks went on their way and we got back to the boozer without being attacked. You could say I survived my first mission. I went two kilometres down the road and returned unscathed.

Nui Dat was a funny place. There was a small hill where the super grunts lived, the SAS. North from the hill was a rather large airstrip running east/west. It catered for winged aircraft such as the Hercules, Caribou and Pilatus Porter. To the east were the rubber trees that housed the infantry battalions. To the south of the hill was a large helicopter pad with the dust-off chopper nearby. Also around that area were the tankies and the artillery guys and a few other hangers-on.

Next door to us were the New Zealanders, two companies of infantry who formed part of our unit. We were called the Anzac Battalion. Our full title was the Second Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment/New Zealand (ANZAC) Battalion or 2RAR/NZ(ANZAC)Bn. for short. It may not mean much to you but for us blokes it was about getting it right. To get it wrong is the same as someone spelling your name wrong. Note how capitals are used for the word Anzac when describing the actual troops.

The first few days involved a lot of introductory training. One of the NCOs had an Armalite, known colloquially as the M16. It is a black lightweight automatic assault rifle capable of spewing out 5.56 rounds at a very fast rate (see Tools of the Trade at the end of the book). It is its high velocity that does the damage. A round can penetrate the flesh of a limb and not do too much damage except for smallish entry and exit wounds. But if that round hits a bone it will shatter, causing severe wounding. It looks like a plastic toy rifle.

The NCO carried out safety precautions on the M16 and said, "This weapon is in the unloaded condition. The chamber is empty, the working parts are forward and there is no magazine on the weapon."

Yep, that seemed to me about as unloaded as you can get. He then attached a magazine containing rounds onto the weapon, grasped it by the barrel and holding the muzzle upright he struck it butt first onto the table in front of him. He then put the weapon to his shoulder, aimed it at the pit behind him and pulled the trigger. The weapon fired!

He went on to explain. "When the weapon is in the unloaded condition, the safety catch cannot be placed on 'safe' like the SLR, for example. Simply placing a magazine containing rounds on the weapon and giving the weapon a jolt is enough to move the working parts to the rear, pick up a round from the magazine and chamber the round. The weapon is now at the instant condition, that is, if the trigger is activated by your finger or caught on a bit of webbing or a stick or something like that, the weapon will fire."

Shit! How dangerous was that?

The M16 was used by the scouts, section commanders and the pogos in platoon headquarters. I hoped they kept an eye on them. I will explain what a pogo is later.

The same NCO, who had our full attention, moved on to a detonator (det). We had to handle dets for the claymore mine. I'll also explain more about them later as well. All you need to know at this stage is that it is an anti-personnel mine that contains explosive and ball bearings. To arm

the mine, a digger has to physically place the det into the mine, then a simple electric charge will set it off. By taking the det out of the mine it is perfectly safe for the digger to carry around in his pack.

The NCO placed the det under a piece of meat about the same size as a man's hand. He set the det off with an electric charge and the piece of meat flew through the air and came down in a mangled mess. That could be a digger's hand if the det went off while he was holding it.

Double shit!

Why weren't we taught stuff like this in Australia?

Later we were taken over to the dust-off helicopter. The dust-off was essentially an ambulance helicopter. It carried no munitions although I suspected the pilots and crew carried personal weapons in case the chopper went down. The dust-off chopper also had a large red cross on a white background located on both sides of the aircraft and maybe underneath, I'm not sure. It was crewed by Yanks.

We piled out of the trucks and climbed all over the dust-off helicopter while a couple of Yanks wearing Raybans stood by looking quite bored.

One of them spoke, his white teeth glowing in the South Vietnam sun, a perfect foil to his dark sunglasses. Excuse me for thinking that these guys were big-noting themselves. The two things I recall from their instructions are that the diameter of the wings was 48 feet, they needed a clearing to be only 50 feet in diameter and they would land the aircraft. And I believed them; we'd all heard stories about how amazing those pilots were. He told us that was preferable to hovering above the canopy winching a wounded digger up to them. They were sitting ducks while hovering and they would rather be on the ground.

The last thing he said to us was, "We take no Kilos!"

"What the fuck is a kilo?" someone whispered.

"Oh, about two pounds," came the response.

"No, fuckhead, he means KIA, killed in action!"

"Oh."

The final bit was a firepower demonstration. This must have taken some organisation. We moved outside the wire. There were APCs guarding us and choppers circling overhead. The battalion was herded together in one group. What a target for the VC!

First up, the APCs showed us their firepower, 30 cal and 50 cal machine guns. We all loved the sound of the 50 cal. Next came the mortars and then the artillery, each showing the various types of ammo which most of us had seen before.

Enter the Centurion tank, the dinosaur of tanks. It rattled forward and parked. The tankies brought our attention to a tree about 800 metres away on a slight hill. The tank let go a heat (high explosive anti-tank) round, shattering our eardrums, and the percussion blocked our ears as well as jettisoning plenty of dust from the tank. It was immensely powerful, but it missed the tree. In fact we could see the trajectory of the round; it went straight through the fork!

The tankies were not happy with all the jeering, so they fired another round and the tree bit the dust. I was surprised how accurate they were for such an old jalopy.

The culmination of the firepower demonstration was the air capability of our supporting aircraft. First up were the Bushranger helicopters. They were normal Huey helicopters fitted out with mini-guns, rockets and twin M60 machine guns on either side. They looked awesome.

But they were not as awesome as the Cobra gunships. They were assault helicopters. They were narrow and the pilots were seated behind one another. They had rockets, mini guns, 40mm grenade discharger, you name it. Even with a full payload on board they were very manoeuvrable and the flying skills of the pilots really impressed us. And they not only looked awesome but they sounded awesome as well.

The last demo showed two jet aircraft dropping their ordnance (see how quickly us dumb grunts pick up the lingo) right on top of that mangled tree 800 metres away. It all happened in a matter of seconds. To make the spectacle more entertaining, loudspeakers were set up so we could hear what they were saying as arrangements were made to drop their bombs.

Boy, what a powerful demonstration of the type of support that was available to us dumb grunts. We became very confident that we would sort those bad guys out. The VC had nothing like it.

Hey, I just had a thought:

They should have invited the VC along. After watching a very powerful display like that, the VC would surrender on the spot and we could go back home. Mission completed.

I'd better tell our CO, Johnny Three Fingers of my great idea. No wait, he might recognise me as the bloke who wouldn't salute him and throw me in the slammer!

Chapter 28

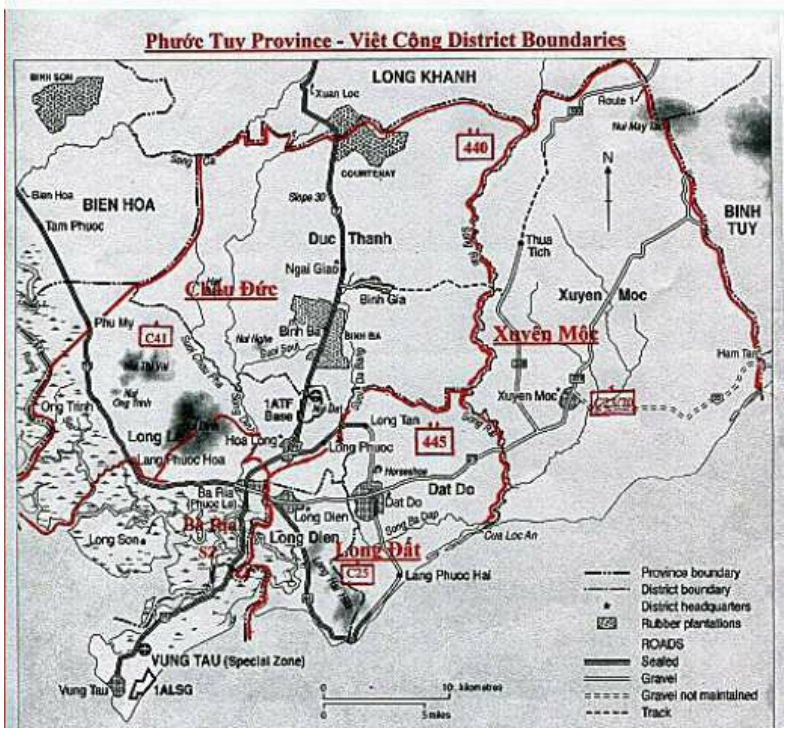
Our First Operation

I'm going to pause for a minute or two and become an armchair general and give youse blokes a bit of background.

Phuoc Tuy Province, or as my mate Smithy calls it, *Fuck You Province*, is located in the south east corner of South Vietnam. To the east is the South China Sea. To the south is the delta region. In the corner between these two is Vung Tau, a rather large provincial city of French influence. It has a harbour and Australia's Logistical Support Group was located there. The Yanks had a large airbase and the South Vietnamese had a military academy. It was also a centre for R&C (rest in country) for Australians, New Zealanders, Americans and VC. Yes, the VC. Saigon is located to the west about a two hour drive away.

The province is mostly flat save for a few scattered mountains. Most of the population is located in the east. As you move inland there are smaller and smaller hamlets surrounded by rice paddies until you meet the jungle. Up the centre of the province is route 2.

The enemy had three units in the province D440 Bn, D445 Bn and D67 NVA Engineer Bn. This map shows how they carved up the province.



The Australian infantry battalions carved up the province as well. 2RAR covered the area west of route 2 which was Chau Duc (C41 Company of D440 Bn) country, and the D67 NVA engineer battalion were quite active as well.

Our first operation was to deploy to the Nui Dinh Mountains. A fair bit of planning went into each operation. The AO (area of operation) had to be carved up for each company. The CO allocated areas to the company commanders and they broke their AOs down for their platoons, depending upon how they wanted to operate.

The most important feature of Australian operations in Vietnam, and one of the main reasons for its success, was the Artillery support. Wherever we went we had Artillery support. As we were nearly always outside of the range of guns from Nui Dat, temporary bases had to be set up and the guns were located closer to our AO. As you can imagine that was a logistical nightmare and involved a lot of personnel who prepared and manned the fire support bases.

Platoons were allocated guns which they had priority over, but other guns might be made available should the need arise. The platoon commander prepared his orders and set out a patrolling program. The FO (Forward Observer), in conjunction with the platoon commander, identified possible targets along the patrol route which the enemy could use for ambushes, forming up places (FUP), that kind of thing, and registered them with the guns that night. The next day, as the platoon moved along its patrolling route, the FO advised the guns of the platoon's progress and the guns were set on each of those identified targets.

So let's say the FO identified an FUP as M115. The guns would be set to drop rounds on that target. Should there be a contact near M115, the FO called, "M115, 3 rounds fire for effect," or something like that, on the radio and bingo, rounds were in the air in seconds. He then adjusted fire by moving the fall of shot left or right; drop or add. Those Artillery guys were lifesavers for the infantry.

Now you know as much as I knew, or maybe that should be as little as I knew.

Enough of this bullshit and let's get back to us dumb grunts. And me. It's all about me.

Davo, our section commander, obtained his orders from Pat, the platoon commander, and relayed them to us. We all whinged and whined as required by tradition. We were heading to the Nui Dinh Mountains. The other rifle companies would deploy by helicopter but we were going to walk in. That's right, our first big operation and no insertion by chopper; we were going to walk across the rice paddies and then up that bloody great mountain. At least we were trained for it, walking up hills that is.

My gear was already packed, all I needed was ammo. That was distributed by Tojo, the platoon sergeant, and given to our section 2IC. For my SLR, I had seven magazines of 20 rounds: one magazine on the weapon and three magazines in each of the front pouches of my webbing. The webbing was a belt with a shoulder harness to spread the weight over my body. On the web belt, I had, in addition to the ammo pouches, two water bottles, a bayonet and a bum pack. In the bum pack I'd have the day's meals, mossie repellent, toilet paper ... umm ... and lotsa other stuff that escapes me now but was very important then.

I carried three hundred rounds for the machine gun: 100 rounds slung over each shoulder (just like those Mexican bandits in cowboy movies); and 100 rounds in my bum pack. I also carried the spare barrel for the machine gun which was in a 'golf bag' slung over my shoulder. The stuff for the gun must be available at any time, so the rounds and the golf bag were slung after I had my pack on.

We carried six day's food and four day's water. In addition to the two water bottles on my webbing, I also had another two on the outside of my pack and a small water bladder that sat inside the pack. The six day's food was made up of two day's Australian and four day's Yank rations. The ration packs were broken down and most of it was thrown out as it was impossible to carry it all. We learnt to swap stuff around and as I am a non-smoker, I swapped the cigarettes in the rations for something else.

A typical day's food for me would have been thus: breakfast - coffee and a tin of noodles (looks like Chinese short soup); lunch – jube juice (I had a bottle of lime cordial concentrate) and a tin of pecan cake roll; and dinner – coffee and a tin of meat based food and a tin of fruit. Spread over the six days would be some dog biscuits, powdered chocolate drink, lollies, cheese and jam and stuff. We also had 2 small tubes of condensed milk for the six days. The Yanks had powdered whitener which tasted like … well, powdered whitener. We had barely enough food to survive on, given the gruelling physical demands on our bodies.

Is it any wonder that we were always hungry and thirsty?

I'd place the food and water bladder in the top half of my pack together

with some toiletries: a razor, toothpaste, a toothbrush; and boot cleaning gear. I also had a couple of smoke grenades and a pair of socks in there as well. In the bottom half I had my sleeping gear: a groundsheet, hoochie and silk inner liner (no sleeping bag as it wasn't cold).

I'd be dressed in the green shirt with sleeves rolled down, green trousers with the pocket on the side and tightening tabs at the waist which were really great. No underwear.

All this gear was extremely heavy. In addition to making you grunt when you moved, your eyes bulged when you initially threw the pack (with all the other stuff) on ya back. The important thing was to ensure you had nothing on you that would snare in the jungle, so there was no gear hanging off anywhere – no grenades, no knives, no nuthin'. The movies where guys have grenades, knives and all sorts of shit hanging off the webbing may make them look tough but it can be very dangerous as it is so easy for stuff to get snagged. Grenades could easily lose their safety pin and 'boom', it's good night.

The final touches were the bush hat, known as the *giggle hat*, and a sweat rag around your neck to help wipe the sweat away from your eyes and to keep those little bits of debris like small twigs and leaves from falling down your neck and getting rubbed into your skin by the gear on your back.

Oh, I mustn't forget the rifle, a 7.62mm SLR with a field dressing strapped around the butt. The SLR was a hard hitter. Get hit by one of those 7.62 rounds and you don't get back up. The weapon was robust if a little heavy and it was perhaps a little too long for jungle work.

Going through the jungle was hard work. You've probably seen the movies with guys bashing at the jungle with machetes. We didn't use them because they were too noisy and after 10 minutes of slashing at the jungle you would be buggered anyway. No, for thick jungle we used secateurs and quietly cut our way through. Well, the first few blokes did and the rest just followed in single file.

For our first operation, I was very apprehensive. Who knew what was going to happen, but everyone put on a brave face. We trucked down to the south of the Nui Dinhs. The company shook out and headed for that big bloody mountain in front of us. It looked quite daunting. All I could think about was the other companies riding to their AOs in choppers. Bastards.

Patrolling across the rice paddies was very difficult. There was a shallow layer of water with a thin layer of mud and then a hard surface

underneath. That meant our boots slipped quite easily in the mud and it was hard to gain traction.

Past the rice paddies and into the foothills we grunted and bent our backs under the weight. And the going only got worse. It was hot and humid as we sweated and grunted more and more on our way into the mountain. Progress was extremely slow and it wasn't long before we had a casualty with heat stroke. The guy was from another platoon and I could tell he was in trouble - he was delirious and I could hear him sobbing; there was no way he could go on. He was choppered out. I've mentioned before how tough it was in our training back in Australia. That was nothing. The mountain was really killing us, but we gritted our teeth and soldiered on.

A few days passed and we hadn't seen any enemy. The Kiwis and the other companies had contacts: they found caves that had been occupied; and they came across bunker systems with caretakers who bugged out when the good guys showed up. The only thing we saw was an old campsite that hadn't been used for some time.

Where were these bastards? Why didn't they come out and fight?

We soldiered on for a few more days.

Nuthin'!

Was there a war going on there or not?

Chapter 29

More of the Same

After a few more days, they pulled us out of the Nui Dinh Mountains. Pulled is probably not the right word - we got a lift back by truck. Still, it was better than walking. Coming home was like returning from a fishing trip where you don't catch any fish. All I can say is that if I thought the training in Australia was tough, then I was mistaken. Our first operation was quite physically demanding, to the point that I wondered how I could last 12 months of that shit.

The wet season was upon us. Cootamundra gets an annual rainfall of 23 inches whereas Fuck You Province gets that amount of rainfall each day. We put in for new hoochies as the ones we had were useless against the monsoonal deluge which revealed holes everywhere and let the rain come on down. The CQ wouldn't be happy.

The rounds for the machine gun, which are held together with a disintegrating belt, were showing signs of rust. ("Disintegrating" referred to the type of belt feeding the ammo into the gun - it was chewed up and spat out the other side, just like the spent cartridge casings.)

As we arrived back at The Dat we got a free can of Cottee's soft drink. Bewdy, we were all dehydrated. I downed mine in two mouthfuls. We called soft drink *Goffas.* I dunno where the name came from but those drinks certainly hit the spot. There's something to be said about quenching your thirst with an ice cold carbonated drink that makes your eyes water when you drink it quickly.

But we had work to do. We packed our gear straight away ready for the next operation in a couple of days' time. We stripped down the weapons and gave them a thorough clean. Then we hit the showers. Mail was available once all the jobs were done so we didn't dilly dally.

That night the cooks put on a nice smorgasbord dinner for us: steak, cold meats, salads and even a few prawns. Bloody fresh food, we'd all be farting next day. About halfway through my steak I was full. I looked around and everyone else seemed to be struggling to eat more than a few morsels as well. It seemed our stomachs had shrunk from the lack of food during the operation. But who cared about the food, they had been stockpiling the beer!

Two cans later, I was fucked. The beer went to my head so I staggered off to bed, looking forward to a night of uninterrupted sleep because there was no picquet. In the bush we were lucky to get six hours sleep. That night I was getting eight!

Our beds were single inner spring mattresses that were full of lumps and smelt of mould and a bit of body odour but they were much softer than sleeping on the ground. They only supplied us with one sheet which went on the mattress so we slept uncovered because it was so hot and humid. Most of us slept naked as we didn't have any underwear or PJs and our modesty was protected somewhat by the mosquito net that covered the whole bed. Normally I lay there for a few minutes trying to get off to sleep because I could hear those bloody mossies patrolling along the side of the net looking for a hole so they could come in and ravage my body. That night I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

An hour later I was up for a piddle. I was up again in another hour for a further piddle. It seemed there was no justice in the world. And then I slept right through 'til six. Up for rollcall and down to breakfast. Even though we were between operations our time was not our own and our whereabouts were tightly controlled.

Breakfast was OK except the bacon didn't have any red meat on it, just a few thin red strips and the rest was white, but it was better than ration pack food. The chocolate milk was great. It was American, like most of our food including powdered eggs. The milk seemed thicker than the stuff I was used to. The label said 'fortified'. I wonder if that was a euphemism for Bromide?

I was quite excited as a few of us at a time were allowed down to the PX. I looked forward to finally getting that SLR camera (single lens reflex, whatever that means, not to be confused with Self-Loading Rifle).

The camera, flash unit and a few rolls of colour slide film practically cleaned me out, money wise. But I was thrilled to finally have a decent camera. I eagerly rushed back to our tent to open the contents of the box. I had no idea what I was buying; I sort of relied upon the bloke at the PX. I said I wanted an SLR camera that was easy to use.

I opened the box. It was a Canon EXEE. Eek! I'd never work out how to use it. I played around with it for a day or two before I even loaded the film. All I had to do was point and shoot, the camera did the rest, I think. I must have read the manual a thousand times and I think I needed to read it some more. It freed up my Instamatic from being my main camera. I might take it on patrol with me.

Davo briefed us on our next operation; it was going to be a bit of a swan. It seemed elections were to be held by the South Vietnamese and our job was to park close to a settled area and be seen hanging about just in case somebody might want to cause trouble. As long as there were no hills to climb I didn't really care. We were all packed ready to go by truck so a couple of us sauntered off to see a movie. That's right, we had a movie theatre! But you had to take your own chair.

We strolled down to the "theatre". There were a few blokes seated in front of a big white board with nothing else except a bit of a stand where the projector went. We set our chairs down and waited for the movie. What a great way to see a movie - in the open air. I dunno what movie was playing but it wasn't about the movie, it was about the experience. Where else could you speak up and give a commentary on the film? Where else could you throw a *goffa* can at the screen if you didn't like the bad guy? And where else could you give encouragement for the leading man to shag the leading lady?

You know the scene, guy meets girl but they have trouble getting together; then finally they kiss and stare into each other's eyes.

"Give her a tonguey!"

"Let's see her tits!"

"Go on give it to her!"

Then when the good guy decides to leave without doing the deed ...

"Boo … hiss!"

"What a pissweak bastard!"

You get the idea. The movies were even better if you've had a couple of beers beforehand.

Next morning we loaded up and headed out on the trucks south down Route 2 and after ten minutes or so we stopped and debussed (is that the right term for getting off a truck?). We patrolled to an old orchard and harboured up. That was to be our base for a couple of days.

Killer and I were set down facing the road. We seemed to be within grenade throwing distance of it and I was a little concerned. How easy would it have been for Nigel to lob a grenade, satchel charge or RPG (rocket propelled grenade) in our direction?

The point was we were supposed to be seen. So we dug a pit just in case,

as did most other blokes. It was quite hot and steamy and we didn't have much shade as the trees were spread out a fair bit. Soon our shirts were off and we were digging in. It was hot thirsty work. Water discipline was not really a problem as we could be resupplied easily from The Dat.

We got a warning order for a night ambush and later Davo gave us the orders. At last light we were to patrol to an ambush site, but there was a problem. As we were near a village, we couldn't just shoot anyone, people would complain. Sorry, I made that up. Civilians were in the area and we couldn't fire unless: we were in danger; we were fired upon or attacked; or they could be easily identified as enemy.

That wasn't going to be much fun. If someone was in our killing ground at some god forsaken hour in the middle of night in the middle of nowhere, were we to shine a torch at them first?

Late afternoon and we were on the move across the paddy fields. We saw a farmer tilling the soil with a water buffalo. To respect his work we changed formation and confined ourselves to the bund around the rice paddy. That was dangerous as they could be booby trapped. We were moving at right angles to the farmer and he was drawing nearer to us. When he was about 50 metres from us he stopped, or rather the water buffalo stopped. It kept raising its head into the air as if it was trying to analyse our scent. Suddenly it bellowed and took off across the paddy field with the Vietnamese farmer hanging onto his tilling equipment for dear life while muttering and complaining in his native tongue. We couldn't help but laugh our heads off. We were supposed to be winning the hearts and minds of those people but I got the feeling we were failing it at that very moment.

But it WAS funny.

We were ambushing the waterways. That was one way to get to the village, so we had it covered. The problem was we were out where there was no vegetation, like shags on a rock. We couldn't use a hoochie so we just lay down in the rain. It was not very pleasant. You can wrap yourself up in the hoochie but you have to breathe. I managed to leave my head exposed but I kept my bush hat covering my face. I managed a few hours' sleep. This is testimony to the fact that infantry soldiers can sleep anywhere.

I awoke to find myself completely wet, actually laying in a puddle of water. The ground was so soft that my body made a depression in the soil which filled with water that was warm, warmed by my body heat. Sum Wun said that if you place the elbow of a sleeping person in warm water they will wet themselves. Well, that is something I may write to

Myth Busters about because as I started to dry out, I noticed that my greens smelled of urine. That meant that either my mates pissed on me during the night or I piddled myself while I was asleep.

"Did any of you bastards piss on me last night?"

You could imagine the responses if I asked that question, so I said nothing and hoped that no one would smell urine on me.

During the day we would head back to the old orchard and flop about doing nothing but catching up on some sleep; oh, and protecting the local population from the marauding enemy.

5 Section: Davo, John S, Woolly, John L, me, Killer and Digger

Near Davo's elbow you can see the tarred road and how close we were to Route 2, and you can see the pit behind Davo. We would fight over it if Nigel threw a grenade at us. This picture is a stark reminder of how skinny we all were; and this was the start of our tour.

I should mention Woolly who is the guy with the M79. He never went anywhere without it. It was a great weapon that could fire rounds just like a shotgun, or it could lob 40mm explosive rounds at the enemy and

do tremendous damage; or it could fire an illumination round to light up the killing ground at night. I dunno what type of round he carried in it. He was the one who talked about filling an SLR with 20 rounds of tracer so the enemy would burn when he shot them. He was probably joking but I wasn't game to ask him what type of round he had in the M79 waiting to unleash upon the enemy.

Killer took advantage of the daily monsoonal downpour. He stripped down, grabbed a bar of soap and stepped into the rain. It was not a pretty sight but it gave us all a laugh as the rain pelted his body. Once lathered up he had to stay being bombarded by the monsoonal onslaught until the soap washed away. He never tried it a second time.

Oh, I nearly forgot to mention our giant scare.

We were in the mud again and just near a pier a couple of hundred yards from Long Cat. We moved into the ambush site at last light. We could see the lights of the village from our ambush position. Killer and I had the machine gun facing along the channel that led to the pier. We could see about 80 to 100 yards up the channel. It was a terrible night with plenty of thunder and lightning only the tropics can supply, and we had no shelter except for wrapping ourselves in our hoochie.

At around 11pm a woman and a couple of kids came to the pier. They were distressed and obviously feared for a family member who had not returned. About 10 minutes later I spotted him. About 80 yards up the channel, each time the lightning flashed, I could see a canoe being pushed by a person in a coolie hat. My heart started racing as Killer and I inched down behind the machine gun. The rules of engagement meant that we could only engage this person if we could identify him as enemy. I told Davo who came up and had a look. I pointed, with a shaking hand, towards the guy as the lightning flashed. As he got closer we could see that the tide was out and he was pushing his canoe along the mud. It was obvious that he was very tired as he slid the canoe forward.

Davo asked me to cover him as he signalled the guy. It was no good Killer covering him because of the nature of fire of the machine gun - if Killer fired at the canoe guy, Davo would get hit as well because the machine gun sprays the bullets out in a cone of fire.

I pulled the SLR into my shoulder and flicked off the safety catch. My finger was still outside the trigger guard as I aimed the SLR at the guy's chest. Davo motioned for the bloke to show his ID. He produced some papers wrapped in a couple of small plastic bags. I was very alert and I thought to myself if he makes any wrong move, I would have no hesitation in shooting him. I've seen films where soldiers freeze at that

very point but I was amazed at how calm I was focussing on my job of protecting Davo.

The guy was OK and his canoe was searched for weapons and ammo and stuff. It was all good. Boy, that was a bit of excitement. I wondered what I'd be like when we struck the bad guys for real?

Unfortunately over the next couple of days no enemy showed up.

The operation was a complete success and we prevented the enemy from disrupting local elections.

Chapter 30

Land Clearing Teams

"When do we get a ride in the choppers like everyone else?"

"Sheesh, are the bastards trying to save money?"

Our next operation took us up to the village of Phu My which is on the road to Saigon. From The Dat we headed south to Baria along Route 2, then turned west and north along Route 15. In essence we were driving around the Nui Dinhs and the Nui Thi Vai Mountains. We debussed from the trucks and patrolled to NDP (Night Defensive Position) *Sharon*. The NDP should not be confused with the FSB (Fire Support Base). The Artillery guns were at FSB *Gail* located further south and we were in range. The NDP was a base for the LCTs (Land Clearing Teams). Some bright spark decided to knock down a few acres of jungle. That would expose the movements of the enemy and in addition, the cleared areas could be accessed by the civilians to grow crops.

Big dozers were used to knock down the jungle. Initially they used chains and dragged them behind two large dozers to pull down the scrub. Apparently that wasn't quite as successful as they had hoped, so they decided to just bulldoze the stuff down. It was a bloody mess I can tell you. Our job was to protect these guys by patrolling the surrounding jungle to make sure Nigel kept his distance. The platoons were rotated between patrolling the jungle and then spending a couple of days defending the NDP where the dozers would park for the night. Centurion tanks and APCs were also located at the NDP along with the pogos at Company HQ – the Red Rat and his mates.

Almost immediately the other platoons (One platoon and Three platoon) had contact with the D67 NVA Engineers, but not us. Maybe the NVA could smell us and took off before we saw them? We soldiered on. Where were those bastards?

One morning we had to move fairly quickly to check out a certain area. The platoon commander decided to move along the edge of the cleared jungle. Now that posed a risk as we could be ambushed. Barry and his 4 section were in the lead, I could tell Browny was up front because of the rate at which we patrolled. When he got a bee in his bonnet he just took off and we struggled to keep up with him. He was the best scout we had, no risk. So we were travelling at a fair clip when the enemy sign came down the line. I should explain. The enemy sign was the 'thumb down' sign. It meant enemy or danger. But what happened first was the scout, in this case Browny, propped or hesitated a bit when he thought he detected something unusual. As he was about to extend his arm backwards to give the 'thumbs down' sign, everyone anticipated that and merged into the scrub. When Browny looked back to give the sign, he couldn't see us as we were all in cover!

The other platoons experienced a number of mine and booby trap incidents, the work of the D67 guys. That's what they did. We were therefore on guard looking for anything unusual. Nigel always marked his mines and booby traps so he knew where they were. It could be a blaze on a tree made by a machete, or some rocks near a track or simply a broken branch. The enemy knew what sign they used but we didn't, so we had to be on the lookout for anything unusual. The pressure was on the lead guy, the scout, to look and blokes like Browny developed a sixth sense.

Browny told me later that he heard something and that made him prop. Barry, the section commander, came forward and together they could hear sound coming from a log just in from the edge of the cleared area. They brought their machine gunner, Kucksy, up to cover them and they

crawled forward. It seemed a guy was calling out from behind a log. They thought about giving him a burst of machine gun fire but then decided to see if he would show himself. They called out to him and the enemy eased himself on to the top of the log. Browny and Barry moved forward covering each other. Browny said the guy was wounded in the leg and the wound was covered in maggots.

“He didn’t look too good,” said Browny.

“That’s probably because he saw you, Browny,” I said, but he didn’t get the joke.

The platoon went into all round defence and the guy was patched up as best we could. He was an officer and had plenty of papers on him, so he was quite a good catch, alive. A chopper came and took him back to The Dat. It seemed a person had to be wounded to get a chopper ride around there.

Our first contact with the enemy and not a shot fired.

How about that?

I think the caption reads: "An Australian nurse in charge of a life for a change. 10-08-70"

Soon it was our turn to defend the NDP. We patrolled back to the NDP to relieve the other platoon. The Red Rat was on hand to greet us. He noticed that some of us needed a shave. Well, for me that wasn’t a problem - bum fluff doesn’t count. The Red Rat wanted the blokes charged for not shaving. Can you believe that? There we were in a war zone and the Red Rat was charging blokes for not shaving! Digger was one of those he charged because his beard was so dark. Maybe I should have confessed to the Red Rat that I hadn’t shaved either. He would

charge me and then I could have shown the charge sheet to the blokes and boasted about how grown up I was and needed to shave every day otherwise the Red Rat would charge me again.

We settled into our position and the next day Digger came over to use my boot polish gear. The Red Rat was hearing the charges out bush. Where is the enemy attack when you need one? Digger was pretty pissed off as were all of us guys in the platoon. I think he was docked a couple of day's pay.

There was a cleared area within the NDP for choppers to land. I was heading across to the other side of the NDP and I decided to walk along the edge of the cleared area. A chopper had just landed and I could see some of the trees being disturbed by the downwash. Then it happened. There was an almighty sound, a thud or a thump, just like a machete hitting a large cardboard box. I saw some light coloured debris get flung through the air. As I moved further forward I could see an APC which had backed up to the chopper. Then the CSM came running past me without even noticing I was there. The CSM was a good guy, his nickname was Mother. I looked back to the chopper and I could see that the pilot was looking down at the ground beside him; there was something in the grass.

I wasn't sure what had happened. I found out later that the driver of the APC had been killed. It seems he backed up to the chopper and crawled out onto the APC. Instead of jumping down onto the ground and going around the side of the APC, for some reason he decided to move along the top of the APC. This brought him very close to the chopper blades. As he got to the end of the APC he jumped. As he did so he straightened up slightly and his head got walloped by the blades. He was dead when he hit the ground.

