

## Chapter 5

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. The boss was very mindful of the strain endured by the scout and he was forever encouraging you to have a break. You could if there was someone willing to take over.

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 Vietcong D445 Battalion had stepped up its activity in the Province. D445 was a well-respected foe with a great track record of being a formidable force. There was also the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) who were very well trained and disciplined soldiers fighting for their cause. All contacts with NVA usually meant that Australians would suffer casualties. 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 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 an unsettling 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 the mine before I stepped on it.

Some men, affected by the heat began drinking more of their water ration, than was recommended and then wanting to share their mate's water. The boss was very strict on water use except for shaving and had little time for those who used their water unwisely. The rationing 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. The boss version is that the Company Commander got orders from the Battalion CO and that under no circumstances could we have a growth on our face. The CO was ok as he was back at Headquarters and they always had water and plenty of time for a shave.

Up front with the heavy workload of scouting I was very tempted to drink up to replenish my 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, and 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 smoking 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. The boss looked past this but if we had ever been shot at because of smoking attracting attention to our position, then I am sure it would have been banned. Smoking on gun sentry at night was very risky. The guys would put anything over their head such as clothing or dig a hole and smoke with their mouth in the hole. The light from a cigarette at

night could be seen for yards and a marksman could easily line you up. Blowing smoke down your shirt or hiding the fag in your shirt was the favorite along with the 'giggle' hat or your boot. We were grateful for small mercies and a fag to some was the only thing that kept them sane. Cigars were definitely a no because you could smell them in the next Province. I hated cigarettes and never smoked even on the worst of days. I tried chewing tobacco but it was a real turn off.

We had to get used to so much on this supposed shakedown, 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 monitor 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" as you lashed out at them in an effort to flick them from your body, they just attacked back. No one warned us about these blighters which 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, our nerves and our sanity were being tested and even the coolest of guys were losing it. There was so much we were not told about, the ants, the lack of 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 (Paddo). 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 being the 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, a mishap with a rifle caused by sheer tiredness or even just tripping over.

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 packs, grenades and grenade launchers. The M60 machine gun was the same weapon used on Huey 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 on but forward scouts and Platoon Commanders were off. Due to the nature of the terrain and the jungle vines I tended in close areas or thick jungle growth to keep my weapon on safety in case it snagged on a vine. If the forward scout were to fire then the immediate response would be for the 'gunner' to open up. This in itself added to the day-to-day pressure and tension of operating in this type of 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. 'BJ you are a bloody idiot', was a constant reminder from Walk. 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 Companies, 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 was 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. I was to later learn that our Boss, Lt. Shea had gone through 4years of Duntroon with Lt. Wheeler as well as played Rugby with him. 'I was effected more by the death of Lt. Patterson (Patto) as he was a married man with a young child,' reflected Lt. Don Shea.

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 Mess 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, I wondered how he managed to keep his feelings to himself, continue to perform his duties and how he must have felt about 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. "Just get over there and don't over react, its nothing", he said.

I also wondered about the Battalion Commander Lt.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.

Officers have a position to maintain and a creed, 'Fair, Firm and Friendly but never familiar'. In Vietnam in the isolating jungles on long patrols this creed separated them from the other ranks. It was an occupational hazard. To me I was a civilian and more open to want to talk to the 'bloke' or the man not seeing him always as an officer. I believed there was a time for being 'Officer' and

times when 'friendly conversation on an equal footing would have served both Officer and men better. Years on I was to learn from the Boss that he wanted "a chat" but he would have been seen as 'having favourites'. Regular soldiers usually had no interest in talking to Officers on a personal level, so it was never a problem for them. Some of us were National Servicemen from all walks of life and for some of us like me, a chat about politics, religion, life and the future, was normal

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 4hours 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 headgear. 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. " You blokes stink, maybe we should just drop you into the sea for a wash", said the chopper crewman.

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.