

## **Interviews with War Dog Operatives**

Series 1, Profile 9 – South Vietnam 1965-72

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### **2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Leo Van De Kamp - Royal Australian Infantry**

Dateline for this profile is 19 March 2010.

Images as acknowledged

#### **Background**

2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant (2LT) Leo Van De Kamp was born in the village of Elsendorp in Holland in 1944, the son of nine children, he migrated with his family to Australia in 1956. He completed his primary school in Bridgewater in South Australia (SA) – including learning to speak English – and completed his secondary schooling at Mount Barker SA. At the age of sixteen, Leo left school and started work as a farm labourer in the Adelaide Hills. He found this to be too boring and on 21 June 1961, Leo joined the Australian Regular Army (ARA). He was seventeen. He attended his recruit training at the 1<sup>st</sup> Recruit Training Battalion at Kapooka and on graduation was allocated to the Royal Australian Infantry. Leo attended his Initial Employment Training (in those days called “Corps Training”) at the Infantry Centre at Ingleburn in NSW. On graduation he was posted to The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of The Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR) as a rifleman at the rank of Private (PTE).

Leo remained in 1 RAR at Holsworthy in NSW for four years. However, he did manage to attract some unwanted attention when he and a mate went absent without leave (AWOL) for seven days. His Commanding Officer (CO) Colonel “Sandy” Pearson awarded a punishment of seven days confined to barracks (CB) and four Pounds fine. A punishment more than that would have left a permanent mark on his personal documents – but – as his CO informed him, that if he “kept his nose clean for two years”, the offence would be wiped from his record. He did, and he was promoted to Lance Corporal (LCPL) in 1964. Better still, in 1965, he applied for officer training at the Officer Cadet School (OCS) at Portsea in Victoria. While he waited for the outcome of his application for the OCS course, 1 RAR (Pentropic with about 1,500 all ranks) was divided in half and became a Tropical Warfare Battalion in readiness for the upcoming Vietnam War. 750 ex-1 RAR members formed 5 RAR at Holsworthy in March 1965 and Leo was one of the founding members. 5 RAR became known as the “Tiger” Battalion.

Then in May 1965, Leo was accepted for officer training and started his course at OCS in July of that year. This was to be the toughest course Leo ever accomplished in his career both from a physical and intellectual point of view. Leo’s class at OCS started with 104 students but in June 1966, graduated about 60 of them. Leo graduated at the rank of 2 LT and was posted to 2 RAR at Enoggera in Queensland (Qld). On arrival, Leo was allocated as the Platoon Commander of the Anti-Tank Platoon (ATK PL) in Support Company (SPT COY). However, because there was very little call for anti-tank warfare in Vietnam, the ATK PL was dual purposed as the Tracking Platoon. In 1965, a Tracker Wing was established at the Infantry Centre under Warrant Officer Class 2 (WO2) “Blue” Carter and Captain Barry French, and in late 1966, Leo was sent to the Tracker Wing at the

Infantry Centre to undertake tracking training. This was called the “Tracking Team Commanders Course”. It was a two week course based on the experiences taken from the Malayan Emergency and had a strong British Army influence in the course content and delivery. This was followed by a “Visual Tracking Course” and about half of Leo’s platoon were trained in visual tracking (VT) and acting as “coverman” to protect the VT and dog handlers. Tracker Wing ran three courses at that time which included: tracker team commander, VT, tracker dog and tracker team. In March/April 1967, Leo took his whole tracker team, which included two dog teams, to the Infantry Centre and completed a tracker team course in readiness for deployment to South Vietnam. The two dog teams comprising PTE Peter Haran and his dog Caesar, and PTE Denis Ferguson and his dog Marcus, who were at that time still part of the Tracking Wing, were fully integrated into the platoon during this course.

### **South Vietnam**

At the end of the tracker team course, Leo’s tracking team, including the dogs, returned to 2 RAR at Enoggera. The two dog teams were deployed by RAAF C130 aircraft to Vietnam with the 2 RAR advance party. The remainder of Leo’s platoon were transported to Vietnam aboard the HMAS Sydney on 30 May 1967, from Brisbane. Ten days later the battalion arrived at Vung Tau and was moved to the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Task Force (1 ATF) base at Nui Dat by CH-47 Chinook helicopters. They moved into the SPT COY lines and were reunited with the two dog teams. 2 RAR relieved 6 RAR. As 6 RAR did not have dogs during their tour of duty, two dog kennels and runs were constructed in the 2 RAR lines by the Engineers of the 1<sup>st</sup> FD SQN GP RAE. The 2 RAR advance party took over these dog kennels. The ATK/Tracker PL was ready to go to war.

