

My Tour of Duty... Vietnam

Chapter Four

Patrolling in the Dry Season took its toll and water became our main priority as the intense patrolling in the dry season sapped us dry, leaving some men very vulnerable to dehydration. We were a modern army with choppers, tanks and a huge Military Base kilometres away. But we were supplementing our water by scooping whatever water lay in bomb craters, dried up creek beds, stagnant pools and the moisture that dripped from the trees at night, using a device that we had rigged up on our bottles. As a result of this dilemma and a lack of water there were many cases of stomach pains and dehydration. There were also a lot of "heated" men feeling the pressure and the oppressive heat.

My first frightening experience in Vietnam was based around these circumstances and haunts me still.

I was selected for water detail, which meant patrolling out from the Section to collect water, dropped by a Supply Chopper. It was not landing as there were enemy in the area and it did not want to draw attention to our location. There were three of us – Dee the forward scout, Rabbit, one of the other riflemen and me – the new bloke. Dee suggested we split up. I disagreed but it was his call as he was the senior soldier. The reason for his decision he gave as "OK – you're supposed to be shit hot, we will wait here and you fan out over there by yourself and meet us back here".

I was itching to prove myself and so I agreed. I thought I might have a chance of finding the water.

When I returned to the spot, after about 10 minutes, Dee and Rabbit were not there. The next few hours became a nightmare. I waited and waited. I thought it was the spot, as I had marked it prior to going out and had kept my field of sight based on my point of recognition. To make matters worse, I found no water and assumed they had and were coming back to get me after delivering it to the others.

After awhile I decided to try and get back to our location. But it was not to be.

Upon reaching a rocky outcrop I became alert to a noise of hushed talking. It was not English and I was immediately aware that it was Vietnamese.

My first reaction was to identify myself, but the shadows and movement of the men on the track indicated that it was Viet Cong, dressed in black and my faint visual was the black shape of the enemy.

I froze. I had my rifle and only one spare magazine. I was scared. Here I was lying as flat as I could watching these shadows, trying not to breathe heavily, not moving one muscle in fear of loosening the dirt and stones beneath me. They were meters away, their silhouettes showing through the thick jungle growth. The path was just below and it was being used as a transport route.

I then worried about the Section – should I fire as to alert them to these Viet Cong, knowing that I would be shot at immediately and probably killed? I was weeks into my first operation, by myself and I was shit scared. There was no one around, and I was lost in the jungle with the enemy below. I was really sweating and my body at times felt limp but somehow I was resigned to my predicament.

My mind went numb with the thought of being lost – missing in action. I also could not believe that this was my introduction to the unit. Had I “fucked up” or was I right – ‘that the bastard was making an example of me’. ‘Fix him – see how smart he is now’. These thoughts crossed my mind but when it came down to it, I was in this spot because I also was a cocky bastard wanting to prove myself to these guys. I wanted to feel part of the unit and finding water under the circumstances would have made me a hero. New blokes were not treated well anyway, but we were not in camp, we were on active patrol in enemy territory.

The Viet Cong stopped – may be they could smell my fear. I was rigid and not one muscle moved. I could smell the Asians, but could they smell us Aussies? My rifle was beneath me and I was ready to use it, but at what cost?

The Viet Cong moved on. I waited. Hours seemed to go by, but maybe it was only an hour.

I decided that I was going to be listed ‘missing in action’. Even if I happened to stagger across an Aussie patrol, I could be shot anyway, unless I was fortunate enough to be spotted by someone who obeyed the Rules of Engagement and asked first “Who goes there?” before opening up with a machine gun. We were trained to ask this first, which was pretty silly out here in the jungle, but important on roads and around villages.

I sat there. What could I do? There were no recognisable landmarks and I was obviously well out of the patrol grid. My mind went through so many scenarios. I had only arrived a few weeks ago and here I was “lost”. What a bloody stupid situation to be in.

I thought ‘shit happens’ and it’s happening to me. Then I had thoughts of walking into an ambush, stepping on a mine or maybe being captured. Being captured would be the worst. No Australian had been reported as being captured by Viet Cong, but I could be the first. The stories that I had heard about what the Viet Cong did to the Yanks sent shivers down my spine. Our training for capture had been “name, rank, serial no and under no circumstances anything else”. I would not have had much to tell.

