

Chapter 6

The chopper trip provided a time to reflect as we ‘whirled’ back to Base after 8 weeks patrolling the jungles of the Phuc Tuy Province. This was our first extraction by choppers from the jungle and the experience exhilarating for two reasons, the excitement of being extracted and secondly making “it back” to base in one piece. I just sat on the floor of the aircraft between the legs of the other guys with my back against Beauy. For me, the trip back was without conversation, main reason being the sheer noise of this aircraft and a chance to reflect as I took in the moment and the opportunity to watch the jungle glide below me. I wonder if someone would pop out of a tree and shoot at us. We covered so much distance in the Huey and I thought what a great job to be the gunner or better still the pilot. This is the way to fight a war but already in our first weeks two RAAF crew had been killed. I suppose it would be like shooting ducks as these ‘birds’ made incredible noise and announced their coming. This enabled the enemy to prepare for a ‘duck shoot’ as these birds provided a large target of themselves. As it was too hard to talk over the noise, so the time to reflect as we skimmed the tree tops made me realise that we were really in a war and we had had a bloody introduction. I was exhausted along with everyone else but I had survived my first combat operation of the Vietnam War. My mind and body was simply exhausted from the long time spent fighting the jungle and its growth along with the jungle creatures and the tropical climate. I had never experience anything like this before. The training prepared you for combat activities but it never prepared you for the sheer impact of the physical exhaustion and mental stress of such a long operation. The constant mental pressure of day to day patrolling and vigilance took its toll on everyone. The pesky jungle creatures, like the ants, the mosquitos, scorpions that came from no where to either attack you or simply make your life even more uncomfortable than it already was and that draining heat compounded by lack of drinking water. The sheering tropical heat had such an impact on your body and soul as you battled fatigue, lack of water, endless days from early dawn to dusk and then long nights on sentry duty or ambush maneuvers that kept you up all night. The strain was unbearable at times and some men scum to the mental pressures or the draining physical strain. This was not something to be ashamed of, as the best would have been taken to their limits. Our minds were numb and our bodies sore. Surviving the jungle was the hardest. Surviving the enemy for us was the easiest task as they had eluded us on this trip.

The choppers dropped us at the airstrip and we were shuttled back by truck to our tent lines sheltered amongst the rubber plantation that made up parts of the Nui Dat base. It was a cool spot. Infantry soldiers were allocated tents and not semi permanent huts like other Corps. Maybe because we were out on patrol so much or were used to tent living, got tents. The accommodation did annoy us when we saw what others had especially the showers. Alighting from the trucks and ambling back dragging our gear as it seemed too hard to sling it over our backs for the short journey from the trucks to our 3 man tents, it was the slowest we had moved in weeks. There was no one giving us orders to move quickly or go there or go there or BJ pick up the pace. I dropped my gear and fell onto my bunk, a typical Army style wrought iron bed with sheets and the grey issued army blankets. The bed was above ground, the first time in eight weeks that I would be sleeping off the ground. I lay there just relieved to feel the softness of a bed and the feeling of being in my own bed space. Living out of a hutchie, our hexy stove for cooking and sharing your bed with any number of jungle pests was not the ideal lifestyle. Even though we had only spent days prior to the Operation in our tent lines, it was like coming home and the bed was a sure relief for my tired and fragile body which was a lot lighter than the start of the Operation. I had lost so much weight, as had others. We were officially off full alert mode and other soldiers from cooks to administration staff were manning our sentry posts, on sentry duty so we could

relax and clean up. Even Nui Dat was not safe from enemy incursions or mortar fire. Nui Dat had been attacked on several occasions in the past, which had resulted in casualties. So there was a constant vigilance even in Base. The VC would have picked the wrong day to attack; we were simply not in the mood. We would have gone berserk and taken no prisoners. We were home and the enemy had reeked havoc upon us in the first 8 weeks of our tour. We just wanted to rest. This day would not have been a good day for the enemy to test our mettle. We were now seasoned old hands of war with mates bloodied in conflict. I had a whole new attitude about my role in Vietnam along with the others. The casualties had bloodied our attitudes and the saying "kill or be killed" took on a whole new meaning.

