

Interviews with War Dog Operatives

Series 1, Profile 11 – Malaya 1955-60

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Corporal Arthur Eather - Royal Australian Infantry

Dateline for this profile is 01 May 2010, as described by Janice Eather, Peter Haran and Norm Cameron.

Background

Corporal (CPL) Arthur Eather was born in Narrabri in NSW in 1940. Arthur was the middle son of three boys. When he was seven years old, his mother died and Arthur was raised by his grand-mother. His father was a bushman and was not around a lot for Arthur as he grew up. He had a tough time of it in the bush during his formative years and did not achieve well at school. At fourteen years of age he left school and worked on rural properties. When Arthur was seventeen years old, he visited Tamworth in NSW and responded to an Army recruitment drive. But, as his education was limited, he managed to co-opt a couple of his mates in to giving him the clues for passing the Army enlistment criteria for education. It took him three efforts to pass the recruitment criteria, but in 1958, he managed to enlist in the Regular Army Strategic Reserve (RASR), which in those days, was a special three year enlistment in the Australian Regular Army (ARA). After nine months, on 26 May 1959, Arthur was able to convert his RASR service to a six year ARA enlistment. He attended his recruit training at the 1st Recruit Training Battalion at Kapooka in NSW and on graduation, was allocated to the Royal Australian Infantry. He attended his basic infantry training at the Infantry Centre in Bardia Barracks at Ingleburn in NSW and then on to the 1st Battalion of The Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR) at Enoggera in Queensland.

Arthur was a rifleman with C Company (C COY) 1 RAR when in September 1959, 1 RAR embarked for a tour of duty in Malaya aboard the MV Flaminia.

Malaya

1 RAR disembarked from MV Flaminia in Penang and moved overland to their patrol bases in northern Malaya. Each company had its own patrol base located near a town in northern Malaya. Shortly after arrival in the C COY patrol base, a call for volunteers to become trained as trackers saw Arthur step forward for this training. In early 1960, he was sent to the British Army Battle School at Kota Tinggi in the southern state of Johore (next to Singapore). During this training Arthur was teamed up with three infantry patrol scout dogs named Wince, Rolfe and Thrush. The training was delivered by the British Army and the Australian diggers on that course were held in readiness for callout in support of 1 RAR at short notice by helicopter. These soldiers were now part of Support Company (SPT COY) 1 RAR. One of Arthur's pleasures was to exercise up to three dogs at a time next to the Kota Tinggi airstrip during the early hours of the morning.

The tracker training brought Arthur in to contact with indigenous Iban natives. These were very short people hired by the British Army for their tracking capabilities but they were exceptionally strong for their size, were incredible trackers and could fight like demons when called on to do so. Arthur liked these guys and got on well with them. There were deployments into the jungle which took them many times onto the Malay/Thai border where the Australian and Iban trackers would operate in support of Australian patrols.

In late November 1961, 1 RAR returned to Australia (RTA) aboard MV Flaminia, and arrived at Sydney Harbour. The unit was stationed at Holsworthy in NSW.

Tracker Wing at Ingleburn

Arthur was in SPT COY in the Assault Pioneer Platoon because on RTA, there was no tracker element in 1 RAR. However, he developed stomach ulcers and after treatment at the Concord Repatriation Hospital in Sydney, he was declared as unfit for combat duty. This meant a posting out of 1 RAR and he was sent to the Transport Platoon of the Infantry Centre at Ingleburn and promoted to Lance Corporal. In 1966, he was approached by Lieutenant (LT) Barry French and Warrant Officer 2 (WO2) "Blue" Carter to bring his Malaya tracker skills into a new wing being formed at the Infantry Centre called "The Tracking Wing". He accepted as an instructor and was promoted to CPL.

In May 1966, Private (PTE) Norm Cameron arrived at the Tracking Wing and began his dog handler training under Arthur's direction. Although Barry was responsible for the overall management of the Wing and Blue trained the Visual Trackers, Arthur trained the dogs and handlers. He used his experience in Malaya as his background. When Norm arrived in the Tracking Wing he found that Arthur was training up to twenty dogs and handlers in the bush. Arthur spent many weeks on end in the training areas around Ingleburn, Holsworthy and Bulli in NSW. He was an exacting taskmaster and watched every one of his dogs and trainee dog handlers with an eagle eye. His de-briefings were delivered in a no-frills manner and he made sure that his training experiences in the bush presented his trainees with as many and varied combat situations as he could muster. After any criticism of a trainee dog handler, Arthur would listen to any explanation put forward by that trainee and discuss it until the trainee was satisfied that there was nothing more to say about his performance. His weekly meetings with Barry and Blue always focussed on positives for his diggers, but he was keenly aware that only the best would stay alive in a combat zone. Consequently, there were diggers and dogs who just were not suited for tracking work in the "two way rifle range". The failure rate for the dogs was high, with about one dog in twenty being accepted as a military working dog. His trainees regarded Arthur as a father-figure. Norm Cameron describes him as "a fair, thorough and highly regarded instructor who worked tirelessly to improve the conditions, kennels, veterinary care and equipment provided to tracker dogs and their handlers. As trainee dog handlers we could trust Arthur to look after us and give us every opportunity to improve and develop our skills and capabilities. Most of us were still teenagers, and he knew how to instruct us and prepare us for war".

