

# Half Circle

Number 27 - February 2009

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

This informal publication is for the members of C Coy 5 RAR (2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

**Barry Morgan and Mike Radwell provided these details on our latest VC recipient, Trooper Mark Donaldson:**



**AUSTRALIAN ARMY**

## **TO BE AWARDED TO THE VICTORIA CROSS FOR AUSTRALIA**

### **8248070 TROOPER MARK GREGOR DONALDSON**

For most conspicuous acts of gallantry in action in a circumstance of great peril in Afghanistan as part of the Special Operations Task Group during Operation SLIPPER, Oruzgan Province, Afghanistan.

Trooper Mark Gregor Donaldson enlisted into the Australian Army on 18 June 2002. After completing Recruit and Initial and Employment Training he was posted to the 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment. Having successfully completed the Special Air Service Selection Course in April 2004, Trooper Donaldson was posted to Special Air Service Regiment in May 2004.

On 2 September 2008, during the conduct of a fighting patrol, Trooper Donaldson was travelling in a combined Afghan, US and Australian vehicle convoy that was engaged by a numerically superior, entrenched and coordinated enemy ambush. The ambush was initiated by a high volume of sustained machine gun fire coupled with the effective use of rocket propelled grenades. Such was the effect of the initiation that the combined patrol suffered numerous casualties, completely lost the initiative and became immediately suppressed. It was over two hours before the convoy was able to establish a clean break and move to an area free of enemy fire.

In the early stages of the ambush, Trooper Donaldson reacted spontaneously to regain the initiative. He moved rapidly between alternate positions of cover engaging the enemy with

66mm and 84mm anti-armour weapons as well as his M4 rifle. During an early stage of the enemy ambush, he deliberately exposed himself to enemy fire in order to draw attention to himself and thus away from wounded soldiers. This selfless act alone bought enough time for those wounded to be moved to relative safety.

As the enemy had employed the tactic of a rolling ambush, the patrol was forced to conduct numerous vehicle manoeuvres, under intense enemy fire, over a distance of approximately four kilometres to extract the convoy from the engagement area. Compounding the extraction was the fact that casualties had consumed all available space within the vehicles. Those who had not been wounded, including Trooper Donaldson, were left with no option but to run beside the vehicles throughout. During the conduct of this vehicle manoeuvre to extract the convoy from the engagement area, a severely wounded coalition force interpreter was inadvertently left behind. Of his own volition and displaying complete disregard for his own safety, Trooper Donaldson moved alone, on foot, across approximately 80 metres of exposed ground to recover the wounded interpreter. His movement, once identified by the enemy, drew intense and accurate machine gun fire from entrenched positions. Upon reaching the wounded coalition force interpreter, Trooper Donaldson picked him up and carried him back to the relative safety of the vehicles then provided immediate first aid before returning to the fight.

On subsequent occasions during the battle, Trooper Donaldson administered medical care to other wounded soldiers, whilst continually engaging the enemy. Trooper Donaldson's acts of exceptional gallantry in the face of accurate and sustained enemy fire ultimately saved the life of a coalition force interpreter and ensured the safety of the other members of the combined Afghan, US and Australian force. Trooper Donaldson's actions on this day displayed exceptional courage in circumstances of great peril. His actions are of the highest accord and are in keeping with the finest traditions of the Special Operations Command, the Australian Army and the Australian Defence Force Personal biography of Trooper Mark Gregor Strang Donaldson, VC

Mark Donaldson was born in Waratah, Newcastle, NSW on 2 April 1979. He spent his formative years in northern NSW where he graduated from high school in 1996. Trooper Donaldson enlisted into the Australian Army on 18 June 2002 and entered recruit training at the Army Recruit Training Centre, Kapooka, NSW. He demonstrated an early aptitude for soldiering and was awarded the prizes for best shot and best at physical training in his platoon. Subsequently he was allocated to the Royal Australian infantry corps and posted to the school of infantry at Singleton, NSW, where he excelled in his initial employment training. At the completion of this training he was again awarded best shot and best at physical training, as well as the award for the most outstanding soldier in his platoon.

