



HOLDFAST

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OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE VIETNAM TUNNEL RATS ASSOCIATION INC



See you at Club Banora

The reunion organised by the 1 Field Squadron Group is to take place at Club Banora, northern NSW at the end of this month.

Running over the weekend of August 26 to 28, the event will be attended by many Sappers, including a strong contingent of men who are also members of the Vietnam Tunnel Rats Association. This is a great opportunity for former Engineers from all units who served in Vietnam, to get together, have a great time, and of course, remember those who did not come home.

The reunion is an annual event organised by key members of the 1 Field Squadron Group, including Barry Kelly, Terry Ward, Cul Hart and Mick George.

Located close to the Gold across the border in Queensland, Club Banora is a superb facility. There plenty of activities planned, with the dinner on Saturday evening being the highlight.

Pack your bags, leave your troubles behind and look forward to three days of great comradeship.

Here's some M16 mines the VC didn't get hold of



When the laying of the Australian Minefield in Phuoc Tuy Province was completed in 1967, there were many M16 mines left over, still in their boxes.

There's no better way to get rid of a mine than to blow it up, so that's exactly what was done with them. The extraordinary photo above shows just a section of the vast blast being set up by Sappers to destroy the excess mines. "Jethro" Thompson, a former Sapper with 1 Troop provided us with the photo. "Jethro" was badly wounded while working on the minefield.

A TV documentary on the decision to create the minefield and its impact on Australian troops goes to air on SBS at 8:30pm on the 18th of August. Several former 1 Field Squadron Sappers are featured in interviews.

Nostalgia Corner



Pages of great pics from the past to amaze and amuse. Contributions welcome. Send your favourite Vietnam photographs by mail to:
 Jim Marett
 43 Heyington Place
 Toorak Victoria 3142
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“What’s down there Sapper?”

2RAR located an enemy bunker north of Nui Dat in September 1967. Lieutenant Gordon Hurford listens in on details of the tunnel search from Sapper Les Carruthers as he emerges from the tunnel.



Prodding along

In August 1971 Sapper Claude Molone (left), and Sapper Paul Taylor prod carefully for mines in front of a land clearing bulldozer in the southern sector of Phuoc Tuy Province.



“I’d rather be back in Mudgee”

Sapper Ian Williams, then of Mudgee, NSW, takes a break during an operation with the Infantry in July 1968 in an area north of the Long Hai Hills in Phuoc Tuy Province.



Walking the weeds

In January 1970 an 8 RAR patrol emerges from the jungle led by Private Colin Oliver of D Company, followed by Sapper Colin Healy who was attached to 8RAR for the operation



It's a Gas!

Sappers from 2 Troop 1 Field Squadron plan their method of attack for an enemy bunker system into which they have to lay CS crystals (a form of tear gas) to deny access to the Viet Cong. From left to right: Sappers Jock Peattie, Smokey Coe, Ross Hansen and Daryl Porteous.



Operation Sandpit

In between operations with the Infantry or Armoured units, a Sapper could expect all sorts of odd jobs to keep him busy (and out of trouble). Here Sapper Paul Grills has been tasked to supervise the pick-up of a load from the sand pit. It was also a chance to mix with the locals.



Pedro's Party

Can there be a better reason to celebrate than going home after a year as a Tunnel Rat in Vietnam? Here Sapper Peter "Pedro" Piromanski (left) with two of his mates lets it all hang loose on his last night in country. We hope he made it home! Does anyone have a contact number for Pedro?



Sappers on the search

In June 1971 Sapper Daryl Binns (left), carefully prods at the loose surface of Route 2, in the north of Phuoc Tuy Province, while Sapper Steve Armbrust looks on. Before work could begin each day the mini team cleared the road to the North and all areas around any equipment for mines.



Cooling off period

Sapper Barry Waters of 1 Field Squadron comes across a creek in the jungle while attached to Infantry on Operation Broken Hill. Creeks such as these were actually a welcome sight. On top of providing a chance to cool off in the incredible heat, they also provided 'fresh' water.



Bus ride from hell

The buses that rocketed between Saigon and Vung Tau were held together by string and a prayer. Packed with people, furniture, farm produce, and livestock, the buses took their chances with enemy mines and the odd collision with the APCs and tanks of the allies. The only air-conditioning available to ease the stifling heat was the open windows and the rust holes in the floor.



“Take my compass so you won’t get lost!”

The Commanding Officer of 1 Field Squadron, Major John Kemp (right), hands his compass to Sapper Barry O'Rourke to help Barry plot his course through a tunnel complex. The tunnels had been found by B Company of 2RAR during Operation Duntroon in January 1968.



Holey Cow!

The grass is always greener on the other side, but it was a bad tactical move on the part of this cow to move into the Dat Do minefield for a feed. Lacking the Sapper skills to clear a safe path, she came to a quick end. Rumour was that she was sent in by the VC to test the minefield.



Christmas Treats

What more could a Tunnel Rat want on Christmas Day than a fine cigar and a sip of rum served by a friendly Officer? Sapper Bob McGlenn of 2 Troop 1 Field Squadron celebrates the festive season while out bush with the Grunts in December 1970. Bob now lives in Tarampa Qld.



Enemy Bunkers

In March 1971 Sapper Danny Brindley was on operations with the Infantry when they came across a large enemy bunker system. Here Danny works with his Number Two as they search the bunkers for documents and weapons before blowing them up and then moving on.



AC47 Spooky Gunship

You knew you were really in trouble when this bird flew over to help you out. The massive firepower of its three electric gatling guns could cover every inch of ground, and the unique sound was unforgettable.

The Boozer

Here it is - the social hub of 1 Field Squadron, the scene of many an argument amongst the Tunnel Rats over which of the Field Troops spent most time out bush. It was here too that last minute "Jack Rations" were purchased to stuff into your pack before heading out on operations. No official count was ever made on just how many brain cells were killed off in this place, but with beer at just 15 cents a can, the casualties were high.



Back from the bush and tonguing for a beer

One of life's great pleasures in Vietnam was arriving back in Nui Dat base camp safe and sound after an operation and joining your Troop-mates at the Boozer for a zillion beers. Seen here, doing just that are (from left to right) Sappers; John Crocker, Jim Gleeson, Bob McGlenn and Terry Wake, and in front, Sappers Eric Thompson and Roy Sojan, all of 2 Troop, 1 Field Squadron. Ever-resourceful, as Sappers should be, the lads always managed to find a way around the "two cans per man per day" rule which was foolishly introduced from time to time.

Decision Time

You're on-board the Lambro three-wheeled "Taxi" in Vungers and nearing your destination. Naturally you don't want to pay the fare, so it's time to decide on just where to jump out and do your "runner" on the poor driver who works all day for a pittance. Skipping the fare on these Lambro taxis became quite an art form, with many a legend having been created by some of the better exponents. One Sapper, who still wishes to remain nameless, claims he once hijacked a Lambro to drive himself back to base after the driver got out to argue over the fare!