His name was David Doyle, a Trooper with B Squadron 3 Cav. The date was the 31st July 1970.

David's brother Dermot was a Lance Bombardier serving with 4th Field Regiment in Vietnam at the same time. He escorted his brother's body back to Australia a couple of days later.

In another coincidence, David Doyle trained at Canungra with Woolly, you know, our guy with the M79.

Over the next few days One platoon had a couple of contacts and came across a bunker system. Luckily the caretakers had fled. We were to relieve One platoon and to bring in one of our engineers to work out how to destroy the bunker system. As we patrolled to One platoon's location,

the engineer was travelling directly behind me. He hadn't been in country long and he was rubbing his chest saying he had a bit of heartburn.

We married up with One platoon and the engineer went forward with the boss, Pat, to sort out what was happening. Killer and I took up a firing position that protected our rear. The machine gun was covering back along our route in, just in case Nigel was following us up. It was pretty routine stuff. Killer usually had about 100 rounds attached to the machine gun, but when we stopped like that, he would link up another 100 rounds. Then we would sit and keep a lookout while all the other blokes got on with whatever else they had to do.

It was quiet for about 10 minutes and then something surreal happened. There was an explosion over my right shoulder. I instinctively turned and looked in that direction but I couldn't see anything because of the thick jungle. Then I heard some screams further to my right. It was very strange. The screams seemed to come from a different direction to the explosion which was not loud; and the screams came about a second later.

Those screams were different; they were more of a chorused sigh, very high pitched, and not very loud. At first I thought the guys were joking around, but the flurry of voices calling out told us that something bad had happened.

Killer and I looked at each other. Our instincts told us to rush over and see if we could help. Some blokes were obviously wounded but our training ensured that we stayed where we were and we focused on our job, protecting the platoon in case the enemy followed up our track.

Davo came over. He was very distressed. He told us that five blokes were down. One of them was our platoon commander, Pat, who had a badly damaged leg and it looked like he might lose it. One platoon suffered greatly. Their platoon commander, Bill, had very serious wounds to both his legs and two other members of his platoon were also wounded, one seriously. He then mentioned that the engineer, Peter, was dead. He hardly had a mark on him except where a piece of metal pierced his chest, killing him instantly.

One dead and four others seriously wounded, probably from a claymore mine which spews out hundreds of ball bearings. The Dust-off request was sent. The message came back that the Dust-off was unavailable. I said to Killer that they were probably on another mission. It turned out they were not. They were sitting on the pad at Nui Dat about 15 minutes away. They wouldn't come to our aid because there was no gunship

support to protect the Dust-off helicopter which was not armed.

Shit!

They're kidding, right?

What about that great brief they gave us when we first arrived in country? The Yanks had plenty of bravado then, but in our time of need, they weren't coming. I could understand the reluctance of the crew if we were in direct contact with the enemy - it would be foolish to turn up unarmed with no gunship support - but we were not in contact. Nobody was shooting at us. The enemy were only caretakers and they had pissed off!

The guys from 9 Sqn RAAF showed up in a normal Iroquois helicopter. Backup was a Sioux helicopter, the ones that look like a bubble, and a guy had a rifle pointing out the side. Some backup I thought, but they had come!

The chopper hovered for a long time and winched up all five guys. Killer and I, not really knowing what had happened as we continued in our role of rear protection, could see the guys getting winched up, their blood soaked bandages flapping about in the downwash. Killer and I simply looked at each other and said nothing. Thommo died on the chopper on the way to hospital. The date was 2nd August 1970.

Killed were:

1202729 Private Don Thompson 1 Pl

6709611 Sapper Peter Penneyston 1 Field Sqn RAE

Wounded were:

217710 2Lt Pat Cameron 2 Pl

235355 Lt Bill Rolfe 1 Pl

4720840 Private Kyle Secker 1 Pl

It was soul destroying.

Chapter 31

The New OC

I think it is fair to say that we were stunned to lose both platoon commanders. I don‘t want to lessen the despair we felt for the others that were killed and wounded but losing two platoon commanders had a big impact on Alpha Company. Both Bill and Pat were very well respected by the men. We had endured the tough lead-up training to war together and we found them to be excellent platoon commanders – we would have followed them anywhere. Three months in country and we suffered a big loss and we still had nine months to go.

The Red Rat was in trouble, and why not? I dunno anyone who had a good word to say about him. He was so disliked by the men that someone, who will remain nameless, threw a smoke grenade into his tent at The Dat. It wasn’t anyone from 2 Platoon.

The Red Rat was transferred to Admin Company because he had a bad back which was acting up out bush causing him some personal problems. At about the same time, we also lost Tojo, our platoon sergeant, who got a promotion and was transferred to somewhere else in the Bn. Our new sergeant was Mick. He wasn’t a patch on Tojo but as I’d find out later, he tried very hard and he and I actually became great mates. The final change was our new platoon commander John W. He was a Kiwi and he would be with us temporarily until a replacement was found and then he would move on to a Kiwi platoon. You will recall we were the ANZAC Bn. and we had two companies of Kiwis with us.

A company parade was called and we were to meet the new company commander, or looking at it another way, he was about to meet Alpha company. Now normally we walked around our lines in just shorts and boots because it was so bloody hot. So for the parade we polished our boots, put on our cleanest greens and marched down to the company parade area like real soldiers.

The CSM, Mother, was there and he wanted the platoons in a U shape: 1 Platoon on the side, 2 Platoon in the centre of the ‘U’ and 3 Platoon on the other side. Now soldiers just can’t walk up and form a ‘U’. We don’t know how to do that. So the platoon sergeants had to march us into position and the pressure was on them to call ‘Halt’ at the precise moment. If they called ‘Halt’ too soon we'd be short of our designated spot in the ‘U’ and if they called ‘Halt’ too late, well I don’t have to spell it out for you. It's a bit like an old guy trying to park a caravan in a tight spot at the caravan park

with all the old stagers watching him stuff it up.

“2 Platoon. Halt!”

“2 Platoon three paces and halt. Quick march!”

“2 Platoon will advance. Left turn!”

“2 Platoon. Right Dress!”

“2 Platoon. Eyes front!”

“2 Platoon. Stand at ease. Stand Easy!”

I loved all this stuff, especially when the other sergeants were trying to manoeuvre their platoons in exactly the same way, with exactly the same words of command, at exactly the same time. We waited for the OC.

“Shit, it’s hot.”

My mind wandered back to our first parade in country just a little over three months before when the Red Rat said, “Welcome to the war, men,” and I wondered what the new guy would say to impress us.

Mother took charge of the parade. “Alpha Company. Attention!”

He about turned and stood to attention awaiting the OC. The OC marched up to him, they saluted and exchanged words. The OC was shorter than the CSM, he was slim and he had dark hair. His body language told me he was very confident. They saluted each other again, the OC stayed at attention, the CSM did a right turn and marched off to the side of the parade. The OC stood there at attention. We stood there at attention. He said nothing for a few moments as we waited for his words of wisdom.

“I want the platoon to my front to move to my right. I want the platoon on my right to move to my left. I want the platoon on my left to move to my front. Platoon sergeants, take charge!”

The platoon sergeants came to attention, saluted and all called out “Sir” at the same time. Then the fun began as each sergeant tried to move his platoon to the new location as demanded by the new OC without getting tangled up with the other platoons moving about. As you can imagine it was a ridiculous thing to do, but we did as he asked even if it did take a lot of yelling and swearing under breath. Finally we were in position and standing to attention, our shirts soaked with perspiration.

The OC spoke, “Gentlemen, that’s the first and last time I will

intentionally stuff you around."

I liked the new OC already.

Chapter 32

The Barry and Davo Show

You know the digger's lament, don't you?

"Why the fuck do we get all the shit jobs?"

I've written a fair bit about Davo, but who was that Barry character?

Well, in a sentence, he was everything Davo was not. He was of slight build, (Oops! I nearly said how intelligent he was, but that might upset Davo if he reads this.) He didn't smoke, I never saw him drunk and I don't think he swore all that much either. Like Davo, Barry was on his second tour of Vietnam as an Infantry soldier; he knew his shit. I never saw him panic. Barry was well respected by his blokes in 4 section and by the rest of us. I've seen Barry from time to time over the years. He always has a smile on his face and a positive outlook on life; and he is a humble man. You will never hear him say how he was awarded an MID, or talk about the award for gallantry he received from the South Vietnamese Government.

As usual, I am getting ahead of myself.

There was an initiative to encourage the enemy to surrender. Leaflets were dropped throughout the jungle advising the enemy to give themselves up, saying they would be well looked after. There was even a safe conduct pass that was yellow in colour and should the VC hold this up and surrender they would be well cared for.

We of course knew all about this program but I dunno how successful it was. It was called the Chieu Hoi Program (pronounced chew hoy) and Two platoon was asked to escort a guy who had surrendered under this program back to his mates in the jungle so we could kill them, or something like that.

The enemy camp was out near the Nui Dinhs, so off we went to sort those guys out. With us was the Tracker Team from Support Coy. The Tracker Teams used Labrador dogs to follow up the enemy, either by their scent or by following blood trails. I knew all about these teams. As a matter of fact I tried to get into the Tracker Team and I enquired about them when I first went to Townsville with 2RAR. I was told that because I was a Nasho, I had no chance. You can imagine my surprise when I spoke to the dog handler about it and he said he was a Nasho.

Bastards!

Lemme set the scene for you. While the rest of Alpha Coy was back at The Dat getting on the piss each night, we were battling our way through the jungle with its heat and humidity, mosquitoes, ants and leeches, with this kid who looked about 12 years of age. They gave him a pack, one of the old pattern 37 canvas ones and while it looked tiny on our backs when we used them in Australia, somehow it looked just right on him since he was lucky to be 5 feet tall.

We didn't have an interpreter. They either cost too much money or they were too scared to come out with us or maybe Two Platoon had a reputation for being a bunch of animals. I looked around at the blokes, yep, most of them were bloody ugly, but animals? I dunno. We hadn't fired a shot in anger even. We'd captured an enemy officer who supplied plenty of intelligence; and we didn't shave in the bush unless the Red Rat was around.

"Which direction did you come from?"

"Where is your camp?"

"Take us to your leader."

"You're an ugly cunt, aren't you?"

Nigel nodded in response to each question with a smile on his face then he waved his arm and motioned in a certain direction. We took that to mean his mates and their camp were thataway, towards the Nui Dinhs, so off we went. Anyway it was hard for him to speak as his mouth was full of food. Every few hundred yards, Davo would look back at Nigel who

would nod, wave his hand and reach for another can of food.

I had an uneasy feeling about him. I mean, if the roles were reversed, would I lead the enemy back to an Australian camp in the bush. Well, I let my mind wander ... maybe if the Red Rat was there ...

Halfway through the second day we were all getting a little bit tense. Not because we sensed the enemy about, but rather what in the hell was this Nigel guy up to apart from eating? We were all reaching the same conclusion: it was a waste of time.

That's when the Barry and Davo show started.

Davo started to get a little bit short with this guy, you know, raising his voice, waving his arms about and getting so worked up that he was dribbling spit from his mouth. Nigel was nonplussed. He opened another can of food - it looked like Ham and Lima Beans - and started shovelling it into his mouth.

Davo had enough. "I'm sick of this shit," he said in a spray of spittle. He picked up his rifle and made a bee line for Nigel who was watching him over the rim of the Ham and Lima Beans can that was nearing empty. "This bastard is dickin' us around, he's never going to take us to the enemy camp. I'm going to shoot the little prick!"

Enter Barry from stage right. "No. Davo, don't. Don't do it!"

"You prick, where is the camp?" asked Davo who was now only a couple of feet from Nigel with his M16 pointing towards him, his finger outside of the trigger guard. Davo was shaking the rifle and trying to look menacing. Nigel dropped the can of Ham and Lima Beans. I could see it was empty. By now a few of us were watching the spectacle, trying not to laugh. What would Nigel do next?

"I reckon he'll have a tin of fruit," said Woolly, a man of wit who had the M79 resting across his lap. The M79? Davo should shove that in his face.

Before Nigel had a chance to check his pack, Davo lunged. Barry ran between them, grasped Davo's rifle, raising it away from Nigel's face.

"Davo! Leave him alone, mate!" said Barry.

Davo gave Barry a wink, "I'm going to shoot this bastard if he doesn't tell us which way the camp is!" as he struggled in Barry's grasp.

Barry moved Davo back and sat him down near his pack. He turned around, walked over to Nigel, squatted down in front of him and said in a

nice low, friendly voice, “Davo’s as mad as a cut snake, mate, you’d better cooperate with us or who knows what he’s likely to do. You don’t need to upset him anymore. Now which way is it to the camp?” Barry gestured with open arms and suggested a possible way to go by pointing one way and then another.

Nigel, who hadn’t eaten anything for maybe two minutes, pointed in the direction we had been travelling while saying something in Vietnamese.

“He says you’re a cunt, Davo,” said Woolly, interpreting what Nigel said.

Into the third day we went.

To go on seemed futile and besides the tracker dog could only stay in the field for so long.

We went back to The Dat.

I dunno what happened to Nigel, maybe he runs a restaurant in Saigon now.

Chapter 33

LCTs and my near death experience

“Shit, it’s wet!”

The rainy season had really settled in and Alpha company was moving on a rotational basis between the jungle, the mountains and the swamps. At last our movement was by chopper. What amazing machines those Huey choppers were. I could say they were pretty slick but you wouldn’t understand the extremely witty use of the word ‘slick’ I just used. But never mind, I loved riding in the choppers.

I know a little bit about Hueys. They had a pilot and navigator, or is it captain and vice-captain, who sat up front and were protected by so much armour shielding it was hard to actually see them. Then there were the two gunners, one on either side. They had twin M60s to play with and one of them got to play with the winch, if need be.

To celebrate I had a new pack. It was the same as the old one, only different. The straps had more padding, the pack now had a strong backing plate and it had side pockets so I could carry more shit. The backing plates were very important because when loading cans of food into the top of the old pack, sometimes the cans would dig into my back and as the contents decreased, the top of the pack would start to collapse somewhat. The backing plate stopped that.

We flew out to ‘The Mango’ in a heavy tight formation. The clouds were really low and visibility was not good. The Mango was the term used to describe the area where the Land Clearing Teams (LCTs) were knocking down the jungle so those D67 NVA Engineer bastards who had been responsible for giving us a few headaches with mines and booby traps would be denied access to the populated areas along Route 15, the road to Saigon.

We rotated with the other companies from 2RAR - we flew in, they flew out; and then, along with the APCs and Centurion tanks, we set about protecting the LCTs. It was great inside that mini-camp. The dozers would create a wall of earth which would protect us from small arms fire and Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs). We would be allocated an area to set up camp and ran a roster to man the machine guns in case Nigel decided to pop in for a visit. We would also conduct patrols ahead of the cleared areas to ensure Nigel didn’t leave any presents for the dozers that would go ‘boom'!

We used our mattress covers to make stretchers to sleep on by placing two long thin poles (branches) inside the mattress cover and jammed them up against a tree, or tied two small branches together forming an 'X' and sat the poles on the lower part of the 'X'; then we could pull our hoochie edges down below the level of the mattress cover to keep the monsoon rain out and sleep DRY!

We would make tables and chairs out of sticks and vines just like the VC did. Why, it was just like home. In addition we had plenty of food. Our rations weren't increased but the Tankies often left their rejects sitting at the back of their APCs. Because they had no trouble carrying whatever food they liked, there were some good pickings to be had by us skinny starving Infanteers. I guess they took pity on us always asking if they had any spare food.

As an aside, whenever we got a lift with those blokes, their food was better secured than their ammo!

Luxury accommodation in 'The Mango'

Out in the jungle it was wet. Sometimes we would dig a pit for the machine gun and it would quickly fill with water. Often we would be wading in waist deep water for a couple of hours at a time, but at least it was warm. The leeches loved it too, they were everywhere. Sum Wun (he'd been a bit quiet recently) said that leeches like to crawl up the eye

of ya dick. Clearly he had never encountered those leeches which were as thick as your finger. There was no way one of them could crawl up the eye of my dick without me knowing it!

As we paused in our patrolling, I would often watch the insect life and I could see the leeches heading towards me. If I stepped over them they would turn and follow me. Imagine how dangerous they'd be if they had eyes. I would put some of that mossie repellent from the green bottle - the one that tore your skin off - onto the tops of my boots but they still got on, and feasted on, the lower part of my legs. I searched for them regularly, but often I wouldn't notice them until they had gorged themselves on my blood, become bloated and fell into the inside of my trousers that were bloused over my boots. I'd curse, pull them off if need be and throw them at Woolly, the M79 guy who would turn them inside out using a stick and then flamethrow them to death by squeezing the mossie repellent bottle and lighting the spray. Cue laughter, "He, he, he. Take that, you blood sucking bastards!"

The new boss, John W worked us very similarly to Pat as he too ensured we did things right. He was big on us wearing our hats, as many of the guys took them off when they became sweaty, which was most of the time. I was nearly charged for sleeping on picquet. There's an old saying: fix the problems in training otherwise you will repeat them in war. We had been sprung sleeping on picquet during Corps training where three of us in one pit were found asleep.

Well, I'd better explain.

We were patrolling fairly long and hard with little food and the continual wet weather was wearing us down. One morning as I was getting ready to patrol for the day, I reached into the side pocket on my pack to get my toothbrush and toothpaste. I kept them there in a small plastic bag. I also had some other stuff in the pocket including a smoke grenade. I would check my pack each morning because the ants often made a nest in my gear overnight, but this time I reached in without checking and felt something sharp against my thumb. I thought it was the pin on the smoke grenade. When we stored them in our gear we bent the end of the pin over so that it couldn't fall out and set the smoke grenade off in the pack. So I pushed it aside and went to grab the bag containing my teeth cleaning gear and that's when he struck!

I felt a searing pain in my left thumb. Now I've been stung by ants, bees and wasps; this was ten times worse. As I grabbed my thumb with my right hand, I looked into the pocket of my pack and could see a large black scorpion retreating further into the pocket, his stinging tail still protruding well above his head.

Shit!

I instantly recalled a movie I had seen where a bloke was in the desert. He was dying of thirst and he had collapsed onto the ground. A scorpion crawled up his trousers. In the next scene two guys were looking down at him. One said, "By the look on his face, I'd say he died in agony!"

Died in agony? I was in agony, my thumb was throbbing and the stinging pain was unbearable. The Doc came over as Woolly leapt on the chance to play 'get evens' with another insect. There wasn't much Doc could do for me. No ice, no magic potion, no nuthin'. We rubbed a bit of toothpaste on it. Meanwhile I forgot about Woolly and the get-even plan and I totally missed the death of the scorpion; or maybe he let him go!

A radio call confirmed that it wouldn't kill me but that I should rest for the day. Rest for the day? That's it? Doc had a bag of stuff and he produced some pills from it. "Take these Knackers, they'll make you feel better." Then I sat around for the rest of the day feeling sorry for myself while the other blokes went on small recce patrols. Later in the evening Doc gave me some more pills.

It rained most of the night and Killer and I hoochied up right behind the machine gun. The blokes on picquet therefore were just at our feet. Just before first light, I stirred as I heard someone approaching. It was John W. I sat up. No one was at the machine gun! He came up to me and asked, "Who's on picquet?"

My mind raced, something had gone wrong, someone had stuffed up and remembering what happened back at Corps training, one in, all in, I replied, "I am."

"Can you see down along that way?" John W asked, as he pointed to our front.

"No."

"Wake the rest of the section up, the platoon sergeant will be down to see you at stand-down."

I dunno why I said 'No'. Maybe I wasn't properly awake. Anyway it was still dark, so maybe I was answering truthfully because of the lack of light.

The platoon commander went back to platoon headquarters and I overheard Mick, the platoon sergeant, say, "Charge the bastard!"

He never did. Apparently Doc came to my defence. He advised Mick that

the pills I had taken could make me drowsy, and the platoon commander's words, "Yes, he was there," meant I was there behind the machine gun so I was indeed on gun picquet.

I never did tell Mick I just woke up.

Someone in 5 Section owes me a big favour. If only I knew who, but I never brought it up. But I will next time I see the boys. Someone owes me a beer!

Chapter 34

Moon Arrives

John W, the Kiwi Lt, was with us temporarily until our new platoon commander arrived. I was sad to see him go. In the month that he was with us, he fitted in very well and he commanded the platoon under what must have been very difficult circumstances for him. He replaced a very popular man and to make matters worse, the platoon sergeant was also new, so he had very little to go on and he did a marvellous job.

Moon arrived on 1 Sep 1970. There were no speeches, no fanfare, Moon simply arrived. He came from a posting in New Guinea and he could speak fluent Pidgin English.

Whereas the previous platoon commanders had a traditional Army leadership style, Moon was different. The Army manual tells a new commander to impose himself on the men, to do something bold and impressive. Moon did not big-note himself - he was a very humble, unassuming man - and he commanded the platoon through the section commanders, working very closely with them.

It didn't take long for him to gain the respect of the men, but I had a suspicion a larrikin was lurking somewhere under that humble persona.

Moon changed the way we operated. Whereas before we would search most of our AO (Area of Operations) by patrolling all over it looking for the enemy, Moon would look at the map and highlight the natural features such as streams and high ground (I was nearly going to say hills) and concentrate on those. The platoon would set off about 8am, patrol for a couple of hours and prop. Half the platoon would then go on a recce, checking for enemy signs and return; then the other half would check out another area. This way we covered more ground by actually patrolling less. The objective was to find something to ambush each night: maybe a track, a stream (where we could resupply water); or better still a track and a stream. By 4pm we were in a harbour and maybe we could get lucky.

And lucky we were ...

One of the sections came across an old track which didn’t appear to have any recent use. That would be our night location. As we were moving into

an ambush/harbour site, the platoon propped. The enemy sign, the hand held in the thumbs down position, came down the line. 6 section had spotted something.

Suddenly one shot rang out and a machine gun opened up. We all ran forward and closed up at the rear - our contact drill just like we had rehearsed many times. Killer and I were facing to the rear, my heart was racing at full warp speed; my breathing was so rapid I had to open my mouth to get more oxygen in. No sooner had the shooting started than it was over. Then there was silence. I could hear the voices from the section as they moved forward and swept the area.

All clear.

Moon placed us in a harbour. One VC was dead. He had an AK-47, a pack and some documents. His body was dragged in off the track.

Wally from Tasmania was the number two on the gun for 6 section and he filled me in on what happened. They saw the guy coming down the track, he wasn't just walking, he was stepping left and right across the track as he moved towards them. Maybe he was trying to hide his footprints. They decided that Wally should fire first because a burst from the machine gun, with its cone of fire, might miss him. Wally hit him right in the chest and dropped him instantly. Glenn, the machine gunner from Victoria, opened up just in case there were more enemy and covered the whole area with suppressing fire.

It was all over in a matter of seconds.

Details of the contact were radioed to Alpha Company HQ and soon a Sioux chopper arrived and hovered above us as a bag was lowered down on a rope. I got the call to go to platoon HQ. Mick handed me a Polaroid camera and said, "Knackers, we need you to take some pictures."

Well how about that? I was considered the camera guru of the platoon and I couldn't even understand my own Canon SLR, let alone work out a Polaroid. It was the same type of camera that Rick used back in Townsville to take pictures of the sheila with the big tits at the swimming pool. You can see how valuable that sort of training was.

Mick read out the instructions: "Take one profile shot and one full face frontal."

I looked at the camera, it was a bellows type. I pulled it out and the sights opened up at the same time. No viewfinder, just a simple black bit of metal with a hole in it and an inch away an open frame.

I looked down at the dead guy. The only other dead person I'd seen was a guy in a coffin when I was a kid, and then I only got close enough to see his nose protruding above the white stuff on the side of the coffin. I was too scared to go any closer. Yet here I was in a war zone with a camera I had no idea how to operate, trying to take pictures of a VC who had just been hit with a round from an SLR.

He was of slight build, as all Vietnamese seemed to be, and he was about my age. His shirt was pulled up to his neck and his arms were stretched up beside his head; this was a result of being dragged in off the track by his legs. I could see his chest where the bullet entered his body. It was a simple mark about the diameter of a pencil and a little bit of blood had trickled out only an inch or two. It was located just below his rib cage in the centre of his chest. Wally said the impact blew him from one side of the track to the other.

I was amazed by my reaction at seeing this poor bastard lying there. I felt nothing.

I pulled his right arm back down to get a clear profile shot of his head. I pulled on the shirt fabric which was damp and greasy, moved his arm in an arc and placed it beside his trunk. I wiped the greasy stuff from my hand onto my trousers, lay down and aimed the camera at his face. I was aware that the light was poor so I held the camera as steady as I could by locking my elbows and controlling my breathing which had settled down somewhat since the beginning of the contact. I framed up the shot to include his head profile and clicked the shutter in a nice easy smooth motion, just like pulling the trigger on a rifle.

I stood up and pulled the film out of the camera by pulling on the tab marked 'pull.' I handed it to Mick who placed the film into a metal clip and tucked it under his armpit as per the instructions. Well the instructions said nothing about armpits. It said to place the film in a warm spot for 30 seconds and peel back the cover. I was just glad not to be handling the metal clip after it had been under Mick's armpit.

Mick peeled back the film and we all gathered in for a closer look. He held up the black and white picture. It was perfectly exposed, a great picture, nice and sharp, taken in poor light because I used the marksmanship principles. Yep, it was a perfect picture alright, save for one important thing – I had taken a picture of his ear!

Shit! We only had 9 photos left in the camera. The pressure was on to deliver.

Well, I lay down again, a bit further back this time and got the profile

shot. I then moved above the body and after a couple more attempts we got what was required – a full face frontal shot and a profile shot, but I used the whole film in the process. I didn't know before, but those pictures would be used to identify the VC.

With my first photographic assignment completed, I couldn't resist having a look at the AK-47. It used the same calibre ammunition as our SLR which was 7.62. It was lighter and shorter; a simple rugged design. It was clean, but a few years old, as was the ammunition because the brass was a dull colour. It had a 30 round magazine and was capable of full automatic fire, something our SLRs were not unless the innards were strengthened and changed which turned it into an AR. It was better suited to the jungle than our SLR.

The chopper came back, dropped a rope down through the jungle canopy to retrieve the bag containing the camera and the VC's stuff and reported back to GHQ wherever that was. The platoon was in high spirits, having finally engaged with the enemy with something to show for it, because most of the time the enemy bugged out and dragged their dead and wounded with them.

As the boys were digging a grave for the VC, I went back to Killer and told him everything I had just experienced, emphasising my skill in taking such great photos in the trying conditions. Killer just smiled and nodded - he already knew I was a bullshit artist. Anyway I imagined what happened back at GHQ when they inspected the camera and photos. "What the fuck were those blokes doing to use the whole film?"

It didn't matter. I was 2 platoon's camera guru.

Chapter 35

Nigel and the Nui Thi Vai

The Nui Thi Vai are a mountain range just north of the Nui Dinh Mountains. The intelligent blokes in the battalion (OK, they were called Int. Section) told us that they had some sensors in the ground and not only had they been detecting movement but they had also been hearing voices.

Off we trotted to sort it out. With us was Nigel. I've used the term Nigel before to describe the enemy because if I started to tell you about the National Liberation Front, the Main Force of the People's Liberation Armed Forces, the People's Army of Vietnam, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong, I'd get you terribly confused. I used the term 'Nigel' to describe the enemy and there we had a bloke called Nigel. Geddit?

Nigel was a Nigel in a previous life. He gave himself up under the Chieu Hoi Program and he was helping the government forces of South Vietnam to rid Phuoc Tuy Province of the dreaded VC. You may note a little bit of sarcasm on my part. Indeed I don't think any of us trusted Nigel. Each of the platoons was trying one of those guys out. The idea was they would help us to identify mine signs and maybe we could use them as interpreters if we captured any VC. Great idea, except Nigel didn't speak English. Well not to us anyway.

We didn't like patrolling in the mountains. Apart from the normal heat, humidity and mossies, we encountered steep hills and thick jungle. The only way to move was to use the tracks that ran along the ridgelines. The danger was that there would be booby traps and we could be ambushed quite easily. Being in single file strung out along a track made it almost impossible to return effective fire and regain the initiative if we were ambushed.

We found the two bunkers where the sensors were hidden, but no enemy. Indeed no recent sign of enemy. So we checked the area out as best we could. Just down from the bunkers, Smithy, our forward scout, noticed a few pieces of stick that didn't look quite right. Could they be a mine sign? Nigel was called forward. As he passed by me I could see he was sweating profusely like the rest of us and he was mumbling something in Vietnamese under his breath. Clearly he didn't want to be there and I was just glad he wasn't carrying a weapon.

Smithy pointed out the sticks just off the side of the track. Nigel responded by yabbering something in Vietnamese, waving his arms about, moving up to the sticks and knocking them down. We got the message that it wasn't a VC mine sign. I think what he was saying was, "You Aussies are all fucking idiots!"

Moon reported in that there was nothing there and we were tasked to check out another location. The boys back at The Dat were still hearing voices. I imagined that the VC discovered this sensor thingo and it was probably at the pub in the village of Phu My where everyone was having a great time laughing at us trying to catch the bad guys. But orders are orders so off we went again, this time down the mountain into open grassland.

I'd now like to report that the Int guys literally had us running 'round in circles, and here is the proof:

I must thank Peter Watson for saving these maps. Peter was in 6 Section

Down the mountainside we went and fanned out into more open vegetation to arrive at the grid reference they'd given Moon. We propped and harboured up. I could see Moon on the radio advising them that there was no one there. I don't think they believed us. They said they could hear laughter being picked up by the sensor. Looking around we could see for a few hundred yards as the vegetation was not thick as shown by the white area on the map. Not only couldn't we see anyone, we couldn't hear anyone laughing either. Maybe we should have checked the pub out at Phu My. It was only about four kilometres away. I'm sure the Int guys would have shouted us if we found their sensors for them.

Off to the North East was a knoll, a small hill. Moon sent 5 Section to check it out. It doesn't look much on the map but it was quite steep. I was getting really pissed off at this stage. I was sick of being stuffed around by some guys back at The Dat. I bet they had an air conditioned office and they had green ice cream for dessert after lunch. Bastards! As we got near the top of the knoll, Davo motioned me to stop where I was. That would not normally have been a problem. But I was fucked from going up and down mountains for the last couple of days on a wild goose chase and I wasn't stopping until I got to the top of that fucking hill. I told Davo in no uncertain terms, "I'm not fucking stopping anywhere until I reach the top of this fucking hill!"

I pushed on passed him and stumbled up to the top of the hill like a mad man; then I went back down to where he originally wanted me to go. I took my pack off, threw it on the ground and sat down with my head in my hands, fuming like a little spoilt kid.

Davo chuckled. "Gee, you're a cranky cunt, Knackers!"

While we were getting our breath back on that knoll, a strange thing happened. Three helicopters flew over with things dangling under them. They were normal Huey choppers however we couldn't make out what they were carrying. One of them dropped a red smoke grenade which landed not far from us and there were a couple of bursts of automatic small arms fire. They didn't see us and the fire was not directed at us. It was just … strange.

A call was put in to The Dat. Apparently they were Yanks and the things dangling underneath the choppers were in fact men. Gee, what cowboys! Red smoke is only used to identify enemy targets. If they had fired at us, I'm sure we would have returned fire. Now that would have been really interesting.

We married up with the rest of the platoon back down in the open area and later another patrol went out to have a look around. While they were out, there was an enormous monsoonal downpour and we were in fairly open country without the protection of the jungle canopy. I was on the gun so I had to maintain a lookout. Wrapping myself up in a hoochie was out of the question. I put on my '*smocks tropical*' but found it was useless in dealing with the deluge. I knew I would end up soaked to the bone, but as soon as the rain stops you dry out pretty quickly except for your crotch. So the most important thing if I wanted to have a comfortable night's sleep sans damp crotch was to keep it dry. I sat there with my knees up to my chin and clasped my arms around my legs, just like I did as a kid at the pool when bombing my mates. When the storm passed I threw off the '*smocks tropical*' and voila, my crotch was still dry, even

though I was wet everywhere else. Not bad for a dumb grunt eh?

The patrol came back and entered our harbour through our gun position. They didn't see any sign of the enemy and they were all completely soaked. They slept wet, I slept dry. Suck it up 6 section.

