



**14900 CPL. GILBERT, George Geoffery**

**17 October 1939 ~ 9 March 1969**

**National Vietnam War Remembrance Day Ceremony**

**City Hall  
King Street Newcastle**

**Saturday 16 August 2014**

**Profile of Corporal George Gilbert 5RAR**

**Researched and read by James Mackay OAM  
Honorary historian  
Newcastle & Hunter Region Vietnam Veterans Inc**

Good afternoon

I acknowledge the advice and assistance given by members of the Gilbert Family and veterans of 1 and 5 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment Associations from every state in Australia including Brigadier (retired) Colin Khan AM DSO, in the preparation of this profile about CPL George Gilbert.

I also acknowledge the Australian War Memorial Canberra and various publications and productions about Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War.

This address is a condensed version of the profile that I have written about George Gilbert. The complete document will be archived by the Newcastle and Hunter Vietnam Veterans INC for future reference.

The names of the 19 men from the Hunter Region who served and lost their lives during the Vietnam War appear on this war memorial. It has become a tradition to tell the story of one these men in Remembrance during this service.

This year we remember the life of **Corporal George Geoffrey Gilbert** who was a member of Five Battalion Royal Australian Regiment of the Royal Australian Infantry Corps who was 29 years old when he died.

George was born to parents Victor, a furnace stoker who worked at the former Zaara Street Power Station which was located near the eastern end of The Foreshore Park Newcastle East, and Evelyn on 17 October 1939.

George had five elder brothers and later, a sister. The family at the time of George's birth lived at 69 Darby Street Cooks Hill where they remained until around the time of Victor Gilbert's retirement due to medical problems, possibly associated with his working environment at the power station.

Due to difficult financial circumstances the family moved to an area near the present day Jesmond roundabout that was known as Hollywood, basically a camp on Crown land which had sprung up as a result of the Depression.

Many camps such as Hollywood existed throughout the Newcastle Region and Australia where people desperate for somewhere to live built makeshift huts and houses. There was an extreme lack of resources such as electricity, water and sanitation.

Hardship for many families didn't end until well after the Second World War. They were unable to afford houses and were forced to continue to live in these circumstances.

After finishing high school at Jesmond George secured employment as a slaughterman at Newcastle Abattoir which was located on the site of the suburb of Warabrook.

He owned a horse which he kept in a yard alongside the house at Hollywood and would ride it to work. The horse must have enjoyed its role because it would thump the side of the house to wake George in time to go to work.

In 1958 George was called up for National Service. He was sent to 11 National Service Battalion Wacol Queensland for recruit training.

He enjoyed army life so much that he decided to enlist in the Regular Army. During recruit training at Wacol, George met future wife Dorothy at a dance in Brisbane.

George undertook Corps training then received a posting to 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Australian Regiment based at Enoggera outside Brisbane.

George and Dorothy married in Brisbane in December 1958.

The Gilberts celebrated the birth of first son Robert, in 1959.

During the Malaya Emergency which began in 1955 the Australian Army had committed a Battalion in rotation for deployment to Malaya to help prevent communist terrorists from destabilising and overthrowing the Government of Malaya.

It was the turn of 1 RAR to be deployed there in 1959.

1 RAR began operations in the Thai/Malay border area in dense jungle and mountainous terrain searching for the elusive Communist terrorists.

The situation in Malaya had stabilised sufficiently by the time of 1 RAR's deployment to enable families to safely join their servicemen husbands and fathers in country.

Dot with baby Robert moved to Malaya and were quartered in Penang.

Second son Donald was born in Malaya in 1961.

1 RAR completed its deployment in Malaya later that year. The Battalion returned to base at Holsworthy near the Sydney suburb of Liverpool. The families moved into married quarters nearby.

Michael von Berg who later became an officer, was a digger in 1RAR at Holsworthy and that's where he first met George at rugby training.

Mike takes up his story.

“In those days the battalion was a Pentropic Battalion some 1500 strong which had the luxury of providing 2 x teams in the local army rugby competition.

“The two teams were not called the 1st or 2nd XV because they played in the same comp, therefore of equal capability and talent.

“The teams however did have a bit of a demarcation line where the Dark Blues were mostly officers with some hand-picked other ranks and the Light Blues were mostly all other ranks. “I had previously been selected for the Army Inter Service team so I was in the "officers" team and Georgie as we always called him was in the Light Blue team as a hooker.

“Small in stature and size for a hooker you always knew when Georgie was playing because he used to make an absolute nuisance of himself whilst playing against you because he didn't take a backward step and had a heart as big as himself.