I don't know how long I lay on the bed before I decided to take my boots off. But to some of us there were more important things...our mail, waiting on our bunks. Mail from home is what keeps diggers happy, feeling good (if the mail is good and not bad news) and a reason to get through your day. After being out for eight weeks even though we got some mail in the field, being able to lie on your bed and take in the smell, feel photos and the words of a letter from your sweetheart, mum or dad, friends or family was just so good. After a brief time of reflection and getting your boots off, our instructions were to strip and throw our cloths into a growing pile of jungle shredded army greens in the centre of our Platoon area. They were to be burned, as there was no intention of washing them. Our gear would have just designated in the wash. The relief for my feet was when the sox's came off and went into the pile and that my boots were replaced with thongs. My feet saw daylight and breathed air for the first time in weeks. I wanted to keep my sleeveless shirt as a trophy but it would never had made it through the Tour because of the dirt in grained and of course the smell, as a wash would have killed it. My pants were falling off and no seamstress could repair the damage and no dry cleaner would accept the garment. My pants were lethal, just as bad as the pong of my sox's. Our tent reeked even though the flaps were up permanently up and we had only arrived back. The body odor of three men and their gear would have caused the environment authority to prosecute for foul air. We stank something horrible, no wonder the chopper crew wanted to drop us in to the sea

Our first important job was to secure our weapons and make sure our grenades and other firepower was securely stored, as the threat of a misadventure was constantly a problem especially in the confines of our Company area and the tent lines. With three men to a tent and tents adjoining one bullet could take out a few guys and one misfire from the machine gun could take out a lot more. If a grenade pin was accidentally dislodged and a grenade blew it would take out a couple of tents and half a dozen guys or more. This was the serious side of being back in our lines. It would have been easy for the Section Commanders and the Platoon Sargeant to ease off as they realised we were tired, irritable, but at the same time elated and ready to relax, but to ease back on the discipline could be disastrous. So the annoying orders were issued to clean weapons, secure ammo, store all projectiles (grenade launchers and claymore mines) and clean weapons. This was before we got to clean ourselves. There was certainly no point in having a shower prior to cleaning your gear. So everyone pitched in especially to help clean the machine gun.

Back at the lines there was plenty of gear cleaning, packs being unpacked, cups of real tea and eats from the Base kitchen, the first real food in eight weeks. As Infantry troops the Army made sure that when you were back in camp that you were well fed. The promise of an evening BBQ with an extra beer ration was something to look forward to. I was hoping there was something I could drink because I didn't drink beer. None beer-drinking non-

commissioned ranks and privates were not catered for in the Army. Asking for a good glass of red would have caused a great deal of laughter and you were treated with a certain amount of contempt and distrust. Officers, I am sure had a good selection of wine in their bar or even at their BBQ. Maybe a coke or one of those American beers would have to do, as I was not game to ask for a wine.

Our Unit did not have the sadness that was being experienced by Charlie and Delta Companys who had suffered severe casualties with members being killed and wounded. We were lucky that we did not come back to beds that were empty. Empty because the men who slept there were either dead or wounded. Some of the soldiers of our Unit were subdued after their visit to the other Companys to check on their mates. It was sad news they learnt and they felt bad for their mates who went through what was a very harrowing time over the last 8 weeks. We were so lucky. I felt for some of the guys who were visible affected by the deaths and the extent of the injuries to the wounded. The Boss still continued to be so in control and so focussed on making sure that we were completing our tasks. He wanted to stand us down as quickly as was possible. He realised that a lot had been asked of us over the last eight weeks and we needed some release from the pressure. He also needed time out to reflect on his role as our Commander and the death of two of his mates. He probably needed to join other Officers to share his loss but wanted to make sure we were secured away first.

Then it was time to hit the showers and it could only be done in relays. As an Infantry Unit it was considered that proper showers were not needed for us, as we weren't in camp enough. Our showers consisted of a fuel burner in a 40gallon drum that you filled with cold water and raced under the shower as the warm water filtered through. It took a few buckets of water to get a good shower. It helped to have a mate outside filling the burner. This was the first shower I had in 8weeks and like everyone else it was hard to hurry. There were a lot of 'pissed off' guys lined up waiting for a shower. 'Why do the admin staff and cooks enjoy much better ablution amenities when we were out there fighting?' 'Why do we have to line up and fill the boiler when they have hot running water?' A few guys were nearly shity enough to march over to Admin and use their showers, which compared to our "outhouse" with the fuel burner; they had hotel like accommodation. It didn't happen, but it was always to be a constant annoyance, the comparison of amenities between the 'blanket folders' and the 'real' soldiers.

