the Early Times.

My 'marble' was drawn in the 4th ballot in late 1967, by ex-test cricket captain Lindsay Hassett, & it was some time before I could discover if I'd been "lucky". I was working as a Public Service "pen-pusher" in Sydney at the time, not bad money, but for a 20yr old, pretty boring stuff for one brought-up on a diet of John Wayne movies & action comics. Once I learnt that the information was available on personal application, & couldn't contain my curiosity any longer, so one lunch-break, I walked across to Chifley Sq., to enquire. The clerk went away, & presently returned, with the solemn news that I was "in". To his surprise, my response was something like "you beauty!", & I skipped away back to the office, with visions of derring-do going through my head, with the promised great adventure ahead. When I got home that evening, I recall that my dad said very little, but mum had me already measured-up for a box. It was to be some months before things got properly moving though. I had to receive official notification, & attend a medical exam.

The big day came on Wednesday 19 April 1967, & I was to present myself at Arncliffe depot, for further medical & dental checks. My parents drove me in, & goodbyes were said at the gates. I can't remember their emotional state that day, only my own excitement. We were bussed in convoy down to Wagga, a journey lasting many hours, & arrived at Kapooka camp (1RTB) in the dark very early hours. After being put to bed for what remained of the night, the next morning was made busy shedding our civilian clothes, (to be sent back to our parents I think, hopefully the only time they would receive a parcel of my personal belongings), issued with a full kit of obviously antiquated military gear at the QM store, & were marched off to the ablution-block, where a brace of barbers from town were honing-up their shears for our regulation "short back 'n sides". I heard one new guy, obviously sensitive to current hair fashion, ask his barber to do a bit here & a bit there. The barber responded by just moving the electric clippers over & over his head, 'til all trace of his crowning glory was obliterated. Thus was the fate which soon befell all of us.

We were assigned to a room in a multi-story barrack block, me rooming with Lee Shipley, a "journo" from around Gosford way, (who I soon teamed-up with), Jimmy Last, (a school-teacher), & Tony Wodianicky, who we all found rather difficult to connect with, all of us now in 20 Platoon D Company.

Our Platoon Commander was a Lt. Kerr, who we didn't see much of. I later heard that he'd gone into army aviation. Platoon-Sergeant was Sgt. Nelson, who of course, gave us a rough time, as was his job, breaking us down from the civilian mould, to rebuild us into a "rough, tough, fighting machine!! There was to be no leave into Wagga township or home, for about 6 weeks, except in an emergency, & in that time, we learnt the fundamentals & finer points of 'drill w/o arms', 'drill with arms', (over & over & over again), physical training, route-marches, fundamental arm's handling, map-reading, etc, etc. Funny thing though, after a time, our loose-knit group began to pull together as a team, giving one guy who refused to pull his weight, a hard time. I remember on a 20 mile route-march in full pack we took out towards a place called The Rock, those who faltered were helped along by the others. We were all going to make it, whatever came. Must have been satisfying to Sgt. Nelson, though he'd never admit it to us of course. Towards the end of our 3 mths. at Kapooka, we were surveyed as to which army-corp we would like to go to. We were to give two choices. I kinda thought that being APC M113 crew looked pretty 'cool', sleeping in hammocks inside, rather than on the ground, having an Eski for necessary food & beverage supplies, & not having to walk everywhere. My second choice, & in hindsight a mistake to indicate on this survey, was

Infantry. BIG mistake, as I think my first choice was somehow overlooked. Hello RAR ! With my previous P.S. clerical background, some people said I should have nominated for a Service Corp. posting, pushing a pen somewhere, but I wanted to get as far from that as possible. Besides, apart from family ties, I had no other hold on me. I wanted to be in a "fighting corp". It's an interesting statistic, that of the 45 in my platoon at 1RTB, I find that just 25 went on to serve in Vietnam, & of these, only 12 served in the infantry.

I had heard of the easy-lifestyle experienced by those posted to units at Malacca in Malaysia, with servants to do the hard yakka. Sounded like a real holiday on full pay to me. 'I could live with that', I thought. So I opted for the RAR. Silly naive me!

In late June, our families attended a "marching-out" parade, overseen by the 1RTB CO, Col. Oxley. Fortunately for all, the weather, though brisk, was fine, as all that "spit 'n polish" we'd lavished on our kit could be better appreciated. We were then posted off to our respective Corp. training schools, in my case, the Infantry Training Centre at Singleton, in the Hunter Valley, NSW. Mid-winter there, as was at Kapooka, was not at all very pleasant, especially at early morning-parade, often carrying our bed-sheets over a shoulder, to ensure we would had to remake our beds daily. Sergeant Zymski, our new platoon-sergeant, introduced himself to us on parade that first morning with the words "I am God", & we certainly believed him. Must have, I still remember those words. For the next 12 weeks, we honed our skills under the watchful eye of Sgt. Zymski ; small-arm's training, PT, bush skills, map-reading, (I was good at that), drill, etc. One afternoon, we were all marched down to the camp theatre, there to watch the recently released movie "Zulu", principally to observe the discipline displayed by the British soldiers there at Rorke's Drift in 1879. I also put-up my hand for a 1-day officer-training aptitude test, to be sent to OTC at Sceyville, out near Windsor. Really didn't think I was 'foreman material', but thought I may as well have a go. Nothing to lose. Various team-exercises, followed by a meal in the officer's mess, but no! It wasn't to be. I was destined to remain a 'grunt'.

We had more freedom of leave over some weekends starting lunchtime Saturday, & went home to Sydney sometimes, driving down the Putty Rd., & also down to Newcastle on occasion. Got a lift in Bobby Byrne's VW "Beetle". He lived over on the Nth. Shore in Sydney somewhere. He went on be assigned to 4RAR like me, & was to later die of wounds received in Vietnam, after spending some months in a coma at Concord Repat. in Sydney. Inter-platoon rivalry grew rather intense as time passed. I recall that one guy in our platoon who didn't appear to be 'pulling his weight', was waylaid in the "ablution" block (toilet block to civies) on one occasion, while a number of the platoon worked a little "persuasion" on him. We finished our training with an exercise up in the nearby Bulga Mountains, where our "enemy" we were told, were to be members of the SAS Regiment. We were further told that should any of us be captured by them, though we would be returned still breathing, rather 'unmentionable things' awaited us from their rough handling. On one night, we were all rostered two at a time & overlapping, for a two hour duty in the 'gun-pit' on sentry piquet. As each of us arrived throughout that moonless night, it was quietly passed-on that there were some 'blackened-up' SAS out front, edging slowly & silently ever closer, only moving when the breeze rustled the leaves. Rest assured, nobody slept on sentry that night. In fact, I remember an aboriginal guy from Cowra, NSW, (Terry Stacy was his name) in the pit with me for an hour. All I could see of him were his wide eyes. I have never been so bloody cold as the nights out on that exercise. On one particular night, though we were told that an A4 charge awaited anyone lighting a fire to keep warm, one guy did just that, & he was.

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HALCYON DAYS in the "HD" CLUB.

The new members of 4RAR, (myself included), bade a fond farewell to our "beloved" drill-sergeant Zymski, & travelled by bus in early Sept. 1967, to join our unit, not yet returned from active-duty in Borneo & Malaysia. I remember travelling into Brisbane in the gathering evening darkness, past the developing site for the forthcoming World Scout Jamboree out at the now-named suburb of Jamboree Hts., & arrived at our new home at Enoggera Barracks in the early evening.

This was to be the start of a very easy 3 months for us, all at that stage housed in the "High-Density", or HD accommodation block, 3 storey's high, with about 4 to a room, as well as beds lining the corridors, with ablutions at the far end of each floor. As I recall, we had a farmer from Victoria in my room, Alan Davis, who occasionally regaled us with a rendition on his bagpipes. Lucky I like the pipes eh! Lazy days were to follow, as a small number of present 4RAR staff did duty, the remainder, as they returned from overseas, going on leave 'til early in the new year.

