

Half Circle



Number 153 - September 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.

ARMY MEDICAL RECORDS

After reading Ian Leis' story in Half Circle No. 150, it caused me to remember some facts and experiences after I left my Infantry career behind. I hope my recollections may be useful to some others.

Soon after I was transferred to the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps (RAAMC) I was panelled to attend a Medical Administration course at the School of Army Health at Healesville, Victoria. It was pleasing to see that the Army was going to train me for my future RAAMC postings.

Part of the course involved learning about Army medical records. To provide some first-hand experiences, all the students were transported to Melbourne for a visit to the Army Health Records Office (AHRO). After we were given a lecture on the filing system, each student was tasked to find their own Army Medical Record. I passed the test but was surprised to find that I had two folders. When I asked for an explanation, I was told that the extra folder was for my hospitalization in SVN which had produced a lot of paperwork.

Many years later, I was posted to Canberra, to a staff officer position in the Office of the Surgeon General Australian Defence Force (OSGADF). Across the corridor from my office worked a Defence civilian called Alan. Alan's title was FOI Clerk. One of his tasks was to photocopy Defence Medical Records requested under Freedom of Information. Ex-Service personnel may request a copy of their medical records to assist with their ongoing medical treatment or to assist with preparing claims for DVA.

When Alan heard that I was resigning, he advised me to submit a FOI request. I took his advice but mindful of my visit to AHRO, I asked for all folders. I received two binders of medical documents.

Since I left the Regular Army, there have some changes to the Defence records structure. After a review and reorganisation, AHRO became part of ADF Health Records. The health records for **former** service personnel are managed now by Defence Archives. A request form for your health record may be downloaded from <http://www.defence.gov.au/Records/ExService.asp> .

These days Defence Archives provides access to records electronically on CD or via email (just as well that Alan has retired). The types of records provided may include:

- Service Report,
- Full copy of personal documents, or
- Full copy of health documents.

If you are an ex-serving member seeking access to your Military Compensation file and it is pre 1999, send request to:

Army - AHQ.FOICoord@defence.gov.au

I hope this information is useful.

Barry Morgan



AT THE RAP: Peter Commerford, Barrie Taylor, Roger Lambert (cataract surgery). Also, best wishes to Lorraine Postle, who has had a period in hospital with serious illness. Look after her, Max! We send our best wishes to our mates who are not as well as they would like to be.

MAX AITKEN – MY STORY - Vietnam 1969-1970.

After the garbage of Puckapunyal and finding out that a one striper was God, who mostly lacked brains and was happy without them, I settled into being conscripted. Two years in the bloody army. Not being able to plan anything ahead, all my ambitions had to stop, this was jail. After a few moves finally Canungra. This was getting serious. Moved to Ingleburn, Sydney ready to go. Spending nights with a baseball bat, trying to catch the phantom basher who apparently terrorized the officer's mess. Terribly cold nights until we found the drying room which was beautiful and warm.

Flew to Singapore then left on a Caribou plane, I am travelling by myself there were no seats and no seatbelts on the plane. Where do I go, I thought to myself? "Oh, just go down the back and sit on the mail." As we cruised, the tailgate was partially open, and I could see all the pockmarks on the ground from bombing raids. There were bomb craters everywhere. Landed at Tan Son Nuit airport in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), Vietnam. It was so hot and the sweat was dripping off me. How can I live here??

Before I know it I am on the back of a truck driven to Nui Dat. No rifle. I see little dark people, some with rifles. I hope they are on our side. I was shown to my tent, then introduced to Major Ducker. A few days pass then we go out the wire on a TAOR. I am sitting quietly hiding in some ferns waiting for the enemy, knowing nothing. Is

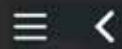
everyone the enemy??

Some oxen (bullocks) come along the track into the ambush. A very small girl probably around 8 years old was sitting on one of them tickling the animal with a small stick, she was singing. Are we supposed to shoot? I thought she is no danger, so we didn't. I was thankful everyone left her there. I hope she has had a full life.

The same day we boarded helicopters in full gear. I hop on the side no seats, no straps, no doors, sitting with my back to the engine. I have never been on a helicopter before in my life. It wobbles sideways as we lift off, leaves, sticks, rubbish, dust goes everywhere and I can't see or hear a thing. I am going to fall out! Then it noses forward – I can breathe again. As we go higher I can see lots of bush and paddocks, water, etc. but no people in sight. As the helicopter came down to drop us off we hovered 2 foot off the water in a paddy field. GET OUT!!! 6 of us jumped out of the copter. Planted!! Up to our knees in mud and waists in water. Bugger - I can't move! I have a 100-pound pack on my back. I don't know how I can get out of this. The Americans had dropped saturation bombs which were yellow and about 2 foot long. Whatever you do don't touch them as they had landed on their side and not exploded. We set up an ambush not far away and put up our hutchies. The rain came in and it absolutely pelted down. I couldn't see and hardly hear anything apart from the rain.

