

Interviews with War Dog Operatives

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Series 1, Profile 2 – South Vietnam 1965-72

Lance Corporal Brett Charlton - Royal Australian Infantry

Dateline for this profile is 06 November 2009.

Background

Lance Corporal (LCpl) Brett Charlton calls Northampton in Western Australia his home town. After leaving school, Brett worked in the bulk grain industry until he was eighteen years of age and then, in 1966, he joined the Australian Regular Army (ARA). His father had served in the RAAF as a bomber pilot during WW II, his uncle had been a sailor in WW II and his grandfather had served in Europe as a soldier in WW I. Brett received his recruit training at the 1st Recruit Training Battalion at Kapooka in NSW and then his Initial Employment Training at the School of Infantry at Ingleburn in NSW.

As Brett was too young to be sent overseas, he was held at Ingleburn on the infantry tactics demonstration team. He found this boring and he applied to become a tracker and dog handler. He was interviewed by Captain Barry French and Warrant Officer Blue Carter and accepted on the course. He trained dogs, but many of them failed the gun shyness test. All potential tracker dogs were either donated or rescued from dog pounds.

In 1968 Brett was posted to the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR) which was in the process of moving to replace 7 RAR in South Vietnam. Brett moved to South Vietnam as a part of the 1 RAR advance group by QANTAS air via Sydney, Singapore, Saigon and then to Nui Dat – the home of the 1st Australian Task Force.

Overseas Service

On arrival at the 1 RAR location at Nui Dat, Brett was introduced to his dog, Justin. Justin's handler was tracker Private Tom Blackhurst (killed in action on his second tour of duty with the Australian Army Training Team). Justin was a Kelpie cross Labrador. Tom on handing over Justin to Brett had to totally ignore the dog so that Brett could bond with him. Brett and Justin bonded quickly which was just as well because three days after arrival in country Brett and Justin were called out for tracking duties. This occurred near the township of Hoa Long where an Australian laid ambush was triggered and there were a number of enemy trails leading away to the west, in the direction of the Long Hai Hills. Brett learned very quickly that Justin was a brilliant tracker. He had an enthusiasm for the job and picked up human scents very quickly. Particularly so, if the scent was Viet Cong (VC). However, as the Australian patrol was crossing open ground, over what had once been old rice paddies, a spotter in an aircraft saw a group of VC form a firing line to engage the exposed Australian patrol. The track was aborted before the VC managed to bring effective fire on the Australians.

The work for a tracker team was often a short notice affair. The team consisted of a tracker and his dog, a coverman (sometimes trained as a visual tracker) who was armed

with a rifle, and a support digger who was often armed with an M60 General Purpose Machine Gun (GPMG). These three diggers were often called out at night and flown into a contact area. This happened when a night ambush had been triggered and there was strong evidence that some VC soldiers had escaped the ambush but were not far away. One of the numerous slogans used by the trackers was “You lose ‘em, We find ‘em”. Next morning the tracker team would lead off to track down where the VC went.

The Battle of Fire Support Base “Coral”

On 12 May 1968, forward elements of 1 ATF flew into Fire Support Base (FSPB) Coral. The Australians were not able to fully set up and coordinate their defensive location before nightfall and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) recognised this and took advantage of it. It should be noted that the NVA were regular soldiers, not the part-time “shoot and scoot” local VC. In the early hours of 13 May 1968, the NVA attacked the Australians with overwhelming force and overran the 1 RAR Mortar Platoon and temporarily captured their six 81mm Mortars, captured the Number Six 105mm Gun/Howitzer from 102 Battery of the Royal Australian Artillery, blew up the ammunition bay of Number One Gun and put loads of pressure on every unit and sub-unit which were in the way of the NVA attacks. By next morning the scene at FSPB Coral was one of devastation, death and clear evidence that a desperate battle had just barely been saved by the Australians. Included in the battle was 161 Battery of the Royal New Zealand Artillery.

Also included in the series of battles which commenced on 13 May 1968 were two tracker dog teams. This is the story of Brett and his dog Justin. In Brett’s words: “We flew into the FSPB by helicopter and were ordered to set up next to a small dirt road. Our position had a road drain in it so myself, Justin and my coverman, John Quane, dug in and waited for orders. None came, so we waited. We were located with the HQ of 1 RAR. Then in the early hours of 13 May 1968, all hell broke loose. We heard the NVA attacking with mortars, recoilless rifles, heavy machine guns, unending rifle fire from their AK 47s, the noise of whistles, bugles, shouting and lots of guiding tracer (green) to give them their direction of attack. Our diggers answered with the full force of everything we could possibly hurl at them including support from helicopter gunships and “Spooky” DC 3 aircraft together some bombing missions from United States Air Force Phantom F4C aircraft. Huge flares turned night into day. The NVA seemed to be everywhere. They appeared to run over and passed us on their way to their own set objectives. It was a very dangerous situation to be in and we were very grateful when first light arrived and some relief came. Poor Justin hated the never ending blasting and booming but remained under my control in the fire pit. The firing of my own rifle didn’t help him much either”.

