

# Half Circle



Number 150 - June 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.

***A note from your editor: Welcome to edition number 150 of Half Circle. This publication would not normally be 11 pages, but I took the decision to include all the material below due to the fact that the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Binh Ba will occur on 6<sup>th</sup> June, with an appropriate commemoration in Canberra on 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> of this month. Claude has spent considerable time and effort in compiling the following account of activities in Hoa Long, as has Ian Leis in telling his own story, and David Wilkins' account of the Court Martial in Namibia. Please read on, Don.***

## C Company "outing" in Hoa Long – 50 years ago

We men of C Company 5 RAR may not have been aware of it at the time, but President Nixon was meeting with the South Vietnamese President Thieu on Guam on 7/8<sup>th</sup> June 1969. The main purpose of this meeting was to make the South Vietnamese take greater responsibility for the war and Richard Nixon announced the withdrawal of 25,000 US troops as part of a much larger staged US withdrawal. In view of this the enemy planned a widespread demonstration of force including in Phuoc Tuoy Province. In Hoa Long the enemy announced the formation of a Provisional Government in areas held by the Liberation Army.

Already on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 1969 the 1 ATF Ready Reaction Force was committed to what became a highly successful action at the village of Binh Ba, which had been occupied by a battalion of 33 NVA. Initially this action mainly involved D Company 5 RAR with a troop of APCs and a troop of Centurion tanks. This major engagement soon required the involvement of B Company 5 RAR. The re-capture of Binh Ba was a brilliant combined infantry / armoured / RAAF gunship operation and D Company will be commemorating the battle at their reunion in Canberra on 6 / 7<sup>th</sup> June.

As 6 RAR and 9 RAR at this time were fully committed to operations well away from the Nui Dat base and A Company of 5 RAR having proceeded to Vung Tau for their break, the only

remaining infantry force available was C Company 5 RAR who had just returned from their short break at Vung Tau.

Late on the morning of 7<sup>th</sup> June 1969 I was called to HQ 1 ATF. In the absence of Brigadier "Sandy" Pearson, who was following the main battle near Binh Ba, the GSO 2, Major David Chinn, briefed me on the difficult situation the Task Force was facing. There were a number of different threats in the Task Force area of operations, including the report of 200 enemy having occupied part of Hoa Long not far from the 1 ATF southern perimeter. The enemy had resisted several attacks from three SVN Regional Force companies, and from artillery fire.

There were a number of other incidents in the Task Force's area of operations including enemy road blocks on Route 15 and the heavy mortaring of the 9 RAR Fire Support Base south-east of Dat Do, and some sporadic rocket fire on the Nui Dat base.

1 ATF were reluctant to immediately commit us as we were "the last shot in the locker". Nevertheless, I did send a message back to C Company to be on stand-by. My "After Action Report" shows that I left 1 ATF at 1320 hours. Lt Col Peter Gratton, who commanded the Civil Affairs Unit in Vietnam, was waiting outside my office. He told me about the large-scale damage inflicted on Binh Ba the previous day, requiring a massive rectification programme from his unit. He seemed to be imploring me to ensure minimal damage to Hoa Long during the coming action to deal with the enemy in that village. I told him that I had to go on with my task and that there was no time for delay. My task was already difficult because no arrangements had been or were being made to evacuate the civilians from Hoa Long.

I gave some preliminary orders to facilitate our deployment. There was also the dilemma that the CSM and all the NCOs were involved with either instructing or as students on promotion courses. I decided not to interfere with this important opportunity for these men and did not ask for their release. As with D Company, it turned out to be that the remaining senior privates rose to the occasion.

At 1420 our reconnaissance group and 7 Platoon arrived at Hoa Long Sub-section HQ.

I had a further briefing from Colonel Ken McKenzie, our likeable Deputy Task Force Commander. He had just arrived from hospital and said he was only armed with a tooth brush. At this stage I was able to obtain a SIOUX helicopter so as to do a close recce of the enemy locations. As we flew near the enemy position two RPG rockets were fired at us. As one of these came very close to us, the pilot Lieutenant Alan Jellie, indicated that we should withdraw (this intrepid pilot was shot down and killed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 1969).

