

Interviews with War Dog Operatives

Series 1, Profile 10 – South Vietnam 1965-72

©

Private Gordon Hay - Royal Australian Infantry

Dateline for this profile is 18 April 2010.

Background

Private (PTE) Gordon Hay was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1945. Shortly after, Gordon's father passed away. In 1956, his widowed mother migrated her family to the suburb of Oakleigh in Melbourne, Australia. Gordon completed his schooling and Technical College training in the Oakley area. Gordon became an apprentice printer with Artcraft Print in the Richmond area and completed his five years of apprenticeship with that company. Immediately after he completed his apprenticeship, Gordon was "called up" as a National Serviceman in April 1966.

Gordon attended his eight week recruit training course at Puckapunyal in Victoria. On graduation from that, he was allocated to the Royal Australian Infantry. Gordon attended his Infantry Corps Training at the Singleton training unit in NSW, and on graduation from that course was posted as a rifleman to the 7th Battalion of The Royal Australian Regiment (7 RAR) at Puckapunyal. 7 RAR went to the Shoalwater Bay Training Area near Rockhampton in Queensland for unit training.

On its return to Puckapunyal, 7 RAR needed a Tracker capability and Gordon was selected to join a team of 7 RAR trackers. The team was sent to Ingleburn in NSW to undertake this training. The training included visual tracking, coverman duties and tracker dog handling. The 7 RAR group was teamed up with their tracker dogs at that time. PTE Norman Cameron had tracker dog Cassius and PTE Tom Blackhurst had tracker dog Justin. Gordon was trained as a coverman to travel behind the tracker dog team and provide bodyguard duties for them. At the completion of the tracker training, the 7 RAR team rejoined their battalion which was again at the Shoalwater Bay Training Area. On return to Puckapunyal, 7 RAR was on standby for deployment to the war in South Vietnam and followed the mandatory requirement of sending all ranks to the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra in Queensland for final training before moving to Vietnam.

By this time the trackers had organised themselves into tracking teams and Gordon was now the coverman for Norm Cameron and Cassius. The trackers were a part of the Anti-tank Platoon of Support Company, 7 RAR. Cassius and Justin were about to become the first of the eleven Australian combat tracker dogs into the Vietnam War.

First Australian Tracker Dogs into the Vietnam War

7 RAR travelled to Vung Tau in Vietnam on board the HMAS Sydney. The tracker dog teams (Norm/Cassius and Tom/Justin) travelled by RAAF C130 transport aircraft with short stops at Darwin and Butterworth (in Malaysia) and then on to Saigon and eventually, Nui Dat. The remainder of the trackers flew from Mangalore in Victoria by civil air to Darwin where they transferred to RAAF C130 transport for their on movement to Vung Tau. Vung Tau to Nui Dat was by RAAF Caribou aircraft. On the 20th April 1967, they arrived at the Support Company 7 RAR lines. The trackers were separated from the Anti-tank element of that platoon and positioned on their own in a line of rubber trees, virtually at the end of Luscombe Field. Luscombe Field was the name given to the main airstrip servicing the fixed wing elements supporting 1 ATF at Nui Dat. The trackers erected their tents, dug their fighting pits and settled in. The engineers from the 1st Field Squadron RAE came over to 7 RAR and built the kennels and concrete runs for Cassius and Justin. Familiarisation to the heat, humidity and the environment was restricted to the rubber trees inside the base area. Feeding of the dogs was by 7 RAR rations and veterinary care was administered by the United States Army Veterinary Corps (USVC) at Vung Tau.

Within two weeks, Cassius and Justin were ready for combat. They were the first two Australian combat tracker dogs into the Vietnam War.

In early May 1967, A COY, 7 RAR was involved in a large contact with Viet Cong (VC) soldiers and some of the VC escaped the contact. Norm, Cassius and Gordon were called to hunt down the fleeing enemy. They moved to A COY, picked up the scent and followed up on the VC. Norm cast Cassius on the long lead and after about twenty minutes Cassius pointed. The A COY diggers went into action and the result was the elimination of one VC soldier at no loss to the Australians. The first track by Cassius was a success and the trackers had earned their pay.

On another contact, the trackers were called out to support armoured and engineer elements of the United States Army. In Gordon's words: "We were called out to go to a place where the American engineers were bulldozing big tracks through the jungle. They were being protected by tanks and armoured personnel carriers (APC). The enemy had attacked an APC with a rocket propelled grenade (RPG 7) and followed this up with a successful hit on a tank with another RPG 7. In the contact which followed, the Americans retaliated and found a number of enemy trails leading away from the scene of the firefight. They decided to follow up but needed specialist support from the Australian trackers to do so. The whole tracking team was choppered up to a fire support base, then from there on APCs to the scene of the contact. After a quick brief from the Lieutenant, Tom spotted a trail and cast Justin on to it. Supported by the Americans, we set off behind Justin. After about two hundred yards we came across a small enemy camp. A quick search confirmed that it was deserted, so Tom cast Justin onwards and shortly afterward, Justin pointed. We stopped, crept carefully forward and saw four VC sitting on the ground having a conversation. Tom and I opened fire straight away and the Americans swept through the area. Two VC were killed by that action – one at the

contact site and another body was found the next day. The other two VC escaped. That was the end of that follow-up and we were taken back to the fire support base. It was late in the afternoon and we had to overnight with the Americans. The tanks and APC were formed up in a large circle which gave us a perimeter. We asked permission to cook in the back of an APC, but were told not to worry because rations were being brought in for them. After dark, a big chopper came in and dropped off hot meals, drinks and coffee. Next morning we were choppered back to Nui Dat. It was a successful track and the Americans were very grateful”.

