

Interviews with War Dog Operatives

Series 1, Profile 4 – South Vietnam 1965-72

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Private Peter Haran - Royal Australian Infantry

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Peter Haran is the author of the book “Trackers” New Holland Publishers (Australia) Pty Ltd and is available for purchase through the ADFTWDA. Click the “Merchandise” tab on this website.

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Background

Private (Pte) Peter Haran was born in The United Kingdom (UK) and was raised in Zimbabwe (in those days Rhodesia). In 1961 the Haran family returned to the UK and in 1964, moved on to Adelaide, South Australia. Peter completed his high schooling in Adelaide and at the age of seventeen he enlisted in the Australian Regular Army in January 1966. He attended the 1st Recruit Training Battalion at Kapooka in NSW and then on to the Infantry Centre at Ingleburn near Sydney.

Peter was well under the age for overseas postings (nineteen years minimum age) and as the Tracking Wing was being raised at the Infantry Centre with a focus on tracking and dog handling, Peter was asked if he would like to train as a tracker dog handler. He did, and on arrival was teamed up with a dog named Caesar. In early 1967, he completed his tracker training and was posted to the 2nd Battalion of The Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR) with Caesar. Also posted with Peter and Caesar to 2 RAR were Denis (Fergie) Ferguson and tracker dog Marcus. They were stationed at Enoggera in Brisbane.

In mid-1967, 2 RAR commenced its move to South Vietnam aboard RAAF transport aircraft. The advance party included Peter and Fergie and Caesar and Marcus. The requirement for the dog teams being in the advance party was so urgent that neither digger received their Battle Readiness training at the (then) Jungle Training Centre at Canungra in Queensland. This was a unique situation.

South Vietnam for the First Time

The RAAF flew the advance party of 2 RAR to Butterworth Air Force Base in Malaysia where the dogs received their inoculations, then on to Saigon in South Vietnam and then on to the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) base at Nui Dat. On arrival at Nui Dat, the dog teams were allocated their area which included well constructed dog kennels with concrete runs, drainage, wash points, chain wire enclosures and covered accommodation for each dog. Peter remarked that the Royal Australian Engineers had done a magnificent job of constructing the dog facility. The area where the Tracker teams were housed was in the Support Company (Spt Coy) lines which had, up until then, been the home of 6 RAR of The Battle of Long Tan fame.

Acclimatisation training in the Spt Coy rubber continued for about three weeks until the main party of 2 RAR, ex-HMAS Sydney, arrived. Very soon after the main party arrived, they were into combat operations in a serious way. This was June of 1967 and the tempo of operations was very active in Phouc Tuy Province. As a result the management of the dog teams had to be flexible. Both 2 RAR dog teams were placed on immediate standby for rapid movement should a rifle company contact the enemy and need a rapid follow-up tracking capability. To enable this, Peter and Caesar were in one dog team ready to go at short notice and Denis and Marcus were in another dog team. One dog team would deploy at any one time by helicopter straight to the hot spot, while the other would stand-by at Nui Dat, ready for immediate deployment should another contact, in another rifle company occur. The result of this was that the two teams never worked together in the whole time of their tour of duty. They would meet occasionally at a fire support base, but never out in the bush on tracking duties.

Peter remembers two tracking operations which were very testing for himself and Caesar. This is the first – in Peter’s words: “The area known as the “light green and the long green” was situated about eleven kilometres to the South-west of Nui Dat. This area had a notorious reputation for being festooned with large quantities of the M16 mine – also known as the “jumping jack” because it would fly up about a metre into the air before it fired. The results of casualties from this mine were always horrific. One day 12 Platoon (Pl) of D Coy had been involved in a large contact with the enemy in the Light Green area. A dog team was called for. It was my turn, so I grabbed my combat gear, collected Caesar and went to the 2 RAR helicopter landing pad – codenamed “Eagle Farm”. There were three of us. My coverman, a machine gunner, myself and of course, Caesar. We boarded a Huey (UH-1 Iroquois helicopter), took off, and within ten minutes we arrived at the D Coy position. We quickly deplaned and were taken to the contact site. There was a great deal of blood scattered on the sandy ground as well as streaked along some bushes. My coverman said “I’m ready when you are”. The Pl Commander (who had been commanding 12 Pl for only one week) gave the order to commence the track. Caesar began his track at a fast pace and the tracking team followed at the end of his leash. 12 Pl did not patrol on the track, they were aware of the land mines and preferred to move off the sides of the track. My coverman and I had no choice but to honour where Caesar wanted to go, and he wanted to go on the track where the strongest enemy sign was. We patrolled for a couple of hundred metres, when we came upon a T junction in the track. This was a dangerous situation and I willed Caesar to point. He did not. Instead, Caesar came straight back to me and sat on my foot. He had never done this before. We were now stopped and exposed in the middle of an open track. The next thing, there was a terrible explosion and we discovered that the Pl Commander had stepped on a mine. It exploded and blew off both his legs. An engineer splinter team arrived and began clearing the mine blast area with their counter-mine equipment. Once cleared the casualties were treated and evacuated by DUSTOFF medical helicopter. The two sappers then went in front of Peter and continued their sweep for mines along the track which lead to the T junction. At the T junction the sappers removed a large anti-tank mine and four M16 anti-personnel “jumping jacks”. Caesar had never received any training in mine and explosive detection, but he was suspicious of what he found at the T junction and for good measure, came back and sat on my foot so that I would not continue toward the