Parades were few, food was plentiful at the mess (heaps of steaks, all you could eat), & leave was frequent, usually into town, where my mates & I were to be found at the Arcadia Hotel at the top of Elizabeth St., the Land's Office Hotel around the corner in George St., or at the Treasury Hotel also in George St., with it's punkah swinging from the front bar ceiling, all now long gone. The Grand Hotel down at the far end of town was the best venue for a bit of "stoush" if one was in the mood, & the tables & chairs were all bolted to the floor, & for very good reason. At the opposite end of the spectrum of respectability was Christie's Restaurant & Milk-Bar, to be found in Queen St. down near Edward St. corner. There was also a great little nightclub alongside the Arcadia where every table was prominently numbered, each being furnished with an "in-house" telephone (just dial-up a table-number of choice) to call-up girls sitting at other tables for an anonymous chat if the mood hit. Soft lights, music, booze, all the ingredients. - it was a great place for a 'pickup'. Other popular destinations, but usually on a Saturday night, were a small floating dance-hall down a long & steep flight of stairs to the river in town, a drive down to The Glen Hotel out near Eight-Mile Plains in the city's south, or to what was commonly referred to amongst us as "The Bulk Store"; better known as Cloudland, an old-fashioned large & very prominent "big-band" dance-hall perched on the top of a hill out at Bowen Hills , with "wall-to-wall" single females in attendance. If you couldn't get a 'pickup' there, then you weren't trying. I found a girlfriend from there in my first week in Brisbane, she lived out near Capalaba as I recall. (I was also to find another girlfriend there just a week before I sailed in May '68.) As it was difficult to travel out to Capalaba at awkward weekend hours by public transport, my next essential was to get a set of wheels, so I soon had me an old FE Holden for $300, picked-up from a dealers out at Albion. (Bill Harrison Motors). There was a large rust-hole in the front passenger-side floor with a rubber mat over it, very handy after a "heavy" night out & driving back to camp, as one didn't really have to stop moving if someone was "busting for a leak". When the wind got up, so did the mat as we moved along, with a mate Bob "Zorro" Page from Colac, Vic., hanging out a window yelling "ariba, ariba" to all & sundry as we passed-by. We'd also take the occasional weekend down on the Gold Coast, where Greg Reid, "Shorty" Partridge & I, would make the best of sleeping in my car, & spend the odd hour together at the "Cabbage-Patch beer-garden at Coolangatta. Eats were obtained from what we referred to as the "Chew & Spew" café, in the main street of Coolangatta.These were wild & carefree times.!! We were all indestructible then. Young 'n dumb !

Life at Enoggera during those 3 months revolved around duty, (or ducking it); usually in the mess, (OR's, Officers or Sgts.), gardening details, or sentry duty. I spent my 21st doing the latter in fact. I recall early one morning being told that in our shower block in the HD, there were several 'ladies' of a very "dark complexion" & very questionable morals, to be found. A number of us attended a fortnight's Mortar Course down at Ingleburn outside Sydney during November, which was very convenient for me, as I came from Sydney. Life was very lazy. In early December, we & the rest of the country were shocked, when the P.M. Harold Holt disappeared while swimming off a beach in Victoria. Rumours had it that he'd been picked-up & whisked away by a Chinese submarine.

During this time in Brisbane, a contingent from the British Army's "King's Own Shropshire Light Infantry" stayed for a few days in the barracks nearby, post-exercising up north I think. They marched everywhere at "double-quicktime", which seemed very comical to us, but I really did like that "rainbow"-striped belt of theirs, & tried to barter for one at a pub in Brisbane. They wouldn't part with it though. Several days were occupied with a party of us travelling down to Hamilton Wharf by truck to do stevedoring duties on the British supply ship "Sir Lancelot", then loading a cargo for Vietnam. Took us longer than it should I suppose, but we were in no hurry to get the job finished. It broke the boredom anyway. Some time was even spent by some, across the road at the local pub. As several of the blokes could operate forklifts, they held a jousting bout down on the cargo-deck for our entertainment. My favourite music then, was by Garry Puckett & The Union Gap, & Engelbert Humperdinck's "Last Waltz" was not bad either.

TRAINING UP for BIGGER THINGS to COME.

As those who had been on extended post-tour leave began to return to barracks into January, our holiday was finally drawing to an end. Lt. Max Chambers was appointed to be our platoon CO, with Gerry Villalba his Sgt., & to us new blokes, our nemesis. Continuous rounds of drilling, route-marching around the suburban streets of Brisbane, (as far afield as Keperra), range-practice out at Greenbank, tracker training, practice in "chopper" loading & unloading on the base's football field, bushcraft, practicing with APC's, numerous parades, practice with Recoilless Rifles, (both in camp & out on the range), training, training, training. But the time went by faster than in late '67. Sometime during April, we found ourselves up in the Shoalwater/Tin-Can Bay area near Rockhampton for a week's exercise, made a little more palatable by a small group of us, while riding on an APC on one occasion, discovering a beachside pub to buy a few cans of Mac's, then travelling at some speed down the long beach 'til we were brought to an abrupt halt by the discovery of some girls sitting on the beach, who looked as though they were badly in need of a drink & a little convivial company.

We were some weeks later off to Canungra JTC for a 2-week stint. There, it was to be yet more weapon's training, bayonet-fighting, tracker-training, battle condition's practice, where we crawled beneath barbed-wire entanglements over a course through mud, whilst an old Vicker's machine-gun fired live bursts over us into a vast rock wall on the far side of the valley. The infamous obstacle course was awaiting us at course's completion, with it's much feared "bear-pit", full of all kinds of obnoxious materials. As I recall, on the river crossing, where one had to cross-over through the water, pulling yourself on a rope fixed at each end, Jimmy Cawston, our English platoon member, (conscripted whilst in Sydney on holiday from his home in Essex), had "the gun" strapped on his back. After it's 22lb weight pulled him under for the 3rd time, he wasn't going down for a 4th count. He promptly uncoupled it, & it sank to the river's bottom. He was promptly placed on an A4 (charge), & the M60 had to be later retrieved by a staff member of JTC. The course finished with the climbing of a tower in full webbing, kit & weapons, & a leap into the river from around 25 metres. Before this, & luckily, they would ask about one's swimming ability. They didn't wish to lose anyone prior to Vietnam, did they ?

Immediately after Canungra, we spent a further 2 weeks in Northern NSW at the Wiangaree State Forest, brushing-up further on our bushcraft, patrolling techniques, ambushing & tracking practice. This place was absolute "hell". Straight up & down stuff., with lots of "scrub-bashing", ants, leeches, mosquitoes, 'wait-a-while" vegetation, snakes. Vietnam would be a breeze after this place, I'm sure. Glad to get back to Brisbane & some real food, girls, soft beds, girls, showers, girls, pubs, girls, again.

As May '68 came, we went on final embarkation leave, & upon return to base, arranged a platoon party for our final Saturday night, our destination was to be Bishop Island, at the mouth of the Brisbane River, with a BBQ, booze, wives, girlfriends, concubines, whatever. Chartered a small ferry out, & a great time was had by all, to various degrees, I'm sure. I remember that I walked with the girl I was with down to the beach & gazed out to the number of small launches & yachts bobbing about in the gloom, anchored just off-shore. As I remember, she said something about us commandeering a nearby row-boat & going out to "look them over more closely", but I ignored her suggestion. Was I slow, or what ?

Couldn't take it with me where I was headed, so I finally had to offload my old vehicle.