He was posted to 1st battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, Townsville, QLD in November 2002. It was during this time that Trooper Donaldson decided to pursue his ambition to join the special air service regiment. In February 2004, he successfully completed the Special Air Service Regiment selection course and was posted to the regiment in May 2004. He was then posted to I Troop, 3 Special Air Service Squadron. Since that time he has been deployed on operations to East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq.

On 12 August 2008, Trooper Donaldson was wounded in action whilst conducting nighttime operations in Oruzgan Province, Afghanistan. He recovered from his minor wounds and continued on the deployment.

Trooper Donaldson was involved in an incident on 2 September 2008 in Oruzgan Province, Afghanistan that resulted in him being awarded the Victoria Cross for Australia. He was invested by her Excellency the Governor-General of Australia at Government House, Canberra on 16 January 2009. Trooper Donaldson remains posted to the Special Air Service Regiment in Perth, WA. Trooper Donaldson is married to Emma and has a daughter Kaylee. His parents are deceased.

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### Dave Wilkins said..... A Brush With Fame

The announcement on 16 January 2009 that SAS Trooper Mark Donaldson had been awarded the Victoria Cross for valour in Afghanistan brought back memories from 40 years ago in South Vietnam when I was proceeding on R & R leave to Taipei. I had arrived in South Vietnam with the Battalion's advance party of 145 men on 28 January 1969 and by 21 August 1969 was ready for a break.

I departed Nui Dat's Luscombe airfield on the RAAF "Wallaby" service, the Caribou transport aircraft, to Saigon where I stayed overnight before flying out to Taipei. I arranged to meet an old Army mate from my Papua New Guinea days, Don Medson, when in Saigon.

Whilst waiting for Don at the self-importantly-named "Free World Headquarters" in Saigon, I bumped into another old mate from Papua New Guinea, ABC journalist Don Hook. He informed me that something very significant and quite historic was about to be announced that afternoon, and it would be worth my while to hang around and be on the spot for it. He suggested I be in the conference room early to get a seat and be unobtrusive in a back corner.

At 1530 hours a group of high-ranking officers, plus members of the AATTV and a swag of press representatives crowded into the conference room, with me tucked insignificantly in what felt like a darkened corner.

General Hay, the Commander AFV (Australian Forces Vietnam), then announced and cited the winning of the Victoria Cross by WO2 Ray Simpson. Ray, who was of course in the room, had only been warned of this about 30 minutes prior.

After the brief formalities we all went outside for a beer with Ray, who then began answering the harangue of press questions.

When talking with other members of the AATTV, I was left with the impression that Ray was a man who revelled in danger and fighting, and deserved every bit his Victoria Cross. Some of the brass said their aim was to just keep him alive, but others said that Ray wouldn't want a "cushy" job, and would far prefer to be back in the scrub again.

His citation was magnificent and referred to two particular occasions (in May 1969), but I was told there were so many occurrences that his bravery had become an almost everyday occurrence.

Part of his citation for our highest award for outstanding valour read:

"...Disregarding the dangers involved, he placed himself at the front of his troops thus becoming a focal point of enemy fire, and personally led the assault "... (During the assault) one of his fellow Australian Warrant Officers was seriously wounded and the assault began to falter. Simpson, at great personal risk and under heavy enemy fire, moved across open ground, reached the wounded Warrant Officer and carried him to ...safety. He then returned to his company where with complete disregard for his safety, he crawled forward to within 10 metres of the enemy and threw grenades into their positions...

"(A few days later) the battalion probed ahead with Warrant Officer A.M. Kelly leading the 231st Company. In the first burst of fire from the next contact, Kelly was wounded and the battalion commander, Captain Green of the American Special Forces, was killed when he went to assist Kelly. Simpson quickly organized two platoons of soldiers and several advisers, and led them to the location of the contact. Despite the fact that most of his soldiers had fled, and disregarding his own safety, Simpson moved forward through

withering machine-gun fire in order to cover the initial evacuation of the casualties. The wounded, including Kelly, were eventually evacuated but Simpson was unable to reach Green's body because of the heavy, accurate enemy fire. At the risk of almost certain death he made several attempts to reach his battalion commander's body, but on each occasion he was stopped by heavy fire. Realising the position had become untenable ... he then covered the evacuation of the wounded to the helicopter pad by placing himself between them and the enemy. From this position he fought on and by outstanding courage and valour was able to prevent the enemy advance until the wounded were removed from the immediate vicinity. ..."