Then suddenly I heard the firing of gunshots. My first reaction was to respond, but I hesitated for fear of attracting the wrong response, or alerting the enemy to my location. The firing was persistent, so I shot off 3 shots in succession, my first shots of war. There was a response and I took a reading of the general direction where the fire was from and thought what have I got to lose. Hopefully it was my unit looking for me.

Rejoining my unit there was less than a minute of pure joy and relief, the rest of the night and days to come, was pure embarrassment. It was a bloody miracle getting back unscathed, with the feeling of me being a ‘bloody idiot’ and anger at the other lance corporal.

No one believed me and why should they? I was the new bloke and as yet I was not one of them. I was ‘green’ to them and certainly the outsider. The Sarge was OK towards me; maybe it was the relief that he didn’t have to file a missing in action while looking for a water drop. My Section Commander was also sympathetic; maybe he realised what really happened. I paid for my mistake for the rest of the tour. The Boss was not amused, why should he be! I’m sure he was relieved that I was back though. I was then dubbed “Lost”, a nickname that was to appear on our section board, displayed in our tent lines. Also a large sign was displayed within our lines that forever heralded our Platoon as ‘Lost’. I was responsible for this embarrassing nickname.

Over the next few days I cooled my heels and suffered the jibes from the others. My nickname “Lost” was repeated often. The other sections of our Platoon had an even worse opinion of the new bloke and I found it very hard to get to know them. There was a special bond between these blokes who had trained together. I spent my time in the middle of the section being silent. I was lucky that one bloke, Beauy, who was my ‘hutchie up’ mate (the bloke you bed down with)

was an easygoing bloke and because I was a good cook, we got on real well. I could really give those rations a work over, do a good cuppa and was always very handy when preparing a good bedding down spot. He could also rely on me during our sentry stints to stay awake and alert. We looked after each other and he wasn't worried about me being the new bloke because he was a Nasho and it could have easily been him in the same position. I was lucky to be set up with Beau and ended up sharing a tent with him and the 2IC back at Base.

Patrolling was becoming very arduous for us and more so for the forward scout. It was very draining and demanding, as he is the one cutting a path through the jungle, bamboo or thick tropical undergrowth, as well as also constantly looking for booby traps, trip wires, mines, signs of the enemy or an ambush. This constant mental pressure and physical exertion takes its toll on any man.

We were patrolling still in very dry conditions through the long undergrowth that dwarfed us in places and unfortunately not along tracks or roads, which would have been, easier going but had their own hidden dangers such as mines. Our scout needed a break and I was called up for the first time. A little chat from the Sarge and the comment "Now don't get us lost", said with a smile, and pat on the back, he pointed me forward. My Section Commander set some engagement rules and went through a quick series of hand signals he wanted me to use. I was off in the lead.

I was not going to blow this chance. So I set out to provide my section and the rest of the Platoon with a pathway through the jungle, fit for a king. I had my M16 rifle, machete and the pruning shears that were the tools of trade for a scout.

As a scout you are responsible for providing a safe pathway for the troops following and an early warning to enemy danger or mines. You are constantly aware of this responsibility. You had to recognise any signs of danger such as enemy tracks, broken branches, foot prints, trip wires, noise, smells, booby traps and above all you had to see "the bastards" first. If there was something the "Boss" wanted checked out, it was your job.

I took my job and its responsibility very seriously and at all times kept in contact with my Section Commander Scat, so that he felt that I was keeping him informed and in visual sight. I was very mindful and appreciative of his role and his responsibility for the safety and performance of his section. He was a good leader and I respected his job and hopefully he accepted my opinions on our position or what we had to achieve. The direction we were heading and the speed of our task at hand, as well as the need to be ever vigilant. I also wanted to prove myself and turn things around with the guys.

We had only been in Vietnam for four weeks but the stresses had begun to take their toll and our nerves were now on edge. Everyone was getting "snakey" with each other and the lack of water was creating problems. On top of that Headquarters had reassessed the enemy movements and identified that the North Vietnamese D445 Battalion had stepped up its actions in the Province. D445 was a well-respected foe with a great track record of being a formidable force. All contacts with D445 usually meant that Australians would suffer casualties as these NVA (North Vietnamese Regulars) were very well trained and disciplined soldiers fighting for their cause. The word was that they enjoyed going up against Aussie troops as they respected our professionalism and our jungle warfare skills. Headquarters response to this new intelligence was to reissue orders for more ammunition to be carried. This order just put more pressure on us as it confirmed our fears that this was a real operation. High casualties already and now a step up in fire power. Where were we going next? What was around the next tree or down the next track? Was it our turn to be confronted by the enemy?