Mine Incident!

Four Sappers wounded in action share the horror of their experiences



The casualty rate amongst the "Tunnel Rats" in Vietnam was horrendous, but the unique way we worked meant many of us often weren't aware of how many of us were being killed and wounded. We carried out our mines, booby traps, tunnel and bunker searching tasks, while attached to Infantry and Armoured units for four to six week-long operations. This extended time out bush and the fact that we worked in teams of only two men meant we didn't hear about the casualties within our own Troop or the two other Field Troops until we got back into base camp. The immediate impact was gone.

As an example of one 12 month posting period - from June 1969 to June 1970 there were 48 casualties (12 killed and 36 wounded) from 1 Field Squadron. At least 95% of these casualties were among the approximately 120 men who comprised the three Field Troops of

*"You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by
Sneak home and pray you never know
The hell where youth and laughter go"*

Siegfried Sassoon
Suicide in The Trenches

"Tunnel Rats" then operating in Vietnam (each Troop had about 40 men who went out on operations). This represents a casualty rate of over 33% - or one in every three of us was either killed or wounded.

John (Jethro) Thompson, a Sapper with 1 Troop, 1 Field Squadron, Vietnam, was wounded in action on 9 May 1967

while laying the Dat Do Minefield. He lost his left leg, his right arm and three of the fingers on his one remaining hand.

In late April I was sent out to the "Horseshoe" base camp where 1 Troop had started on the laying of the minefield which comprised various tasks including testing, placing in position and arming. The worst task for me was arming the mines. I would get splitting headaches from the combination of the concentration, the tension and the relentless hot sun. For me it was nerve-wracking stuff arming those damn things, but some of the guys appeared less concerned, acting like cowboys in a rather cavalier way, and competing to see who could arm the most mines in a day. Instead of working in a team as we were instructed, sometimes they'd arm mines on their own while the other team-member had a smoke. These cowboys used to worry me

as we were all working so close, and if anything went up, we'd all be caught in the blast and shrapnel zone.

On that fatal day of 9 May, at the morning parade we were told that the boss wanted us to lift our number to 500 mines a day. To achieve this we were to now work in sections, taking turns at all the required tasks throughout the day. My section was given the task of arming the mines first up. I wasn't happy, but was at least pleased that it was to be in the cooler early part of the day. From memory I believe we were to arm twenty clusters, totalling eighty mines, then rotate to another task such as carrying, digging or testing.

We completed arming our required number of mines and moved out of the danger area to where we had left our gear and rifles. An NCO came along wanting to know what we were doing, so we explained that we had completed our task as instructed, but he responded by telling us all to get back into arming mines. This was contrary to what we had been told earlier, but we started to head back to where we had left the flak jackets and helmets.

As I was standing there adjusting my jacket I noticed that my partner for the morning, Ashley Culkin was crouching over a mine. He was a top little bloke but I thought, "Oh shit, he's already into it". And that's the last thing I remember before I was flying through the air. All the dust and crap seemed to float down and cover me in very slow motion. My hands were just spewing blood and I couldn't feel my left leg it actually felt like it was hanging over an edge, dangling in mid-air

As I was lying there many guys come over to assist the wounded. Four of us were laid out on the ground and several others were sort of mobile but had shrapnel wounds. Ashley was badly lacerated and had vision problems, Ray Deed received a fatal wound in the throat and died later that night. Dennis Brooks received wounds to his leg



Above: Jethro being air-evacuated from the hospital in Vung Tau to Australia. Left: Jethro today



and would probably have lost his leg if he had of survived, but he suffered from a clot on the brain about two weeks later in hospital.

I got hit from left to right. My left leg was only attached by shreds high up in my thigh. I'm not one to boast, but my dick is now longer than my left leg. My left hand was a mess of fingers hanging all over the place and blood rushing down my arms. I lost all but the thumb and index finger. My right hand was bloody, but not so bad apparently. I only lost a small piece of a finger, but my wrist had been badly gouged. My buttocks and right leg were badly lacerated and I still have many scars at the rear. My left eardrum was perforated and a piece of shrapnel lodged behind my left ear and above my left eye. It's still there.

wound at the base of the flak jacket which opened me up exposing my intestines. I put my arms up and thought what a bloody mess. I heard someone yelling out to put the pins back in the mines near us. Then one bloke said, "We can't Jethro's got them".

Bret Nolen the Troop Sergeant was hovering over me trying to stop the blood flow. I was hot and looking into the sun. Two other guys were attending to me and I tried to keep them between me and the sun. When I asked for a drink they looked at each other then at the medic. As I had so many wounds I think they thought I was going die anyway, so they gave me a drink despite my intestines hanging out. Apparently the chopper that flew me to Vung Tau had to land at a small fishing village to collect more blood to keep me alive. I received 51 units of blood products during the evacuation and first operation.

I remember an American nurse with big blue eyes asking me questions about what I may be allergic to and had I had this or that needle. Behind her, brandishing a pair of shears in



African-American I'd ever seen. I feared the worst, but the sheers were to cut away any clothing. After hearing the doctors calling for one of the choppers to remain on the pad, I eventually passed out.

The chopper was required to fly Deed and Culkin to another hospital. I woke up after five lost days, feeling very sore. I was also getting shitty about the guy in the next bed to me, as I kept speaking to him, but he wouldn't answer me. Later I was told that he'd had his jaw wired and couldn't speak.

At one stage a nurse woke me and asked me to speak to Dennis Brooks. Later they wheeled him out of the ward. I asked where they'd taken him and was told he'd gone to another part of the hospital. I found out much later that he had died of his wounds. In fact, I had no idea what had happened to the others until after many months when I was back in Australia. My sister told me while visiting me at the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital.

Meantime, back in Vietnam, about ten days after the mine incident, one of the doctors told me he had some bad news for me. I was told they'd have to amputate my hand. I thought that was not too bad as it was a mess held together with wire. I looked at what was left of my left

M16 mines stored in boxes at the Horseshoe before placement into the minefield

hand and moved it forward as if offering it to the doctor. "I'm sorry" he said, "it's the right hand that has to go". The surgery to repair my lacerated right wrist hadn't worked. They didn't have microsurgery available in those days. The shrapnel that had perforated my intestines created such damage that I lost my gall bladder several weeks later along with most of my small bowel.

In the early days after coming home and recovering, I suffered a lot from anxiety and I packed a lot of guilt. But now I've had so many good years since the incident and it's no good bitching about it. I give all credit to my mates, to the medics and to the DVA who have all looked after me well. If I'm bitter about anything, it's that no one ever asked me what happened on that day. Reports were written on the incident but incredibly, no one ever asked me to contribute.

