

Half Circle



Number 154 - October 2019

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.



AT THE RAP: Peter Commerford, Barrie Taylor. We send our best wishes to our mates who are not as well as they would like to be. We also pass on our very best wishes to Lorraine and Max Postle. Lorraine has been re-admitted to hospital, with a long rehabilitation anticipated.

VIETNAM – THEN AND NOW. Have a look at the following link. Amazing! (contributed by David Wilkins)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qaupiCp4GI&feature=youtu.be>

A MESSAGE FROM THE OC, CLAUDE DUCKER:

Dear former Charlie Company comrades,

Judith and I recently drove from Canberra to Gunning via the picturesque village of Gundaroo. The road was bitumen all the way and it took just less than an hour. We intend to go to Gunning for “Thommo’s” remembrance service on 1st February. His sister Helen told me some time ago that about one hundred people had indicated that they would attend, including members and friends of the family. About 24 have booked in at the motel as indicated by Don in his last Half Circle, but there is plenty of accommodation in the surrounding towns including of course Canberra.

I realise that several of you are attending the 5 RAR Reunion later next February and it would be difficult for those living interstate to attend Thommo’s remembrance service. Nevertheless, you may decide to do so if you live within easy driving distance of Yass.

I have spoken to Colin Kahn about the function at Gunning, but he said he was not well enough to travel to Gunning nor to the Battalion reunion at the Gold Coast – at least at this stage.

I understand from Helen that the money is in hand for the lunch on 1st February 2020. The local RSL Club is assisting with this.

I regret that due to my medical condition I will be unable to attend any night-time activity.

On another matter – you would recall that I wrote a short account in Half Circle of our outing to Hoa Long on 7-8 June 1969 (Operation TONG). Dr Robert Hall, the webmaster for the ADFA/University of NSW Vietnam Map project asked me to contribute an enlarged version of my article to this project. It appears together with a Brigadier's comments. You can view this at the following address: <https://vietnam.unsw.adfa.edu.au/tag/operation-tong/> Some of you might like to make your own contribution to this website by writing about a contact or incident during your Vietnam Service, relating it to a grid reference.



Claude Ducker at the Gunning (NSW) War Memorial, September 2019

A Patrol into The Stone Age

By Dave Wilkins

Because there are few roads in Papua New Guinea, long distance travel is mainly by water or air. Mind you, flying in the rugged mountainous PNG can be somewhat nerve-wracking where one of the principles is 'Never fly in the clouds because they're full of rocks.'

Many of the airstrips are tiny, some carved into deep valleys or jungle hillsides where the front edge of the runway is a cliff face. Fortunately the pilots were (and probably still are) both skilled and courageous, and maybe just a little crazy.

On one occasion, I queried the wisdom of landing on a tiny mountain airstrip to receive the pilot's quip:

Dave, I could put this thing down on a tennis court. They'd just need to take down the net first.

During the mid-1960s, I spent three years living in and patrolling remote regions of this rugged and very primitive country. At the time I was a young Lieutenant with the Australian Army, posted to the Pacific Islands Regiment, which then consisted of Pacific Islander soldiers commanded mainly by Australian officers. As independence approached in 1975 more Papua New Guinean officers were trained to replace the Australians.

So remote are some of these tribes that modern man rarely contacted them and so their ancient traditions continued to prevail. Cannibalism was one such tradition, one that I was confronted with during a patrol in 1966.

My platoon in C Company 1 PIR (yes, C Company again) flew by Hercules C130 into the Nomad River patrol post located in the remote north-eastern corner of Western Province. Australian Patrol Officers (known as a 'Kiaps') manned these isolated outstations, a lonely life, often leading to psychological and alcohol issues. At Nomad River however, the Patrol Officer was the very sane and sober John Kelly, who warmly welcomed this expatriate company, albeit for a short while only.

My patrol from there was into the Biame area and beyond, which required special government clearance to enter. Usually, it was a prohibited-access zone because of the danger from these primitive and aggressive tribes who at that time still practised cannibalism. My patrol had special government clearance to enter.

For these reasons, extra care had to be taken. John provided me with a Nomad River native policeman and another two locals to assist with translation of the different languages to be encountered during my patrol. On the second day of walking through the dense jungle, we located a narrow track leading in the correct south-east direction necessary to find the village of Biame.

As part of our Army training, my patrol silently followed the track, well spread out in typical infantry formation to reduce vulnerability from ambush; the Kiap had informed me earlier that this was a real possibility from these tribes.

Some hours later we suspected we were being shadowed in the thick scrub to our flanks. I dispatched patrols to check, and indeed they detected signs of parallel movement to ours, such as overturned leaves and broken twigs where a few people had walked. No one was seen, however. Carefully, we continued on and after several hours emerged from the jungle into a large clearing, at least the size of a football field. Centrally located was a single long house, similar to those found in the Sepik District: grass-thatched roof and split bamboo walls to ground level, and measuring about 50 metres long by 20 metres wide. It was eerily deserted, inside and out, with not a person to be seen anywhere. After I had posted sentries, my patrol rested in the shade of the long house and brewed up, having been briefed by me for no one to enter the building.