A major decision I had to make was whether to advance into the enemy held north-west part of Hoa Long on foot or by Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC). Hoa Long had much more vegetation around the houses than Binh Ba. Furthermore, in the limited time available no attempt had been made by the local district chief to clear the civilians, who in Hoa Long were particularly hostile ever since their removal from Long Tan.

It seemed that the tank and APC commanders were pleased when I decided to move in a dismounted formation in our initial sweep through the enemy-held area, bearing in mind that the damage that had been inflicted on the armoured vehicles and their crews in Binh Ba the previous day. The disadvantage of advancing in dismounted formation was the limited daylight that remained that day, after a considerable delay when two out of the three tanks

broke down on their way to Hoa Long, requiring their replacement. I decided the tank support was too valuable to go without and their support did prove invaluable as they assisted the leading platoons to advance by demolishing claymores and several enemy occupied dwellings and bunkers.

The APCs also proved invaluable on this operation, not only carrying infantry to the start line and in the later mounted sweep but also giving us flank protection, and they were particularly effective in eliminating enemy snipers who were firing from one or two trees at our Headquarters group soon after we first crossed the start line.

During our forming up stage I saw a large group of journalists and film crews gathering around our start line area. I decided this was an unfair imposition on my men and asked the Public Relations person who was shepherding them around the place to get them out of the way as soon as possible. It seemed he complained to Brigadier Pearson on his return to Nui Dat who wanted an explanation from me for this decision. I replied in my defence that I considered the situation to be my call and he seemed to accept this.

After my return to Australia I discovered that the PR man had become a member of the Victorian Parliament and I made my peace with him by inviting him home for Sunday lunch.

After we swept through the enemy position by 1830 hours, I received orders to stay in Hoa Long for the night, because the enemy were expected to return to the area to collect the weapons they had discarded during contacts before fleeing as civilians.

I ordered the company group to harbour in the main area of enemy opposition to prevent the enemy returning. At this stage a further enemy armed with an RPG was killed by 9 Platoon 200 metres to their north. During the night torches were seen shining outside the perimeter. These could have been civilians returning for dead bodies or weapons.

The next morning, we did a mounted sweep to a larger area of north-west Hoa Long. We never had the chance for a thorough search for enemy bodies or weapons. Enemy casualties as claimed by us were 6 VC KIA, 2 captured and then a further 4 VC were captured by RF in the tunnel under where our Headquarters was located.

Documents captured at the main enemy area of resistance indicated that they were only 53 men from the Chau Duc Company, not the 200 that was claimed. The larger figure was probably put about in a bid to get a reaction in Hoa Long, perhaps drawing forces away from Binh Bah.

You will be interested to know that according to the subsequently captured diary of Nguyen Hoang Mai – the commander of C-41 Company, *“on 7 June, we fought in Hoa Long against six attacks. In the final attack, there were Australians and armour – there were no aircraft. We killed 18 and wounded three from the Sector PF and RD Cadre. One M41 [sic] tank was burnt out and one damaged, two M113A1s were knocked out. Our casualties were two KIA, one CIA, one WIA, and one surrendered.”*

In actual fact, we did not sustain any casualties. In the absence of their NCOs I consider that the men of C company did a magnificent job that day, and I was proud of them and their young platoon commanders.

C H DUCKER



C Coy 2IC CAPT Bill Titley (slouch hat, in foreground), with OC MAJ Claude Ducker, seeing off the C Coy troops for 36 hours R&C leave in Vung Tau, early June 1969



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

**CORRECTION:** In our last Half Circle (No 149), John Hellyer provided a picture of his ANZAC display. This display was in fact situated in the Recreation Room of the retirement village in Bargo, NSW, where John and Hazel live. There are a number of WWII veterans living at the village, so John put up a display for them. His son James, a WO2 with three overseas postings as a commando spoke about the modern day ANZACs. The 114 residents of the village attended the tribute. *John Hellyer.*

### **A Court Martial in Windhoek, Namibia** **(Part 3- a short trial with a guilty plea)**

By Dave Wilkins

Parts 1 and 2 described events before the court martial began in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, previously the German colony of South West Africa.

