“HEY CHARLIE”

25 JULY, 2011

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MARCH, 1969 : LONG BINH, AMERICAN ARMY BASE – (33kms from Saigon)

“Hey Charlie”, was the frantic shout which pierced through the whining of incoming rockets.

It was the early hours of the morning and a full scale assault on the base, with rocket and heavy machine gun fire, was underway.

We were part of our transport unit’s forward deployment, based at Long Binh. Our role was to supply Australian Fire Support Bases (FSB), ‘Kerry’ and ‘Betty’, which had been established as part of our contribution to the defence of Saigon, for the ‘Tet’ offensive of 1969.

“Charlie”, was the increasingly urgent call from Bruce, now reverberating around my pounding temples; poundings from a few too many whiskies and coke that night in the PX. The CO had warned us that we would be attacked tonight but how were we to know that this would be the first time he was bloody well right!

“Charlie, my truck isn’t in our compound, I left it down at the perimeter fence. You’ve got to come with me to get it back.”

“Bloody Bruce, you slack bastard”, I cursed, as we raced towards the perimeter fence, with incoming rockets and tracers flying over our heads. ‘Why is it that Bruce is so often out of step with the rest of us?’I thought, in that mad dash in the madness of the night.

And there that bloody truck was, right alongside the perimeter fence and the outer ring road from beyond which the incoming fire was advancing.

“Move, move, get …….. ” but the words hung incomplete as we suddenly froze in what appeared to be headlights bearing down upon us; headlights and then heavy machine gun fire. “It’s a bloody Huey Cobra strafing the road!”

Suddenly, all went quiet, nothing moved; time was suspended.

“Charlie, quick, for God’s sake get in the truck,” and with that the crescendo of sounds and light burst forth again. We scrambled into the truck, finally heading away from that fiery Huey, but accompanied still with the more subdued lazy trail of overhead tracer fire.

“Where the bloody hell have you been Corporal,” a rather flustered officer demanded as I finally reached our defensive trench and reported in.

“One of our trucks was down near the perimeter fence, sir, and I helped return it to the compound.”

“Why the hell wasn’t it in the compound, why was it down there?” “Whoever left it there I want to see him and you in the morning.”

Bruce and I clambered into our defensive trench, and I quietly said to him, “look I think that his angst will be forgotten once this is all over, because tonight is his moment of glory. He’s in command and under fire even though we are behind the Yanks’ major defence line and their forward outer perimeter defence line.” However, we did subsequently hear that some parts of the forward perimeter line were overrun, early in the assault.

Anyway, it was tense as we remained in the trench with loaded rifles at the ready while the sound and light show progressed through the night.

“Jesus, what was that?” exclaimed Bruce to the sounds of bursts of deep, burping resonate groanings.

“It’s a modified DC3 –‘a goony bird’ – which has 4 sets of mounted, rotating ‘Gatling’ type 50 cal. machine guns.” There were a couple of these DC3’s seemingly lazily hovering overhead, raining down torrential fusillades on the enemy below. Eventually the assault was bludgeoned back into the murky and hostile surrounds and silence gradually dawned with the early morning light.

Our compound was adjacent to the main fuel depot, an obvious target, yet amazingly there was no damage to any of our trucks or gun jeeps. No casualties for us either, except for Bruce who bruised a couple of ribs when he dived onto the concrete floor of our accommodation hut, as shrapnel from the first rocket strikes hit the roof.

After a quick cuppa and smoko, whilst watching the Yanks napalm a VC sniper squad, we fired up the trucks and with APC escorts we headed out to re-supply FSB ‘Kerry’ and ‘Betty’. We passed through the nearby deserted village which had been one of the enemy’s staging points for the assault and yet despite the high level of tension within us, all around was eerily calm and peaceful.

The winter storm of thunder and lightning had now been transformed into the chill, still air of winter, the chill still fear in the pit of the stomach

And bloody Bruce had left his rifle behind!

SEPTEMBER, 1973 : A HOUSEBOAT ON EILDON WEIR

“Hey Charlie, grab some more tinnies will you.”

It was a late spring afternoon on the weir, a cool breeze whisking the weir into wisps of white tipped swells. There were six of us on Bruce’s in-laws’ house boat as we trawled for redfin, hopefully to be a pan fried entrée prior to barbequing steaks on the weir’s banks.

The six of us were inseparable in those days, three married couples, brought together through the close bonds of Bruce, Jim and me from our time in Vietnam, continuing on into civvie street: Bob, Carol, Ted and Alice, plus two, yet devoid of any nocturnal naughtiness.

“Come on Charlie, a man could die of thirst, you’re not an NCO now you know!” “Settle down Bruce, you’re not back in the old boozer drinking as if there’s no tomorrow.”

Yet for some reason, past recollections of Bruce never appearing to be overly affected by booze came to mind, and still even now on the house boat.

