

# Half Circle



Number 151 - July 2019

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.

## **THE 2019 AUSTRALIAN QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY HONOURS LIST:**

We are delighted to advise that two of our Vietnam-era officers were recognised in this year's Honours list. **Both David Wilkins and Bill Titley were awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia – OAM.** Both David and Bill have dedicated themselves, not only to recording military history and Legacy, but have continued to unconditionally support us for over 50 years. Our sincere congratulations to you both and thank you.

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### **My life – Ian Leis**

My earliest memories take me back to living on a small dairy farm (I was born in 1948). My father was a veteran, having served in New Guinea. There were really two families – four children before Dad went to war and two more when he came home, me being the youngest. When I was about seven years old (1956) we moved from Casino in northern New South Wales to Brisbane. The four oldest children were all looking for work as were both parents. There was a “pound” to be made and many jobs available, while my sister and I were left to organise ourselves before and after attending school.

Brisbane was an amazing place for me. What an adventure! I was a bush kid. My new life consisted of many new excitements – people everywhere, many kids to play with, trams and motor cars everywhere, and Picture Theatres (now called the Movies). I was seven years old and mostly left to my own devices – to fend for myself. Sure, Mum and Dad provided the necessities of life – but they wanted to make money and were occupied with that goal. Fishing, crabbing, swimming, bike riding and mischief occupied me!

Primary school did not advance my education. By the time I was sent to a Christian Brothers school in Grade 4, I still didn't know my alphabet and couldn't spell or do my sums. (Hence my bad spelling today.) I just had so much to do. It wasn't long before I started having the odd "unofficial" school day off.

It was around this time my physical working life began – at nine or ten years old. I would be awoken from my bed around 3 am to go and assist my eldest brother who had a baker's run, delivering bread to shops and houses. I would assist him until around 8 am and then catch the tram to school. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday after school I would return and meet him to help finish the deliveries. There was never much homework done on these days. On weekends, mainly Saturdays, I would assist my second-eldest brother who was a brick layer, mixing the mortar and carrying bricks – physically hard work at a young age.

Now I did get paid for this work, so I always had some money in my pockets. This was useful for getting a mate to do my school homework, or for me to have the extras other kids didn't have. From memory I think Mum made me bank half my wages – the rest was for my personal use.

The Christian Brothers did their best to improve my education. Some would even allow me to put my head down on my desk for a nap after lunchtime as they knew what my routine was. Note that this was the time we had religious education – I think they had given up on me in that respect! However, one Christian Brother in particular was able to improve my schooling skills - he worked out that I loved sport! So – no improvement in my lessons meant no sport, especially football and swimming.

As I said before, I always had some money in my pockets, so trips to the Saturday night pictures (movies), a packet of smokes and alcohol were part of my life by the age of fourteen or fifteen. Girls were also a big interest for me at this stage, having been receiving some sex education from the mother of a mate – the lady being about sixteen years my senior! Illegal use of motor vehicles became a common weekend practice. Weekends were spent surfing and in general life saving club activities, on the Gold Coast and Fingal Beach, Tweed Heads.

My teenage years were similar to previous years, but by now I was in my senior years of school. About the only thing that was going right was my education. I had really improved and so had my sporting activities! My father told me that if I could get a good pass in Grade 8 (Scholarship in Queensland) I could leave school and start an apprenticeship. Well I obtained 98% that year, only to be told my marks were so good I could continue with school for another two years! I did not pass one subject in those two years. I believe I took as many days off school as I attended.

On leaving school I obtained a job working in an engineering workshop building truck bodies of all kinds – again, very physical work. I enjoyed this job and tried very hard to improve my skills. I did not receive a very big wage.

Alcohol was by now a big part of my leisure time. Some weekends were filled with surf-lifesaving duties, but many were spent in partying, surfing and mischief in general. During these years I was lucky – very lucky – not to get into serious trouble with the law!

At eighteen years of age Glenys and I were married (1966). Our first son arrived in 1967. I was not a very mature person and wasn't really ready for marriage and the

responsibilities involved. In November 1967 I joined the Regular Army for three years, mostly at the insistence of my father and the local police sergeant! National Service was well under way and my father convinced me that as I would most likely be called up I might as well join. I believe he felt that this was a good option for me, especially the discipline I would endure. My whole family hoped the army would mature me and I would become a better person and improve my marriage responsibilities.

### **Military Life**

Recruit training at Kapooka – what a shock to my system – like a jolt of electricity! The only thing in my favour to help me to survive was that I was very physically fit, having worked physically hard from a young age. I was also able to exist on only a small amount of sleep. I enjoyed my training at Kapooka, and then at the Infantry Centre at Ingleburn. There wasn't any aspect of the training I couldn't handle. I made many friends, and my sporting activities continued, representing the Infantry Centre in football a number of times. I also received the Best Trainee award on leaving the Infantry Centre.

