



# HOLDFAST

August 2006

NUMBER 7

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE VIETNAM TUNNEL RATS ASSOCIATION INC

## Date change on Darwin visit to 1st Combat Engineer Regiment

The Darwin trip is turning out to be bigger than Ben Hur. Even before calling for people to commit and book we've had an exceptional response, with many Sappers ringing, emailing and writing to say they'll be in.

Due to operational activities the date of our trip has had to change to November 17 to 20, but you'll need to arrive in Darwin at least late on the 16<sup>th</sup> as Friday the 17<sup>th</sup> will be a full day of activities on the Army base.

At the Darwin end, the 1st Combat Engineer Regiment (1CER) are pulling out all stops to show us a warm welcome and give us a great range of experiences. They are laying on buses to transport us to and from our Darwin city accommodation and the Army base (about 20 km) and they plan a whole range of activities.

On the Friday we'll head out to the base (men only on this day) where we'll be given a hands-on look at the latest equipment used by modern Combat Engineers. We'll be taken through their state-of-the-art laser shooting range. We'll ride in the armoured personnel carriers that are now part of CER equipment (this should stir a few memories for us all, including those who've been blown of these things by mines in Vietnam!). We'll enjoy drinks in the OR's Mess, giving us a chance to chat with the Sappers serving in 1<sup>st</sup> CER, and of course



*ABOVE: A modern-day Sapper from 1st CER*

a chance to tell them wildly exaggerated war stories – and explain how when we left Vietnam we were actually winning the war. Honest! Finally we'll end up in the BDE Mess for a few quiet drinks and maybe a few mess games before getting back on the bus to return to our accommodation.

During the day on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> we plan a trip to the Australian Aviation Heritage Centre where they have a range of fascinating stuff including Mirage and Sabre jet fighters, a B-52 bomber and a Huey Cobra gunship.

Saturday night we'll have a Tunnel Rat's dinner to which we'll invite some of the officers and men from 1<sup>st</sup> CER.

Sunday will be a free day, to do what you like. As usual we'll designate a nearby pub to be our meeting point – a place you can always wander to and find a few mates enjoying a beer.

On Monday we'll head back to the 1<sup>st</sup> CER base for a farewell lunch or afternoon tea.

After that, it will be time for some final drinks together at the pub in the afternoon/evening before people head off either that night or next day. Some people are staying longer to enjoy the sights of Darwin.

**See next page for details on how to book and what to do:**

## Darwin trip details

### Accommodation

As we've discovered to our delight in the past, the reunion experience is much better when we all stay in the same accommodation venue. It means we don't break off into separate groups and it makes the "meeting point pub" a real success, with a constant flow of people dropping in and out.



The place we've found, the Mirambeena Resort is situated in the city centre and has a whole range of accommodation options that will suit all tastes and budgets:

**Deluxe Rooms:** Spacious 4-star rooms with two queen size beds, split system air-conditioning, colour TV, in-house movies and refrigerator.

**Executive Rooms:** For the discerning traveler, also 4-star and offering a little more space, with 1 queen-sized bed, writing desk, bath robes and other deluxe features.

**Townhouse Units:** These self-contained 3.5 star loft-style townhouses are ideal for families or guys wanting share to cut the costs. Features a queen-size bed plus two divans in a separate lounge area. There's a dining area with table and chairs and a kitchen with hot plates, a microwave, small fridge and kitchen utensils.

**Standard Room:** The upper 2 floors of their 3 storey wing has comfortable, compact 3-star rooms where the bedding

configuration is mainly 1 double and 1 single bed. And on the ground floor the standard rooms can be configured as 4 single beds or 2 singles and a King size bed.

### Booking your room



You'll need to make your own booking. We've organized special discounted rates for our group. All you have to do is figure out what room type you need, and the dates, then ring (free call on 1800 891 100) mentioning you are part of the Vietnam Tunnel Rats group for the November visit. If you plan to share the room with a bunch of mates, make sure you tell them that so they can allocate a room with the correct number of beds.

### Getting to Darwin

You'll need to make your own arrangements to get to Darwin, and you should plan to be there by at least late afternoon or evening of Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> November. The travel options are air (by Qantas, Virgin Blue, and Jet Star), train, bus or car (it's a long haul). Air is obviously the most convenient and you can compare the fares of all three airlines on one site on the internet at [www.webjet.com.au](http://www.webjet.com.au)

### We need you to commit

We need you to book so we can figure out the numbers and plan accordingly. Commit using the separate form included with this issue, making sure you enclose a cheque for \$30 for each person included in your party (the \$30 covers the dinner on Saturday night). Do it now.

If the loose booking form is not

with this newsletter, simply send us a note with the names of the people you want to book for and a cheque (made out to Vietnam Tunnel Rats Association) covering \$30 for each person. Post it to: Vietnam Tunnel Rats Association 43 Heyington Place Toorak Victoria 3142.

Don't forget, separately you need to book your own transport to Darwin and your rooms at the Mirambeena Resort (call free on 1800 891 100).

### Who's coming?

At this early stage it's hard to gauge numbers, but the indications are good and we know we'll have a good turn-up.

Some have committed even before we've called for bookings. Included among these are some legends and leaders, including three Colonels! We definitely need lots of Sappers to out-balance this influx of brass. Just some of those already attending include: Colonel Rex Rowe (former CO 1 Fld Sqn 1969/70), Colonel Doug George (former Troop Commander of 2 Troop and 3 Troop) and Colonel John Hopman (former Troop Officer 2 Troop), Sapper John "Jethro" Thompson OAM (1 Troop 1967), Phil "Jonah" Jones (1 Troop and 2 Troop), Sappers Mick "Grumpy" Foster and Kev Conner, both blown up together on an APC in 1970 and keen to ride one again at 1<sup>st</sup> CER. This is a just a sample, there are many more already committed – so hook in, make your bookings and come join us for a great time in Darwin.

"Up the old red rooster and more.....!"