The next morning the rain was still torrential with very little visibility, but the water was warm. 1000 hours comes around and time to put the new fella on sentry. No one will come along in this weather. I was shown where to go and swapped over. I moved up the bank a bit under a man fern. "Jeez, where did they come from?" Four men, five men, six men, I was gone. I flew through the bush slipping in the mud, straight into a fox hole which someone had dug next to the M60 machine gun. I gave the thumbs down for enemy got the thumbs up but seeing me in water with just my head and shoulders showing, my eyes were sticking out a foot! Mick jumped into his hole beside me. Thankyou whoever dug those holes. The first man to come along (dirty old Bugger) was about twenty foot away. I thought he would have been down near the paddy fields one hundred metres away. He looked me in the eye turned his head and kept walking. More guns that way I thought. The second man walked behind him wearing a Yankee hat with an Armalite rifle about thirty seconds later. He stopped and looked back about three to four men had ganged up. They had obviously lost their scout leader who had disappeared. The fourth man sees me and points at me. Bang - he is dead. Mick beside me has his machine gun cylinder in back to front. Only has one shot. Panic. With the noise, they didn't know what was happening. Too late, four bodies. Claymore took my ears but the ground to our left is shot to bits and the cactus above us is shot to pieces. The enemy were confused and sought cover everywhere. Artillery hit a big tree close. Pieces of tree everywhere. Six more and the ground shook again and again. We were lucky for those salvos surely disheartened them. Thinking about this later I am glad the officer had coordinated everything perfectly for there were certainly a lot more enemy than we saw. After the sweep we buried seven. The rain eased and I began to calm down. The first day in the bush and this. What the bloody Hell's next? Luckily, we had no one killed.

Private Max Aitken C Coy, 5RAR.



People

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Tribute to young war hero

Remembering Paul Leslie Smith five decades on

MELANIE WHITING

ANYBODY can be a hero. That's the message the family of Paul "Leslie" Smith want to spread as they remember their much-loved brother and son on the 50th anniversary of his death.

The Lance Corporal, who grew up south of Mackay as the third of six children, was just 19 when he died from injuries after setting off a land mine during the Vietnam War.

On July 5, his family, including sisters Diane Smith and Patricia Clews, celebrated his life during a family get-together in Mackay.

"He died in 1969 and that's when man first walked on the moon," Ms Smith said.

"After we had heard about Leslie, I thought, 'it's odd that you can get to the degree of knowledge that you can send man to the moon, but we still have wars here on earth!'

"It just didn't make sense to me."

Leslie grew up on a cane farm in Ibbilbie and worked on the family farm after he finished his junior high school years.

While he always wanted to stay working on the farm, a lack of work led Leslie to find a job as a builder's labourer in Sydney.

From there, he enlisted in the Australian Army and left for the war on January 29, 1969.

Because news broadcasts were not as frequent or in-depth back in those days, Leslie's sisters were not fully aware of the risks and always assumed their brother would return home.

"We didn't know that the people of Australia hated the idea that Australians had to go to war," Mrs Clews said.



TRIBUTE: Sisters Diane Smith and Patricia Clews hold a photo and letter from their brother Paul Leslie Smith.

Photo: Melanie Whiting

“ WHEN YOU DO SOMETHING THAT IS SCARY OR DANGEROUS BECAUSE YOU NEED TO SAVE SOMEBODY AND YOU'RE AFRAID, BUT YOU DO IT, YOU'RE A HERO.

DIANE SMITH

Only a few months later, Leslie and others were conducting manoeuvres when their car got bogged in an area that had been filled with land mines.

After one was set off, Leslie was arranging the evacuation of injured people when he accidentally set off another, this time injuring himself.

Ms Smith was getting ready for a colleague's wedding the day she heard the terrible news that Leslie had succumbed to his injuries in a hospital near Saigon.

"An uncle who lived in

Mackay visited when I was living with my grandmother," she explained.

"I was just in the kitchen fussing around and didn't think anything of it and then my uncle sat down and then my grandmother came to me and told me that Leslie had been

killed. "It was just shocking, I was 17 and he hadn't turned 20 yet."