The dirt from our bodies literally blackened the water as it flowed down the recess. Washing your hair for the first time in eight weeks was exhilarating especially mine which by the end of the operation was nesting all sorts of bugs because of its length. Bobby and Laurie the singers were amateurs when it came to long hair. When it dried which did not take long in the hot steamy weather, I was a Jimmy Hendrics look alike, all curls and a mop. Clean long hair, new jungle greens, clean sox and light sandals, I could not smell for the first time in awhile, myself or anyone else, this was the best feeling. Men had smiles on their faces and the BBQ was not far away.

I had only been back a few hours before I was in trouble with the Company Sergeant Major who noticed my hair was very long. Being the 1970s, Rambo, had not been born in Hollywood, but I definitely had the Rambo look with no sleeves, as I was yet to throw

my greens onto the pile, my trousers had gone but I was hanging onto the shirt till the last.

The Company Sergeant pulled me aside. "Soldier get over here, who the hell are you? What Unit do you belong to? Who gave you permission to let your hair grow so long? You are a disgrace to the Army. Are you in our Army?" barked the Sargeant Major. "Sir, I said with respect and pride, I'm with 3RAR 1 Platoon and we have just finished our first Operation". "Well son, you get a hair cut as soon as possible and don't let me catch you with long hair like that again", he said. I had never met the man before and I suspected that he was someone you did not want to cross.

It was common practice that after each Operation that a Company BBQ would be held where you had as much good Aussie steak, salads, potatoes and vegies as you could devour. The only problem was that our stomachs had shrunk and our system was used to dry and can food. We could put down a good steak but much more was a bit much. Unlimited Beer was able in the old 2litre cans. The biggest worry was that it was Foster's beer from Victoria and the South Australians and Western Australians who were in our Unit were horrified that there was no Swan or Cascade beer. Back in those days men were men and there was no such thing as light beer. I didn't like beer and never had, this alienated me from the "boys". To them I was strange or a "poofter", not liking beer. I think I settled for some soft drink and a lighter beer which was available called Budweiser, an American beer that according to the beer drinkers was like 'piss' and only for "girls". We did not have stubby holders in those days because there were no stubbies, so I couldn't hide what I was drinking.

The BBQ was a great idea and allowed you to wind down without fear of being shot at or having to be on your guard. I remember it being a good night for food but after a few beers some of the guys became belligerent and in some cases very angry about the events of the last eight weeks.

Alpha Company was very fortunate in that we did not suffer casualties like other Companys. I could only image how sombre and thoughtful their Company BBQ was.

There of course was the ribbing and jibes about "getting lost" from everyone, which became a bit worn after awhile. Beer has a huge impact on personalities or it allows people to act how they really want to act but are able to control themselves when they are sober. The beer began to take its toll on a few of the guys ranging from being very sick, to being very aggressive to being very somber. Being out on patrol for eight weeks without a drop and all of a sudden you can have as much as you like does have an impact. In the 1970s there was no such thing as the 'sissy' light beer. So a few cans and you could either be on your head, very happy or very aggressive. Beer could also make you depressed if you had received a "Dear John" letter from home, It was to become a regular occurrence amongst the ranks for those with short-term girlfriends would get a "Dear John" and unfortunately one or two who were married. Beer takes away your ability to be rationale and after eight weeks out you looked forward to that contact from home with the letter or two but if it is a Dear John, then it takes on a whole new meaning. Ten weeks

away from home and guys were being dumped by their girlfriends or lovers and I was one.

I got a letter from my American airhostess friend who I met in Sydney. We had enjoyed a few very passionate and wonderful months together between flights back and forth with her airline duties and my Army roster. We even fitted in a trip to Melbourne, which caused a bit of a stir with my friends who were captivated not only by her beauty but her Yank accent. It was also noted that she was older than me by a few years. One of my Army mates Sid just wondered where I thought I was going with this considering I would be off to Vietnam any day.