However, there was one glaring omission from the peacetime training of the trackers with the remainder of the battalion. They had never trained the trackers with the rifle companies on exercises in Australia. It was to be a steep “learning curve” for all concerned. In Leo’s words: “I had the unenviable job of convincing the company commanders to use the trackers in the field. But it was problematic. After every contact, the infantry sections would scour the immediate area securing it against any hidden enemy soldiers or abandoned enemy weapons and equipment. This seriously contaminated the “sign” used by the trackers to successfully commence a rapid follow-up of fleeing enemy soldiers. So our employment in the early days of 2 RAR’s tour of duty had to be carefully managed and this caused a few problems with the rifle platoons”.

He continues: “Ironically, it took a 2 RAR tracker team supporting American forces to convince the Australian commanders that the trackers and their dogs were a valuable asset. The tracker team, including Peter Haran and Caesar, supported the US Army 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Cavalry Regiment (11 ACR) and were very successful in following up the enemy after a contact. They travelled for several kilometres through a variety of jungle conditions and then Caesar indicated the presence of enemy soldiers to their immediate front. The Americans attacked and it was a successful operation. News of this success swept through the Australian units like wildfire. The trackers life now turned full cycle

and they were called out on numerous occasions for tracking duties in support of 2 RAR operations”.

The excitement was in the bush. But Leo, as the platoon commander found himself coordinating the tracking support from a Command Post in Nui Dat. This was not what he wanted – he preferred to be in the bush with the diggers. So, he requested a transfer from trackers to a rifle platoon so that he could fulfil his desire to lead diggers at the forward edge of the battle. In October 1967, Leo was transferred to D COY as a rifle platoon commander. This did not end his contact with the trackers. In November 1967, Leo’s platoon had a major contact with the enemy in the “Long Green” area of Phouc Tuy Province (the 1 ATF area of operations), and Leo called in a tracker team to follow up a group of enemy who were trying to escape away from the site of the contact. The dog followed the enemy trail but Leo was unable to engage the enemy as they had crossed the Song Rai River which was outside the range of Artillery from the Horseshoe feature and accordingly, he was not given clearance to follow on.

Following this contact, Leo’s platoon executed a successful ambush the following day and bagged a Viet Cong (VC) officer who was leading a group of carriers taking rice to VC units in the Long Hai Hills.

Leo was frustrated by some of the attitude shown by some commanders about the value of tracking teams in the Vietnam War. He believes that the success of tracker teams could have been more pronounced had there been a better understanding of their employment. Not surprising given that the trackers of 2 RAR were never “written into” that unit’s exercise instructions during pre-Vietnam deployment training.

Leo was the Platoon Commander when PTE Peter Haran had an accidental discharge in his tent with his rifle and narrowly missed shooting his mate, PTE Denis Ferguson. Leo heard the shot fired and braced for bad news when one of his Corporals told him that Peter had been charged, but nobody had been hit. A bullet hole through a table and the tent was cool relief for Leo compared to what might have otherwise been the case.

Another task for the ATK/Tracker PL was to dig their 106mm Recoilless Rifles into pits around the perimeter, in coordination with 7 RAR, to add depth to the defence of the Task Force. Thankfully, they were never called on to fire their anti-personnel rounds.

### **Return to Australia (RTA) and the Tracking Wing**

In January 1968, Leo RTA on a posting as Officer Commanding (OC) Tracker Wing at the Infantry Centre at Ingleburn. WO2 Blue Carter was still in the Tracking Wing when Leo officially took over as OC in March 1968, but Blue was posted soon after and he was replaced by WO2 Mick Parkes. Leo set about making some changes to the training content so that it included a greater emphasis on the Vietnam requirement compared to the Malayan Emergency style of training. Leo remained at the Tracker Wing for two years during which time, in July 1969, he was promoted to Lieutenant (LT). However

this rank did not last long and shortly after, Leo was promoted to Captain. This was in line with the rank of the other OCs of the Wings in the Infantry Centre at that time.

The tracking discipline did not enjoy wide spread support from some of the infantry community and to get things done required an ongoing process of “fighting the system”. The kennel area was improved during Leo’s time there and he also acquired much experience in tracker dog training techniques. However, Leo’s staff were producing excellent results and he was determined to represent them as well as he could do, even if that meant some “exchanges” with officers who were more senior to him.

Life was busy in the Tracking Wing. There was an ongoing process of selecting volunteer dog handlers from the graduating Corps Training courses as well as the acquisition of suitable dogs to undertake tracking training. The training of dogs and their handlers was a long and difficult task with a significant number of both dogs and handlers failing to meet the mark. There were numerous courses for tracker platoon commanders, visual trackers, tracker dogs, and tracker teams. Leo had oversight for the training of the RAR battalions tracking capabilities, and he saw quite a number of these personnel pass through his Wing on their way to the war in South Vietnam.