Curiously, the family received a letter written by Leslie that arrived after his death. Ms Smith said in part of the letter, Leslie stated he did not think he would be returning home.

"I don't know why he said that," she said.

"Because it was part of the letter and then he went on talking about other stuff."

Although the family has never been able to solve that mystery, they still get together regularly to remember Leslie, the fit and adventurous "friend to everybody" and "country boy" who did not return home.

"We don't dwell on (his death), but if his name comes up, we talk about it openly," Mrs Clews said.

Ms Smith said although she had moved on from her brother's

untimely death, she still tried to remember and pay tribute to Leslie.

"You can't keep grief in your heart forever because it's exhausting. But you do return to it occasionally and you sometimes wonder what would have happened to him if he came home," she said.

"Heroes can be anybody - when you do something that is scary or dangerous because you need to save somebody and you're afraid, but you do it, you're a hero."

"I think that made him a hero."

Business Subscription Offer



FROM DENNIS (Digger) NEVINS – WHEN MAN LANDED ON THE MOON

21st July 69.

We choppered into the Fire Support Base around 1000hrs by Chinook, it was later than expected. Charlie Company boys helped us with setting up as Pioneers were in the bush operating.

It's normal routine digging pits and putting up wire. The area around the base is pretty well cleared of trees but the grass is waist high and the soil is a rich red clay.

Barney Simpson, Pete Mathie went to A Company and "Robbie" Robertson and Pat Walker went to D Company, attached as dog handlers and trackers. Pat has now taken "Ceaser as "Moose" Barter has given handling away.

Running along the front of the Arty side is the remains of a Minefield the Aussies put up a few years ago, the wire is gone but the steel posts still stand, it was a large Minefield but the Nog's filtered it and took many Mines to use against Aussie troops.

*I'm surprised I made no mention of the moon landing on this day, while we were digging down our pits in that horrible wet clay someone had a small transistor radio and we were listening to the live broad-cast. Even though it was day time the moon was at an angle, I remember looking up to it and thinking back to my station days when we sat under the stars at night on the grass outside the homestead, I was just a young bloke but this one night our wonderful stockman Harry Wiseman said " You know they're talking about putting a bloke on the moon one day" to which my father replied "I can't see that happening what happens if they get a flat tyre". Our life on the station was one of flat tyres when mustering.

So looking up at that moon I remembered how we thought it could never be possible and now it was happening, I was a long way from home digging fighting pits with a little issued shovel. I understand they did get to the moon and back without getting that flat tyre. Even today I have a vivid memory of what we were doing when man walked on the moon.



Vietnam Veterans' Day 2019, in Devonport Tas. On the far left is Kevin Mulligan, and Max Aitken on the far right. Kevin commented on the aging of our personnel – evidenced by the amount of water and light beer consumed.



Vietnam Veterans Day 2019 in Port Macquarie NSW, observed by Eric and Pam Hamlin and family

THE MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR 2790020 PTE BARRY JOHN THOMPSON, GUNNING, NSW
SATURDAY 1ST FEBRUARY 2020

The planning for the service to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Thommo's death in Vietnam in February 1970 is going well. The coordinator, Ray Seymour, has given us the following update:

- The service will be held at the Gunning Cemetery at 1100 hours on Saturday 1st February 2020, followed by a Wake at the Telegraph Hotel in Gunning;
- The Australian Army will provide a Guard of Honour and a Bugler;
- Pastor Wayne Lyons of the High Street Church, Queanbeyan (a Vietnam veteran), will conduct the service;
- Our two Vietnam-era Company Commanders of C Company, Claude Ducker and David Wilkins will be attending;
- Major General Jim Molan AO, DSC (Retd) will be attending;
- The C Company 5RAR veterans attending who served with Thommo will pay a special tribute;
- Local RSLs will be represented;
- The Canberra Chapter of the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club will attend;

Unfortunately, the Gunning Motel has been booked out. Alternate accommodation may be sourced in Goulburn, Queanbeyan or Yass.

Visitor to the Battalion: "How come all the soldiers look alike?"
RSM: "Standardised training."
Visitor: "For the infantry?"
RSM: "The regimental barber!"

My pet mouse, Elvis, died. He was caught in a trap.



Half Circle was compiled and edited by Don Harrod – donharrod@bigpond.com, 0418 423 313, with help from Barry Morgan, Jim Lowry, Digger Nevins, Roger Lambert, Eric Hamlin, Roger Lambert, Kevin Mulligan, behind-the-scenes assistance from 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.**