

Half Circle



Number 166 - October 2020

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: Vince Feenstra. Now at home following spinal surgery. We send our best wishes to our mates who are not as well as they would like to be.



Social distancing in the 1960's

ARE YOUR CONTACT DETAILS UP TO DATE? As our 5RAR Association journal "Tiger Tales" is now sent to members by email where possible, it is important that the editor and Memberships Officer has your correct contact details – address, phone number and email address. If yours has not been updated, please contact Gary Townsend at garyt.5rar@gmail.com as soon as possible.

A Watery Patrol in Papua New Guinea.

By David Wilkins

So rugged, inhospitable and inaccessible is the terrain in TPNG that there are over 800 different tribal languages among a thousand separate cultural groups. The two principal, mainly spoken languages however, are Pidgin in New Guinea and Motu in Papua. One of the first requirements at PIR was to learn the Pidgin language (*'mi laik kisim save long Tok Pisin'*) in order to communicate with the Pacific Island members of the unit, without which, particularly when on patrol surrounded by soldiers not speaking English, *'mipela i nogat kaikai na mi dai pinis'* (without food I would die) and tragically fail in my command. Working constantly with my soldiers, I learnt quickly and survived.

As Platoon Commander of 9 Platoon, C Company, 1PIR, I trained my 30 men in the Port Moresby region and from Taurama Barracks led them on patrols in remote areas such as the Western District. In April 1965, C Company flew by civil aircraft (TAA) to the island of Daru on the southern coast of Papua just west of the mouth of the massive Fly River. The Fly River has its fountain in the Star Mountains and travels south for 1,000 kilometres, becoming the border with West Irian at one point and finally emptying into the Gulf of Papua where the estuary is 100 km wide. The river system there, with its enormous estuary and vast flood plains, lakes and tributaries, supports one of the richest fish, aquatic and wetland fauna systems in the Australasia and Indo-west Pacific region. It is home to approximately 120 fish species as well as turtles, crocodiles and many other amphibians and reptiles, including the fierce Taipan, the world's third-most venomous snake. This particular patrol was significant because of water - the extent of it and its different types.

From Daru, the thirty members of my platoon, plus a native policeman and SAS Sergeant Hoffman accompanying us, the latter to learn the ropes of long-range patrolling, were ferried by a single-engine Army Cessna 180 aircraft, a few soldiers at a time, to the village of Balimo, on the Aramia River. As Balimo was part leper colony, the first issue to be confronted was to convince my men that they would not catch leprosy in the village, providing they did not wrap themselves in the clothes or bedding of a leper or become too physically close. In any event, we were there for only a short while before moving on, providing hardly enough time for such personal relationships to develop.



In 1965 after flying from Daru to Balimo in TPNG's Western District, I led a patrol north-west to above the top of this map then south to the Fly River where we floated on an improvised raft to Wasua Mission, just to the west of Kaviepu. We finally trekked north back to Balimo. We had walked and floated over 320 km.

It was April, part of the wet season, which meant that much of this mainland basin area was inundated, so the only means of travel between the villages was on the water. I hired some canoes for the first phase of the patrol and, as this was mainly uncharted territory, I also used some local guides. Indeed, my map was a patchwork, with graph paper glued to those parts that were blank where not previously surveyed. The canoes were often enormous. Hollowed-out tree trunks as long as 10 metres enabled my whole platoon plus the guides to fit into just three or four. We were surrounded by hundreds of kilometres of grass swamp similar to the Australian Kakadu with thousands of birds, and wild life abounding. It was quite magnificent. With all this beauty, however, came some dangers. Not only was this crocodile country but also there were leeches, snakes, particularly the taipan and 'Black Pap', and malarial and dengue mosquitos. During one overnight stop on some dry land we erected our one-man tents or hutchies with the small mosquito net hung up inside each. When I woke the next morning after a very restful sleep, I noticed the inside surface of my green hutchie was

completely black. It was shoulder-to-shoulder mosquitoes just waiting for this juicy morsel of white flesh to emerge from the protection of his net.

To combat deadly malaria, we each swallowed a daily tablet of Paludrine but during my three years in TPNG, despite being most conscientious in taking the medication, I was still hospitalised three times, twice with malaria and once with dengue fever. One such episode in fact occurred some weeks after this patrol was completed. The symptoms included severe headache and joint and muscle pain particularly to my lower back, high delirious fever, chills, shivering, shaking and profuse sweating. It was most unpleasant.

After 130 kilometres of travel in these canoes, propelled by ad hoc paddles and rough sails improvised from our hutchies, we finally came to an area of high land, which contained no water at all. We farewelled our guides and struck out overland for the mighty Fly River some 65 kilometres to our south. Ironically now there was initially no water anywhere and the thick jungle and bamboo forests that had to be penetrated in the extreme tropical heat of the day, meant we had to be careful not to drink ourselves dry before we could replenish. Water discipline is a topic that is derided these days because modern doctrine says the body should be fed with as much water as it craves. What this theory fails to address is the situation where the only available water is two bottles per man.