I remember even the seasoned NCO's on their second or third Tours were getting jumpy. Our Section Commander Scat was now more intent and serious in his briefings and obviously there was more pressure on him to get the job done. There was tension right through the ranks and the uncertainty of intelligence and conflicting orders did not help. At the same time we wanted some of the action, but on our terms. We were well-trained soldiers and this was what we trained for. Not everyone shared this point of view; some of the guys were happy to keep their heads down and just get through the Tour without any trouble. I just wanted to see the 'Gooks' (Viet Cong) first before they saw me or step on a mine.

Some men, affected by the heat began drinking more of their water ration and then wanting to share their mate's water. This caused a lot of tension even between good mates. It did not help that the Boss still insisted that all soldiers shave every morning no matter what the conditions, or the lack of water. He figured you could have a dry shave or use ground water. Up front with the heavy workload of scouting you were very tempted to drink up to replenish your thirst. We were all becoming 'niggardly' and the boss and his shaving rules did not help.

This was still supposed to be a "shakedown" Operation where we figured out what we needed as regards rations, how our packs worked best in the climate for each one of us and what rations we could carry. I remember getting perilously low on water and I thought, "stuff the enemy", water was what I wanted to find. We were even down to using our purifying tablets for the smelly ground water we collected to drink or shave in.

I also felt that as the new bloke and having 'got lost', that I couldn't go to anyone else for water. So you soldiered on by sharing water for cooking and a cuppa wherever possible to conserve your water. Our Aussie rations did not help the situation as they were dry and required water. The Yank rations were tinned and there were many that decided that more Yank rations were on the menu next time around, even if they were heavy. You just had to be selective with your choice of cans. I would never include the rice pudding, ham and eggs or some of the desserts again. The Yank rations were great but we had to balance weight against flavour. Baked beans and meatballs were my favourite, along with Pound Cake followed by spaghetti and other meat dishes plus the fruit desserts, which contained a lot of juice which was a winner in the heat. The rations also included smokes, cigars, chewing tobacco, chocolate, chewy and all sorts of goodies that only the Yanks would think of as field rations. I exchanged my cigarettes for cigars and developed a habit for cigars for life. I had never smoked a cigarette prior to going to Vietnam but you needed something in your mouth. Of course I was banned from smoking cigars on patrol for fear of attracting the attention of the enemy. Guys needed a 'fag' and there were times when a 'fag' saved you from going crazy. The smokers had come up with some innovative ways to have a fag without being detected.

We had to get used to so much on this supposed shakedown, about our equipment, the climate, working with other Platoons and just surviving the jungle which was nothing like we experienced in our jungle training in Australia. Of course being the first operation the Boss had us carrying everything from a spade to a machete, to extra rocket launchers and water bags that we could not fill. He was in the same boat, first time out for him as well. Even coping with the footwear in this dry climate and the constant need for foot powder, shirts being destroyed and not replaced, ill fitting equipment and lots of simple annoying things that combined without water, frayed tempers. The uncertainty of enemy movements and the new orders that came via radio each day took its toll on the harmony of the Platoon. Besides all this, there was the irritation of the native bugs especially the ants. Spiders, ants, snakes, pesky monkeys and the occasional large lizard really tested tempers especially at night when you inadvertently put your "hootchie" on an ant's nest. These ants just attacked you so furiously and no inch of your body was spared. The more you tried to get them off the more they bit you. They cast their eyes towards you as if to say, "do it" and then just attacked you again. No one warned us about these blighters who were the size of the biggest bull ants back home.

It is very hard not to yell when you are supposed to be dead silent. Either in an ambush situation, bedding down for the night, or on patrol in full silent mode. Not even your webbing (a belt that carries your water, ammo, small rations and bayonet), bottles or pack contents makes even the slightest sound and then these ants attack you because you bumped their nest. There was much to get annoyed about and even the coolest of guys were losing their cool. There was so much we were not told about and the ants and water were big ones besides the enemy turning up unexpectedly.