All I received after much barter was $10, & that for it's battery, which incidentally had been taken out of a long abandoned car in our car-park near the HD Club building at Enoggera. I think the previous owner had "gone over the hill" (AWOL) quite some time earlier, so we assumed he had no further use for it.

Came our last day in Brisbane before departure, Monday 20 May, & I, with some mates & our partners, went along to the Land's Office Hotel that evening for one last "bash". That was literally what eventuated. Our troop-transport, the HMAS SYDNEY, had arrived in port that day, & a fair number of it's crew was also in attendance at the crowded Land's Office beer garden, all sitting at tables covered with glasses & jugs of beer, & taking in the on-stage singer's floor-show. Don't know who started it, but it was on, the annual Army v Navy "game". The very first bar-room brawl I'd ever seen or been a part of. The singing continued for a time, & I recall the female vocalist up on stage swaying out of the path of airborne jugs & glasses as she continued on with her number. Had to eventually leave though, as we had our girls with us, & did the right thing by them & got them away, but in hindsight, would have loved to have taken part just once in one of these legendary altercations. Everybody there on this eve of our embarkation must have been a bit tense, & it wouldn't have taken much for it to have triggered-off. Must have been some sore heads & sundry other parts next morning, I'm sure.

Tuesday 21 May arrived, & the Big Day. We were up early & on parade out on the battalion parade-ground with full kit straight after breakfast, awaiting the convoy of trucks to take us through the city & down to Hamilton Wharf. My parents & siblings had driven up from Sydney, & with my new girlfriend, were there to see me off. Goodbyes were said at ship-side down on the wharf, & boarding made for our send-off under a sunny Brisbane sky. The SYDNEY turned around out in mid-stream with a band ashore playing "will you no come back again" & other suitable numbers, & as we set off down-river toward the open-sea, every ship's whistle on the river was sounding off a haunting farewell. Most of us still lined the flight-deck 'til well down-river & out of sight. With such mixed emotions, I bet there was the odd "speck of dust " in the eye with not a few of us, & a large lump in the throat. What awaited us ?

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<u>"ALMOST a DIARY"</u>- Extracts of letters written home ; aboard the troop-carrier HMAS SYDNEY, en-route to Vietnam, and upon arrival "in-country".

"Somewhere in the Coral Sea" – 23 May '68

-Well, we've been at sea nearly 2 days now. This letter will be taken off at Manus Is. On the 25th,(Sat.). We are supposed to drop anchor here for a day to a day & a half while the ship replenishes supplies of food, water & fuel, & we're going ashore for some Army vs Navy competitions like footy, boxing, volleyball, etc. We should reach Viet. on either the 1st or 2nd of June. In the meantime I think I'll sleep on the deck where it's cool instead of in a hammock because it's too cramped in one of these. I'll probably spend a night in one though just for curiosity's sake, but it's comfortable enough lying on a thin mattress & pillow with a bush blanket around me. The only trouble is that on the first night out I was sleeping very peacefully, when suddenly I had someone stumbling all over me in the dark. I hope they don't make a practice of making a track straight across me & my bed every night.

Where I am sitting (on the deck outside our hoochie,), all one can see is water, water, water, all the way to the horizon. The blue of the water is absolutely beautiful, & is broken occasionally by a porpoise breaking surface or a few flying-fish. About ½ a mile to port, (my side of the ship), is the destroyer-escort HMAS Anzac, which we picked up on our first night out. What navy in the world would dare attack us, what with our 6 Ack-Ack guns, & one 4.2" naval gun, it's barrel stuffed with a wooden block. All I can say is it's lucky the Viet Cong don't possess a navy.------

"Somewhere in the New Guinea, New Britain Area."- 24 May '68

-As I write this we are passing the coast of what we think is New Britain, so what I said yesterday about being off Nth. Qld. is pure rubbish. We must have been crossing the Timor Sea. The land we now see is rather hazy but is only some 8-10 miles away off the port (left) side & is extremely steep & high. In fact the mountains look as though they slope straight into the sea. To think that at this very moment we are probably being watched by hundreds & even thousands of beady little eyes attached to head-hunting axes & cannibal's knives. We've also passed quite a few small green coral islands in the past day, some with shipwrecks on the sands.

This morning it was quite dull & dismal, with steady rain falling, although it was by no means cold. Everything looked grey- the sea, the sky, the "Anzac" a mile or so off the port side, & you'd be surprised just how this rain calmed the sea. There was just a swell on the surface, with no whitecaps whatsoever. Now though, (3.30pm), it has cleared up considerably, & although it's still overcast, it's quite pleasant. It's all quite tropical really, me sitting here on the deck outside our quarters dressed only in shorts & boots while Hawaiian-style music is played over the intercom. (Ahh, what a life.)

You should see me hair, or what there is of it. Yesterday I went to the barber's & told him to "go to town" on my hair. He did. Now it's only about ¼ to ½" long all over. Almost a "Yul Brynner" look. I don't know if it will be cut quite as short again but it seems that since I got mine cut, quite a few others are getting in on the act, even several who laughted when I first got mine done. Anyway, it's more practical, being cooler & easier to look after. They call me "Curly" now, a la "The 3 Stooges".

You wouldn't notice it here, but between this sentence & the last has been a break of about 10-15 mins., while I rushed away for "beer parade".(1 x 26oz can of good old Sydney Resch's, for 20c per man.) Along with my own, I was lucky enough today to get another can off a fella who didn't feel like it today.

Guess what! It doesn't really take 4 nights to get used to hammocks. I slept in one last night for the first time & slept like a log. It's something akin to a cradle really, because with

the roll of the ship we are rocked to sleep. I'll stick with a hammock from here on. Last night as I "hit the hay" our "Sea Daddy", (the sailor who shows us the ropes), played his guitar-flamenco, which he says is the only way to play.

Next Sunday afternoon we will be welcoming King Neptune aboard for the "Crossing of the Line" ceremony. In this we "pollywogs", who have never crossed the equator, will be initiated as "shellbacks",or old salts. Tomorrow when we arrive at Manus Is. We have been warned about the natives. They reckon we will be besieged by natives selling fruit & wooden goods, but that the carvings will be of poor quality & very dear. As mail is taken off tomorrow for the last time before we arrive in Sth. Viet., you won't get any more mail 'til next week.-----

"Somewhere between Manus Is. & the Philippines."- 26 May '68

-I'm now a "shellback". It is not even an hour ago at the writing of this letter that we sailed into the Nthn. Hemisphere, on a course which will take us just south of Mindanao, the largest island in the southern Philippines group. We are doing a rate of approx. 520 miles per day & once clear of the Philippines & Borneo region we will be crossing the South China Sea on the last leg of our cruise to Vung Tau. We are due to anchor out to sea off the Cape at about 7am next Saturday morning.(1st June).

Yesterday morning (Sat.), I awoke at about 6.20 to find we were only about 4 miles off Manus Is., which I was surprised to find was very large indeed. I was expecting some small coral island, but instead was an island with mountain ranges stretching off into the distance, harbours & a fringe of small coral islands about a mile off the coast with several large rusting wrecks adorning the reefs. We tied up about 7.30 am in a cove several hundred yards off the naval installation there, complete with about half a dozen patrol boats like they're building in the Brisbane River. It looked like something out of "McHale's Navy." As soon as we stopped engines, out came the natives in outrigger canoes selling shell necklaces, bananas, mangoes, coconuts & carved goods, but all I bought was one little old coconut. It was just the shot though, what with the sun blazing down. The carvings were of a poor quality & they wanted anything upward of $4 for them. Some of the blokes were gullible enough of course to buy them, but what in hell would a fella do with a 4ft. wooden crocodile in Nui Dat?

