

Half Circle

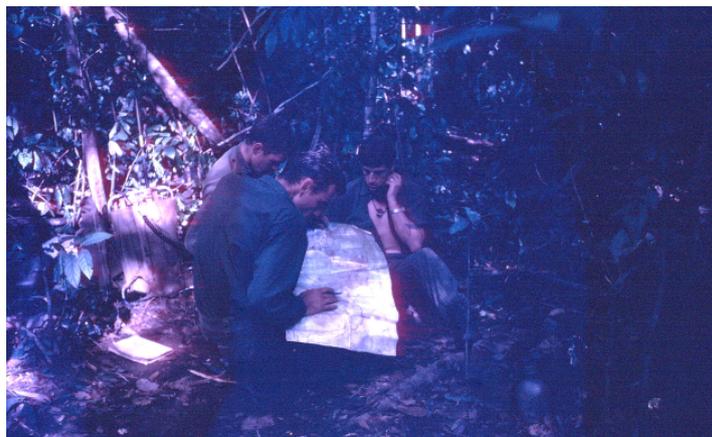
Number 37 - January 2010

(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.



Submitted by Roger Lambert, with apologies to Jack Bradd, who detests the word "Grunts". Jack says this is an Americanism, and prefers "Crunchies".



Welcome to 2010 - 41 years since we left Australia to go to Vietnam. This flashback shows the OC Claude Ducker and Company Sig Alan Miles. Who is the other bloke? Was it our Arty Rep? Please let us know. Picture taken by Don Frohmuller and submitted by Dave Wilkins. **Speaking of Alan Miles, read the following. It is one of the best articles written about the involvement of C Coy 5RAR's second tour:**

Working in the Middle. Life in Company HQ

I joined the army in 1968 with no idea what I was going to do except be a soldier. To cut a long story short I went through the usual ritual of Kapooka, Ingleburn and then 5 RAR.

I remember lining up outside CHQ with everyone else who had been posted to 5RAR to have a (very short) interview with Major D.D. Graham, the then OC of Charlie Company. This was to assign us to a job in the Company. I still remember the words of Major Graham when I fronted him. "You are English so you should be understood on the radio. Radio Operator 9 Platoon." No, I don't know how he worked that out from my (then) thick Liverpool accent!

I thought that was it and I spent a very enjoyable period of training with Roger Lambert, Platoon Commander 9 Pl and "Taffy" Cheeseman, acting Platoon Sergeant. (Good actor was Taffy. Sorry Taff. Actually Taffy was by far the fittest man I have ever seen, before or since). We developed an excellent rapport and I was very happy in the position. But, as fate would have it, Company HQ suddenly needed a Radio Operator and I was recommended for the position. I wasn't happy and neither was Roger. But to no avail, Company Radio Operator I was.

So that was how I went to South Vietnam, "C" Company Radio Operator. And that was how I came home, "C" Company Radio Operator. I spent the whole 12 months "working in the middle".

Working as the Company Radio Operator had one big advantage. The most protected man in the Company was the OC. Right next to the OC was the Radio Operator (Me). We never had less than a Platoon of the best soldiers in the world around us. That was very comforting let me tell you, although we did have our moments.

My stint as Major D.D. Graham's operator was brief. Two or three operations and Don Graham was injured (back injury I believe) and that was it for him. Then came Claude. I can now use the first name but back then Claude was Major Ducker or sir and woe betides anyone who thought different...

Claude was a bit of a culture shock for me. Claude was Army with a capital "A". I didn't know what hit me at first. He was a stickler for protocol and everything had to be done exactly by the book. At first I resented this and was a very discontented puppy. But things changed and I will try to explain how.

I carried the radio for four different OC's in Vietnam. Don Graham and Claude Ducker I have mentioned but also there was Bill Titley (Captain Titley the Company 2IC) and Dave Wilkins (Battalion Adjutant before joining C Coy). They all had the same onerous responsibility. To take a Company of young Australians into harms way in a foreign land, be successful in those endeavours, and most importantly, get those young Australians safe home again. And during those times I was as close to the OC as I am now to this keyboard I am typing on.

As the majority of my time was as the Radio Operator for Claude Ducker I will stick to my experiences with him for the time being.

It took a little time for me to realise just what that responsibility entailed for the OC. At first it was all a big adventure, spells of interest and wonder interspersed with short bursts of sheer terror. All reading this will know what I mean. And it all started at the Company "O" group before going out on operations. As the Company Radio Operator I attended the "O" group to check all the radio procedures, codes, frequencies etc... Mostly I just sat there and stayed quiet and listened. Believe me Claude's "O" groups were meticulous. Every detail was gone over and then checked again. I had to walk out of there and know intimately every aspect of the Radio Communications for the upcoming operations, and I did. I was too bloody scared of the consequences if I didn't!