A little while later, from the jungle fringe appeared some 'meri' and 'pikinini' (women and small children), but no men. The women were semi-naked, just wearing

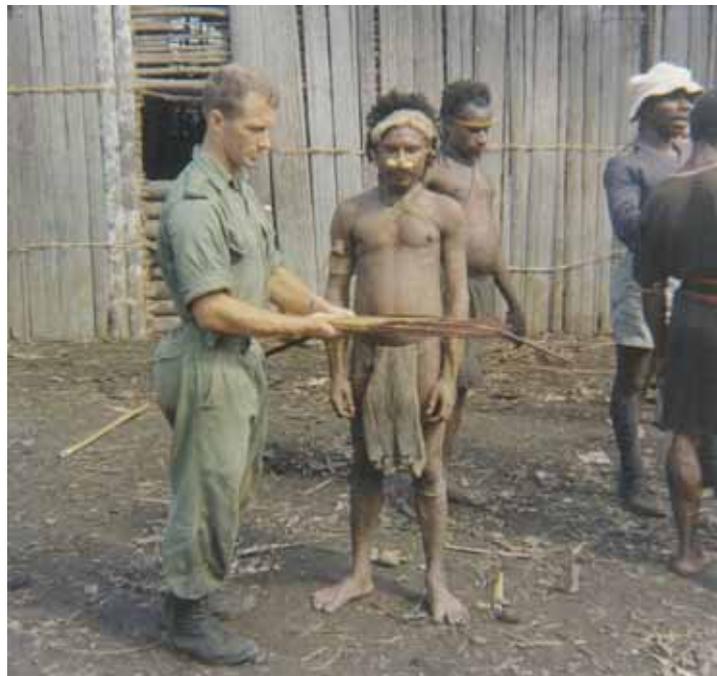
grass skirts, some with drab tapa bark capes fastened to rear tufts of thick, tight fuzzy hair. The front three-quarters of the head was shaven and their skin was filthy and scaly.

After talking with these women and children for a short time (using the interpreters), we noticed the Biami warriors emerging from the surrounding jungle shadows. They approached from all around us, with bows and arrows strained at the ready. The expression wasn't used then but I think 'Be alert not alarmed' may not have completely covered our situation. Trying to remain calm myself, I reminded my men to do the same. As they advanced towards us they slowly released the tension on their bowstrings as it became apparent we were there in peace. They had sent their women and children ahead to test the water, all the time having each of us covered. They told us that one false move and their swarm of deadly arrows would have been released.

Each of these aggressive and suspicious warriors wore just a small piece of bark hung over his genitalia, a possum fur headband, tight bicep armbands, bamboo rope around each forearm and a short cylinder of bamboo through the nasal septum

We conversed through a series of languages from one 'ples tok' (local language) to another, then into Motu and finally into pidgin, which I could speak, and gradually the tension eased. Some of these warriors had indeed been following our earlier approach to their village, and told us they had decided not to attack us because, although strangers, we were clearly a large and disciplined force (we numbered about 25) and in their view might be too strong to fight.

The men, women and particularly the piccaninnies were fascinated by my white skin, all wanting to touch me. Was it testing the meat content for their next meal, I asked? No, they laughed, I was the first white man they had ever seen. This was not to say that white men had not been to Biami village previously in early PNG history, it was just that, in their lifetime, I was the first they had laid eyes on.



Dave Wilkins trading with a Biami warrior. PNG policeman and an interpreter at right. The bow and arrows plus the bone dagger in his arm band now adorn my study.

After a few hours of talking, trading and resting we prepared to move on. They asked which way we were headed. I said we were going to Gebusi (if I remember the name correctly) over the distant hills. The warrior in the photograph immediately offered some interesting advice:

Don't go there. They will eat you.

Though conscious of this warning we nevertheless departed and eventually arrived at our new destination where there was a process of reception similar to that in Biami. When asked where we had come from, we answered 'Biami' at which they showed their amazement, exclaiming:

And they didn't eat you?

My writing this is testimony to my not making their cooking pot.



THE LIVERPOOL PLAINS KOKODA TRACK MEMORIAL WALKWAY

The Liverpool Plains (NSW) Shire Council is currently conducting a feasibility study of constructing a Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway between the towns of Quirindi to Werris Creek. The Walkway will be 20km in length, through rolling countryside, and will incorporate the walking track, an education facility, parking for caravans, camping, rest centres in old modified railway carriages, town-to-town foot and wheelchair races, riding for the disabled on a parallel track, and bordered by natural grasses and sunflowers (a crop which is grown throughout the district).

The main goal is to build Australia's most substantial memorial to the Kokoda Track, to acknowledge and honour the soldiers who were part of the battles along the track in defence of our nation.



It sure looks like Eddie Moon! (Photo by John Hunter)



Who threw smoke in order to “disinfect” the toilet block?

If anyone is interested, a friend of mine bought a ticket for the World Cup Rugby in Japan without realizing that the date for the Wallabies vs Wales match coincided with his own wedding date!

Please, if you know anyone who is free and wants to go in his place, it’s at St Clément’s Anglican Church, Mosman on 21 September 2019 and the bride's name is Sue.



Home plumbing

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