Well, he was right, it did not last. Her letter was very polite and she “dumped” me so nicely and with such good reasons that I did not feel that bad. I actually felt for her and the pain she was suffering. Her reason was that she did not want to think of me over here on a day to day basis wondering if I was Ok or not. It was too much for her and the experience of ferrying American GIs back home with horrific injuries had impacted on her. Her explanation was very moving and also seemed quite reasonable. It was a pity it was to end, she was a beautiful person, great looking and our sex was for me at the time just out of the world. It meant that her picture had to come down and be stored away. I wrote back very understanding and never heard from her again. Maybe she was onto her next Aussie back home. I had a few months with her and it was very nice. So I had no complaints and besides what could I do from where I was. I had other girls I was sweet on and had kept in touch with, so I was not worried about not getting mail. My sisters had also sent me a few letters and asked me to write back to their classmates as well. Letters were so important to how you felt. A few guys did not get letters so you would share “some” of yours around. I asked my sisters to write directly to some of the guys so that they had their own mail. Sending letters to serving members in Vietnam was postage free so it was great for my sisters and their friends to get together during recess at school and write off to the guys in Nam. The guys just loved it and even though their writing skills were somewhat limited they managed to get a few sentences off. I suspect that because they found writing a chore was the reason why they did not get mail because they had very rarely sent mail to anyone, even family.

My grandmother’s letters were very important to me, as she was on in years, fragile but so proud that her grandson was in Vietnam. My father’s line of the family had been represented in every war since the Boer War in the 1890s. She was a proud woman and her pride shone through in her letters. She still went to church next door to her house and lit a candle for me everyday. A devout catholic she believed that I was doing the right thing fighting for freedom and against Communism. My nanna was also pleased that I proudly represented our country and the Queen and that I fought under our flag.

The BBQ was claiming a few of the guys, which was to be expected. No one had had a beer in eight weeks, our diet had been so different and our bodies were very tired. This is a deadly mix with beer, especially when you throw in the emotional turmoil of "Dear Johns", the casualties of friends from other Companys and the sheer stress of the last eight weeks. I was, during times like this; very glad I was not a beer drinker. I was feeling lonely for my mates back at Sydney and

how easy it was having a “drink” with them without the “poofter” sneer remarks because I didn’t drink.

Before I knew it out of the blue one of the guys turned up, Ted. He had been posted from Sydney to Ready Support Unit Nui Dat. He couldn’t believe my hair was so long and that our operation had taken eight weeks. It was apparently the talk of the base. I was so pleased to see a familiar face. He had been in the country for a few weeks and was waiting for us to get back so he could surprise me. He had news from back home, from the guys in Sydney and what he was up to. It was great to be able to talk to someone you really knew and knew you. It was fairly late by the time he arrived so I offered him a beer and introduced him to the other guys. He was very keen to hear the story about getting lost and the guys filled him in, their version. He was a bit surprised at their attitude towards me taking into account my track record and that he knew I was differently not a poofter. We agreed to meet up the next night over a beer at his Unit.

It was not late by “partying terms” but most of us were stuffed or others simply “drunk” which was understandable. We were used to bedding down on dusk for the last eight weeks with sentry duty every couple of hours. Not this night we were going to get full nights sleep with out the sentry duty, which was still being covered by the administration and cooks for our perimeter of Nui Dat.

My bed was a very welcome “luxury” after writing off some quick letters home, my body hit the sack and I was soon asleep. I don’t think I thought of much that first night back. My head just hit the pillow and I was relieved to be able to sleep without the fear of being attacked, woken for sentry duty or being bitten by mosquitos or attacked by ants. I had a good eight hours sleep and did I need it. I woke up clean, dry and walked to breakfast, being served in the mess hall. I also had the option of a shower with soap and a real toilet if you call the army ‘thunder boxes’ real loos. They were installed in an iron outhouse with a row of black ‘thunder boxes’, a bit like a big can with a hole at each end. These were installed over a pit, which was very deep and disinfected with a white substance mixed in diesel petrol that I can still smell today when I think of those thunder boxes. No privacy, no time to read the paper or a stick magazine. Who would want to sit and longer than necessary over this pit? It was rumoured that the pit contained more than human waste but was also a disposal pit for all sorts of ammo.