Moon decided we would camp there for the night. It was the first time we had harboured up in open type country so we were spread out a lot more than if we were in the jungle. Nigel was a bit concerned. He slept in a hammock and there were only a few scattered trees about to tie it up. It was nearly dark when he started banging a log on a tree. Thump, thump, thump. The sound carried a long way in open country. He bashed on the tree a couple more times until Mick managed to stop him. What was that all about?

We stood-to and watched as day turned into night; then we stood-down and the blokes took over picquet on Killer's gun. I was asleep within seconds as it had been a tough and unfruitful couple of days. In the middle of the night I heard a buzzing sound followed by an explosion. Both Killer and I sat up and looked at each other.

"What the fuck was that?"

"It sounded like an explosion!"

"Oh."

We lay back down. You're not going to believe this but we were so tired we tried to go back to sleep. Then we got shaken awake to man the machine gun so the blokes on picquet could go back to their pits. There was a fair bit of activity going on. It seems an RPG round came in and exploded nearby. No one was injured but it meant that the enemy were out there and maybe they were lining up to have a crack at us.

We stood-to for some time. Nothing happened. It would have been unwise to send a patrol out in the dark, so that had to wait until first light. We eventually stood-down. Killer and I went back to sleep quite easily. You'd think that an RPG attack would keep us awake but we were so stuffed we went off to sleep almost immediately. Next morning the clearing patrols went out but found nothing.

It just goes to show that those bastards were out there.

Nigel didn't go on any future patrols with us.

Oh, and there wasn't a pub at Phu My either.

Chapter 36

Vung Tau - Rest in Country and the Bar Girls!

Vung Tau is a rather large town on the coast about an hour's truck ride south from Nui Dat on the south eastern end of the delta. We'd been down there a couple of times, staying at the Peter Badcoe Club, a facility built especially as a place for Australian soldiers to have down time as a get-away from it all; except you could only go there as a whole rifle company with all your dickhead mates. I mean, I'd lived with those guys 24/7 for 12 months, so a break from them would've been nice. The Badcoe Club was located right on the beach inside the 1st Australian Logistical Support Group base camp. It had a swimming pool and if you timed it right you might be entertained by a visiting concert group.

Smithy and me at Peter Badcoe Club

Once there, we stored our weapons, threw off the green Army suit and changed into civilian clothes ready to hit the town in pursuit of leisure; the Army made us do this you understand – but only for 36 hours. We were paid in MPC (Military Payment Certificate) which looked like monopoly money. MPCs were used to keep the American greenback out of the black market. We changed our MPCs into the local currency called Dong, $20 at the base, and the rest in town where the going rate was much better. But don't tell anyone I said that.

We travelled into town by Lambrettas, essentially a motor scooter with

seats in the back. It cost $1 to go to town. There we checked out the local culture: the museum, the library, the hill covered in Buddha statues, including the reclining Buddha, the temple; that kinda thing. Oh, who am I kidding? We hit the town to get to the bars and the bargirls.

They gave us the lectures: don't walk around by yourself; don't stray from the centre of town; don't visit establishments unless they display the sign (some approval sign where a government hack declares the girls clean and free from disease by medical inspection every month); don't get pissed; don't smoke mary jane; don't carry a weapon; don't carry pornographic material; respect the local population. We were there at the invitation of the South Vietnamese Government and what you did reflected not only on the Army but also on Australia, blah, blah, blah ...

An hour after being in town a guy from 1 Platoon smoked weed, bought naked girl playing cards; and to complete the trifecta he bought a flick knife. Trivial shit for a combat soldier in a war zone taking some time off. If he was a psycho the Army would not have trained him to kill and given him the weapons and authority to do so. But now armed with all these contraband items he was suddenly a danger to society. He got nabbed by the MPs. They carted him off as his mates booed and jeered. This is why they took our rifles off us, so we had nothing to fight the pogo MPs with. Bastards. It must have been a slow day for them, you know - no shooting, stabbings, punch-ups or anything like that going on. Maybe we should've started a riot so they earnt their punch-up money.

An hour later he was back in town. The MPs had taken him back to the Peter Badcoe Club and told him not to be a naughty boy. What else could they do, lock him up? Who then would close with the enemy and engage in actual combat? Not the fucking pogo MPs, that's for sure.

We hit the strip where the bars were located. They were similar to the milk bars back home except they served beer and girls. There was a counter on the side or at the rear, and down the other side were a number of cubicles and in the centre, normal tables and chairs. Just getting inside one of those bars was a hassle. The girls, all with heavy makeup, short dresses and small tits, waited at the doorway to coax you into their place. As you stepped in, they grabbed you on the genitals, the bum and everywhere else as they giggled and bounced up and down while you danced around them trying to get inside. Well that's if you were a new guy. An experienced guy pushed the girls aside saying, "Di di mau" (fuck off), and barged straight through.

Those girls were the day shift, only a limited number were for hire. Their job was to extract money from you by getting you to buy them 'Saigon Tea'. I dunno what that drink was, and I dunno any bloke who has had a

taste, but I suspect it was just jube juice, or flavoured water to you civilians.

When you sat down, the girls were all over you, stroking your leg and holding your hand; they made you feel like a man women can't resist. Now Australian soldiers are tight-arses, we just wanted a couple of beers and a bit of a giggle without any hassle. Budweiser Beer cost $1 in the bars, which was five times the cost of real beer (Australian beer) back at Nui Dat. None of us drank spirits - well not if we were paying for them as they were too expensive. And if we wanted a girl we'd rather wait until after dark when the price was cheaper.

They wrote a song about us. *Uc dai loi* is the Vietnamese term for Australian.

Uc-dai-loi, Cheap Charlie,

He no buy me Saigon tea.

Saigon tea costs many many Pee.

Uc-dai-loi he Cheap Charlie.

We had strategies to upset the girls so they'd leave us alone, but we didn't use them straight away of course - we wanted them to cuddle and smooch us a bit first. A good strategy that upset them was to hold hands and use sign language to let them know that me and my mate were an item. That really upset them, they shouted and gesticulated and off they'd go in a huff.

The girls had some sort of code. If you had visited a bar before and spent the night with one of them, then you were expected to come back to the same girl. If you wanted another girl they labelled you a 'butterfly.' So this was strategy number two: when you came into a bar and a couple of your mates were there having a beer surrounded by girls, you'd take one of the girls by the hand and say, "You butterfly, you belong to me, what you doing with him!" The girls would get a look of horror on their face, and then you pretended to start a fight with your mate. The girls soon scattered leaving us all to have a rollicking good laugh.

Well it was time to take a break from the girls and have a look around town and check back later when the night shift arrived. There was plenty to do. We could get a haircut and ahem ... get some other services while we waited. Indeed just by walking down the street, people came up to you and asked, "You want girl?"

There was a large Yank airbase in Vung Tau and about eight of us decided to check it out. At the entrance, a large double-gate size opening, was a big black MP. He was a very imposing figure indeed. We walked in through the open gate, line abreast, real confident-like.

The black man-mountain spoke, “Hey, you guys.”

We stopped and turned to face him, with pained expressions on our faces.

“You guys know you are supposed to go through that building over there.” The big guy pointed to a building where people are lining up to go in; it was probably a security check thing.

Smithy rolled his eyes and said in the broadest Australian accent, “Gees, youse blokes, come on, let’s do what this big bloke fucking well says.”

“Don’t worry about it this time guys, but next time, you go through the goddamn building.”

We scarpered off before he had us arrested and searched or something and we entered what seemed to be a wonderland. What a place. Choppers, about a metre off the ground, taxied towards runways; there were traffic lights to direct them. Jets were taking off and landing almost continuously, the noise was deafening. As we moved deeper into the base we passed by some maintenance hangers and I could see Cobra gunships being stripped down for service and repair. I paused to take a photo. One of the guys working on the Cobra gunship stopped, looked up at me and yelled out to his mate, “Hey, Chuck, move back a little, the man’s trying to take a photo!”

Doncha just love the Yanks?

We found the soldiers club and invited ourselves in. The sign out the front said ‘*Zulu Club*’. It was just like a nightclub inside. We settled down at a table and started to make real gooses of ourselves by being brash and noisy, real over the top ocker stuff to entertain the Yanks with.

They were funny guys. They didn’t seem to form large groups like we did. They were in groups of two or three, indeed many were by themselves. I went to the bar for a shout and this guy introduced himself and wanted to buy me a drink.

“What'll you have, a whisky?”

“Ah, geez, fair crack of the whip, mate. If I don’t get these beers back to those pack of drongos over there, they’ll fucking well lynch me, no risk,

mate!"

Then I overheard another Yank coming out of the toilet. He said, "Don't go in there, there's FOUR of them in there!"

A few blokes come up to say hello, but most stayed back a little just watching our antics as we hammed it up. It's a wonder they didn't toss us out. There was a stage at the front and a guy stepped up to the microphone, "Gentlemen welcome to the *Zulu Club*. We hope you are enjoying your stay with us. There will be some live music in about an hour so we hope you can stay for the show. Now, are there any men here from the 173rd Airborne Brigade?"

Some hands must have been raised.

"Go to the bar, gentlemen and collect your champagne."

"What about the Australians?"

Gee, that sounded like Smithy who was talking to some black guys way down the back.

"Are there any gentlemen here from the 1St Cavalry Division? Aha, welcome. Your champagne is waiting at the bar?"

"What about the Australians?"

"Are there any gentlemen here from Austewalia?"

"YEEAAAHHH!!!! WOOHOO!!! BEWDY BOTTLA BONZA!!"

"Gentlemen, your champagne is waiting at the bar with our compliments."

Smithy raced to the bar and came back with a magnum of champagne. We didn't need glasses. With much noise and mayhem we passed the bottle around and demolished that magnum real quick.

Well, having been paid homage by the Yanks, we settled down and started to act normally. They were friendly types but so gullible. They wanted to know all about Australia so we told them about the drop bears and kangawallafoxes and stuff.

Soon the entertainment started. The live music was very good, much better than the Shades and Silhouettes, two top bands that played at the dances at Cootamundra and surrounding towns. They were Philippinos. The band sounded great and the singer had a really good voice and sang

all the songs we knew; but we were looking at the backup singers and dribbling at the mouth.

“Shit what time is it?” It was 8.30pm. Curfew was at 10.00pm. A couple of us left the others and legged it down to the bars. We managed to find another couple of blokes from the platoon at about 9 pm. Many of them were paired up with the girls already, you know, the ones you can dance with back at their place.

Now here is the important bit which required a sober mind and a steady nerve. The deal to get a girl must be done by 9.30pm so that you were off the streets by curfew. If you made your move too early you might pay too much. As 9.30 approached, the prices started to fall. If you left your run too late, all the good lookin’ girls were taken, leaving you only the, ah, energetic ones to choose from. It became a strategy play as to when to make your move. It was even harder when you are full of American beer, champagne and a couple of whiskeys.

You didn’t have to do anything, you just sat there and the girls came to you.

“My name Lin. You like me?”

Lin looked OK so I nodded.

She came close to me and kissed me on the neck, you know, that thing that women do to men. It sent tingles down my body. I paid Lin in Vietnamese money, about $17. I would have paid more if she had asked. She checked in with Mamasan and I headed off into the night with her. I was fuelled up and I had plenty of bravado. I wasn't concerned about my safety as I was a rough tough jungle fighter, ten feet tall and bulletproof. We walked to Lin’s place with not much time to spare. Curfew meant that no one was to be on the streets.

Lin had a small flat she shared with a friend but the friend was not there. Lin tried to pronounce my name. She couldn’t say ‘Ian.’ I told her my last name, Cavanough, and she managed to say “Kevin”. I thought, *that's close enough,* then, *maybe I should get her to try and pronounce ‘Knackers.’*

“Kevin, take shirt off, come to me.” Lin moved to the rear of the flat, she turned and looked at me with that ‘come and take me' look. As I moved forward she handed me a bucket and with a curling finger she took me over to a well. “Water.”

As I stood beside the well with the bucket in my hand and my mouth open, she moved over to two rather large vats. “You fill, please?”

They had no bloody plumbing so I had to draw bloody water from their bloody well, carry it to some bloody large vats and bloody well fill them up. It took me a few trips as I was spilling a fair bit. I think the floor was a little uneven.

Pretty soon the water job was done and I had a sweat up.

“Kevin wash now.”

Lin took me to the bathroom. There were no taps or shower rose, just a vat of water and a ladle. As I was washing myself I could see her checking my body out.

“Sores on legs,” she said, pointing to my lower legs.

“Leeches,” I told her and then made my fingers move like a leech. She had a closer look, nodded and then smiled. I had passed the medical.

“Teeth,” she said, pointing to a toothbrush.

The toothbrush was old and the bristles were all splayed outwards. I wondered how many mouths it had given service to. I pretended to brush but I used my finger to smear toothpaste on my teeth. She didn’t notice my subterfuge.

Finally we were off to bed. Living rough in the jungle, patrolling to the point of exhaustion, being sleep deprived with very little food and limited water for a few weeks at a time makes one yearn for the softer feminine things in life; a need to be pampered. Lin pampered me. I drifted off to sleep with a bloody great big smile on my face.

Suddenly she was waking me. “Police, quick.”

She took me to the back door and pushed me out. She placed her finger up to her lips signalling me to keep quiet, then she closed the door. I looked around, it was very dark but I could see that I was in a small triangular yard. The back fence was small and I could see other buildings on the other side. I couldn't see any gate though.

So there I was, somewhere in Vung Tau, in the middle of the night, locked out of a building. Lucky I wasn't naked. I had my underdaks on, but that was it. I could hear voices at the front of the flat. Apparently the White Mice (Police) gave the girls a hard time. They wanted money or favours.

Well, what was I going to do? If I was stranded there I guess I’d have to wait until morning and make it back to town in my underdaks. The only thing that worried me was the ribbing I would get from my mates. Gee,

no wonder they call us dumb grunts.

A few minutes later the door opened and Lin grabbed me and pulled me inside. She was very apologetic and took my hand.

“Kevin like Lin?”

“Lin is shit hot!”

“Lin shit hot?” She repeated what I said and she seemed very pleased with my assessment of her, so she took me back into her bedroom and pampered me some more.

I was in man heaven.

Chapter 37

Nui Dat – "The Dat"

Nui Dat is where the fighting arms of the Australian Army were located to carry out combat duties in Phuoc Tuy Province.

At first glance, there's not much to see, just a lot of rubber trees and a couple of airstrips. As a dumb grunt I have a bit of problem describing the details in this picture because I never did get a royal tour of the area as we were confined to the rubber plantation in the left foreground. If we were deployed on operations by truck, we used the road at centre left that skirted the smaller airstrip which was used for helicopters, then out onto Route 2. Later as we deployed by helicopter, we used the cleared area, centre left of the picture and not the main helicopter pad.

The rubber plantation on the right also housed infantry soldiers. When we first arrived in country there were three infantry battalions at The Dat but during our tour, that reduced to two which meant we were out more and working much harder covering the Province.

The airstrip on the right catered for fixed wing aircraft. I was at the airstrip one day and watched in awe as a Hercules Transport came in. Those things just smacked onto the tarmac and braked heavily so that they would not overrun the short runway. I guess that's why there were runoff areas at both ends.

Near those buildings between the rubber and airstrip is where the entertainers performed if we were lucky enough to catch a show. In 12 months we only caught one show of Australian performers because our platoon spent 318 days on operations. Not a bad effort.

The show featured Lorrae Desmond and the Taylor Sisters. They were fantastic. Lorrae wore some sensational outfits and she was very popular with the troops.

This is how we lived among the rubber trees

As you can see the tents were old. We did refurbish many of the sandbags and later we used a corrugated iron wall filled with dirt in place of them.

The place looked like this during the dry season when the rubber trees lost their leaves.

At The Dat we had plenty of work to do. Plenty of area maintenance of course, but we also had to man the machine guns to protect the base. In addition we had to conduct clearing patrols outside the base. These were called TAOR patrols (Tactical Area Of Responsibility). Our section, 5 section, used to volunteer for these patrols to get away from all the bullshit. After being out in the deep dark jungle, the TAOR patrols were seen as 'pretty soft'. We would patrol our allotted area, find a bloody great big patch of spiky bamboo by 4 pm and settle in for a quiet night with plenty of sleep. We didn't miss The Dat as the beer supply ran out fairly quickly.

I was lucky enough to be at The Dat when I turned 21. We were on duty manning one of their machine gun posts at Bravo Company while they were out bush. We used Killer's machine gun on a facility that included a nice timber deck where a tripod was permanently mounted. Digger was in charge and he arranged for me to be on picquet at midnight. At the stroke of midnight I rang up Bravo Company HQ.

A concerned voice came on the other end, "B Company CP?"

"Hi, mate, it's 12:01 and I'm ringing up to tell you I just turned 21."

"Let me be the first to wish you a happy 21st birthday, mate."

"Thanks, mate."

We didn't really celebrate birthdays as we had nothing to celebrate with.

Alpha Company was outa beer so Smithy took me down to Charlie Company where one of his mates filled me up with the required amount of amber fluid. So I managed to get pissed on my 21st, just like every other normal person. The difference was for me it only took three cans!

I was a whiz at the phones. One evening I dropped into Alpha Company HQ to find out what movie was playing at the open air theatre. The guy on duty was busting for a crap and he asked me if I wouldn't mind holding the fort for him. He gave me a quick soldier's five on how the switchboard worked. If a call came in, all I had to do was pick up the phone and plug the cable in where the call was originating from. If they wanted the *offer's mess* for example, all I had to do was pull the matching cable from the bottom part of the console and plug it into the *offer's mess* extension and turn the handle a couple of times. I wasn't allowed to listen in, and I had to check periodically if the caller was still on line by asking, "CP, working?"

It was a bloody cinch, and besides, as it was just after mealtime, nobody would ring anyway. Yeah right. Well, as it happened, someone fell over and damaged his face. The phone rang.

"A Company CP, Pte Cavanough speaking, sir."

"Yeah, mate, can you plug us through to the Doc?"

"Yes, sir."

Now what did that guy tell me to do with the cables? I pulled my plug out of the extension that was calling and picked up the cable from the Doc and placed that in the extension. Then I realised I wasn't plugged in, so I plugged myself somewhere and turned the handle a couple of times to ring the Doc. This meant that as I turned the handle to ring the extension I was actually ringing back to the original caller.

"The fuckwit is ringing us, he's stuffed it up."

I paused for a moment, and then I asked "CP, working?"

"Ah, no, mate, he hasn't answered yet."

"I'll give him another burl, sir."

I then reversed the cables back to the way they should have been and rang the Doc. Thankfully he answered. A few moments later Mother was in the doorway.

"Pte Knackers, what are you doing here?"

No doubt someone complained about the idiot up at A Company CP.

“Just minding things because the sig needed to have a crap, sir. Is there a problem?”

“No, just Pte So-and-so split his head open. The Doc has it in hand now.”

Mother could have chewed me out but he never did. He was a good guy and he was well respected by the troops. The sig returned and I told him what had happened. He seemed more concerned than I was. “Gee, those flies are bad at the shitter, they should do something about it.”

Sum Wun said that if you throw a smoke grenade down the pit it kills the flies. The only danger is the smoke grenade may generate a spark and with all that methane gas in the shit pit it could blow the shithouse to kingdom come.

“I gotta go, mate.”

“Yeah, thanks very much, mate.”

They never did ask me back.

The next day Kucksy from 4 section had had enough of the flies too. “I’m gonna get those little bastards, ey?”

I don’t have to tell you that Kucksy was from Queensland. Off he strode to the shitter with a smoke grenade in his hand. We were all watching from a safe distance, behind a sandbag wall of course. If the shitter went up we didn’t want to miss it.

Kucksy disappeared inside the shitter, moments later he flung the flyscreen door open and sprinted over to us. He was highly excited and puffing heavily.

We waited, eyes just inches above the sandbag wall, waiting for the shitter to start its climb into outer space.

Nothing happened.

“Hey, Kucksy, didja pull the pin on the grenade?”

“Get fucked, youse cunts.”

And then it happened. Purple smoke started billowing from the shitter. We all started laughing. The shitter wasn’t going to explode after all; and then we realised that the smoke might well attract some attention from

the NCOs, so we went and hid in our tents.

The flies were back tickling our bums the very next day.

Chapter 38

How I Became a Pogo

Five months into our tour and we were advised to start thinking about when to take R&R. R&R was a five day trip to many leading cities in the world and free travel was provided. The rest (read girls and grog) must be paid for by the soldiers. Not a bad lurk in my opinion but taking leave after only five months into the tour seemed a bit early to me, I'd rather have the holiday somewhere past the halfway point so that the downhill run to home would seem much shorter. But I was easily persuaded, so off I went to Bangkok.

The break would do me good as I was getting a little bit sick of being Killer's number two on the machine gun. We had been together 24/7 for about a year and we were having a few minor tiffs. Nothing important, mind you, no real arguments, just sometimes we got on each other's nerves and I was tired of being essentially a pack mule for the machine gun ammo and maintenance items.

Our platoon radio operator, Dennis, was a Nasho whose time was nearly up so he was about to head home and get out of the Army. I asked him about his job and what it was like. He told me how good being the platoon sig was. You got to know everything that was happening as you were with Moon most of the time and you were there when decisions were being made. I expressed my apprehension about the weight of the gear the sig carried and whether I could do the job effectively. Let's face it, my track record was not exactly exemplary; I had made plenty of mistakes in my short Army career.

He reassured me that the sig probably carried less weight than the number two on the machine gun. The sig carried a lighter weapon, the M16; and there was no need to worry about the radio traffic as it was the boss's radio and the sig simply carried it for him. When the OC rang up you simply handed the radio to him or took messages. Dennis encouraged me to have a go.

I returned from R&R and as I hopped off the truck just outside A Company orderly room, the clerk was there to greet me. I was wearing sunglasses with my polyester uniform, a big no no in those days. The clerk approached me and removed my sunglasses. "Shit, you had better leave them on, Knackers. Your eyes look so bloodshot you'd bleed to death without them! You'd better get your gear together the company is about to head out."

“No way, mate, I’m just back from R&R. I get a week back at The Dat before going out on operations.” I left him and headed up towards 2 platoon’s lines.

Mother spotted me. “Get you gear on, Pte Knackers. We move out in ten.”

“Sir, I get a week off back here, don’t I?”

“Ten minutes.”

“Shit!”

I ran up and grabbed my gear which was packed ready to go - all I had to do was fill the water bottles. Mick B, a Pom, had taken over my job as Killer’s number two on the machine gun while I was on R&R. He seemed to be doing OK.

Mick came up to me. ”So you want to be the sig, Knackers?”

What could I say? I didn’t think I would be good enough but I remembered things that my father used to tell me. One was: “Son, never be frightened to take on a job because you think you may not be able to do it, otherwise they will give it to some other dickhead.” So I sorta nodded and it looked like I was going to be the next platoon sig. Dennis saw me later and gave me the nod. In the meantime I would be a rifleman in Davo’s section.

Off we headed out into the Province. We met up with some APCs and clambered on board. I dunno where we were heading but up front were Centurion tanks. The pace was slow, but at least we were safe. No one in their right mind would mess with us. We didn’t travel inside the APCs as they were designed for us to do, but rather we threw our packs inside and sat on ammo boxes on top and hung on for dear life. The tankies liked that too - if we were on top of the APC we weren’t inside pinching all their rations.

We were having a few problems with the APCs throwing their tracks. They’d have to reverse up so they would slide back home. The cause was the difference between the Centurion and APC wheelbases. They weren’t the same and as the APCs followed in the tank tracks it was quite easy for a track to start sliding off.

We pulled up somewhere late afternoon and went into a harbour. Because I had just returned from R&R, they let me off gun picquet for the night. I lay my head down at sunset and didn’t stir until morning, some 14 hours later. I was so tired, I musta had a great time in Bangkok. I’d tell

you all about it but it'd only make you envious.

It was quite different being a rifleman, going on water parties, carrying different gear such as claymore mines and C4 explosive and being a general dogsbody. It was about this time that Davo and Leon were transferred to 3 platoon and Barry, the section commander of 4 section went to 1 platoon. Roy took over 5 section. He was about our age and he was a very keen and switched-on soldier. As he came from 6 section it was up to me to set him straight about how 5 section worked. He would later make RSM, no doubt due in part to my efforts.

Me sorting out Roy. You can tell that Roy was really scared.

I worked closely with Roy up in the Nui Dinh Mountains as a forward scout. I lasted three days.

The vegetation was very thick and the ridgelines were quite steep; there was no option but to patrol along the tracks. That made us very vulnerable to mines, booby traps and ambushes. Roy asked me to be forward scout. I dunno where Smithy was - he was 5 section's scout and was very good at it.

What does it take to be a good scout? Well first up, I'd say that the men have to trust you and be able to rely on you as their early warning system.

The Army textbooks say there should be two forward scouts who operate as a team, one protecting the other. As we were never at full

strength, this was not an option for us. Davo used to be right behind the forward scout; then a gap back to Killer and his number two. Being out front like that meant you were very exposed to any threat. So thanks very much, Roy - I was it, the bloody forward scout.

One of the bonuses of being a scout is that you had an M16 and you don't carry any extra gear, but that doesn't compensate for the effort you have to put in.

Patrolling along the narrow mountain tracks as the platoon's forward scout was, well, 'exhilarating' is not quite the right word, nor does 'exciting' seem to cover it, and 'shit scared' has been done to death. Just imagine that someone is out there with a rifle trained on you waiting for you to come closer so he can zap you; or maybe he has left a nice booby trap for you to step on. Every part of your being is on high alert, you are tingling all over as you scan the area to your front.

Are there any signs of fresh diggings on the track?

Are the leaves on the track disturbed at all? That might mean a mine is just under the surface. Are there any other mine signs? Is that stick leaning up against a tree a possible mine sign? Why are those three rocks together on the side of the track?

Is there something unusual with the vegetation that doesn't quite fit?

That place up ahead would make a very good ambush site. Are Nigel and his mates hiding there waiting for you?

Your body is really alive to any nuances around you. The pressure makes you sweat profusely as the continual alertness takes its toll on you.

Etched into my brain was a vision of the track which I could see up for 50 metres to where the vegetation was really closing in. That would make a great ambush site. I thought I heard something behind me but as I was concentrating intently trying to 'look through' the jungle left and right off the track, I failed to look behind me. I moved into the dark shadows caused by the thick jungle, glancing back at Roy. He wasn't there! I fucking had a huge dummy spit! Roy was about 50 metres back! I raced back down the track to where he was and bashed him over the head repeatedly with my bush hat.

Apparently he had signalled me to stop and he didn't check me. I can't believe how upset I was.

Later when thinking about it, I was upset because I realised how

vulnerable and exposed I was without any back-up. Anyway both Roy and I agreed that I wasn't really scout material – I couldn't handle the pressure. Three days was my limit - I couldn't handle more than that. I had tons of respect for Smithy and Browny who were our top forward scouts for the whole tour of 12 months!

Well, how was I going to go with the radio? I seemed to stuff up a fair bit so I really had to smarten myself up. I knew only what most soldiers knew about the radio, you know, how to set it up, how to change frequencies, how to send and receive a simple message. How hard could it be? To train a proper signaller took months. I did a three day course – that seemed about right in a war, I guess.

Every hour when patrolling we sent our location back to company headquarters in a coded message called a locstat. Moon gave the signal for the platoon to come to a short halt, the section commanders came into platoon headquarters where Moon and they argued about where we were. He gave me the grid, I coded it up and sent it to company HQ.

For three days it was going swimmingly, then on the fourth day I couldn't raise Company HQ. That went on for about four hours. We would halt, work out where we were and I'd attempt to get them on the radio. All to no avail. Then, in the distance I heard the CO's chopper. Each type of chopper makes a distinctive sound and the CO travelled in a small Sioux helicopter.

I switched over to the Battalion's frequency, listened for a while and then I called Johnny: "Hey Johnny, this is the guy who didn't salute you back in Townsville. Can you take our locstat?"

Well, maybe I should have said that, but this is how it really went: "Niner, this is one two, over."

Silence.

"Niner, niner, this is one two, over."

He came on net, I could hear his carrier wave and the chit, chit, chit of the helicopter in the background, "Ah, one two, this is Niner, wait out." His voice sounded as if he was a little puzzled, and no wonder - I can't just call up on any net unless I am authorised, or I must be authenticated first – there's a procedure to follow; but I didn't have comms with OA, the net controller, so I just winged it, and besides I didn't really know those rules at the time.

It wasn't long before the CO came back to me. "One two, this is Niner,

over?"

I took a deep breath and said, "Niner, this is one two. I have been unable to raise callsign one for many hours, can you relay our locstat to callsign one?"

There was a pause for a few moments.

"This is Niner, send, over."

"This is one two. Locstat. I set alpha tango, grid Juliet Xray Foxtrot, Bravo Golf Yankee. Moving north. Over."

"This is Niner, I read back. Locstat callsign one two. I set alpha tango, grid Juliet Xray Foxtrot, Bravo Golf Yankee. Moving north. Over."

"This is one two. That's correct, thank you. I will now go back to my means. Out."

For the next few moments before I switched back to Alpha company internal frequency I could hear him trying to raise callsign one on his net. If you can, unscramble all this.

What impressed me about the CO is his radio procedure was spot on.

Moon couldn't believe what I just did, calling the CO up for a locstat. It went around the battalion like wildfire too, especially amongst all the properly trained signallers who spent months training on this stuff and there I was, a three day wonder hassling the CO for a bloody locstat. But I believe I did the right thing, we established comms after four hours of nothing and advised them of our location. It was unorthodox and against ratel (radio/telephone) rules and procedure, but none the less, it was a successful way of getting a message through to Alpha company HQ advising them of our location. No doubt about it.

The incident actually gave me a lot of confidence to do a good job as platoon sig, a bloody pogo!

I should explain what a pogo (sometimes referred to as 'a poge') actually is. A pogo is someone who goes off to war and isn't involved in actual combat with the enemy and is under no direct threat. You may be surprised to know that this is about 80% of the Army personnel during war, such is the strength of the administrative tail to keep soldiers adequately maintained in the battlefield. For every combat soldier there are at least another five soldiers supporting him in the rear.

So this is the story regarding pogos in Vietnam. The pogos were based at

Vung Tau while the fighting arms were at Nui Dat. But there were pogos at Nui Dat who stayed back at the base and didn't engage with the enemy – cooks, drivers, clerks – that kinda thing; it was the infantry battalions that did the fighting. But there were pogos in the infantry battalions who stayed back at HQ and looked after pay and administration and left the rifle companies to fight the war. Then there were pogos in the rifle companies who looked after admin, like the Q and clerical stuff, leaving the platoons to fight the war.

Now this is the important bit. The fighting in the platoons was done by the sections. As platoon sig I was in platoon HQ, I was then 25 yards further from the battle than I was as a number two on the machine gun. So I was a pogo in platoon HQ.

Geddit?

"Yep, Knackers is a fucking pogo now."

Chapter 39

We Work with the SAS

Gee, I was really enjoying being the platoon sig as I was privy to all the things that were going on around us instead of being isolated behind the machine gun in 5 section. I think too that Killer and I had reached an understanding. He often nodded to me and I think we both realised that we were a pretty good team for that 12 months.

I carried completely different stuff. I didn't have much webbing, all I had was a web belt with only two ammo pouches on them and nothing else; I didn't need the shoulder straps. That was because I carried an M16 and whereas magazines were normally carried in the ammo pouches, I carried them in a sling over my shoulder. The rounds for the SLR came in slings and the rounds were stored in clips in little pouches. Those pouches took an M16 magazine, so I filled them up with M16 magazines, tied a knot in the SLR ammo sling and carried it over my shoulder.

We also had a second radio in the platoon. When Mal, another bloody West Australian, joined us I found out that he was a fully trained sig and I was worried of course that Moon might want Mal as the platoon sig. This did not eventuate however and I can't recall if there was any issue between Mal and me - certainly when we met again years later there was no issue between us. Mal was in 5 section and Moon decided that he should carry a second radio for the platoon.

That had a couple of advantages.

First the platoon had a means of communicating when we split into half platoon patrols. It seemed that our continual presence with the Land Clearing Teams, in the Nui Dinh Mountains and the area generally west of Route 2 was so successful that the enemy engineer company headquarters moved away and we were only detecting small groups. Johnny Three Fingers, our CO, knew what he was doing after all. Our platoon strength was about 23 soldiers, a lot less than the 30 it should have been and it was a logical step to have half platoon patrols. The extra radio allowed for efficient marry-up procedures.

