

## **My Tour of Duty.... SOUTH VIETNAM.....First Three Chapters**

### **Chapter One**

My trip to Vietnam started that fateful day back in 1969 when they pulled my birth date from the barrel of rolling marbles. I was called up for two years National Service Duty and within months I had to report to the Albert Park Army Depot to begin my Nasho training. I was trading my 9 to 5 job as a Bank Clerk after only 12 months out of College, to be a warrior. The girls at the Bank put on a great going away party, which was very memorable. I had happened to mention after a few 'reds' that I was still a virgin, so I was going to be a Virgin Soldier. I woke up next morning in bed with two girls, they were flatmates and responsible for the party. I remembered the events of the night and needed to confirm that I had definitely lost my virginity. While one went off and showered I experienced the greater depths of a woman that had me wondering why I had left it so long. Her girlfriend was not impressed that we had made 'love' without her and the delights I had just experienced were repeated again. I was no longer to be a Virgin Soldier and I was now truly captured by the sensuality and intense freedom of the depths of a woman and wondered when I would experience the wonder and joy of sex again. My bus ride from Albert Park to Puckapunyal Army Base near Seymour, where I began my basic training was a time to reflect and my going away present was certainly a memorable occasion in my life. I had National Service to thank for it.

The bus ride gave you some idea of what lay ahead. As you had to fit into the Army's idea of what a man looked and acted like. If you had long hair or a Beatle cut, you were a 'marked man'. The army hated long hair and they related long hair to being a sissy or worse.

Getting off the bus and stepping onto the parade ground, after a one-hour trip up the Hume Highway, it was made very clear that the Army owned you now. The Training NCOs (Corporals) were immediately in your face, especially if you had that long hair, wearing jewellery, nice clothes or looked a bit of a nerd.

Puckapunyal became eight weeks of hell on earth but survival was possible. The Army is for 'real men'. We were National Servicemen, in their minds, not real men. They were used to men wanting to join the Army, young, fit and short haired young men. We were National Servicemen men from all sorts of backgrounds; ages and whole range of other types were drafted. Regular Soldiers made their choice to join the Army, but we Nashos and had no choice. Our marble had been drawn out of the barrel like a lottery ticket, but this was no lottery win.

Some of the guys were just so unsuitable for the vigorous and "bastardization" training that was their way to 'make a man' - Army style. Even the way they cut your hair, especially picking on those with long hair. They saved these guys, humiliating them in the process. I was lucky being a VFL Umpire that I already had a short army style cut, so I missed out on this humiliation ceremony. Mine was to come in the form of reading my letters from female friends on parade and highlighting the intimate and 'missing you' parts. I had to write back and ask that the perfume envelope and the intimacy be cut back so as to avoid this humiliation on Company parade. Otherwise I enjoyed the challenge of the training and the possible opportunities that the Army had to offer over the next two years. I figured if I had to be here for two years, then I might as well get the most out of it. If you survived this demoralising Recruit Training, and some didn't, then depending on your physical ability and aptitude you were allocated to an Army

Corp. I wanted and selected Tank Corp as my first preference but was instead sent to Infantry. They assessed my bush skills and ability to lead from the front as the perfect attributes for Infantry. I was also considered for Officers School but that would have meant a Training School Appointment and the unlikely opportunity of a Tour of Vietnam. I rejected the offer and failed the literacy test. I had demonstrated my leadership ability by earning the right to be the Hut Captain and as a team we paraded at the end of our Basic Training as the best hut.

After my Recruit Training and now as an Army Private I left a cold and humbling Puckapunyal and was sent to a desolate, hot and even more foreboding Singleton in New South Wales for Infantry Training.

Recruit training left you fit, lean and mean, but Singleton is where it got serious – real serious. The day-to-day expectation was, you were going to Vietnam, and you were prepared for it every long waking minute of every day.

Pucka, or Boot Camp, was a physically and emotionally draining introduction into the army. Infantry training tested your ability as a man to kill and not be killed. Singleton was the reality of what it meant to be a "grunt" and that your next posting would be to an Infantry Battalion and the likelihood of Vietnam. You were trained to kill and kill very efficiently. You learnt to track the enemy, to be willing to cut their throats if you had to, shown how to effectively use a bayonet, throw a grenade and shoot some of the most powerful weapons in the world. I enjoyed the challenge and one day on the firing range lobbed a grenade into a tank at 100yards off a grenade launcher attached to my rifle. I felt good and thought what awesome power the Army had put in my hands. You were taught how to lie in ambush for hours, in order that you could kill the enemy, and shown the best way to set up a "killing mine field". You learnt to live off rations and in the bush, put up a hammock in a way that would protect you in case of a mortar attack. This was the 'boys own' adventure stuff and my scouting days helped me survive some of rigours of 'bush'.