**BOOK NOW**  
**1800 891 100**

# 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 Vic 3142 Or by email to: tunnelrat@optusnet.com.au

## “Is a three-minute fuse enough mate?”

In July 1967 Sappers Peter Weedon (left), and John Kiley, Tunnel Rats with 1 Field Squadron prepare explosives to demolish Viet Cong bunkers found east of the Australian base at Nui Dat. Peter and John were attached to Infantry on Operation Cooparoo. The Tunnel Rats had to check each bunker for booby traps then search for weapons and documents before demolition. The occasional trophy was found on these missions, such as a flag or an NVA officer's belt or map case.



## “Honest, it's just tobacco!”

They say that Sappers will have a go at anything, and just to prove it, Roger Davis (right), a Tunnel Rat from 1 Field Squadron has a draw on a South Vietnamese soldier's water pipe. Though suspiciously like a drug smoking device, they did indeed use them for just tobacco. The men were attached to 3 RAR on Operation Overlord in June 1971 in which a huge enemy bunker system was found.



## The drip

This is one version of “The Drip” in Vietnam that was OK. Rubber tree sap drips from a purposely cut groove into a ceramic bowl. In the plantations just north of Nui Dat, workers collected the sap daily and took it to the nearby factory for initial processing into sheets.



### Walking the weeds

Corporal John Ash, a Tunnel Rat with 2 Trp 1 Fld Sqn takes a break and a sip of precious water during a patrol on Operation Finschhafen. It was March 1970 and Corporal Ash was attached to 7RAR on their first operation of their second tour in Vietnam. Unusually, several elements began this operation departing Nui Dat on foot rather than by chopper.



### The source of the stink at Cat Lo

After two days leave in Vung Tau, driving back to Nui Dat base camp with a hangover was bad enough, but when the truck passed through Cat Lo you were assaulted with a stink from the very depths of hell. We just figured it was a smelly town, but in fact it was a town famous for making fish sauce. Cat Lo made it the traditional way from dried fish (above).



### Tree surgery

Sapper Jack Power, a Tunnel Rat from 2 Trp 1 Fld Sqn (left) is blowing down trees to create a landing zone for choppers. It was February 1970 on Operation Bondi with 5RAR. Helping him is Private Wally Cameron of 5RAR who was thrilled to add demolitions to his skill set.



### Search & Destroy

Sapper Barry Harford, a Tunnel Rat with 1 Fld Sqn stands on the outskirts of the village of Duc My during Operation Sydney in July 1966. Barry was attached to 5RAR and they had just swept through the village capturing several enemy. It was now time to search the huts.



### Sapper's God Squad

In April 1971 Father D. B. Casey, Chaplain of 1 Fld Sqn took delivery of this motorcycle which was originally intended for use by the Vietnamese padres but proved to be too heavy for them. Members of the Light Aid Detachment recovered it and restored it in their spare time.



### Base camp fever

Sapper "Crow" Crawford, a Tunnel Rat with 1 Fld Sqn hams it up for the camera in 2 Troop's Recreation Hut. Just back from operations with the Infantry, "Crow" was letting off steam and enjoying a few beers with his mates. Coming back to base was a short but sweet few days.



### "Are your boys crazy enough to go in there?"

Tunnel talk between the CO of 6RAR, Lieutenant Colonel Colin M. Townsend (left), and Major Warren Lennon, the CO of the 1 Field Squadron (home of the Tunnel Rats) during Operation Enogerra. The Sappers were given the task of exploring, mapping and demolishing a complex tunnel system found in the village of Long Phuoc in June 1966. The village was just a few kilometers from Nui Dat base camp.



### Tilt switch terror

Sergeant Harry Bird of 1 Fld Sqn (1971) holds a Viet Cong tilt switch used to trigger mines and booby traps. These were highly unpredictable devices which could trigger the explosives they were attached to at the slightest touch. Wise Sappers left them alone, blowing them up in place rather than trying to defuse them.



### "Just poking around"

In June 1970 Sapper Mick Lace, a Tunnel Rat from 1 Field Squadron uses hisbayonet to carefully sift through the ashes of a fireplace in a Viet Cong base camp. He was attached to 2RAR (The ANZAC Battalion) on its first operation since returning to Vietnam for its second tour of duty. The operation was in the Nui Thi Vai and Nui Thi Dinh hills to the west of the Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat. Before searching for documents and weapons, the Tunnel Rats had to clear any mines and booby traps that may have been left behind by the enemy.



### Hazardous crossing

Sapper Peter Graham a Tunnel Rat with 1 Fld Sqn makes his way through a river while on Operation Windsor with the Infantry in October 1968 in the the Hat Dich Area, fifteen miles north-west of Nui Dat.



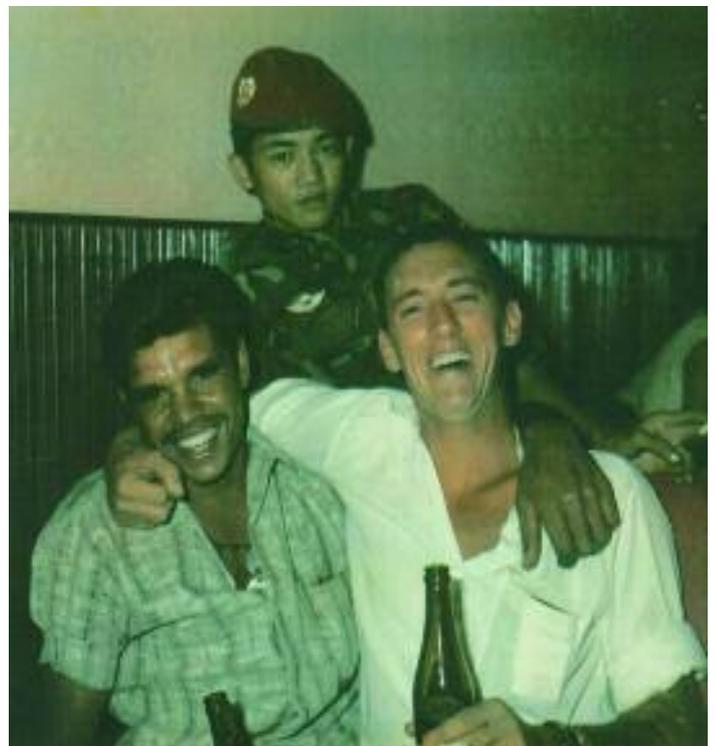
### Briefing the Brady bunch

In late 1969, Corporal Frank Brady briefs fellow Tunnel Rats of 2 Troop 1 Fld Sqn on the breathing equipment they are preparing and fitting. This equipment was used for tunnel searching when oxygen levels were low in tunnels or when CS tear gas had been used to flush out the enemy or deny them access. (L to R) Sappers Tom Ryan, Arthur Davies and Bruce Bofinger, Corporal Frank Brady and Sapper Jim Marett. Frank did a later, second tour with the Training Team AATTVN.