Contrary to what I had heard, we were not allowed ashore. The island looked so inviting that I doubt whether they would have got everybody back aboard anyway. This was the point at which our mail was taken ashore, so this letter & any more I write over this next week shall not be taken off until we arrive in Viet. At 4pm on Sat. we pulled out again from the beautiful green of the waters in the cove, & once clear of the fringe islands around Manus we rendezvous with the fleet oiler HMAS Supply to take on more fuel. I don't know what kind of oil she carried, but hanging out of a rear porthole was a 30ft. long tiger's tail.("put a tiger in your tank", & all that.).After watching this episode & having a turkey dinner down in the mess, I watched the film "The Sins of Rachael Cade" before turning-in for the night.

Today has been perfect with just a little cloud around this morning. The breeze remained refreshingly cool despite the hot sun. I already have a bit of a tan up. The sea today for our crossing of the Equator has been fantastically smooth, almost mirror smooth. I didn't think the sea could look so calm. The surface was broken yesterday afternoon by a school of at least a dozen porpoises, but today nothing has broken the surface. All in all it was a perfect setting for the Crossing of the Equator Ceremony. At about 2pm we were called & presently King Neptune & his Court appeared.(They were senior officers of the Battalion of course), & proceeded to "try" various members of the battalion for various "crimes" which I won't discuss here. They were all found guilty one by one & after being covered in various concoctions like eggs, glue, flour, whitewash & kitchen leftovers they were given the "order of the bath" in seawater. When the trials were completed a high-pressure hose was turned on

us & hey-presto, we were declared genuine "shellbacks".-----

"500 Miles closer to Vietnam than Yesterday's Letter".- 27 May '68

-We'll probably be doing a little training aboard this week, but we're still left with many hours to kill. What seems to be lowering our moral just a little I think is the absence of any mail for nearly 2 weeks. Regular mail aboard ship would do us the world of good. We're all looking forward to getting off this tub & getting ashore next Sat. morning, knowing that mail for most of us will be waiting there.

Today has been pretty hot all day & the sea is still very calm. All we did today was fire over the side with our weapons at balloons & beer cans, but in being on deck nearly all day we have all become a little burnt. In fact some are already wearing long trousers, shirts & hats to protect their burnt skin, instead of just shorts. I started wearing a shirt myself this afternoon when I found my shoulders becoming a little tender to the touch.

Tomorrow (Tues. 28th), I cop my one & only duty on board. I'll be working as a "galley slave", working down in the kitchen, assisting the cooks. It's terribly hot down there, & I'll probably lose a little weight in sweat, but up in these latitudes we're drinking heaps more fluids & downing 3 or 4 salt tablets per day. One advantage of working here though is we are not found wanting for eats. We eat all we want. The only trouble with the food being served up is that much of it consists of "fatty" foods, such as chips, fried meats, etc. Thank goodness they also serve up salads,- they're easier to digest in this climate.------

"Philippines."- 29 May '68

-As from yesterday pm until we reach Vung Tau, our watches & clocks aboard have been put back 1 hr. Once we have arrived there, our watches will be set back yet another hour, & will then be on a par with West Aussie time. What else? Oh yes. Yesterday afternoon we saw a school of whales cruising by the ship at a distance of about 200 yds. They were diving & surfacing continuously & blowing jets of water into the air. Also yesterday we saw our first ship since leaving "Brissie", apart from our oiler & our escort. It was a large tanker & crossed our path at right-angles about ½ mile ahead of us. Taking no risks with 478 troops aboard, our choppers from the carrier flew over to & looked it over, in the off-chance it had ulterior motives.

Working in the galley wasn't quite the hardship I thought it was going to be after all. Sure it was hot alright, but not as bad as I was expecting. At any rate, the day's work was made worthwhile by the tea I had that evening. I really had all I could eat, not a wise thing to do in this climate. As a result of this over indulgence I am now laying-off eating for a day. Besides, I'm getting a little too much weight on this cruise, what with eating plenty & doing little training.

"*Philippine Sea."- 30 May '68*

-This morning we passed through the southern extremity of the Philippines, passing several large islands, one of which was Mindanao, 2nd largest island in the group. From the ship we could see a town on the Nth. Coast of the island, with a few rather large buildings, oil storage tanks & several ships at anchor in the small harbour. The mountain range which rose from the coast was rather high, the tops hidden in cloud. On our port side was another large island complete with volcano, which I am told was in eruption 3 or 4 wks. ago. It all looks quite peaceful today however. All over this island this morning there were wisps of white smoke rising, probably from villages scattered around the hills, & in the straits between these islands we passed many outrigger canoes, some quite close & probably belonging to the local indians.

To look outside now I would hazard a guess & say we are now sailing into the influence

of the monsoon region. After days of beautiful weather, we woke this morning to an overcast sky, with grey cloud scurrying across the sky. It has steadily deteriorated as the day has progressed, & is now steadily raining. The sea has risen some & the whole picture is once again grey. At least it will give everyone's sunburn the chance to lose it's soreness. They tell us we're going to have to condition ourselves to the rain, because about the time we reach our destination the monsoon season will be getting underway & will last for most of my tour in Sth. Vietnam, but I'll know more about that from first-hand experience very soon.-----

*"**South China Sea."- 31 May '68***

-Well tomorrow's the big day for us. The day when we go ashore on the beach at Vung Tau from our barges, kit-bag in one hand & universal travelling bag in the other. If we're lucky we just might be able to find room to squeeze in our rifles also. Believe me, things will be hot in Nui Dat, in more ways than one, but I'll be glad to get off the old tub they call a "fast troop carrier". Although life aboard has been quite a holiday with so little work to do, it'll be a change to be occupying ourselves with a little of the old toil again. At least time will pass quicker with work to do, (filling sandbags, digging gunpits, etc.) At the moment, time just drags by here at sea.

The latest word is that we arrive off Cape St. Jaques (Vung Tau) in the early hours of Sat. morning & begin disembarking at approx. 7am. Precautionary measures have been taken aboard ship for our arrival by night in Viet. Waters. Yesterday, all lightbulbs visible away from the ship were exchanged for blue bulbs, with shades covering them to seaward. At the moment though I don't think it has really dawned on us as yet that as from tomorrow there will be people around us who will be firing fair-dinkum live rounds at us. It all seems as though it's still completely unreal, & that the fighting is still on the other side of the world instead of on our doorstep. Oh well, tomorrow will probably be the rude awakening for us all.-----

"Nui Dat."- 2 June '68

-Oh, the smells of Asian villages, (whew!) sweat, dust & rotting vegetation pervading the camp. Believe me, when I say sweat, I mean Sweat with a capital S. Even just standing still we just drip, even though all we wear in camp is a hat, shorts, socks & boots. The days here have temps. In the 80's, but oh, the humidity. The nights fortunately are cooler, & last night at about 4am I even had to pull a sheet over myself.- I've still much to talk about, like the camp & the trip up from Vung Tau etc. but since it's 10.45 pm, I'd better hit the hay & write again tomorrow. If this letter is not posted by 8am each day it lies around until the next day, so,-----

"Nui Dat."- 3 June '68

-We left the carrier at about 9am Sat. morning & went ashore at Vung Tau port in LST's which the SYDNEY had slung over the sides. Once ashore we were issued with front-line ammo. of 120 rounds SLR per man, or for whatever weapon we carried. Then off we went in a convoy of over 30 trucks, APC's & 3 choppers overhead looking out ahead for possible enemy on the road.

We passed through about 4 hamlets & villages on the 25 mile trip to Nui Dat, & they look just like the Asian villages in the movies, with the addition of smells. The squaller some of these people live in is unbelievable & depressing, but these people are probably used to it. In between these hamlets are rice paddies & clumps of bamboo & bush. The paddies are dry as the monsoon season is not properly with us yet, but for most of Sat. it was drizzling rain. Then about 5am Sun. morning it really came down in buckets,- & the mud. Every step I took

Sunday morning I think I grew about an inch, what with the clayey mud clinging to the boots. The weather was again wet last night, (it helps to cool the place off at night anyway). Today the temp. got into the mid 90's but oh!, this humidity.