The month of March continued to take its toll as contacts with the enemy resulted in more deaths and wounded. On 20 March 3RAR lost a second officer, mortally wounded, Lieutenant Patterson*. The same contact resulted in the death of an RAAF Flying Officer with others wounded. We were some distance from the contact but the air activity and the chatter over the radio had a very big impact on everyone. We could hear the war and the pain. Then the frustration of not being closer enough to help. The voices of the aircrews that were taking weapons fire and hearing that one crewmember had been wounded. The boss must have also realised that another fellow officer was mortally wounded. His last order to his men over the radio was to retreat back from the enemy fire and to give details of the contact to Command. This was a black day and the radio bristled with new orders for us to move in and cut off the enemy retreat.

The jungle was so thick and we were so far from the contact area. Our thirst and lack of water was insignificant compared to the plight of C Company. Our actions did not amount to much and now the frustration that we were not "in the war" was creeping in. Career soldiers want to fight and our Boss was a Duntroon man. The regulars in the Platoon were itching to pay back the "gooks" sometimes also known as "nogs" (NVA or Guerillas).

For the forward scout, speed was now the instruction, 'to get us there'. So between the Sections we shared the load of lead section with the forward scouts being responsible for the pace and following the direction of his Section Commander, who in turn was receiving his instructions from the Platoon Commander located in the middle of his Sections. I always hated being in the middle or up the back because with everyone so nervous you could find yourself in the middle of a very dangerous outburst of fire.

Each Section carried an enormous amount of firepower. Compared to World War1 and World War2 we had as much firepower as a whole WW1 Battalion did. We had weapons that would blow up buildings, rifles that fired 7.62 rounds of ammo that could pierce metal structures and blow your whole back away if you were shot, there were claymore mines in our pack, grenades and grenade launchers. The M60 machine gun was the same weapon used on Heuy Gunships, APCs and Tanks- and we had one to each Section. You only needed one trigger-happy guy or one misfire under these circumstances for the whole section to open up. On patrol most of the weapons had their safety catch OFF. This in itself added to the day-to-day pressure and tension of operating in this climate. On full readiness patrolling hour after hour was very tense and the stress unmeasurable. Our days started at first light and finished at dusk. After dusk we took it in turns of two-hour shifts of sentry duty. The pressure of patrolling would affect you for life. There were no counsellors here to talk you through your daily torment and through the thoughts of death you had each morning as you started your day.

We were all prone to being a bit short unless you were Tail end Charlie and you just cruised along without a care. Our Tail End Charlie was like that. "Walk" just wanted to be left alone, do his job without too many orders, keep his place at the back and leave the heroes up the front. He did not like the idea of being in the middle of a Platoon or Company formation but loved coming up last even in that formation which put him along way from the front. He rejected any idea that he could be picked off by the enemy as the tail end. He believed that they would not let too many go past before they started shooting. So he would have plenty of warning. Being tail end he was last to stop, always last when bedding down and always last to start his brew (cuppa tea) but that's how he liked it. I think he thought I was "cracked" wanting to be up front and do all the hard work of

cutting a path, being always vigilant and being told to go here, no go there, head for that tree or peak or 'a bit faster', as the boss would direct. He just followed in our tracks without too much as a word. Everyone was starting to fit into a groove to survive, as we never thought it was going to be like this, his groove was the best. I don't think 'Walk' ever patrolled with his rifle safety catch off. He was one cool guy and preferred to be the 'loner'

The Platoon had a role and a task to perform and so did each Section in each Platoon. The Platoons of A Coy had a specific task. This time it was to patrol a certain grid in support of Delta Company who were having the worst of our first Operation in Vietnam and seemed to be dogged by the enemy. Our Platoon Commander and Platoon Sergeant kept in close contact with the lead section and its section commander, constantly asking for updates, verifying our position and also being mindful of the time in which we had to perform each task. At the same time taking orders on the "blower" from the Company Commander and he in turn from the Battalion Commander.