With only one flight arriving per week and my luggage still 'lost' in transit, I borrowed the in-country Australian Legal Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ken Northwood's law books for the trial commencing on Tuesday 1 August 1989 and successfully cannibalized the Army uniforms of seven officers and soldiers to fit me out completely- polyester shirt and trousers from a vertically challenged Sapper (no sniggering thank you), shoes, socks, Colonel's rank, red collar tabs, ribbons for my various medals and even the Infantry Combat Badge.

The court martial commenced before the court President, Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Pippard and court members Majors John Spencer and John Hutchings, with me as the Judge Advocate, at which stage the two accused pleaded guilty to the two alternative (lesser) charges of assault upon a superior. The prosecution accepted this and withdrew the primary charges of assault occasioning actual bodily harm, before evidence in mitigation of sentence was submitted. I summed up on the law concerning sentencing and its evidence. By 6 PM the President and members of the court had returned to sentence each accused to 70 days' detention and 60 days' detention respectively on the two assault upon a superior charges, to be served concurrently. This was a particularly astute sentence, to be served in an MCE in Australia, because it meant the prisoners did not receive an early mark into society back home while their engineer mates were completing their tour of duty in Namibia. So the Sapper unit would return home and its members would complete their leave before Boseley and Phillips would be released from custody.



**District Court Martial in Windhoek, Namibia, 1 August 1989:**

Standing: Captain Paul Wilkinson (defence), Captain Harry Dempsey (prosecutor), Captain Lynne McDade (defence), Lieutenant Colonel Ken Northwood (UN Legal Officer).

Seated: Colonel David Wilkins (Judge Advocate), Major John Spencer, Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Pippard (President), and Major John Hutchings.

**END PART 3**

Comments by Digger Nevins:

How odd it was to read Dave's entry on the Court Martial at Windhoek on the 1 August 89. I was there that day. I saw all the Diggers milling around and I thought the RSM Jake Arnold is bound to

give these blokes a serve and he did. I called into CE UNTAG reference work on a refugee camp. The RSM was my section in 2ic 28 ANZUK Fld Sqn in Singapore in 1973, so I had known Jake a long time. Our section Corporal was Tony Bower Miles. He wrote a book called Bomber and when it came to explosives there was no better man. I wrote a bit about that day as we all felt the whole thing was an overreaction as the blokes had moved on. I don't think Jake wanted the court hearing but the SSM of 17 Const Sqn did. His name was Rory Osbourne and was an excellent SSM. I can't remember the two Sappers now but I know I drove one of them back to Grootfontein that day. The Cpl was Spike Reid. I'm sure that is correct. Spike was a good bloke as a Sapper but started to get gobby once promoted so I wasn't sorry he got a touch up. However I had no idea Dave was inside the building. We could have walked past each other without knowing.

At CE UNTAG they had cells along the right back fence, they had no lights inside or out of the cells. While my section was there we had a British soldier bought in with a Cpl. The NCO would march him to the dunny always screaming left right etc, you know how they go on. What the Cpl never found out is that us blokes would go down to his cell at night, sit outside and give him ciggies and a couple of cans. He was a good bloke and when we had to move again we said cheerio to our adopted Digger. He said one day he would come to Aussie and join our Army. I wonder if he did?



#### **FROM LESLEY LOWRY – ANZAC DAY 2019, CHARLEVILLE, QLD**

Sorry this is a bit late but we have only just come back from a trip around country Queensland.

We Attended ANZAC Day in Charleville. It was a wonderful to see all the local schools and Kindergarten children marching, even the pony club. There was only a small number of Veterans but it was very intermate and poignant.

We were lucky enough to be addressed by a current serving member of 5RAR. A local lad who had permission to come to the service. Unfortunately he made it very clear that we were not to share his name or any photos. [Dangerous times]

Basically he shared his journey from country Queensland to the army and the service of our country. His proud Mum was in the audience.