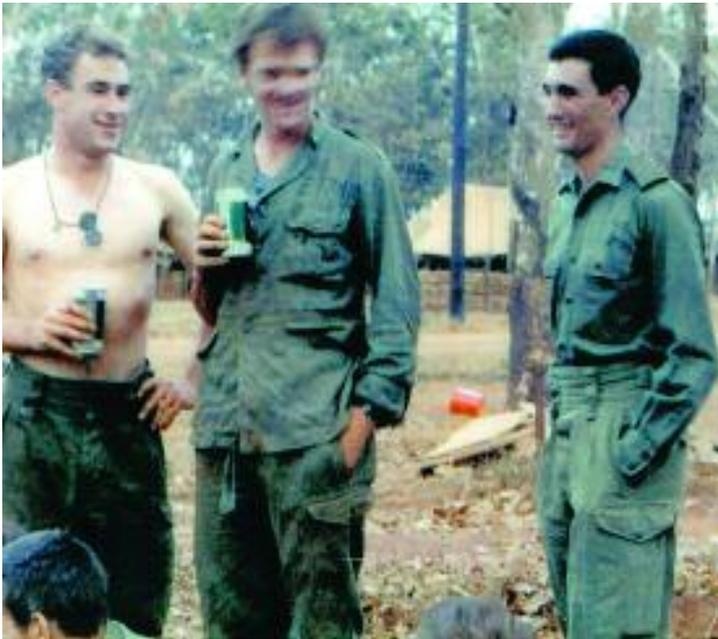
### Eye make-up by Picasso

The Sapper who sent this photo wants to remain anonymous. He spent five days with this Hong Kong honey on R&R. She has actually painted eye-lashes onto her cheeks to create a round-eyed look, and according to the Sapper, the make-up stayed this way for the entire five days - night and day. Bizarre!



### Two Tunnel Rats on the town

Going on a two-day leave to Vung Tau was paradise, and these two Tunnel Rats from 3 Troop are enjoying it to the hilt. On the left Corporal Dave Cook, on the right Sapper Barrie Morgan, and above them, a South Vietnamese Paratrooper who just wanted to be in the photo!



### Back to base for a BBQ

One of the great pleasures of coming off operations out bush and getting back to base camp for a while, was the traditional post-op BBQ. Enjoying a 1 Troop 1 Fld Sqn BBQ in early 1969 are (Left to Right): Sapper Smillie (later killed in action), Sapper Laird and Troop Officer, Lt. George Hulse.



### On Track

Sapper Chris Koolen, a Tunnel Rat with 1 Fld Sqn uses a mine detector to check for mines on a track running into a village in Phouc Tuy Province. Chris was attached to a Troop of armoured personnel carriers (APC's) from 3 Cav Regiment for the operation in 1970.



### What's the rush?

Two Tunnel Rats back from operations and heading for the mess in double time before the delicious food runs out. Leading is Sapper Kev Connor (later wounded in a mine incident) with Saper Ken Stockdale behind. Perhaps they were actually heading for the boozier first?



### Briefing the big brass

At Xuyen Moc in July 1969, the officer commanding 1 Field Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers (RAE), Major Rex Rowe (centre), briefs the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Joseph Daly on projects being undertaken by engineers in the area. Holding the map is Staff Sergeant Brian Lamb of 1 Troop 1 Field Squadron. Partly obscured at left is the Commander of Australian Forces in Vietnam (COMAFV), Major General R. A. Hay. Rex Rowe commanded 1 Fld Sqn through a year of very heavy casualties from mines. He retired as a Colonel and now lives in Melbourne with his wife Noema.

# Going into the tunnels

In each issue of "Holdfast" we take a closer look at some of the specific tasks carried out by the Tunnel Rats - the men of the Engineer Field Troops in Vietnam. In this issue we take a look at going into the enemy tunnels, a task that combined all of our skills.



The Tunnel Rats in the Field Troops (3 Field Troop and 1, 2 & 3 Troop of 1 Field Squadron) had a variety of tasks to perform, usually while attached to Infantry or Armoured units out on operations.

These tasks included checking for and defusing booby traps, checking for and clearing enemy mines, unexploded bomb disposal, clearing safe paths to casualties in mine incidents, demolitions, searching and blowing up enemy bunkers, village searching (including all of the above), and of course searching and blowing up enemy tunnels.

It is this last task from which we

draw the name of our unit association (the Vietnam Tunnel Rats Association).

Many people wrongly perceive the tunnels we experienced to all be the miles-long, multi-level systems found at Cu Chi and entered by our 3 Field Troop Sappers. In fact systems this big were few and far between.

Mostly what we found and searched and destroyed were tunnels within villages and within enemy bunker systems.

Those in the villages were usually under each house and they led to either a bunker, or an escape point, often a creek or shallow ravine. The dilemma

*ABOVE LEFT: Corporal Colin Dennis a Tunnel Rat with 3 Field Troop in 1965 heads into a tunnel via a trapdoor in the village of Xom Cay Xoai. ABOVE RIGHT: In June 1966 Lance Corporal Ron Rockliffe, a Tunnel Rat with 1 Troop 1 Field Squadron prepares to drop into a tunnel system during Operation Enoggera with 6RAR.*

was not knowing whether the family had this tunnel for its own protection against incoming artillery and mortar rounds, or whether they were enemy sympathizers and the tunnel was part of the escape and storage tactics of the local VC.