Some days were just patrolling in a grid, along with other Companys, looking for signs of enemy or protecting the activities of Logistical and Engineer Units working in local villages. Other days we moved quickly to support a Company under fire from enemy mortars or in contact with the enemy. These days were the worst as you were under more pressure to get to a point of support in a hurry. As a forward scout you were always mindful of the enemy in the vicinity and the chance of making contact with elements of the enemy who maybe retreating

The boss, our Platoon Commander, was also under enormous pressure to get us where the Company Commander believed would best support the Platoon or Company under attack. Especially with two Platoon Commanders killed he must have been feeling very alone and wondering if he was next. It must have been a terrible time for the Officers coming to terms with the deaths of two of their own so early in the tour and knowing that one Private was also dead and others wounded. .

Radios bristled with instructions from one commander to another or the other Company and then relayed to the Forward Scout. On these days the sounds of gunfire and the urgent voices on the radio made the job of the forward scout very demanding. It was further highlighted by the knowledge that there were casualties and the sky was filled with Hueys (Helicopters) and gunships firing their M60 machine guns.

As a scout you had to get there first, in front of your section or Platoon but at the same time, get there without being blown up or running into an ambush or running into a "friendly force".

There were so many of these days, so early in our tour. Putting enormous pressure on everyone from Battalion Command down to Platoon Commanders and their troops. We were only in the country for weeks and it seemed that every couple of days we were in support of either our own Companies or that of the New Zealand Battalion, also taking casualties.

Some days we were deployed to meet up with APCs (Armoured Personnel Carriers) to get us from one grid to another quicker, or to resupply us with water.

In the weeks of our Operation, meeting up with APCs and the men who manned these iron crates was reassuring. I had trained with some of the guys at Puckapunyal that had been posted to 'Tankies' as they were affectionately called. There was plenty of ribbing about us grunts and having to walk everywhere and carry around our own supplies. The 'tankies' had it made with running water and heaps of it, hot engines to cook their food, a cuppa anytime, cans of Coke and sleeping above ground. They really "rubbed it in" about the value of wearing the black beret of the Tank Corp. Below that bravado was the knowledge that many of their mates had been blown up by land mines. The mines were laid along the routes to the Australian headquarters at Nui Dat, or they were ambushed on route to support other units. Their size and noise made them vulnerable and a very easy target. The tankies always became a very important rendezvous; as our infantry lifestyle

would improve either with new rations, hot food, water, a ride or the opportunity to have a chat. These guys were also responsible for improving our wellbeing with letters from home and on our long operation just general news from base and an update on the war. These were good rendezvous.

On one of these rendezvous' with the Tankies, we heard the grim news of the contacts and its cost of lives. Although they were the bearers of bad news, you could feel their compassion and sympathy for us as they shared the news. I think they also realised the impact of the news on us having only been in the country weeks. I saw the Boss once in deep conversation with the Tank Commander and wondered how he coped with the news. He was a real professional soldier and a stoic man.

At that time I did not know any of the men killed and I could only think of how my Platoon Commander was feeling, as fellow officers had been killed, and men he would have shared months with in preparation for this Tour of Duty. They would have spent a fair amount of time together, as young officers not that long out of Duntroon. They would have spent time in the Officers Club sharing a drink and as competitive Platoon Commanders but equally proud of their Command and the men. This was a terrible blow to all men of the Battalion and especially the Officers. I did not know these men and had not met them but it was obvious the respect and feelings of the other guys for the loss. Our boss, Lt. Shea, must have been devastated and I wondered how he managed to keep his feelings to himself, continue to perform his duties and how he must have felt terrible not having the opportunity to say goodbye to fellow officers and friends. They would soon be in those black body bags I had only seen weeks before on the tarmac at Saigon. The officers and men would not get to say goodbye as the dead would be back in Australia and this Operation, although we weren't to know, was to last eight weeks.

My father had said this was not a 'real' war and I was not in danger. I wondered if he would write to me after he read of how our Battalions had already lost good men within weeks of arriving in Vietnam.

I also wondered about the Battalion Commander Colonel Scott. I had not met the man, only to stand in front of him on Parade when he gave us the orders to move out, how did he feel. He had just lost two of his officers and a private, with others badly wounded. Officers who could have been like sons, men he looked to for support in providing a high level of efficiency and competitiveness within the Battalion. Our own Company Commander Major Doyle, what was going through his mind and that of the Delta Commander? Men I did not know but who I could feel empathy with.