They flew the New Zealand, Australian and Aboriginal flags. They sang Anthems from both countries. The Charleville War Memorial is pictured above.

Lesley and Jim

## MY LIFE – IAN LEIS

I continue on with my life story. I believe in my last letter, I had just been placed into 7 Platoon with Lt. Ian Hosie as my boss – known as “Sir” in Nui Dat, and “Hoss” or “Skipper” in the “J” (Jungle). I was given 1 stripe – L/Cpl, and command of 2 section. Before this occurrence I was 2 IC to Cpl Ted Suttor (“Eyes”). This was an easy job as I had been in Ted’s section (5 Section 8 Platoon) – this section’s members having been together since our arrival at 5 RAR. The original members of 5 section were:

L/Cpl Barry Morgan – “Morg”	Private Ian Leis – “Bop”
L/Cpl Ted Suttor – “Eyes”	Private Matt Smith- “M.K.”
Private Neil Davis – “Dartsa”	Private Bob Wyatt – “Water Rat”
Private John Yabsley – “Skippy”	Private Peter McCarthy – “Freddie”
Private Ray Fitzpatrick – “Fitzy”	Private McMahon – a soldier left from the previous battalion. Not sure of correct name.

In my new job. 2 Section made up of “Reos” (reinforcements) . Sandy McKinnon being the only original C Company member (plus myself). Sandy was my forward scout. Robert Newberry (Blue) from the Q Store requested to join my section. Blue and I had been mates since recruit training at Kapooka. This did happen, and Ted Suttor went into the Q Store.

Training was foremost to bind the new 7 Platoon together. Our lives depended on each other. My feelings – beliefs as a leader? were: Was I capable – could I do what was required of me – did my men believe in me? All this spinning in my head – however, I had to believe I could do the job.

All the reinforcements were good soldiers. Keen National Servicemen. Jimmy McMillan attached himself to me. Every time I needed someone – he was there. In the short time we shared life, Jim and I became mates – good friends – we shared knowledge of each other’s families back home, of what our future plans for life were. As I have already spoken to Claude with regard to the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1969 – (the loss of Jimmy and Sandy badly wounded etc) in this story I won’t go there again. The feelings I carry regarding this day about “my leadership” will never change.

However I would like to mention that I gained a huge respect for our C.S.M. (Company Sergeant Major) Warrant Officer Jack Lake. Respect that I still hold today. His job as CSM on many occasions would not have been an easy one. He was the meat in the sandwich. He was the one who had to please – guide – ensure orders from above were carried out whilst still keeping the troops in line and accepting of what was required of them. Not easy.

Late in the day on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1969 I assisted with the CSM in placing Sandy McKinnon on the jungle penetrator. He (CSM) was cool, calm and very much in control (just what was required in the situation we were in. However he did get a little excited when the N.V.A.’s (North Vietnam Army’s) heavy machine gun began trying to blast the “dustoff” chopper out of the sky.

Following this harrowing day, I had my R & R, “Blue” Newberry and myself returning to Australia together. This in itself was an experience “mentally” I have never forgotten.

The following statement of mine is an extract from the book “*The Vietnam Years*” by Michael Caulfield.

*That night I slept with Jim’s body within arms-length of me. Well, I didn’t sleep. I spent the night with Jim’s body. The next morning we were reinforced with APCs and armoured tanks, Centurion tanks. It was hard to see Jim’s body just rolled up in a plastic hootchie, put into the back of an APC. He was just like a bundle of rubbish.*

*That was the last I was to ever see of Jim’s body. Late that afternoon I was lifted out of that area as I was due to go on R & R...The next morning I flew back to Nui Dat, I showered, put my polys (Polyester uniform) on, ribbons, grabbed a port, was flown to Binh Hoa, then to Tan Son Nhut where I boarded an American plane which flew us back to Sydney. I had come from death to the safety of Sydney in a matter of 24 hours. I had eight days, ten days R & R – one day home, one day back, eight days in Australia.*