‘It’s funny how dynamics change with different circumstances’, I thought. Bruce had married into a self made affluent family and here at the weir, he was very much the captain of the boat. Unfortunately he expressed this in a domineering, rude manner, particularly towards Rowena, his wife. This overbearing manner increasingly covered over underlying insecurities and anxieties.

His emotional instability was exacerbated by his father in law’s open contempt for bankers and banking generally, which was very unfortunate for Bruce as he was an assistant bank manager.

Our other close mate, Jim, was one of those irrepressible characters, as sharp as a tack with a very quick wit, which when needed took no prisoners.

I had been returning with the tinnies when Rowena, pulled me to one side and quietly asked me, “Did Bruce ever shoot any kids? He has been having nightmares recently, particularly one where it sounds like he shoots a child?”

“Jesus, Rowena I don’t know of Bruce doing anything like that at all or of any circumstances where that might have happened.”

Yet Rowena’s question stayed with me, even with the ongoing consumption of tinnies. In the early hours of the morning I awoke recalling an incident which occurred not long before our deployment to Long Binh, when we were on a convoy to a ‘FSB’ and it was my first time in charge of a convoy.

We were waiting for our APC escort on the outskirts of a small village, when suddenly two children came running towards us. In addition to the tension of this being my first time in charge, I was still captive to a recent incident near a ‘FSB’ where, because of my slackness, two children had loitered beside my truck, near the fuel tank. A nearby warrant officer well and truly ‘did me over’ pointing out in no uncertain terms that they were potential enemy, who could easily have set a grenade on that very fuel tank.

With his words still resounding in my mind I yelled for these kids to stop, to turn back.

Yet they kept running towards us, seemingly unresponsive to my urgent calls to ‘Stop’!

Then instinctively my loaded rifle was cocked and aimed.

‘Jesus what is happening here, this is terribly wrong’ my inner self was screaming.

They did stop, turn and race away but the starkness of what might have been, sliced into my inner being ; a being deeper than that of a conditioned soldier’s. The conditioned soldier was irrevocably wounded by this potential wrong. I was ‘demobbed’ as a soldier whilst ‘still in the field’.

And standing there was Bruce, rifle held in a menacing stance, yet there was Bruce with a demeanour where menace was stillborn.

Had spring time seeds of insecurity and vulnerability been sown for Bruce’s emerging denial of his then Vietnam reality and now, for his stormy nature clouding over the houseboat all these years later?

And not long afterwards at Long Binh, Bruce did start leaving his rifle behind.

JANUARY 1984 : A FACTORY IN WEST FOOTSCRAY

“Hey Charlie’’, “Yes Jim’’, “Charlie, did you know that Bruce checked himself out of the Melbourne Clinic this afternoon?”

“Jesus Jim, are you sure, I literally took him there by the hand this morning and checked him in myself.”

It was early on a hot, humid Friday afternoon and I was sitting in my office, manager of a 1950’s time warp manufacturing company, which was content to be operating in standards more akin to the early 1970’s.

“ Charlie, when Rowena phoned you last night from their home in Queensland, did you tell her that you were disappointed in Bruce because he hadn’t told us he was an alcoholic?”

The question chillingly sank into the pit of my stomach.

“Why?”

“Because Rowena rang Bruce at the Melbourne Clinic this morning, not long after his admission, and she told him that you were disappointed in him, particularly in his not telling us he was an alcoholic.”

“Jesus Jim, I can’t believe that. She must have known what effect that would have. Jesus, Rowena had me wound up like a top over her concerns about Bruce’s abusive and threatening behaviour towards her. She totally convinced me of her fears and she pleaded with me to ring Melbourne Airport requesting them to contact her if his name appeared on a passenger list.”

“Jim, it was then that she queried whether or not I knew that Bruce was an alcoholic. When I replied that I didn’t, she proceeded to spell out all the signs that made Bruce’s alcoholism painfully obvious. I was just totally unaware of them and I expressed my disappointment to her in Bruce either not feeling able or willing, to talk to me about his addiction.”

“God Jim, this has been such an emotional roller coaster of a week with Bruce staying with us. We have tried everything we could think of to get him to open up about his mental and emotional troubles: of the need for him to seek professional help in dealing with them; of presenting himself to the Melbourne Clinic for admission, through Repat.”

“In fact, Rowena’s call last night made me even more determined to get Bruce admitted ……… “ And then the fearful realisation hit that Bruce had probably returned to my home and my anger at what could potentially unfold, because of Rowena’s intervention, consumed me.

My mind was totally wrung out in dangers that lurked in the shadows of what had been played out before me, of the horrible betrayal of trust that Rowena had perpetrated. She had played me as if I was a redfin swimming innocently in Eildon Weir.

“Gloria, I need a line now”, I yelled, cursing the extinct telephone push pull cord system we were stuck with.

“Megan, is Bruce with you?” my voice filled with apprehension, asked.

“Yes, luv, it’s OK, he’s in the back garden painting his ceramic vases, with the boys.”

“Look, I’m coming home straight away. I’m sure all is OK but just be alert to his moods.”