If you had ever worried about what manhood was or what being a man means, then here it had a whole new meaning. By the end of training and by Army standards you were a very efficient trained killer of other men. It's like the taste an animal must get when it has its first kill, you know you have the ability and you know how. This stays with you for the rest of your life in the back of your mind. In some its always just there. We were ready for Vietnam.

After Singleton I was posted to Ingleburn, near Sydney to the Reinforcement Unit. Again I enjoyed the challenge and achieved my Corporal Stripe. I was no longer a Private in the Army, but a Lance Corporal and this was an added achievement for a National Serviceman to get it so quickly. Reinforcement Unit (REO) was the Infantry Ready Force standby unit, on day to day alert. Every morning we lined up waiting for our orders to embark for Vietnam.

On one such occasion where orders had come that we were off to Vietnam in next couple of days, parents came from as far as WA to see their sons off and then we were

literally turned back at the Sydney Airport. False alarm and a typical army stuff up. It was not to be that today.

We were replacements for the dead, wounded or those coming home, so it was a day-to-day proposition. This makes you grow and age beyond your years. Soon I would discover that being at Ingleburn was nothing compared to where I was going.

Ingleburn was close to Sydney and this is where I first got drunk. It was because we finally after a couple of months got our marching orders. We were off to Vietnam the next day, so we were given the night off with a stern warning to be back at 0700hours no matter what condition we were in. Off to Sydney we went to say good-bye for the last time to our friends, lovers and our "girls of the night" who we had coffee and swapped yarns with regularly as young twenty year olds but too scared to pay for sex. We felt that this was it and there was much to celebrate, but really there was much to be scared of. So the drinks flowed and helped by some seasoned soldiers, mainly Yanks on R&R, who had to tell us the worst war stories about how their mates had been blown up, so we were encouraged to drink up. I became as they say "legless" and thought I would die. I had never experienced this feeling before nor had I ever been so 'sick'. My last night in Sydney was memorable but only for the drink, as there was no time for romance and I was not capable of sex. The next morning I was on a train to Melbourne, then to Adelaide, heading to the 3RAR Battalion enroute to Vietnam.

Reinforcement Wing was a Unit hard on friendships as we were allocated to other Units not as a group but on needs. This split great friendships and guys you had trained with and spent months together at Ingleburn. You would wake up to find out you were off and your mates would still be waiting for orders. This sort of uncertainty and the time I spent at Ingleburn made it also very sad to leave some guys behind. I was also their junior leader and we were a well-trained and competent group of soldiers. Our days off were spent exploring Sydney, Canberra and very fast trips to Melbourne. We spent some great times with local girls at Coggee Beach in Sydney and discovered that there was great steaks and salads at the Coggee Beach Hotel. The girls were a new experience for me as my experience with the opposite sex was limited to 'pashing' and once only "shag", as it was known in those days. They were older than we were but we had some great parties and nights out. Bob and I were the 'ladies men' but we occasionally got Sid involved. Sid was a great mate and although he couldn't understand me and that our lives were so different as in backgrounds, we got on well and it was hard to leave him behind as he was keen to get to Vietnam just like me and for us to stay together. Bob and I were alike and we really knew how to socialise and woe the 'ladies'. There were other guys who were part of our group and one being Ted who followed later on to be posted to Reinforcement Unit in Vietnam. It was hard leaving the guys as the day to day nature of our Unit bonded us together. The guys in Battalions were lucky because they got to stay with their mates when their orders came through. We were split up everytime orders came through. I left Ingleburn without my mates, it was hard and I was to be alone on this journey.

Newspapers carried the stories of the war effort and the number of dead or wounded. I was lucky that no Australians were reported as being killed or wounded in that week, but as always the death toll for Americans was high. These stories always had an impact but as young man or even as an adolescent I had never had a big issue with Vietnam. At school articles that appeared in the school paper were always supportive of

the involvement of Australia. Being at a Catholic Boys College the general feeling was that Communism must be stopped at all costs. There were no families directly affected by Vietnam, so it was all about Communism. I was the only Whitefriars student to serve his country in Vietnam. To this day, no one, Priest, Brother, the Church or School Community has ever asked me how I felt about being 'Called Up' and about going to Vietnam. I always thought how uncharitable. Not a goodbye wishes from my old school where I had proved to be a model student and a senior school prefect.