The other advantage of a second radio was it made my job easy each night. At midnight I had to change frequencies. I thought this was a bit silly because irrespective of operational conditions I had to change frequencies at midnight – not good when we were in ambush close to a track where the enemy might stroll along at any time and there I was

click, click, clicking, changing frequencies and doing radio checks. I often had to use a torch because even though the radio had a light, it was difficult to read the dials. I had to be careful to conceal most of the beam in my hand. But in full daylight I could set the second radio on the new frequency and wait for the frequency change from company HQ at midnight and then pick up the other handset for a radio check on the new frequency. Simple.

Mal carried his radio in the top of his pack. He had no need to carry all the radio CES and codes and stuff. My radio was mounted on a frame. Attached to the radio was a CES pack which contained a 10 foot aerial and another component aerial I could throw up into a tree when comms were really bad. I also carried the radio codes in the CES pack. Those codes gave me all the radio frequencies and the days they were to be used. They were also used to encode and decode messages because no vital information was ever sent in clear over the radio. The exception was when we were in contact with the enemy, then everything was in clear. I would transfer the codes for use each day to my ammo pouches along with a notebook to record all messages received and sent.

(I held onto this book for many years but somewhere along the way it went missing. I wish I still had it now because a lot of our activities, such as visiting the same places a few times over, are all jumbled up in my head and I'm struggling to get the proper sequence of events right.)

In the lower part of the frame was a large pack that tied at the top. I used it to store my rations and sleeping gear as well as a spare battery for the radio. Water bottles were attached to the outside; in all, it wasn't too bad to lug around. The pack easily detached from the frame so I could quickly release it. That was necessary when the platoon split into two using our current location as a base.

If a small recce party went out and wanted to travel light they would come in and get my M16 and ammo sling and leave me their SLR and ammo. If they took my radio, they just had the radio and frame, and Mal would leave his radio with me. It seemed to work out pretty well. The guys on small recce patrols could move swiftly and silently through the scrub because they were not carrying any weight.

Here I am with Roy showing him how to use a radio properly, he was always seeking my advice.

The CO had the rifle companies rotating through the Nui Dinhs to deny the enemy access. Indeed there was very little happening. For a week or so we worked with the SAS (Special Air Service) in the Nui Dinhs. Those guys were super grunts and they went out in four-man patrols to gain intelligence on the enemy. Their uniforms were different to ours and they wore gloves with the fingers cut out. Whereas we used secateurs to trim the path through the jungle they simply pushed the vines and branches back slowly and silently so they left no trace and the gloves protected their hands from thorny scrub. The patrol leader carried a combination M16/M79 weapon they called an over-and-under – I wished we had one but I don't think Woolly would have given up his M79. I'm not sure of all the weapons they carried but one of the blokes had a cut down SLR. Maybe it was an AR – similar to the SLR but with beefier parts. It was a fully automatic weapon.

We moved through our AO (Area of Operation) in the normal way, that is we set off early, made a base a couple of hours later and sent out a couple of patrols and then camped somewhere for the night. The SAS took some of our blokes out for each patrol and bingo, the first patrol struck the enemy. Mick had taken my radio and gone with them. It wasn't long

before we heard automatic gunfire bursts and also a couple of M79 rounds going off. The platoon stood-to and waited for instructions from the boss.

I heard nothing on the radio from Mick. It is normal procedure to send a message "contact, contact" over the radio so that no one will come on air until the contact is finished thus leaving the channel open for the group in contact to use the radio at any time. About ten minutes later they came running back in. Mick was really excited and explained to me what happened. It seems they ran into a couple of enemy, the scout opened fire, one of the SAS guys moved forward in support and then they withdrew, popping a couple of M79 rounds up in the air as they returned back to our base. Later we cleared the area and found nothing. It just goes to show that Nigel was still about.

Mick told me in minute detail how it feels when you are running away and there's plenty of shooting going on. He told me how you get this giant twinge in the middle of your back. He stood there all excited and I had to ask for my radio, it was still on his back. He handed it to me, and I could see that it was covered in leaves and twigs and the handset was missing; it had been torn off as he ran through the jungle. No wonder he didn't call us - he didn't even know the handset was missing!

We ordered a new handset to be dropped in by chopper. The next day we sent out a few more patrols and then stopped at a knoll. Suddenly the sentry who was positioned a few yards down a track came running back in, his eyes seemed to cover his whole face. He said nothing. He didn't need to.

Before I had a chance to take cover there was automatic gun fire and all hell broke loose. I grabbed the radio handset, took a deep breath and calmly spoke/yelled, "One zero, one zero, this is one two, one two, contact, contact, wait out!" I then buried my head deep behind the radio and the rest of my body seemed to shrink down in size behind it.

The gunfire stopped after those initial couple of bursts. No one was shooting back at us; the enemy probably took off. Moon waited for a few minutes and then decided to head down the track to see what was going on. That could be dangerous. 1 platoon had a contact a few days before and followed up the enemy only to be confronted with a claymore. The wiring had been spooled out but the firing device was not attached – they were very lucky. No doubt Moon had that in mind. I saddled up and went with him and a few others down the hill. There were a couple of packs on the track and plenty of blood, but no bodies. We continued, following the blood trail down. Gee, that guy was losing a lot of blood; it was on the vegetation everywhere.

A hundred metres down the hill the blood trail was getting hard to follow and it was getting quite dark. Moon decided to move back up the knoll and check it out first light next morning.

Later, in platoon headquarters, I managed to hear the story from Grant, the sentry. He was sitting on the ground just off the track when he heard someone stumble. The sound was like a boot hitting a rock on the track. After he heard it a second time he moved back into the perimeter brandishing the enemy signal even though he didn't actually see anyone – they were still in dead ground.

One of the SAS guys was sitting on some rocks off to the side, his cut down SLR resting across his lap. When Grant came running back brandishing the enemy sign he grabbed his rifle and faced it down towards the track just as an enemy soldier came into view. The enemy stopped and stared, he seemed to be looking straight at the SAS guy who by now had his rifle pointing right at him from his waist. He stayed motionless, his finger on the trigger but his safety catch was positioned between 'off' and 'auto.' He dared not make any sudden move so he slowly clicked the safety catch to 'auto'. The SAS guy reckoned the enemy soldier heard it, so he fired an automatic burst at him from the waist and the enemy dropped out of sight.

I don't think many of us got much sleep that night. Our position was compromised and normally we would move to a new location, but at the time, the knoll was probably the best place to be. During the night the guys from 4 section said they could hear moaning and it wasn't Barry talking in his sleep.

Next morning we followed up the blood trail. It went down the hill and then across to the right and then back up the hill. We found him still alive. He had crawled back up the hill and was not far from our night position.

"They do that just in case we called in artillery. Near us is the safest place from the artillery barrage. These blokes are gutsy."

I dunno who said that but I started to have some respect for the enemy. I sat there and watched doc bandage him up - he was wounded in the shoulder. This was the first live enemy I saw and what struck me was how white the whites in his eyes were. Maybe it had something to do with his loss of blood.

Later a chopper came and Nigel was winched up and taken away. Sum Wun said that in hospital he kept pulling out the tubes they stuck in him and he died a couple of days later.

That day changed the platoon. We had been in the area a couple of times and seen no enemy, and then suddenly working with the SAS, we had a couple of contacts. Maybe the way we operated was the problem: the enemy heard us and bugged out. From then on we started to move a lot more slowly and silently through the jungle to minimise any sound.

We had to play it smarter to catch Nigel.

Chapter 40

The Rung Sat

“What the hell is the Rung Sat?” I hear you ask. Well, it is a mangrove swamp, known as ‘The Delta’. It covered a huge area from Vung Tau to Saigon. Our sojourn was limited to the swamps just south of the village of Phu My and we still hadn’t had a chance to visit the pub there.

The Viet Cong were using the Rung Sat extensively and the Americans had a whole ‘Riverine Force’ which conducted operations in launches and extremely quick patrol boats in the larger estuaries. I never saw one so I can’t tell you much about them. Our platoon effort was not that sophisticated - we patrolled on foot. It wasn’t always like that. B Company did some patrolling in boats with outboard motors with limited success.

Our objective was to find a hospital staging area where the VC brought in their wounded. I should mention that the CO, Johnny Three Fingers, was shot down in the Rung Sat not far from where a bunch of Kiwis were conducting operations, not that I am suggesting the Kiwis had anything to do with it of course, cough, cough.

We went in by chopper. They found a small clearing in the mangrove swamp and hovered about a foot off the ground while we jumped out into the mud. That's Killer below gingerly stepping off the chopper. A couple of steps later he was knee deep in mud. I was laughing so much I didn’t capture the moment on film as I had packed my camera away already. Things happen like that during war, don’t they?

Notice 707 painted on the chopper's nose? A peace symbol for the zero.

It would have been bloody impossible to negotiate the mangrove swamps in full battle gear so we were travelling light, having left our packs back at the Fire Support Base (FSB).

It was hard going in the swamp. The mud sucked on your boot each time you went to pull it out and take a step forward. I found it easier to step where others had after they churned the mud up somewhat making it quite slushy; it was slippery but the effort was easier without the suction. Another way was to step on the mangrove roots but only the thin ones. The thick ones didn't give way and your boot slipped off them making you stumble. The last thing you want to do in the swamps is to come a gutsa – your mates would never let you live it down and beside I couldn't stand them laughing at me all covered in slimy, sticky, stinking mud. We made a bloody great track through the mangrove swamps. I hated every step.

We did this for two days and found nothing. Each afternoon we were winched out to camp overnight at the FSB. There was no vegetation around us and at about 4am one night I got up for a leak. I looked towards the southern sky and there was the Southern Cross way down low near the horizon. I was so excited I woke up Mick: "Mick, Mick. Look, there's the bloody Southern Cross."

He mumbled something, "What. Oh yeah, OK, Knackers."

Later that morning when I mentioned it to him, he didn't believe me. I don't think I dreamt it.

Things got a lot better on our third day in the swamp. We were patrolling again in single file, slipping and sliding everywhere. Then a strange thing happened - the mangroves seemed to open up. They thinned out. The canopy was still the same but the mangrove trees seemed less dense, we could see about 50 metres in front of us rather than the usual 10 metres. Things were looking up. In addition there were marks on the mangrove trees – little shiny bits where things had rubbed up against the branches. Sum Wun suggested that canoes might be responsible for the marks as Nigel floated his wounded colleagues in on the tide.

We could sense we were getting closer to our objective. The platoon was definitely switched on at that stage.

We came across an eggcup! It was a structure made out of mud and styled just like an eggcup. It was big enough for a VC to occupy. We guessed it was a sentry position where the sentry could remain dry when the tide came in. Unfortunately it looked old and had not been used recently. Encouraged though, we patrolled on. We were REALLY switched on by then.

We next came across two odd structures. They looked like igloos made out of mud. Beside each of them was a square-shaped pool of water. Inside each igloo was a tunnel that could house two men. The mangroves were growing out of the top of the igloo so it would be impossible to see it from above. The mud to construct the structures was obviously dug from the nearby holes which were filled with water. They had no recent use. What impressed me though, apart from Nigel's ingenuity, was how square the hole was.

Suddenly we burst into an occupied camp. There was a fire and other evidence of habitation by a large number of enemy, and there were a lot of footprints leading away from the camp. Moon decided to chase them up. I stayed behind in the enemy camp with him, and Mick took some of the boys and followed the footprints. Moon asked for assistance in the form of artillery or helicopter gunships to cut off the fleeing enemy. That was denied - something about the Geneva Convention. We were in a hospital staging area and there would be no artillery or helicopter gunship support.

The CO's chopper came out for a recce. The pilot reported that there were about 30 enemy in front of our guys. It was an impossible situation. There was no way they would catch them in those muddy conditions so the chase was called off and they all got away.

I was talking to Digger about those enemy - their little bare footprints were everywhere. You could tell they were running, their toes were splayed out and mud was pushed up between them. When I mentioned to Digger that the pilot reckoned there were about 30 enemy ahead of them, he said they knew from the tracks that there were a lot of VC, but they nearly shit themselves when they found out the actual number as there were only ten blokes with him. It could have gotten quite nasty.

We regrouped back at the enemy camp. Moon decided we would stay there for the night just in case they returned. I was very apprehensive about that. We were going to stay for a night in an enemy camp and not only was there a danger of the enemy returning to take us on (there were 23 of us) but there was also the danger of mines and booby traps.

The camp was very well designed. There were quite a few of those igloos in roughly a semicircle. Inside each was a tunnel-like shape with two stretchers made out of small twigs and cuttings so that Nigel would be off the mud.

Each igloo was linked by a series of poles. They were set on an 'X' type frame putting the poles about a foot off the ground. They were not high enough to escape the high tide mark but by walking along them Nigel was clear of the mud. There were a number of tables and seats, just like the picnic tables we have in our parks. Those were also made from sticks and tied together.

In the open part of the semicircle was a fire and a large basket-type arrangement that was lined with plastic and filled with fresh water. It was also set above the high tide mark. There were a few mud crabs tied up and stored in another basket.

I tried to take some photos of the camp with my little Instamatic camera but it was too dark and the slides came out so black that it was hard to make anything out. But I'll give it to those VC - old Nigel was an ingenious bastard, that's for sure.

The chopper came and threw our packs out from the height of a two storey building. My pack survived OK. The only thing damaged was a spare battery - it split open and was cactus. We were issued with hammocks. They were the inner liner of the sleeping bag made out of silk, the sides sewn, with an open hem sewn in on each end. We could push a stick through the hem and tie it to the tree or simply thread our toggle ropes through and tie it off to a tree. I found it was better to push a stick through each end and tie them off. I had never slept in a hammock before and I had no idea how high the tide would rise. I simply tied the hammock as high as I could. The mangrove trees were not that strong

and the branches bent easily under my weight.

I climbed in and the branches didn't break off. I hung everything up in the trees: the radio, with my pack attached, and my boots – I hated sleeping with my boots on. I didn't get much sleep as there was a fair bit of noise when the tide came in. As the water filled all the little holes in the soil it made bleep, bleep, bleep sounds and the tide rose up closer to my backside. I put my hand out and the water was just four inches below. I thought I was in for a wet night but that was the limit of the tide.

I was woken a few times by blokes moving about in the water. I dunno what they were doing, maybe they attempted to sleep on the ground and were hastily erecting their hammocks when the tide came in. Surely they were not that dumb. Oh, I forgot, there were a few dumb guys in 6 section.

As daylight filtered in, I surveyed the area. No one was up walking around. Those that I could see were in hammocks, high and dry like me. It seemed no one was game enough to sleep inside the igloos as the couple I could see were empty; and then I saw Moon. He decided to sleep on the picnic table - half of it gave way and his feet were in the water; he was sound asleep. I chuckled to myself and cursed that I couldn't get a decent photo.

Soon we were up and sloshing about the water. A few blokes tried to walk on the poles but their boots just slipped off. We sent a clearing patrol out to have a look around. The enemy had indeed returned some time during the night – maybe that's what I heard, I'm not sure. They didn't come into our, or rather their, camp though, but they dug something up out of the pools where the old igloos were.

Word came down from the OC, A Company that the camp was to be destroyed and a couple of hours later some engineers turned up with lots of explosive stuff to blow that place to *comedom king*. We looked for a clearing so the choppers could hover low for them to jump out like we did but in the end they were winched down to us.

Boy, did they blow the place ...

And then they winched us out...

I was one of the last ones to be winched up and the chopper floor was covered in mud.

Back at the FSB, we borrowed some stuff from the tankies and cooked up a feed of crabs, courtesy of Nigel.

Whilst the other companies swanned around the Rung Sat in boats staying nice and dry, they found nothing.

It was 2 Platoon that located the hospital staging area probably by sheer chance but we didn't care – we were feeling really confident about taking the fight up to Nigel even though we only numbered 23.

Chapter 41

Christmas in the Nui Dinh Mountains

We seemed to be in choppers every week by then - and I never lost the thrill of riding in them - as the CO, Johnny Three Fingers, rotated his rifle companies through our various operational tasks. It was so successful that we dominated our AO - it was ours - the HQ of the NVA Engineering Company had moved out of the area. The action shifted to the far north of Phuoc Tuy Province on the border of Long Khan Province but we weren't rotated up there for about another month. In the meantime we visited for the umpteenth time the Nui Dinh Mountains. Rather than walking up those great big bloody mammas like we did on our first operation six months before, we flew in, courtesy of Ronnie RAAF to spend Christmas and New Year there.

The Huey helicopter became a symbol of the Vietnam war. There is an earlier, smaller model Huey in the War Memorial at Canberra. You can hear the sounds of battle over the radio, and along with the radio traffic and the downwash you can get a sense of what it was like. It certainly brought memories flooding back for me which I'll tell you about in a minute.

Lemme ask you this. If you had a choice between riding in a helicopter or patrolling through the jungle, which would you choose? The chopper right? Unless you were in 6 section. Those guys were the epitome of really dumb grunts. The sound of that familiar beat of the rotor blades in the distance either meant they were coming to resupply you or to pick you up and take you back to The Dat; except on those couple of occasions where they were lifesavers. Thank God for 9 Sqn.

Yep, those Hueys were great alright and they generated plenty of excitement in me. They still do. Some years ago when I was working with the Department of School Education we were holding a refresher course on annual financial statements for school principals and their admin staff. On this particular day we were at Shellharbour Surf Club, right on the water at Shellharbour beach. It is a beautiful spot.

I dunno what session I was in the middle of but there I was up the front espousing my considerable financial management knowledge in my usual erudite fashion to a group of about 50 people when I heard the Huey. I could hear that slow woop, woop, woop sound that only Hueys can make as the chopper approached from the north along the beach.

I stopped mid-sentence, a rarity for me. I paused and listened intently. I asked the group, "Is that a Huey?" No response. They just stared at me in silence. I listened further and then I was driven by an intense desire to seek out the aircraft so I left the group and walked over to the large double doors that were open. I stepped outside just in time to catch the Huey as it zoomed past heading south, probably to Nowra.

I stood there for a few more moments as the beat from the Huey's rotors ebbed away and then I went back inside and continued on with my session after informing the group that I was indeed correct as usual - it was a Huey. They didn't invite me back the following year.

Sum Wun must have told them I was one those Vietnam Veterans.

The Hueys had four crew members: two pilots up front and two crewmen, one on either side at the back. Both crewmen had M60 machine guns permanently mounted in front of them. The crewman on the right also operated the winch when needed. About seven or eight of us piled into each aircraft. It was a bit squeezy. Four fitted on the seat and the others sat on the floor. I often wondered what these RAAF guys thought of us -dirty, smelly, unshaven grunts - as they transported us from place to place.

I watched the pilots enough to know how to fly the Huey. It was pretty hard to see into the front of the cabin though. The pilots sat in bulletproof seats which had large side bolsters and they also wore flak jackets. The only thing they had to worry about (apart from crashing) was Nigel scoring a direct hit between the eyes to kill them; they were protected everywhere else. My guess was the reason they didn't have ejection seats in the event of an imminent crash was because the seats were too bloody heavy with all that armour plating. Anyway looking past the seat I noted that they only had two pedals which meant they could only fly automatics! What a bunch of whimps!

There were no steering wheels - just two sticks: one beside their leg which made the chopper go up and down and one between their legs to protect their genitals. The pilots could multi-task, I'll give them that. The stick on the left also had a throttle just like a motor bike and the one in the centre had buttons on it so that they could talk to their mates.

The RAAF guys had seat belts but we didn’t, maybe it was a cost cutting measure. I usually sat on the floor on the left of the aircraft and we rode with the doors open. This afforded a magic view of the ground below. Now you may think that the combination of no seat belts and riding with the doors open may have been a tad dangerous. Not so. We couldn't fall out unless we were pushed. When the chopper banked for a turn and I

could see the horizon nearly vertical through the pilot's window there was no sensation of being thrown out of the open doors. The chopper seemed to swing on an arc as if it was dangling from a rope like a pendulum and the centrifugal force overcome the force of gravity and held us in. Geez I know a lot of stuff.

Before the choppers arrived we arranged ourselves in groups on the LZ so the pilots could see where to stop for us to pile in. Like everything in the military there was a set procedure involved. When the choppers were on their way, they would call me up on the radio and the exchange would go something like this:

"One Two, this is Albatross Zero Four, over."

"Albatross Zero Four, this is One Two, over."

"Albatross Zero Four, inbound your location figures five minutes. Standby to throw smoke, over."

"One Two, standing by, over."

We could usually hear them coming by then. They would be flying in formation high up in the sky.

"One Two, this is Albatross Zero Four, throw smoke, over."

The section up front where the lead chopper would land was tasked to throw the smoke grenade. The choppers land into the wind and we would be sited appropriately and the smoke grenade also helped the pilots to gauge their angle of approach.

I yelled out to the first group, "Throw smoke!"

I waited until I could see the smoke and then I said, "One Two, smoke thrown, over."

"Albatross Zero Four, I see yellow, over."

"One Two, I confirm yellow smoke thrown, over."

The choppers would then drop down out of the sky and magically appear at treetop level at our LZ. I got on the last chopper because I had the radio. This ensured I had the best ride. Being in the last chopper, the last to leave the LZ, meant that it was the most vulnerable to enemy fire and the pilots gunned the aircraft to catch up with the rest of the formation.

One day I thought we were going to ditch!

The pilot gunned the engine alright. The whole aircraft seemed to vibrate more than usual as the revs came up. He twisted the stick thingy, with his left hand, remember. We rose only a couple of feet and stayed there while the revs kept increasing. The crewman to my left was leaning out and looking to the rear checking the tail rotor. I guess that was his job, to ensure it was still there and that it was clear of any vegetation. The pilot dropped the nose and we started forward across the LZ, the motor still screaming and the aircraft shuddering as if it was about to fall apart. He gunned it across the clearing still only a couple of feet above the ground, then he lifted, but only enough to clear the trees so we were then skimming along the treetops.

I was a bit concerned at that stage. (OK, I was scared shitless!) I looked out and saw the trees only a couple of feet below. I looked at the crewman who was also looking down and back at the trees. The Huey was bucking and shuddering and the engines were screaming. I looked at the pilot. He was sitting hunched slightly forward, and just beyond him, I could see the instruments which were all shaking just like you see in those airline disaster movies when the plane is about to crash violently. Up above the instruments and out through the windscreen I couldn't see daylight. All I could see were treetops blurred by our forward motion.

The pilot then pulled on the left stick and up we went racing ahead to catch up with the others and join the formation. Thank heavens for that. That was scary and thrilling at the same time. From then on I always got on the last chopper.

That wasn't the only time I got a big fright in the choppers. We did a couple of 'hot insertions'. I didn't really know what these were except that there was no one on the ground to secure the LZ. Big deal, Nigel can't be everywhere. So there we were high up in the air approaching our LZ and I could see where the artillery shells were pounding the jungle clearing. Also down low was a small chopper where the FO (forward observer) was directing the artillery fire. The chopper was quite visible against the green jungle canopy because only one of its rotors was painted white. That made it very distinctive and we could see it easily from high up above.

Suddenly we dropped down to treetop level, my stomach was moving around just like it does on a roller coaster ride and the chopper was shaking and vibrating like a clapped out Holden ... or a new one for that matter. We were approaching our LZ at breakneck speed and then we dropped down below the tree level into the clearing and we were still going flat chat. Suddenly the door gunner to my left opened up and he was firing into the tree line. I assumed he must have spotted some

enemy so my next thought was *surely they are not going to drop us off if Nigel is shooting at us*? Then he had a stoppage – his gun stopped firing and he was unsure what to do next as he grabbed hold of the cocking handle and did nothing. Maybe mental telepathy would get it working again. "Cock, lock, look, dickhead!" I wanted to say to him but I didn't get the chance as the chopper raised its nose then dropped to the ground. In an instant I was out and the chopper took off. We lay there for a second or so, there was no in-coming fire, so we up and moved into the tree line. Note to self: during a hot insertion, the door gunners fire into the tree line as we land. Don't panic!

Hey, the chopper stories are flooding back so I'll keep at it.

If a chopper was dropping off some supplies, Mick would stand in the LZ with his back to the wind and with his arms extended above his head. This told the pilots where to land although sometimes they ignored him. Once we had a chopper coming and I said to Mick that I'd like to do the hand outstretched bit. The LZ was an old rice paddy and the guys were over in the tree line protecting the LZ. The chopper was coming. This was my big chance at a starring role. I stood there with my arms outstretched just like you do when you are going to do some star jumps. The Huey was coming straight at me, just skimming the treetops. He dropped onto the LZ and made a beeline straight for me. I stood there trying to show that I had done this a squillion times before while he kept coming at me at a great rate of knots. I stood my ground. When the rotor blades were six inches from my face he raised the nose and dropped the chopper on the ground. I went to pieces at the last moment. When he raised the nose I was not expecting such a blast from the downwash and he literally blew me away.

Huey one, Knackers none.

But back to our trip to the Nui Dinhs. Someone would be tasked to collect the mail whenever choppers were about. If it was a resupply chopper, the mail would be handed to the door gunner. On this occasion, we were being picked up in the jungle and taken to the Nui Dinhs and Big Julie was the mailman. As soon as we were in the air he tapped the left pilot on the shoulder. He turned around with a surprised look on his face. He had a rather large nose and a moustache that cartoonists would have a field day with. Big Julie handed him the mail. He nodded and shoved it down the front of his jacket.

Over in the distance we could see Nui Dat, our base camp. Big Julie tapped him on the shoulder again and got the same surprised look. Big Julie pointed to The Dat and motioned for us to go there. The pilot looked, saw The Dat, then extended his hand and rubbed his fingers

between his thumbs and mouthed the words, “You give me money.”

The last time we were in the Nui Dinhs, we secured an LZ for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The LZ was on a saddle feature and I was on the edge of the clearing guiding the choppers in by radio and smoke grenades. The RAAF were giving the ARVN boys the ride of their lives. The choppers would come in flat chat, pull up their nose to wash off their forward speed then bang down hard on the ground. The ARVN couldn't get out quick enough! One time the rear of the chopper hit the ground first. The chopper shot up in the air about 15 feet then crashed back down. Inside were about 20 ARVN soldiers. All you could see were their big eyes as they desperately clung to their weapons. I could see they were terrorised by the ride from hell, courtesy of 9 Sqn.

The side door gunner spotted me and made a laughing motion as he waved his arm imitating the chopper bouncing on the ground and the poor tiny ARVN soldiers who had the body size of a normal 12 year old Australian boy poured out onto the ground and ran for their lives. They all looked deathly white, the poor bastards.

Oops, sorry about all the chopper stuff but that's how we got to the mountains over Christmas and New Year. We had been there many times and I began to enjoy the place as Nigel was nowhere to be seen. History was right. Aggressive patrolling allowed us to dominate the area.

From those mountains we got a tremendous view of the province. We could see the traffic on route 2 heading north/south and the incessant sounds of car horns drifted up to us. We could see Vung Tau and the ocean. It sure beat sitting there in thick jungle staring at the ants.

Night time was even better. There was no traffic on route 2 because of the curfew. But there was plenty of stuff happening in the sky. Tracer rounds were floating about from many locations although I couldn’t hear anything. I got to see “Puff the Magic Dragon.” That was a DC3 painted black which fired at targets in the jungle where there were suspected enemy. I could see lots and lots of tracer fire being directed downwards but I couldn’t see the aircraft nor could I hear anything. I dunno what guns they had on board but there certainly was a high volume of tracer rounds.

I awoke on Christmas morning to a beautiful sunny day. The air was clean and I could see for miles. There were no sights or sounds of warfare. It was a great day.

Just after stand-down, Moon approached me with a cheeky look on his face. “Gimme the radio, Knackers.”

He put the handset to his ear, pressed the send button and sang in his best sounding pirate voice:

“Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way.

Oh, what fun it is to ride in a one horse open sleigh.”

He may have done a second verse as well.

He handed me back the handset. “Thanks, Knackers.”

“Thanks, boss, nice one.”

We were very high up and our transmission would have gone far and wide but nobody came back on air.

I told you Moon was a larrikin.

Ronnie RAAF also dropped in on Christmas day.

I picked up other transmissions on the radio. A Yank was talking to his mate about a Bob Hope USO Show that he was going to see that afternoon. Later he called up again and in the background I could hear the music. I have no idea where it was but I can say I heard a Yank USO show on Christmas Day. How about that?

Overall we had a pretty quiet run in the mountains that time. Nigel must have been off celebrating somewhere else. About the only exciting thing that happened to me was the handset falling against my face. I slept with the handset against the side of my head. During the night it fell onto my face. I picked it up then realised I had an enormous frog in my hand so I threw it over towards the boss hoping it would annoy him!

A few days after New Year we flew back to The Dat. Sum Wun said the officers and senior NCOs would serve us Christmas lunch so we were looking forward to that ... and a couple of beers of course.

You could imagine our surprise/anger/frustration when we arrived back at The Dat to find that the camp was dry!

No alcohol was permitted because some bloody pogo took a few pot shots at blokes in the Sergeants' Mess on Christmas Day.

There’s going to be trouble ....

Chapter 42

Christmas Lunch in January

Well it was true, Sum Wun wuz right again! The officers and senior NCOs were going to serve us Christmas lunch.

That should be interesting.

They were sending us down to Vung Tau for the auspicious occasion. I'm not sure if the shooting at The Dat had anything to do with our going to Vung Tau or not – what a sad state of affairs that was.

It seems Private Ferriday, a driver with Air Despatch, was pissed and depressed when he fired his SLR into the Sergeants' Mess killing two sergeants and wounding a third. If he could shoot that well when he was pissed maybe he should've been with the Grunts, not that we'd have had him of course. I spoke about it to a mate of mine who was involved with the court martial proceedings. He told me that initially they were going to let him off due to insanity. How insane is that? He was eventually charged with manslaughter and served eight years in prison.

Still we were determined to enjoy our Christmas lunch. It was held at one of the unit mess halls at 1ALSG (1st Australian Logistic Support Group). There were a number of units located near the beach at Vung Tau, including the Peter Badcoe Club where we stayed on R&C. I think they tried to keep us away from the other soldiers – you know what soldiers are like – any reason for a punch up. But from time to time I caught up with blokes I served with in recruit training at Wagga some 18 months before.

The best one that comes to mind was meeting up with one of the Joss twins. They were from Albury and both were conscripted because the callup was based on birthdates. Sum Wun in our platoon was heading over to some canteen somewhere within 1ALSG where the boys celebrated an RTA (return to Australia) night. Beer was 5 cents a can! That was enough to get a few of us tagging along. We were used to 20 cents a can and limited cans at that. I dunno where these blokes got all their grog from so you can imagine how wild the night was – three blokes were heading home. I think at one stage during the festivities they were stripped and soaked in beer – it seemed like a perfectly reasonable send-off ritual at the time.

I saw Joss when I went up to the counter to get a few beers. It was as

noisy as hell and I had to shout out my shout, so to speak. While I waited to get my beers, I looked to my left and there was Joss!

“Fuck me, it’s Joss! Howyagoingmateallright?” as I slapped him on the back.

“Hey, Cav, you fuckin’ dickhead. What are ya doin’ here, mate?”

“Havin’ a few beers, mate. You OK?”

“Yeah, mate, never better. You?”

“Yeah, good, mate.”

“OK, seeya, mate.”

“Seeya, mate.”

Maybe I’ll catch up with the Joss boys again one day. If you know the Joss boys from Albury tell them to give me a call.

But back to Christmas lunch in January.

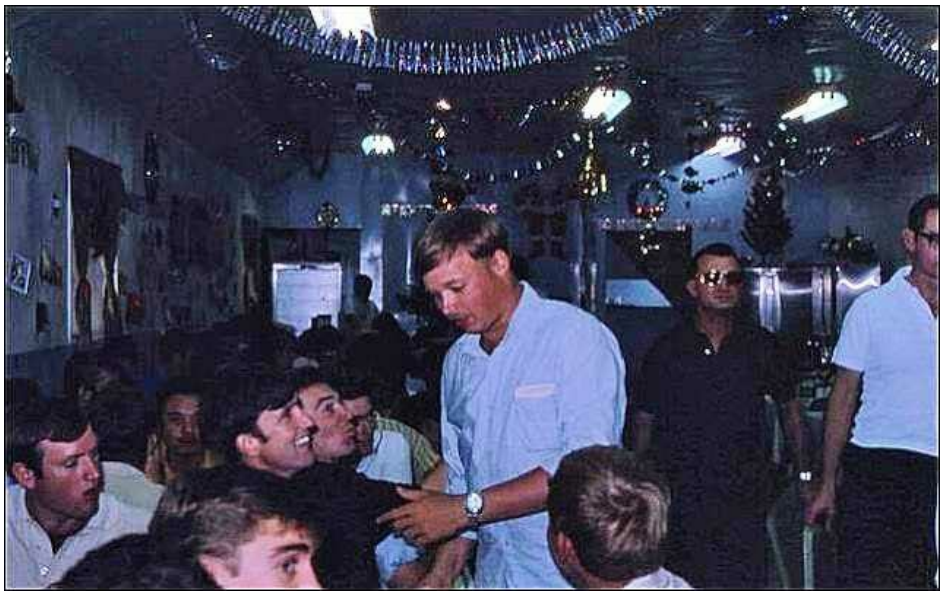
Moon was in his element. I think he may have been a bit pissed as well and we gave him a hard time with plenty of jeering and mock abuse. He deserved it. He spilt food all over his shoulder at one stage, I think one of the guys in 6 section was responsible for that.

