

## **Interviews with War Dog Operatives**

Series 1, Profile 3 – South Vietnam 1965-72

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### **Private Bryan Meehan - Royal Australian Infantry**

Dateline for this profile is 13 November 2009.

#### **Background**

Private (Pte) Bryan Meehan was born, bred and educated in Melbourne. He graduated from the Xavier and Assumption College system and commenced work for his father when he was fifteen years of age. Bryan's father was a ship's chandler and Bryan was engaged to learn his father's vocation, but found that he wanted a life with some action, travel and adventure. His "redemption" came by way of the National Service call to arms and on 28 September 1966, Bryan was drafted into the Australian Army. He proceeded through recruit training at Puckapunyal in Victoria and then through the Infantry Centre at Singleton. On graduation from the Infantry Centre, Bryan was posted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of The Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR) at Holsworthy near Sydney.

Bryan was initially assigned to A Company (A Coy) but asked for a transfer to Support Company (Spt Coy) so that he could be near the tracker dogs. His Platoon Commander was Lieutenant (Lt) Les Tranter, who commanded the Anti-tank/Tracker Platoon. Bryan enjoyed his work and received much training in the bush at Darkes Forest near Bulli in NSW. Bryan together with Pte John Quane attended a Vietnamese language course at Woodside in South Australia. Shortly after this course, Bryan was shipped to South Vietnam on board the HMAS Sydney. He was getting all the action, travel and adventure he wanted.

#### **Overseas Service**

After leaving Sydney Harbour, HMAS Sydney travelled to Manus Island in Papua New Guinea and then on to Vung Tau in South Vietnam. The ship to shore transfer was conducted aboard an army landing ship. The diggers were boarded on the landing ship and found that they could not see over the ramp of the craft. They had no idea what they were going to see once the ramp was lowered for disembarkation. As the craft approached the shore, a person aboard the landing craft ordered "Fix Bayonets!". They did, and when the ramp went down they all charged forward with hearts in their mouths. They were met by a group of very bemused Americans who wondered what they were doing. So did Bryan and his mates.

A truck ride later, and they were in their base at Nui Dat. Forty-eight hours later, Bryan found himself on patrol in the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Task Force (1 ATF) Tactical Area Of Responsibility (TAOR). His adventure had now become deadly serious. Bryan was the coverman for a dog handler named Ray Morris with tracker dog Tiber. The coverman acts as a personal guard for the dog handler when they are on a tracking task following up on enemy sign. In March 1968, Ray developed appendicitis and was evacuated to hospital.

Bryan took responsibility for Tiber. This was an easy team-up because Ray shared the handling and care duties of Tiber with Bryan. Bryan had several experiences on tracking tasks with Tiber, so Tiber and Bryan knew each other well.

Bryan and Tiber were involved in a bad incident near the Nui Thi Vai Hills (nicknamed “The Warburtons” by the diggers). The platoon was transported by Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC) along a narrow road. Before they arrived at their designated drop-off point, one of the APCs broke down, so the Anti-tank diggers and the Trackers disembarked at this point. Their skipper, Lt Les Tranter, warned them all to be extremely careful as they went into the area. Bryan and Tiber were at the front of the platoon. Before all of the platoon had left the road, one of the diggers stepped on to an M16 Anti-personnel fragmentation mine, also known as the Jumping Jack (because it jumped about a metre out of the ground before it exploded with a deafening roar, and then scattered numerous chunks of red-hot shrapnel everywhere). One digger was killed in action (KIA) – he was Pte Peter Murray. Peter had been a new arrival into the platoon and he and Bryan had attended the same Xavier College in Melbourne earlier in their lives. Numerous other diggers were wounded in action (WIA). However, Bryan and Tiber survived the incident and Tiber did not appear to be affected by the blast. Lt Tranter took command of the situation and recovered his KIA and WIA back to the hospital at Vung Tau by DUSTOFF helicopter evacuation. “DUSTOFF” was an acronym used by the helicopter medical evacuation teams and stood for “Direct Untiring Support To Our Fighting Forces”.

In April 1968, Bryan and Tiber had a successful track on an operation in support of an infantry company. Fresh enemy footprints had been detected along a track and Bryan and Tiber sped off in pursuit of the Viet Cong (VC) soldiers. The tracker team realised how close they were getting to the VC when they crossed a river and could see water still flowing into the Ho Chi Minh sandal prints on the far bank of the river. The team pursued them, and upon turning a corner in the track, Tiber pointed, and there they were, the two VC sitting beside an old ant nest. They were taken by surprise and were quickly captured. They were taken away by helicopter for interrogation by the Intelligence staff in Saigon.

