

Brian meets Vietnam

As a Forward scout, and after undergoing extensive training in Aussie we embarked from Adelaide on what was promoted as an enjoyable ocean cruise aboard Her Majesties cruise ship HMAS Sydney. On board the cruise directors organised such onboard activities as aerobics on the main deck, target practice shooting at balloons thrown off the rear deck, lectures on the wonderful people we were about to meet, swinging in hammocks to the gentle roll and pitch, enjoying Navy tucker like greasy pork chops and the gentle roll and pitch, gentle roll and pitch of the HMAS Sydney. We enjoyed the experience of checking out the flying fish chasing the vomit from those with less delicate stomachs than ours.

I must point out that during the trip we were issued with vouchers for 2 extremely large cans (26 ounce imperial) of beer per day as a reward for surviving the trip so far. Unfortunately, many of our mates did not feel the need to partake of the amber fluid due to previous commitments over the side of the ship. It was only natural that those vouchers for 2x 26 ounce cans of cold Victorian Bitter could not be wasted, so, it, being an unwritten law of the sea, the unused vouchers were divided among the surviving (not seasick) tourists. Unfortunately after partaking of the rations of too many of those too sick to partake, those partaking became members of the unable to partake and joined those at the side of the ship.

One day out of Vung Tau, the rumours began to circulate that we were heading into a major turn in the war and that we would be lucky to last a week. It turned out it was standard operating scare tactics by the Navy to scare the crap out of the poor suckers landing tomorrow.

Ten days after leaving Aussie and after travelling through the straits around Krakatoa, the largest volcanic eruption in modern history, we anchored in Vung Tau harbour.

Clear skies over Vung Tau and the beautiful sight of fishing vessels returning from a nights fishing contrasted against the patrol boats with armour on each side.

I was very impressed by the fact that the HMAS Sydney was surrounded in the harbour by gold fish in Vung Tau harbour.

The moment was shattered by my Sergeant bellowing “get ya fuckin’ gear ready, ya leavin’ in 30 seconds”. So much for the touchy feel bit.

We climbed aboard a Chinook and were whisked away to a new adventure.

Landing in Nui Dat we were transported to our accommodation in 3RAR lines which turned out to be a little different to what we thought we had been promised. Our accommodation turned out to be 1 star tent accommodation 4 share instead of the 5 star twin share resort we had expected.

Bugger.

Anyhow, after receiving a heartfelt welcome to Vietnam from our RSM who turned out not to be the activities director but a very cranky bloke with a very bad attitude, we settled in to enjoy the ambiance of 50 degree temperature, humidity in the 200% range, local fauna in the form of mosquitoes, gnats, carnivorous moths and other creatures we only imagined in our nightmares.

Then the fun began.

We were kitted out with everything from shaving gear to phosphorous grenades. A nice contrast with something we could use to remove facial hair to something that will remove flesh. Nice.

No one told us that we would have to carry a backpack weighing 50 pounds for our next step on our itinerary, but after loading up with 3 days of essential American rations containing chewing tobacco, fudge, chicklets, cigars, chewing tobacco, Pound cake, franks and beans (my favourite) , ham omelette, pork and lima beans (not my favourite), all of the former being basic items in an American ration pack (3 cans per meal) subtly contrasted with delicacies contained in the 2 days of fabulous Australian ration packs that made up our tucker for the next 5 days. These included breakfast of cereal blocks (no fresh milk) , ham omelette which somehow lacked something which on examination turned out to be, taste. Your choice of coffee or tea followed, which was textured by the whiskers we had just removed using our coffee mug/shaving mug/ bath water heater. Later we craved for the delights of the Aussie packed lunch of hard crackers (left over from the Boer War), delicately combined with a nice can of tasty aussie

(very matured) cheese combined with the fabulous cup of freshly brewed instant coffee which was then used to strip the residue from the fabulous aluminium dinnerware.

Dinner was anticipated with a gourmet's palate drooling for a meal of bully beef curry served on a bed of rice or tuna served with a Mornay prepared with the aforementioned cheese. This was accompanied by delicious local water gathered from a crater made by a 500 pound bomb subtly enhanced by a handful of steriliser tablets.

Anyhow, I digress, we then headed down to the helipad loaded up with everything a bloke would need for a week or 7 in the beautiful wilds of Phouc Tuy Province.

After an enjoyable flight in a helicopter which had obviously been overbooked and finding it was necessary to fly, not only without doors in place, but with only enough room on board for the poor blokes closest to the doors to have only one cheek of their buttocks planted on the seat. Very poor planning I thought.

The helicopters were obviously in a hurry so we were told that we only had 2 seconds to disembark before they had to head off to their next booking.

We landed and were rudely told to leave, then the helicopter lifted off without a wave goodbye. I thought it was very bad form given that we had chosen to fly with their company. Virgin Blue could certainly show them how to treat their passengers.

Afterwards we were shunted on to what was to be yet another search/waste of time and after 7 weeks with our greens rotting for the 4th time we were finally choppered back to Nui Dat and "civilisation". Stripping off the green stuff that was normally called a uniform and having a hot shower and being issued with new greens we sort of felt like humans again. After carrying around 50 pounds of equipment for 7 weeks we felt as light as feathers. Following a meal at the mess which reacted badly with our sensitive ration prepared stomachs we settled in for a night of sleep in our very own beds in our very own tents protected by our very own sand bag perimeter. In the morning, after a night of waiting for the piquet to wake you for your stint, of 60 to 90 minutes, behind the machine gun protecting our section of the perimeter I woke to find that someone else has carried out my job.