At bottom right is Killer, then Digger in the centre and Ashes stuffing his face.

Now I don’t want you to get the impression that every time we went to

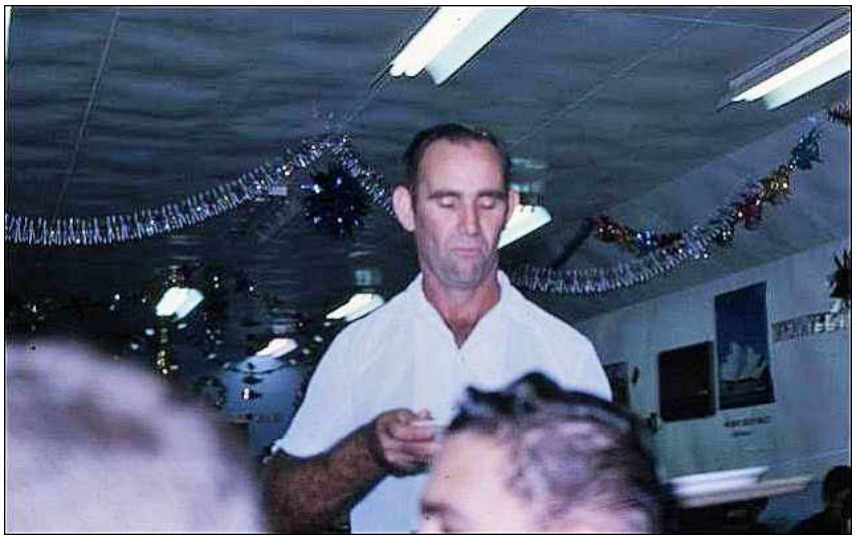
Vung Tau, all we did was drink piss and have women chase us. No. That did happen of course, but if we played up too much it made our life unbearable when we went back out into the bush. Usually we spent 36 hours in Vung Tau and then back on operations. If you were suffering the effects of too much indulging, you sweated it out pretty quickly humping that 40 kg pack through the steamy jungle. If you could keep up.

And then there was the danger of contracting *nonspecific urethritis*. That would mean Doc would have to give you needles in the arse out bush.



Moon taking a bit of flak from the boys

The OC, Captain B



The CSM – Mother - a picture of concentration.

It was nice gesture having a dinner like that. We all thoroughly enjoyed it and I think the officers and senior NCOs did as well.

We forgot all about the war, the problems back at The Dat, the fact that we missed our families back home; and we looked forward to getting our final six months in country behind us and then getting the hell outa that place.

Chapter 43

Route 2 to the Song Rai River

That thin vertical line in the west is Route 2. The Song Rai, that wriggly blue line to the east, is a river. The distance between the two is 12 kilometres – we roughly followed the third set of grid squares down from the top and it took us nine days to complete the patrol!

Our food supply had to last that long whereas it normally only had to be good for six days.

Water wasn't a problem as there was a stream every couple of kilometres as you can see on the map, so they gave us dehydrated rations. Forty years later, just the thought of them nearly makes me dry retch.

Did I tell you they were New Zealand rations?

I dunno which was worse, the VC or the NZ rations.

Read on to see if I survived ...

We were up at Sparrow's fart, packed and ready to go. I was always apprehensive on the first day of an operation. I'm not sure why.

I had on clean greens but no jocks. They would last me the whole of the operation which was usually about four weeks. I had new socks which would last me the two weeks till they resupplied us with new ones. I

rarely took my socks off in the bush even though I slept with my boots off. Replacing one's socks was a serious occasion. I found that the socks stuck to me feet after about three or four days so I left them until the resupply and then I peeled them off and threw them away. I'd give my feet a wipe and put the new socks on. For the next couple of hours patrolling, my feet would be sore; that's why I never took my socks off - it hurt too much.

But back to my apprehension - I think it was the combination of dreading having to lug a full pack containing maximum food and maximum water; oh and maybe the few beers I had the night before. In addition, I didn't sleep too well before an operation.

It was one of those mornings where the humidity seems worse than usual. We marched down to the company admin area to board the trucks. It was about 100 metres and when we arrived there, I was already sweating profusely. In a matter of minutes we boarded the trucks, headed out onto Route 2 and sped north. There was no canopy on the trucks and the moving air was very refreshing. It would be our first time in that part of the Province (east of route 2) and I was a little concerned at what might lie ahead.

Twenty minutes later we dismounted and started patrolling east. In the distance we could hear the sounds of APCs. Whenever we were near tankies, we always sought them out. That way we wouldn't surprise them - they had 30 cal and 50 cal machine guns and we didn't want to spook them.

Amazingly, one of the crew commanders was a guy I was with in 22 platoon at Kapooka some 18 months before!

"G'Day, mate, howyagoin'?"

"Hey, Cav! A grunt, huh? Whatsitlike? Tough?"

"Yeah, mate. Crew commander, eh? Not bad!"

"Yeah, good job."

"OK, mate, catchyalater."

"Seeya, Cav!"

And off we went in search of the VC ...

On day two we made an amazing discovery. Browny, the forward scout, was told to move to the edge of a rise and to check it out. He came back

to his seco and said, “Nothing there but an ambulance.”

“A fucking ambulance?”

“Yeah, it looks like a VW.”

“Fucking bullshit, Browny!”

But sure enough, there it was – an ambulance in the middle of nowhere. It was a VW Kombi.

I waited until the boys checked it out before approaching it as it may have been booby trapped. One thing I had learned was never to be inquisitive. If something looked different or unusual I never went near it. I still live by that rule today. Even though I kept my distance from the Kombi, I did notice that the tyres were all cut away. No doubt the rubber was used as footwear - Nigel had probably made a few pairs of Ho Chi Minh sandals.

We patrolled on to our night location. We were following a track and it turned south and crossed a creek. A track and a creek! Jackpot! I’ve mentioned this before - a creek and track is an excellent place to lay an ambush. After the claymores were set, we settled into our night routine manning two machine guns covering the track and a third at the back, a sort of triangle-shaped harbour with a machine gun at each point. I was in the centre with the boss in platoon HQ.

The track ran north/south. It was an old tank track which was then used as a foot pad by the VC. We were in an area classified as a free fire zone, that is, there were no civilians or friendlies in the area, yet the foot pad was well defined although it had not been used in the last day or so. Still it was worth a shot, so to speak.

The night was uneventful. Next morning the clearing patrols went out and we stood down to have breakfast. Now's as good a time as any to tell you about our NZ dehydrated rations. The rations were in a green satchel. We could heat them up two ways: by filling them with boiling water and allowing them to stand; or by mixing cold water in the satchel and placing the satchel on a hexi stove. A hexi stove was a little metal fold-out stove and the hexamine tablets were stored inside the stove. One tablet was enough to heat the satchel and maybe enough for a brew. We had to be careful though as our supply of hexamine had to last nine days. But we had some other stuff. We also carried slabs of C4 plastic explosive. Sum Wun discovered that breaking off a small piece of C4 and setting it alight really generated a lot of heat; it was much better than hexamine. It was great for heating stuff although the light it emitted almost blinded you. I dunno who was the first idiot to discover this, but it sure worked a treat.

Lemme see, ham and eggs for breakfast, that'll do. As I balanced the satchel on the hexi stove Glenn's machine gun opened up with a couple of very long and sustained machine gun bursts. I dunno if the claymores were let go at the same time. They may have been, but one thing is for sure that M60 rattle sure gets the blood pumpin'! As I radioed 'contact!' to One Zero, a sudden burst of incoming fire from an AK-47 cracked inches above my head. Leaves and debris were falling down on top of me as I hugged the ground using the radio and my pack as cover. I'm sure seven or eight day's supply of NZ dehydrated rations would stop a 7.62 round from an AK-47!

Glenn was about 20 yards from me and I could see smoke coming off the barrel of his machine gun as he engaged the enemy. Another burst of AK-47 rounds came in and I decided to turn my head side on to make my profile even lower. Debris was still falling on me. Grunt's machine gun opened up as well. He was over to the left, closer to the stream. Grunt was the guy whom you may remember was the sentry up in the Nui Dinhs - he heard Nigel coming that day we were working with the SAS.

It's a strange feeling being shot at. You can hear each round as it passes overhead … crack, crack, crack, crack, crack. You then hear where the rounds are coming from as a thud, thud, thud, thud, thud. You know exactly where the shooter is even though you can't see him. In addition,

all weapons have a distinctive sound signature so you are able to identify the different types: the M60, SLR, Armalite and AK-47. Even though you can't see much, it's the sounds that help you make sense of what's happening although it is chaotic.

I realised how exposed I was. Because the ground sloped upwards from the track I had very little cover. There was no way of telling how close those AK-47 rounds were to my head. They could have been ten feet above, but that sound - crack, crack, crack, crack, crack - seemed only inches away. With the debris falling on me, I realised that the VC was shooting way too high. The rounds were going up into the trees. My mind went racing back to what Pat Cameron taught us back in Townsville: make sure the machine gun rounds hit the ground in front of you then walk the bursts up to the enemy.

The firing stopped.

Silence.

A couple of blokes moved forward. There was a quick exchange of fire and then voices yelling, “All Clear!”

I started breathing again.

A clearing patrol went out and found only one dead enemy with an AK-47, a pack and some other gear. Grunt would later say that he only let off a few bursts to his front so he could get new ammo as some of the links for the M60 were getting a bit rusty.

I photographed the enemy as usual for identification. It wasn’t a pleasant sight as he was shot in the head and it was kinda crooked. The photos, his weapon and his gear were sent back on the chopper.

He had put up a good fight. He took us on even though he would have known by the two machine guns that we were at least platoon strength. I can’t understand why he continued to return fire rather than bug out. His firing at us allowed the machine gunners to pinpoint his exact position. Maybe he was shot in the leg or something, I dunno, but he stayed and fought us and he paid the price with his life.

The VC was given a proper burial just off the track and the location (grid reference) was sent back with his belongings. A few weeks later another patrol was in the area and they discovered two more bodies down near the stream. Our clearing patrol had failed to locate them. They did not return fire so they were either hit very early in the contact or they were not armed. The other bodies were added to our contact report by CHQ.

Later, when everything calmed down I managed to salvage some ham and eggs but I had lost my appetite. Still I knew I had to eat something even if it tasted like shit. I tried a number of ways to heat this stuff but it all ended up the same. In the end I couldn't eat ham and eggs and I never have scrambled eggs to this day.

It wasn't all bad. The chilli con carne was OK, but that was about it. I thought about breaking off a bit of C4 explosive to see how that tasted - it surely had to be better than those dehydrated rations - but I never did.

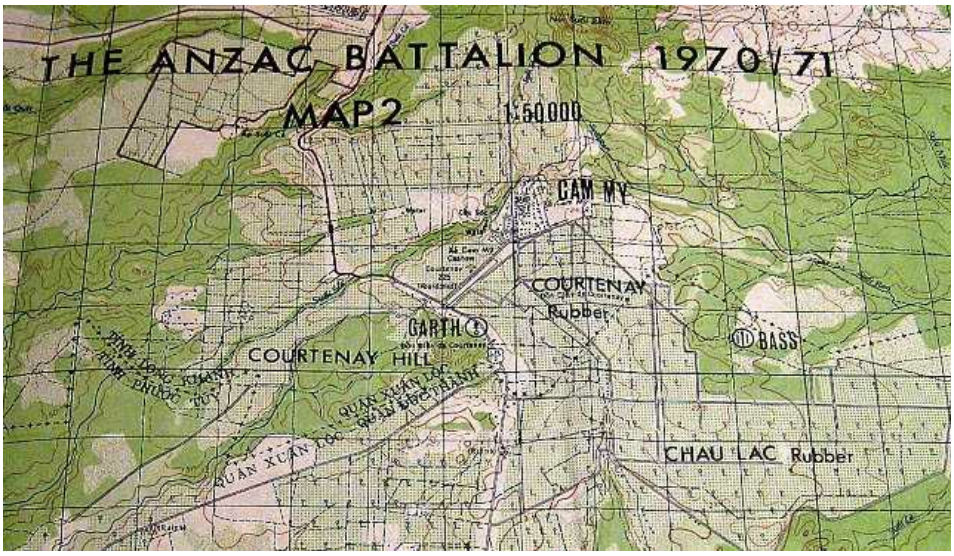
We soldiered on, heading east towards the Song Rai River in our usual patrolling technique: we'd set off for a couple of hours, then prop. Half the platoon would have a look in one direction and then return, so the second half of the platoon could check out a different area; and then we would decide where to head for our night location. We were making steady, but slow progress.

We didn't come across any more VC. Maybe we should have stayed back at that track for the nine days.

We crossed the Song Rai on an old tree that had been felled. Still no VC. I wasn't disappointed. I managed to get this great shot of Moon crossing the Song Rai, one of my favourite photos from Vietnam.

Chapter 44

Garth



FSB (Fire Support Base) *Garth* was located on Courtenay Hill which is in the far north of Phuoc Tuy Province. It's near a large number of rubber plantations just south of Long Khan Province. FSBs in the battalion were named after the wives or girlfriends of officers posted to the battalion. No one was game to ask how '*Garth*' got its name.

We were the last rifle company to be rotated through the Courtenay Rubber. As you know by now the battalion commander, Johnny Three Fingers, continued to dominate our AO (Area of Operations) by a

sustained presence as he swapped the rifle companies about. The other rifle companies experienced many contacts in the area and we were worried that the enemy movements might fizzle out before we got amongst them. The enemy, in squad size groups, were entering the villages at night to obtain food supplies to take back to their camps in the jungle. The rubber plantations were easy to navigate at night because there was no undergrowth. In addition, the trees are aligned in rows. You simply walked down a row of rubber trees so that it was impossible to get lost. I was sure 3 Platoon would test that theory out.

The VC were the bad guys who gave the villagers a hard time. History showed that Phuoc Tuy Province was indeed a bad place. The VC would enter a village, kill the village chief and demand supplies from the peasants. Although this was true in many cases, there was another dimension that was not known to us at the time.

Imagine for a moment that you are a male teenager living in one of these villages helping your parents in a simple subsistence life working in the rubber plantations. You are at conscription age where you will be required to serve in the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). The officers who run the ARVN are the 'elite' of South Vietnamese society - many are corrupt and incompetent. As an ARVN soldier you could be sent anywhere in South Vietnam and your chances of being killed would be very high indeed. The alternative is to stay near your village with your family and friends and by default you would have to help out the VC. Not much of a choice really, is it?

In successful ambushes, our battalion was unknowingly killing some of

the young men from the very villages we were trying to protect.

So that was our job around *Garth*: to stop the bad guys from killing and harassing the locals. We would conduct ambushes by night and we would lay up somewhere in sight of the locals by day so they knew we were about. What a bludge. We were not on our feet all day patrolling, we would be awake most of the night; but we would try to catch some sleep during the day. Ezy.

The Huey flight took about 30 minutes from the Dat. As we dropped down towards the LZ, an airstrip that was secured by APCs, we could see the extent of the rubber plantations. They certainly covered a wide area and there would be plenty of civilians moving about working in them. We were given the rules of engagement: no shooting unless fired upon, and no shooting near locals. At night any movement in the rubber plantations would be VC. Look out Nigel, 2 Platoon is coming to get ya!

FSB *Garth* was a pretty dismal place, we only camped there one night, thank goodness. It was the height of the dry season so it was dirty and dusty. About 800 metres up the road was an abandoned house. We used it as an early warning base and sat around ready to take on Nigel if he decided to take on the FSB.

I never did go inside the building. Mines and booby traps are a real problem to the Infantry soldier and one of the best ways to survive is to be vigilant and to suppress your curiosity. If something didn't look right, or there was a suspicious looking 'thing' on the ground, you stayed right away from it. I never touched anything, that's why I still have all my fingers and toes ... and other useful bits and pieces.

We had an interpreter with us as well as the National Police, the 'White Mice'. We jabbered on a fair bit with them, trying to find out more about them but they didn't tell us much. My guess is that they were asked the same questions by each platoon which had rotated through that early warning task over the last 6 to 8 weeks.

One day an old guy turned up and I managed to get a few photos of him. We were told back in Australia that the locals might not like having their picture taken and we should be mindful of the cultural differences and respect their wishes. But this guy, who looked to be in his 80s, was posing for me as he worked on a pole with a machete, so I took a few snaps of him. The interpreter told me he was a 'hunter'. Hah! A bloody

hunter? Who was he kidding? He was an old guy! He was dressed in shorts and t-shirt with a coolly hat on his head and plastic sandals on his feet. I had a pair of those sandals when I was a kid.

Some time later he returned with a mongoose he had trapped. He quite proudly displayed it

for me, just like a cat which brings a dead bird to the front door for you to see and tell him what a good boy he was. So he was a 'hunter' after all.

He said he was going to take it home and cook it up. You could imagine my surprise when he turned up later with a plate of mongoose stew. To my bitter disappointment, to this very day I regret not tasting that stew. It looked good. It smelled good. But I shook my head when he offered me some. I suppressed my curiosity about what mongoose would taste like. I didn't want to eat the local food and then heave my guts up for the next two days from some exotic tropical bug that my immune system had never encountered before. So no strange food for me. I was consistent in that area. I never tried the ice blocks we were offered near one of the villages down south and I never ate any Vietnamese food. Oops, I tell a lie.

Once, in Vung Tau, I was getting a haircut and Burkey was with me. Burkey, you may recall, was the bloke who had the girls from the Hong Kong Restaurant in Townsville trained to perfection so that when he entered the restaurant they served him his beer and sweet and sour prawns with fried rice 30 seconds after he sat down. Burkey, from South

Australia, had the gift of the gab. His hair had already been cut and while he was waiting for me he decided to have a look around. Through the hallway, the barber's family were sitting on the floor around a number of small food bowls having a meal. Burkey decided to check them out.

When the barber was finished cutting my hair, I got up from the chair to look for him. I went through the doorway out the back and there was Burkey sitting down on the floor, chopsticks in hand, chomping in with the family of about four or five people. Mamasan smiled at me and I could see she had plenty of teeth missing as she motioned with her hands for me to sit down and join them. So I did, smiling and nodding a lot as I unsuccessfully tried to use the chopsticks. The laughter and banter from the family was at my expense, I'm sure. I dunno what I was eating but it was sumptuous; but then again I had a few Budweisers under my belt so my judgement was a little cloudy that day.

Lemme answer the question you haven't asked. Is it better to walk or ride on an APC? The answer is *I dunno*. Each has their respective advantages and disadvantages. The APC was designed to carry soldiers into battle by closeting them inside the vehicle, safe from small arms fire. They are quick and agile. But ... Looking at it from a dumb grunt's perspective, they leave a lot to be desired. They are extremely uncomfortable, they are hot and noisy, the grunts get thrown about inside like rag dolls trying to pinch some of the tankies' rations in the dark; and when the vehicle stops, the grunts are expected to leap out to start fighting the enemy while suffering blindness from the extreme glare after being in total darkness, as well as suffering from a combination of motion sickness and poisoning by diesel fumes. Who in their right mind designed those things?

They only kept us safe from anti-personnel mines. A good tank mine would squash all the grunts inside. That's why we rode on top. But there were no seats. The tankies, in an effort to protect their rations from us thieving, starving grunts, placed ammo boxes in a row along each side of the APC. We sat on those as the tankies gave us the ride from hell and we had nothing to hang onto. Imagine doing 40 kilometres/hr through a rubber plantation, sitting on nothing but ammo boxes.

The APC neatly fitted inside each row of rubber trees. A real hazard was the ground which was sometimes banked to divert rainwater. Consequently the APC was riding up and down over each of those little banks. Then there were the ten foot aerials above that worked up a whipping motion as the APC rode over the bank. Those aerials sliced into the foliage dislodging leaves, sticks, spiders, biting ants and the occasional sniper.

Sorry, I lied about the sniper bit.

And that was the bit the tankies really loved: to see us grunts hanging on for dear life on top of their APCs, beating off biting ants and spiders as we rode over each earth mound looking like cowboys riding a bucking bull at the rodeo. In addition the ammo boxes we sat on kept moving and pinching our arses! Bastards. All because we borrowed the odd can of ham and lima beans from their ration stash inside.

To answer the question you didn't ask, I'd rather walk. Except when I was hungry and tired and we had a long way to go.

Chapter 45

Ambushing 101

The house just up from FSB *Garth*

APCs driving through a young rubber plantation

Big Julie and a hut on the edge of the rubber

Patrolling in rubber plantations is dead easy. The lack of undergrowth makes it a breeze but there is a downside - you can see a couple of hundred metres one way and only a couple of metres another because of the way the rubber trees are aligned. That means the enemy can spot you and take a pot-shot at you from a couple of hundred metres away and quickly disappear. Your gaze must shift into another gear scanning the area a couple of hundred metres away.

This means you spend less time looking to your immediate front for mines and booby traps. So while the physical effort may be reduced while patrolling in rubber plantations, the mental effort can be very acute indeed.

We didn't move much during the day. We tried to pick a nice shady spot where the locals could see us as they went about their work in the plantation and fields. Sometimes if we were bored we'd set up a bit of a checkpoint near a track, stop the locals and check out their papers even though we didn't know what we were looking at.

Big Julie was out on the track and he was surrounded by a few kids. Usually they were after lollies or whatever else we could give them. They were a nice distraction for a while but soon they became a pest. That's when one of the machine gunners would pick up his M60 and run screaming at them to scatter them in all directions. The poor bastards probably had nightmares about that. But soon they'd be back again with their cheeky grins.

So anyway Big Julie spotted an old woman riding her bike towards him.

He moved to the centre of the track, standing tall with his chest puffed out, his SLR by his side pointing downwards. He held his left hand up high as a stop signal and called out to the old woman, "Dung Lai!" (Halt)

Mamasan completely ignored him. She didn't even look at Big Julie but simply rode her bike around him as he rotated around with his hands on his hips looking like an idiot and watched her ride past him. The platoon, sitting about bored senseless in the shade, erupted into laughter and spontaneous applause!

At last light we were on the move. The platoon split into two groups and headed off in different directions to lay ambushes in the rubber plantation. Each patrol was of about 12 men. I usually went with Moon and our callsign was One Two Plus. The other group with Mick was One Two Minus. I dunno who thought that up, but we were both on the Alpha company net which was back at Courtenay Hill at FSB *Garth*. Comms with company HQ, callsign One Zero, were very good as they were on the high ground and our radio signals were line of sight, so to speak. Often therefore we had comms with One Zero but not with each other.

Things were pretty quiet. We set ambushes a couple of nights and nothing happened. Maybe Nigel had given up and moved elsewhere. Somehow I started heading off with Mick, and Mal filled in as sig with Moon. Mick and I got on quite well together. He tended to panic a bit at times but his heart was in the right place.

The ambushes were set very quickly. Because we were not ambushing tracks, we would simply pick a spot in the rubber plantation between the jungle and a village and wait. The 12 men were divided into three groups and set in a triangle pattern all facing out. Claymores were placed out front of each group and we settled down for the night. We would all stay awake until 10pm and then one person in each group would be awake by themselves for an hour then wake up the person beside them, and so on. Noise had to be kept to a minimum. A few nights of this and we were all fucked.

I normally laid out a groundsheet and placed my pack and radio beside me. My M16 was on the ground in front of me. We were all lying on our guts peering into the darkness. Listening was more important and gave us more information than our eyes ever could. I was in the centre of the group of four. Mick was on my right and two others were on my left. A machine gun was forward of the centre of the group along with the clacker (firing device) for the claymores. Even though it was dark I could see the other two groups behind us about 50 metres away.

Mick prodded me in the side.

"What's up?" I whispered.

"You're fucking snoring, Knackers!" Mick whispered back.

"How the fuck can I be snoring with my eyes open, Mick?"

I must have dozed off.

After 10pm the person on sentry would sit up, but I'm sure we all lapsed into sleep at times.

BOOM!

I jumped about 10 feet into the air. The sound of the claymores exploding behind me, followed by a sustained burst of machine gun fire, had me instantly awake. Mick grabbed our machine gun and turned it around towards the rear group. They were silhouetted by their muzzle flashes and Mick started firing into the gap between the two rear groups. All three groups were now firing into the rear killing ground. I radioed 'contact, contact' and immediately went into machine gun mode, something I had done for 12 months. I grabbed the linked belt and started feeding it into the machine gun as Mick fired off towards the killing zone. The tracer clearly showed his fall of shot which he was keeping nice and low.

But there was a problem. When Mick grabbed the M60 and turned it around, the linked belt attached to the gun hooked onto my groundsheet and it was soon being pulled closer to the feed plate. I doubted if the gun would work with my groundsheet wrapped around its working parts. I tried to pull it back but that jerked the gun to the left, closer to the rear group. Mick was not happy as he mouthed something that I couldn't quite hear over the noise of the battle. In the end I broke the link belt just as Mick stopped firing.

It was quiet. We lay there and waited, listening for any signs of the enemy. There were none. A couple from the rear group got up and checked out the area. "All clear!" We were talking loud now as whispering was pointless as our position was given away by the noise of the weapons. "The killing ground is empty!"

Did we all miss them?

Mick went over and had a chat with the rear guys. With us was a new FO, an artillery corporal. It seems he panicked because he thought someone was approaching them so he set off the claymores. That was the signal to engage the killing area which we all did. Mick radioed to One Zero that it

may have been a false alarm and we would check it out at first light.

At first light there was nothing to show for the ambush. No bodies, no gear, no blood, no nuthin'! The FO was very apologetic. The rubber trees bore the brunt of the weapons. The ball bearings from the claymores hit the trees way above the height of a man. We would have to sight them much lower in future. Mick was boasting his prowess as a machine gunner by pointing out to me how low the rounds he fired were hitting the rubber trees.

A bloody false alarm.

And boy did we cop some shit from One Two Plus.

Chapter 46

A Big Day

We lost count of the number of ambushes we set around the Courtenay Rubber which were all to no avail and the strain was starting to show on the men. Well I was fucked anyway.

They gave us a Starlight scope. This looked like a telescope except it enabled us to see in the dark. The image was green and a little bit snowy, but it was a great piece of kit even though we couldn't keep the batteries up to it. All night blokes were looking for Nigel in the dark. It emitted a high pitch whine that seemed really loud when you were sitting in the middle of a rubber plantation in the dark.

It wasn't the first time we had used technology. Some weeks before they gave us motion sensors. The idea was to place two along a track at one end of the ambush site and another two on the other end. The kit came with a headset that fitted over one ear. If anyone moved near the sensor it set off an electronic signal which we could hear in the headpiece. If the second sensor went off in sequence it would indicate that Nigel was coming down the track.

But all it did was give us heart palpitations every time the damn things went off. They were never in sequence and there was a lot of 'falsing'. Stray artillery in the distance or swaying branches in the wind set them off. Sitting there in the dark when the sensor went off sent my heart thumping so hard I thought it would end up in my throat. Is it any wonder that I have blood pressure problems today? We used them for a week and gave them the flick.

But these Starlight scopes could be useful in the rubber. One night the group of four I was with were behind a slight mound. The machine gun was on top as we were still using the three group triangle method of ambushing. It was before 10pm so we were all awake when I noticed Ashes checking out something with the scope. His body language indicated that he had spotted someone as he settled in behind the gun. The others craned their necks to have a look while I looked to my left. I was on the end and the others had some cover behind the mound whereas I was sitting out like a pimple on a bum. I started to slink down behind the radio. I dunno if it would have given me any protection but I had nothing else.

I stared out into the gloom but could see nothing. Ashes was now

crouching up a little bit higher. He was whispering, "Yes, yes!" He had the scope locked onto the enemy. I opened my mouth so my heart could beat more freely in my throat. Then I saw them, moving towards us, about 25 metres away. *Fuck me. Blow the fucking Claymores!* They came closer and closer. Ashes still had the scope trained on them when they stopped and snorted, smelling the air. Fucking pigs, you fucking bastards! I'm having a heart attack here! I got up and bashed Ashes around the head with my bush hat. It transpired that he wasn't saying *yes, yes* at all - he was saying *pigs, pigs*; and I was the only one who didn't hear him properly. Pricks.

The next day I was back with Mick and as we were moving to our ambush site, I monitored the following on the radio: "One Two Plus, this is One Zero, Dustoff request sent, over."

Shit!

There must be a problem with Moon and the rest of the platoon. Some bastard must be hurt! Radio discipline meant that I couldn't ask One Zero what was happening.

"One Two Plus, this is Dustoff, inbound your location in 10 minutes, standby to throw smoke, over."

I mentioned to Mick that something was wrong with Moon's group as we continued on our task. It was very frustrating not being able to hear what Mal was saying on the radio. If we stopped I could attach a bigger aerial to my radio and listen in. But this would compromise our ability to reach our assigned position before dark. We kept moving and I kept the handpiece pressed to my ear.

"One Two Plus, this is Dustoff, throw smoke, over."

"Dustoff, I see green, over."

Silence.

I waited and waited, anticipating enough time for the chopper to land, pick up whoever was wounded and then head back to the hospital at Vung Tau.

"One Zero, this is One Two Minus, over."

"One Zero, over."

"One Two Minus, we are anxious to find out what is happening with One Two Plus, over."

"One Zero, roger, Dustoff picked up the following paxs: KIA 173 ..."

My heart leapt! It was Killer! Even before he had finished saying his Army number, I knew it was Killer. He was KIA!

“.....5712 callsign K. WIA 2792250 Callsign C, over.”

Shit! Killer is dead and the other bloke must be Ian C, the guy I drove home with from Townsville to Cootamundra on our pre-embarkation leave.

I stopped in my tracks. Woolly caught up with me. I stared at him and said, "Killer's dead!" He looked at me in disbelief! Mick came up and I told him also and word went around the group. We all said nothing. Some guys were just shaking their heads. Nobody said anything. We just got on with our task. We set the ambush and waited for Nigel to pay us a visit. Nigel had better look out!

I don't think I got any sleep that night and Nigel stayed away as well. Next morning we joined the rest of the platoon. They were all very subdued. It seems that Ian C stepped on a mine and Killer was right behind him. He staggered back and set off a second mine. They were unsure if the mines were command detonated or just buried in the earth on the track and set off when someone stepped on them.

I went over to Digger and sat with him. He was Killer's best mate. He made a brew. We sat there together side by side. We said nothing, we just sat there sharing the brew.

8th Feb 1971 KIA 1735712 Pte Peter Kowalski

WIA 2792250 Pte Ian Crisp

Peter Kowalski KIA, me, Ian Crisp WIA, and Digger at Lavarack Barracks Townsville 1969

Chapter 47

May I be a little self-indulgent?

Six months ago I decided to put pen to paper, so to speak, to write about my experiences as a Nasho completing a full tour of duty in Vietnam as an Infantry soldier. I had been thinking about this for some time, but now that my youngest son is currently serving in Afghanistan with 8/9 RAR, the time is right to do it.

I've read plenty of books on Vietnam and I've seen plenty of films but none of them seems to portray what I experienced. My war was different. I also noticed that people were under the misapprehension that the American experience in Vietnam was the same for the Australians. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Americans threw lots of resources at the war and engaged in large encounter battles with the North Vietnamese Army. Heavy losses were sustained on both sides.

The Australians did it differently. We mostly confined ourselves to one province - Phuoc Tuy. We fought a war of stealth against the VC and occasionally the NVA. Our goal was twofold: to dominate the province by aggressive patrolling; and to engage in civil construction of infrastructure such as roads, public buildings and utilities as well as introducing health programs.