“Both of these First Battalion sides played in the grand final in 1964 and it made the Battle of Waterloo look like a stroll in the sun. “It was full on; diggers punching officers in the tight; officers punching diggers if they could catch them and little Georgie copping and giving his fair share but still standing.

“The Dark Blues won the Premiership but after the match all participants went up to the ASCO Canteen for drinks and Georgie was right in the midst of it, no hard feelings and embracing in the spirit of rugby and soldiering”.

5 Battalion was raised on 1 March 1965 as part of the Australian Government's increasing commitment to the war in South Vietnam. The Battalion was also based at Holsworthy.

George Gilbert was transferred to 5 RAR as one of its founding members.

The Battalion was to be made up of regular soldiers and conscripts and to serve in South Vietnam.

In March 1966 the battalion after completing its final training exercises deployed by chartered aircraft or in HMAS SYDNEY to South Vietnam.

This included the first National servicemen to serve overseas.

George had been promoted to section commander (corporal), prior to departing Australia.

The Battalion re-assembled in Vung Tau then with US forces and 1 RAR conducted their first operation, Operation Hardihood, clearing a zone surrounding the site at Nui Dat in preparation for establishing the First Australian Task Force Base.

During the operation, Private Errol Noack, a 21-year-old National Serviceman and a member of George Gilbert's section was accidentally killed by 'friendly fire'. Noack had been in Vietnam for twelve days and was the first Nasho to be killed in SVN.

Sometime afterwards three soldiers including George and John Smee were placed on a charge by the RSM for failure to take malaria precautions (sleeves rolled up) and for using the battalion mail tent for the purposes of gambling.

This was the only tent permitted to have lighting and was equipped with blackout curtains and a Tilley lamp. It was decided that Lance Corporal Smee would accept the charge and pay a fine to avoid demotion to private.

George and the other soldier, both corporals, decided to challenge the charge because the RSM who made the bust had been on his way to the ablution block for a late shower and was only wearing a towel and thongs at the time. The hearing did not go well; George lost a stripe and was fined. However his rank was quickly restored because he was a valuable section commander.

The Battalion completed its tour of duty in May 1967 and returned to Australia. George returned to his young family who were living in married quarters at Derna Road Holsworthy and continued training with 5RAR.

John Smee remembers George and Dot having an immaculate front garden but the back yard where the boys plus a dog played, resembled a war zone.

George was a good father and cook who used to make meat pies for afternoon tea when the boys returned home from school.

Much of his service time was spent at the Army Jungle Training Centre at Canungra in Southern Queensland.

In 1968 5 RAR under command of Lieutenant Colonel Colin Khan began workup in preparation for its second tour to SVN

Moose Dunlop recalls:

“As a young officer prior to 5 RAR’s 2nd tour I spent about six weeks with George as part of a two man team on the battalion cadre at Canungra.

“Most of our time was spent in the rain forest at Levers Plateau in the border ranges between NSW and QLD somewhere near Casino, I think.

“During that time I got to know him well as a man and a soldier.

“Everything about George was professional.

“He had a good sense of humour and was good company.

“Nothing phased him, he saw a silver lining in all circumstances.

“He was a larrikin but controlled. By that I mean he liked to play the fool and supported practical jokes but always without a victim.

“He respected rank but was prepared to give his opinion which was always worth listening to.

“I had genuine affection and respect for him”.

The Battalion completed the pre-deployment course at Canungra then exercises at Shoalwater Bay also in Queensland.

In December 1968 George and Dot Gilbert with the two boys travelled to Mornington Victoria to spend Christmas with his brother John (also a regular soldier) and family.

John was a member of the Mornington Apex Club where George became an honorary member, assisting the club to cut and sell Christmas trees as a fundraiser. He was well accepted by all the other members. Perhaps ironically, upon learning of George’s death approximately 8 weeks later the Apex Club hosted a special evening to raise funds to help payout his debts.

As with the first tour George, a member of the advance party, was transported by chartered aircraft from Sydney to Saigon, arriving at Nui Dat on 28 January 1969.

The Battalion took over from 1 RAR on 14 February.

Five RAR was allocated the same lines including the boozier as constructed and occupied by the Battalion on its first tour.

Ten Platoon D Company however was allocated lines on Nui Dat Hill also known as SAS Hill which they shared with the SAS and a radio comms unit.

After being in country for two weeks on 2 March 5 RAR began its shakedown operation known as Quintus Thrust 1 and 2.

