AN ACCIDENTAL LANCE JACK

I was an accidental lance corporal: promoted accidentally and accident prone by nature.

This story recounts some of my experiences as a lance corporal expressed from echoes of embedded memories, letters written home and some research of battalion records.

My promotion occurred in Vietnam, in January 1969 when I was a truck driver with 2 Transport Platoon, 5 Company RAASC, based at Vung Tau. Vung Tau was 77 miles south east of Saigon, on the south east coast and was the major Australian logistics base (1ALSG) supporting the Australian Task Force operations in Phuoc Thuy province.

At that time our unit had an informal policy of promoting National Servicemen (‘nashos’) to the rank of Lance Corporal, rather than ‘regulars’. Although I was a ‘nasho’, I was promoted because of a mistaken belief that I had been an NCO (Non Commissioned Officer) in the C.M.F. (Army Reserve, today). I had been a member of the 5th Royal Victorian Regiment at Hawthorn but any suggestion that I had been an NCO could not have been further from the truth; I can only imagine the howls of derisive laughter had the NCO’s of 5RVR heard about it.

The truth be known, I believe that I may have been the only 5RVR recruit, certainly one of the very few, who had to repeat the regiment’s annual two week basic training camp!

Not only that but I have a clear recollection of marching with the regiment – bagpipes and all – down Burwood Road in Hawthorn for a major regimental parade and being the only one in step!

However, as is the nature of the army, myth became fact and I duly became a Lance Corporal. At that time the second Tet Offensive of 1969 was pending, so early in February, 1969 I was transferred to a detachment of 2 Transport Platoon, stationed with a US Army Transport Company at the US Army base of Long Binh.

Long Binh was then the 2nd largest military base in the world and was the major logistics centre and the command headquarters for the US Army in Vietnam; it was 65 square miles and at its peak in 1969 was home to 60,000 personnel. It was also commonly referred to as, ‘Bribie Island’ and in many ways it was a microcosm of American society. It was big, bustling, brash, noisy, comprising: poor boys from the ‘South’, blue collar workers from the manufacturing cities of the ‘North’ who all loved us, ‘Aussies’. There were also the tall, lithe, ‘soul brothers’, who walked with languid strides to the rhythmic sounds of their shoulder-held ghetto blasters.

During February and March 1969 the detachment’s task was to supply and support our Australian Fire Support Bases (FSB’s) which had been established around Long Binh for the second Tet Offensive and the defence of Saigon.

The FSB’s were ‘Kerry’ and ‘Betty’ which 9RAR and 4RAR/NZ operated from and around as part of Operation Federal. ‘Kerry’ was about 15 miles from Long Binh and a further half a mile ‘off track’ into the ‘scrub’; ‘Betty’ was a further 5 miles into the ‘scrub’, not far from ‘Bear Cat’, another American Base.

From 2 Transport Platoon’s first deployment to Vietnam, the unit had regularly operated in the Long Binh/Bien Hoa region. During the ‘Mini-Tet’ Offensive of May/June, 1968 the unit supplied FSB’s ‘Coral’ and ‘Balmoral’.

And so, after arriving at Ling Binh I reported to the unit’s HQ and to our officer in charge (OC). As I recall, the general attitude of the troops was that this was the high point of the OC’s career: ‘front line’ operational command. So imagine when I reported to our HQ and stood in front of him, he was presented with a: 5’7” – desperate to be 5’8’’ – thin, scrawny soldier, with a less than well ironed army green shirt, tucked into regulation shorts which ballooned well below my knees – classic ‘Bombay bloomers’. Not only that but my one stripe was precariously stitched onto a cloth brassard (armlet) held around my shirt sleeve, attached to a buttoned epaulet. Being oblivious to any of these imperfections I was somewhat taken aback when, after presenting my most impressive salute accompanied with the salutation of, “Lance Corporal Mosley reporting for duty …. SIR!” his response after a bemused and prolonged silence was, “You must be bloody joking!” Shrugging off this not very promising introduction, I was taken to our quarters which we shared with the American transport company. I met up with my mates, most of whom were greeting me for the first time as a Lance Corporal; needless to say I copped plenty of ‘stick’ about that. A fine welcome to Long Binh indeed!