PTE Peter Haran also arrived in 1966 and was under aged for posting to a combat unit. Arthur approached Peter and recruited him into the Tracking Wing. Peter spent many months under Arthur's instruction and guidance and in Peter's words: "Arthur was a friendly and social person who made you feel at ease. I thought of him as the God of all dog training. There was nothing that he didn't know about tracking with a dog. He was a veteran of tracking in Malaya and he continued to wear the British Army Olive Green jungle uniform issued to Australians in the Malayan Emergency campaign. He was always immaculate. Even after a rough night on the turps, the next morning his eyes looked like crushed Jaffas, but that did nothing to blunt the keen intellect and his sense of purpose. He could impart his knowledge to us in a firm way and knew all the answers to our questions. He was instrumental in demonstrating how to become the Master in the dog/handler team and yet maintain a total trust in the dog. He made us recognise every nuance of behaviour of each individual dog and would have us tell him whether or not the dog was on track or off chasing a wild animal or bird. He taught us everything we knew about the total welfare of our war dog – feeding, minor veterinary care, grooming, transportation, protection in the field and kennelling in a base area. He stressed dog obedience to ensure the same discipline in a dog as existed in the soldier. He was the master of the understatement. If we had a particularly difficult day and things went awry, we would 'bitch' and his response was a classical 'what do you want – an *easy* life?' He also instilled in us that we must: 'watch your dog for *any and every type of alert*. Don't just plough on, it could be a punji pit or a mine'. Those were prophetic words. They saved my life on more than one occasion in Vietnam".

Arthur was to instruct numerous diggers in the roles of tracking and dog handling prior to their posting to infantry battalions and then on to the war in Vietnam. In September 1967, despite his medical classification, Arthur convinced his Army leaders to give him a go in Vietnam.

Vietnam

In September 1967, Arthur arrived in the 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) base at Nui Dat and took up the job as an instructor in the Reinforcement Training Unit (1 ATF RTU). However, his medical condition caught up with him again and in May 1968 a medical officer ordered that he be repatriated to Australia from 1 RTU.

Return to Australia

On RTA Arthur was posted to the 2nd Recruit Training Battalion at Puckapunyal as an instructor and promoted to Sergeant (SGT). He remained there until 1970 when he was posted to the Infantry School at Singleton in NSW as an instructor. He enjoyed that posting because it was close to his and Janice's home towns in NSW. During 1972, Arthur returned to the Tracker Wing for a short duration. When the Australian commitment to the Vietnam War ended at the end of 1972, Arthur was posted into the Quartermaster Store (Q Store) at Singleton. He remained in that job until 1976 when he was posted to Papua/New Guinea.

Papua New Guinea

In November 1976, Arthur was promoted to Staff Sergeant and posted as the housing officer stationed in Port Moresby and his role was to ensure the standards for the Australian personnel were kept as high a standard as could be achieved. He enjoyed the posting but Janice found it a bit difficult with the humidity and the constant vigil required to keep her family and home secure from the rascal gangs who roamed the streets at that time. In November 1978, Arthur was posted to Canungra in Queensland.

Jungle Training Centre – Canungra

Arthur was posted to the Jungle Training Centre (JTC) at Canungra in Queensland in the Q Store at the rank of SSGT. On 27 May 1980, Arthur elected discharge and left the ARA.

Civilian Life

After leaving the ARA, Arthur and his family bought a home at Beenleigh in Queensland and secured a job at a local plumbing company delivering supplies to the construction industry. A short time later the management of the company recognised Arthur's managerial skills and promoted him to Manager. A few years later, he was successfully head hunted by a rival plumbing company and worked for them for some years – not bad for country kid with no education.

In 1988 and 1989 Arthur was President of the Vietnam Veterans Association (Logan and Albert area).

Unfortunately, in 1991 Arthur contracted severe lung cancer and was told that he had just months to live. But, Arthur lasted another sixteen years and it took the cancer to enter his brain before he succumbed to it on the 15th November 2007. He was a Trustee and took a term as the President of the Beenleigh RSL in 1990 and 1991. During this time, Arthur and Janice travelled extensively within Australia and internationally. He is survived by his wife Janice, a son and a daughter.

When Peter Haran wrote his book “Trackers” he sent a copy to Arthur with the words

“To the best dog trainer in the world. If it wasn't for you, I would not have survived to write this book”.



Private Arthur Eather, 1 RAR Malaya 1960. Image courtesy of Mrs Janice Eather 2010.



“Rifle Range” at Kuala Kangsar, Malaya 1960. PTE Arthur Eather is first on left of image. Image courtesy of Mrs Janice Eather 2010.



British Army War Dog School, Kota Tinggi Malaya, 1960. PTE Eather is third from the right (with leg bent). Image courtesy of Mrs Janice Eather 2010.



PTE Arthur Eather with infantry patrol dog Thrush. Kota Tinggi, Malaya 1960. Image courtesy of Mrs Janice Eather 2010.



Arthur Eather with his dog Collie at home in Beenleigh shortly before Arthur passed away on 15 November 2007. Image courtesy of Mrs Janice Eather 2010.