The Papers carried many and varied stories about the politics of the war. The stories highlighting the Anti Vietnam marches, Monash University Labour Club alliances with the Viet Cong and supplying them with medical supplies and Bring Our Sons Home, a group encouraging National Servicemen not to fight and to lay down their arms, abound every edition of the daily papers.

At this time these Sons of Australia were on a train, off to fight in a very unpopular war. We were the foot soldiers of the Queen. We were proud National Servicemen, willing to fight and serve our Country, our Army and the Queen. This was our destiny, it was our job, and we were soldiers in the Infantry.

So here I was with the first leg of my journey completed from Sydney. It was February 1971. Other soldiers on leave joined me in Melbourne returning to Adelaide. The passengers aboard the Melbourne to Adelaide train – The Overlander – recognised the young uniformed soldiers and some wished us well. Conversations were short as our minds were deep within pondering what the future held. No one hassled us or identified themselves as Anti-Vietnam Protesters either out of respect or that there was only a few of us and we looked so foreboding in our uniform. It was an uneventful ride across three states where sleeping was hard in the upright position. Only 3 years before I had travelled this very same train as a schoolboy footballer to play Blackfriars College in Adelaide. The feelings were very different to that trip and I had no thoughts of not coming home.

On arrival in Adelaide we were greeted in typical army style – “line up here, be quick and shut up”. I had arrived at the 3RAR Infantry Battalion, which was stationed in Adelaide and preparing to embark on their second tour of Vietnam. I had been close before, that few weeks ago in Sydney, ready to depart and called back. Vietnam did not want me that day but there was no being turned back this time.

But today was different. My memories of arriving that day in Adelaide are few, but I do remember being “kitted out”, being readied to move quickly to the RAAF base for a Qantas flight to Vietnam, being reissued with a rifle and live ammunition. This was real. This was not a dream. I was excited at the prospect of putting all my training to good use but apprehensive of possible outcomes as an infantryman.

Something that stands out is that it always seemed to be dark when I was leaving. I had left Sydney in the dark, left Melbourne in the dark and was now to leave Adelaide for Vietnam, in the dark. I remember thinking, was there a message here.

A small crowd of wives, girlfriends, mums, dads, brothers and sisters had gathered to wave off the men from the locally based Battalion and all were dabbing at their eyes. Their men were off to Vietnam and an uncertain future. I had no one to wave me off. I

turned and waved hoping that someone in the crowd returned my sentiment. It was sad that no one was there for me to wave back. It felt lonely and a lot of guys, like me who were drafted from around the country for Vietnam, were away from their families who were not there to wave them off.

Their good byes were made days earlier, or for some like me, made over the phone. My father refused to come down to Spencer Street Railway Station, as he believed that this was not really a war and that his brothers and father had been in real wars but not his own son. To him the war was a scrape in far away Asia. 'That not enough Australians were being killed to worry about and that it was not a real war. So I should just get on with it'. My sisters never got a chance to see their brother off and our good byes were done over the phone in a cold dark phone box at the Melbourne railway station. The trip from home to the station was a mere half-hour. My last hours in Melbourne were very lonely as the notice to go was so quick that I had no chance to let friends know and besides it was a week day and everyone was busy. This was very different to other Wars, where Battalions had left in triumph with whole communities coming out to send them off.

The plane lifted off from Adelaide first destination, Darwin. I had never been to Darwin, or the tropics. The air was hot and the darkness did not temper the heat of this February night on the tarmac at Darwin. I was about to embark on a boy's own adventure from the top end of Australia.

I was following in the footsteps of my forefathers who had left the shores of Australia to fight for their King and Country in foreign lands. But I was going aboard a Qantas Jet and within hours I would be stepping off the plane and into the Vietnam War. The fastest journey Australian men had ever had to war. I was very tired by this leg of my journey and experienced a good sleep because I was exhausted from the emotion of the event and a lack of sleep since departing from Sydney a few days ago.

## Chapter Two

On arrival in Vietnam the door of the plane opened and immediately the hot, sticky thick air hit your nostrils. The airhostess had warned us, but the warning did not prepare you for the feeling of being choked by the intensity of the heavy hot air. It was not just the tropical climate; it was a war zone and also the busiest airport in the world. The air was thick with petrol and octane fumes, the smell of metal and of hot, sweaty men. I was in Vietnam and experiencing my first sights and smells of another country and the hardware of war.