Out on operations was the same. The OC had enough on his plate to worry about frequencies, radio pickets, or whether communications with the Platoons was established and clear. That was my responsibility and one I took very seriously. I can remember after settling into a harbour or an ambush position with one of the Platoons I would set up the radio with the appropriate antenna for the position, work out the picket and then settle down myself. Claude would be studying the map using a torch with a pin prick lens. There would be an "O" group with the Platoon Commander, the 2IC, the Artillery FO and the CSM after receiving any orders from BHQ via the Battalion Radio Operator. Often I would get aroused at some deathly hour to do my turn on the radio and look across to Claude's position to see the pinprick of light still hovering over the map. Meticulous.

Of course more went on in CHQ than just Claude and me. The Artillery FO and his Radio Operator had to set up their comms and do whatever it is they did. I was usually too busy to worry about what they were doing, maybe one of the FO's out there could do a small article on just what being an Artillery FO with an Infantry Company entailed. Jack Lake and Bill Titley would be busy on the admin radio arranging for re-supply drops and any other administrative tasks that had to be done.

When the stuff hit the fan a series of actions was precipitated. Usually, unless the contact was with the Platoon with CHQ, it would start with the noise of gunfire from a distance. Both the OC and I would tense waiting. Then the message would come from the Platoon involved, "contact". That short terse message was then relayed to BHQ. After a short period while the Platoon in action sorted things out a contact report would come over my radio. No code, everything was sent using a pro-forma and the map references were sent in plain language so as not to compromise the codes being used on the operation. Then the wheels really went into motion. Organise artillery and air support, ground support if possible, liaise with BHQ, organise resupply of ammo and supplies if needed and of course action the radio message no one wanted to hear, "stand by dust-off". All done automatically, no time for procrastinating. Every thing had to run like a well oiled machine, just do the job you were trained for and woe betide anyone who asked "how do I do....."

And so it went. Month after month. The initial excitement went and boredom set in (still interspersed with the moments of sheer terror). But the meticulous planning that Claude started with never waned. I lived and breathed within a couple of meters of Claude. Close enough to hand him the radio handset immediately when needed. Even so I never thought of Claude as a mate, at least not in Vietnam. Claude was a Major and I was a NCO and although I now think of Claude as a mate then it was always an officer and NCO

relationship, as it should have been. I do think that Claude and I melded into a good team after we got used to the way each other worked.

If Claude was the authority then Jack Lake was the hammer. Jack was the CSM from training through to coming back to Australia. Jack was a man not to be underestimated. I remember an incident in a bar in Vung Tau when a digger, big bugger too, decided to "get even" with Jack and offered him outside. Jack came back a few minutes later and the digger was not heard of again that night. Jack was the glue in Company HQ, bloody hard but fair. For all of us that got home relatively unscathed we owe a lot to our mates, Section Commanders, and Platoon Commanders but, although I think that a lot of the Company members did not really appreciate it at the time, I do believe that the efforts of Jack and Claude, along with Bill Titley and Dave Wilkins, went a long way to getting the Company safely home. Gentlemen you have my deepest admiration and gratitude.

And so there it is. CHQ was a lot more than the above but my memory is shot these days. Brain cells dying rapidly! But for those who did not ever get a look in to CHQ those are my very brief recollections.

Alan Miles. C Company Radio Operator, SVN 1969-1970.

Ed's note: after Alan left the Army, he had a very successful career in the NSW Fire Brigades - his specialty - you guessed it - communications.

[Fighting to keep the sand out of my beer](#) (Submitted by Don Teichelman, and sourced by other diggers) by Richard Cutler

DARKNESS is falling.

High above the thick Vietnamese jungle a lone helicopter is punching its way home.

Three thousand feet below, a Digger finishes his last cigarette before night and listens to the sound filtering through the trees.

Enviously he thinks of the crew of the unseen 'chopper.

He sees them sitting back comfortably, cracking jokes over the intercom as they speed at 75 knots-plus towards base.

He can see them happy at the thought of a night on the town - in the messes and bars of the nearby cities of Vung Tau, Bien Hoa or Saigon.

He wonders what the night could bring for his infantry company, spread on the ground in an overnight position.

Already the gloom under the canopy is thickening.

The figures of others merge with the background of thick bushes and vines, as visibility decreases.

The critical period is approaching.

A low whistle sounds and the company is called to stand-to.

The slight rustle of 100 men moving to their perimeter posts seems to scream in the stillness.

Each man lies in his shallow shell-scrape and prepares to face the night.

IN the distance a flock of birds takes to the air, protesting. Have they been startled by men in black moving below them?

Has there been a silent pyjama-clad spectator to our stopover? Is he even now leading his unit back to our camp to wait for dark before attacking?

Will the VC presence be announced in a few minutes with a murderous burst of automatic fire and a hail of rockets?

Or will it be another night when the only sounds are birds and animals and from sleepy sentries stumbling to their posts?

Nights are long in the Vietnamese jungle.