There is no such thing as weekends or any other day off here. We work 7 days a week, & believe me, there is plenty of work to do in the hoochies in which we are quartered. They were really left in a mess by 2RAR who we've relieved at Nui Dat. We passed most of 2 battalion on their way into Vung Tau. They were on their way out to the SYDNEY. Many of us will be envying them on the 13th June at approx. 8am when they arrive in Brisbane.-----

"Nui Dat."- 4 June –'68

-After working from 8am 'til about 4.30pm each day with only about an hour or so off for lunch, you just can't imagine what a booster it is to mail each day. At the moment we're having a bit of a bludge just working around the camp on our 3 week acclimatization period. After this settling-in period we get down to the hard work ahead. On our first payday here, (June 6), I'll be buying myself a camera, probably an Instamatic, & from then on clicking away, even when "beyond the wire."

I forgot to tell you in previous mail that we received some shocking news on the ship last Friday morning. We heard over Radio Hanoi that on the previous day we had been sunk with the loss of nearly 5000 lives. There was a report of only 2 survivors being picked-up. This was terrible news to hear that we had all been killed the previous day. Then, several hours later they reported that we would be arriving in Sth. Vietnam on the Sunday morning. (so work that out.)

When we arrived last Sat. morning we were besieged by small kids every time the trucks stopped. They were after anything we would throw them, & some of these kids were only 2 & 3 yrs. old. I would say that about half of them were smoking, but they reckon that the people here do everything at an earlier age than back home. They even get married at the ripe old age of 13 or 14 yrs.

Last Sunday morning we went down to Luscombe airfield, about 500 yds from our lines, & watched an ASCO (Aust. Services Canteens Organisation) entertainment team of 3 girls & 5 fellas. The girls singing was the most appreciated in their 2 hr. show. I think they could have just stood there doing nothing & still would have taken the honours. On the whole though, the show was most appreciated.

As I write this I am listening to the US Armed Services Radio (AFVN) program from Saigon.(a 24hr program). It is a request program for servicemen in Vietnam. From men in various units in-country & from their loved-ones back home, dedicated to them. Also tonight there is the usual noise of crunching mortar & artillery fire, which they send out of the camp every night to harass the enemy. After each gun has fired, we hear the shell going through the air above our heads, only to crash off in the distance. This is continued all night & every night, but we soon get used to it.

When we moved in last Sat. morning it looked as though 2RAR (the unit we relieved) had been given only 5 mins. To pack & shift out. The hoochies, (which house 3 men, big tents surrounded by sandbags) were in a simply shocking state. The stuff lying around was phenomenal.- ammunition, grenades, plastic-explosive, claymore mines, (firing about 800 ballbearings about 500 yds when detonated.), money, watches & clocks, souvenirs, army equipment, writing material, hundreds of books, personal gear, clothing, a radio, a thermometer, a VC skull we called Herman, (taken from a 2 yr's earlier KIA), you name it, we found it there. It was quite a job cleaning up, & even now there's still a mountain of work to do, making furniture, & tidying & brightening up the tents.-----

Before long, I had scrounged up a parachute-flare canopy, which looked just great when

suspended from our hoochie ceiling, especially after we'd decorated it with a "Playboy of the month" centrefold pinned into each section of the chute, in an overall circular pattern. About a dozen in all, & VERY interesting, I must say ! But our CSM (Darcy Tilbrook) , & after a 'close' inspection, unfortunately disagreed when he finally saw it while making a lines' inspection one morning. A great pity. It was very artistic !

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A Weekend in "Vungers" ~ (23/25August 1968)

We'd been "in-country" about 12 weeks before our first short period to unwind arrived. Come Friday afternoon, & we were in a convoy of trucks with armed escort, winding the 20 miles or so down Hwy. 2 en-route to Vung Tau, 1ALSG, & the newly-opened *Peter Badcoe Club*, right on the beach, & our resort home for 2 nights. The contrast in climate between Nui Dat & here surprised us. Just a short distance between, but at Nui Dat it's always raining now, but here on the coast, not a sign of rain, & blue skies for us all weekend, but very much hotter.

Once off the trucks around 3pm, the rules & regulations were read-out to us, & all weapons, ammo, & webbing, were handed into the armoury-store. Indeed a strange feeling after near 3 months, not to have our personal weapons readily at-hand. A naked & exposed feeling . Assigned 4 to a room, we were blown-away by the comparative luxury available. Ceiling-fans, clean sheets, pillow cases, & not even having to remake our beds next morning. Wow ! Local Vietnamese women would enter the rooms about 8:30 or 9 in the morning, to clean & tidy-up our mess.

Very soon after our arrival, the bar was packed with very-thirsty diggers, many hadn't even bothered to change out of their bush gear before getting stuck into it. That could wait. I ambled down to the nearby beach with a mate to take a look, & went in for our first dip in the South China Sea. The water was kinda' warm, no surf as we'd know it at home, & with globs of what we thought was oil floating about. After about 30mins, we took a walk south along the beach past the ROC complex, 'til we came to a barbed-wire fence strung across the sand & out into the water. This of course wasn't about to stop 2 curious diggers, so after traversing this obstacle, we were now on Uncle-Sam's property, & home to their *Beachcomber Club,* more like a beer-garden with covered bar area, poker-machines, etc. Did our "reccon" & thought that perhaps we'd better make it back in case there was a roll-call or something. Didn't want to be posted as missing. Just in time for evening meal in the club restaurant, we were to find that there was even a waitress-service provided here. I'd almost forgotten what civil-living was all about, it'd been so long since.

Leave in the "flesh-pots" & bars of downtown "Vungers" would be allowed between 6 & 9 pm for half of our company that night, with the 2nd contingent, (including myself) to be let-loose on the following night (Saturday). Such a small detail as an official leave pass wasn't about to stop us breaking out that night though. We changed into 'civy' clothes & a mate & I walked down toward the 1ALSG gatehouse to try our luck. & it was with us. As we neared the gate, a Kiwi officer drove up heading for the gates, & asked if we'd like a lift ? In we jumped of course. At the gate, the sentry checked the Kiwi officer's pass, who then said he'd only just picked us up, & our papers better also be checked. The jig was up! Miraculously though, the "screw" looked us over in the back, & said 'they'll be right", & through we went, all the way downtown. The 'gods were indeed smiling on us". We intended to have a good look over this town tonight, prior to our "official" visit in 24 hour's time. I'd guarantee however, that 60-70% of the guys we saw around town didn't have passes that night.

Vung Tau central was a maze of bars, hotels, souvenir shops, café, etc, & full of bar-girls in every door, enticing US & us poor naive Aussie guys inside to buy them "Saigon-Tea", simply a glass of coloured water at $2-$3, & beers for ourselves, at about 70c bottle. What a racket ! A 'rip-roaring' town to say the least. So easy to part with one's cash. I was a

little light-on anyway, & only went through $40 to $50 all weekend, but many were to lighten their pockets by 2-3-4 times that amount. Being officially AWOL, & not wanting to press our luck too far, we made a point of being back at "The Flags" rendezvous place by the allotted 9pm, in time to jump aboard a truck back to 1ALSG. Again, I would've thought that only 1 or 2 on this truck had leave-passes for the night. Arrival back at the Badcoe was around 9:15, & some of us continued on at the poolside bar for an hour or so more. Not healthy to be out & about in town between 9pm & 6am, as there's a curfew, if picked-up by the MP's an evening in the 'can' awaited, or worse, the trigger-happy SVN "white-mice" may come across you. Now that could've turned ugly !