The tunnels found in the enemy bunker systems were there for

internal movement within the bunker system while it was under attack, and also to provide a means of escape, usually again to a nearby creek or ravine. In larger bunker systems the tunnels sometimes led to store rooms, meeting rooms or even hospital operating rooms.

For the tunnel Rats of the Field Troops, regardless of the size of the tunnel or bunker complex, the searching techniques and the risks were pretty much the same.

The first task in searching the system was to give priority to clearing it of any mines or booby traps. Once these were out of the way, you could concentrate more clearly on looking for whatever else the enemy had left behind.

It was important to not take the tunnel system at face value – what you saw was not necessarily all you could get. There were sometimes hidden trapdoors or entrances of some kind, which if found and explored, revealed additional rooms or stores. And if they had tried to conceal them you can be assured these were the most valuable parts of the complex in terms of what was hidden there.

For the Tunnel Rats it was very satisfying work to be pulling lots of enemy weapons and equipment out of the tunnels and bunkers. It was not unusual for a complex to yield hundreds of rifles, explosive devices and assorted other weapons including rocket propelled grenade launchers and the associated ammunition. Maps and documents were also of great value and were quickly passed on to the Intelligence section of the Battalion you were attached to at the time. Strange things were found too, including



*TOP: In January 1969 Corporal P. Graham, a Tunnel Rat with 1 Fld Sqn attached to 9RAR enters into the unknown in a tunnel system found on Operation Goodwood. BOTTOM: On the same operation an Infantryman from 9RAR guards the entrance to a tunnel while the Tunnel Rats work below ground.*

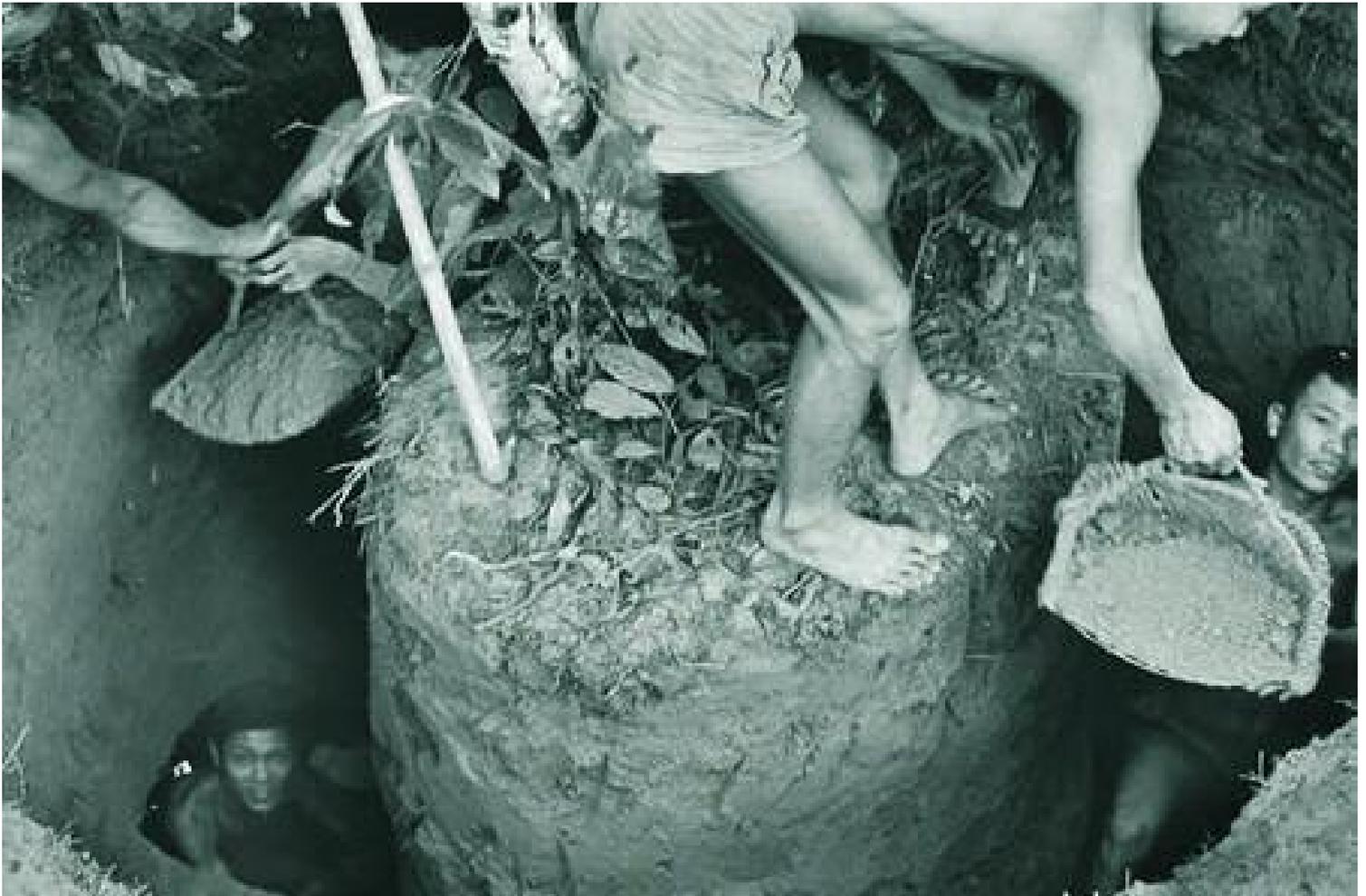
bicycles, religious items including mini temples, and once, a selection of exotic women's underwear. Go figure that one!

Searching the tunnels was a stiflingly hot, very dirty, claustrophobic and of course dangerous job. But at the time, being young and surrounded by comrades doing a variety of brave things, you felt it was just your job, and to some degree you felt you were “bullet-proof” – at least until something nasty happened, which would quickly

bring you back to reality.