It was also the smell of Asia, the musky smell of sweaty Asians. I had never experienced the smell of other nations. There were millions of Asians in this country and I had only met two Asians in my life and that was at school. Chinese restaurants were not my favourite eating-place in the 60's & 70's. Asians were not in great numbers in Australia in the 1960's, so as a twenty-year old this was truly an experience, the smell burnt into my nostrils.

The airport was littered with machinery of war. Warplanes dwarfed the Qantas Jet. Helicopters of all shapes, sizes and colours with jeeps filled with men, rushing everywhere.

There were men in all types of uniforms and carrying weaponry I had never seen before. Huge Afro-Americans that I had only ever seen in movies or on the TV sports highlights, in their big bold white hats of the Military Police. Their large guard dogs by their side. As a team they looked forbidding and not to be messed with but were also magnificent in their distinct uniforms.

This was a war zone. The realism of where I was could be seen in the piles of metal and the remains of planes and tanks. The first sight of wounded men bandaged, on crutches or being escorted on stretchers, being ferried to a plane for a ride home, as if from an episode out of the TV series 'Combat'.

Landing at the Ton San Nook Airport at Saigon, you realised how important the airport was as a supply line for men, weapons and food. It was also the disembarking point for soldiers arriving for their tour of duty. Both Americans and Australians, and the embarking point for soldiers on R&R or going home. It would also be the final ride for the men in the body bags. These black bags carried the bodies of men who had fought in a war that had engulfed the United States since 1961, back to their homes and their families, their last journey. I did not see any Australians in body bags.

As we stepped off the plane we looked like we were straight out of a B Grade movie. Clean fresh-faced young soldiers still with starched uniforms arriving for their tour of duty. But this look was not to last long. I could already feel the sweat dripping from my body and the green of the uniform turning to a darker green from the sweat and its fresh look was starting to wilt. There was a good side to this, as a 'greenie' you were heckled by the 'veterans' who had been there for a while. These guys looked scruffy, dirty, intense, hot and some looked very sad.

The airport lounge was filled with scraggy sleepy soldiers surrounded by Asian treasures and boxes containing duty free stereos. One bonus we had heard about serving in Vietnam was the shopping.

Our transport to the Australian base at Nui Dat was waiting, a huge Chinook Helicopter. It was like walking into the mouth of a shark. There were rows of canvas seats along the walls of this giant transporter. I now felt like a real soldier, in a real war. The noise, the smell, the Yank pilots and the urgency of the moment showed that this was the real thing.

We were now on the last leg of our journey to the Nui Dat Base. The Chinook was a very noisy and smelly "plane", but you could see the terrain below through the open back end. There was such a contrast of scenery - rice paddies, the jungle and the long straight roads choked with military traffic, slowed by the local farmers and their buffaloes.

My palms became sweatier and my uniform was now soaked with sweat. The nerves had begun kicking in. Before I knew it we had arrived at the airport at the Nui Dat base and we were now being shepherded into trucks for the short trip to the lines of the Australian base.

On arrival at the final destination, the Nui Dat Taskforce headquarters of the Australian Army and soon to be the home of 3RAR. There was no fanfare, any welcoming for new members to the Battalion. It was down to business.

Nui Dat was a huge Army base, set up similarly to bases in Australia, like Puckapunyal, Singleton or Ingleburn with rows of tents and army huts housing men, machinery, stores, administration, catering and ablution blocks. The roads (streets) were named and crisscrossed the entire site.

There was a place for everything and every Unit had its place, and space. Of course the Special Armed Services, SAS Unit, had its place on SAS Hill overlooking the entire base. I guess being the elite unit of the Australian Army it was fitting that they should look down from the highest vantagepoint.

During my training at Ingleburn I had been selected to try out for the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV). This was another elite and courageous Unit of the Australian Army, and one of the most decorated Units in Vietnam, but had been denied the opportunity by a Papuan Army Sergeant who had a real attitude about National Servicemen.

I had performed to a very high level of Infantry efficiency as a Section Commander during pre Vietnam training at the Jungle Training Unit Canungra. I remember on the bus ride back to Ingleburn a Training Sergeant approaching me and asking if I would be interested in additional training for the AATTV Unit. Back at Ingleburn instead of being able to join this Unit, my Sergeant had me on fire drill the day I was to be posted to the Language School at Adelaide in preparation to join the AATTV. The exchange that took place afterwards between us coped me a week confined to barracks. He then had me posted to 3RAR Infantry Battalion also located in Adelaide who were preparing for their second Tour of Vietnam.