On the morning of 13 May 1968, the remainder of the Task Force arrived, mainly by road, and began to construct defensive works with a great degree of urgency. The battle field was like a scene from a surreal Hollywood set. There were numerous dead NVA soldiers lying on the ground, either singularly or in groups of dead men. Body parts and torn limbs and equipment were scattered over some areas of the battle field. There were still some NVA close to the Australian position and there needed to be a number of clearing patrols mounted to get rid of them. One NVA medium machine gun had opened

fire after dawn and this had to be dealt with quickly. A fighting patrol of Australian diggers was formed to attack the area where this machine gun was located. Brett and Justin were assigned to this patrol in case a rapid follow up was needed. The patrol approached the machine gun area using fire and movement – get up, run a few metres, get down and fire in support of your mates who were up and running forward, and then when they hit the ground, you get up and run and then go down again and repeat the process again and again and again until you overrun the enemy. Justin handled this fire and movement task with zeal. In Brett's words: "Every time I got up and ran forward, Justin was right there at heel. I would go down and immediately so too would Justin. He seemed to understand the drill, although the noise of it all was not to his liking, but he handled it with resigned acceptance that this is what I wanted, and he just did as he was told". There was a moment of repulsion that Brett has tried to erase from his memory, but it is still there. In his words: "Toward the end of the fire and movement, we were told that a United States Army Cobra gunship helicopter had the mission to fire on the NVA machine gun position, and we should go down and hold where we were until after the Cobra mission. The Cobra came and delivered an enormous amount of fire onto the NVA position. I looked at Justin and what I saw made me choke with nausea. Justin had come across a dead NVA corpse and was licking at the sticky ooze which had been blasted out of the dead soldiers head and eyes. I couldn't believe he would do that. But afterwards when I thought about it, to a dog, something dead on the ground is a free feed. Its just that the thought that it was a human being sickened me. The memory of it still does". The NVA attacked 1 ATF positions numerous times and did not succeed in their bid to destroy the Australian forces both at FSPB Coral and its neighbouring position FSPB Balmoral.

Justin really did not need a free feed. His combat rations weren't bad. Dog food looked like a hamburger patty and came in a twenty litre drum. The dogs loved them and Brett confesses that surplus dog "hamburgers" were sometimes eaten by the handler. Brett reckons that they tasted better than some of the human United States Army combat rations.

After FSPB Coral, 1 RAR returned to the 1 ATF base at Nui Dat. During the battles of FSPB Coral, Brett had been promoted to Lance Corporal (LCpl). As a break, Brett was sent to Saigon on guard duty for seven days without Justin. Justin went back to Nui Dat. On Brett's return to Nui Dat, he received a welcome he would much rather forget. Justin had been formally charged with a number of military offences including disorderly conduct by attacking a fellow canine, and of course, conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline in that Justin damaged and destroyed government property. Brett was to 'front up' on the charge with his dog Justin. The 1 RAR Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM) marched Brett and Justin into the Commanding Officer (CO), Lieutenant Colonel Phillip Bennett (later to become the Governor of Tasmania) to have the offences dealt with and the appropriate punishment handed down. Brett kissed goodbye to his still new and shiny LCpl stripe and stood before his CO shaking in his boots. The CO found the dog guilty of all the offences and committed Justin to two weeks confinement to kennels on half rations and no exercise. The 1 RAR Regimental Police made sure of this by mounting a continuous watch to make sure that Brett did not

sneak extras to Justin during the night. Brett copped a boot in the arse for having such a wayward dog, but he managed to keep his LCpl stripe. Brett had to keep the kennel clean by collecting the dog shit and washing off the concrete. But the two weeks punishment was reduced to one week because Brett and Justin were called out on a short notice deployment in support of a rifle company in the bush.