In the field, officers were "alone". The officers, for their own reasons, kept a distance between them, and us. It could have been for the effectiveness of discipline inside the company, or in case you were killed on duty. If as a grunt you chose to strike up a conversation with the officers or swap a yarn or two, or joked about a good "red", shared a cigar, as I sometimes did, you were called a "greaser". You were sucking up to the boss. So in the field they were isolated. Back at Camp there was the Officers Mess and like other blokes they would share a drink and a conversation. But it was always back to a lonely tent.

I just wondered about how these men were feeling. How they were coping with the loss of a fellow officers and one of their troops killed within weeks of arriving in Vietnam. The "other ranks" could console themselves and would not feel isolated by rank. The deaths and the suddenness of them affected all ranks

March was full of enemy sightings, quick contacts, guys being sent back to Base for rest, sickness or for other reasons such as leave or special courses. The war does not interfere in the day-to-day administration matters of army life. If you were out on patrol and it was your time for leave or you had been booked for a NCO course – you were picked up. I think one of our guys completed his

National Service and went home after only weeks in the country. This left the Platoon and sections with a shortage of manpower and firepower. This shortage of manpower brought with it other tensions as the burden fell on fewer and the fear of contact was a reality now – we felt vulnerable but nothing could be done or said. The solution was to keep the Platoons closer to one another.

March was our baptism of war. The contacts, the deaths and wounded, the uncertainty of your future, the tensions between troops due to the unbearable heat, lack of water, reduced numbers and that in our first eight weeks of combat duty we had quickly become seasoned soldiers. We aged years because of the sheer responsibility of making sure you survived each day, and also your responsibility to your mates.

This first operation took its toll. Two officers and one private killed, four diggers wounded just from our Battalion. The ANZAC Battalion and the RAAF also took casualties during this eight-week operation. This was a bloody introduction to war and took everybody by surprise. March ran into April and it was the same day to day patrolling in the oppressive heat.

Our training saved us from greater casualties and our fitness saved us from the punishing dry season conditions and the unforgiving jungle.

During our eight weeks we had been shot at by, the enemy and friendlies (Artillery). Attacked by ants, snakes, spiders and laughed at by monkeys. We ran out of water, got lost, got nasty with each other and we smelt. We couldn't understand the boss making us shave and consistently asking to inspect weapons. We couldn't believe that army intelligence had got it so wrong. We also lost good men.

Letters from home helped us to survive. The deaths and the wounded bonded us together. The boss, never once did he drift from his course of firm discipline to the every day tasks that he thought were important to get us through.

So we continued to learn how to shave without water. Some guys got away without shaving because they were so young they still had bum fluff (no whiskers). Our rifles were spotless and in full working order. Sentry duty and "stand to" was vigorously maintained each night. Sentries were posted each time we were stationary. Sleep was a luxury and we were lucky to get 4 hours a night.

We completed our allocated tasks and patrols as directed by Command Headquarters and I am sure our Boss asked for more.

We were all looking forward to a break. As the operation drew to a close we had our last contact with the Viet Cong and a sleepless night. We were to be air lifted to Nui Dat after a 58-day non-stop operation the next morning. We all wanted to make it back because it was only hours away. When you are so close to lifting out of the jungle it gives you heart that you will survive till the next day after surviving fifty-eight days of non-stop combat duty and the hell that was your first experience of war. Staying awake that night helped because the enemy were still close and being ready maybe you had a better chance of making that flight out and back to the relative safety of Nui Dat.

We had not showered, changed our underwear, which some had discarded, slept every night of the 8 week operation in your gear, rotated your socks maybe, my shirt was sleeveless and my hair had grown to an Afro style. My 'bush' hat now sitting on top of the hair, kept on with a piece of cord, not army approved head gear. It was to get me into trouble back at Base but also ended up being a great status symbol, long hair along with my new American Under and Over M16 rifle. I looked like a civilian freedom fighter. We were thin, muscle sore, and operation sore with bruises, scratches, sore ankles, bites, and rashes and aching backs weak from lugging the heavy packs. Most of all we were very, very smelly.

The airlift back to base was a mixture of relief, achievement and satisfaction and that we had survived. Our training, our Platoon Commander, Platoon Sargeant and our Section Commanders had got us through what was the longest combat operation in the history of 3RAR Infantry Battalion*. It had taken its toll on the best of our soldiers. I was happy just to be back and to know that in the end I had accounted for myself very well and proved that I was a worthy member of the Unit.