John "Jethro" Thompson now lives in Queensland, is extremely mobile, absolutely positive about life, and enjoys a glass of good red over a long lunch, particularly in the company of Sappers.

Peter Hollis, a Sapper with 1 Troop, 1 Field Squadron, Vietnam, was wounded in action on 22 May 1969 on the outskirts of Dat Do. He received wounds to his hands, arms and back, and was temporarily paralysed.

Our Troop had been working as mini-teams and splinter teams with 4RAR for a year and was about to start working with their replacement, 6RAR. In the interim we got all sorts of odd jobs, including working on constructing a series of bunkers around the village of Dat Do. It was to be a pleasant break from patrolling with the Infantry, and it was to be unusual because instead of working in teams of two as we normally did, about 15 men from the Troop were assigned to the bunker construction task. To carry this work out, we'd live at the Horseshoe base camp and travel each day to Dat Do. The idea was for the local forces, the ARVN, to protect the work site each night when we returned to the Horseshoe.

A small dozer would dig the basic hole for the bunkers, and the framework would be pre-fabricated at Nui Dat then delivered to the site by truck. On 21st May we inspected the hole into which we'd construct our first bunker, planning to come back next morning when the framework would be delivered. That



Sapper Peter Hollis (Centre) out bush with Whisky Company, obviously in the wet season!



night at the Horseshoe we observed a firefight obviously going on at Dat Do, with the tracer rounds zipping across the skyline, making us realize that the enemy were close at hand to the work area. This made the possibility of mines being laid against us a strong concern, so we were very careful next morning.

On arrival at the site at around 9am we met up with Major Rex Rowe, the OC of 1 Field Squadron and the truck which had come in from Nui Dat with the frame for the bunker. Fred McIntyre from HQ drove the truck and Peter Brunton from 2 Troop was riding shotgun. I took two Sappers with me to help unload the truck, Peter Bramble and Alan Smith. We walked in front of the truck towards the work site where three ARVN soldiers who'd been guarding the site overnight were waiting for us to arrive so they could leave. I told them they could go, then we walked into the site, making sure we didn't step on any of the 'spoil', an obvious place to set mines. I told Peter and Alan that we'd have to check all the 'spoil' area and the hole itself for mines before we began work. The truck was starting to come in off the track

towards us when there was an explosion. For an instant I thought we'd been hit by an RPG. It all seemed to happen in slow motion, with my rifle sort of floating away from me, the woodwork disintegrating in fine detail. I remember being worried that the RPG would be followed up with small arms fire and I needed to be ready for that, so I reached out for my disintegrating rifle and saw the blood spurting from my hand. Realising my rifle wasn't going to be much use I then reached for my pistol but I'd left it in the truck.

I was still in mid-air as I twisted around to see where the explosion came from, when I saw the second lot of mines coming up out of the ground - each one a puff of smoke surrounded by dirt coming out of the ground. It was happening over in the 'spoil' and I now realized it was mines and not an RPG. A total of four mines burst out of the ground, but only three of them exploded.

The ARVN had taken a short cut across the 'spoil' and set off the mines, but at the time I didn't know this, and I thought I'd stood on one of them myself.

The Horseshoe base camp from which Australians carried out work on the minefield and the bunkers around Dat Do

I then realized I couldn't feel anything below the waist and began to panic about being paralyzed. My hand was hurting and there was a burning sensation from my back and shoulders. I forced myself to look down, and I was wounded in the leg but at least both legs were still there. Peter was on the ground beside the excavation and I could see that he'd been badly hurt. Alan was between Peter and myself and I could see he'd been wounded in the back and he didn't respond when I asked him if he was OK.

The truck was damaged in front, including a broken windshield. I saw that Peter Brunton was climbing out of the hatch in the truck's roof, and I knew he would try to come to our aid, but I yelled at him to stop and to tell everyone that we were in a minefield. The drill in these situations is for everyone to remain stationary while Sappers cleared safe lanes to the wounded.

Major Rowe and Lt. Jesser, Troop



Above: Peter Hollis today: (left to right) Gary Degaring, John Fuller (front), Peter Hollis, Max Goiser and Terry Gleeson, all Tunnel Rats from 1 Troop, 1 Field Squadron. Max and Terry helped clear safe lanes to the wounded at the mine incident



Left: In May 1969, Sapper Ken Wheatley works on one of the bunkers around Dat Do

Officer with 1 Troop started coming down the track with Sappers Alan Foster, Alan Paynter, Max Goiser and Terry Gleeson. I told them to work their way into us by clearing for mines with their bayonets. The Sappers later used mine detectors which had arrived from the Horseshoe. They worked their way into us, past me and up to Peter who was obviously the most severely injured, and on to Alan and over to the ARVN.

The dustoff helicopter sent to evacuate us had to circle above us for some time while the area was cleared of mines and while a landing zone was chosen and also cleared of mines. Eventually we were lifted off, about 30 to 40 minutes after the explosions.

Only one of the ARVN was alive, and he was with us in the chopper, but he died soon after arrival at the Australian Hospital in Vung Tau. By

the time we got to the hospital I was actually elated because I could feel pain in my legs and I could move them again. The paralysis must have been temporary. We went into the hospital where they started working on Peter right away. They worked on him till about 3pm but unfortunately he died from his wounds. They didn't tell us this until the next day.

Alan and I had been immediately transferred to the American 36th Casevac hospital as there was no room at the Australian unit due to renovations. Here we were operated on quickly and within a few days sent back to the Australian hospital. Alan developed infections which caused him to be sent home to Australia. I healed quickly and easily, which meant I was sent back to 1 Troop at Nui Dat. My first trip back out on operations was with Whisky Company, incredibly, back

to the Dat Do village area again.

I learnt after I got back to 1 Troop, that the guys clearing the mine incident site found seven more mines that morning, a total of 11. That night they returned to the Horseshoe, again leaving the worksite to be protected by the ARVN. Next morning, obviously on full alert, they thoroughly checked the worksite for mines and found that 13 new mines had been laid overnight, including two where the dustoff chopper landed and two where Sappers had rested under a tree during the clearing process the day before.

We learnt later that all these mines had definitely been taken out of the Australian-laid minefield. In July 1969 I saw a 19 year old female 'Chieu Hoi' (VC who surrendered and entered a program where they helped the Government forces fight the communists) demonstrate how easy it was to go into the minefield. She went in and recovered 28 mines from a cache. I saw her again some weeks later, this time in the Long Greens area, with Rex Rowe who was obviously getting intelligence information on mines from her about the tunnel and bunker system we'd just found with 9RAR. I took the opportunity to ask the girl who had laid the mines that got the Australians at Dat Do on 22nd May. She grinned and proudly proclaimed that she had laid them. I took off my shirt, showed her my wounds and told her about my mate Peter Bramble and the ARVN who'd been KIA that day. Fear washed over her face as she saw the anger building up in me. Fortunately they took her away, out of harms way before anything happened. I saw her again about a month later, freely walking the streets of Dat Do. Incredible!