Guys would drop anything down there if it needed disposing of or you wanted to dispose of evidence such as ammo that had been tampered with or that Dear John. It was also a lark to rig a grenade with rubber bands around the pin so that over a period of time with the heat of the pit wearing out the rubber, the grenade would explode maybe with someone on the “can”. Thus maybe that’s where the name ‘thunder box’ came from because it would have been a lot of thunder. I can only remember once a muffled noise like a grenade from the pit but no one was on the “can” at the time. Sometimes it paid to have a look just in case but it was such a dark hole that you could never hope to see anything other than the paper, flares or a few floating objects but there was always that terrible disinfectant smell. The old thunder box was a relief from the hole you had to dig out in the bush, if you had time. In the ‘j’ it was not always possible to finish the ‘job’

and at times you were nervous of attracting attention to yourself. Too much air could be enough to alert the enemy of your position and definitely doing your business during an ambush was a sure way of alerting the enemy to your position. As most of us did not wear underwear and that loo paper was in short supply in the field that many a time a paper wipe was not possible. You would get used to a hand full of leaves or grass to wipe, your all purpose army scarf or wash with water if you were near a creek. That disinfectant smell of the camp latrines is still vivid in my memory.

Our next day back was more equipment cleaning, sorting out our gear and cleaning out our tents. Eight weeks away they were dusty, with blown in rubbish and a dirty film over all our gear. It was also a chance to really look at our rifles and make any adjustment to our sights and to customising our rifle magazines. Some of us had a more creative flare and decided that wallpapering our Grey lockers would brighten up our tents. The only wallpaper available as an army issue was the Pin up Girls in our Penthouse and Girlie magazines. Each tent competed for honors in the best Pinups and I was very proud of our efforts in redecorating our tent. "Beau" was particularly talented in his wallpaper selections and we had some great "boobs" shots and the best "blondes". Our tent was becoming a shrine for the best that Hugh Heiffer had on offer. In camp you had a chance to get a haircut, visit the Salvos for a cuppa tea, walk around the Battalion lines and just see where you were. Prior to the first operation we did not get that chance.

There was the clothing and equipment store to replace any torn gear, worn out boots or ill fitting equipment like our belts and shoulder straps. I attempted a haircut that day but it was too busy. I just needed to stay clear of the Company Sergeant Major (CSM) because he had warned me about the length of my hair. I checked out an old gravesite located close to our lines and of course the battalion lockup which was a tin hut surrounded by barred wire. You could also pop in to the kitchen or mess hall to grab a morning tea and a biscuit or army cake always on offer or it came up in a jeep to your lines. This was very civilised and a nice change from being on patrol. Nui Dat also had a open sit in theatre and a football ground and amenities like shops and you could also pop in to see the Armourer to talk about your rifle and get some hints on customizing it for rapid fire.

I had acquired the new American Under and Over M16 5.62 round rapid fire automatic rifle with a grenade and shot launcher with a second trigger mechanism. This was a close range specialist rifle the Army was testing with some forward scouts and the Special Air Services (SAS). Typical of American rifles, you needed to be at close range as the bullet calibre and the velocity had little impact if it hit something before the intended victim. I enjoyed carrying this rifle around base as it was a great conversation opener and attracted a lot of interest from the non-combatant troops who had never seen one. It was a bit of a status symbol and everyone wanted to know where you were from. The old faithful Australian issued Self Loading Rifle (SLR) was a bigger weapon with a nasty 7.62 calibre bullet that would piece amour plating or pass through a tree and still kill the intended victim. It was also the same calibre of bullet used in our machine gun. Our rifles were very reliable and sturdy but also long and had a tendency to catch on anything in the jungle. Scouts found the M16 easier to carry, lighter and compact. One solution to our SLR was to have the barrel cut down. There was a willingness of the Armourer to

accommodate our request but our Company regulations did not allow such a conversion. SAS found our SLR cut down a very efficient weapon and we believed it was their choice other than a range of other alternatives they had at their disposal. We were allowed to customise our magazines and some of us had our mags joined so that we had a double magazine on our rifle. My ammo magazines were small so I had all mine made into doubles for quick change giving me 40 rounds on the rifle. Some of the guys “doctored” their ammo which was also against the Geneva Convention of War. The rationale behind ‘nicking’ the bullet was the impact of the losses we incurred in our first operation, “they deserve to get what is coming to them” attitude. A bullet tip that was “doctored”, a hollowed bullet, would rip the victim apart and there would be no hope of surviving if your shot entered their body at the chest or stomach region, it would rip their insides apart and all their vital organs. This war now had a new perspective with the death of two officers and one private, it made the war more personal even when it was not guys in our Platoon but they were in our Battalion.