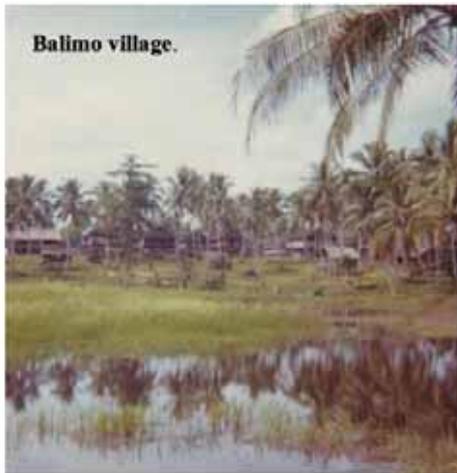
We survived, and two days later came out at the Fly River, quite exhausted from the journey including having to wade waist deep through a huge sago swamp as we neared the river. Although we were well over 160 kilometres from the estuary mouth, the river was at least a thousand metres wide in this remote location. The nearest inhabited village was about 80 kilometres downriver from our position, the riverbanks were almost impenetrable from vines, bamboo and swamps and crocodiles were rife. The only feasible way to reach our destination was on the water.... but in what? I sent out some reconnaissance patrols that provided an answer when one located the old deserted village, Muga Muga shown on my map. There was nothing there other than some coconut trees on the banks of the Fly River but, more importantly, there were also some derelict canoes. We patched the holes with mud, grass and leaves to make them waterproof again, and then constructed a bamboo platform on top, lashing them together with vines, to create one large raft.

I christened her *HMAS Muga Muga*. She was big enough and buoyant enough to take all thirty of us and our equipment, but was very unwieldy. Again, we used improvised paddles and sails to try to manoeuvre the bulk of this monstrosity, but mostly we moved with the tides of the river. As we slowly made our way downstream I closely monitored a tidal schedule I had with me. The Fly has a funnel-like estuary more than 100 kilometres wide, which means that as the river narrowed to about 5 kilometres in width, the water mass from the incoming flood tide is constricted as it moves upriver. This creates a dangerous tidal bore the full width of the river as high as 2 to 4 metres, depending on the tide. After making calculations from my tides chart, we found a side creek in which to shelter when the wall of water rushed past. As it turned out I did not really need the schedule as we could hear the roar of the tidal bore half an hour before it arrived at our location. It was a sight to behold: a huge brown broken wave, a thousand metres wide and about 2 metres high rushing upriver at 10-15 knots, pushing logs and debris in its path. In the sanctuary of the muddy side creek we waited 2 to 3 hours until the tide was about to turn. This way we could utilise the ebb tide to propel our progress downriver. Then, as the ebb became stronger, the reverse effect of the flood tidal bore occurred. The withdrawing water was now being sucked out towards the estuary, causing large whirlpools up to 2½ metres deep and 10-15 metres wide, worsening on bends of the river.

Finally, after three days and without mishap from encounters with whirlpools, a few crocodiles and just one 3-metre shark, we reached our destination at Wasua missionary station. We rested, cleaned up as best as possible and attended the Easter services there the next day. On Easter Monday we patrolled to local villages and river islands, took an airdrop resupply, and the following day set off overland for the final 50-kilometre two-day trek back to Balimo where the Cessna would collect us. The patrol of this remote region was at an end after fifteen days and 320 kilometres, of which about 210 were travelled on water.

Throughout this and my other patrols, I was able to utilise the knowledge I acquired as an instructor in 1964 on the Signals Wing of the Infantry Centre, Ingleburn. To maintain long distance communications throughout our patrols, we were equipped with high frequency (HF) radios (the A510) with specific frequency crystals and long wire aerials, strung between trees at a calculated length. Using Morse code we sent messages that were emitted as HF waves to bounce off the ionosphere at heights varying from 50 to 400 km, then down again to Earth

and the receiving station. This system permitted us to communicate the length of TPNG, clearing the highest mountains and penetrating the deepest valleys.



Balimo village.



Patrolling through the grass swamps of the Aramia River system in western TPNG in 1965. Some of these canoes, carved out of trees, were 10 metres in length.



Right: after toiling through the jungle on a hot day it was refreshing to enjoy the cool coconut water, here on the banks of the Fly River. Note the leech bites to lower leg.

Below: when we reached dry land at Ali village we staged a show parade for the local villagers, here a weapon inspection. They put on a sing-sing for us that night.