Peter Hollis now lives at Port Macquarie, NSW. His wounds are well healed these days, except for the skin and muscle feeling a bit dead down the back of his legs and on parts of his back. All in all, he's positive about life and values the experience of Vietnam, particularly the comradeship it generated.

Sappers Mick "Grumpy" Foster and Kev Conner, of 2 Troop were wounded in action when a command detonated anti-tank mine exploded under the APC they were on near Long Phuoc Hai on March 23rd 1970.

Grumpy and Kev were attached to the APCs operating in the Long Greens. Kev had been with them for some weeks, but Grumpy had only joined them the day before after being sent out to replace Bruce Bofinger. "I'd been caught and charged for drinking in the lines, so they thought they were doing the right thing by sending me out bush instead of doing my punishment at Nui Dat," says Grumpy.

The APCs returned to NDP Bridget each night and it was on the return journey to Bridget on March 23rd that the incident happened.

"I'd had a feeling that something was going to happen that day," remembered Grumpy. "We were moving back to Bridget, with a dozer in front of us. I had been sitting inside the APC, but because of my premonition I moved back up top and sat at the back left side."

Kev was already sitting up top, on the right side. "I never sat inside because you'd be mince meat if you hit it a big one," said Kev.

The mine was command detonated, the dozer was let past and then the mine was ignited under the APC, right under Grumpy, flipping the 13 ton APC onto its side and sending Grumpy over 20ft into the air before he came crashing down into the mine crater.

"I remember a huge flash, but then nothing until I awoke in the hospital," says Grumpy.

Kev was thrown about 10ft into the air, landing hard on one knee. "I remember the flash and the incredible bang, and flying through the air before coming down with a real whack," recalls Kev. "And I nearly froze to death on the dustoff because we were strapped onto skids on the outside of the chopper.

Once at the hospital all the nurses Troop on light duties



Top: Grumpy (left) and Kev, all dressed up for the 5RAR Reunion in February 2005. Bottom left photo: Chris Kalouris (left) and Grumpy on the chopper pad at Nui Dat. Bottom right photo: Bob Ottery (left) and Kev Connor sinking a "goffer" at an RTA farewell.

and doctors swung into action, checking us out, trying to see where we most needed attention."

Grumpy had internal bleeding, damaged eardrums, a badly damaged back and incredible bruising. "I was black from my knees to my chest," says Grumpy. Kev had similar ear and back injuries plus his damaged knee.

After three weeks in hospital, both were ready to be discharged, with Mick being told he'd be sent back to Australia. "I told them there was no bloody way I was going home without seeing my mates in 2 Troop", say Grumpy. "The CO of 1 Fld Sqn, Major Johnston even came down with my gear for going home, but eventually I convinced them and was posted back to 2

Kev was posted back to 2 Troop and resumed Tunnel Rat duties.

On returning to Australia, both Grumpy and Kev had continuing back and hearing problems. Grumpy had a series of internal problems, and at one point in 1985 an operation revealed a marble-sized piece of shrapnel, which was removed from his stomach.

Today Grumpy and Kev both live in Cairns. They still look after each other, with Grumpy calling around to Kev's place each day to drag him out for a "run". Kev sold his newsagency business several years ago, and now spends time fishing and crabbing. Grumpy has also retired but is very active in

Sapper Snippets



A great aerial shot of Nui Dat base camp

It mightn't look like much, but this was home for the Tunnel Rats when we weren't out on operations.

Nui Dat base camp was safe as houses and seeing the view above from a chopper as you came back after a long time out bush was one of the most glorious sights known to man. SAS Hill is roughly in the middle, with Luscombe Field airstrip to the right of it and the big chopper pad to the left of it.

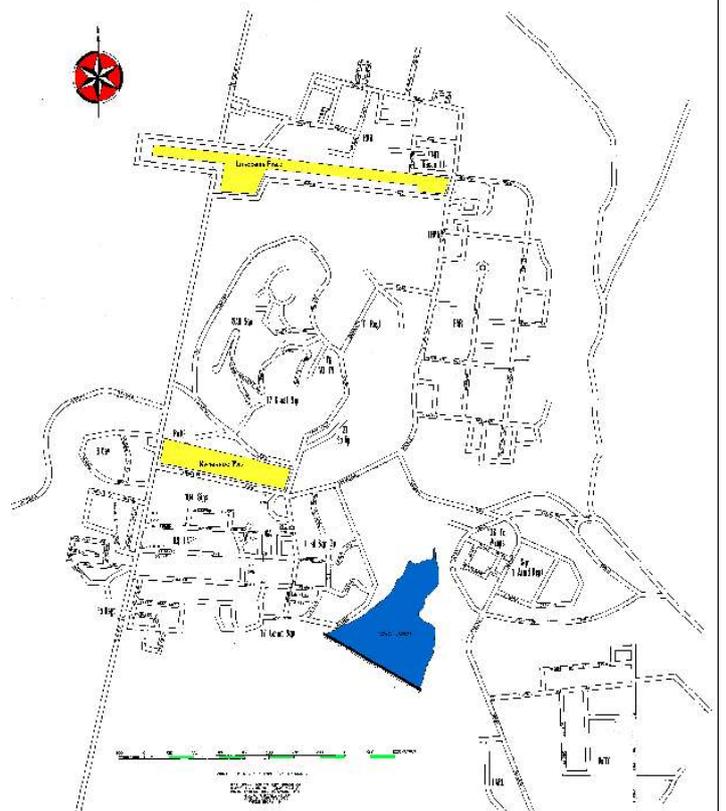
Nui Dat meant hot showers, real food (instead of C Rations), movies, the PX Store and the boozier. Best of all it meant you could see a few of your Troop mates again, knock down a few beers with them and catch up on what's been happening.

The three Field Troops (1, 2 & 3 Troop) were located immediately to the right of the triangular shaped dam seen to the extreme left of the photo. Several Sappers actually went water skiing on the dam when the powers-that-be felt it was necessary to "test-run" one of the aluminium boats held in storage at the base.

To the right is a road map of the whole base camp.

1 ATF ROAD MAP

Not to be taken outside 1 ATF area without the authority of GSO 2 GPO



Business is booming at the Back Beach

If you go back to Vietnam today you'll be a little surprised at how things have changed at the Back Beach where the Peter Badcoe Club was located.

Nowadays the place looks more like the Gold Coast than the sparse stretch of beach that we knew.

There are now dozens of hotels, motels, massage joints, night clubs and restaurants crammed onto the strip of once barren land.

The top photo on the right shows the beach in 1969 and the bottom photo, taken in late 2004 shows the dramatic changes that have taken place.

There is now a four lane road running from the beach front in the main part of town to the Back Beach. There are some great little seafood restaurants on this road.