The main Task Force of the 3RAR was on route to Vietnam on the Aircraft Carrier HMAS Sydney. So the first few days of my introduction to this theatre of war was drifting around alone, getting kitted out and changing my SLR Rifle for an M16 Armalite. I was also informed that I would be joining A Coy 1 Platoon as a Forward Scout.

My first contact with 3RAR was with Sergeant Saunders; he was my Platoon Sergeant. He was straight out of the TV Series 'Combat', name and all. I think it was his second or third tour. Sergeant Saunders immediately made me feel at home. He was a bloke that you could feel comfortable with, and you were secure in the knowledge that he knew what he was doing. Saunders looked like a real soldier. Permanently tanned, fit; short hair and a raspy voice, earned from years of shouting out drill instructions. His rifle just seemed to be part of him. I immediately took a liking to this bloke.

Saunders introduced me to A Coy 1 Platoon 3rd Section – my new home. These guys had been together for 12 months; training for their tour and the comradeship was thick. They were used to living in each other's space, sleeping out in the field. They had their routine; a system of combat drill and everyone knew his job like the back of their hand. They were a fighting team and I immediately felt the coldness towards me – this reinforcement, the new bloke who was joining. I was a National Serviceman, a Lance

Corporal who spoke with a pushy tone and was replacing one of theirs. I immediately felt on the outer.

Some of the company were polite, others were downright rude and made me feel unwelcome, others simply didn't care one way or another, as we were all going out together soon for the first time, so they reckoned we were all the same boat.

As in most Army Units names are not used much, maybe as a means by which you don't become too close or personal. Bernard was a very uncommon name and the abbreviation of Bernie never appealed to me nor did I respond to being called Bernie. My name was also regarded as a bit "uppity" and if you corrected someone by saying, "No my name is Bernard" it immediately got a response, "oh is it now!" accompanied with a gesture of the finger.

The section started with 9 men with abbreviations of their names, Dee D, Scat, PB, Bob (for Robin), Ben (only real name), Beauy, Rabbit, Walk and BJ for me, after my initials. Our symbol was the Dragon, I never knew why or asked you just accepted what was already done.

My Section Commander, Corporal Pat Scanlon, was a Regular soldier who seemed a nice bloke and welcomed me to his section. His 2.I.C. was a National Serviceman, well spoken and educated and had a real sense of the responsibility of his position.

Our first assignment was a tour of the Phuc Tuy Province (the immediate area to the Base). This was conducted in a convoy of trucks to get a feel for the people and where we were. It was a Public Relations tour highlighting the work of Australian troops in the Province.

### CHAPTER THREE

I found it very confusing as we motored around villages that had been built by Australian engineers and other troops. Drove along a highway that cut across paddy fields, through thriving towns also built by Australian Engineers. There were schools, hospitals, brick making factories, new brick homes, repaired churches, restored temples and water on tap, all courtesy of the Australian Army. The Highway called Route 327 was an engineering feat when you considered the terrain, the weather and the war. The highway was as good as, if not better than, the highway between Melbourne and Sydney. Route 327 is still being used today.

None of this had ever been mentioned in the newspapers back home. The infrastructure and the humanitarian work of the Australian troops in Vietnam were amazing.

We visited the French provincial area of the Phuc Tuy Province. The former palatial homes of the French settlers were huge, with sweeping staircases reaching two or three storeys high and with what would have been magnificent gardens down to the surf of the South China Sea, which before the war was a popular tourist spot. These once majestic villas were a favourite target of the North Vietnamese bombs and all that was left were shells of their past glory, a deserted beach, littered with bomb craters, debris and permanently damaged palaces now used as shelter by the poor.

We also visited the site of a major Australian disaster. A minefield had been laid to protect the Aussie troops from an attack from the South. It was an ingenious plan with some thousands of jumping jack mines laid. But turned out to be a catastrophic mistake, or an underestimation of the will and tenacity and ingenuity of the Viet Cong

The disaster came in the way that the Viet Cong ripped up the mines and used them to kill Aussie soldiers. The mines were used extensively against Tanks and Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) and on roads and tracks. These mines over the years of the war took a heavy toll on Aussie troops in those maimed, wounded and killed. It was probably the most strategic mistake of the war for the Australian Army, as the minefield was meant to protect, but ended up costing Australian lives.