Over the following months the trackers deployed with the battalion whenever it went into the bush. The trackers initially travelled with Support Company headquarters. As soon as a rifle company had a contact, the trackers would wait on stand-by for a call forward by helicopter, if they were needed. At the end of the tracking mission, the trackers would return to Support Company and wait for the next tracking mission. Most operations saw the trackers called out to follow-up the enemy at least three times. In this way, the trackers were instrumental in finding enemy bunker systems and camps. The bunker systems almost always gave the Australians a lot of intelligence material.

In another A COY ambush, the trackers were called in after the contact had subsided and: “When we arrived at the contact site of ‘A’ COY a Corporal from that COY was showing the visual tracker (Reg Parker) and me how far out they had gone when we spotted a VC in the jungle off the track. After a brief contact the enemy was killed. The visual tracker then had a look further out and found a blood trail. Tom Blackhurst put Justin on it and we followed it until it got dark and were forced to stop for the night.

The next morning we started to track again when we heard firing a little way off. It turned out to be ‘C’ Coy who had shot and killed an enemy who had come past them. On inspection they discovered that he had already been wounded.

We kept on going with the track and Justin led us right up to the body at ‘C’ COY”.

Gordon was initially the coverman for Norm and Cassius. However, Cassius needed some additional training in a safe area. It was decided to take the team to Vung Tau and train in the scrub and sand dunes there. During the day, Cassius was cast on a number of trails but started to show signs of heat stress. He began to wobble and then collapsed. Norm and Gordon carried him into the sea to cool him down. This worked for a little while and Cassius appeared to recover. But, when they began to walk him back to the base, Cassius collapsed. Norm carried Cassius but they did not have radio contact with the personnel at Vung Tau to arrange transport for Cassius. Eventually, when a Land-Rover was organised, it took a long time to respond to the urgency of the situation. By the time Cassius arrived at the USVC unit at Vung Tau, he was too far gone and they were unable to save him. Cassius died. He was the only Australian combat tracker dog to die on combat duty in the Vietnam War.

Norm was re-teamed with another tracker dog – Tiber.

In March 1968, Gordon’s tour of duty in Vietnam came to an end and he returned to Australia (RTA). However, he had the personally stressful task of saying goodbye to

Justin and Tiber. The diggers on the advance party of 7 RAR moved by road from Nui Dat to Vung Tau and then by air to Saigon. They RTA by QANTAS aircraft from Saigon to Sydney where they arrived at about midnight.

Return to Civilian Life

On arrival in Sydney, the diggers who were to travel on to interstate destinations had to overnight at Mascot Airport. Next morning, Gordon flew to Melbourne on civil air and went on three days leave. Thereafter, he had to report to Watsonia Barracks for discharge procedure. They were told to report to Watsonia Barracks in civilian clothing because they were not to be seen by the general public as soldiers arriving back from the Vietnam War. Seven days later, Gordon was discharged as a National Serviceman.

Gordon resumed his printing job with Artcraft Print in Richmond. But Gordon was about to experience the effects of the massive deflation that some soldiers feel after they have been a part of war service, mateship, loyalty, selflessness and personal discipline compared to what goes on in civilian life. He became unhappy with the attitude of the people there and left Artcraft, worked for another printing company which he left for another printing company, which he again left for yet another printing company and so on. Gordon was drifting. He was disgruntled and becoming morose. At this point, Gordon's family decided to move to Southport in Queensland and he moved with them.

Gordon's family started a printing business in Southport and Gordon worked in that business for about ten years. Then the old problems resurfaced and he left his family business to take up janitorial duties at the Southport School. He needed to be on his own. Or so he thought. The owner of the cleaning company retired and made Gordon his manager. This put him in the direct line of fire with twenty cleaners, a first aid matron and four laundry staff. They had their usual personal problems plus the hassle of organising and managing the duties and quality control issues all landed in Gordon's lap. After some time, the pressure became the tipping point for Gordon and on visiting his family doctor he was referred to specialist consultations. In 2001, severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was diagnosed and Gordon was forced to retire.

Gordon and his family moved from Southport to Bundaberg where he enjoys being a part of the natural environment and taking the family dog for long walks. Gordon is invited to talk to the local school about tracker dogs and service in the military. He is a single person having never married.



PTE Gordon Hay in Saigon, South Vietnam 1967/68.



Left to right: PTE Norm Cameron with Tiber, PTE Gordon Hay, and PTE Kevin Harker. South Vietnam 1967/68



Left to Right: PTE Tom Blackhurst, PTE Gordon Hay, PTE Kevin Harker and PTE Norm Cameron. South Vietnam 1967/68.



Left to right: PTE Bob Goodger, PTE Ken Aspinall and PTE Gordon Hay. South Vietnam 1967/68.