*To this day, I don’t know how I got through those days. I could not speak of what had taken place. I could tell no one, least of all Glenys. I couldn’t tell of the carnage that I had seen, encountered, had actually done to fellow human beings. Everything had to be fine. Everything had to be okay, portraying the feelings that I was safe. I had my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in those eight days. I had love, family and safety. It was great. It was a happy family time. I had a family ceremony, a reunion for my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. I did not want to party. I had told that to Mum and Dad by letter. I just wanted to be at home, alive, and it was unreal to sleep in a bed after having been sleeping on the ground, not actually sleeping, lying on the ground, usually wet, usually scared. So my R & R was a tremendous relief in many ways to be back home and be in Australia, but I really don’t know how I got through it.*

*I went back to Vietnam by Qantas. Once again, to go from Sydney, Mascot to Tan Son Nhut, from love, safety, fun place to that horrible place again. You just can’t put it into words. The transformation, you just couldn’t comprehend it. I was back in Nui Dat and within four hours I was back in charge of my section, back in the jungle.*

After R & R it was back to the same routine, I enjoyed my time working with Ian Hosie. We had our differences and moments. However, there was respect both ways. I had some more new reinforcements to replace Jim and Sandy. One thing that did occur with the Reos – many of us were very hard on them. It was hard enough for them to arrive into a totally foreign group, but they usually had to occupy a bed or tent belonging to a K.I.A. or W.I.A. member (Killed in Action or Wounded in Action). In some ways we expected them to prove themselves before being accepted into the section/platoon. Today I know this was wrong – by isolating them in that way. “M.K.” Matt Smith was one who shared these feeling with me many years later whilst he, Sandy McKinnon and myself were visiting the McMillan family in Horsham, Victoria. MK stated “*You know, we were very hard on the reinforcements – we should have welcomed them, made their lives easier – accepted and protected them. We didn’t. We failed them in a most un-Australian way.*”

Very true in so many ways for many of us.

My story now goes to me being injured by the blast from an artillery shell. I say injured – I should say I was wounded! (Or so I have been told!)

I do not remember the day's activities very well. I know there were three of us wounded at the time. The actual occurrence has always been a blur to me.

(A stray artillery round resulted in three wounded, one of whom later died.)

I think I remember being winched in a wire basket "litter" to a "Dust Off" chopper. It was an American chopper. (Medic Kevin Mulligan correctly diagnosed my injuries as needing a litter, which wasn't carried on all helicopters.)

I was taken to an American Hospital in Long Binh. I was assessed and told spinal surgery to pin damage to my spine was required. I was numb from my hips to my toes – no feeling. Rather frightening, I remember.

This surgery was planned by the Americans but did not happen. I was removed from their system by a visiting Australian Officer and flown to the Australian Hospital in Vung Tau. I spent approximately two weeks there. (This was the beginning of around three years of receiving some stupid medical treatment by the Australian Army, followed by the Repatriation System.

I was medivaced to Australia by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). I was held over at RAAF base BUTTERWORTH, Penang – Singapore as I was not well enough to continue the flight. I was there for 7-10 days and treated very well by RAAF personnel. Eventually I arrived at AMBERLEY Base outside Brisbane, via RICHMOND Base NSW. The 1<sup>st</sup> Base Military Hospital at Yeronga was my final destination. "HOME".

My wife Glenys was taken aside and told my condition was not good. I would not be able to walk correctly and lifting etc would always be a problem for me. My immediate treatment was unknown. I was given a copy of my diagnosis at the 1<sup>st</sup> Base Hospital. It stated: Ruptured disc at L5-S1 lower spine – a hairline crack same area. Ruptured disc at C6-7 level "neck". Also, a cracked coccyx, lower spine.

The doctors were very much undecided what treatment would best suit my injuries. The Americans didn't give me an option. "Pinning would assist and ensure a full recovery."

Whilst awaiting decisions to be made by Military doctors I was placed on and lived on a very strange bed which rotated, somewhat like a rotisserie. I was strapped to the base and pressure on my spine could be relieved when the bed was rotated through 360 degrees.