### **After Tracker Career**

In March 1970, Leo was posted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Pacific Islands Regiment (1 PIR) based at Taurama Barracks near Port Moresby in Papua/New Guinea (PNG). He was second in command (2IC) of SPT COY. However, the COY Commander returned to Australia and Leo became the acting COY COMD for almost five months. In July 1970, Leo commanded a company level PIR patrol in the Western Districts of Papua into the very rugged Mullins Range mountain country. But Leo could not speak Pidgin English at that time and all his troops were predominantly Pidgin speaking Pacific Islanders (PI). The patrol lasted for seven weeks and by the time he returned to Port Moresby at the end of the patrol, Leo was a fluent Pidgin speaker. During the patrol, rations were delivered by Australian Army Aviation Nomad aircraft every seven days. However, these were placed in sand bags and stuffed with kunai grass to try to protect them from the impact when they hit the Drop Zone (DZ). Many rations did not survive the ordeal and so the rations were supplemented with whatever the PI soldiers could buy from local villagers or trap/eat in the jungle (bush tucker). The Army Aviation pilots were also a great boon to give the commanders on the ground a grid reference as to where they *actually* were (not necessarily where they *thought* they were). Leo then went on to an infantry company, the Adjutant and Intelligence Officer of 1 PIR.

In March 1972, Leo RTA to become the Adjutant of the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal South Australian Regiment (10 RSAR) based in Adelaide. 10 RASR soldiers are Army Reservists and Leo was very impressed with the dedication and, at times, unorthodox problem-solving skills of a citizen soldier.

In March 1974, Leo was posted as a Captain Company Commander of B COY, 1 RAR based in Townsville. During his tour with 1 RAR his company was selected to undertake a five week Pacific Bond exercise in Hawaii in 1975.

In March 1976, Leo was promoted to the rank of Major and in April 1976, Leo returned to PNG as the Senior Instructor in the Officer Training Wing (OTW) located at Goldie River, outside Port Moresby. OTW conducted courses in the disciplines of Tactics and Administration for PNG officers, to qualify them for promotion to the ranks of Captain and Major. Leo worked there for six months. In early 1977, the OTW was relocated from Goldie River to the Joint Services College of PNG, based at Igam Barracks near Lae. Leo was appointed as Chief Instructor of OTW at the time of relocation. Late in 1978, Leo RTA from Lae after two and a half years on his second posting to PNG.

On RTA, Leo was posted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Training Group at Wacol near Brisbane and rekindled his admiration for the work ethic demonstrated by Army Reservists. This occurred at a time when the Army Reserve was undergoing huge expansions, and the accommodation for recruit training was almost always under canvas.

In December 1980, Leo was posted to the District Support Unit (DSU) in Adelaide. The DSU was staffed by both ADF personnel and civilians and Leo learned to command the soldiers, but manage the civilians. He enjoyed this posting for three years because of the diversity of requirements and leadership and management styles he needed to make the DSU work. The DSU had responsibility for the management and administration of Defence assets including field firing ranges and exercise areas.

In 1983, Leo was posted to Canberra, and worked in the “Overseas Establishment Section” which was a joint military/senior public servant operated organisation. Leo learned the ways of the public service, the government financial control and allocation process and the political influences which, at times, tend to permeate the Defence system.

In 1986, Leo had served for twenty-five years in the Australian Regular Army and decided to try his hand at civilian life. Living in Canberra, the primary function of the city is the public service and Leo accepted a job in the same area in which he had worked as an Army Major. He applied for jobs elsewhere in the public service and achieved personal success in the eleven years he served. He was promoted from Clerk Admin Class 1 (equiv PTE) through the ranks to Senior Officer Grade C (equiv LT/Colonel).

1997 saw Leo retire from the public service and relocate to Queensland. In 2001, Leo and Bob Bettany started the Australian Army Trackers and War Dogs Association. The first reunion was organised on the Sunshine Coast in March of 2002. Major General Peter Phillips AO MC attended as Guest of Honour and Leo subsequently approached him to become the Patron of the Association. General Phillips accepted and has been a very supportive Patron since that time.



2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Leo Van De Kamp and Pte Peter Haran with Caesar, at Nui Dat, South Vietnam 1967-68. Image courtesy of Peter Haran 1967.



The main gate to Bardia Barracks Ingleburn. Image courtesy of Bob Murray 2010.



A course at the Tracking Wing circa 1968. The sign in the centre reads “War Dog Kennels”. Image courtesy of Bob Murray 2010.



The Tracking Wing in full flight with courses circa 1966-70. Image courtesy of Bob Murray 2010.