On weekends it's shoulder to shoulder on the beach and you are constantly pestered by vendors wanting to sell you everything, from a cold drink to a hot woman (some things never change).

There are remnants of the Badcoe Club left, but you have to look hard, and they are disappearing fast.



Sapper Smith's Skinny dippers

Kevin Smith (a Tunnel Rat with 1 Troop 1 Field Squadron) provided this amazing photo, taken when he was out bush with 6 RAR on Operation Portsea during March/April 1967. Forget tactics, forget "never bunch up" and forget "never be without your weapon" - these boys were desperate for a swim and a scrub. The river was the Song Rai, but to these guys it felt like the French Riviera. The only downside was that within five minutes of resuming scrub-bashing, you were bathed in sweat again and the Song Rai was a distant memory.



Line-up of leaders

In the last issue of Holdfast we published a photo of the four lads on the right, despite the fact the photo was out of focus and blurred by movement. Taken at the reunion with 5 RAR in February this year, it was such a rare moment to have these four leaders together that we ran the photo despite its failings. Graeme Gartside sent us a better image, and here it is at right:

(From left to right) Bevan Percival (former Troop Sgt. with 2 Troop), John Hopman (former Troop Officer with 2 Troop), Colin Kahn (former CO 5 RAR), and Rex Rowe (former CO of 1 Field Squadron). If you were a Tunnel Rat in Vietnam in the 1969/1970 period, one or all of these men were an influence on your life. We thank them for their leadership then, and for their comradeship now.



Vungers!

For the Sappers who went there on leave, Vung Tau was a very special place, and it still holds a unique spot in their hearts



A trip to Vung Tau was a rare treat indeed for the Tunnel Rats of 1 Field Squadron. Usually the trip was for two days leave after a four or six-week operation out bush.

A period of incredible comradeship, insane drinking and even some erotic pleasures could be looked forward to over the two days. Not everyone indulged in this latter activity, but for those that did, there were many options available, and all at affordable prices.

With civilian clothes in our bags and evil on our minds we'd head off for Vung Tau on the morning convoy. The journey took little more than an hour, but a transition took place in us during that journey that went far beyond mere time. Compared to being out on operations, we felt totally safe for the next few days. Add to this the powerful feeling of anticipation and total freedom as you neared the town. All those pleasures were waiting for you, and there was nobody to stop you enjoying them. In fact some guys never got over it, and spent much

that incredible feeling by living in one of the seedier cities of Asia. It's not the same of course, because the comradeship and sense of urgency that war brought to the package were essential elements in the mad mix that was Vung Tau.

Accommodation was at the Peter Badcoe Club, an Army-run facility with real beds, good food, a bar and a swimming pool. At check-in we'd hand in our weapons and receive a lecture from the Padre about the dangers the hookers in town were to our health and morals. "Put two condoms on then stand at the door and watch your mate do it," was the sage advice from one Padre.

It was then time to change into civilian clothes, adding again to that feeling of freedom. The bar at the Badcoe club seemed to be open all the time, so a few beers were the first order of the day, and perhaps lunch at the Club because you'd probably eat very little over the next few days. There were restaurants and food stalls in town, but we were

*The Peter Badcoe Club, with
1 ALSG in the background*

dramatic dose of the trots. The bread rolls stuffed with cold meats sold on the streets were known as "Heppo Rolls", because of the hepatitis risk in every bite. Simple solution; drink, but don't eat.

Getting into town involved a walk to the front gates of the base where cabs or "Lambros" were available. Lambros were basically a Lambretta scooter with a small cabin added to carry passengers. Weighty Aussies soon discovered that by standing on the back step of the cabin you could tilt the whole machine and have the front wheel and the driver in mid-air with no control over the machine. Small things amused us at this stage in our lives. The trip to town was short, but the fare always varied according to how much the driver thought he could get away with.

the local currency, the Dong. This illegal, black market transaction usually took place at one of the Indian tailor shops. We knew these guys were thieves and rogues, but the “profit” on exchanging these currencies was so high that even after the cheating process you ended up with “beaucoup” extra spending money. What a way to start the day! The downside was that you'd really be in trouble if you got caught but, hey, what are they going to do, send us to Vietnam?

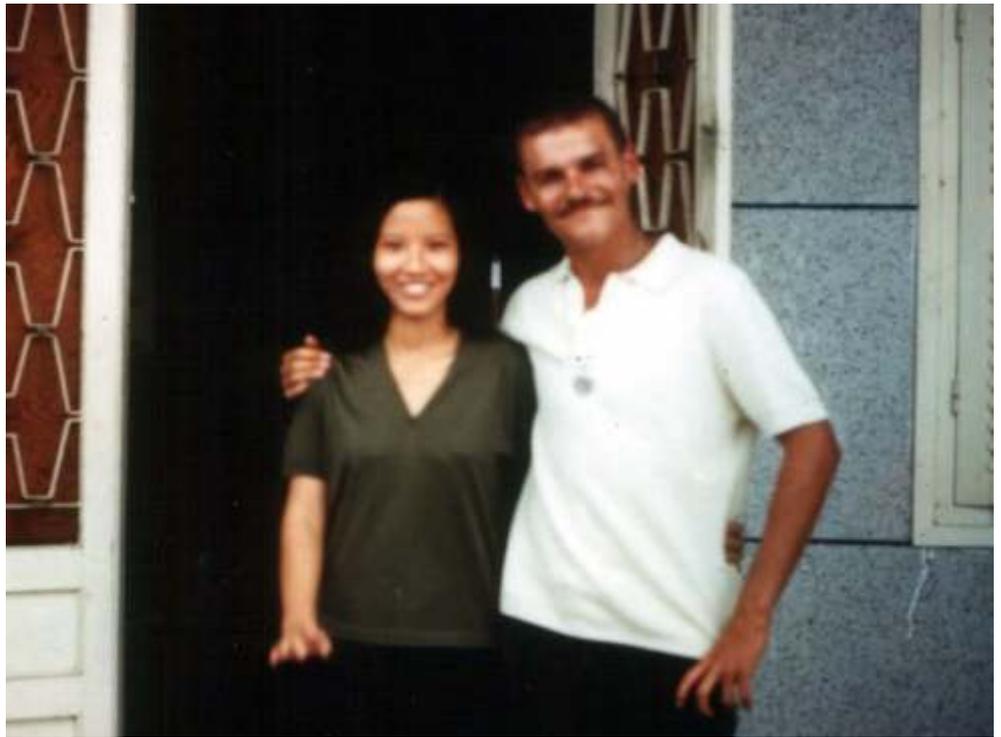
We'd then meet up with each other in the heart of town, at “The Flags”, a patriotic display listing all the nations supporting South Vietnam in the war. From here it was a matter of choosing which particular delights you wanted to pursue that day. There were plenty of options.

The Bars.