We were attached to Infantry or Armoured units in teams of two Sappers and were known as a Splinter Team, unless we were carrying a mine detector and wearing flack jackets, in which case we were known as a Mini Team (this was most often with Armoured units where carrying the heavy mine detector case was not an issue as you were riding with the Cav, not walking with the Grunts.

Though we worked in teams of



two, it was not wise to be too close to each other in a tunnel while searching for booby traps or mines. Usually, and it might have been against proper procedures, just one of the men in the two-man team went down, taking it in turns with his teammate if he was experienced enough.

You went into the tunnel with your torch, 9mm pistol and bayonet. When looking for booby traps and mines (though mines would more usually be found in the approaches to the tunnel and bunker entrances), you were looking for trip wires and any other means of setting off an explosive device.

There were several dilemmas. Firstly, you only had two hands to hold these three crucial items, and the task of getting yourself through the often narrow passages required handwork as

well. Most of us held the torch and bayonet in the left hand and the pistol in the right, swapping the pistol with the bayonet when you needed to prod the ground in front of you looking for hidden entrances or concealed booby trap switches or pressure plates.

The search technique most of us adopted was to use your right hand (the one holding the pistol) to feel ahead of you for trip wires with the back of your fingers, carefully moving your hand across the width and up and down the height of the tunnel as you proceed.

Meantime you are also looking for disturbed earth on the floor, ceiling or walls which can indicate a recently planted device or an opening to another area.

A second dilemma was that of using the torch. You simply had

*ABOVE: The Viet Cong busily digging a new tunnel complex, this one has a tricky hairpin bend right near one of the tunnel passages.*

to use it to see your way, but it made you an instant and easy target should any VC still be in the complex. Thankfully this was rare as we often threw grenades into the bunkers and tunnels as we made the initial assault into the complex.

The third dilemma was if you were ever compelled to actually fire your pistol while down in a tunnel. The noise in such a confined space was enough to destroy your hearing for many hours and perhaps cause permanent damage.

The tunnels always smelt of damp earth, and there was all sorts of wildlife down there, including spiders, mosquitoes,

bats, snakes and the occasional larger animal such as a pig or armadillo.

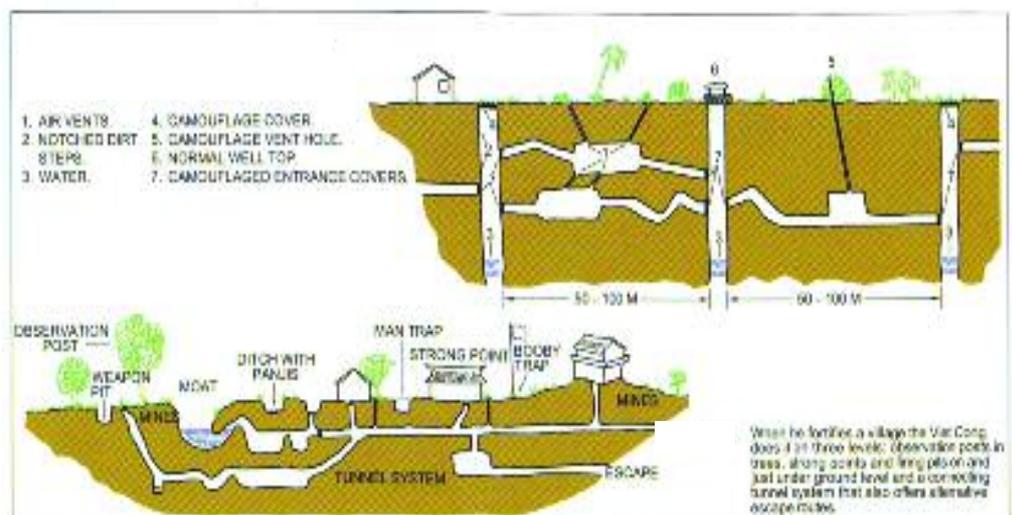
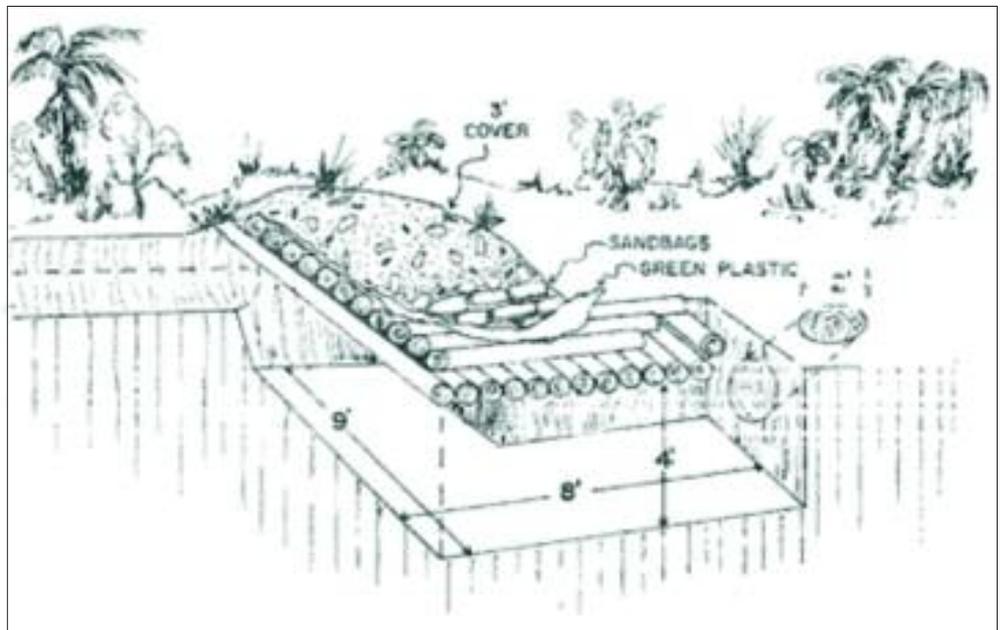
If the tunnel had been neglected for some time, the roots of bushes and trees intruded inside, making it even more spooky and difficult to navigate.