### **The Battles of Fire Support Base Coral**

The 1 RAR anti-tank platoon had been working in an area not far from where Fire Support Base (FSPB) Coral was to be established. It was a heavily grassed area to the South of the FSPB and Lt Tranter was ordered to move his platoon into the newly established FSPB before last light on 12 May 1968. They arrived about 1600 hrs and saw CH47 (Chinook) helicopters carrying 105mm Gun/Howitzers and landing them into their gun position. The 1 RAR Mortar Platoon had set itself up for the night and the Anti-tank platoon was allocated a position about thirty metres away and to one side of the mortar position. Digging in was difficult in that area and the platoon only provided a “shell scrape” (an indentation in the ground just deep enough to put your body below ground level) for themselves before darkness overtook them. After last light, clearing patrols were sent out and Bryan and his mates cleared an area next to the Mortar Platoon.

On return to the Anti-tank Platoon position, Bryan and his two mates plus Tiber took up their defensive position for the night. Around midnight, it was Bryan's turn for sentry duty and he remained alert for the approach of enemy patrols. It was about this time that the Australians realised that something was happening to their front. In Bryan's words: "We could hear the movement of a lot of enemy soldiers to the front of our positions and we suspected that they were forming up for an attack. They were forming up in a dry river bed, about eighty metres away and at that stage, were out of sight to us. At about 0100 hrs or so, there was a huge noise of bugles, enemy tracer, machine guns, RPG 7s and a lot of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars who came charging forward screaming and shouting. I needed to get back from the sentry position to my shell scrape and stood up and made a bolt for it. But, I had to run forward a little to do this and I heard one of my mates, Corporal (Cpl) Doug Dupille, yell "for Chrissakes Bryan, you're running the wrong way!". I readjusted my journey and dived into my shell scrape. The scene with the Mortar Platoon was chaotic. They were being over-run by the NVA and called for gun fire to help save them. It was apparent that our position was about to be over-run also. Our Platoon Commander Lt Les Tranter and our Platoon Sergeant Terry Schmidt came around to re-assure us and make sure that we had ammunition and water. They both took great risks as the bullets and shrapnel were intense. At about 0500 hrs we were instructed to empty some ammunition tins, pierce some butter cans from our ration packs, stuff some service rifle cleaning flannelette in with the butter cans and set them in a circle around our position. We then set fire to the butter and the glow from the flame intensified because of the gold colour lining of the ammunition cans and these formed secondary beacons which could be seen from the air, but not from the ground. The helicopter gunships could see where the friendlies were and where the NVA were thanks to that method of identifying our positions. However, the NVA discovered the idea and soon returned to our positions to fight at close hand. At that point, due to the intense firefight and noise, my dog Tiber, took fright and tried to do a runner. When Tiber lunged, the leash twisted off my wrist, it then slid through my fingers until I was trying to hang on to Tiber with my little finger. Tiber just pulled free and disappeared into the night. The Spt Coy Second in Command, Captain Mick Bindley, saw Tiber running and dashed in the open to catch him, but despite a respectful rugby dive, missed the leash by a very small margin. Tiber returned to Bryan at about 0700 hrs that morning. He was cut about by barbed wire, but the biggest injury was his mental state. Tiber was mentally devastated and was never the same dog again. He was evacuated back to Nui Dat and looked after by Pte Mel "Snoopy" Collison. Tiber was eventually given to An Australian civilian family in Saigon".

The platoon was involved in a number of counter-attack style of actions where they used fire and movement tactics to clear the NVA from the perimeter of the 1 ATF defended locality. There were several large scaled NVA attacks over the next weeks and numerous contacts with the enemy. Bryan's tenure as a National Serviceman was just about completed when he left FSPB Coral. Shortly afterward, he returned to Australia (RTA) and was discharged back to "civvy street" in September 1968.

## **RTA and Civilian Life**

Bryan's final leg of the journey from Viet Nam ended at Essenden airport near Melbourne where his family met him. It was 0300 hrs in the morning. At 0700 hrs the same day, Bryan commenced work with his father in the Ship Chandlery business. He did this deliberately so that he would remain mentally focussed on things other than the war. He reported to the Personnel Centre at Watsonia until his discharge on 24 September 1968. He worked with his dad for a few years and then started his own business selling wire rope and tackle until 1988, when he sold the business and moved to Queensland. In Queensland, Bryan opened a Real Estate agency until 1996 when he returned to Melbourne and worked in another Real Estate business where he remained until he retired in 2004. Bryan is married with three grown up sons and lives in Myrtleford, with a view of Mount Buffalo, in Victoria.



Private Bryan Meehan at Singleton, 1967. The possum was not used for tracking purposes. It's the only shot of Bryan, in uniform, that has survived the years.