There were many bars to choose from, and after a few visits, most guys had selected their favourite places. The formula was simple, and the same across all the bars - booze and women - but a good bar was one that didn't cheat you too much, had good looking, good humoured girls and felt comfortable enough for you and your mates to hang out there for a few hours. The girls worked you over like the professionals they were. And let's face it, all our defences were down and we were easy targets. The girls had three key goals. One was to sell you plenty of booze. Another was to get you to buy her “Saigon Teas”. These were literally drinks of tea or sometimes soft drinks with prices bearing no relationship to the contents. What you were actually doing was buying her time, paying for her to sit with you and tell you how handsome you were. Her third goal was to “seduce” you into spending the night with her. In most cases this was not a difficult task and usually required nothing more from her than a straying hand and maybe a romantic line. “You like boom boom me?” was always a winner. Ah yes, life was so simple back then.

All-Nighters

Taking your girl out of the bar for the



night involved certain charges which had to be negotiated with the Mamasan. Evidently the money was then split between the Mamasan, the bar owner and of course the lovely little vixen you were about to walk out the door with. Most of the girls lived in little terrace houses in the back streets of town, sharing the house with a number of other hookers. The bedroom often housed two, three or even four double beds, with mosquito nets providing the only element of privacy. This didn't seem to matter at the time, and in fact provided the opportunity to meet

Top: Sapper Frank Denley emerges into the light of day with a brand new friend. Bottom: Sappers Greg Gough (left) and Jim Marett (right) have combed dozens of bars to end up with these beauties!

new people, including a few US servicemen who were on leave at the same time. Bathrooms were non-existent. Instead there was usually a large earthen jar in an adjoining outside courtyard. Using a wooden dipper, you'd be given a splash bath that sobered you up a little before retiring to the communal



love nest. Ceiling fans turned lazily overhead throughout the hot and humid night, accompanied by the occasional squeal of delight (or horror) from one of the other beds. In the morning you had to wait till the curfew lifted before exiting the house and heading back to the base camp. At the Badcoe Club you'd shower and compare notes with your mates over breakfast before starting the cycle all over again by heading back into town for day two of the festivities.

Legitimate Barber Shops

Even the legitimate barber shops in Vung Tau did a whole lot more than cut hair. Manicures, facials, shoulder massages and ear cleaning were all on offer. Even the basic haircut and shave involved shaving of the entire face, including the forehead, nose and the surface of the ears. Nose hairs were delicately clipped with needle-like scissors and by the time you left the chair you were literally shining.



Hanky Panky Barber Shops

These places did all of the above but also offered steam bath and massage plus "extras". This was a great way to refresh yourself halfway through a day of drinking with the lads. The steam bath was communal, and great fun with a bunch of mates, all anticipating the massage and "extras". The massage was performed by a pretty young girl whose role was not unlike that of a teasing mare in horse breeding. Towards the end of the massage her hand would "inadvertently" brush against the most sensitive areas while she did her sales pitch on whether or not you wanted "extras". The answer was always yes, even when by experience you knew that once the additional money was paid, the young girl would disappear and an



Top: The favoured rendezvous point was "The Flags". Middle: The barber shop, steam bath and massage joint near The Flags. Bottom: The Jade, slightly out of the way, but well worth the trip

old and ugly “Turkey Woman” (ie a gobbler) would take her place to perform the final act. The romance of the moment was often further reduced by one or more of your mates peering and jeering over the low partitions between each massage cubicle.

The Jade Bar

This place was the market leader. It was a little out of the main area of town, but well worth the effort. Somebody just got the formula right in this place and created perfection. Behind the reception desk were displayed the photos of all the girls available that day. You made your choice then retired to the adjoining bar for a drink while you waited for the girl to join you. Once acquainted you moved to one of the rooms out the back, each of which were totally self-contained. Every room had a bath, a steam bath and a massage bed. She washed you like a baby in the bath and it was all downhill from that point onwards. This was really upmarket and accordingly cost a little more than the sleazier joints.

The Grand

Speaking of upmarket, “The Grand” lived up to its name. An old French hotel from the 1800's, the Grand was frequented by officers, but we diggers went their too, partly to annoy the officers and partly because the girls seemed to be prettier. There was a real restaurant. There were floorshows and even poker machines in an area exclusively for officers.

Sightseeing

There was plenty to see in Vungers, but most of us didn't get to see it until perhaps towards the end of our tour when concerns over taking “the clap” home had us seeking alternative pursuits. There was a huge Buddhist park featuring many statues, there was Villa Blanc, the white mansion on the edge of town, there were old French forts to see, and a walk through the market was a must.

Heading back to base

The weary and battle-worn bunch of lads that gathered to await transport back to Nui Dat after the two-day



leave were quite a sight to see. There were always physical injuries from falls and fights. Some had lost a wallet, a watch or a camera, and usually someone had lost all three. Nobody had any money left. Hangovers were monumental, and a low point of the trip back was the gut-turning slow drive through Cat-Lo, a place famous for the manufacture of dried fish and fish sauce.

Great memories are made of these things.

Editor's note: We realise that in today's terms the tone and content of this piece is totally politically incorrect, but they were different times back then and vastly different circumstances. Don't even think about complaining.



*Top: The posh Grand Hotel.
Middle: A row of Vung Tau bars.
Bottom: The dreaded “Heppo Rolls” awaiting their next victims*

The Boys from the North

The NVA travelled far and did it tough when they got there

These extraordinary photos are the work of a North Vietnamese war photographer who accompanied North Vietnamese troops on their journey south.

The enemy in Phuoc Tuy Province came in two versions, the local Viet Cong forces, and the more structured NVA who walked all the way from North Vietnam.

For the NVA, the journey south could take months, during which time they faced the continuous threat of attack from B52 bombers. These aircraft flew so high and dropped their bombs from so far away there was absolutely no warning of the impending apocalypse. Those that survived the blast were odds-on for severe hearing disabilities!

The NVA were in larger groups than the VC, often operating as a Company or even a Battalion.

Local VC units were employed to construct the bunker systems for the NVA to move into on their arrival in Phuoc Tuy Province. The continuous patrolling by the Aussies in particular meant these systems were quickly found. It was the role of the Sappers in the Field Troops, the "Tunnel Rats" to search these bunkers and then blow them up to deny any further use of them by the enemy.

This kept the NVA on the move and of course kept the Tunnel Rats busy. New bunker systems were quickly built, and just as quickly discovered and destroyed.

You had to admire the determination of these NVA troops who survived on what they carried, supplemented by a supply system that was highly vulnerable. They had no air support and for the severely wounded, it was a long way to any decent form of medical treatment.



*Top: A genuine action photo as an NVA officer drives his men forward.
Middle: It actually got cold in the highlands - here the NVA cross the mountains on their journey south.
Bottom: They may not have had Bailey Bridges, but they had plenty of Sappers to do the hard slog.*



More Tunnel Rats found

Here's our updated list of former Tunnel Rats from 1 Field Squadron RAE, Vietnam 1965-71.