Saturday arrived, & after arising at a luxurious time around 7:30 & taking a cold shower, (very welcomed in these climes) we were informed over breakfast with much jubilation, that we were to get leave-passes into town from 12 noon, 'til the usual 9 that night. With only about 3 hrs now to kill, back down to the beach we went, spending about 2 hours there, back to freshen-up & change, collect our passes, & away ! Stopping for some quick shopping at the American PX on the way, we jumped a lift into town, where the troubles for our platoon, & us in particular, slowly unwound. That afternoon, we did a further reconn. around the town, stopping in for several hours at the Aust. Leave Centre, downing a few ales there, then moving-on to inspect the USO Club, supposedly an 'exclusive' oasis for American personnel, but obviously no objection shown to Australian diggers also paying them a visit. Then again, perhaps they couldn't tell we were Australians, dressed in our civies as were all the others. Looked a great place to grab a feed, 45c "all you could eat", so we stayed on there a bit.

Leaving the USO Club behind, it was back into town we went, via the area known as "the Flags". There we came upon two of our platoon mates, blind-drunk, in an American jeep, apparently placed there we discovered, by some MP's, to "sleep it off". One of our guys had climbed into the driver's seat, & though the wheel was chained, he had tried to get the vehicle moving. Meanwhile, two US guys who belonged to this vehicle, returned & tried to haul our blokes out. Voices on the footpath grew progressively louder, with a little pushing & shoving mixed in. Another of our Tracker Plt. guys appeared & went over to try to settle things down, but met with little success. I reckon that if a blow had've been struck then, a riot would've quickly erupted, as it looked like a hundred US & Australian servicemen had gathered to watch the show. In time, an Australian vehicle with 3 RP's drew-up, & after some explaining of the situation to them, it was suggested that they take our 2 back to base to 'dry-out'. They were having none of it. A little more pushing & shoving, & while one of our guys went quietly, the other suddenly spun around & slugged one of the RPs. Now that was a BAD MOVE ! They put him in a headlock, thrust him in the back of their vehicle, & away they went. We later heard that one was charged with making a nuisance of himself, & the other was released on Sunday morning on "open-arrest", charged with assaulting an RP & resisting arrest. At last someone else, if not many more, would soon be joining me in our platoon as one to receive an A4, mine being several week's earlier. What a record.

Following this "street-circus" affray, our thirst had returned again, & with it now getting dark, we decided to walk down to the beach-front esplanade & the famous Grand Hotel, overlooking the beach. Surely remaining from the French epoch, this grand edifice is a popular "watering-hole" amongst the military. Going in through the side 'tradesman's entrance' & into the main bar area, the place was full of Yanks & girls, a true "den of iniquity' it appeared, & so just the place for us. Grabbing a couple of bar-stools, (don't know if they were spoken for at the time ?) & ordering a couple of 'balmy-bars' to keep the thirst at

bay, it wasn't long before we were brushing-off the bar-girls who sidled over asking "you by me Saigon-tea ?" After being stung the previous night, we were now all-knowing, & perhaps a little more selective with our free-spending. Soon got talking with some Yank patrons, & saw several more of our blokes in there too, quietly taking tea I suppose ?

Having arrived there around 7:30 pm, four hours quickly passed, & before long, it was nearing 11pm. Far too late to break curfew & return to base now , we could also run the risk of a confrontation with the 'white-mice' out in the streets, so we decided it was better to wait out the night hours there in the bar. The Yanks didn't seem too concerned, & since they were doing all the buying, who was complaining! Besides, so much for getting back to base by 9pm. Both our platoon CO & the Major in charge of our whole detachment over the weekend, were still drinking in the bar around 10pm. : "Goose & Gander". We considered we'd have a good case to argue should we have found ourselves charged over returning late to the Badcoe.

We ran into our platoon mate Jeff Kemp in the bar that night, pretty 'stoned' it would appear, & as the hours passed, he grew more drunk & agitated. It appears that in his infinite wisdom, & sometime earlier that evening, he'd given "his" bar-girl companion $40 or $50 for a few 'extra favours' that night, & he hadn't seen her since payment, (in advance) was made. Well "Kempy" was going to rip this place apart, & after some heated 3-way discussion with 'mama-san' & 'the girl' in question, she offered to supply 3 stretchers for us in the now closed & darkened restaurant, there to remain 'til curfew was lifted next morning. Everything looked 'rosy' I thought, 'til, in a fit of drunken temper, 'Kempy' punched a plate-glass window. A bloke can sober-up so very quickly indeed sometimes. He withdrew his arm, blood everywhere, with pleas to stem the bleeding. "Help, I'm bleeding to death". "Quick, put a tourniquet on it". Bright-red blood was literally spurting from a gash about 3inches below the elbow, obviously an artery, & there was no movement or feeling in the hand, so there was muscle & nerve damage also. My mate Davy Coxhead used his dog-tags & a pen to stem the bleeding, & meanwhile, mama-san grabbed me by the hand to rush upstairs & call an ambulance from our base. By the time I came back down however, both "Kempy" & Coxhead were gone, rushed away to the US 36th Medical Evac. Hospital in the nearby US air base, in a Yank vehicle.

Two operations were to follow in the next few days, & while we thought that just maybe he'd be back with us in a month or so, he was eventually RTA'd back home, & his arm was to remain in plaster for around 3 months. We never saw him back again at Nui Dat.

Not much more I could do that night, so bedded down in the restaurant with a few other curfew-breaking Yanks, arising about 6:30 Sunday morning to get back to 1ALSG by local "noggie" taxi. Arriving at the gates, the MP's allowed me through with a minimum of fuss, & I thought that under the circumstances, I was in the clear. I soon found that about 7 or 8 of our blokes in the platoon were now facing charges over weekend incidents in town. Davy Coxhead was told by an Australian RP on his way back to base after leaving "Kempy" at 36th Evac. Hospital, that they'd had more trouble from members of our platoon than all the other 4RAR platoons there over that weekend. Drunkeness, brawling, assaulting 'screws', one of ours in hospital, etc. Obviously a great weekend was had be all ! A very gentlemanly well-behaved crew, I think.

Getting back to base around 7:20am, I just had time to take a quick shower, change back into my "work", clothes, get across for breakfast, then hurry back to the room in time to clear out my gear, in time for the room to be cleaned & prepared for the next incoming guests

that afternoon. We were to be on the trucks back to Nui Dat by 9am, but were told that departure was delayed by 4 ½ hours, as some "big-wigs" from Oz were to visit later that morning to officially open the Olympic-size swimming pool at the Club. "Great", we thought. Here's a pool we've been banned from using all weekend during our stay, because it hadn't been 'officially' opened, & it'd be 'opened' for use just as we're leaving. Typical ! And as for it's name. The "Harold Holt" Pool. Seemed a little whimsical, a pool named after a guy who'd apparently drowned. "Official" opening was set for noon, & in the meantime, we were told we could just hang-around, or go down the beach, but the bar was closed. It wasn't long before about six of us were back through that wire along the beach, to pay another visit to the US Beachcomber Club, & get stuck again into that Yank beer to while-away some time. We observed that we were soon also joined by a number of 4RAR sergeants, including our own platoon sergeant, & several RP's, so we considered we were on "safe ground" here, but hoped & trusted that we wouldn't meet with any problems on the road back to Nui Dat that afternoon, bearing in mind the amount of booze we had, & still were consuming.

Quietly told that we'd be OK providing we were back at the Badcoe Club in time for the official opening at noon, we started to withdraw around 12:15pm, but Dave Coxhead & I only made it a little past the Beachcomber's entrance-gate, then noticed one of our guys still locked in conversation & sitting with several Yanks over a beer, inside. Not being ones to leave one of ours behind, we were quickly over to join him, & them, not eventually leaving 'til around 12:45, when we stole back, arriving unseen around 1pm., & still in time to catch the convoy bound for home.