A typical short notice deployment occurred when a B Company (B Coy) ambush commanded by Major Barry French (the same French mentioned above) was triggered during the night. Brett and Justin were flown in by helicopter soon afterwards so that a follow up could be conducted at first light next morning. At first light it was apparent that the ambush had produced a number of fresh tracks and blood trails for the tracker team to follow. Justin took the scent quickly and took off as fast as he could on the scent left behind by the VC. Brett and his coverman kept up with Justin at the end of a 20 foot long leash. Justin indicated on rest areas and equipment abandoned by the VC. When the B Coy patrol came out of the jungle they had to traverse open country which had a scattering of low bushes covering it. Justin went to air scenting and continued on tracking. But they had to stop when they came into the area of another Australian patrol. Visual contact was established between both patrols and French asked them if they had seen the enemy group which had survived the previous night's ambush. They had not, but were now in on the hunt for them. Justin had indicated that a large group of VC were close by and Brett passed on the likely direction to Major French. Major French flew Brett and Justin back to Nui Dat and handed the continuing search over to the other Australian patrol. Not long after Brett arrived back his kennel area in 1 RAR, he was told that the other patrol had found the VC and a successful contact had been conducted without any Australian casualties. A job well done by the trackers, again.

At the completion of 1 RAR's tour of duty in South Vietnam in 1969, Brett had to hand Justin over to the next dog handler Private Denis Rowlands of 5 RAR. This was hard time for Brett because he had to totally ignore his four legged mate while Justin formed a new bond with Denis. During this time Brett was assigned to road convoy protection duties, mounted in Land-Rovers fitted with 106mm Recoilless Rifles, for vehicles plying between Phuoc Tuy Province and the Capital at Saigon. He then returned to Australia.

Back in Australia

Brett took his discharge from the Army in 1972, but found himself missing the mateship and action of Army life. Six months later, he re-joined the Army and went to Kapooka as an instructor and was promoted to Corporal. He was posted to 3 RAR at Woodside in South Australia as his terminal posting. Brett loved Army life, but in 1978 decided to discharge from the Army for the second time. He worked on construction plant and equipment from then until he retired. He now lives in Northampton in Western Australia.

Justin

Justin continued to serve as a tracker dog in South Vietnam until his discharge in 1970. He was retired to the loving care of a civilian banker in Saigon. It is understood that

Justin did suffer from battle noise problems which became increasingly more difficult for him to manage as time went on. After his experience at FSPB Coral, that would not come as any surprise considering that the battles at FSPB Coral were the biggest and bloodiest of all the battles fought by Australian forces during the South Vietnam War. Justin is well remembered for his energy, enthusiasm, mateship, efficiency and for saving many Australian lives.

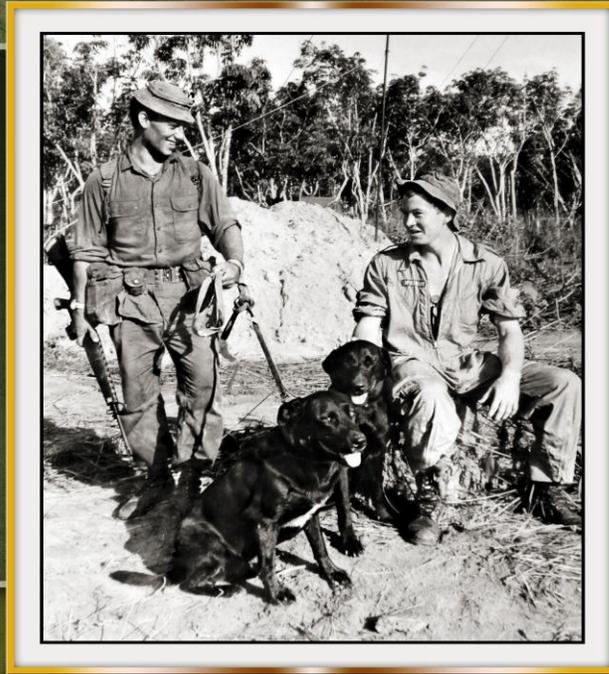


Pte Brett Charlton and Justin (closest to him) and Tiber at Fire Support Base Coral in May 1968. Photo courtesy of Brett Charlton, 2009.



Pte Brett Charlton and RAAF Door Gunner, Aircraftsman Rod McKinnon at Fire Support Base Coral, May 1968. Justin (on lead) and Tiber accompany them. Vietnam, May 1968. Photo courtesy of Brett Charlton, 2009.