It was also frustrating and a bit of a joke after our first bloody Operation that we would have to listen to a lecture on “Rules of Engagement”. This becomes a regular activity after each Operation as from top down there was a concern for bad public relations associated with shooting innocent civilians. You were expected to ask first, 'are you a baddie'. Taking into account that both civilians and the guerillas wore ‘black pajamas’, the traditional working gear for Vietnamese peasants and farmers, you took a risk waiting for an answer. This whole procedure was a joke to us but when patrolling in villages and around rice paddies it was important to establish who were the goodies and the baddies before you opened up with a machine gun. There were plenty of stories of diligent soldiers especially the Military Police on roadblocks asking too many questions and being shot or blown up in the dialog of the “Rules of Engagement”

Lunch came around which was good as we got to sit at a table. The lunch choice was typical Army, potatoes, stew, sausages, and eggs, peas, white bread and jelly maybe for dessert. Big pots of tea, weak coffee and jugs of cordial were always available. Breakfast hours earlier had been the usual, eggs scrambled, poached, maybe hard boiled, porridge or Weeties, heaps of toast, sausages and maybe liver. No fancy stuffs here and ask for something not on the menu and suffer the wrath of the cook. Army cooks were very sensitive men because everyone complained about the food, it was a sport in the Army. They did not suffer in silence and many a verbal clash would take place until the cook corporal or sergeant would come to the defence of their privates and put you in your place. No matter what your job in the Army above rank was a very powerful deterrent and you were very quickly reminded of rank by a Corporal or Sergeant especially NCO cooks. We had a tendency to over step the mark with these guys whom they probably did not deserve but in those days we thought they were just a bunch of ‘sissy’s’. Anyone who had a job in camp was a ‘pogo’ or a ‘blanket folder’ which was not a very complimentary term. As infantrymen we were legends and we acted badly towards those who were not. I had a real pride about my job and always regarded the other guys as wimps especially when they got scared on gun duty at night with all the barred wire and sandbags around them. It was not uncommon for some guys to be very afraid of the sentry duty, as they did not sign up to fight. In the darkness the barred wired did not seem a deterrent to the

enemy and the shadows formed by the moon upon the rubber trees played havoc with your mind and every movement was 'enemy'. Some guys could not cope with even sentry duty inside the Base wire. We treated them with contempt, as we knew no better and that is the Aussie male 'thing'. To day these guys are as badly effected by the war as those who were fighting in the jungle on a day to day basis. One of our scouts went further and even called his Section Commander a 'pogo' because he would never lead from the front. This is what forward scouts were for, lead from the front and pass on information to the commander but you were at the pointy end of the section and extremely vulnerable to enemy fire and the first to find a mine with one fatal step. If fired upon the scout would usually find himself isolated from his section and in these circumstances very scary and vulnerable.

Nui Dat was a huge place with up to 7,500 guys in its peak each year. To keep one guy in the field there was usually about six guys' back in camp. These men included, cooks, drivers, mechanics, administration staff, clerks, supply personnel, barbers, armourers, road workers, engineers, air drop specialists, medical staff, pilots, hygiene staff, radio communication and intelligence staff and the Chaplains and Salvation Army. Nui Dat was like a small country town with the heart of the town centred on Headquarters where the Colonel and his staff ran the war. Battalions were then located around the Base Headquarters with their own Admin and services. It was a town like what we were used to back home such as Puckapunyal Army base near Seymour in Victoria, carved out of the jungle since 1967, three years after the first Aussies troops arrived.

I was looking forward to the next day as we were off on R&C (Rest in Country) at Vung Tau, which was a truck ride away south of the Base. We had heard heaps of rumors of what could happen to us over the next 72hours at the Vung Tau "Beach Resort" for Aussie troops on their short leave. It was our first break in over 12 weeks since we embarked from Australian shores for our Tour in Vietnam.