During that hurried and troubled drive home, my mind drifted back to another convoy, after the major attack on Long Binh, when with APC escorts we arrived at another ‘FSB’. Just after we had finished unloading pallets of ammunition the outer perimeter of the base, directly opposite from where we had entered, came under mortar attack.

“Corporal”, a lieutenant barked, “you need to decide whether you return to your base without APC escorts or you remain here. If you stay, I cannot offer any cover or support for your trucks or your men.”

‘Well thanks lieutenant’, I thought,’ may Christmas come for you too in the form of a thousand black adders.

And there was Bruce just standing, listening, with eyes remote to the sound of incoming mortars.

With fear and apprehension we left the FSB, away from the incoming mortar fire, back along the tread marks made by the APC’s on their way in, painstakingly staying within them.

Our fear was heightened by the possible sighting of a VC on our way in and therefore a potential ambush or mines on the way out; thankfully neither eventuated. Just as well as Bruce had left his bloody rifle behind!

During those convoys to our FSB’s, I usually nominated one particular driver to be the lead truck, which meant that he could be the first to be ambushed, or more possibly to run over a mine. On Anzac Days, typically after a few reds, he invariably yells out to anybody nearby, “bloody Charlie, the rotten NCO bastard, he always made me lead truck!”

But of course there were the nightmares of imaginary ambushes, yet with fear that was real.

Well, Megan was right, by the time I reached home, there was Bruce sitting calmly in our backyard with our two boys, while they helped him paint his ceramic vases.

“Bruce, I’m sorry that we weren’t ……………” but the words faded silently into an inner well that was now parched and barren.

Quietly he said, “Charlie, it’s OK mate but it’s time for me to go”. The destination unnamed, unspoken yet his eyes were lost in that unnamed destination; it was a destination settled upon and accepted in the innermost depth of his being.

As his car drifted away, my eyes brimmed with a resigned understanding of the message of his gaze. The emotional tension of the week burst forth through uncontrollable tears that flowed from the deep realisation that even though I could give no more, what had been given was not enough and it was never going to be enough. I then knew deep down I would not see Bruce again. It was the first time my boys had ever seen me sobbing.

In that long, hot and sultry summer of a week, which ended in that downpour of emotion, the inevitable time was approaching when his rifle would be at hand but at a time when it should have been left behind.

APRIL, 2010 : HOME, ON OUR BACK DECK

“Hey Charlie, do you often think of Bruce, other than on days like Anzac Day?”

It was one of those wonderfully mellow autumn afternoons and we were outside on our back deck, deliciously digesting one of Meg’s warm chicken salads accompanied with an equally mellow Merlot.

“Sure Marg, I do and in fact I have been thinking of him a lot recently.”

Jim and Marg, Megan and I have remained the closest of friends over these years and we are very much family to each other and to our respective children.

“I’ve been thinking Marg, about how he was obviously more deeply and lastingly harmed by his Vietnam experience, yet I am not aware of him experiencing anything more traumatic than the rest of us. We now understand that he was one of those guys somewhat flawed and vulnerable before conscription and someone who should never have been sent to Vietnam.”

“When you think back” said Jim, “Bruce was always hiding in one way or another : the many days he spent in Signal’s tape recording studio; his long stints on the water trucks around Vung Tau; his practice of not taking his rifle on convoys.”

“In fact” Jim continued, “I can remember one FSB – around the back of the Long Hai Hills –where we had to stay overnight in the scrub. Bruce and I were ordered to man one of the outer listening posts and Bruce just flatly refused!”

“Well Jim, although psychiatrists come up with reasons for these varying capacities to cope with stress and trauma, I really believe that, ‘God only knows why it is so’. Perhaps ours is not to reason why and certainly not to die but to do our best and to live out of our own truth, drawing on our deepest reserves whenever testing times may take us to the brink.”

“Who knows, other than God, what went on in Bruce’s mind and in his innermost being. However to paraphrase Leonard Cohen, perhaps Bruce lived a life dancing to the tune of Gorecki’s Symphony of Sorrowful Songs yet I believe that he now dances to the sublime melody of Mahler’s adagietto movement, the 4th, in his 5th Symphony. Maybe that is where it best lies for us.”

“And I guess that God only knows how traumatic life must have been for Rowena in those very turbulent and distressing years. I need to be more understanding, more accepting and not so judgemental, of her desperate situation.

So there was an autumnal settling of acceptance that we had done the best we could for Bruce, reinforced with the increasingly mellow infusion of Merlot.

Suddenly our relaxed mood was interrupted with a piercing shout of, “POPPY …., POPPY.”

And with that a whirlwind of golden, bouncing tresses, surrounding wide blue eyes, burst on to the back deck.

It was our beautiful grand daughter.

“POPPY, PO”…….pause and a deep breath….., “POPPY,”

“Yes darling,”

“Poppy, what did you do in the war?”

MICHAEL MOSLEY