If you can help with names and numbers, please contact our "Master of The List", Graeme Gartside on 08 8725 2845, or by mail to Graeme Gartside, 9 Park Street Mt Gambier SA 5290 or by email: hawthorn@anson.com.au

3 Field Troop (1965-66)

Alan Tugwell 08 8552 5229
Keith Mills 07 4770 7267
Les Colmer 08 8087 3817
Ray Forster 07 3409 1907
Bary Harford 08 8088 4371
Wilfred Eyles 02 4390 0150
Bill Corby 07 5502 1193
Snow Wilson Jnr 02 6649 3998
Des Evans 07 5486 3886
Warren Murray 03 5728 3341
Ian Biddolph 02 4472 9434
Bernie Pollard 08 9248 3178
Peter Ash 02 6771 4623

OC's 1 Field Squadron

John Kemp 02 6288 3428
Rex Rowe 02 4861 6324

1 Troop (1966-67)

Ron Rockliffe 02 9789 4302
Trevor Shelley 0419484954
John Thompson 0732168906
Barry Kelly 07 4661 2898
Ken Jolley 02 6624 4066
Mick George 02 6882 8574
Cul Hart 02 4392 0912
Kevin Smith 03 9787 1506

1 Troop (1967-68)



Bret Nolan 03 5278 9969

Alan Rantall 03 9434 2031
Clive Pearsall 03 9459 4470
Bob Coleman 03 5342 0941
Peter Sheehan 03 9390 2834
Peter Koch 04 3822 3100
Phil (Jonah) Jones 07 3390 1130
Ray Kenny 07 3881 3648

1 Troop (1968-69)

Colin Spies 07 4743 4676
Garry Von Stanke 08 8725 5648
George Hulse 07 3399 7659
David Wright 03 9435 4131
Ken Wheatley 07 4774 0045
Bob Wooley 03 6264 1485
Peter Carrodus 02 9759 6383

1 Troop (1969-70)

Terry Gleeson 03 5623 2886
Larry Batze 07 4033 2025
Jon Fuller 02 4774 1674

Garry Degering 03 9763 0510
Paul Cook 02 4946 5321
Trevor Kelly 08 9538 1184

1 Troop (1970-71)

Peter Krause 02 6723 2835
Jim Weston 02 4987 7179
Ian Cambell 03 9870 0313
Mick Augustus 07 3205 7401
Barry Meldrum 03 5427 1162
Garry Sutcliffe 07 4684 3229

2 Troop (1966 1967)

Richard Beck 07 3208 5808
David Buring 02 6254 6689
Ron Cain 02 6586 1412
Graeme Carey 02 6056 0997
Stan Shepherd 07 5523 2157
Mick Shannon 08 8552 1746
Ken McCann 03 5985 3276
Bill Harrigan 08 9447 1127
Bob Sweeney 08 9248 4432
Rod McClellan 07 3267 6907
Peter Matthews 03 6250 3686
Peter Hegarty 07 4169 0372
Bob McKinnon 07 3267 0310

2 Troop (1967 1968)

Peter Fontanini 08 9301 0805
David Matulik 07 4055 1915
Harry Cooling 07 4778 2013
Peter Perry 08 9756 7780
Peter Bennett 08 9385 5499
Brian Sheehan 03 9336 3137
Robert Knowles 08 9535 6416
Bernard Ladyman 08 9795 7900
Lew Jordan 03 6397 3261
Dennis Burge 08 8281 2270
Murdock Ballantyne 08 8298 2515
Ron Johnston 07 3351 1609
Ray Kenny 07 3881 3648
Stan Shepherd 07 5523 2157
Andrew Rogers 08 8087 5671
Stephen McHenry 08 9344 6939
Warren McBurnie 02 6687 7030
David Kitley 02 4735 4991
John Kiley 02 4228 4068
John Beningfield 07 4778 4473
Hans Rehorn 03 5623 5572
Geoff Russell 02 6342 1292
Brian Rankin 07 4775 5095
John Goldfinch 02 6674 0855
Roland Gloss 02 6367 5324
James Smith 0413 669 087
Garry Cosgrove 02 4845 5153
Mick Rowbotham 03 9439 7566

2 Troop (1968 1969)

Peter Clayton 0418 823 266
Bill Morris 08 9384 2686
Robert Earl 02 4990 3601
Stan Golubenko 03 9361 2721
Don Nicholls 02 9579 4126
Peter Laws 02 4942 8131
Rick Martin 02 6928 4253
Colin Norris 02 4627 1180
Ray Vanderhelden 02 4776 1373
Paul Grills 07 4162 5235
John Douglas 08 8376 3788
Mick Weston 07 5444 3307
Phil Lamb 08 8564 2001
Rod Crane 08 9530 3083
Daryl Porteous 07 4973 7663
Geoff Handley 03 5593 1791
Ray Jurkiewicz 07 3886 9054
Ross Bachmann 07 5495 1443
Ted Podlich 07 3862 9002
Jim Castles 02 9639 2941
John Gilmore 08 9795 6847
Richard Branch 07 4947 1044
Don Beale 02 6236 8267
Ross Hansen 07 3202 7540
Bob Austin 02 6644 9237
Harry Classen 07 3273 6701
Bud Lewis 07 3881 1230

Darryl Lavis 08 8263 9548
Wayne Lambley 07 3851 1837
Peter Brunton 03 5156 5531
Terry O'Donnell 03 5334 3443
Harold Bromley 03 9726 8625

2 Troop (1969 1970)

Bob Smith 07 5442 9322
Dennis Wilson 08 8892 2671
David Brook 03 9546 2868
Colin Redacliff 02 9673 0597
Peter Scott (219) 02 4341 3782
Les Shelley 07 3264 4041
Ian Pitt 03 5349 2018
Ron Coman 07 3355 7279
John Hopman 02 9398 5258
Jim Burrough 03 9885 8285
Stephen Wilson 07 5538 2179
Mick Van Poeteren 03 9435 0383
Brad Hannaford 08 8389 2217
Jim Marett 03 9826 3908
Frank Brady 02 6555 5200
Graeme Gartside 08 8725 2845
Bob Ottery 03 5199 2516
Kevin Connor 07 4032 2208
Marty McGrath 02 6059 1204
Greg Gough 0417 911 173
Jimmy Shugg 08 9776 1471
Janis Atrens 02 6292 3071
Doug George 03 9889 2116
Mick Lee 07 3808 4823
Phil "Jonah" Jones 07 3390 1130
Bevan Percival 07 5537 1577
"Roo Dog" Scott 07 5576 0232
Bill Lamb 0418 424 208
Gerry Wallbridge 03 9803 4223
Bruce Bofinger 02 4861 5715
Chris Koulouris 02 4952 6341
Arthur Davies 07 3408 1556
Brian Scott 07 3204 5691
Roy Elbourne 02 4868 1493
Grumpy Foster 07 4041 2321
Jack Power 07 4955 3761
Frank Denley 02 6571 2056
"Arab" Avotins 07 4129 8012