Once you felt the tunnel and bunkers were clear of booby traps, you could search more thoroughly for weapons, documents and stores and start dragging them to the surface, again being careful that these items were not booby trapped.

Once this was done, the final task was to set the tunnel and bunkers up for demolition. This involved digging slots in the walls to place slabs of C4 plastic explosives. Charges were also attached to timber supports (if any) in the ceilings. All these charges were linked by detcord to form one big explosive ring connected to a single detonator and safety fuse.

The length of the safety fuse determined the time it took to burn down to the detonator to set off the chain of explosions. One bayonet length of fuse took roughly one minute to burn. The time needed to get a safe distance away from the demolition depended on the terrain and the vegetation. The Sapper would figure this out, cut the fuse, attach the detonator to it and in turn attach this to the detcord leading to the whole ring of explosives.

The Infantry walked off first and the Tunnel Rats followed once they had lit the fuse. The explosion as you walked away was always one of the most satisfying moments in any Sapper's time in his weird and wonderful career as a Tunnel Rat in Vietnam.



TOP: Enemy weapons and stores taken from an a VC tunnel system in Phouc Tuy Province. MIDDLE: Trapdoor entrance to the right of a bunker leading to a tunnel at the rear. BOTTOM: Typical extensive tunnel systems, with multiple layers, water supply and sealed hiding areas.

# We knew we were good - but what did the Grunts think of us?

The Tunnel Rats enjoyed the rare privilege in Vietnam of working very closely with the Infantry Battalions. Few “outsiders” got to share the unique experience of being out on combat operations with the Infantry for extended periods, usually for four to six weeks at a time. During this time, the Tunnel Rats operated as honorary Infantry soldiers, participating fully in the endless patrolling, the regular ambushes and the lonely hours manning the gun in nightly harbour-up positions. On top of this the Tunnel Rats carried out their specialist mines, booby trap, tunnel and bunker searching and demolitions tasks.

We were busy – but we reckon we were pretty good at it.

In a shameless attempt to confirm that our “clients” thought we were good too, we sought comments from several senior Infantry officers we had worked with, and we combed the historic records for further comments:

## 5th Battalion RAR Vietnam 1969 - 1970

**“They were always there, up with the forward Infantry”**

*Brigadier Colin Kahn DSO, former Commanding Officer of 5 RAR on their second tour (Feb 1969 to Feb 1970), a man affectionately and respectfully known as “Genghis”.*

Whenever 5 RAR operated in



*TOP: Tunnel Rats from 1 Field Squadron, Sappers Peter Scott (Left) and Greg Gough out bush with the Grunts of 5RAR in 1969.  
ABOVE: In 1969 (then) Lt. Col. Colin Kahn, CO of 5 RAR.*

be it in Long Khanh, Bin Tuy, Bien Hoa etc, we hit bunker systems ranging in size from 6 to 600 bunkers.

The call went out continuously – “We need the Sappers”, and the wait for the Splinter Teams was not long, for they were always

5 RAR located some 1,500 bunkers in the period and the need for Sappers was great. The Splinter Teams attached to, moving and fighting with rifle companies, searched these bunkers for mines and booby traps, and when we left a bunker complex, they either destroyed

thoroughly with CS crystals.

There are numerous riflemen from 5 RAR who came home safely because of the support, the courage and the professionalism of our Splinter Teams.

I believe, and I have always believed that the Sappers who moved and fought with Infantry and Armour deserved some distinguishing recognition such as a "Combat Engineer Badge". We Infantrymen have our Combat Badge – Splinter team members deserve something similar.



ABOVE: Lieutenant Mike O'Brien (now Major General - retired), Intelligence Officer with 7 RAR in 1970 (left) debriefing a recently captured VC prisoner (right) with Cpl Steve Smith (centre).

## 7th Battalion RAR

Vietnam 1970 - 1971

**"They saved the lives of many an infantryman"**

*Major General Mike O'Brien, former Platoon Commander and Intelligence officer with 7 RAR on their second tour – Feb 1970 to Feb 1971*

No infantry platoon, company or battalion commander could have done without his engineers.

As always, war was a team effort, and each part of the specialised team was essential if the team were to succeed. The Sappers were always essential and particularly so in the post-minefield part of our Vietnam War.

We rarely gave them the credit due: we often did not allow for their redeployment to and from our companies, the need to know who was who and the need to settle into a team. We demanded high performance straight away – but we always got it.

They developed a particular expertise suited to our specific operational methods: their appreciation of mines and booby traps was often little short of uncanny.

They had distinctive personalities, perhaps less regard for the niceties of neatness than some, but when it came to the crunch, they performed and performed superbly.

They saved the lives of many an infantryman and we should be eternally grateful.

If there is a sad note, it is that few infantrymen realise that it was the Sappers in Splinter, Mini and Combat Engineer Teams from the Engineer Field Troops that suffered our highest casualty proportion in the Vietnam War: a grim testament to their effectiveness.

Look at their list of killed and wounded and remember it next time we say 'Lest we forget'.

## 3rd Battalion RAR

Vietnam 1967 - 1968

**"A significant and unique honour for the Sappers"**

*3 RAR on their 1967-68 tour had nothing but praise for the Tunnel Rats that worked with them:*

"In most Battalion operations, the Engineer Combat Teams of 1 Field Squadron were either an integral part of an individual rifle Company or were held in readiness at Battalion headquarters to be inserted in support of Companies when called for... The task for which they will be most remembered by the Battalion however, was their task of clearing cunningly concealed and potentially lethal mines and booby traps."

3 RAR's Operation Pinnaroo during March-April 1968 involved penetrating into the Long Hai mountains, an area peppered so heavily with mines,

mine fields and booby traps that the Tunnel Rats from 3 Troop 1 Field Squadron led the advance that took many days. It was a costly Operation, with casualties from mines and booby traps far exceeding casualties from small arms fire.

Task Force Commander Brigadier R L Hughes, DSO sent the following message after the Operation:

"I want to commend everyone who participated in Operation Pinnaroo for their steadiness and professional ability during an Operation which I believe has been the most difficult and dangerous yet undertaken by 1ATF. Particularly I want to commend the Engineers and Pioneers for their work in the minefields. The completion of Pinnaroo is a job well done."