By any measure this was a successful way to prosecute the war, but in the end, it was too little, too late; we simply abandoned the South Vietnamese to their fate. When I say 'we', I don't mean the Infantry soldiers. We did our bit. It was the Australian people (and the Americans of course) who abandoned the South Vietnamese.

I view my war experience in South Vietnam as a very positive one. We did what was asked of us and we did it well. I believe this is the story that needs to be told. I set out therefore to write about what I saw and what I experienced; to inform people about what we did in Vietnam.

We were just a bunch of ordinary blokes.

As I began to write about my experiences, looming over me was the fact that I would have to write about the death of Peter Kowalski whom I served with as his number two machine gunner for more than 12 months. We were together 24/7. We were a bloody good team.

I have just reread chapter 46 where I mention Killer's death. I squibbed it.

It should be quite evident to you that I am not a writer. I last studied English at high school in 1967. My grammar, structure and syntax is at best, 'fair.' My writing lacks an essential element - emotion. There is no emotion in my writing.

There is no emotion in my writing.

This is a decision I took at the very beginning, essentially my emotions about the war are buried very deep inside me and I am unable to relate to you how I feel about my war experience and in particular how I feel about Killer's death. I wish I could talk about the grief, the disabled flight/fight response mechanism and the survival guilt we veterans all carry with us.

I guess that's why they call us "dumb" grunts. We do not share our emotions. Being scared is normal. Everyone is scared when they are confronted with danger, but you can't show your mates how scared you are. Likewise you can't show your grief. You just get on with the job. Whatever happens, you keep doing your job, that's the important thing. If a soldier goes down, he knows that the other blokes will come to his assistance, but he must wait until the area is secured, that is, the enemy threat is neutralised. To do otherwise would be foolish, extremely dangerous and may well cost more lives. Heads have to remain cool. We bury our emotions and get on with it; then and now.

My emotions have been buried for 40 years. I am unable to share them with you now.

Sorry.

Chapter 48

Life Without Killer

Roy, Ashes and Harry the Black (I write about Harry later)

The Padre, OC, Capt B, Mick, the platoon Sgt, Big Julie, Ashes and further back on the right, AB Morris. Russell is near the APC

I last spoke about Digger and me sitting and sharing a brew after Killer's death. It took a while for him to open up and explain to me what happened.

He spoke slowly and deliberately, not looking at me, but staring down at the ground. I knew he was suffering badly. He said they followed a track not far from a village. There were two explosions. He said that Killer was still conscious after being badly wounded although he seemed bewildered and he did not seem to comprehend what was happening. His wounds were horrific. The Dustoff chopper was there in 30 minutes. Killer was still alive when they put him on the chopper.

Crispy too was badly wounded. You know that saying, *never volunteer*. Crispy (I referred to him as Ian C previously, but we called him Crispy) was due to go home. His time as a Nasho was up. When time was short, blokes spent their last few days safely back at The Dat. It seemed the company was down a sig and Crispy volunteered to carry the radio. I recall his ranting and raving and then volunteering to go on his last operation. I think his words were, "All right, youse pricks, I'll carry the flamin' radio!"

Poor bastard. He volunteered and then got blown up.

His first objective when he went down was to try and get his radio working. But it was fucked. How's that for commitment to task? Although he was probably in shock, he was still focused on his job.

Crispy's legs were in a bad way. We had a great medic in Doc Lindmark. I never saw him panic; he was quite methodical in his work. When tourniquets are applied to soldiers' limbs, the time is written in red on their forehead. Crispy calmly pulled a pen out of his pocket and handed it to Doc. When he and Killer were aboard the Dustoff helicopter, Crispy propped himself up on an elbow and waved to the blokes as they took off.

They were in Vung Tau hospital within 30 minutes but Killer died on the way.

Crispy lost a leg and had a lot of fragmentation wounds over his body. There was a worry about his manhood, but I can tell you that he married a local girl in Rye Park and they went on to have two kids; and no, they are not as ugly as he is! Before Nashos, he drove trucks for the local shire council and on his return, they acquired an automatic truck so that he could still do his old job. Not a bad effort considering the bad rap Vietnam Veterans were getting in the 70s and 80s.

I got a lot more information from Browny, the forward scout. He blames himself for leading the men into an ambush. Browny was the best scout in the battalion, no risk. The blokes would have followed him anywhere. I know I trusted him completely.

"We fucked up, Knackers!" he said to me. "They told us not to use tracks unless it's absolutely necessary and using the same track twice is a big no no. Digger and me and another couple of blokes went on a recce for our night ambush. We had to go between a plantation, a swamp and a barbed wire fence. A tank track went straight through it, so we used that track and then used it again on our return. After we had a brew we set off again. As I got to a rise, I stopped because something wasn't right, it was too quiet. Barry came up and asked how far the ambush site was and I told him about 200 metres, so we kept going. It was then I heard boom, boom, one after the other. The first explosion was much louder than the second."

The next day the engineers came up and checked out the whole area. There in the mud was the cable from a claymore mine, so one was command detonated and the other was set off using a bamboo pressure switch. A bamboo pressure switch has slits cut in a piece of bamboo. Electrical wire is attached to a nail and a battery. The nail is pushed into the bamboo with the nail near the second wire. The weight of a person stepping on the bamboo forces the nail against the second wire completing the circuit and setting off the mine. Crude but effective.

The OC and the Padre came out and we met them on Route 2. The road was being upgraded by Australian engineers as part of the civil program to support Phuoc Tuy Province. Gee, the Padre and OC looked really clean while we were dirty, grubby and unshaven from living in the field for a couple of weeks. We would've stunk too. They brought us mail and the Padre moved around our platoon having a chat, simply just saying hello and shaking our hands. He was a Roman Catholic priest and he was well known to us and highly respected. I guess you could say he was a good bloke. It makes a difference that someone is prepared to travel out and say g'day just to make sure we were getting on OK after the loss we suffered.

Digger was sent out as he was not coping well and the rest of us remained in the area for about another ten days before returning to The Dat. We did spring a successful ambush but it is all a bit of a blur to me. I think most of us were operating on auto pilot.

When we got back to The Dat, all Killer's gear was gone. It was as if he was never there. I've always thought the Army handled deaths very badly. When a soldier is killed it should be his mates who pack up his gear and make sure his stuff gets to his family. That would give us a chance to grieve.

Moon organised a vehicle to go and see Crispy who was still at the hospital at Vung Tau. Only a limited number could go so I missed out on

seeing him. Even though he was in pain he was in high spirits. I was glad to hear that.

The battalion had a parade a few weeks later for all members in the battalion who were killed. Someone probably thought it was a good idea but I didn't think it was appropriate. It was basically a march on, march off affair with some words being said in between while we stood around in the hot tropical sun. We weren't used to it as we were always in the jungle and didn't get much sun. A few guys started to feel faint. If operational requirements allow it, I think a platoon should be given time to grieve for their mates as soon as it happens, not weeks or months later.

We had completed nine months of our tour by then, three months to go and we were home. I could see the changes in us especially when we got new guys. New guys? Boy, did they have it tough. They were assigned to a platoon, then they didn't see anyone else except the 20-25 men in their platoon. That was their war, just the platoon.

When you first arrived in country your attitude was well, if ya time's up, ya time's up. But after a while you begin to change and you actively ensure that your time won't be up, that you will survive and head home. So you don't take risks, you move silently through the bush, you only talk in whispers when on the move, and when progress stops for a moment, you melt into the trees. Stuff like that.

We often had to pull the new guys aside and explain the facts of life to them. Killer and Crispy's loss really hit us hard as we endeavoured to soldier on. We were dumb grunts but aside from the physical strain on our bodies we were also suffering from grief, a disabled flight/fight response, and survival guilt. It would stay with us for the rest of our lives except that we didn't know it then.

Chapter 49

Snakes, spiders, scorpions, wasps, fireflies, mossies, monkeys, ants, fuckoff lizards and woodpeckers

Woodpeckers?

Yes, I saw my first woodpecker in Vietnam. I knew what they looked like because of the cartoon character. He looked just liked the cartoon version except that the feathers on his head were yellow instead of red. There he wuz, hammering into a tree in the middle of the jungle somewhere in South Vietnam. What a sight! I dunno why but we didn't see many birds in the jungle, but we saw everything else known to mankind that stings, bites and shits on you from a great height.

In the '60s, I got my information about jungle wildlife from the flicks (movies to you guys under 40). Those black and white movies we saw on Saturday arvo showed blokes going on safari and shooting everything in sight. It didn't matter what it was, if it was big and it moved, they shot it. The jungle was a place to be feared, where your life was constantly in danger from carnivores and rampaging elephants.

You wouldn't catch me in the jungle, I was scared of the dark and doubly scared of spiders. When I was a kid in the '60s, my parents were worried about my, ah, I was going to say phobias, but I'd never heard of that word then. I was just scared of certain things.

I think I know why I was scared of spiders. I was the youngest of four boys and I do recollect my eldest brother waking me up one evening and dangling a fake spider near my face. A couple of nights later a spider was on the sheet in front of my face. I saw the outline of something moving. It was backlit by the light coming through the doorway. I leapt out of bed and went running to my mother. I was screaming and yelling a bit too but I think I've always done that.

She tried to calm me down by coming straight into the bedroom I shared with my brother and rolling back the blankets to show me that there was no spider, but there on the sheets was a bloody black spider! I've never recovered. Every night for a week, I searched my bed before going to sleep with the light on.

Our toilet was outside and we didn't have an outside light, so my parents got me a nice lantern style torch that I used as I rushed from the laundry door to the toilet. It kept me safe. No one attacked me.

I could have done with that torch in Vietnam.

Queensland has vicious ants. They were angry bastards about an inch long and they tracked you as you walked past their nest, but I don't recall anyone getting bitten by them. There were ants that lived on a gravel heap and blokes walked near them, dragging their boots over the top of the nest where hundreds of ants would swarm out and try and attack your mates behind you. Living in the field for extended periods meant that we knew about ants, but nothing prepared us for the ants in Vietnam.

Where do I begin?

The worst were the biting ants that lived in trees. They formed a nest by gluing leaves together into a tight leafy cocoon that appeared as a blob in the tree. If you left them alone, they left you alone but brush against their nest and you would be mauled by these small orange biting ants. They weren't all that big but gee, they could bite. Most of the colony lived inside the leafy structure but the soldier ants waited on the outside protecting the nest. Their job was to attack and bite; and they did. The worst case was on the APC as I mentioned earlier where we looked like cowboys at the rodeo as we held on for dear life with one hand while the APCs roared through the trees with us grunts bashing the biting ants with our hats in our free hands.

Next were the trailing ants. These were large columns of ants moving through the jungle, tightly packed together in what seemed an endless stream about a foot wide as they meandered their way along the jungle floor. The ants were carrying pieces of leaves, maybe they were going to a party or something. They seemed to ignore us as they continued on. No one was game to test what they would do if you lay down in front of them. Would they go around or over you? (I should have suggested to the 3 platoon blokes that they give it a try.) On the outside of the moving column were the soldier ants. They were about an inch long and their heads were half an inch long. They were evenly spaced along the column ready to defend the colony. Gee, they had bloody big heads. I was thinking of posting one home to show my parents.

At night if you moved near their column they would emit a shimmering noise that would rise and fall in volume, so we piddled on them.

Ants were so prolific that we had a field signal for them: making a sign with your finger and thumb imitating their pincers. They weren't terribly dangerous, they were just annoying. One time the field signal came down and I started looking for the ants, especially those ones in the trees. As I got to a slight clearing, about 20 metres ahead of me were blokes belting

their trousers with their hats. I assumed they were hitting at the ants on their legs.

Between us was a barren scene with no vegetation, stripped bare. It was a jumble of naked vines, and I could smell honey. I then saw the ants crawling all over the vines. There was a kinda tunnel though the vines so I ducked and ran through the tunnel. I covered the 20 metres very quickly. The honey smell was very strong and I didn't get bitten. Bewdy. I looked down and there were a lot of ants attached to my trousers, so like the others I started to belt them off with my hat. It was then I realised that they were hooked onto me, all their legs were free and they weren't trying to bite me. They were attached to me by hooks on the back of their bodies. The hooks were in the shape of an anchor. Navy ants! They seemed just as dumb too.

While termites often built nests in our packs overnight at least they didn't bite and only once did Killer and I get chased out of our farter by ants. Often things crawled over you at night and as Killer used to say, *if they crawl on, they'll crawl off*, but this time they were biting my face. I would grab them and throw them across in Killer's direction. Pretty soon we were both awake and decided to move, only there was nowhere to go at night in our harbour. To sleep we had to clear a space and that was not possible in the middle of the night so we settled down on the track plan. We told the guys to watch out for us but every hour on the change of picquet we'd get walked over. Bastards.

Next morning we saw the reason for the ants' movement. The gun was placed near a termite mound and some bored bastard started to dig into the mound with his bayonet. This upset the termites, but something else happened. A colony of black ants moved into the termite mound starting WWIII in ant town. Killer and me were sleeping in the path of the black ants.

But that wasn't the only thing. Where I slept on the track plan, a giant bloody spider was suspended above me. You know, those ones that sit in the middle of their web hanging upside down. He could have been sucking blood outa me all night. Although my fear of spiders was still there, this one raised my curiosity more than my fear, probably because he didn't have hairy legs. We studied the web. There was a white zigzag pattern on the web above and below the spider. He was pretty docile even if he was about as big as my outstretched hand. He didn't move when we took a closer look. I also noticed that there were other smaller spiders on the web. They seemed to be clearing dead insects away and placing them together on the side of the web. Amazing.

Yeah, what was really amazing is that I didn't kill him.

We were often sitting in the jungle just listening. That gave me plenty of opportunity and time to observe insects. I noticed a spider on a leaf. He was on the underside of the leaf, not moving. Then I caught the trail of silk as it reflected the light. The silk was streaming out from his body and floating away on the air current. Aha! So that was how they strung their web between branches. Well, that's what I deduced anyway.

There was another insect with hairy legs. We only saw them on a couple of occasions just after it rained, when they would be running around on the forest floor. We called them front end loaders because of the way they moved. They moved slowly and their bodies were soft as we squashed them under our boots. Sum Wun said they were RTA (return to Australia) bugs. Get bitten by those guys and they have to send you home. They were brightly coloured, orange and white.

Killer and I were stripping the gun down when one appeared in front of us. He was about four inches long and he was crawling slowly along the jungle floor with his front legs pushed out in front of him, hence the nickname of front end loaders.

I prodded him with the guide rod from the machine gun. The guide rod is about a foot long and as soon as I prodded him he reared up, exposing his underside and beak. The beak was grappling with the end of the rod and I could feel the vibrations along the rod. I can't recall how it ended but let's just say he didn't get me. A couple of years later I saw a funnel web spider for the first time. It was then I realised that these guys were spiders and that beak was in fact his fangs. The RTA bug was more than twice the size of an Australian funnel web and I was teasing him with the guide rod from the gun just inches away from me. No wonder they call us dumb grunts.

I only saw a couple of snakes, which is good, I think. The first occurred when I was sitting there quietly in the jungle and heard a rustle in the bush in front of me. Then I spotted him, a small snake with a black head. He was slowly moving through the bush when he got level with me and popped his head out to have a gander at my youthful good looks. I wasn't concerned, I just kept observing him although I was ready to bolt if he moved towards me. We gazed into each other’s eyes. I'm sure at another time, at another place we could have developed a relationship. I certainly hope it was female. She then decided to move on.

The second snake encounter was quite different. We had a signal for snakes and when it came down the line, I was once again looking up in the trees because those black and white jungle movies showed me that snakes just drop on you at any time. They wrap themselves around your neck and strangle you to death. Up ahead was an area where some

filtered sunlight came down through the jungle canopy. Sunbathing in the centre of a pool of sunlight was a snake, not just any snake, but a fucking big snake! He was 15 feet long and as thick as my thighs and he had a diamond pattern on his back. I'm pretty sure he was a jungle python. He was not curled up but rather he was strung out in a straight line. Because of the thick jungle we had no option but to tiptoe past only a couple of feet from him.

I was walking beside him as if I was on eggshells. I didn't want to wake him and have him going for my throat. As I got to the end near his tail I tried to stir him up for the rest of the blokes coming through by kicking some dirt on him. He didn't stir. Maybe he was dead, or dumb, just like the guys in 3 platoon.

It didn't take much to stir up some wasps, let me tell you. You only had to go near their nest and they attacked, and in numbers. They darted out, stung, and darted back to the nest; plenty of them. Killer and I got caught in a blitzkrieg by a squadron of wasps. Killer got hit first and I managed to cover my face as I started going backwards through the scrub. They must go for the soft tissue areas on your face because Killer got stung a few times in the fleshy area just above his eyes. I got stung on my ear lobes. We both managed to survive OK with very little sympathy from the blokes who were actually laughing at our antics as we were being attacked. Bastards.

And lastly the fireflies. Sum Wun said if you put them in a jar you could use them as a lantern. We never tried it though so I can't tell you if it works. The fireflies were about the size of a bee and they flew very slowly through the jungle. Their abdomen was the light source - two little rectangular patches that emitted an intermittent green light that pulsated as they flew along. The light was bright enough to light up a person's face so maybe the jar thing would work.

Oops, I haven't mentioned the fuckoff lizards which were really entertaining when you were sitting in the jungle watchin' and listenin' for Nigel. Suddenly from outa nowhere: *fuckoff, fuckoff, fuckoff, fuckoff, fuckoff*. Now let me be clear, I never saw one so I dunno if it was indeed a lizard. All we heard was their call: *fuckoff!* They would do this a number of times in succession. We'd have bets as to how many times they would say *fuckoff*.

And finally, I have to tell you that I was very comfortable living in the jungle - the thicker, the darker, the denser, the better. Living in the jungle for 318 days on operational service in a war zone was a place that I found very peaceful and I felt safe most of the time.

Yeah, I know what ya thinkin': bloody dumb grunts!

Chapter 50

Nursemaiding CHQ

The sigs manning the radios at CHQ

Some big brass drop in to see us

Mick gives Woolly a shave before we meet the grand poobar

After we left *Garth*, things seem to quietened down in the Province. We were still out there patrolling, patrolling, patrolling but Nigel was laying low. I can't say that I was disappointed, but it is right what they say: 95% of warfare is boredom. The only difference was we couldn't relax because out in the jungle there was no front line. The enemy could pop up 25 yards away.

And he did.

When the company was in the field, one of the platoons had to nursemaid CHQ (company headquarters). This group consisted of the boss, Capt B, the CSM, and an entourage of radio operators and other hangers-on. CHQ provided the link from the infantry platoons back to the battalion and the outside world. Communication was vital for this to occur so CHQ was weighed down with a lot of gear including a small command tent that some poor bastard had to carry.

A platoon could complete its necessary drills for a night harbour in less than 30 minutes, whereas the same process took at least two hours with CHQ. So in addition to slow progress through the jungle with these guys carrying all their gear, we also had to set up much earlier in the day; hence we considered nursemaiding CHQ as a bit of a bludge.

Browny, our forward scout, would give those blokes hell. When he had a bee in his bonnet (which was often), he would move very quickly through the jungle with the rest of us struggling to keep up. CHQ struggled along and would often ask us to slow down. The conversation

over the radio would go something like this:

"One Two, *puff, puff,* this is One Four, *puff, puff*, over." I should explain that CHQ would use a radio callsign One Four rather than One Zero for communication to us when we were with them.

Whenever I got a call from CHQ I would be puffing and blowing from the exertion so I was very careful not to let them know that I too was feeling the strain from our quick pace. This required me to take in a bloody big breath and speak to them in my best radio announcer's voice. You know, a silky smooth low toned voice, one that would show them that I was completely in control of the situation: "One Four, One Two, over?"

"*Puff, puff*, this is One Four, *puff, puff*, can you slow down, over?"

A big intake of breath and: "One Two, understand you want us to wait for you, over?" Exhale and suck in more air.

"*Puff, puff*, affirmative, over."

Another big breath, "One Two, roger, out."

"Hey, boss, the wankers from CHQ want us to slow down."

"Fuck 'em. Ah, hang on ... tell Browny to ease up a little."

At times there was a bit of wit over the radio too. One day it was pissing down, "One Two, this is One Four, wet check, over!"

Ha, ha, ha.

Something like that would really lift my spirits and bring a smile to my face. Another time I went with a water party down to a nearby stream to collect water. "One Four, One Two, we are at the Murrumbidgee now, over."

Patrolling along with CHQ in tow often meant that we were just standing there waiting for them to catch up. The weight of our packs would cut into our shoulders so we would melt into a bush (for camouflage), lean over and flick the pack further up onto our backs so the load would be taken off our shoulders. I assumed this position while listening to the OC talk to another officer who was circling about overhead in the CO's chopper. The CO was on leave or something. Suddenly Doc Lindmark who was right behind me opened up with his M16. My first reaction was to dive to the ground. This seemed to take a long time as I floated through the air because gravity slows down when adrenaline kicks in.

I couldn't radio CHQ because the OC had the airwaves tied up talking bullshit to the guy in the chopper and the noise of the chopper was masking the gunfire. Doc was still firing from a standing position. Go Doc. I'm not sure if I could see anything from down where I was, but the guys up ahead began to open up as well. The contact was over in less than a minute.

Doc was really excited. He said he spotted a couple of guys coming right towards us as we were just standing there in the jungle. "What's our guys doing out there?" he wondered to himself. "As I was trying to work out who they were, they got to about 25 yards from me when they turned right and started to parallel us. Then I realised they were the enemy so I opened up on 'em."

As our guys were conducting a sweep to clear the area, the OC must have finally been told what was happening and let the chopper know that we had a contact going on. The chopper took off quick smart.

As the sounds of the chopper faded there was some yelling followed by a couple of bursts of M16 and SLR rounds, then silence. Mal was carrying the second radio for our platoon, "One Zero, One Two Minus, one enemy just died of wounds, over." Cheeky bastard. A further sweep found another dead enemy, the third got away. I think this was the first time CHQ were involved in a contact.

Doc Lindmark was the hero. He had been through a lot. As our platoon medic, Doc worked on the guy who got the top of his head taken off by the chopper. He worked on our platoon commanders, Pat Cameron and Bill Rolfe when they lost their legs. He worked on the enemy soldier in the Nui Dinhs. And more recently, he worked on Killer and Crispy. He saved a lot of lives but he may well have saved more lives by being switched on and hitting the enemy before they even saw us.

It was at about this time that we received some bad news. You may recall that after our platoon commander, Pat Cameron, was badly wounded we had a Kiwi, Lt John Winton, with us for a few weeks before Moon was posted in. John then went on to command one of the Kiwi platoons (we were the ANZAC battalion). John was killed conducting a sweep after an ambush. The ambush started a fire, probably from one of the tracer rounds, and unfortunately one of the claymores that was not detonated when the ambush was sprung was in turn detonated by the fire. John suffered some horrific wounds and died a short time later.

10th March 1971 KIA Lt John Winton

Chapter 51

We Never go first

Ya know, there's a distinct disadvantage being the middle platoon in Alpha company.

At the end of an operation they pulled the platoons out of the jungle in the following order: One, Two, Three.

To mix it up a bit they varied the order to: Three, Two, One.

But us Two platoon boys were not happy. We never got to go first. Being first back at The Dat meant you got that Cottee's cordial first. You got to pack ready to go again first. You got to have a shower first. And, more importantly, you got to read the mail first lying back on your bed while the rest of the company was still returning from the operation all hungry, thirsty and dirty.

We never got to go first.

That was not fair.

So we whinged and whined and ... "tomorrow, 2 platoon will be extracted first at 0900 hours."

"Woo Hoo! First. We'll be back at The Dat by 0930 and have all our jobs done, shaved, showered, clean greens and be reading our mail by 1030 at the latest. Sweet."

We were well prepared in our night harbour. Just 100 yards away was a nice large clearing where all the choppers could land at once. There was a fair bit of spiky bamboo about so we should be nice and safe that night as the bamboo was hard to negotiate by day, let alone by night. Nigel wasn't going to be bothering us. Our moral was high and I wuz feelin' good.

So good in fact that I ate all the food I had left and I also had a delicious guzzle of water. We were always short on water and practised water discipline continuously. That meant that we only took our water in sips, we never drank when we were puffing and sweating as it sweated out onto the body making you just as thirsty again. But some nights it was great to have a guzzle and I was looking forward to doing that in the middle of the night. I could easily last until my next drink at 0930, no risk.

"One Two, this is Albatross Zero Four, over."

"One Two, over."

"Albatross Zero Four, inbound your location figures five minutes. Stand by to throw smoke, over."

"One Two, standing by, over."

We were in the clearing, set out in little groups that Ronnie RAAF called slicks. Upwind was the first group where one of the blokes was tasked to throw the smoke grenade when I gave the signal and the rest of us were in little groups so that the pilots knew where they were supposed to land.

"Albatross Zero Four, throw smoke, over."

I signalled to the guys up front to throw smoke.

"One Two, smoke thrown, over."

But there was trouble up ahead. A fire started near the first group. It must have been from the smoke grenade which worked like an ordinary grenade - pull the pin and throw. It ignites and starts spewing smoke. However we were standing in chest high grass that was as dry as a ... well it was very dry. What the thrower should have done was pull the pin, let the grenade ignite while still in his hand (not terribly dangerous), then throw it on the ground. I betcha it was that dumb bastard KR. That's something he'd do.

I could see the boys trying to bash the flames out but it was taking off big time and I could see them jumping and dancing around the fire all to no avail as it was spreading fast and being fanned by the wind. It was heading for the rest of us standing in the clearing. We had no escape. The clearing was surrounded by spiky bamboo which is virtually impenetrable; you have to cut your way through with secateurs.

"Albatross Zero Four, this is One Two, we have a slight problem here at the moment. Stand by, over."

"Albatross Zero Four, roger, over."

The fire was raging by then. The first groups scattered down towards us. The fire, which had flames leaping ten feet into the air, was funnelling smoke up into the sky. There was no way the choppers could land as we needed to get off the clearing and away from the flames as quickly as possible.

"Albatross Zero Four, this is One Two, we have a problem with a fire on the clearing. It is impossible to land here until we make other

arrangements. Suggest you move on to pick up the others, over."

"Albatross Zero Four, understand you want us to abort, over?"

"One Two, roger. Delay our pick-up until the area is safe, over."

"Albatross Zero Four, roger, over."

"One Two, out."

Shit, that orange Cottee's cordial would have done the trick right then, but we had a serious problem - the fire was heading towards us. Moon made the decision for us to jump through the flames. He had to be kidding, right? I mean we were carrying ammo and stuff. We could get blown up!

That was our only way out, to move to where the clearing was already burnt.

Have you ever stood in front of a raging bushfire watching it flare up ten or fifteen feet in front of you with the grass making multiple exploding noises while you are waiting for it to die down to just a couple of feet so that you and your ammo can safely negotiate your way through the flames?

No, neither have I.

You thought I was exaggerating, eh? That's Mick, the Platoon sergeant, looking a bit worried

There was a lull in the flames, so we rushed it. I ran full pelt and jumped at the right time. I sailed 25 feet above the flames and landed upwind of the fire where the air was clear but the ground was jet black with burnt vegetation still smouldering under my feet. I seemed to be on a barren black plain, standing out unprotected. If Nigel was about we would be goners for sure. He would have us trapped in the open with no cover and the fire would cut off our only escape. In essence we were sitting ducks.

Smithy pointing at the fire for me

Well, so much for being the first platoon back at The Dat. I hope KR was happy with himself (assuming it was KR of course, cough, cough). Now there we were sitting in a black moonscape with no water, no food; and we would be in big trouble if Nigel showed up.

A couple of hours later ...

"One Two, this is Albatross Zero Four inbound your location figures five minutes, over."

"One Two, roger, do you need us to throw smoke, over?"

"Albatross Zero Four (laughs), we know where you are, over."

"One Two, roger, over."

I could see the choppers high up in the sky flying in formation. They usually confirmed our position visually then dropped down out of sight to reappear at treetop level downwind of the clearing. Everything was going OK until they flew over the burnt out vegetation. The downwash from the choppers picked up all the cinders creating a black fog. I couldn't see anything. I had to clamp my hands over my eyes to protect

them from the flying debris. Surely they couldn't land in that chaos?

Well they did. I was usually at the rear of the slicks, on the last chopper out. I was crouched down covering my face when I heard above the normal din of the choppers a swish, swish sound. I looked up and a chopper was coming down on top of me. I scooted out of the way, the chopper landed and I hopped on, unable to see much through the black blizzard.

We lifted off, hurtled down the clearing through the black fog and then suddenly rose above it. I looked back down. We had left some blokes behind!!!

Should we leave them there?

We never asked to go first again.

Big Julie took this photo of me as I was on the radio to Albatross Zero Four.

Chapter 52

I lied to my mates!

I know you are going to find this hard to believe, but I lied to my Cootamundra mates.

I didn't mean it, honest. But the stress of war made me do it. It wasn't my fault.

You see a couple of my mates were writing to me every now and then and I was probably telling them how much of a hero I wuz.

But that wasn't the lie I'm talking about.

This is the lie ...

I wrote and told my mates that I met this girl in Vung Tau, that she was a nurse and guess what? They believed me! What idiots!

Actually I was experimenting with my new Canon EXEE SLR camera. I framed up to a picture in a magazine and took the shot you see here. It was on a slide and I may have got my mates to run a picture off it, I can't recall. But they thought she was great. I did too, whoever she is.

The whole platoon knew about the joke and following a platoon reunion about ten years ago we produced a book about our adventures in Vietnam. The photo appears in the book.

Clockwise

A Chinook about to land on the flight deck.

A Coy CSM Alf Handley (Mother).

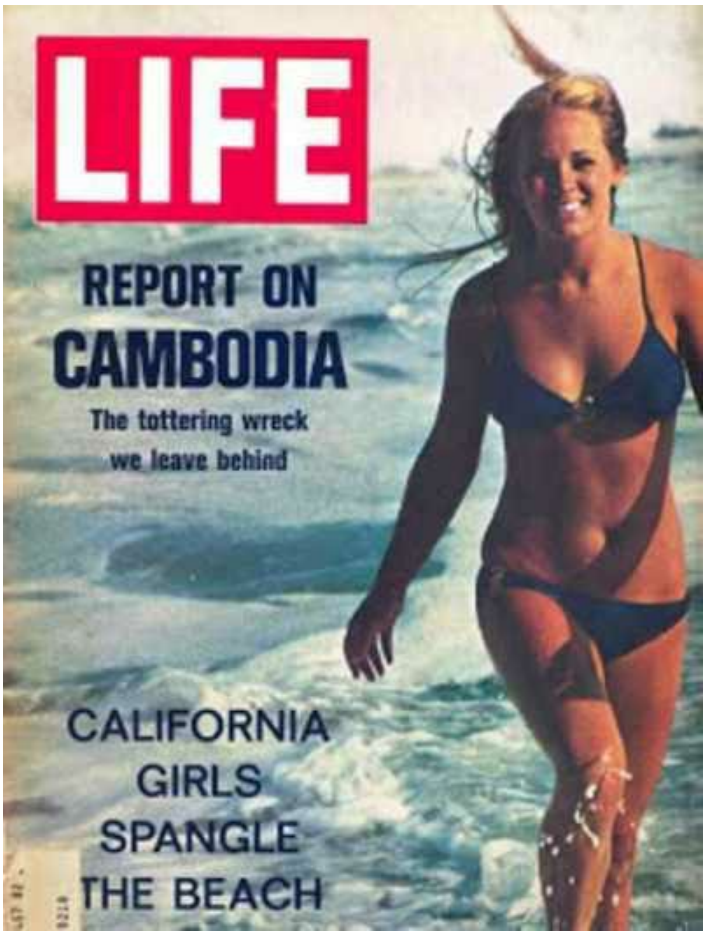
"Caucasian Dreams". A picture Ian Cavanough took from a magazine early in the tour and sent it home to mates telling them how he met this nurse in Vung Tau. The rest of the Platoon had pictures of the real thing but told Ian they cut it out of a Pix Mag ... and of course Ian believed them.

Neil Baldwin has an eye for the camera while Maurice Dwyer and Bill White concentrate on the cards.

The caption reads, *"Caucasian dreams. A picture Ian Cavanough took from a magazine early in the tour and sent it home to his mates telling them how he met this nurse in Vung Tau. The rest of the platoon had pictures of the real thing but told Ian they cut it out of a Pix Mag ... and of course Ian believed them."*

Hmmm, I think they were having a go at me there.

This is the actual magazine. The girl's name is Katie O'Pace McCauliff.