2 Troop (1970 1971)

Mick Rasmussen 0428 790 645
Denis Crawford 03 9497 3256
"Sam" Collins 08 8262 6107
Bob Hamblin 08 8672 3930
Butch Marsden 08 9921 6183
Graham Besford 03 9439 2661
Des Evans 07 5486 3886
Jock Coultts 08 9279 1946
Keith Burley 07 5543 0990
Bob Hamlyn 08 8672 3172
Brian Christian 07 4778 6602
Keith Ramsay 02 6585 6503
John Brady 02 6888 1192
Kevin Lappin 07 3273 8614
Peter McCole 03 5155 9368
Gary Sangster 0409 522 099
Bob McGlenn 07 5426 1597
Paddy Healy 02 4930 7541
John Smith 07 4788 0123
Leon Madeley 07 5497 1038
Steve Walton 07 3269 3192
Terry Wake 07 4786 2625
David Gammie 02 4365 2696
Bill Marshall 07 5545 0389
Ziggy Gniot 0418 885 830
John Crocker 07 3206 7995
John Cross 02 4757 2273
John Tick 04 3898 7262
Chris Koolen 03 5237 7368
Jeff Maddock 03 5442 2875
Rod O'Regan 02 6550 6068
Gary McClintock 07 4788 0123
Des Polden 03 6223 3830
Roy Sojan 08 9926 1235
Kevin Hodge 08 8347 7060
Ray Fulton 03 6288 1176
Graeme Pengelly 03 5345 2397
Bruce Arrow 02 6288 3872

Mal Botfield 02 9872 2594
Peter Cairns 03 6267 4646
Ron Cook 03 8787 7377
Cec Harris 02 6629 3373
Dave Young 02 4283 3439
Robin Date 03 9783 3202
Bill Craig 08 9530 1008
Mick Bergi 03
5974 2175

3 Troop (1966-67)

Ray Forster 07 3409 1907

3 Troop (196-68)

Barry Gilbert 03 5023 6657
Les Colmer 08 8087 3817
Bob Embrey 07 3351 1222
Bob Yewen 07 5532 4560
Mick Woodhams 08 9459 0130
"Jonah" Jones 07 3390 1130
Bruce Beddin 07 5591 3202
Bob Coleman 03 5342 0941
Frank Sweeney 07 3205 4161
Chuck Bonzas 08 9330 3490
Viv Morgan 02 9331 3252
Barrie Morgan 0419 820 290
David Clark 08 8388 7728
Jack Lawson 0429 798 673
Murray Walker 08 9364 2829
Tom Simons 03 6267 4629
Norm Cairns 03 6267 4629
Peter MacDonald 08 9448 5418
Peter Perry 08 9756 7780

Three Troop (1968-69)

Bob Pritchard 07 4779 0608
Geoff Box 08 9731 2757
John Murphy 08 9493 3771
Brian Glyde 02 4457 2200
John Nulty 02 6931 1884
Ian Lauder 08 9419 5375
Geoff Neenan 08 9362 4079
John Hollis 02 6662 6660
"Sam" Houston 07 5495 5480
Greg Roberts 03 5941 2269

Three Troop (1969-70)

Phil McCann 03 5442 3459
Ray Fulton 03 6288 1176
Tony Bower-Miles 0412 317 306
Graham Harvey 07 5445 2636
Chris Brooks 08 9271 2811
Bob Done 02 4944 9321
Norm Martin 0422 508 336
Chris Muller 07 4653 0457
Hank Veenhuizen 0407 487 167
Jim Burrough 03 9885 8285
Rod Kirby 07 4973 7726
"Jacko" Miller 03 6267 4411
Chis MacGregor 02 4472 3250
Phil Devine 0418 830 169
Phil McCann 03 5442 3459
Gerard Rentmeester 03 9735 5236
Richard Day 08 8088 4129
Terry Cartlidge 03 5367 1472
Darrel Jensen 07 4938 7203
Gordon Temby 08 9757 2016

Three Troop (1970-71)

John Beningfield 07 4778 4473
Gordon Temby 08 9757 2016
Ray McKenzie-Clark 08 9729 1162
David Wilson 07 3855 1370
Robert Reed 07 3351 4440
Robert McLeay 03 5386 1122
Ben Passarelli 02 9610 3949
Geoff Ansell 03 5762 1215
Ted Clarke 03 5682 2584
Mal Botfield 02 9872 2594
Bob Clare 03 5439 5532
Graeme Clarke 07 4128 4660
Eric Banfalvi 07 5543 5230
Ian Campbell 03 9870 0313
John Davey 07 3378 4316
Les Shelley 07 3264 4041



Many thanks again to those who forked out the \$38 to support the newsletter. A superb personalised "Tunnel Rats" membership card is provided for all those who join. Let us know if you have joined but not received your membership card.

Who can join?

The Association was formed for all who served with one of the Field Troops. Membership is exclusively for men who served in Vietnam with either 3 Field Troop or 1 Troop, 2 Troop or 3 Troop of 1 Field Squadron. This is not an attempt to exclude, but to bring together the Field Engineers. Other units are free to form their own Associations.

If you haven't joined and you'd like to, simply fill in the form below and

post it with your cheque.

But don't worry, even if you don't join, we'll continue to send the newsletter - we realise some are not interested in joining anything, and some may not be able to afford it right now.

Why we formed the Tunnel Rats Association

Our status seemed to be getting a bit blurred. It had reached the point where any Engineer who served in Vietnam was calling himself a Tunnel Rat.

The members of the Field Troops listed on the banner above are the only Engineers who went out on four and six week-long operations with the Infantry and Armoured units. They fought alongside the Infantry plus they performed their additional tasks of mine and booby trap detection and clearing, plus bunker and tunnel searching and demolition.

It is these men of the Field Troops who represent over 95% of the casualty list of the 1 Field Squadron Group.

We are extremely proud of what we

did, in particular of how we worked so closely with the Infantry and Armoured units. By wrongly claiming Tunnel Rat status, some men from non-field Troops have begun to blur the line defining the unique role of the Tunnel Rats. If it became generally accepted that all Engineer units in Vietnam were Tunnel Rats, then our status would be reduced. Nobody has a right to do that. We should not allow anybody to diminish something we are so proud of. The forming of the Association is not an elitist thing, and it is not an anti "Pogo" thing. It is simply intense pride in what we did and a move to protect our status.

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Dates IN Vietnam: _____

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Rats Association Inc.

Post the completed form and
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Toorak
Victoria 3142

Note: If you don't want to cut into this newsletter, photocopy the form or write the details on a sheet of paper and send it with your cheque.