

# Half Circle



Number 161 - May 2020

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.

## **VALE – 5715880 LANCE CORPORAL ALEXANDER MICHAEL (HIPPY) KOPPEN**

We are sad to advise that Hippy passed away recently in England, as a result of COVID-19. Hippy served the full term of our second tour of Vietnam (February 1969 to March 1970). We offer our sincere condolences to Hippy's wife of 50 years, Fran. Here are some tributes:

**John (Buddah) Martini:** *Hippy had been in a nursing home for the best part of a year. I have just had a call from his wife Fran to say that Alex has succumbed to Corona Virus whilst in care and died on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2020. Naturally the family are extremely upset as they could not see him before he passed away.*

**Dennis (Digger Nevins):** *I received the sad news of the passing of our cobber Hippy. His wife Fran must be devastated as they were married for over 50 years and were devoted to each other. Hippy and I served in Tracker PL together and he was my No2 on the gun. We both transferred to 7PL to continue serving with LT Hosie, and marched into C Coy together. Hippy may have been a Pommie but he loved Australia and served in Vietnam under our Slouch Hat. A sad day for all of us.*

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**ANZAC DAY, AUSTRALIA – 2020**



Phil Winney  
(centre),  
Newcastle  
NSW



Clockwise from top left: Andy  
MacDougal, Ben Oram, Jim  
Lowry, Eric Hamlin, Barry  
Baker, Bill Titley (centre)



Pam and Eric Hamlin, Port  
Macquarie NSW



Bill Hartley at dawn, Port Macquarie NSW



Ben Oram, Hervey Bay Qld



John Hunter, Brisbane Qld



Kevin Mulligan, Devonport Tas



**AT THE RAP:** Colin Summerfield (hospitalised following a series of falls), Roger Lambert, Barrie Taylor, Peter Commerford. We send our best wishes to our mates who are not as well as they would like to be.

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## **A COURT MARTIAL IN MENDI (Part 1)**

By David Wilkins

Rambu Melo was ‘wanpela bikman’ (an important citizen) in the eyes of the Yamiyami people in the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. A man with 5 wives and 22 children, he was a village councillor and had been a member of the first national parliament following PNG’s independence in 1975.

On a wet and windy afternoon in May 1983, Rambu occupied the rear seat of a 12-seater VW Kombi mini-bus which was travelling from Mendi to Ialibu in the Southern Highlands. Beside him sat his old ‘wantok’ (friend) Fabiani Waga, a former policeman of 22 years’ service. As the mini-bus bumped its way along the corrugated, pot-holed, dirt road referred to on the tourist maps as the Highlands Highway, Rambu indicated that he wished to visit relatives near Paguge village and asked the driver to stop. Fabiani warned Rambu in their local Kiwabe language: ‘Hurry along friend. Try not to get too wet.’

Rambu stepped down from the bus, carefully avoiding the overflowing gutter at the side of the road and made his way to the rear of the bus before commencing to cross the road. He did not see the passing Toyota Landcruiser until it was too late. He died from his injuries in Mendi Hospital the following morning.

The driver of the Landcruiser was an Australian Army engineer, Sergeant Siegfried Pinnow, a member of an Australian engineer detachment from 12th Chief Engineer (CE) Works, operating in the Southern Highland’s capital Mendi, doing local construction work.

As the Southern Highlands Province was the last in Papua New Guinea to be explored and established, it was well behind the other provinces in most forms of development. The country is rugged, dominated by Mt Giluwe at 14,327 feet and Mt Ialibu at 11,365 feet, and the people were primitive. The Australian Army had since 1971, allotted 12th CE Works to be located in Mendi to provide the supervisory and management staff for the Southern Highlands Provincial branch of the national Department of Works and Supply. The unit was responsible for the construction and maintenance of the roads within the province, government houses, offices, health centres, hospitals and a variety of other buildings. It also maintained 12 airfields and was responsible for operating the Provincial government plant and transport vehicle fleet. Not only was the unit possibly the most remote Australian unit in our Army at the time, but also provided its members with greater than normal responsibility and a very high degree of job satisfaction.

The death of Rambu Melo set in train an unusual sequence of events. The Coronial inquest before a national PNG magistrate was standard procedure from which Pinnow was charged with a criminal offence under PNG law. The magistrate noted however, that Pinnow was an Australian soldier on duty and in referring to the Status of Forces Agreement between the Governments of Australia and Papua New Guinea, he ordered

that the matter be referred to the Australian government. By that agreement, Australia had the primary right to exercise jurisdiction over Australian servicemen charged with offences arising out of the performance of official duty.

The Minister for Defence in Australia responded that it would be handled by an Australian Court Martial, convened to sit in Mendi in February 1984. The charge was dangerous driving causing death. The Judge Advocate appointed was an Army Reservist, Sydney judge, Colonel His Honour John O'Meally. I was nominated to be the prosecutor\* and Lieutenant Colonel Jim McIntyre, a Sydney Army Reservist barrister, was defending officer. It was considered appropriate that the persons filling key appointments should have had prior experience in Papua New Guinea. For example, the Court's President, Lieutenant Colonel Ian McLean, had previously served as Commanding Officer of the Engineer Battalion in PNG; the Judge Advocate had earlier been a Judge of the PNG Supreme Court; and I had previously served for 3 years in the Pacific Islands Regiment based in Vanimo and Port Moresby.

\* Following my Vietnam service with 5RAR, I was medically downgraded so I studied law then transferred to the Army Legal Corps.