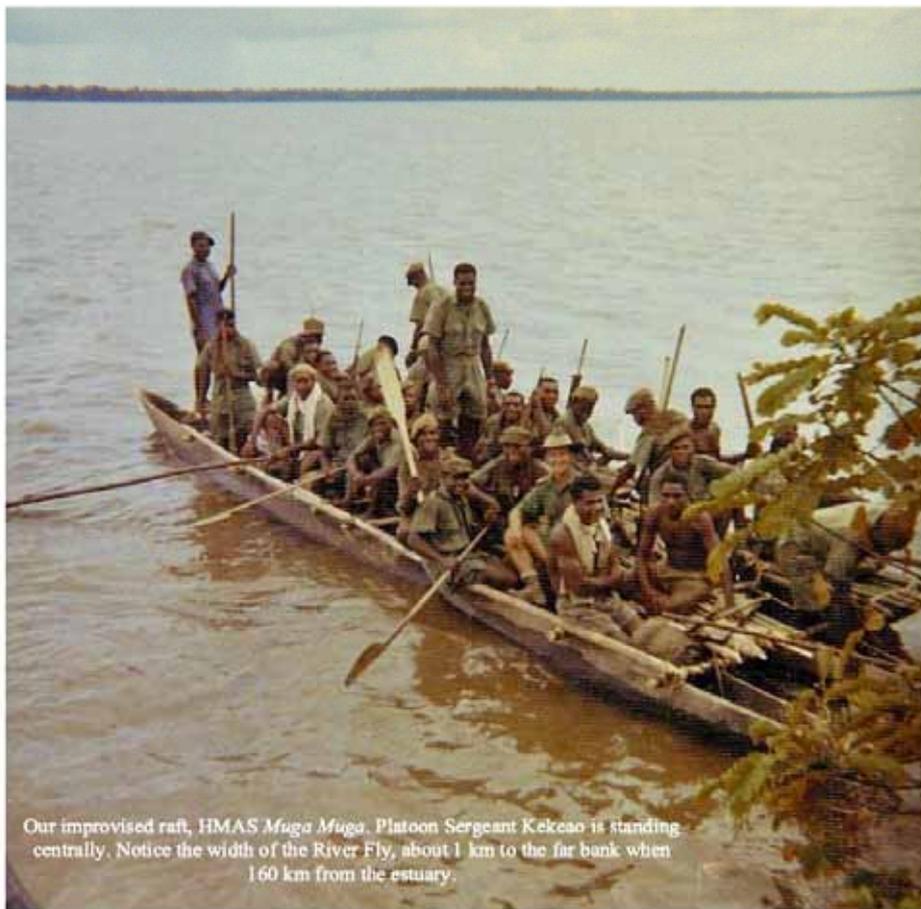




Three derelict canoes with holes in their bottoms were patched with mud and leaves to be waterproof, then bamboos poles were lashed with vines to make a raft.



Two of the deadly hazards we faced, the highly venomous aggressive Taipan and the prehistoric crocodile. A 3-metre shark was also confronted in the Fly River.



Our improvised raft, HMAS *Muga Muga*. Platoon Sergeant Kekeao is standing centrally. Notice the width of the River Fly, about 1 km to the far bank when 160 km from the estuary.



TRAVELLING ABOUT:

Geoff and Liz Storm – travelling from Barham on the NSW/Vic border and seen near Mackay in north Qld.

Bryan and Arleen Schafer, together with grandchildren, visiting Cowra, Central West NSW.

WHO STOLE CAESAR? This article was printed in Half Circle No 160:

Stolen from its position outside Edmondson Park railway station precinct The Monument of Tracker Dog Caesar reflecting the 11 Tracker Dogs who served in Vietnam. Dedicated in November 2016 & stolen in January this year.

The precinct has a number of artefacts that signify the presence of the Military in the Ingleburn Camp including Bardia Barracks where Infantry Centre Tracker Wing was initially established in 1965.



This article has an update on Caesar's alleged theft:

Below is a report from NSW Police on the finding of the statue of Tracker Dog Caesar:

A man and a woman will appear in court later this month after being charged with the alleged theft of a statue of a dog in Sydney's south-west last year.

The alleged theft happened about 2.10am on Thursday 12 December 2019, at Edmondson Park Railway Station.

The statue of the dog, known as Caesar, is celebrated as one of 11 local tracker dogs that saved the lives of their handlers during the Vietnam War.

Officers from Liverpool City Police Area Command commenced an investigation and obtained CCTV footage of a silver car which drove into the railway station car park on Croatia Avenue.

A man and a woman were seen to park the car and return a short time later.

After numerous attempts, the man managed to remove the statue and place it into the boot of the car, before driving away.

Following numerous inquiries and a media appeal, police arrested a 39-year-old Liverpool man and a 51-year-old Liverpool woman.

They were both charged with stealing and granted conditional bail to appear before Liverpool Local Court on Wednesday 30 September 2020.

The bronze statue of Caesar, worth an estimated \$40,000 has been recovered by police and is being assessed for damage.

Police would like to thank the media and the public for their assistance.

C COY 5RAR “BEFORE AND AFTER PHOTOS”. David Wilkins is drawing to a close on the photo project. **Receipt and inclusion of your photos will cease on 7th October.** If you have not sent your photos to David by that date, you will miss out on being a part of C Company’s second tour of Vietnam pictorial history. **Please act NOW. No more chances!**



Half Circle was compiled and edited by Don Harrod – donharrod@bigpond.com, 0418 423 313, with help from David Wilkins, Kiwi Hill, Wally Barnett (Trackers), 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.**