danger. Soon after, we were all airlifted by helicopter back to our base at Nui Dat. That was the worst day I was to experience during my tour of duty. That day haunted me then, and continues to do so to this day”.

But there was worse to come at that very place. This was the same T junction where, two years later, another infantry platoon would be cut to pieces by M16 mines and create the inspiration for that haunting song, “I Was Only Nineteen”.

Peter was emotionally affected by the events of that operation. On his arrival back into the Spt Coy lines, he put Caesar away, went back to his tent and commenced maintaining his rifle. On reassembling the weapon, Peter lost concentration on what he was doing and accidentally fired a bullet. The round narrowly missed Denis Ferguson who was sitting on the bed opposite Peter. Peter’s Commanding Officer, LT Col “Chicka” Charlesworth, gave Peter his field punishment. He had to fill and emplace a shedload of sandbags for the next two weeks, dressed in full combat gear, by day and night – watched by the 2 RAR Regimental Police (RP). He managed to completely sandbag the dog kennels to protect them from shrapnel and blast effects from incoming enemy shells and mortar bombs. What the RPs did not know, was that Peter’s mates would smuggle the odd can of beer to him using their superb tracking and camouflage techniques.

Operational duty continued out of Nui Dat on tracking missions until late 1967 when Operation “Santa Fe” was mounted in the north east of Phuoc Tuy Province. The purpose of the Operation was to provide security to a large United States (US) Army Corps of Engineers group who were land clearing along the “Firestone Trail”. It was a big show which involved 2 RAR, 7 RAR, 3/5 US Cavalry, their Direct Support Artillery units and the US Engineers. The two Australian Battalions were to sweep each side of the Firestone Trail and the Cavalry were to provide close protection to the Engineers. However, there was a big contact which hit the Engineers hard. There were serious American casualties. In Peter’s words: “We were in a Fire Support Base when an urgent call came to provide a tracker team to support the Americans. A helicopter came for us and myself, Caesar and my coverman Bob Moodie, were taken to the Firestone Trail and landed in the 3/5 US Cavalry area. The enemy had fired a number of RPG 7 rockets at the bulldozers and hit them. The enemy then did their usual “bug out” back into incredibly thick jungle. The Cavalry carried us to the site of the contact and we were escorted by a group of American GIs who were armed with a wide assortment of weapons, wore military clothing of sorts and had a ferocious disposition to “kick ass” when they closed with the enemy. At the site of the contact, we were shown plenty of enemy sign and told to get going. Our initial investigation confirmed that the enemy were a large group of Viet Cong (VC) reinforced with North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars. Caesar took the scent and we took off in pursuit of the enemy group. The jungle was really dark, but had a small path to follow which the enemy had used. The GIs took up an aggressive assault formation behind us and we pressed into the bush at tracking speed. As we penetrated deeper into the jungle we came across huge bomb craters, divisions of track into different directions, an assortment of vegetation types, and of course the heat and humidity. Caesar kept tracking the enemy despite the confusion of tracks. After several hundred metres, I was sweating and it was an effort to keep up with the dog. Then Caesar pointed. I looked ahead at a