Anyway, there was no time for ‘pleasantries’; it was ‘full on’ with constant, daily convoys to the FSB’s and the relentless loading and unloading of trucks. My first letter home from Long Binh noted that,*”* *the organisation has been chaotic with people constantly pressing the panic button.* *We worked our rings out, on the road 12 hours a day and some nights loading trucks up to midnight”.*

However, at the end of those days or nights, there was always the ‘Yank’s’ large and very well catered for PX/canteen - or as we called it, the ‘boozer’. When entering the PX/canteen you were immediately confronted with the dense fog of cigarette smoke and the juke box – pretty much commandeered by the ‘soul brothers’ - repeatedly playing Marvin Gaye’s, ‘I Heard it Through the Grapevine’.

One of my letters commented, *“the boozer is absolutely top class* – (Oh dear, did I really write that!) - *but in a way it’s a bit too classy because when we walk in after being in the scrub all day with dirty, dusty greens all the yanks are there in spotless greens. The yanks are very friendly towards us and forever want to talk to us and buy us a beer.”* Sadly though, there was an informal but strict after hours segregation between ‘blacks and whites’, with virtually no socialising between them; each to their own tables and gatherings, and never the two would meet. In reality these canteens were shop fronts for the black market of pretty much whatever you wanted particularly of course, drugs; all of which I was naïve to as I think most of us were.

Unfortunately, my first day of operational duty - taking a convoy of trucks to supply artillery ‘ammo’ to FSB ‘Betty’ - did not end well and seemed to confirm to the OC his initial impression of me.

It started with the morning’s operations briefing which amongst other things confirmed where we were to rendezvous with two Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC’s) which were to escort us into ‘Betty’; the rendezvous was about a mile from a creek crossing which led to the track into ‘Betty’. The tightly winding track, 5 miles long was narrow – just wide enough for one truck - and bordered by tall and dense vegetation. The OC emphasised the importance of arriving on time as there had been a contact with a VC patrol at the creek that morning, at first light. I was given the map coordinates for the rendezvous which immediately raised a problem: map reading unfortunately was not a strong point of mine, to say the least. In fact back in Australia the previous year, during a very large scale transport exercise in the hinterland of Nowra, I managed to get 20 plus vehicles ‘lost’ because of one wrong turn I made at the classic, ‘fork in the road’. When our sergeant finally caught up with us and realised that I was the ‘culprit’, he exclaimed words to the effect, “not bloody Mosley again!” Prior to arriving at Long Binh this hadn’t been an issue, as all the convoys which I had been in charge of were to familiar destinations; but around Long Binh this was all ‘new territory’. After the meeting the admin sergeant, sensing my concern, reassured me that most of the drivers were familiar with the rendezvous, particularly the driver of the lead truck.

Another concern widely held, was the ineffectiveness of our VHF radio sets. They had a very limited range: radio contact was usually lost 20/30 minutes from ‘base’ or it frequently ‘dropped out’. Operational command was aware of the problem but it was one of those issues which infuriatingly was never addressed, let alone fixed. However, when we were under APC escort they would ‘tune us in’ to their frequencies, so that we could remain in contact with them if trouble arose.

And so on that morning, we drove out of Long Binh on the wide, graded and dusty road arriving on time, at the rendezvous. It was not long before the two APC’s were upon us in a swirling cauldron of red dust. But instead of stopping, giving me the radio frequency and positioning the APC’s at the front and rear of the convoy, they merely slowed down and in typical ‘wild west’ fashion signalled, “Follow us!” “But what about the radio ………..” I yelled into the dust filled slipstream, to no avail.

“Mount up and get going”, was my desperate call. We scrambled into the trucks and high tailed it after them. As I was ‘in charge’ of the convoy, my truck was ‘tail end Charlie’, with no radio frequency, driving at 50/60 mph with virtually no visibility because of the thick dust clouds being thrown up by the other trucks and the APC’s.

My driver, a ‘nervy’ type, fell well behind the rest of the convoy and as we came round a sweeping bend in the road, we just caught sight of the truck in front of us driving out of the creek and disappearing into the track leading into the FSB. This further panicked my driver and before I realised what was happening, he charged into the creek while still in 4th gear; no stopping and changing into the low gears for him! Too late; the truck stalled, with water spurting into the cabin and drowning the engine. To make matters worse any hope of getting back ‘on track’ was dashed when his trembling hands dropped the rotor button into the creek! So there we were, stranded, with an inoperable radio and a wait of at least 40/50 minutes before the convoy reached the FSB, realised we were missing and hopefully returned for us.