On 24 April 1968, 3 RAR celebrated Kapyong Day and 3 Troop 1 Field Squadron was not only invited by the CO Lt Col J J Shelton, MC to parade with them, but was drawn up in front of the Battalion.

It was a significant and unique honour for the Sappers.



R G SMILLIE



J SMITH



B V HANSEN



A LISLE



J G GREEN



A L DUNCUFF



A E HOLLIS



J ENGSTROM



TOP: The eight Tunnel Rats from 1 Trp 1 Fld Sqn KIA while attached to 6 RAR on their 1969-70 tour. BOTTOM: On Op Pinnaroo in 1968, Lt Col J. Shelton, CO of 3 RAR 1967-68 (right) and the OC of C Company, Major Ian Hands.

## 6th Battalion RAR

Vietnam 1969 - 1970

### 6 RAR Honours fallen 1 Troop Sappers

In another, and later significant gesture, the Sixth Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, has formally honoured those eight members of 1 Troop 1 Field Squadron RAE, who paid the supreme sacrifice in South Vietnam in 1969-1970 while taking part in 6RAR/NZ (ANZAC Battalion) operations.

6RAR Association President Graham Smith said that the names of the Sappers will be listed on the Honour Board at 6RAR, as well as on their website Honour Roll. We believe this is the first time that an RAR Battalion has accorded operationally attached sappers this honour and respect.

Those 1 Troop sappers KIA with 6 RAR on the Battalion's second tour, and who are on the Honour Board are: Sapper RG Smillie (23 July 1969), Sapper J Smith (23 July 1969), L/Corporal BV Hansen (21 October 1969),

Sapper A Lisle (2 November 1969), Sapper JG Greene (8 December 1969) Sapper AL Duncuffe (25 October 1969), Sapper AE Hollis (30 January 1970), and Corporal J Engstrom (30 January 1970).

Also honoured are Lt BA Garland, 101 Field Battery RAA, and from 6 RAR's first tour, Sapper L Prowse, 1 Field Squadron RAE, and Gunner RW Cliff RAA are honoured.

On behalf of our fallen comrades we thank 6 RAR most sincerely for this exceptional honour.

## 3rd Battalion RAR Vietnam 1971

“Great professionalism under very difficult conditions”



*Colonel Peter Scott, former CO 3RAR Vietnam 1971.*

newsletter of the Vietnam Tunnel Rats Association.

In Vietnam we visited the 1 Fld Sqn 'Mines Room' during our 'In Theatre' training and this alerted us all to the dangers of mines likely to be encountered in Phouc Tuy Province.

However the real advantage to 3RAR was to have the Splinter Teams attached to each company for every operation. Without examining the actual time spent on operations I would estimate the companies were on operations for about 90% of the time in Vietnam. This meant that the 'Splinter' Teams and members of 3RAR had plenty of time to know each other and gain each other's respect and confidence.

The diggers of 3RAR relied heavily on the advice and confident way in which the 'Tunnel Rats' undertook their tasks which, were many and varied. Destroying UXBs and bunkers were the most prominent and frequent of these.

The bunkers encountered during the Battle of Long Khanh are an example of the enormous task that the members of 2 Troop

undertook willingly and with great professionalism under very difficult conditions.

On behalf of the members of 3RAR who served in Vietnam in 1971 I belatedly congratulate all the Tunnel Rats who provided such outstanding support during our tour. Good luck to you all and may your association develop to support all you great 'Rats'.



*ABOVE: Capt John Tick, the Officer Commanding 2 Troop 1 Field Squadron 1971.*

The existence of the Vietnam Tunnel Rats Association came to my attention through the article 'Battle of Long Khanh' published in issue 6 of your newsletter, which had been reprinted in the RAR Association (SA Branch) Newsletter for Anzac Day 2006.

It was a great article and it included quite rightly the contribution of the 'Splinter' Teams of 2 Troop, 1 Field Squadron attached to 3RAR for that operation. There were many photographs taken by the then Captain John Tick, OC 2 Tp, which I saw for the first time.

The article brought home to me the embarrassing fact that I had never acknowledged the great job the sappers of 2 Tp did in supporting the battalion during the whole of our tour of Vietnam in 1971.

It's very late but I do it now through "Holdfast", the official

*BELOW: Part of the huge enemy bunker system which was searched and destroyed by 2 Troop Tunnel Rats during 3RAR's "Battle of Long Khanh" in June 1971*



## Sapper Snippets



### A great photo of the Horseshoe base camp

This classic photo of the Horseshoe base camp shows a typical afternoon storm brewing in the background. Close to the village of Dat Do, The Horseshoe was also the starting point and base for laying of the barrier minefield which ran from Dat do

down to the sea, about 11km away. The base usually contained a company of Infantry plus artillery and Engineers. There were few of the comforts of Nui Dat, but it was far more comfortable than going bush with the Grunts.

### Flooding the market with mines

The barrier minefield (right) laid by the Sappers of 1 Field Squadron RAE became an arms supermarket for the enemy. Left unguarded by the South Vietnamese troops, the Viet Cong entered it regularly to lift the mines and use them against Australian and local troops in the area. This unusual photo was taken in the wet season and shows the minefield heavily flooded. This water-logging would have played havoc with the accuracy of the mapped locations of the mines, and must have also rendered some useless due to water penetration. The minefield was eventually cleared by 1 Fld Sqn using a variety of methods, but you wouldn't walk there for quids - even today!