(to be continued)



Mendi



Mt Giluwe

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**FROM DENNIS (Digger) NEVINS' DIARY:**

**3rd Jan 70.**

No movement into our Ambush. Crikey, I wish the bastards would come, we set these things up, look, listen and wait for hours that go into days. Delta Company found a Cache yesterday it consisted of 21 x RPG 7s, 21 x RPG 2s, 20 x 75mm round's, 2 x BARs. Also, small and heavy arm's ammo.

Doc took out a water party down to the creek to fill bottles for the Platoon. Yesterday 3 Section took over from 2 Section in the Killer Group. At 1600hrs today our Section took over from 3 Section in the Killer Group.

#### **4th Jan 70.**

Again, no movement last night, at 0830hrs about 20 of us which included myself and 3 others from my Section moved to the LZ for a resupply, this is the same LZ we choppered into on the 31st Dec. Doc was in charge as the Boss stayed with the rest in the Ambush. It didn't take long to get there as it was only 600 yards away, we harboured up and a work party was sent out to clear the LZ of small rubbish. The chopper was due in at 1000hrs but was delayed and arrived at 1500hrs, we sat around for 5 hours bloody bored and jacked off, on top of that we didn't have any tucker.

We received 4 days rations, then we had to load up like packhorses and carry the rations, gear and water back to the Ambush, it was bloody hard yakka. Hippie was sent out due to ear trouble and Mick Browne came out, Mick wasn't able to cram into the chopper when we lifted off on the 31st Dec so he's been having a bludge at the FSB. We got back to the Ambush at 1700hrs, our Section is in the Killer Group again for the second night running.

#### **5th Jan 70.**

No movement into the Ambush. Doc took out a water party to collect water when they returned the Platoon packed up the Ambush, that meant repacking the Claymores ect and move to the new site. We shook out moving through the scrub following the track direction but stayed in the scrub keeping well off the track. After 300 yards we turned towards the track and harboured 30 yards from it. A Recce was carried out and when they returned, we saddled up and moved into the Ambush positions.

This a completely different Ambush to normal, the Ambush is split in two so there is two separate Ambushes 30 yards apart, the Boss got this idea off D Company. In our group are 12 Diggers which includes our Section, PLT HQ also George Mulready and Eddie Davies from 3 Section.

My Gun is on the right flank the other 2 Gunners are in Doc's Section 30 yards from us. Doc's is a Gun Ambush, he has 16 diggers in his group while ours is a Claymore Ambush. The bamboo is very thick around here, this is the same area we came into when we carried out the Recce on the 2nd Jan. The Killer Groups have dug shell scrapes.

Call Sign 6-2 [Pioneers] made contact, they surprised some Nog's, they captured 6 packs but no kills. D Company killed 1 Nog.

\* The reason the Boss wanted to move positions was he felt the Nog's knew we were on their track, they wouldn't know exactly where but they would have an idea. That's why the Skipper decided to change it, we moved the Ambush in the direction

of where the Panji Pits were, so it was a change of position but still on the same track.

**6th Jan 70.**

No movement into the Ambush, Jack and Andy shifted around to my pit on my Gun while myself and Mick [Bluey] Fitzgerald moved to the Killer Group.

8 Platoon made contact the result was a blood trail, a captured AK47 Rifle but no body.

We in Ambush carried out normal piquet's 1 on 3 off.

\* If a rifle was captured along with a blood trail you could count that as a kill.

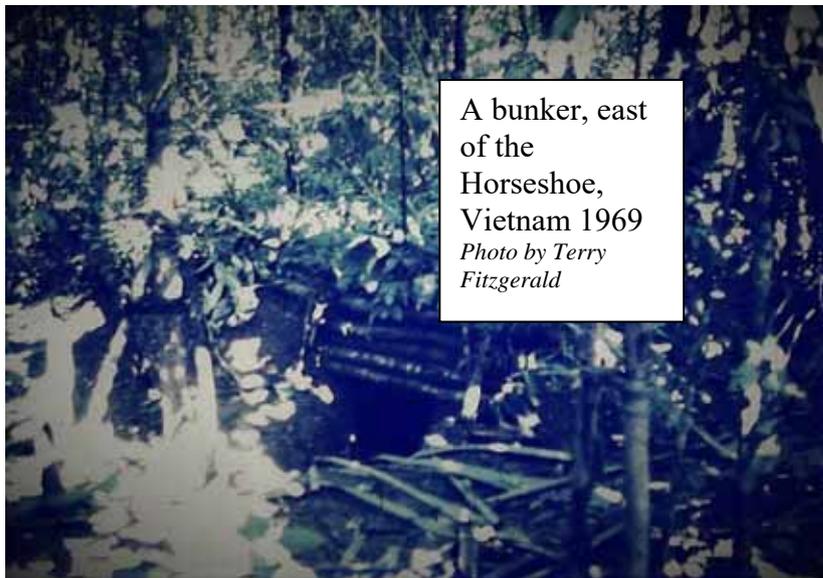
***More in the next issue***

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The link below will connect with an interview with Peter Knight, PL SGT 9PL following Operation Twickenham, June 1969. Well done, Peter!

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1122892>

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A bunker, east of the Horseshoe, Vietnam 1969  
*Photo by Terry Fitzgerald*

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**FROM DAVID WILKINS:** Does anyone have a photo of the OC's hut (affectionately called "Yarralumla) at our base at Nui Dat? This was the two-roomed hut (half OC's quarters and half briefing room) with the Company Command Post beneath. Anyone who was rostered to do a radio picquet will remember the bulging, mouldy walls holding back soggy earth and the steep stairs leading down to nowhere! **Please help**, David needs this photo.....

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