

Memories of SVN

Official histories on any subject can be, and usually are, very dry and stick to the facts - the history of the Vietnam War is no different. For those of us who fought there though, I know that hardly a day goes by without some thought or snippet of memory surfacing from those times nearly four decades ago.

Now, not every person who went there will have the same experience. Most that served there never saw a shot fired or saw the enemy in any form. Some saw too much and suffer from it today. My own experience as a young Infantry soldier of nineteen years was initially one of great adventure. I thought I was bullet proof and that nothing could happen to me. An older seasoned soldier soon dispelled that notion one morning (after we had sprung an ambush and were searching the mutilated bodies) by a few simple words which I have never forgotten. He said "See those blokes laying there, that could have just as easily been you". Those words sunk in and from then on the adventure turned somewhat more serious.

When I think of the country itself rather than what went on in it, a picture always comes to mind of a peaceful daytime scene of a village surrounded by coconut trees and rice paddies, where a farmer, typically dressed in his black pyjama clothes and wearing his conical shaped hat goes about ploughing his paddy behind a water buffalo - just the same way it had been done for hundreds of years. After dark though, that whole scene changed from being peaceful to an expanse of land lit up by artillery or mortar illumination rounds and with it the crump of high explosive shells landing somewhere. No one who ever heard it will forget the eerie "whoop whoop whoop" sound of the shell casings falling to earth after parachute flares were deployed. Likewise the occasional burst of tracer fire, sometimes from a gunship, all contributed to a sinister light show.

For the enemy, night time was the time to move - for us it was a time to lay in ambush or to try and get a rest after a long day patrolling through the jungle in search of an illusive enemy. Of course we never got a full night's sleep as the gun had to be manned all night to ensure nobody came calling and surprised us. Time on operations went from a few days, to weeks and weeks, and there was very little time if any to relax. We suffered badly in the wet season from monsoon blisters and fungal conditions and the skin between your legs would erupt into a red weeping rash that continually burned and itched. The cure was

worse than the disease, as it was like pouring acid onto your tender parts. In the dry season heat exhaustion became a real problem for some and we were weighed down with extra water bottles. Combat rations made your gut shrink so that when you went back after an operation it took days before you could eat a reasonable sized meal. I have never forgotten the smell of etherised eggs being cracked by the cooks or the cardboard taste of American dehydrated potatoes when we were back at Nui Dat.

Now I was what was called a "Grunt" - that is a Infantry man - and I am glad that I was, because I could never have been in a support unit. Those blokes really had to put up with the boredom of Task Force life. We used to call them "Pogos" and often we would put them down, but of course everything we were able to do was because they were there providing the food, the ammunition and all the other logistics needed to keep us in the field. Like I said at the beginning, their memories of the place would be far different from mine and they had it hard, just the scenario was different.

As the years have gone by, the Battle of Long Tan has taken prominence when the story of Australia's war in Vietnam is commemorated. Nothing can be taken away from those who participated in it, but it has tended to override the lesser known but decidedly savage fighting that took place at Fire Support Bases "Coral" and "Balmoral" during the Tet offensive in 1968. The Battle of Binh Ba in 1969 and the numerous deadly bunker fights that occurred all through the years we were there. Those actions remain with us, etched in our memory, to surface at the occasional battalion reunion or on Anzac day.

I lost a few good mates over there and when I look at the photos I have of them I really still can't come to grips with it. I remember two days after I came home from my first tour that I heard on the news that a good friend who went through recruit training with me had been killed in action. The news upset me, but what hurt me more was that no one seemed to care and I couldn't talk to anyone about it. I have a good wife and kids, and I just feel so sad at times for those young lives that were wasted and who never would be able to have a family and live like everybody takes for granted. In the end it just wasn't worth it.