When you think about it, in that first op, we spent around 65 hours on piquet, with

5am to 6am stand to

6am to 7.30am breakfast and receiving orders for the day

7.30am to 5.00pm on patrol

5.00pm to 5.30pm prepare harbour for the night. During that time we would carry out a sweep with a patrol group to make sure everything is clear

5.30pm to 7.00pm stand to

7.00 stand down

Sleep

Sometime during the night you are woken to do your time on piquet then have to wake some other poor bastard, who is dreaming of home, to do their time

Back to sleep

5.00am start all over again with stand to and perimeter patrol.

Breakfast, shave etc

7.00 to 7.30am move out for the days operations

If you are lucky, the day's operations won't be in bamboo which will rip your clothes and your skin to shreds.

Bliss is finding the platoon harboured for a couple of days next to the beautiful Song Rai river where, because of the stench of 30 to 40 sweaty bodies we are ordered to set up defensive perimeters and have a skinny dip to wash off the grime and have a bit of fun swimming.

Night time brings the worry of being attacked, not by the Vietcong, but by the RTA bugs.

RTA bugs, I think these are legends created by platoon sergeants sadistically bent on providing a bit of fun that they can laugh about in the Sergeants mess back in Nui Dat.

The story is that these orange/white/black (depending on the person telling the story) creatures with nippers like a lobster and tails like scorpions inhabit the Vietnam bush around rivers and creeks and will kill anyone who comes in contact with them.

Many a night was spent trying to sleep or do piquet duty in terror of coming across the march of the monsters simply called RTA bugs. In the dark of night one could see the march of these creatures and the only way to protect one was to squash them with a full water bottle. THUD.

By the way, RTA stands for "RETURNED TO AUSTRALIA" normally in a body bag if you are bitten. I think, in reality, they may simply have been fresh water crayfish on the move, which if I had known at the time, I would have combined with a touch of curry powder, cheese spread, a touch of

Vietnamese greens, making a nice mornay sauce and serving them on a bed of ration pack rice. It would have then been easy to draw in the Vietcong into an ambush with the aroma of cordon bleu ration pack RTA bug tucker. Oh, the waste. I will take this up with the powers that be when next I see them. RTA Bug ala Aussie Vietnam. I think I'll start a franchise.

Anyhow, back to the serious stuff.

After 7 weeks in the scrub, we emerged via flying bird, to Nui Dat feeling like cavemen Grot and Bog.

After being fed and washed, we were then ready to be inflicted on the population of Vung Tau.

We were transported by truck with full armament to the Peter Badcoe Club which was a soldier's idea of Club Med.

We were told that we had 36 hours of leave and could do anything we wanted as long as it met the guidelines of the Australian Army, US Army, South Vietnam Army, United Nations and a few other countries guidelines such as Idi Amin's Uganda as long as we did not offend the local Vietnamese. They wished us a pleasant stay and "Y'all come back now y'hear".

Green as grass 6 of us hopped on board a Lambro to Vung Tau and this was an experience in itself with the front wheels lifting off the ground every few feet like a drag racer but without the speed. Arriving in town, what a culture shock this was for a 21 year old virgin. Holy Christ.

Getting off the bus I was approached by a nice lady saying welcome. I thought at the time she was a member of the local Chamber of Commerce welcoming us and wishing us a cultural and enlightening experience in Vung Tau.

As it turned out she admired my Tissot watch which I had bought in Australia for \$150.00 after selling my beloved Ford Cortina 244 with twin double throated Webber carbies, chrome wheels and double overhead foxtails and clearing \$200.00 after paying out Custom Credit.

I mean this watch did everything in those days including tell the time in every country known to man and then some. I figured this watch would be of immeasurable value to me in Vietnam on patrol. Pity I had to keep it covered at night with the equivalent of today's duct tape because it glowed so much we could use it as a search light. Not an advantage when you are conducting a night-time ambush.

Anyhow getting back to the watch and Vung Tau, I got off the bus and this lady from (I think) her Chamber of Commerce, having taken a shine to my Tissot (described above) watch proceeded to offer me money to buy my beloved watch. Her offer was offensive and I politely, as Aussies do, advised

her that her offer was far less than I would be prepared to accept. In accordance with her Chamber of Commerce charter she then proceeded to increase her offers until she reached the equivalent of \$130.00. At this stage I was starting to look seriously at her offer but asked her to up the offer to \$140.00.

In Vietnam, at the PX, \$140.00 would buy the top of the range Omega so in the spirit of international cooperation I agreed to her offer.

I had to admit that her grasp of currency exchange rates was something Alan Greenspan today would envy. She quickly converted \$140.00 Au into Rupiah and proceeded to count out the amount quicker than any Commonwealth Bank teller that I have seen, and handed over the roll of currency, which she kindly wrapped in a rubber band, and I handed over the watch and she must have had to get back to pick up her kids from pre-school as she disappeared so quickly I didn't even get a chance to thank her for her consideration of the plight of a simple Aussie in a strange land.

After admiring her devotion to her children, I had a look at the roll of cash that I had so carefully watched her count out and I found that she had made a really bad mistake in counting the money because she had only given me one note worth \$1.00 Au and the rest only added up to \$1.70 making the total \$2.70. She probably felt terrible after finding another roll of notes in her purse worth \$140.00 instead of the roll worth \$2.70 that she was going to use for shopping at Kmart and Woolworths for her family. She probably searched and searched for me for weeks after that and gave up heartbroken that she couldn't return the difference to me.

I made it a point every time I went on leave, after that, to try to find this lady so I could help her ease her mind about this mistake in trade.