

Half Circle



Number 48 - December 2010

(Please increase picture size to 150% for a better read!)

This informal publication is for the members of C Coy 5 RAR (2nd tour), South Vietnam, 1969/70, and for the families of those who are no longer with us. It is non-political, and is designed for us to have a laugh at ourselves, re-live our memories, and maintain camaraderie. Formal advice, when needed, should be sourced from Veterans' Organisations.

PLEASE NOTE: There was some difficulty with distribution of the last Half Circle, as the size of the document exceeded the computer capacity of some of our members. If you didn't receive your copy, please refer to the Sub-Unit Newsletter icon on the Home Page of the 5RAR website, or give me a shout, and I'll forward a copy to you. Don



Most of the Second Tour diggers of C Coy know David Mead - the commander of 7 Platoon - until that fateful night on 4th July 1969, when 7PL hit two M16 land mines, killing three and wounding most of the Platoon (some very severely). Below is a story, published by "The Age" newspaper, depicting much of David's career after that time. He is an inspiration to us all, and we are honoured to know and have served under him. Here is the story, along with picture of David taken in 2009:

(With thanks to Mark Baker, Asia Editor, "The Age", 28/12/2002). When reading this article, please consider that it was written eight years ago, and that numbers of animals and monetary values will have changed considerably.

A GREEN HEART BEATS ON:

In the late 1960's, as the war in Vietnam careered towards its humiliating climax for the United States, Khmer Rouge guerrillas in neighbouring Cambodia began to secure the jungle footholds that would launch them to power in the wake of Ho Chi Minh's expected victory.

In the country's south-west, Pol Pot's men established a mountain base that they would hold throughout their murderous reign and keep as a last redoubt for almost two decades after they were toppled from Phnom Penh.

In the heart of the Cardamom Mountains, near the Thai-Cambodian border, the rebels found a pristine sanctuary of dense virgin rainforest and abundant wildlife, a rugged terrain they could easily defend and a small population of scattered villages that could readily be bent to their ruthless will. Ting Kong,

now in his 60's, remembers when the Maoist fanatics first arrived in the settlement of Tatai Leu in the heart of the forest.

“There were a lot of commanders and their bodyguards. If people didn't do what they said, they would take them and kill them. When we couldn't give them enough food, they would also kill. A lot of people died here, so many I cannot count them”, he says.

“In those times, the forest had not been touched. We had lots of animals. They were everywhere around the village: elephants and deer, even tigers. Before the Khmer Rouge came, there was plenty to eat. We never bought things, only sold our surplus to the town. That was before the big timber companies arrived. Before that we would take only what we needed from the forest – a few logs for our houses, nothing more”.

Around the time that the Khmer Rouge were settling into the Cardamoms, **David Mead**, a young Australian Army officer, almost met his death facing another tenacious guerrilla army holed up in a mountain range about 400 kilometres to the east, in southern Vietnam.

On 4th July 1969, **Lieutenant Mead's** platoon stumbled into a Viet Cong minefield while on a night patrol close to the Long Hai Hills, near the Australian Task Force headquarters at Nui Dat. Three members of his platoon were killed, and another 16 Australian soldiers were wounded – including **Mead**, who suffered serious internal injuries and had to be evacuated to Australia for treatment.

“We hit two M16 “Jumping Jack” mines. My platoon was demolished that night in two minutes”, remembers **Mead**, who recovered to do a second tour of duty in Vietnam, later rose to become the army's director of infantry and completed his military service as defence adviser at the Australian Embassy in Phnom Penh. “I had a wonderful career. I'd only take back that one night”.

Now the tangled legacies of two wars, two nations and a retired Australian colonel have converged in a remarkable environmental success story in the vanishing green heart of Indo-China.

In the midst of the Cardamom Mountains, the Cambodian Government recently granted formal protection to the centrepiece of a vast forest sanctuary that is expected to play a critical role in preserving what remains of the region's embattled ecological heritage. And much of the credit is being given to **Mead**, who survived the horrors of war in Vietnam and the traumas of an uneasy peace in Cambodia to become an improbable but accomplished environmentalist.

In an effort that combined the diplomatic muscle of one of America's most powerful conservation groups, **Mead's** unique military and political contacts and not a little good luck and timing, Cambodian authorities were persuaded to order the preservation of a forest zone already vulnerable to the devastating impact of foreign logging companies and domestic wildlife poachers.

Under an order signed in late July, a 402,000-hectare protected forest was declared in the centre of the Cardamoms. Set between two existing sanctuaries, the forest park now forms a conservation zone of almost 1 million hectares – the largest and richest wilderness area in mainland south-east Asia.

The government's commitment has been backed by some tough legislation and the assignment of a company of armed military police now under the direction of **Mead** and his team.

“Another two dry seasons without protection would have seriously degraded the area from logging and wildlife poaching”, says **Mead**. “This was one of the most heavily logged-over provinces during the bad old days of illegal logging in the 1990's because of its proximity to Thailand. It has been quite an achievement to get this up”.

Ironically, it was Khmer Rouge's reign of terror that did much to save the Cardamoms for Cambodia and mankind. As long as the Khmer Rouge controlled the area, rapacious foreign logging companies that have lain waste to vast tracts of the country, aided by corrupt officials, were denied access.

By the time the last Khmer Rouge strongholds were abandoned in the mid 1990's, most of the forest now under protection order remained virtually untouched.