I was very fortunate to travel the above path right into 8 Platoon, C Company, 5 RAR at Holsworthy with many who had completed our training (so far) together. This helped us as a group to continue with battalion special training. We found the existing NCOs were actually human, not like those we had experienced thus far. We could talk to our officers who (except for the senior one) had our interests at heart. I won't go into the contempt held for "D.D." by the company. In my opinion, we trained hard and we trained well but I was not prepared for South Vietnam. As a company we were not a unit – just a bunch of individuals. Our leader at the time had no respect for us – how could we have respect in return for those around us?

Claude Ducker's arrival as our OC early in our tour in SVN was more than a breath of fresh air. Here was a Major who did everything he asked his company to do. He was one of us (except for what was on his shoulder). We had an OC who actually took the time to learn our names and speak to us in a manner previously unknown, and who included us in all the information available in regard to what was expected of us, as a unit, in the next operation. I had previously felt we were never informed adequately. Finally, we weren't just C Company, we were a Unit. Claude did that for us and I thank him.

I now felt that I might survive, and that we had a leader whose example might get us back home.

To his troops he became known at the "Feathered Warrior". Chicken Man was a comic serial on American radio. He was a fearless superhuman and stood for all things right. He could fight crime, fight wars – or just make us laugh. I know of one person who would play this segment over the company net on some occasions! We weren't putting him down – we were letting him know that to his company he was special – a fearless leader who deserved respect. He was our winged warrior. He also ensured we were looked after and that we received what we needed.

On one occasion I was tasked to carry the platoon radio (I was the M-60 gunman for 5 Section and Greg Dick was the usual radio operator). The operation was in the Long Green area, working with our tanks and bulldozers, clearing fire trails. Lt. Brian Thripp was our leader.

I really had no idea about the radio procedure or the phonetic alphabet. A light contact took place – a single enemy was observed walking along the edge of the pushed jungle. Like a good radio operator, I reported “3 – this is 32 – Contact – wait - out”. I then left the radio and also engaged the fleeing soldier, who managed to disappear.

I didn't know I was supposed to stay on the radio. When I did finally return I could hear Claude's voice from some distance away from the 25 set. He was irate, to say the least, and in no uncertain terms told me to give the radio to Thripply – IMMEDIATELY! I don't know what was said but I was back on the M-60 that same day!

However, I did manage a short sigs course and returned to that job on a few occasions. At a later stage I received a kind of compliment from Claude – “Private Leis, your radio skills have improved!” My efforts were acknowledged!

I was then sent on a Junior NCOs course, with Brian “Blue” Schaffer, Wayne “Bluey” Maltby and myself from C Company. This was held in Vung Tau. I was then posted to the new 7 Platoon and 2 Section became my home and Lt. Ian Hosie my boss. Another good leader in our Company!

I had many written notes, slides, photos and letters from my time in Vietnam, but unfortunately, I destroyed them during a very black period of my life. Some of the influences and effects of my service, including my medical rehabilitation over some three years, took me to a bad place in my life. I wish I still had those notes, especially as they covered my time as a section leader in detail. I only have my memories now.

***Ed's note: This is the first of three articles on the life of Ian Leis. Somehow, part 2 was published before part 1. Apologies for this. Please read part 1 (Half Circle 151 before part 2 (Half Circle 150).***



**AT THE RAP:** Peter Commerford, Barrie Taylor, Colin Summerfield.  
We send our best wishes to our mates who are not as well as they would like to be.

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**TRAVELLING ABOUT:**

Tony Samuel is currently in Inverell NSW, assisting other volunteers in “Farm Aid”. This involves building fences and helping with other farm tasks. Well done, Tony!

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Geoff and Liz Storm – last heard of travelling north to the Cairns region from their home on the NSW / Victorian border. Have a great trip.

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**ALSO TRAVELLING:** Dennis (Digger) Nevins: G'day coppers. I got back just today from the NT. I once again put in the hard Hakka but I'm finding the hard yakka harder to do. I came across a number of traditional stones one in fact was in amongst dense bush that I had been through 6 times, I just came upon it an upright stone with small stones around it. This is no man's land and even after 32 years I get lucky. The station owners have left after 39 years I missed them by one day they have been wonderful to me. I don't scrub bash on station land, but I have to go through it to do what I want to do. I took a selfie, see below.



I have .22 rifle across me for wild dogs, the sling in fact is a polyester belt.

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**A Court Martial in Windhoek, Namibia**  
**(Part 4- a continuing travelogue)**

By Dave Wilkins

As described in parts 1-3 of this story, in 1989 I travelled with three other Army Legal Officers to Namibia for the Court Martial of two Australian Sappers. The trial finished with their pleading guilty to alternative (lesser) charges and their sentencing...

...and my luggage was still missing.

That night, we legal officers dined together in a Windhoek restaurant on venison, in its numerous forms (they have many), accompanied by substantial South African red wine.