I later heard that when our Delta Coy. had their weekend-leave in Vung Tau 3 weeks earlier, (in early August) they collected twenty-eight A4 charges for a company compliment of approx. 128 personnel. By what was flying around this weekend, we just may have given this number a good shake.

Though there for just 2 days, I received a sunburned face just knocking about in "Vungers", so although so close to Nui Dat, the weather was so very much different.

The Badcoe Club facilities were very beach-orientated. Around 40 surf-boards, 2 sail-boats, water-ski equipment, a power-boat. The surf is certainly not much to write home about, but who cared ? Many would just take out a board, (skilled with one or not), & gather in a loose circle a hundred yards off-shore, just floating about, sitting or laying on the board, & drinking scotch or whatever poison took your fancy. What an easy life this was !

Despite my good intentions that second night in Vung Tau, despite the good reason for getting back to base next morning, despite the gate MP's indicating that I should be OK, I was very soon served with my second A4 "on tour", this time for being AWOL that Saturday night. A certain irony there I suppose. I was lucky that first night to get a way with it, though with no good alibi ; but on the second night, despite having good reason for being out late (?), I'd been caught out.

-Transcribed from an audio-tape recording made by Pte. A.W.Wood (2786855) on Monday 26 Aug. 1968 on return to Nui Dat

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"Remembering FSB "CONCORD".- June/July '68."

Travelled out of Nui Dat to Concord by road-convoy on the morning of Sunday 23rd June '68, for a planned stay of about 6 weeks on Operation "*Final Victory*". The role of the Tracker Platoon was to be used as base defence, plus available for call-out on contacts follow-up by the rifle companies. The base, already established by the US, & not far from the air-base of Bien Hoa, was about 300 yds in diameter, completely devoid of any vegetation, & scattered with tents, sandbagged bunkers, & numerous US Army vehicles, the most obvious being a dug-in battery of six 155mm Self-Propelled Howitzers of the 2/35 US Artillery.

The perimeter was surrounded by 3 barbed-wire fences, & our allotted position faced approx. south, adjoining some US forces, (199th LIB, I think) which was a blessing, & quite an eye-opener to us newly arrived "in-country", as to how the other half lived in the field. Here we are, with our Aust. military C-ration packs to sustain us, while these guys receiving Yank beer, soft-drinks, known as "goffers" to us for some reason, (?) radios, fresh cold milk, ice, ice-cream, & all supplied from their PX just down the road at the Long Binh complex. We were soon finding our way into their mess-tent to eat their freshly cooked rations, (steak, ham & eggs, etc), & taking HOT showers, our first in some weeks, since arrival "in country".

Work quickly commenced on building our defence bunker, given a good start by us getting the aid of an American GI driving a back-hoe, who quickly dug the hole for us, about 20ft long, x 8ft wide, x 5ft deep. Until this was habitable, we slept in shallow "shell-scrapes" about 1ft deep, continually partly getting buried by dirt, from the vibration caused from the 155's on their frequent night fire-missions. With the day's light long gone, & the Yanks watching us "stand-to" with a certain amount of amusement & curiosity, the only lights visible would be faint red bulbs in the 155's, throwing low light in each turret. A fire-mission would come in, the turrets would rotate with a low whirring noise, the barrels would all elevate in unison, there would be a call in a broad American accent of "stan-bah", & a deafening multi-sourced eruption followed, fire spewing from each barrel, & a whizzing sound off through the black night skies, only to be followed by a very distant multiple-crunch as the shells found their mark. Quite awsome, & something I will never forget.

Another night memory comes to mind. We would sit out under the stars in the evening, watching the aircraft activity at Bien Hoa, & sometimes the distant fireworks of an artillery strike, or a lightening storm. One evening, there were 2 fiery jet trails off to the south, as fighters lifted off from Bien Hoa. Suddenly, one flame pointed back to earth & went out, followed by a far-off explosion. Never did discover if the pilot ejected.

On the night of 4th of July, we were treated to a firework's display courtesy of multi-bursts of star-shells & numerous other sky-bound explosive devices all across our region, an awsome sight for us, not long "in-country". Then on other nights, we watched the awsome spectacle of the fire-power exuded by US "Spooky" gunships, as they emptied their load of ammunition into the ground in a matter of just a minute or two, via several "mini-guns" aboard ; electrically operated Gatling-guns, their tracer seeming like just a single unbroken stream of "death-ray" down to the ground.

Our palatial sandbagged bunker, to house 6 men, wasn't quite finished even after a week, but habitable by the start of the 2nd week at "Concord". Just to finish sandbagging the roof, & we'd be ready for anything, we felt. But we didn't plan for flood. Our 1st Sunday in our new home, & I was busy writing home, laying in my bunk inside. There was a short,

sharp shower, which soon passed. 15mins. Later, the skies opened with a deluge, but inside was dry, so far. After 30mins. rain, a trickle of water started down into the bunker. No problem, “we can deal with that”. On I wrote, but suddenly there was a noise of running water, & through the far entrance came an 18in. wall of water, followed by a flurry of activity from the inhabitants, throwing equipment though gun-ports or hanging it from the ceiling. It was some days before the level was reduced to an oozy-mud floor, & much of our equipment was either ruined or needed some degree of drying-out. With the help of a US bulldozer, we were able to arrange some diversion channels to take any further deluges away. My supply of *National Geographic* mags. was ruined, but on writing to their head-office in the US some months later, they were happily replaced for free under the circumstances. Fortunately, our *Playboy* mags. were rescued. Priorities! My ½ frame camera was also much worse for wear, & was never the same after that inundation. First chance I got, I bought a new one at the base PX.

About mid-July, & having finally just completed our “palace”, elements of our platoon were put on alert for a 3 day patrol outside the wire, but after these days went by, crashing about the bamboo thickets, thorn-bushes, hills, biting flies, mozzies, leaches & red-ants, the ‘powers-that-be’ decided we loved it out there, so flew out a further 3 days rations by chopper. Great! So hot out there, we had blokes fainting from heat-stroke, & we’re expected to stay alert too.

After our week getting acquainted with the countryside, we returned to “Concord”, to be alerted to pack-up our gear for re-deployment. Four weeks had passed based out of “Concord”, our first long operation away from Nui Dat. It had been a real experience here, working with the US forces for our first time, doing boat patrols at night on the nearby Song Dong Nai River, & swapping cultures with them. I’d surely miss those large cartons of thick “Foremost” chocolate milk freshly flown in from Hawaii, even though I once overdosed on the mixture, then wasting the whole carton’s contents in the mud at my feet. Off to the “Firestone Trail” by chinook-lift on the 18th July.

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"Contact on Operation Capital"- Saturday 16th Nov. '68.

This Saturday, I was in a Tracker team commanded by Lt. Bob Sayce,& carried the PRC25 "sig" set in our team at the time, & attached to the "Kiwi" Victor Coy, with whom we had many experiences, good & not so good, during out tour. It was sometime around 9am, & not all that long after moving off for a day's patrolling, our team being not too far off the front of the column, & with me with a plug in one ear, listening into AFVN Radio's "Good Morning Vietnam" program, the very final morning show for departing US presenter Marine Sgt. John Horton, my favourite, returning to "the world" as we called any place other than Vietnam.

I don't recall just how it started, but as we came in out of a relative cleared area into an area of bamboo thicket, all hell broke loose. "The shit was flying".Machine gun & small arms fire, explosions. We hit the dirt, & there were the sounds of a pitched battle raging all round, but especially up front of us. My CO, Lt. Sayce, called on me to lob a grenade to the front, which I did, (the only time I did "in anger.") We took cover behind bamboo bungs, while thoughts of Gen. Custer's fate flashed through my head for an instant. At that moment, my estimation of the bravado & furocity of the "Kiwi" soldier in action was born. Many, if not the majority, are of Maori extraction, a "warrior" race, & as they swept past us, the sounds of whoops & holla's, with broad grins on their faces as the shit flew around their heads, firing machine guns, M79's, & lighter weapons from the hip, filled one with unbounded confidence. "I'm glad these blokes are on our side" I thought. A scene which will never leave me.