Once the Khmer Rouge was routed, the loggers moved to make up for lost time. Grand Atlantic Timber, a Malaysian company granted a concession to log an area covering most of the central Cardamoms, had already built a river port, carved a road more than 20 kilometres into the heart of the rainforest and begun felling some of the richest sections of the forest before the first protection orders were issued.

The company's vandalism was typified by the use, in one area, of 800 huge logs to build a bridge that within months was washed away- squandering timber worth more than \$200,000.

"The whole area was under concession and the loggers had plans to move into the centre as quickly as possible," said *Mead*. "There was a 25-year development plan, notionally. But in reality, the area would have been stripped within six to seven years. Another couple of seasons and we would have been in big trouble."

The declaration of the protected forest came not a moment too soon for the region's rich fauna.

Poachers last year wiped out 30 of the area's remaining elephants, which were hunted for their trunks, bones, penises and gall bladders to feed the bizarre medicinal wildlife markets of China. As few as 90 elephants are estimated to be left, moving in three herds through the Cardamoms. The tiger population is in an even more precarious situation. With a single adult animal fetching more than \$10,000 for its skins and body parts on the black market, the tigers numbers are believed to have dwindled to a handful, and a level where extinction might already be inevitable.

But a limited survey in 2000 revealed the richness of the remaining wildlife resource. It identified 67 mammals, 213 birds, 65 reptiles and 40 amphibians – many species not previously recorded in Cambodia or Indo-China. Apart from the remaining populations of elephants and bears, the survey found several other varieties of exotic cats and two viable colonies of Siamese crocodiles, a species thought previously to be extinct in the area.

A team of about 100 rangers, including 25 military police on secondment, has now succeeded in curtailing illegal logging, land clearing and poaching in the region – although the pressure of rural poverty, compounded by a rapidly growing population and the demobilisation of thousands of soldiers with no alternative income sources, means the forest guardians must remain vigilant.

"We apply a pound of pressure, and they release an ounce of give. You know who wins in the end. I don't see a long-term future for the forests of Cambodia except those that are properly protected," says *Mead*.

The conservation effort in the main areas of the Cardamoms has been unable to answer the continuing threat from illegal logging along the Thai border, where the Thai poaches protected by corrupt elements within the Cambodian military and provincial governments, are logging unhindered. During a surveillance flight near the border last month, *Mead* saw 15 trucks loaded with logs preparing to cross back into Thailand. "We believe there are up to 200 chain saws operating in the area and hundreds of metres of sawn timber are being moved out every month," he says.

The Cambodian Government first flagged its willingness to protect the Cardamoms in May, 2000, at a meeting with aid donor nations. In January last year, Conservation International – the US-headquartered group that has pioneered the strategy of saving biodiversity "hot spots", targeting the richest remaining pockets of nature as the priority for limited conservation budgets- won agreement for a moratorium on commercial logging.

At 55, *Mead* acknowledges himself to be an improbable, if not reluctant conservationist.

"I was always appreciative of the beauty of the wild, but not as a conservationist as such", he says. "The skills I bring are somewhat new to conservation, but not to me. Defending a piece of ground is second nature. The forestry challenge found me; I didn't go looking for it. But this is about defence. It's about people, politics, winning the hearts and minds of the locals – stuff that I've been doing as a soldier for a long time."

The road to success in the Cardamoms was a rocky one for *Mead*. He retired early from the army after suffering a breakdown in the aftermath of the 1997 Cambodian coup. He had played a key role in evacuating Australian civilians while watching the unravelling of the professional detachment that he had worked hard to help cultivate within the ranks of the local armed forces.

Within a few months, *Mead* was back in Cambodia. After a period trading in gemstones and developing an ill-fated internet retail business, he began doing consulting work on forestry issues for the government. He also published a confronting book of poetry and photographs drawn from the suffering drawn from Cambodia's years at war.

"There's a terrible beauty to Cambodia. They are a beautiful people who have done terrible things to themselves and they are still doing it," he says.

"You can't forget that Pol Pot was a Cambodian. But the country is infectious. When you know this history, your heart goes out to the people. They have had 30 years of unbelievable trauma. You feel that if you can, you want to do your bit for them."

While mindful that the many pressures to unlock the rich resources of the forests could yet unravel the achievements so far in protecting the Cardamoms, *Mead* remains quietly optimistic. "I feel that if we can draw the line and hold the line, this will be here forever with the flora and fauna intact and rebuilding. I think that we have got here just in time."



In Sydney and want to hit the little white ball? Then head for the Georges River Golf Course, Henry Lawson Drive Georges Hall. Geoff Grimish and his team will make you most welcome. Geoff is a Vietnam vet (RAA), and is a great supporter of this newsletter. Phone (02) 9724 1615.

HOW'S THIS FOR A QUOTE? It is easy to snap a pencil in half. You cannot snap a bunch of pencils that are tied together. I would like to think that C Coy 5RAR is like a bunch of pencils. It's up to us to keep the binding intact.

MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR: Roslyn and I would like to take this opportunity to wish everyone a safe and Happy Christmas, and may 2011 be kind to you. We have lost a few mates and some of their family members in 2010, and others have been doing it a bit tough. It is those such as you that are in our thoughts.

Half Circle was compiled and edited by Don Harrod, donharrod@bigpond.com , (02) 6842 4913, 0418 423 313, with thanks to David Mead.