The combination of tension and hard earth can make sleep difficult.

THREE weeks or more patrolling through the undergrowth, carrying a 60lb pack, takes its toll.

No wonder the Task Force base at Nui Dat is regarded as a haven by the infantry soldier.

Here he can relax several degrees behind rows of barbed wire and deep fighting pits.

It is far from his "other world" - the dank, still jungle.

At Nui Dat there is plentiful water for washing and shaving, a can of beer at the company canteen, and a game of darts or even a movie.

Not much by Australian standards, but a far cry from the bush life where entertainment is restricted to picking off leeches or killing scorpions.

Life at Nui Dat comes second on the scale of living standards for Australian troops in Vietnam.

The base, about two miles long and half a mile wide, is home to most of Australia's 7000-man contingent.

The area draws its name from the small, scarred hill in its centre. It was established in 1966.

It is the base for all Australian unit operations. The skies above are crowded with helicopters, transport planes and artillery shells flung from nearby support batteries.

Patrols daily snake across the broad swathe of cleared ground surrounding the base, to be swallowed up in rubber plantations and patches of jungle at its border.

Hours later they will be disgorged, sweating and dirty, thankful for the sight of the rows of sandbagged tents which are home.

PATROLLING of the TAOR (tactical area of responsibility) is a routine task carried out with the minimum of fuss there is no guarantee, though, of the area remaining free of guerrillas. This is one of the worst features of Vietnam service.

At times it is hard to believe there is a war going on: at other times it is hard to believe there is anything else.

Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province are mostly clear-cut. Troops move into jungle areas where civilians are forbidden to live and where an innocent Vietnamese has no reason to go.

In the other phases of the Australian activities, the issues are involved.

The areas to the south of Nui Dat are densely populated. It is here the VC is entrenched.

The major towns like Baria, Long Dien, Dat Do and Hoa Long have guerrilla units drawn from their townspeople.

These units are content largely to restrict their fighting to the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam) whose small, fortress-like camps can be death-traps.

The Australian bid to reduce the strength of these guerrilla units centres mainly on snap village searches, ambushes and harassing artillery fire often directed by spotter planes.

Village searches are frustrating and usually fruitless.

It is hard to believe that a unit of, say, 150 is drawn from a quiet little town.

Diggers move from a cordon position in line abreast, prodding, overturning and digging.

The villagers watch them blankly while their children rush among the soldiers, cadging cigarettes and food.

Buffaloes, kept in flimsy pens, show the only overt hostility. They will break free of their restraint and charge thunderingly, even without provocation.

THE village search is the Nui Dat soldier's main source of contact with the Vietnamese. Apart from this he will spend only four days' leave in Vietnam, at the rest centre in Vung Tau.

For the 1000 or so Australians stationed at the logistic support base at Vung Tau, service in Vietnam is comparatively a Cook's tour. Their sprawling compound on the beachfront of the peninsula city is only two miles from the hundreds of bars and messes catering for servicemen.

Vung Tau is neutral ground, apparently because of the VC share of the bar profits, and there is little risk of fighting.

A narrow road built up from swamps is the only access. ARVN outposts guard the neck of the peninsula.

US launches patrol the South China Sea coast.

For the Australians in Vung Tau and the small group at US headquarters in Saigon it is a good life.

For the less fortunate Diggers at Nui Dat, about one-third of whom are combat troops, there is dull routine punctured by bursts of violence.

The "bush Digger" feels strongly about the difference in state of his counterpart.

A favourite joke in Nui Dat seems up the feeling.

"What did you do in the war, Daddy?"

"I was in Vung Tau, fighting to keep the sand out of my beer"

Published in the Newcastle Herald, December, 1968. Winner of the AJA Prodi Award for Feature Writing, 1969.



"Half Circle" is supported by the Georges River Golf Club, Henry Lawson Drive, Georges Hall (Sydney). If you are in Sydney, call in for a game, a feed or a beer. All veterans are most welcome. Phone (02) 9724 1615

ARE YOU MISSING? We are still missing a lot of C Company blokes. Many emails bounce back as being invalid, including those to Andy Kakafikas, Ken Leggett, Max Hedley, Euston Swan, Mick Bolton, etc. There are also many blokes who have not yet made contact to be included on the mailing list. Please let your editor know if you are one of these and have seen Half Circle on the 5RAR website - donharrod@bigpond.com.

Jim Lowry said:

Tell me this isn't true - has the RSL started selling *The Last Post* as a telephone ring tone? Jim also had a few other things to say if this is in fact the case. Surely something so sacred to service personnel and their families could not be prostituted in such a way. . Watch this space for further information.

Half Circle was compiled and edited by Don Harrod - donharrod@bigpond.com, (02) 6842 4913, 0418 423 313, with help from Roger Lambert, Don Frohmuller, Dave Wilkins, Alan Miles, Don Teichelman and Jim Lowry.