Not knowing what we had walked into, the NZ CO ordered the Artillery Fwd. Observer travelling with us to call in a fire-mission on whatever was confronting us.
A round was landed, then another, only closer, & then-------

Not more than 100yds in front, a full salvo or two landed, I remember the crashing trees, the intense noise, & the sound of whizzing shrapnel past our ears, & overhead, with twigs & leaves falling all around us. How close can one get to "mother earth." VERY CLOSE indeed!

Eventually, & after maybe 20mins, all was quiet, & the Kiwi's made a clearing sweep. What they found was a bunker system in the bamboo forest, walked right into. One Kiwi was KIA, L/Cpl Bensseman, & several others WIA in the action that morning.
It's only when all falls silent again, & the adrenaline level drops, that the "shakes" start, I discovered on that morning. A cigarette helped, though I was not a smoker,… then.-

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a Bush Christmas~1968

Christmas Day ’68 came for us out in “the scrub”. It was Operation ‘Goodwood ’ 4RAR was assigned to block any VC/NVA movements toward *Bearcat* Base, the giant US complex NE of Saigon. A 4RAR Digger, (Pte. Roost) had been killed a day or 2 ago whilst on patrol, so we knew we were not alone. Someone back home in the Roost household was in for a rather ‘flat’ Christmas I guess.

Not a busy day for our platoon though. I recall we were dug-in on a hill-side in fairly sparsely vegetated terrain for Christmas Eve. Those who were not already awake (awaiting Santa ?) in the early morning dawn, were roused for the usual “stand-to” procedure, & were each served-up a mug of “coffee-Royale”, (coffee laced with a dash of rum mixed in), by either our platoon CO Lt. Sayce, or the platoon-sergeant Gerry Villalba. Apart from a hot Christmas meal flown out to us by chopper that day, this was to be our only Christmas gift.

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"With 10 Plt. D Coy, on the Song Thai Vai River, Operation "Goodwood II", 10 Feb.'69"

Called out to accompany 10 Plt. D Coy, to set a night ambush on the Song Thai Vai River. I was in a 90mm Recoilless-Rifle team from Tracker Platoon, commanded by Cpl. Milo Schlatter, along with Davy Coxhead, & several others who's names I no longer recall now.

Walking out of FSB "Janice" late that afternoon with the Rifle Co. blokes, we only had to travel less than a klm. through young rubber plantation, & took up our position on a high bank where the river took a sharp turn away. We carried "splintex" rounds for the 90mm, these being canisters filled with hundreds & hundreds of tiny metal darts, which spread as they travel away from the barrel, much like a shotgun, but infinitely more powerful. The hours passed through the moonless night, with no sound save for the breeze & the odd noise of the "creatures of the night." Eventually, & some time after 10 pm I think, we were silently alerted to movement on the river, & we prepared ourselves for ambush.

As I recall, a flare was sent up by the "arties", & the firing started from both sides, but we held the initiative here. Two M60 machine guns & small-arms fire from Delta Coy, was joined by our 90mm chorus, & I recall the number of thuds felt more than heard, as the VC's RPG rockets crashed into the high bank below our position. They were firing too low.
All six sampans & their occupants, numbers unknown, were destroyed that night. They were "sitting ducks". But this was curfew time, & anybody out was considered "fair game".
The following morning, the D Coy. lads made a sweep of this section of the river at low tide, bringing in a number of weapons & other equipment, including AK47's, carbines, & RPG rockets, in the mud by the low water. Our team was assigned the job of searching other sampans as they passed our position.

As a reward for a night's job well done, we were given a ride back to "Janice" in APC's, sent out to give us a hand.-

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Homeward Bound. ~ in March '69

As the time approached for RTA, all eligible personnel (mostly Nat'l Servicemen from my intake), were given the option of staying on for the remainder of the battalion's tour, effectively a further 2 months, then to sail home to Brisbane with the main part of 4RAR. A further incentive was offered : if we agreed, a promotion to L/Corporal rank was on the cards. After consideration lasting several seconds, I decided not to press my luck. So come early March of 1969, all effected said our goodbyes to further service in the field. I walked-out some klms. to a chopper-pad, & was lifted back to Nui Dat. I received a medical there, handed-in sundry army-issue equipment & on Tuesday 18 March, we walked down to Luscombe Field for our "Wallaby Airlines" caribou flight to Tan Son Nhut airbase near Saigon. There, a big Qantas 707 awaited us. A cheer arose as we lifted-off bound for Sydney, & within several hours, the aircraft was totally dry, & the obliging hosties were in for a bit of good natured banter from us all the way home.

It was quite dark when we flew into Sydney, & once again, cheers broke-out as the wheels finally touched down. An army Movement's Controller was on hand to bark orders at us, & I'm told there was also a "Sally's" team there to help-out where they could. I remember my mum & dad were there to meet me & take me home, but what I did then was perhaps a little insensitive to them in retrospect. After initial greetings, I thrust my baggage onto them, told them I'd see them in the morning, & raced-off to accompany my mates into town for one last big bash, before we all went our separate ways. I knew that some of us may never meet again, after being close family for so long under such stresses. Our night was spent up at King's Cross, & finished-up at the NSW Motor-Trader's Club in the Haymarket. Needless to say, I was a little the worse for wear when I caught a train home to Miranda that morning. It all seemed so very surreal to me, & my mother mentioned my 'standing them up' at the airport, for many years to come, with some attached hurt no doubt. Perhaps they even had a 'welcome-home' arranged for that first night ? I never asked.

I later found that many of us arriving that night who lived interstate, couldn't connect on a flight until the next morning, had been given no Australian currency, had no overnight accommodation arranged, & had to sleep in the airport terminals. "Thank God for the Salvos", who tried their best with limited means, for the comfort of these returning marooned diggers. As a fellow veteran once told me, the Salvos have taken a lot of money out of him over the following years, trying to repay their many kindnesses & care shown to him in times of great stress.

One of the first items on my agenda upon return, was to pay a call at the Brighton-le-Sands RSL branch, with whom I had no connection until I received a Christmas package from them, quite unexpectedly. When I arrived & told them the reason for my call, which was to thank them, I was made most welcome & treated like royalty. I didn't buy a drink there all afternoon. In contrast, my reception at my local Miranda RSL was quite unfriendly. Most members there at that time being WWII vets, I was given an abrupt "come back when you're old enough sonny", & "You call Vietnam a war ? That wasn't a real war. We fought in a *real* war".

I was discharged in June, after some lengthy periods of leave interlaced with mixed duties based at South Head Army Base, some around the city, some on the base itself. My old P.S. position was still there waiting, & though I returned to it for a time, I found it very hard

indeed, to settle. Everything seemed so artificial & trivial to me now. In an observance heard many times over about veterans of active service, I had been changed permanently. I stuck this P.S. desk job out for a few months, but eventually resigned, much to the disgust of my mother, & did several short-term stints for a time, such as working with an air-freight firm at Mascot, collecting tolls on the Sydney Harbour Bridge, & working as a traffic-officer with Ansett Airlines at Mascot. None of these positions could settle me down. I was very restless & unsettled, moved to Brisbane, got married to a girl I had met just 1 week before my departure for Vietnam in May '68, & found my niche in the retail travel industry for the next 20+ years, also spending some time in Canberra & Hobart positions. Two great kids, but I still found myself remarried within 10 years.

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