Visiting this site and hearing the story was chilling. It also made you wonder if the road ahead was safe. What I heard and saw remained a vivid memory for the rest of the tour.

The tour of the Province made you feel proud but also confused. We were not here just to patrol jungles. We were here helping to build/rebuild communities. We hadn't been told that, and it was not what you read in the papers.

3RAR was there to protect those who were helping these communities. That was our job – to protect our men, the villages, farms, schools and hospitals. To make sure the Phuc Tuy Province was a safe place for Australian troops to carry out its humanitarian work and a safe place for the South Vietnamese who wanted to carry on their day-to-day business without the fear of the Viet Cong.

It seemed so simple to us at the time. There is South and North Vietnam. We were in the South and these people were South Vietnamese. North Vietnam and the Viet Cong were burning, razing, killing and pillaging the South Vietnamese people in their villages miles from the Demilitarised Zone and 39th Parallel which signified the divide between the North and the South. Our job as Australian soldiers and those of us as National Servicemen called up to swell the numbers in the Army to meet this commitment in Vietnam, was to protect these South Vietnamese. Without the 'Nasho', that was an impossible task. This was the will and commitment of the Australian Government and we were there to serve its will.

The trip became a sobering experience as we drove past buildings and schools bombed days before and only kilometres from our base. Seeing the remains of APCs, blown to bits the, just bits of metal, the result of one of those land mines. Realising that the guys in it never stood a chance. We were in a war and this was a product of war.

I gained a very quick respect for the men of the Armour Corp who drove these APCs and Tanks. I thought that the metal surrounding them would be great protection – not so. The mines split the metal of the vehicles, just like putting a firecracker inside a drink can.

It was a scary thought that these machines were so vulnerable. You wondered how as a "grunt" what chance you stood. Our Sergeant gave us a tip. The best way to travel in an APC is on top, so that you will be blown off instead of blown up inside. He figured, with his tours under his belt, that you had a better chance against one bullet than a mine. As a moving target on top of the APC you had a chance of being missed by a

bullet, but not so with an unseen mine. I don't think that during my whole tour that I travelled inside an APC.

Our convoy then followed the streets of Nui Dat to familiarise us to the huge Army Town. The tour guide pointed out the Armoury, the Mess Tent, and Company Headquarters and where the Pay Clerk was. We were shown the Salvation Army Tent, which was a Mecca for all soldiers, especially when a kind word and a cuppa were needed. The Parade Ground, which I had hoped that we didn't need, because I was sick of marching and drill. We were soldiers now, not 'marching girls'. The "drive in" theatre where you could catch a movie while rapped around your rifle because it went everywhere with you. It was an offence to be caught without a firearm. There was so much here, it was just like a small country town with a Post Office and the General Store where all the supplies were available – the Service Corp Unit.

We were also able to identify the lines for Artillery, Armour, and Air Wing and of course up on the hill the Special Air Services Unit. The other Battalion lines and the Reinforcement Unit, which was my old unit back in Australian, were located near our area.

The final and most important landmark, the PX, was where, we were assured, that a huge array of duty free goods was available for sale. I think that besides the pay and the opportunity of a cheap home loan that a lot of guys did a Tour of Vietnam for the duty free. It was the ToyShop for soldiers and provided, for those who were into stereo sound and the latest technology, an opportunity to order up big on goods worth hundreds of dollars more back home. The PX was an American idea and you could buy almost anything including ordering a car from Ford with the option of placing an order for a Mustang from America.

Other than the boozier at Nui Dat, the PX was the most popular place to visit.

We had just been on what the Aussies call "The Tour". It was "huge". It really set the scene of where we were and what we were involved in. I learnt a lot about the Vietnamese people from our notes, saw some of their culture from the back of a truck. I also saw buffaloes for the first time, how the women dressed, rice paddies up close and experienced the smells of Vietnam as we went through the villages. I learnt more about what was happening in Vietnam, the good stuff and I also saw the bad stuff, the destruction of buildings, our APCs, people and their livelihoods.

After the village tour, like others, I just wanted to get on with the business of what we were here for – in my case – patrolling.

That night I lay in my bunk and just took in the night sky over Vietnam. It was so different to back home. The stars were visible through a haze of war. It must have been the humidity or a constant smoke that lay over the area. I was not lonely for home, for anyone or worried. I just wanted to do my job and to prove to the guys that I was as good as any of them. I was definitely the outsider and felt a bit lonely even in the close quarters of our tent. Maybe because I knocked back a beer with the boys, I didn't drink beer and never had except for that fateful night in Sydney