I had a few beers that night with Ray and his party, and also met a young American sergeant (Peter Holberk or Holmberg I think his name was) who had evidently been with Ray during most of Ray's actions. These two were as thick as thieves and had obviously fought together many times.

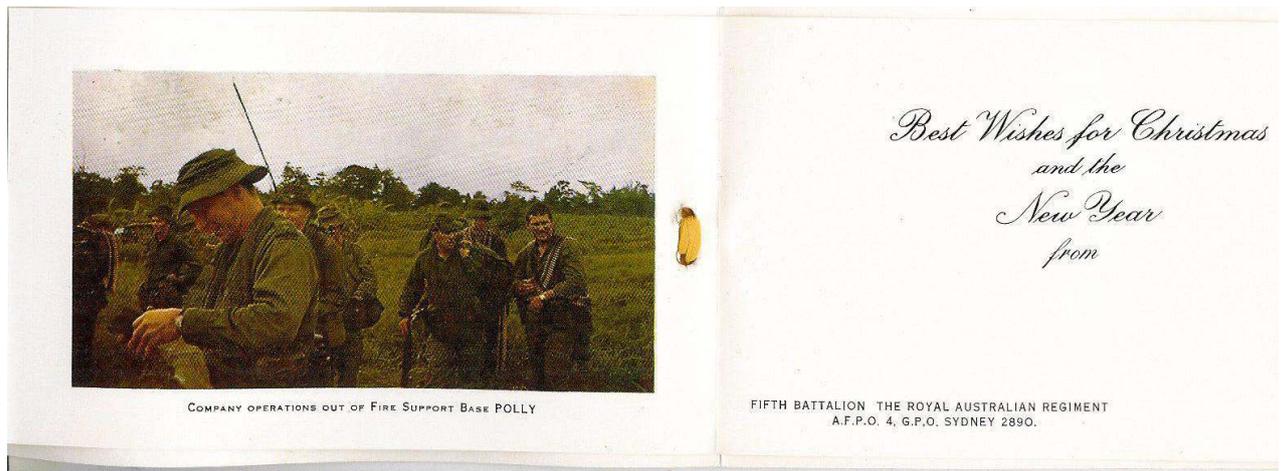


Ray kept referring to the sergeant earlier that afternoon and believed he may be awarded a high American bravery award. He didn't say so in those words or publicly, but he implied it privately. I never found out if this occurred.

**Sgt Peter Holberk and WO2 Ray Simpson VC (at right).**

**My friend Don Medson is in the background.**

After that brush with fame it was off to the nightlife of Taipei. Upon my return to Nui Dat one unkind colleague took one look at me and asked if I had returned to Vietnam for a rest.



**Dave Wilkins said:** Here is a copy of the 5RAR 1969 Christmas Card. Clearly shown are Bill Titley and Buddah Martini - who are the others?



**Dave Bowman said:** Here's a picture of the ever-caring, kind, compassionate, sensitive, considerate CSM Jack Lake still boring it into us, even though we had finished our task and were on the way home!

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**Terry Major said:....** Fifty-one years ago, Herman James, a bloke from the outback, was drafted by the Army. On his first day in basic training, the Army issued him a comb. That afternoon the Army barber sheared off all his hair. On his second day, the Army issued Herman a toothbrush. That afternoon the Army dentist yanked seven of his teeth. On the third day, the Army issued him a jock strap. The Army has been looking for Herman for 51 years.

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**Taffy Cheeseman said.....** Here is a photo of Reg Smith, taken in the 9PI lines on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1969.

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**NEW DRINK!!!!!!!!!!** It's called "Skin-Off". Every time I have a few I fall over and take some skin off.

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**FOUND:.....** **Dennis (Tex) Nevins - 7PI.** Tex can be contacted through his daughter Sarah, at [sarahn3011@msn.com](mailto:sarahn3011@msn.com).

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**Helen Keed** (Barry Thompson's sister) has a new email address. Contact Don for details.

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Half Circle was compiled and edited by Don Harrod ([rosdon@bigpond.net.au](mailto:rosdon@bigpond.net.au)), with help from Dave Bowman, Dave Wilkins, Terry Major, Ian Cooper, Barry Morgan, Mike Radwell, and Taffy Cheeseman.