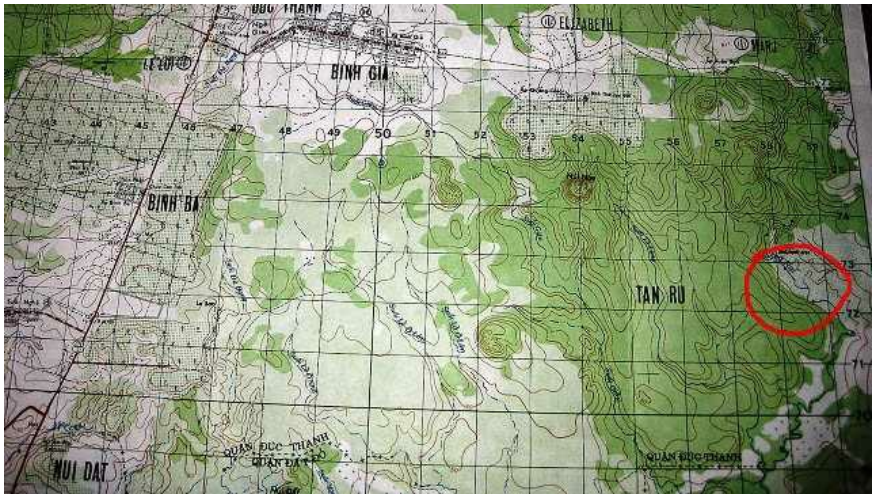


Life Magazine July 1970

Chapter 53

We Sojourn to Tan Ru with 3 RAR

It seems 3 RAR needed some help, so Alpha Company was placed under operational control of 3RAR's CO. The callsign of 2 platoon changed to Five Two and we headed off north east of The Dat to Tan Ru, Xuyen Moc District.



The plan was simple, 3RAR would sit on their arses while we did all the work. Alpha Company, with its three platoons, would move forward across a front about a kilometre wide and head towards the rifle companies of 3RAR who would be the blocking force (read: sit on arse).

1 platoon, callsign Five One, was moving along the Song Rai checking for enemy activity using the river as an axis while we were up on the high ground moving in the same direction. I dunno where 3 platoon were, they must have been nursemaiding CHQ.

As a sig you get to identify each voice using the radio. 1 platoon's commander, Pat S, called up the boss: "Five Zero, this is Five One, fetch Sunray, over."

A good sig could recognise the voice of 1 platoon's commander and if the OC was nearby he would simple pass the handset to him telling him that Pat S was on the radio.

"Five Zero, Sunray, over."

I think I mentioned elsewhere that the term 'sunray' is used to denote the boss of that callsign.

"Five One, are there any friendlies in my area, over?"

"Five Zero, ah, no, over."

"Five One, roger, I have come across a track that is fresh and has been used by a large number of people, over."

"Five Zero, there are no friendlies in the area, over."

"Five One, roger, we'll follow it up, over."

"Five Zero, be careful, over."

A few minutes later the radio lit up with a contact reports from Five One. It sounded like a heavy contact. When you are stressed, the voice goes up in pitch as blokes scream into the radio handset.

Meanwhile we were still on the high ground in two separate groups and I was with Mick. 1 platoon was in trouble, they had hit a large number of enemy who were dug in and wanted to stay and fight. In all the contacts we experienced in the last 10 months, the enemy tried to flee when we engaged them.

1 platoon was particularly gung-ho and regularly chased the VC as they tried to flee, but this time it appeared they were pinned down. It wasn't like that in our normal AO west of Route 2. We were in D445 territory and those guys were battle hardened. They were part of the force that engaged the Australians in the Battle of Long Tan in '66.

Our platoon regrouped with CHQ, loaded up with as much ammo as we could, left our packs behind and we ran down the ridgeline towards the enemy. By now you would know who was leading us: that's right, Browny; and was he steaming through the jungle at a great rate of knots with us trying to keep up with him. The jungle was not as thick as most of the stuff back in our AO so we were able to make good time without the need of secateurs to cut our way through. We were generating some noise, putting us at risk of an ambush but 1 platoon was in trouble so we powered on through the jungle. Normally we patrolled slowly and quietly and keenly observed our proposed route for mines, booby traps or anything else that didn’t look right, including fire lanes. (Fire lanes are areas in the bush where the vegetation is thinned out to give a better view from a static location such as a bunker system; and the fire lanes are covered by automatic weapons.) No doubt Browny's brain was working overtime, quickly assessing what he saw in front of him.

Suddenly a medium sized machine gun opened up in front of us. A

slower, heavier, meatier rattle. A distinct sound that could be heard above the AK-47s. Browny reported low barbed wire entanglement. There were probably mines and booby traps as well. We closed up, hit the deck and returned fire. The rounds were cracking overhead at a great rate; the enemy had a lot of firepower. Normally leaves and twigs fell down around us, but this time the rounds were booming past and knocking bloody great branches on top of us - maybe they had a 12.7. A bloody 12.7! That meant more than a platoon size enemy group, maybe two platoons.

Luckily the rounds were going way over our heads, they were poorly trained, they weren't as good as us but they did have much more firepower and they were in well-prepared positions. We, by contrast, were like shags on a rock with very little cover. Moon took some men and tried to move to the flank but it was too dangerous. It seemed the enemy were between us and 1 platoon and we couldn't get to them.

The radio was going off its head as Moon was trying to get an appreciation of what was happening. Certainly there was maybe a company sized group of enemy, heavily armed and probably dug in just a few yards in front of us. We numbered 24, the enemy was at least three times that. An attack was not on the cards. Indeed we were pinned down to a certain extent. We could not go forward, but we could easily withdraw. However, it did take the heat off 1 platoon as the enemy had to contend with a fight on two fronts while we remained there exposed.

Two helicopter gunships arrived, not the you-beaut Cobra gunships, but heavily modified Huey gunships from 9 Sqn. Ronnie RAAF was coming to the rescue. They were called Bushrangers, quite an appropriate title. I've got to hand it to those guys, when you consider that each time they flew over the battle zone, all enemy weapons were trained on them, yet when they talked on the radio they seemed as calm as anything.

We were told to mark our location with smoke grenades. We had plenty. The two Bushranger gunships would "offload their ordnance" on the enemy which were between us and 1 platoon. In they came, adding more chaos to the scene. Being pinned down by heavy machine gun fire meant that I could barely see what was happening 25 yards away, so I relied on identifying sounds to get a picture of what was going on around me. Moon had the radio to his ear but I could still hear plenty of chatter. Our boys were engaging the enemy with our machine guns and small arms fire as the Bushrangers made their run. The rattle of the mini-guns could be heard clearly above the din of the battle. Hot extracted cartridges were falling down on top of us and the rounds from the Bushranger's mini-guns nearly hit us. We were way too close. Moon decided to move

us back a bit further. We moved cautiously using fire and movement. The last thing we wanted was to be hit by "friendly fire". And we were starting to run low on smoke grenades.

The gunships did a couple of strafing runs which were followed by loud explosions.

"Mortars! Has the enemy got mortars?" Mick asked.

I won't say he was panicking, but he was certainly wide eyed. Indeed some others in the platoon thought it was mortars as well. I reckoned they were rockets fired by the Bushrangers. That was the first time we had heard them up so close but I could discern the "shiiirrrsttt" noise before they impacted. It had to be rockets from the choppers. Mick told me to ask the choppers if they were firing rockets. I didn't wanna do that, so I ignored him.

Mick glared at me and said, "Ask them."

"OK."

I took a big deep breath and in the calmest radio announcer type voice that I could muster, I pressed the switch and talked: "Bushranger this is Five Two, over."

"Five Two, this is Bushranger 77, over."

"Five Two, can you confirm you are firing rockets, over."

"Bushranger 77, affirmative, over."

"Five Two, roger, be advised we are running low on smoke, over."

"Bushranger 77, roger we will drop smoke for you, standby."

A chopper made a low pass over us, I could hear the enemy firing at him as he hurtled overhead. "Five Two, this is Bushranger 77, smoke dropped, over."

"Did anyone see the smoke?" yelled Mick.

Word came back that it was dropped over towards the enemy. No one was going to go over and look for it; that was too dangerous.

"Bushranger 77, this is Five Two, drop no good. Please drop further west over."

"Bushranger 77, roger, standby."

He came over a second time, the enemy were waiting for him and they opened up on him again. We saw the bag! The smoke grenades were in a hessian bag that Roy and Browny grabbed and added to our supply.

"Five Two, we have the bag. Thank you, over."

"Bushranger 77, roger, out."

There was barely a break in transmission on the radio. Sometimes a buzzing sound was heard as two people tried to transmit at the same time. I doubt if the enemy had jamming equipment as it would have been continuous. I heard Barry's voice. He had been one of our section commanders but was then 1 platoon's sergeant. He had a Dustoff request in and within minutes the Dustoff had arrived.

"Five One, Five One, this is Dustoff, inbound your location, figures five minutes. Standby to throw smoke, over."

"Five One, standing by."

"Five One, this is Dustoff, throw smoke, over."

Something terrible had happened. I heard Barry yell over the radio, "Dustoff, come back, come back!"

Gee, had the Dustoff taken off without the wounded blokes? 1 platoon must really have been in the shit and we were stuck there on the other side feeling really helpless. To make matters worse the choppers were running out of fuel and they asked 1 platoon if they wanted all their ordnance delivered before they left. Five One answered with a simple "Yes, please."

"Five One, Five One, this is Bobcat One and Bobcat Two, over."

It's the fucken Yanks!

"This is Five One, over."

"We are in the area if you guys need a hand at all."

I didn't catch the rest of the exchange, but Bobcat One and Bobcat Two didn't drop any stuff.

Once the gunships were gone the artillery started to arc up and pound the enemy. Shit, it was close. We could hear the rounds coming over our

right shoulder and then "clomp, clomp, clomp" just ahead of us. Not only was the noise deafening but I could "feel" the explosions in the back of my throat of all places as the percussion hit me. In addition, shrapnel was whizzing through the trees above us.

Things were grim. But it must have been much worse in those enemy bunkers.

It was getting close to dark when the choppers came back for another go. Gee, that must take some coordination between all parties - we couldn't have the artillery firing while the choppers were in the area. It seemed the APCs had also arrived to help 1 platoon.

We moved back onto a small knoll and adopted all-round defence for the night. We didn't have any packs with us, no food unless someone had managed to stuff a can of something into their webbing but my guess is they were full of ammo when we left CHQ. No brew gear, no sleeping gear and I was also low on water. Nobody was saying much. A pretty big battle had raged that afternoon and we knew that 1 platoon had some casualties. All we did was get pinned down. We felt dejected that we couldn't help them. My spirits must have been particularly low. I was lying there beside the radio in platoon headquarters. There were 24 of us in a little circle on that small knoll and just a short distance away was the enemy, a large number of enemy. If they came up the ridgeline, they would be through us in a matter of minutes. We wouldn't have stood a chance.

My worried expression must have been written all over my face. Tiny came up, looked at me and said, "Don't worry, Knackers, it may never happen." I managed a grin, I think.

The artillery was intermittent by then. Every now and then we'd hear it coming, a few more "clomp, clomp, clomps" and more shrapnel whizzing past. Oh, I nearly forgot. The artillery shells were 105s. But the Yanks had a 155 battery and they were also engaging the target. The 155s had a different sound in the air, almost a buzzing sound, and boy when they hit the ground the whole place shook and the back of my throat also took a bigger pounding.

I didn't think I'd get much sleep that night.

Chapter 54

The aftermath of the battle of Tan Ru

We survived the night without incident. Well, there was a constant artillery barrage, shrapnel whizzing through the trees and we were wondering just when the enemy, who by then must have had a giant headache and be really pissed off, would come screaming over the hill at us with fixed bayonets.

Surprisingly, I managed a few hours' sleep. It just goes to show once more that dumb grunts can sleep anywhere. That night we carried out our normal routine. That is, once down, we sent out clearing patrols and stood-to until nightfall. The three guns were placed strategically around our little circle of pits. Did I say pits? We were just on the ground. It may have been appropriate to dig in but all our gear was back at CHQ, a few hundred metres away. We manned two guns during the night, that way we managed 6 hours sleep. If we were attacked the third gun could easily be used to engage the enemy. It was very unlikely that they would surprise us. The jungle was our friend at night. If the enemy decided to come looking for us, they would find it very difficult to move quietly and their sounds would telegraph their movements.

We were sitting ducks though. We didn't have any claymore mines to break up enemy movement as those too were with our gear at CHQ. That left our small arms weapons and Woolly's M79. We were no match for the enemy. I dunno why we were left there and not allowed to return to 3 platoon and CHQ.

Dawn. It was eerily quiet.

Nuthin.'

We wanted to go back and have a go at the enemy but that was impossible just by ourselves. We were extremely frustrated and dejected when given the order to move back to CHQ and 3 platoon. We all felt it was important for us and what was left of 1 platoon to go back and take out the enemy. But the CO 3RAR had a different plan. He wanted Centurion tanks to assist in the bunker assault which 3RAR would carry out without us.

Charlie company 3RAR entered the bunker system two days later. Two bloody days later!

The CO, who was shot down during the battle, waited for the tanks to arrive before taking on the system. And guess what they found? Nothing. Nothing! The enemy had all got away. How's that for fighting the bloody war? We couldn't believe it. 1 platoon had got a licking and we wanted to go in and sort the enemy out, not two days later, but at dawn the very next day - that's what we infantry soldiers do, assemble our resources and hit 'em hard. Not 3RAR apparently. Oh, they found a lot of blood and guts spread about inside the enemy camp, but no bodies. They all got away while 3RAR sat on their arses waiting for the tanks.

The system was about 100 metres from the Song Rai. It covered an area 350 by 200 metres. It contained 32 bunkers with overhead protection. It was estimated there were two companies of D445 plus a heavy weapons group. Dug in.

We never hit anything like that in our AO (Area of Operations) west of route 2. But then again we dominated our AO. How many times had we been in the Nui Dinhs? The Land Clearing Teams? We covered the whole of our AO continuously from the mangrove swamps in the Rung Sat in the south to the Courtenay Rubber in the north, and everywhere in between. We came across many bunker systems and destroyed them, often hitting the caretaker teams. What had they been doing in the area east of Route 2? Nothing, so it seems. We came over to give them a hand and paid the price for their lack of domination of their AO.

Bastards!

1 platoon got hit pretty bad, and there were other losses as well. The CO of 3RAR, who was the operational commander, was trundling around in his Sioux helicopter over the battle area. He got too close to the bunker system and the chopper took a few hits and had to ditch. How stupid is that? Who did he think he was, getting so close to the battle area, General Patton? In effect he hindered the ability of the Bushrangers and the artillery to attack the enemy because his chopper was in the way. On what grounds could he justify getting so close? Sheesh!

Do I sound pissed off? You betcha!

It seems our location on the edge of the bunker system caused a few problems for the Bushrangers also. Maybe we should have disengaged from the enemy a lot earlier and let them get on with it. We stayed close to the enemy so that they had to deploy some resources to keep us at bay thus taking some heat off 1 platoon. That meant we had to indicate where we were to the Bushrangers by smoke grenades so that they could brass up the area between 1 platoon and us - that's where the enemy were. We started to run out of smoke grenades. The Bushrangers were

prepared for that and carried bags of smoke grenades which they dropped to us. But the enemy ended up with some smoke grenades and started popping smoke which caused the confusion when the Dustoff arrived. You will recall that I heard Barry on the radio calling the Dustoff to "come back". It seems they failed to follow the simple procedure of identifying the colour of the smoke they saw and have 1 platoon confirm the colour they threw. This didn't happen and the chopper drifted over towards the smoke the enemy threw. The Dustoff got hit pretty hard by small arms fire, seriously wounding one of the crewmen who later died of wounds.

1 platoon were pinned down for a long time. Both machine gunners closest to the enemy had their weapons rendered inoperable by incoming fire. Yogi told me that there was a line of muzzle flashes all across his front when the contact started. The contact was initiated by 1 platoon who surprised the enemy. Yogi got a stoppage at one stage. His gun stopped working due to a mis-feed. We practised a drill to get the gun working, but it required you to cock the weapon, raise up and clear the feed plate. Yogi said there was no way he was going to get up on his knees so he rolled over onto his back and tried to clear the gun with it held up above him. He succeeded in clearing the stoppage but not before some hot cartridges fell onto his chest and "burnt the fuck out of me!"

Not far from Yogi was Paul B. His gun got shot up as well. He got hit by a satchel charge in the guts and a gunshot wound to the thigh. After the platoon disengaged from the enemy by fire and movement, he walked to the evacuation APC when Assault Pioneer platoon from 3 RAR came to them late in the afternoon. How's that for a tough bastard?

In the thick of the battle, Lex A was not so lucky. As the battle was raging very fiercely, Lex A exposed himself to enemy fire to throw a grenade. A few moments later he threw another grenade from exactly the same position and he was fatally wounded in the neck by small arm's fire.

Eight members of 1 platoon were wounded. In addition, one member of Assault Pioneer platoon was wounded during the evacuation.

At the end of the battle, friendly casualties were ...

31 March 1971 KIA 1201945 Lex Adams, A111550 Alan Bloxsom (9Sqn)

WIA 1735670 T Elliott, 2792501 P Bateman, 2794514 G Missingham, 218937 K Brown, 218886 M Price, 3790851 A Povey, 1202328 P Wood, 1736448 D Horrigan, 44939 C Fryc (3RAR)

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A few days later, Alpha company had a BBQ at Vung Tau with 9 Sqn where we all got pissed together and talked about the battle. I noticed that the boss of 1 platoon was in animated discussion with one particular fellow from 9 Sqn. I guessed that he was one of the Bushranger pilots.

A little later, I went up to him and introduced myself. "Hi, I was the sig, callsign Five Two." I held my hand out to shake his.

With a beaming smile he took my hand and said, "Ah, Five Two, I was Bushranger 77."

We talked shit for a couple of minutes about how they nearly brassed us up and the problem with the smoke grenades; and then I asked him if he remembered my calling him up to enquire if he was firing rockets. I mentioned that many of us thought the enemy were using mortars.

He patted me on the back and said, "Yeah, I remember hearing that squeaky little voice of yours on the radio."

I should have decked him then and there.

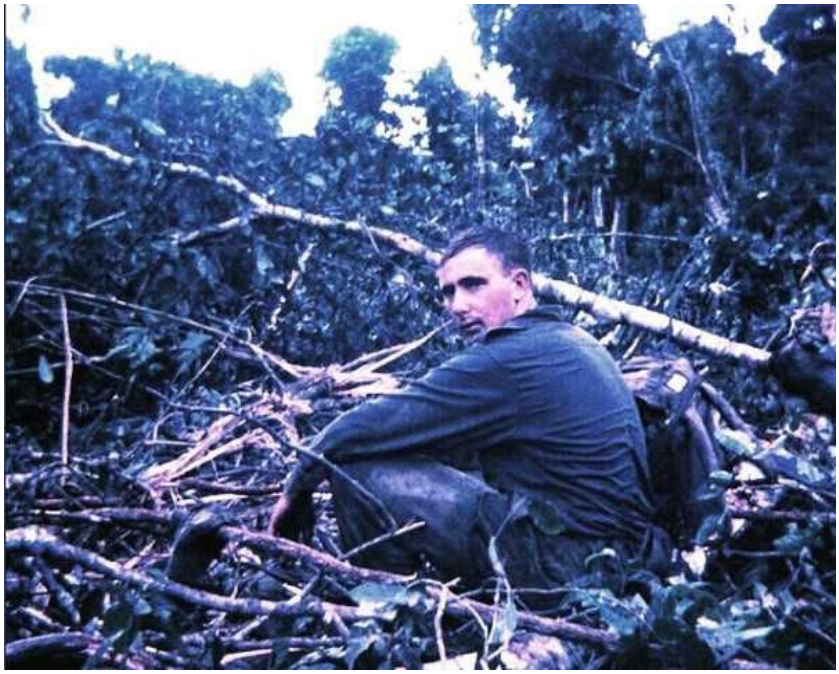
Chapter 55

Our Time is getting short

You know how your mood changes during the working week? Who likes going to work on Mondays? Isn't that where the word *Mondayitis* comes from? But as Friday approaches you start to look forward to the weekend and getting away from work. Well, it was the same in Vietnam. We had been in country 10 months, probably at the low point in the week so to speak. We were looking forward to only two months of patrolling and we'd be home free.

But all this did was increase the pressure on us to survive. To keep risk to a minimum, to be cautious but at the same time not to back away from a fight. 2 platoon had completed 290 days on operations by then and I didn't realise the toll it was taking on us until I was looking at some photos the other day.

Here are Smithy and Browny, our two great forward scouts ...



Smithy

Smithy is wringing wet, not because of the rain, but from sweat because of the exertion and pressure of being a forward scout. You may recall I did three days in the Nui Dinhs and that was enough for me. Both Smithy and Browny did it for 12 months!

Browny won't be happy with this photo. As you can see he was totally stuffed. There's nothing more for me to say - a picture is worth a thousand words.

Both of those photos were taken by Digger who was not fairing too well either.

Digger looks like he needs a decent feed, a good lie down and a shave as well! He's seen here holding an RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade) round. This item was among many things we found in an enemy camp. As you can see by the fireplace, the camp was in use for some time although not recently.

These are stark images indeed!

I don't have to tell you that we were again east of Route 2. As our time was getting short we were operating more as a company group - there was safety in numbers particularly after the mauling we got from D445. Well they got a mauling too. We used to patrol in half-platoon numbers of about 10 to 12 soldiers back over in our AO west of Route 2, but over on the east side, it seemed the enemy had a bit of a free reign. We had no idea what we would be up against so we played it safe and stuck together as a larger group.

The area was not jungle, just dried out bush. The dry season had taken its toll on the vegetation which meant there was less shade and it was quite hot with the sun's rays penetrating though the canopy. Patrolling in these conditions was gruelling. As we patrolled through the dried out

scrub, a lot of debris in the form of leaves, sticks and dust fell down and lodged on the back of our necks. There it mixed with our sweat and got ground into our flesh by our webbing. We used sweat rags to cover the back of our necks but it was still very uncomfortable, especially if the next shower was three weeks away.

From the company base, 2 platoon patrolled out on our assigned route. One of the other platoons was doing the same thing in a different direction while the third platoon nursemaided CHQ. You should be familiar with this by now. The radio I was carrying did not get much use when we were all travelling together and for that reason, I was being a bit lax. I assumed that the battery would be OK - a bad mistake. Because we were travelling light, I didn't carry a spare battery with me - it was in my pack. Prior to our departure, I conducted a radio check with One Zero and everything seemed to be working OK.

About 200 metres out, the scrub opened up. The marked reduction in undergrowth was a clear sign of enemy activity. We inched forward very cautiously, the forward scouts working overtime for signs of enemy and mines and booby traps. We propped and the boss went forward to have a look around. I tried to raise One Zero but even though I could hear them OK I could only transmit for a second or two. The fucken' battery was flat. How stupid was I? If we contacted the enemy, we'd be in deep shit and there we were with evidence of enemy activity right in front of us!

I was able to transmit the words "flat battery" without any other words normally associated with radio procedure and Mother understood and said he was sending a fresh battery out to us. We were only ten minutes away and our tracks would be easy to follow. Boy was I lucky.

Nigel's camp was empty and had been like that for more than a week. We had a good look around, wary of booby traps but we found a fair bit of stuff. Some weapons and ammo, but most of it was food. I saw a hollow in a tree and I gingerly went up to it, checking the ground for anything unusual and I peered in. There down in the hole was a package wrapped in what appeared to be brown paper. I called Mick over to have a look. As he did, I stepped back a bit. In no way was I inquisitive, I was too worried about booby traps to be curious, something that stayed with me for the rest of my life. If I saw something, I just left it there without going near it. Mick hauled the parcel out of the tree and unwrapped it. It was rice.

Tiny noticed some disturbed dirt. He too was very careful as he prodded the dirt with his bayonet in case it was a mine. He hit something soft so he started digging around and he too came up with a parcel with something wrapped inside. He called out to the boss that he had found something and eagerly unwrapped it. You could imagine his

disappointment when he uncovered some dry fish. The smell stayed on his hands for three days.

Over in Digger's section they were uncovering some weapons and ammo - AK-47s, ammo and RPG rounds that Digger posed with above. We spent most of the day checking the area out.

Nigel was nowhere to be seen.

This camp was unusual because there were no bunkers. Wherever we went in Phuoc Tuy Province, we came across enemy bunkers. In the swamp of the Rung Sat, the bunkers were raised up above high tide level. They were made out of mud and looked like igloos. In the Nui Dinhs, there were conventional bunkers with overhead protection. Same same north of the Nui Dinhs right up to the Courtenay Rubber in the far north of the province. Bunkers everywhere, mostly of the same design. One important aspect I failed to mention is that there was no rubbish around any of them. They were clean. C-L-E-A-N. Nothing in those places but the structures. No items, no bits of clothing or other stuff lying around. Nuthin'.

We rarely came across tunnels. The only tunnel system I saw was near a village and the opening had been exposed. I looked into the entrance to the system. It was a pit about four feet deep and two feet square. What impressed me was how straight the walls were even though only basic tools were used by the VC. The entrance to the tunnel system was about half way down one of the side walls, just a little opening, again quite square in shape and it was so small I doubt if I could have fitted in.

Just think about this for a moment. If a soldier went to enter the tunnel he has to drop down into the pit first. This exposed his genital area to the opening of the tunnel. He would be a sitting duck for anyone hiding inside. We had engineers who went down into these systems with nothing more than a torch and a pistol. They must have been mad. There was no way I could have done that.

I think I had reached the high point in my career as a dumb grunt. I was no good as forward scout. I was pretty good as a number two machine gunner but there was no way I could go back to that job because in effect the number two is a pack mule. I couldn’t do that engineer stuff of blowing things up and searching tunnels – a bloke could get killed. No I guess I was stuck as platoon sig – you know, the guy with the squeaky little voice on the radio.

Chapter 56

Am I Dreamin'?

We were heading for Chau Luc rubber plantation in the northern part of Phuoc Tuy Province, not far from the Courtenay rubber. You may remember we were there a few months before in January/February when Killer was killed. We were going back to do some more ambushing. That was much better than stumbling around the jungle and finding Nigel waiting for us in his bunker systems. We were apprehensive because we only had six weeks left in country. But ambushing was good.

“Knackers, Knackers ...”

“Huh?”

“Saddle up, Knackers. We move in five,” whispered Moon.

Shit, something must be up. We were in a harbour-come-ambush setting, it was still dark and we were going to move? I checked my watch. It was 0430. I slid out of my silk and pulled on my boots. They were laced with one single long lace – all I did was pull them on and tighten the laces – ezy in the dark. I quickly rolled up the silk and groundsheet and stuffed them in my pack, took a swig of water, had a leak. I was ready to go.

We didn’t normally move at night, it was too risky. Not only could we get

ambushed, but it is also quite easy for us to lose contact with each other and become separated. In the dark all shadowy figures look alike, and scary.

After about twenty minutes of slow progress we were lined up in a ditch, dawn not far away. I peered into the blackness and made out a couple of huts about 80 yards ahead. Must have been a village. I could see smoke drifting ever so faintly from inside the village, but no activity. I made myself as comfortable as I could and waited.

Suddenly over to the left came the tell-tale sound of mortar primaries going *pop, pop, pop*. Seconds later the rounds were landing on top of us. A combination of blinding light, deafening explosions and trembling earth unleashed its fury. Dirt and debris was raining down on top of me. Moon gave the order to move forward. We certainly couldn't stay there but where the hell were we going to go?

Instantly we were on the village.

"Keep moving, keep moving!" Moon yelled.

Then it happened. I felt a wave of hot air pick me up and fling me into the air. There was a buzzing in my head. The flash of brilliant light killed my night vision. I was aware of hurtling through the air, yet I wasn't afraid.

Am I dead?

I smashed into one of the huts. It collapsed and buried me under a pile of rubble. My hearing and vision returned as my brain tried to comprehend what was happening. It only lasted for a fleeting moment, then I blacked out.

I woke. I dunno how long I was out to it, but I was aware of sunlight about, though not directly shining onto me. I was lying on my back. I felt a lot of weight pressing down on my body. Breathing was difficult because of the weight on my chest. My whole body was still. I tried to stretch. I could feel my fingers and my toes. A good sign. I twisted and turned, and rolled over onto my belly and tried to get up. The rubble on top of me gave way and I stretched up onto my knees. My back ached but I was in one piece.

As I stepped out of the rubble I could see that the scene around me was very bleak indeed. I smelt a mixture of smoke and cordite. The whole area was devastated. The trees and vegetation were flattened and singed but not burnt. Everything was coated in black. Some stumps were emitting smoke but there were no flames.

Where was everyone?

I checked myself out. My right upper arm was scratched but the bleeding had stopped. My greens were mostly black rather than green. They were ripped and torn. My boots were OK but I had no rifle, no webbing ... and no bloody radio!

Where was everyone?

I heard a murmur over to my right. It was coming from another collapsed hut. I moved towards it. Oh, my right leg hurt a bit too. There was someone trapped in the rubble of the hut. I pulled the dried reeds away and could see the body of a woman dressed in a white blouse and black pyjama pants, a typical South Vietnamese dress. She was struggling. I noticed her eyes were covered by a blindfold and there was another piece of material around her neck. It must have been covering her mouth and she had managed to pull it free. Her hands and feet were bound tightly.

I removed the blindfold. A pair of piercing black eyes stared up at me in terror. Her mouth opened to speak but she said nothing as if her brain was processing something. Her eyes started to crinkle. "Kevin? Kevin?" she shouted.

I stood there just looking at her.

"Kevin, me Lin. You, me, number one, boom boom, Vung Tau. (You will recall that Lin could not pronounce my name, the best she could do was "Kevin.")

"Lin? Is that really you?" I asked.

What in the hell was she doing there? And why was she tied up? I quickly untied her hands and feet. Lin jumped to her feet, threw her arms around me and gave me a big pash on the lips. She never did that last time we met and besides I could tell she had garlic with her last meal.

Lin went on to tell me that she wasn't a free woman in Vung Tau. Her parents were very famous people in North Vietnam when she and her mother were kidnapped for ransom money. Her mother was kept under guard at Baria and she was made into a sex slave. She couldn't escape otherwise they would kill her mother.

"So how come you ended up here?" I asked.

"My mother die, so me escape from Vung Tau. Me hitch ride north but White Mice catch me, hold me here."

“Well maybe I can help, come with me.” I took Lin’s hand and headed east towards the main road. “We should be able to flag down a passing military vehicle.”

“Dừng lại!” (Stop) A male voice rang out from behind us.

We turned and faced two men, both with AK-47s, about 50 yards away. Their weapons were pointing right at us. I picked up a lump of wood, faced the two men and pushed Lin behind me.

The men were dressed in khaki uniforms. They were NVA. They were both in their twenties, one was tall and one short. They moved in closer. A smirk covered the face of the shorter soldier.

“You drop stick, GI.”

“I’m not a GI, you dumb piece of shit. Me Uc da loi.”

“Ah, Uc da loi, drop stick, now,” he demanded, shaking his rifle in my direction.

They came in close, weapons pointing at me. The taller soldier was facing me, the shorter guy off to my right.

“Quay lại.” (Turn around)

I did as Shorty demanded - I turned around. Stretch grabbed my arms, pulled them behind my back and tied my hands together.

I turned back around and faced Stretch. He was nearly my height, unusually tall for a Vietnamese. He had acne scaring on his face. His eyes were bloodshot and he was smirking. He was an ugly son of a bitch.

We locked eyes, then I smashed my forehead into his nose, spreading it across his face as blood splattered all directions. He fell like a rock. Before Shorty could bring his AK up to fire I stabbed my right leg out, my foot parallel to the ground as I hit the side of his right knee. His leg collapsed inward. He yelped, dropped his rifle and crumpled to a heap on the ground. Stretch was on his elbows and knees, holding his face in his hands. I kicked him in the guts to open up his body. He half rolled away from me and as his hands dropped away from his face, I drove my boot into it.

“Take that, Nigel, you ugly prick!”

His body flattened out and he was still. I spun back to Shorty and kicked him again. I collected his face with the heel of my right boot as I swung

my leg with plenty of power and a good follow through, just like a footballer kicking a goal at fulltime to score the winning points against Manly. He sprawled onto his back. He was out cold.

"Quick, Lin, untie me."