bend in the track and saw the flash of bare skin of a man's arm and a patch of black uniform above it. They were seventy-five metres ahead. I told Bob "there's the enemy" and he came forward with rifle in shoulder, gave the thumbs down (enemy sighted) to the Americans and they immediately and very quietly, went into attack formation. I could then see at least three enemy soldiers standing in a clearing ahead. This was probably a camp site. I looked down at Bob's feet and saw a Claymore directional mine at his feet, but the detonator was out of the device and it could not be fired. Quite clearly, the enemy did not know that we were right behind them. Bob opened fire, the enemy responded and then the Americans "hooked in". There was a massive fire fight in which I needed to shoot a VC who was too close for comfort while at the same time keeping Caesar on a very tight lead as he was not happy with the enormous din that was going on around him. The Americans then launched their attack and swept the enemy away. Some VC/NVA bolted down the track, followed for a short while by the GIs. A VC/NVA officer was wounded and the American officer wanted to carry him back for questioning. Bob advised that the VC/NVA would be back for a counter-attack and because we were a small group, now low on ammo, we should make a fast exit back to the Cavalry position. So, we returned to the Cavalry as quickly as we could. When we arrived, we mounted quickly into the Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC) and travelled back toward the American base camp. On the way back, we were attacked from a flank by enemy troops firing RPGs and small arms. The Cavalry had plenty of experience with these situations and immediately counter-attacked. An American Trooper on one of the APCs was wounded and knocked down from his machine gun. Bob Moodie took over the gun and resumed firing. I was firing from the rear hatch of the APC and all the spent cartridges were falling over Caesar. I looked into his eyes and I can tell you, Caesar was really pissed off at me. We arrived back into the Cavalry base where we were treated to RocknRoll music, hot steaks and cases of beer. We stayed overnight with the Americans and next morning when we were about to be helicoptered out, the Americans asked us to stay on and help them some more. But we had to go back to 2 RAR. It was the end of an absolutely text book track, point and successful attack sequence of events".

Further tracker support to the infantry companies continued and the dog teams uncovered enemy, weapons and explosive caches, camp sites, bunkers and indicated on sign left behind by the enemy at places such as rivers and clearings in the jungle. The training received at the Tracker Wing was excellent preparation for their roles on operations in Phuoc Tuy Province. The only exception was the number of time Australian troops encountered the M16 mines. There was no answer to these as they proliferated everywhere and it was mainly pot luck if you actually saw one in the ground before you stood on it. It was tough work on a soldier's mind.

At the end of his tour of duty, Peter had to hand Caesar over to the incoming dog handler. This included obedience training and practice tracks inside the Nui Dat base. And then, Peter said Goodbye to Caesar for the last time and left Nui Dat.

Return to Australia

Peter returned to Australia (RTA) and was posted to the Tracker Wing at the Infantry Centre. He was promoted to Corporal and instructed on tracking skills and dog handling, but paid particular attention to the threat of mines and booby traps. This was accomplished by Peter laying trip wires out across a track, burying ordnance and laying an assortment of lethal items in and around the path of a track so that his handlers would be able to read a non-human detection response from their dogs. Peter remained at Tracker Wing for three years and was then posted to 3 RAR at Woodside in South Australia.

South Vietnam for the Second Time

3 RAR was posted to the war in South Vietnam in February 1970 but left the tracker dogs behind at Woodside. On arrival at Nui Dat, the Tracker/Anti-tank Platoon became assigned normal rifle platoon duties. Peter became a Section Commander and supported rifle companies and provided defence duties in fire support bases. After his second tour of duty in South Vietnam, Peter RTA with only a few months to serve out his six years in the ARA.

Civilian Life after the Army

Peter discharged for the ARA in February 1972 and worked as a store manager until 1976 when Peter became a journalist with News Limited. He worked as a recorder in the daily newspaper and then on the Sunday paper as a Police Reporter and Crime Writer until 2004. Peter retired from work with chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and back injuries. Not surprising given the experiences of two tours of duty and the heavy loads carried by the dog handlers and anti-tank diggers in the jungle.

Peter has written four books based on the Vietnam War. Peter is married with a son and a daughter, both of them living overseas.

Caesar

Caesar was retired to the Australian Embassy in Saigon in July 1970 where he became the absolute centre of attention of Jeremy and Sally White and their family. However, Caesar re-visited Peter in a most unusual way. At the "Welcome Home Parade" in Sydney on Saturday 3 October 1987, Peter was gathered with a bunch of his mates after the march in the Phoenician Club. They had "hooked in" to the beer and were enjoying each others company. Peter was touched on the back by an unidentifiable person and this person pushed something into Peter's hand with the words "This is for you". Peter took the item to a chair and sat down to look at it. He found it hard to focus at first because it looked like a twenty cent piece. But then focus kicked in and Peter had a cathartic experience. The item was a silver identity disc and on it was engraved "D6NO3 CAESAR". His dog had returned to him. Peter just had to write the book on "Trackers" and it became a very popular book for readers in the general population. It has done a lot

for ex-Vietnam soldiers, ex-trackers and the general public's understanding of one digger's war supported by his dog.



Pte Peter Haran with Caesar and their Platoon Commander, Lieutenant Leo Van De Kamp at Nui Dat, South Vietnam 1967-68.



Pte Denis "Fergie" Ferguson with Marcus on the left and Pte Peter Haran with Caesar on the right at Nui Dat, South Vietnam 1967-68.



D6NO3 Caesar. His number indicates that he was recruited as the third dog taken into the kennels from New South Wales.