The area of operation was just west of Nui Dat and the mission was to prevent enemy forces from moving towards the strategically important provincial capital, Baria. Over the ensuing eight days the Battalion conducted many sweeps clearing the area of enemy then consolidating into an assembly area ready for the start of phase two of the operation.

Quintus Thrust Phase Two's mission was to conduct a cordon and search of the village of Phuoc Hoa Long which was known to be hostile.

Just after midnight the operation began.

Both C and D Companies were to cordon the village in the darkness.

The search was to be conducted by A and B Companies at first light.

D Company crossed paddy fields and through bamboo to the perimeter of the village to set the cordon.

10 Platoon followed a high barbed wire fence for a distance then not realising they were bordering a minefield, Platoon Commander 2LT Brian Walker cut the barbed wire and passed through, followed by other soldiers including PTE John Mitchell. The party penetrated the minefield to within 5-6 metres of the fence on village side when a weapon was heard to cock. Walker assumed the kneeling position and fired into the village.

In the return fire Walker was severely wounded. His last words were 'I'm hit Mitch', before falling back onto a mine which exploded.

PTE Mitchell and other soldiers were also wounded. Mitchell managed to crawl back to the hole in the fence where he was found by Sgt Bernie Smith and CPL George Gilbert.

Mitchell told the SGT Smith and CPL Gilbert what had happened. They gave first aid to PTE Mitchell. The two men then passed through the fence into the minefield in an effort to assist the wounded. Shortly afterwards a mine exploded killing Smith and Gilbert.

In a matter of minutes 10 Platoon D Company 5 RAR lost its commander, sergeant and a section commander. Many of its soldiers were wounded.

I will read an extract of a message received from George Gilbert's Commanding Officer 5 RAR Vietnam 1969-70 Brigadier (Retired) Colin Khan AM DSO.

"Some men walk through life but leave no footprint – but not George Gilbert, for he was an infantry soldier, one of those men who in war, walk out front.

"He will be remembered within the Regiment and especially the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion as a highly experienced soldier and a section commander who led by example and was respected by his men".

"In this year of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of world War One, it is appropriate to read the comments made in the 5 RAR after action report on the operation in which George Gilbert was killed. It read: "But the success of the operation was not without the loss of three fine men who paid the supreme sacrifice.

"Even at the early stage of our tour it is obvious that the modern soldier of 5 RAR was the same man who fought on the cliffs of Gallipoli, the deserts of North Africa and jungles of New Guinea.

"Corporal George Gilbert was one of those fine young men". Unquote.

George Gilbert's body was returned to his family. He is buried in the Church of England section at the Liverpool New General Cemetery.

Lest We Forget.

(END)

Acknowledgements (errors and omissions accepted):

Mrs Dorothy Gilbert – widow of George Gilbert

John Gilbert - brother

Neville Gilbert - brother

Pam Warner – sister

Dave Newberry ex 1RAR - Malaya

George Mansfield ex 1RAR – Malaya

Les Hankin ex 1RAR

Ray Payne ex 1RAR

John O’Callaghan ex 5RAR – first tour

Robert Kearney ex 5RAR – first tour

Michael von Berg MC ex 1RAR & 5RAR – first tour

John Smee ex 5RAR – first & second tours

Ken Davis ex 5RAR first & second tours

John Mitchell ex 5RAR – second tour

Tony Speelman ex 5RAR – second tour

Graeme Johnson ex 5RAR – second tour

Phil Winney ex 5RAR – second tour

Roland Piercey ex 5RAR – second tour

Don Harrod ex 5RAR – second tour

Kevin Trent ex 3RAR/9RAR

1RAR Association

- President Mike Waldron ex 1RAR/5RAR

- Secretary Mike Lane ex 1RAR

5RAR Association

– President Colonel (retired) Roger Wainwright ex 5RAR first tour

Derrill de Heer Adjunct Associate Lecturer UNSW - Australian Defence Force Academy

National Serviceman’s Association of Australia

- Allen Callaghan, historian

Australian War Memorial Canberra

Lieutenant Colonel (retired) "Moose" Dunlop OAM – ex 5RAR - second tour  
Brigadier (retired) Colin Khan AM DSO – Commanding Officer 5RAR 1969 – 70  
Stephen Finney OAM Newcastle & Hunter Region Vietnam Veterans INC  
"The Year of the Tigers" - The second tour of the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion The Royal Australian  
Regiment in South Vietnam 1969-70. Published 1987 by John BurrIDGE Military Antiques  
Western Australia