I grabbed both AK-47s and we ran east to the road. It was deserted. Normally there was plenty of traffic about. We sat down on the side of the road and waited. I suggested we head south to Nui Dat. Lin said she wanted to head north, back home to her father.

Soon a motorcyclist appeared from the north, he was travelling at a fair clip of speed. I walked out onto the road and pointed the rifle at him with my right hand and held my left hand up with my palm facing towards him – the universal halt sign. The rider pulled up quickly. I motioned for him to get off the bike and sit in the ditch on the side of the road.

"I'll trade your bike for this AK-47," I said as I removed the magazine, took all the rounds out, placed it back on the weapon and threw it down beside him. I grabbed the bike, tossed the crate of chickens off it and said, "Hop on, Lin."

I gunned the 125cc Honda and we headed north towards the coast.

Pretty soon we came to a coastal township, somewhere unaffected by the war. Lin urged me to stop and she disappeared into a shop. She emerged seconds later and headed for a phone booth. She spoke on the phone for about ten minutes while I sat there on the Honda admiring the women passing by in their Ao Dais.

"I get picked up tomorrow at dawn," said Lin with a gleam in her eye.

I looked at my watch and it was 1500, dawn was at 0600. "I need some food and water." I motioned over towards a hotel.

We entered the foyer. We were both extremely grubby and dirty and I had the AK-47 slung over my shoulder. I told Lin to trade the AK-47 for a room and some food as I slumped down in a chair. I was totally rooted.

A few moments later Lin returned with a smile on her face and the keys to a room in her hand. "This way," she said.

Room 79, eh? Woolly would be pleased. Hey, the blokes? I didn't know what happened to them. How did we get separated? Were they out searching for me?

"Kevin need shower." Lin removed my greens and noticed the wound on

my arm. “Poor Kevin.”

“It’s only a scratch, Lin,” I said as she led me to the shower and started to wash me. She gently massaged my body, dried me off and made me feel a whole lot better as only a woman can do for a man. I fell asleep before room service arrived.

Lin woke me at 0500 with a hot breakfast of toast, eggs and coffee. I demolished the lot. Then we made love again and I took another shower. I emerged from the bathroom and there on the bed were my greens, washed and ironed. I picked them up and I could see that the torn pieces were expertly sewn and repaired. My boots were black and shiny and there was a clean pair of socks laid across the top of them.

“Take me to beach?”

“What’s happening, Lin?”

“Me ring father, they pick me up at 6.”

“Who’s they? What does your father do?

“My father, he king of North Vietnam.”

“King? What do you mean, King?

“Me part of North Vietnam royal family, me Princess Lin.”

“A bloody princess? You’re joking, right?”

“You save my life, Kevin. Come with me, you will be rewarded.”

“I can’t leave my mates behind – they need me, Lin. I must find them.”

“You take me to beach?”

“OK, I’ll take you to beach.”

The Honda was stored out back. It fired up easily and the headlight worked OK. Not a bad trade for an AK-47. We rode down to the beach, got off and walked to the southern end of the beach. We sat down and Lin cradled in under my sore arm. She looked up into my eyes and gave me another great pash on the lips. What in the world did she have for breakfast? More garlic?

Then I heard it. The unmistakable sound of a helicopter, a large helicopter. It was coming in from the east, heading straight for the

southern part of the beach. Lin flashed a light a couple of times and it loomed out of the darkness - a bloody giant Russian helicopter!

It landed on the beach. Lin asked one more time for me to go with her. I told her that was impossible. She looked into my eyes, gave me a tender kiss and said, "Me never forget Kevin. Lin love Kevin."

"Kevin love Lin too," I whispered.

She turned and ran to the helicopter. The engines roared, it lifted off, turned, and with its nose down, flew back out to sea. I paused there on the beach for a long time. What the hell was that all about, I wondered. Then reality kicked in. I returned to the hotel, room 79, ordered more food and when my belly was full, I took a nap. I woke at 1000 and began my journey back to The Dat on that great little 125cc Honda.

Mother couldn't believe it when he saw me. "We thought you were captured, Knackers. There's still a group, your old mates from 6 section, out looking for you."

"Well, I'm here now. What's for dinner?"

The boys were happy to see me. Should I tell them about Lin? Would they believe me? I doubted it. So I left out the bits involving Lin. I went back to the Q store and got some new gear. We were due to deploy again in two days. I'd better get my shit together.

The next day the OC called a parade. That was unusual we thought. Capt B was not one to stand on ceremony. So at 0900 we marched down to the company parade ground. The CSM handed over to Capt B who stood there with his hands on his hips. A big beaming smile came over his lips. "Men, the war is over."

There was silence, just a company of dumb grunts standing there with our mouths open.

North Vietnam had instigated a ceasefire. They were withdrawing their troops back north. There would be no more fighting. Well, the company erupted into whoopin' and a hollerin'. Bush hats were thrown into the air. Troops danced around each other, backs were slapped, but there was no kissing.

"OK men, settle down. I guess you want to know how this came about. It seems that the King's daughter was rescued by an Australian soldier, probably one of those elite SAS boys. He was so pleased his daughter was returned safely to him that he pressed the government to introduce an

immediate ceasefire to end the war. The war is over!”

“Knackers, Knackers ...”

“Huh?”

“Your time for picquet, mate ...”

Chapter 57

3 and awakie!

I remember it well.

You see, we were due to come home from our 12 month tour of Vietnam on the *HMAS Sydney*, one of those flat top boats that the Navy sails around in, if you know what I mean. You would expect that when blokes got short, that is, only a few days to go before heading home from the war, the Army brass would pull us out of the jungle to let us wind down and pack our gear for the trip home a little early - like a few weeks prior to the end of our tour. No such luck.

(I dunno why they called it a tour. "*A tour of duty.*" I suppose it sounds better than going on operations in the deepest, darkest jungles of South Vietnam dodging biting ants, stinging wasps, buzzing and biting mosquitoes carrying the deadly malaria virus or whatever it is, snakes, spiders, booby traps, inaccurate VC fire and friendly fire from the Yanks!)

Well, we didn't have a few weeks to pack for home – we had less than 3 days! We were in the jungles of Phuoc Tuy Province up until 3 days before we left the country. I kid you not! Luckily we had a good OC in Capt B. He kept us together as a company while we worked the last few days on operations out in the J. Normally we operated at platoon level, but on our last operation we kept together in one big company group of about 70 soldiers. The last thing we wanted was for Nigel to give us a send-off present. There was safety in numbers.

The last operation went off without incident. We did come across some enemy signs though. One got a certain feeling when operating in the jungle; and there was a definite type of vegetation where Nigel liked to build his bunker systems – slightly raised ground where there were a lot of trees with trunks measuring about 8 inches across. They were great to support overhead protection. And wouldn't you know, the lead platoon, I think it was those gung-ho blokes from 1 platoon, reported evidence of cut trees.

I heard the radio call when the platoon commander of the lead platoon expressed concern that there might be enemy activity ahead because of the cut trees. To his credit, and I guess this isn't in any Army report, Capt B said, "Well, we don't want to take on anything at this stage, so we will move back away from the area." I'm sure he reported the incident to the CO so that 4 RAR could check it out. They were the battalion taking over

from us and at that very moment were steaming, if that's the right word, towards Vung Tau Harbour on that flattop boat.

On our last day out bush, I wrote a message in the ground: "*3 and awakie!"* I wrote it in shaving cream.

We used to get parcels from Australia, many from the RSL sub-branches and other members of the public who supported the troops in Vietnam (not journalists, university students, or politicians). Many packs contained shaving cream, and in the bush where water was at a premium, shaving cream was good for helping us shave. How stupid was the Army. We were supposed to shave every day, however most of us only shaved every now and then, or when someone was coming to visit. The reason? Well, lack of water was the main reason but how stupid was it to scape your face with a blunt razor and risk getting some undiscovered jungle infection; and when your face was nice and clean after the shave you'd plaster cam cream all over it. Lovely!

"*3 and awakie*!"

WOOHOO!

Suddenly we were back at our base camp at Nui Dat, and boy did we have a lot of work to do. We stowed all our bush gear for the 4RAR boys to use, and we had to pack everything into two carry-on bags. That was it. I gave a lot of my gear to Doc, the platoon medic. Doc had a great tour, he saved a few lives, including the lives of two platoon commanders; and he also got a couple of personal VC kills up. So giving him some extra uniforms and boots was a great help to him back home as he was a regular soldier and he went on to complete 20 years' service. I ran into him years later when he was a training Warrant Office at JTC Canungra, but I am getting ahead of myself again.

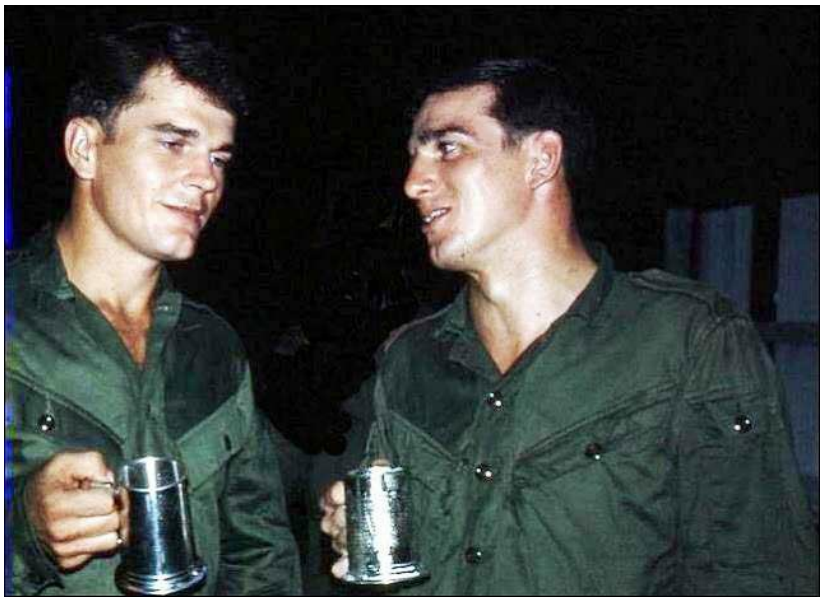
So what did we get up to back at The Dat knowing that we were on our way home?

It seemed such a waste to throw out all those full cans of shaving cream.

The Winner! Or was he the loser?

Naturally we had a big send-off party. Company HQ organised a pewter mug for each of us, inscribed with our nickname. What a very thoughtful gesture, so we filled them and refilled them again with beer and carried on stupid.

You want proof?



Here I am with Jungles. We were together right from the start at Kapooka. I still have the mug though it's showing its age.

This is the inscription on it:

and

But back to the war ...

We all went to bed full of beer and high spirits, thinking that the next day was the start of our journey home. So it wasn't quiet. Blokes just couldn't settle down and someone who will remain nameless (but he was from 1 platoon) decided to give the advance party boys from 4RAR a bit of a thrill. He set his SLR (a semi-automatic weapon) to full auto by placing a match under the sear. He then fired a good 15-round burst into the air. Now an automatic SLR has a very distinctive sound. It is similar to the M60 only the rate of fire is a lot faster, a bit like an AK-47 but the signature has a far deeper sound, far, far, deeper than the M16. So we all knew what it was and rolled over and went back to sleep.

If this had happened early in our tour we would have leapt outa bed, grabbed our shootin' stuff and run to our assigned pits in readiness for the enemy attack!

Apparently they couldn't find the shooter - maybe I should blackmail him and the guy who threw the smoke grenade into the OC's tent all those months earlier.

The next day we headed for home ...

Chapter 58

The '*Sydney*'

The '*Sydney*', as I said, refers to *HMAS Sydney*, the Australian aircraft carrier which was used to ferry Australian troops and equipment to and from South Vietnam during the war. It was often referred to as the "Vung Tau Ferry".

If you haven't seen that boat, I'd like to describe it to you. It was a bucket of bolts. Right then it was anchored off Vung Tau harbour with its escort ship, *HMAS Duchess,* nearby. On board were the soldiers from the 4th Bn., The Royal Australian Regiment. Looking after them were a bunch of ugly, dumb Navy guys.

The plan was to fly us from Nui Dat by Chinook helicopter - about a 20 minute ride - drop us on the flight deck - a technical Navy term for a grey rusty airstrip on the boat - pick up 4RAR boys and drop them at The Dat then pick up another load of us 2RAR boys and so on. As you can imagine, it was a pretty big logistical task.

Back in our lines we cleaned up as best we could, given that the tents were nearly rotting apart. All ammo was taken from us, including bullets and grenades. We kept our rifles, but there were no magazines on them. I hoped Nigel didn't know any of that. There were rumours that when soldiers left The Dat, they pulled the pins on their grenades, tied elastic bands around them and threw them in the toilet pits and under the floorboards of tents. (I'm guessin' the officers' mess may have been a big target for this.) Over time, the rubber bands would perish and the grenades would go off. A stupid act of course and I never heard of any grenades going off while we were there but we had to account for all our ammo, including the grenades, and hand them in before we left.

Each of us was given a number we had to display on our uniform. I had two bags and an M16 rifle and staggered off to the truck which took us to a clearing at the edge of the rubber plantation. I dunno why we didn't use the large chopper pad. Maybe because we could wait in the shade until it was our turn to board the Chinook. A good move.

So there we were. Waiting, waiting, waiting. It didn't matter, we were on our way home. We had survived our 12 month tour (well 12 months and 3 weeks actually). You could say we were probably a bit rowdy. But nobody seemed to mind. What could they do? Keep us over there a bit longer?

Over on the boat was a guy from my home town of Cootamundra. His name was Donny M. I went to school with his brother Paul, and Donny was in the class behind us. I heard that he was in Delta Coy. Now 4RAR did not have an Alpha Coy. I wondered if they might swap us over with D Coy, so I intended to keep an eye out for him.

I think we were just waved onto the chopper. It would have been nice for someone to say, “Gentlemen, can I have your attention please. All those wishing to go home to Australia, please board the chopper now. Thank you, and have a nice day.” But voice communication was virtually impossible because of the deafening sound of the chopper’s twin engines and the downwash created by their blades. Those machines were massive – think of a bus with two sets of intersecting blades on top. They probably held about 30 or 40 men, including me with my two bags, my M16 with no ammo, a bloody big grin on my face and my Canon camera hanging from my neck.

And lift off!

Well, I dunno if you have ever travelled in any military aircraft but they are designed with the barest amount of stuff needed to carry soldiers. It doesn't matter if it's a Herc, Caribou or a Chook, they all have a common theme: the seats (for want of a better word) are made out of cargo straps and you can't see out of the windows. Windows! Slits more like it! In Australia we flew from Townsville to Brisbane and I was unaware that the Herc had actually landed until it was lowering the back door thingy!

We flew south towards Vung Tau. I wasn't going to let a chance go by so I got up and went, well, staggered really, up to the door gunner, gave him a nod and a grin and poked my Canon out the door. I thought my using my camera was more important than his being able to use his twin M60s. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the platoon sergeant, Mick, waving his arms to get me to go back to my "seat". I ignored him, just like on many occasions throughout our tour.

Down there is *HMAS Sydney*. You could probably see it better if I had any idea how to really use Photoshop.

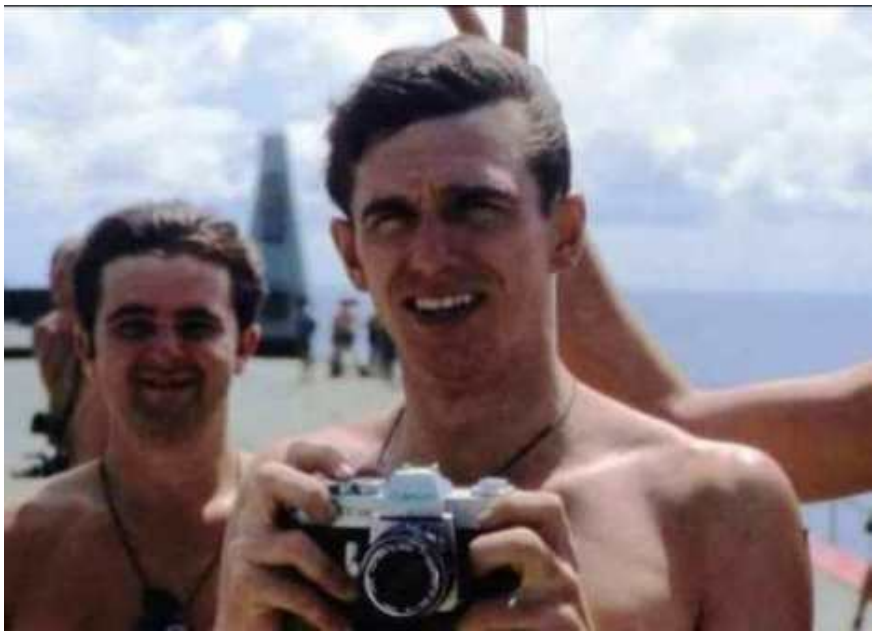
We hit the deck! It seemed like pandemonium, or have I already used that word? The noise, the heat, and the downwash from the twin rotors all attacked the senses as we exited the Chook through the rear door and were marshalled to the flight deck. I looked across at the soldiers from Delta Coy, 4 RAR who were waiting to board our chopper. Then I saw him: Donny M was waving his arm, up nice and high like a person drowning in the water. I waved back. I didn't have time to take a photo and the flight deck descended into the bowels of the bucket of bolts.

We hurried (Army always hurries) with a sense of urgency along a gangway and you won't believe this bit, I spied another bloke from Cootamundra. Now, Cootamundra had a population of about 6,000. What are the chances that I'd run into two blokes from there in Vietnam (well, Vietnamese waters) in the space of ten minutes? He stood aside for us and I knew he didn't see me. I had a bag in each hand and my M16 also in my right hand, so I poked him with that. I think it's the first time someone had poked him in the chest with an M16, judging by his reaction. He jumped about 10 foot in the air, looked at me with a startled look on his face and then recognised me. His name was Monk Kennedy.

Donny M, as well as Monk, were nice, fit, young blokes, but they seemed bigger somehow. And then it hit me. We were all skinny and pale from the rigours of combat in the jungle, often to the point of exhaustion with nothing but meagre combat rations for over 12 months. And hardly ever seeing the sun. We were actually emaciated. Here's a picture of me on the flight deck taken a couple of days later:

It took ten days for the boat to go from Vietnam to Townsville. During that time we did nuthin' except sit around and drink piss. I wish! Since leaving Australia 12 months before, we hadn't had fresh milk, fresh bread, butter, lamb roast (any roast for that matter), baked vegies or proper beer. They gave us two cans (large cans) of Flag Ale each night. I managed to drink one before handing the other to a mate. It was better than that Queensland piss we had been drinking back at The Dat (when we could get it) and that American Bud in Vung Tau when on R&C.

HMAS Duchess, the escort in Vietnamese waters in case *HMAS Sydney* sank!



Me and the Canon EXEE. I still have it. Look at the V

Ian Gleeson on the left. From Cootamundra, and with me in Kapooka!

Chapter 59

Australia!

So there we were, cruisin' the high seas.

The boys from CHQ put out a newsletter telling us the latest news about what was happening on the bucket of bolts. Here are some of the gems I remember:

"Army are to refrain from asking matelots what they are doing using their hammers to belt the flight deck. You too would be embarrassed if you had to clean the rust off your weapon with a hammer!"

*"*HMAS Sydney *is gathering speed as it continues on its journey south to Australia."*

Interservice rivalry – it's what keeps the services going. I can go up to any Navy bloke and call him *a dumb ugly Navy guy* and instantly he will respond with a big broad grin spread from ear to ear as he retorts with an equally abusive statement about Army guys. And then he would offer to buy me a Pimms!

But it wasn't all plain sailing, so to speak. In places the ocean was just like glass, smooth with hardly any ruffles as we sat about doing nothing on the flight deck. Except for that one time when we came across a swell. The swell was coming from 10 o'clock. It was great on the flight deck seeing the horizon rise up, tilt, and then drop down outa sight as we rode the swell. That was during the day. As night fell, we had to get below deck and that's when all the problems started. Boy, was it rough. We were all crook and the Navy boys were enjoying every minute of it watching us suffer.

I was feeling a little dizzy. We were issued hammocks and stuff but I had not used them. Instead I think I mentioned that we dragged our gear up near the sergeants' mess on the "*fauz sail*" where we could see the reverse side of the screen and watch the movies. But I was unwell, so I went back to the cramped quarters where we were supposed to sleep. I hitched up the hammock and climbed in. As the ship lurched from side to side, the hammock swung free. In fact, all the hammocks were still while the ship moved about under us. Lying in the hammock riding the swell like that made me feel even worse.

I staggered down to the heads. A bad move. Plenty of blokes had

staggered down there before me. They were in cubicles barfing into the bowls, most of the sinks were full of what seemed to be curry and carrots and the smell alone was enough to make a bloke puke!

I got outa there quick smart. Making my way up to some fresh air, I staggered along the passage way, bouncing off the ship as it lurched from side to side. I was lurching from side to side too but unfortunately we were not in sync. It's like riding a horse. You know, you are supposed to ride in unison with the horse's movements. My first time on a horseback at home, all I did was go up and when I came down, I'd meet the horse which was on his way up. Well, that's how I negotiated the ship.

I made it up on to a deck. It was beautiful and cool. There was fresh air, I sucked it in with a few other blokes who were also trying not to chunder. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. I started to calm down. I even got hit with a bit of sea spray. A cool refreshing spray. Hey, wait a minute, we were up fairly high, how could the sea spray this far up? Then another spray. Then it hit me. It wasn't salt water, it was someone's chunder. EEK!

I survived the night without losing the contents of my stomach. I took the hammock down and slept on the hard floor, just like in the jungle where I had slept on a hard surface for the last 12 months.

I dunno who cleaned up the mess. The Army certainly wasn't capable of doing it and we have been living it down ever since. The matelots reckoned it was the day that the Army got its sea legs. Anyone who can operate normally on a rollicking rusted boat can't be normal, I say.

Soon everything was back to normal though. We were still gathering speed on the downhill run to Australia and the matelots were still bashing their rusty flight deck with hammers. We just sat around most of the day in between feeds. We could stare at each other or stare at the ocean; so that's what we did. There we wuz in our shorts sitting on our arses staring out to sea. You'd think those matelots would have supplied us with those deck chairs they get out when the Army wasn't on board.

After daze and daze of this, everyone couldn't wait to get home. Suddenly our slumber was awakened when the boys began pointing at something on the horizon. Was it a whale?

No, it was Australia!!

WOOHOO!

Our destination was Townsville – that was 2 RAR's base, so it made sense that we should dock there. Well we didn't dock exactly, we managed to get a ride on those things ya storm the beaches with.


6

Epilogue

Home safe and secure. Well, sort of.

We debussed, so to speak, from that big flat topped boat and ended up in a park along the Townsville foreshores where family and friends could meet the returning veterans.

Unfortunately, most of us were not from Townsville or QLD for that matter, so we all hung around like stale bottles of piss.

The next couple of days are a bit of a blur. We changed into number one greens and marched through Townsville. There were no demonstrators in sight. I did manage to see a couple of the girls from the Hong Kong restaurant however. They were standing on the side of the road clapping and cheering loudly. Later at about 10pm, we boarded a troop train for Brisbane. Two days later, I was having a shower at Brisbane railway station. The acoustics were great. So I did what anyone would do in such an environment – I started singing, until people starting banging on the walls, that is. Bloody music lovers!

We had about a 4 hour stopover in Brisbane before we headed to Sydney. We met up with a couple of mates who had returned home early. We had a few beers and told a few lies with plenty of laughter and backslapping. While standing on the footpath, an MP rode up on a motor bike and started berating us. We were in polyester uniform but we were carrying our slouch hats because it was quite windy and they can easily blow off your head. Boy did he go off at us for not being in correct military attire! We told him in no uncertain terms to fuck off!

Later, when we arrived at the railway station, the MPs were waiting for us. I had two bottles of Johnny Walker stowed in my gear as a present for my father. They were confiscated. I protested. It was put to me that I either hand them over or miss the train. In hindsight I should have stood my ground. They then guarded us all the way to Sydney on the train. Were we really such a danger?

Next day we were at Central Station in Sydney. By then we had been travelling for about 10 days and we were fucked. My parents had moved to Waverley in the eastern suburbs while I was away and somehow they were there on the platform to greet me. What a hoot. My mother came skipping towards me like an excited young child.

But the greeting was short lived. We were trucked out to South Head. Before we even managed to get off the truck, a soldier, with his hands on his hips asked, “What are you blokes doing here?”

“We're Nashos, we want to be discharged.”

“If you want discharge you need to go to Ingleburn.”

Let's pause for a moment.

I mentioned that we were still in the jungle 3 days before leaving Nui Dat. In those 3 days, we cleaned up our lines, handed in all our gear and packed everything into two bags (our limit). We trucked down to the chopper pad. We flew by Chinook to the aircraft carrier anchored in Vung Tau harbour. We put up with dumb ugly matelots for about 7 days. Then two days and overnight by train to Brisbane. We got harassed by the MPs and finally we were at 2 TRG GP at Ingleburn. It would all be over soon and I’d be a civilian again.

“What are you blokes doing here?”

“We're Nashos, we want to be discharged.”

The bloke looked at his watch. At least he didn't have his hands on his hips.

“Ah, it's a bit late today, come back tomorrow.”

We nearly went AWOL then and there. No assistance, accommodation or meals were offered to us. We had to fend for ourselves.

Our arrival home as heroes from the war was starting to look a little bit suss when even the Army didn't care about us. I don't need to go on about it, you probably already know how Vietnam Veterans were treated, but the response from the Army was reprehensible. Job done boys, now fuck off.

You can imagine how being away from home for 2 years, spending 1 year and 3 weeks in Vietnam, including crawling through the J on my elbows and knees for 318 days with a bayonet in my mouth, could have an effect upon me. I felt like an alien. I needed help adjusting to civilian life.

Want an example? The first few times I exited the bathroom at home my mother would ask, “Did you flush the toilet?”

Oh, and I kept calling my mother, “Mate”!

Here is some information that you may not be aware of about the Vietnam War.

The war was won in the 1968 Tet Offensive. Yes, that's right; the North Vietnamese were soundly defeated.

About 70,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers launched attacks all over the South. Their plan was to show enough strength that the people in the south would rally and support them. So confident were they, General Giap was waiting just over the border so that he could quickly claim victory.

But they lost.

They were decimated - 40,000 troops were killed. The media portrayed it differently. Even the well-respected news anchor, Walter Cronkite, who was a supporter of the war, questioned whether General Westmorland and President Johnson (who had been advising that the war was nearly over) were not being truthful to the American people. He suggested that the war could not be won and that it was a "bloody stalemate". By then, Johnson had basically given up his presidency and everyone wanted to end the involvement in the war.

Consequently the North had a propaganda victory, the people back home believed the war was lost and wanted their troops home.

And now to the question you are dying to ask me. How do I feel about the Vietnam War today?

Well, I have always been positive about my service in Vietnam. I hope you now realise that we did OK in Vietnam – that we upheld the traditions and honour of Australians who have fought in many wars in many countries; and we were larrikins too.

Diggers gave their lives, directly killed or wounded in battle, or suffered a lifetime from the lingering effects of the toll of warfare on their bodies.

I tell people that Vietnam was a picnic compared to the battles of the two big world wars.

WWI and WWII soldiers on average spent 40 days on the front over a four year period whereas Vietnam soldiers served an average 250 days. But their fighting was ferocious with losses that are mind boggling. How can you kill 10,000 German soldiers in one explosion? It happened at Hill 60 in World War I. My war, except for probably two battles, was one of stealth, sneaking through the jungle and engaging the enemy before they

even knew we were there. Then they would flee. The Australians dominated Phuoc Tuy Province with aggressive patrolling that has been a hallmark of Australian tactics during warfare.

The AWM (Australian War Memorial) advises that the Vietnam War went from 1962-1975. This is not correct. Australian troops were withdrawn by 1972. There were no soldiers fighting the war except the South against the North in 1975.

The Paris Peace Accord finished the "American" war in January 1973 following the Christmas bombings in the North. All parties agreed on a peaceful settlement. All allied troops would withdraw, but get this, the North Vietnam troops could stay in the South. Can you believe that? The South Vietnamese Government was not involved in the final peace negotiations. Who would have agreed to such madness? Nixon promised President Tho that America would assist if the North failed to abide by the peace agreement. But when the North Vietnamese re-armed and pushed south in 1975 two years later, the American Congress refused to assist the South Vietnamese. Nixon was dealing with Watergate and failed to show any leadership.

We essentially abandoned South Vietnam to its fate. How different would it have been if there had been strong presidential leadership from either Johnson or Nixon?

And finally ...

About 30 years after we come home from Vietnam I organised a platoon reunion at Shellharbour/Woolongong in NSW. We teamed up with the local Vietnam Veterans on Vietnam Veterans Day; we had a very moving dinner with all our wives and partners, as well as other activities. The reunion was very well attended and good mateship was once again rekindled. I never heard any of the blokes say that our service in Vietnam was for nothing.

Tony Arthur, from ABC regional radio, interviewed me for 20 minutes about the reunion, about us and our time in Vietnam. The interview was very well received.

At the end of the interview he looked at me and he asked, “Ian, what is the one thing that you carry with you from your service in Vietnam?”

Without hesitation I answered, “Life is a gift – live it!”


VIETNAM
1966

2 RAR VIETNAM HONOUR ROLL

1201945 PTE LWH ADAMS

5714249 PTE RJ BELL

4410704 PTE RP BINNING

18161 SGT T BIRNIE

2785150 PTE WJ BRETT

4721369 PTE RS CHAPMAN

2785238 PTE TJ CUTCLIFFE

1411181 PTE FJ FEWQUANDIE

61582 CPL TJ GROSE

16141 PTE NS HARALD

6708488 PTE FA HYLAND

1735712 PTE PF KOWALSKI

2276248 PTE PJ LYONS

2782440 LCPL PE McDUFF

2412362 PTE PS McGARRY

1732186 PTE DW MORRISON

1735386 PTE DW NEAL

4718427 PTE DE NELSON

43058 CPL GL NORLEY

3790094 PTE NC PETTITT

43573 PTE SE RADOMI

4410710 PTE JC RIVETT

4718449 PTE J ROGERS

1/4209 WOII RS SMITH

1702729 PTE DL THOMPSON

2792375 PTE DJ TULLY

1200750 SGT JW TWOMEY

1731955 PTE LJ WESTON

3797671 PTE GI WILLOUGHBY

3411951 PTE KR WILSON

4718082 LCPL RM WOOLFORD

Infantry Tools of Trade

5 Sect, 2Pl, 2RAR

Forward Scout	M16
Gun Group	M60
Rifle Group	SLR , M79
Section Commander	M16

M16A1

Specifications:

Calibre	5.56x45mm
Action	gas operated, rotating bolt
Overall length	986mm
Weight 30 rounds	3.6kg
Magazine capacity	20 or 30 rounds standard
Rate of fire	cyclic 650 - 750 rpm

M60

Specifications:

Calibre	7.62x51mm
Action	gas-operated air-cooled
Overall length	1100mms
Weight	12.7kgs
Magazine capacity	belt fed
Rate of fire, cyclic	550 rounds per minute

L1A1 SLR

Specifications:

Calibre	7.62x51mm
Action	gas operated, tilting block
Overall length	1090mm
Weight loaded	4.96kgs
Magazine capacity	20

Rate of fire	20 rpm, semi-automatic

M79

Specifications:

Calibre	40x46mm
Action	Break-open, single-shot
Overall length	737mm
Weight loaded	2.92kgs
Magazine capacity	single shot
Rate of fire	6 rounds per minute

Enemy

Generally	AK-47
Fixed position	DShK 12.7mm HMG
Sometimes	RPG-2

AK-47

Specifications:

Calibre	7.62 x 39mm
Action	Gas-operated, rotating bolt
Overall length	737mm
Weight loaded	4.38kgs
Magazine capacity	30 round generally
Rate of fire	600 rpm

DShK 12.7mm HMG

Specifications:

Calibre	12.7x108mm
Action	Gas-operated
Overall length	1625mm
Weight loaded	34kgs
Magazine capacity	belt fed
Rate of fire	540-600 rpm

RPG-2

Specifications:

Calibre	tube - 40mm; round – 80mm
Action	Front loading, single-shot
Overall length	1200mm
Weight loaded	4.67kgs
Magazine capacity	single shot, 3 spares
Rate of fire	3-4 rpm