The danger of our predicament grew with the overwhelming silence and threatening awareness of the heavily vegetated surroundings. And then we heard our artillery opening up at ‘Betty’, confirming enemy activity in the area.

It was a long wait, not just in time, until we heard the distant ‘clanking’ of an APC which then burst upon us in a swirl of dust. When the APC commander realised that we were OK, his relief was palpable and he exclaimed, “Jesus, we thought we would find you all cut up!” If that had been the case then he would have had a lot of explaining to do, notwithstanding the stupidity of my driver.

It was not over yet though, as we had to tow the truck into ‘Betty’ with chains, in the absence of rigid towing ‘A’ frames. When we arrived at ‘Betty’ the APC towed us up and then down into a large gun pit to offload the ‘ammo’ but because we were not under power and had no air brakes we ‘freewheeled’ into the gun pit. Unfortunately the APC didn’t realise that we no brakes and because of the slope of the gun pit we gathered enough momentum to slam into the rear of the now stationery APC.

End result: one immobilised truck with a smashed in radiator and a missing rotor button, consigned to the work shop! And of course on our return to base I reported the day’s events to the OC which just confirmed his initial assessment of me, expressed as: “Well Mosley, first convoy and …………….” No further words were forthcoming but the expression on his face clearly articulated, ‘I might have known’!

I pretty much managed to steer clear of the OC for the remainder of my time there, except for one night when the base came under a major attack in the early hours of 23rd February.

It’s hard to believe but at the end of each day’s operations we had to ‘hand in’ our weapons which were then locked away in an armoury. While we were never officially told the reasons for this, we believed that it was to minimise any potential racial violence that might erupt amongst the Americans. Also, there were local Vietnamese employed on the base during the day to do menial tasks for the Americans, such as laundering and washing. Consequently, there were many locals wandering around the base, including our lines, some of whom would have undoubtedly been Viet Cong (VC).

So at 2am February 23, Long Binh was attacked by 274VC regiment and 33NVA (North Vietnamese Army) regiment; our sector came under rocket fire from a village 200 yards out from our outer perimeter. As the first rockets were landing we had to ‘queue up’ for our weapons and then under continuing rocket and machine gun fire we had to retrieve our trucks – which were parked about 100 yards in from our outer perimeter - to our defensive trench line, which was 800 yards to the rear of our lines.

A letter home added that, *“our defensive positions are a further 800 yards to the rear of our lines where we immediately go in the case of a red alert, which, much to our distaste, gives the yanks the impression of us beating a hasty retreat any time there’s any trouble.”*

In the mayhem of all that was going on, one of my mates had parked his truck right on the outer perimeter of the base – God knows why – so I went with him to retrieve it - which is another story. But by the time we returned to our defensive trench line, the OC was fuming as to where in the hell had we, mainly me, been. I am not sure whether he was concerned about our safety or whether he was not able to account for his full complement of men; it was probably both.

Anyway, his fuming quickly transformed into what I recollect as some ‘gallant’ reporting back to HQ in Vung Tau. Being alongside him in the trench, it very much sounded to me as if we were on the verge of having to repulse a major attack by overwhelmingly superior forces! Ironically, it also looked to me as if he was using one of the same VHF radio sets which we used, so maybe his reporting from the ‘front line’ fell on deaf ears!

In the middle of March I returned to Vung Tau but we continued to take convoys to the Long Binh/Bien Hoa area every 2 to 3 days for several weeks. A letter home related, "*We've been going back there for overnight stays to move the battalions and artillery into new positions”* - one of which would have been FSB ‘Maria’. Another letter recounted, *“We came up there last night and in our old boozer there was an Aussie show on. Well the troops got a little bit pissy* – more than a little bit I would suggest - *and when the group played Waltzing Matilda all the Aussies stood up and near sang the roof off!”*

I did receive a second promotion to Corporal but that second stripe was also similarly stitched onto the same brassard.

Perhaps that was symbolic of my tenuous embrace of the rank of corporal, which never really sat easily with me. However, I was able to separate and effectively carry out the duties and responsibilities of the rank as distinct from living out of its status and power. From a personal perspective, the experience did uncover aspects of me which had never remotely before, seen the light of day and I stayed true to those uncovered traits. I used to wonder if I was the only NCO of that unit to never permanently sow on his stripes; if that was the case, then that would sit easily with me.

Michael Mosley

(Foot Note: The photograph on the cover sheet was not taken by me and I am not sure who did!)