The prisoners were held in temporary military custody until the next departing flight which wasn't for several days, at which time an unsatisfactory situation arose. There were no escorts available for the trip. So the prosecutor, Captain Harry Dempsey, was saddled with the task of escorting the two diggers all the way to Australia. It was just as well they were basically good, compliant soldiers as it all went without a hitch, although Harry missed out on the social aspects of the return journey, such as a group dinner beside the River Main in Sachsenhausen, the delightful cobblestoned, cosmopolitan small-pub and restaurant area of Frankfurt. Having this overnight stay in Frankfurt (at the Monopol Hotel) also made the lengthy return journey far more bearable for the whole group. So much different from the trip over.

Before departing Windhoek however, there was some spare time before the next flight out so, with engineer Lieutenant Andrew Stanner, I drove in an Army Landrover through the barren mountains and across the vast Namib Desert to Swakopmund on the wild Atlantic west coast. So wild, that the 500 km coastline from Swakopmund north to the Angolan border is virtually uninhabited, other than shipwrecks. Hence its name, 'The Skeleton Coast'.

With the back of the Landrover stacked with cans of fuel, we followed the Central Plateau south from Windhoek where a troop of 15 galloping, barking baboons kept pace with us at about 40 kph, their great long predator teeth clearly visible in their gaping mouths. We descended from the barren

mountains on a perilously winding dirt road where on one corner our back wheels skidded sideways with one finishing up dangling over the precipice below. I advised Andrew that we should take it a bit easy until we reached the desert, suggesting a slower method of driving rather than free falling. Once on the Namib Desert we still had 250 km to travel and our fuel was getting low but the going became a lot faster. The desert terrain varied enormously from endless expanses of flat or undulating plains of sand and stones to the eerie moonscape of black, barren hills, valleys and canyons. Then, quite suddenly while negotiating this moonscape area there appeared an unexpected surprise- an oasis of palms and greenery at Goanikontes, about 50 klicks east of Swakopmund.



**Moonscape (above) near Goanikontes Oasis (below).**



Then on to Swakopmund itself and the beachside Strand Hotel.

Remembering that Namibia was a former German colony, Swakopmund was more German than Germany itself- German food and beer taverns, lots of German language and they even raise Kaiser Wilhelm II's standard on his birthday (he was King of Prussia and Emperor of Germany before abdicating in 1918). The main street is of course Kaiser Wilhelm Strasse. The next morning the freezing sea water made swimming unlikely and created a thick blanket of fog over the beach and at least two clicks inland, remaining the whole day and keeping the temperature at 8 degrees. Inland without the mist, the temperature rose to 25 degrees.



**Huge sand dunes near Swakopmund.**

We explored, ate, drank German beer and shopped before departing on 4 August, travelling south to nearby Walvis Bay, which at the time was a South African exclave surrounded by thick barbed wire security fences. We believed there were diamond mines there as well as it being a strategic port. We were rudely and abruptly turned away at the border gates by determined and very serious armed guards which saw us retreat into the desert.

Andrew and I made our way back to Windhoek where, late that night the incoming plane offloaded my lost luggage, which I immediately checked back in. The legal officers and two prisoners departed for Frankfurt Germany with a fuel stop at the small Atlantic island of Ilha do Sal, off the African coast. In

Frankfurt, and maybe other German cities, the taxis were Mercedes. Ours travelled from the airport along the autobahn at a cool 160 kph. And we were passed by many others.

We touched down in Sydney early on 8 August. Amazingly, my luggage arrived at the same time.

**END**

*Ed's note: Our thanks to David for his four-part story. It was most comprehensive and informed us on another aspect of the Army that we would never have heard about. Don*

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**FROM ROGER LAMBERT:** May I put out a request to the 9 Platoon blokes to see if anyone can recall details of the night that we 'baby sat' a M113 APC stuck in a paddy field? I recall that I had to deploy the platoon around the paddy bunds in a defensive perimeter; it was all we could do to keep our feet out of the water. A US Skycrane was brought in to extricate the stricken APC. What was perturbing was the use of lights to illuminate the APC while we played nursemaids in the dark. It was all very nerve racking at the time.

I'm wondering if any of the guys recall the event and where we were at the time. My 50 odd year-old memory isn't serving me well with this one (I should have kept a diary) but I have a feeling that we were near the Warbies. If I can get any indication of 'who, what, where and when', I'll happily do a write-up of the unusual event for the Association website. Any and all help would be appreciated.

(Photo on next page)



The Sikorsky Skycrane

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Half Circle was compiled and edited by Don Harrod – [donharrod@bigpond.com](mailto:donharrod@bigpond.com), 0418 423 313, with help from behind-the-scenes assistance from Ian Leis, David Wilkins, Digger Nevins, Roger Lambert, Gary Townsend (the Tiger Tales Editor), Ted Harrison (the 5RAR Association Webmaster), **supported by The RB Co, and powered by the Lambs Valley Wine Company, Hunter Valley, NSW.**