BRETT (LEFT) WITH HIS DEFENCE FORCE TRACKER DOG 'JUSTIN'
 Photograph taken during 'The Battle of Coral' - the biggest unit level battle involving Australian soldiers in the Vietnam War



Combat
 Badge



Regiment
 Badge



K9 Tracker
 Badge

5411694 Cpl. *Brett Charlton*
 AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES 1966 - 1978



Australian
 Defence Medal



Australian
 Active Service Medals

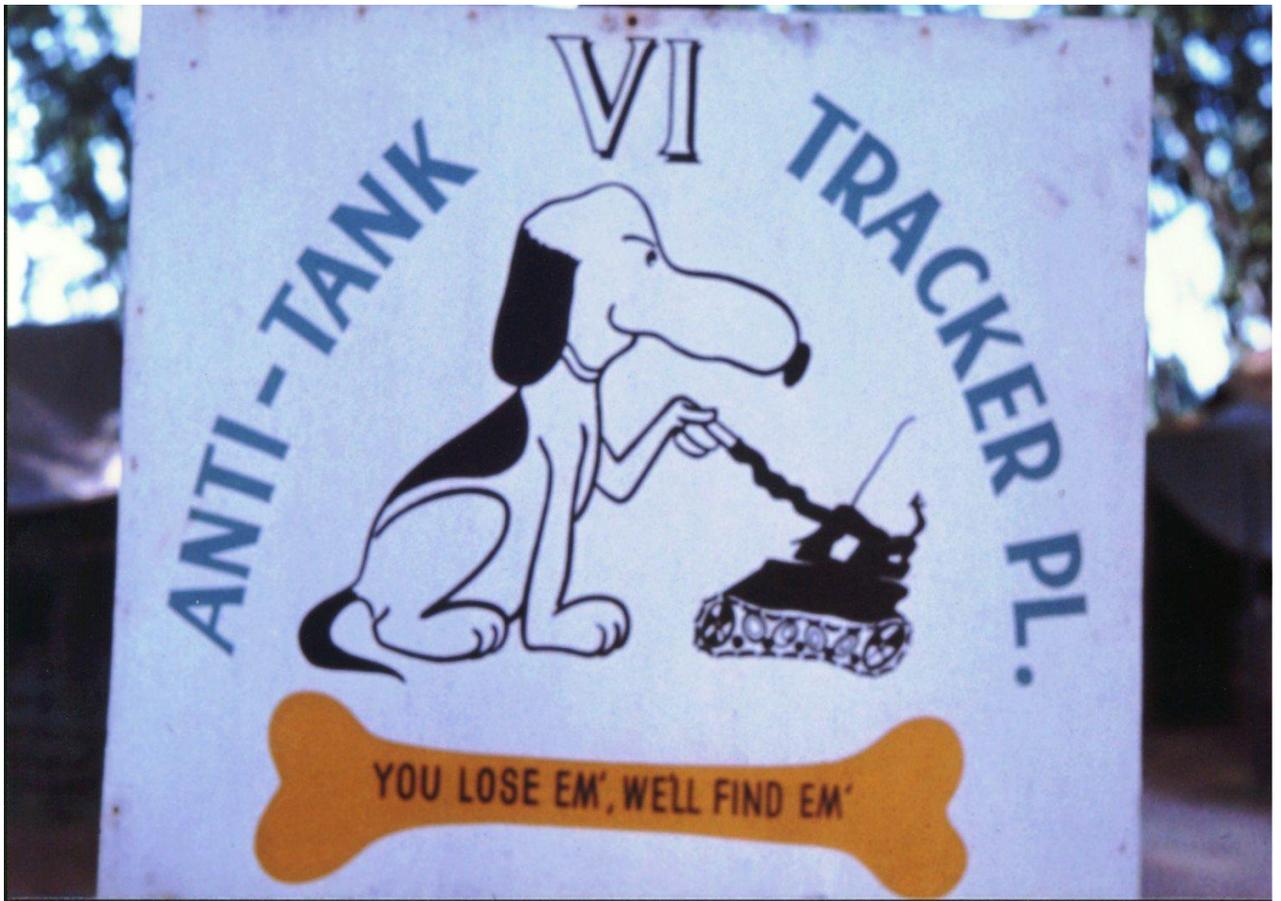


War Dog
 Operational Medal



Canine Service
 Medal

Brett's framed commemoration of his and Justin's medals together with The RAR Badge, Infantry Combat Badge and K9 badge. Image courtesy of Brett Charlton, 2009.



The sign at the dog kennels handed over from 6 RAR to 1 RAR. Vietnam 1965 to 1969.
Photo courtesy of the ADFTWDA.