My injuries were left for nature to mend. No medical records exist (or are held) for me from the time it was recommended I be R.T.A. (Returned to Australia) until my discharge day/date. They just disappeared – very conveniently.

NOTE: In 1994 and 1997 I had major spinal surgery to pin and plate damaged areas of my spine. My neck required inter-body bone fusion also. "Previous Severe Trauma" was stated for the damage found by the Neuro and Orthopaedic surgeons who performed this surgery. At this time a bone spur was compressing my spinal cord. I believe it grew from where the bone or bones had initially been cracked. Spinal cord/cavity repairs were performed during my first operation.

*Ed's note – the above is the second of a three part article written by Ian Leis. It is a warts and all coverage of his youth, military career and adult life. We thank Ian for his openness and willingness to tell his story, and part 3 will be in the next issue. Thanks, Ian!*

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### **TRAVELLING ABOUT:**

Digger Nevins – off to the outback again – this time to the Northern Territory.

Jack and Susan Lake – Hervey Bay, Qld, just before returning to NSW. Bill Titley reports:  
“Jack and Susan Lake called in to Hervey Bay on their homeward journey, to catch up with a few Charlie Coy “luminaries”. Barry Baker was the co-ordinator, organizing a couple of gatherings. This evening we had dinner together, giving us an opportunity to check a few stories, memories, etc and tell a few more lies!  
It’s always a pleasant experience to catch up with those of our Company, who are travelling through and this was no exception.  
It was also nice to have the company of our ladies (carers!)”.



L-R – Beth Titley, Lesley Lowry, Jack Lake, Jim Lowry, Pat Oram, Kelly Oram, Cheryl Hill. Standing – Susan Lake, Bill Titley, Kiwi Hill, Ben Oram and Barry Baker.



Bill Titley, Kiwi Hill, Ben Oram, Barry Baker. Seated – Jack Lake and Jim Lowry.

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This is the 150th edition of *Half Circle*, a most commendable milestone reached by our editor, Don Harrod aka Dan aka Horrid aka Pirate.

*Half Circle* No 1 was issued in February 2007 a month or two after the combined 5/7 RAR Battalion was de-linked and 5RAR, the Tiger Battalion, became a single unit in its own right again after 33 years of being joined with the 7th in 1973.

Thank you Don for your marvellous effort in producing our monthly newsletter, which has been a wonderful conduit for keeping the C Company blokes in touch and to enable their family members to read about the exploits of such close former comrades-in-arms.

It is an absolute credit to Don for starting *Half Circle* and keeping it going for so long, an effort which is greatly appreciated by us all. It has not only kept us in touch with each other, but it has also located some ex-C Company members who were finding life difficult, only to gain some comfort when they were reunited with their Digger mates from 50 years ago.

On behalf of us all Don, our sincere thanks and congratulations for all you have done for us and on reaching this milestone.

Men, if Don is to keep this going, and we sincerely hope he does, please provide him with your stories and warries, both past and present.

As well, if family members are so inclined, please contribute also. We would love to hear from you.

Best wishes to you all,  
Dave Wilkins

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**A RESPONSE FROM YOUR EDITOR:** I thank Dave for his very kind words, and accept them with humility. *Half Circle* was born over twelve years ago when it occurred to me that we were not communicating. We had been to Vietnam together, and then gone our separate ways after that time. We have a bond that can neither be explained to others, and can never be broken. We might go for years without seeing or hearing from each other – but when we meet, we immediately pick up from where we left off. All we need for *Half Circle* to keep going is to remember that it belongs to us – we own it, and only we can manage it. Without hearing from our C Company colleagues, there is little to print. Over to you, and thanks. Don

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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 Claude Ducker, Ian Leis, David Wilkins, Digger Nevins, Bill Titley, Lesley Lowry, behind-the-scenes assistance from Gary Townsend (the Tiger Tales Editor), Ted Harrison (the SRAR Association Webmaster), **supported by The RB Co, and powered by the Lambs Valley Wine Company, Hunter Valley, NSW.**