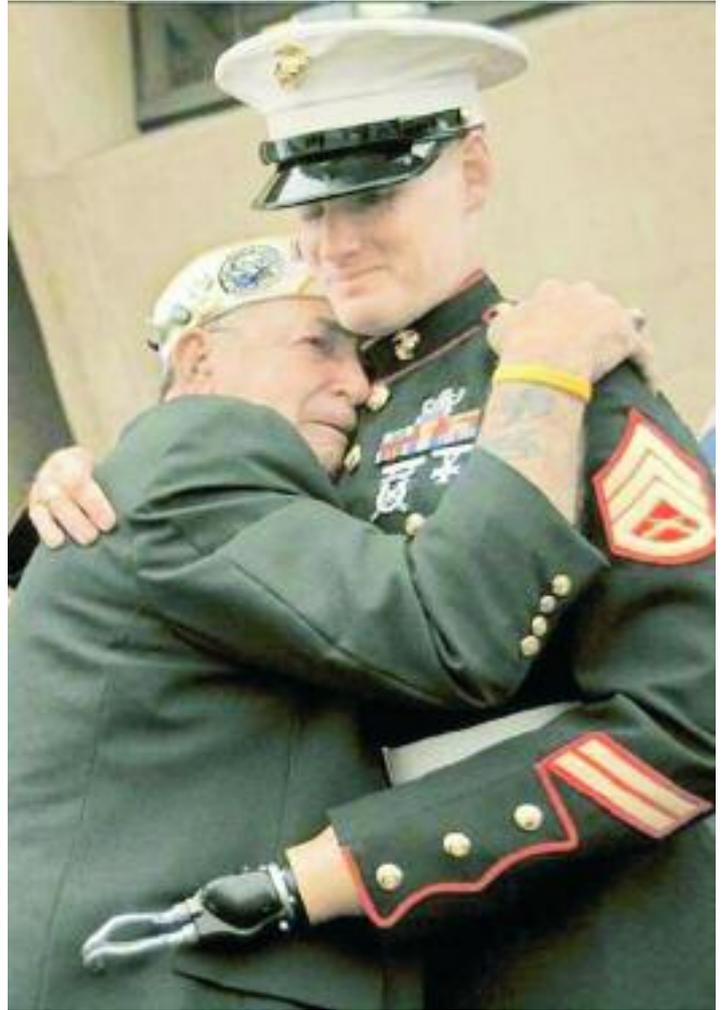


## Bamboo - not Bailey



Bailey Bridge panels were a little too heavy for the NVA to lug around for tactical river crossings, so as usual they improvised. Above, the enemy is seen crossing an amazing bridge constructed from bamboo, with mats woven from reeds as the walking surface. This is an incredible engineering feat considering it is obviously on a stream that is flowing quite quickly. Another technique was to construct "bridges" just below water level so they could not be seen from aircraft.

## No Greater Love



Seen here on Veteran's Day last year in San Diego, USA, Pearl Harbour survivor, Huston James (left) embraces Marine Staff Sergeant Mark Graunke Jr. You might say this photo has nothing to do with the Tunnel Rats in Vietnam, but this US Marine lost his hand, a leg and an eye while disarming a bomb in Iraq. He was in the same trade as us. But more to the point, we just think it is one of the most poignant photographs to come out of any war.

## Gone to the dogs

Do you remember the old military barracks on the left of the road on the way out of Vung Tau? It was once a pretty swish French military academy. It is seen here (right) on an old French postcard from the late 1800's. Not a regime known for preserving heritage buildings, the Vietnamese seem to have pulled this place (and an adjoining French military cemetery) down to make way for a greyhound racing track, funded partly by Australian interests. It seems the infamous "Dat Do Dogs" which was joked about so often has become a reality



## Top brass Tunnel Rat

In perhaps the ultimate example of that great Army tradition of "I'll never ask my men to do anything I wouldn't do myself", in April 1968 the Chief of the General Staff (CGS), Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Daly (right) went into an enemy cave used by the Viet Cong as a weapons and food store.

It was in the infamous Long Hai Hills in the south-east corner of Phuoc Tuy Province, an area that then and subsequently saw many Australian casualties from mines and booby traps.

Watching the CGS is the then Task Force Commander, Brigadier Ron Hughes. The CGS was visiting troops in the field as part of a tour of Australian bases in South-East Asia.

These very caves are now a tourist attraction and are visited often by Aussie Vietnam Veterans who stay in nearby Vung Tau for a nostalgic few days in the old operational area.



# HOLDFAST

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE VIETNAM TUNNEL RATS ASSOCIATION INC

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# 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@ansonc.com.au](mailto:hawthorn@ansonc.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
Barry Harford	08 8088 4371
Wilfred Eyles	02 4390 0150
Bill Corby	07 5502 1193
Snow Wilson Jnr	02 6649 3998
Des Evans	07 4128 2390
Warren Murray	03 5728 3341
Ian Biddolph	02 4472 9434
Bernie Pollard	08 9248 3178
Peter Ash	02 6771 4623
Alan Christie	07 5494 6628
Frank Mallard	08 9377 4560
Alan Coleman	07 3204 7401

### 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	0419784954
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
Graeme Cook	02 4390 5159
Neil Innes	02 9875 2962
Alan Coleman	07 3204 7401
Nick Burgerhof	07 3271 1592

### 1 Troop (1967-68)

Alan Rantall	03 9434 2031
Clive Pearsall	03 9459 4470
Brett Nolen	03 5278 9969
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
Phil Baxter	02 4625 6213
Ken Ford	02 6645 2738
Max Goiser	02 9792 1765
Cliff Truelove	02 6495 7844
Kerry McCormick	03 6344 5291
Brian Lamb	02 6059 6947
Peter Hollis	02 6581 5401

### 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
Les Slater	08 9361 0603
Des McKenzie	07 5448 3400
Alan Coleman	07 3204 7401
P. "Guts" Geisel	07 4092 1735

### 1 Troop (1970-71)

Peter Krause	02 6723 2835
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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
John Pritchard	02 9626 3376
Eric Banfalvi	07 5543 5230
Dennis Pegg	03 6229 9294
Paul Taylor (NZ)	(64)42990915
Terry Ward	02 6566 6163
Garry Shoemark	02 6546 6778

### 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
Noel McDuffie (Silent number)	
Graeme Leach	07 4777 8627

### 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
Murdoch Ballantyne	08 8298 2515
Ron Johnston	07 3351 1609
Ray Kenny	07 3881 3648
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
Eric McKerrow (Silent number)	

### 2 Troop (1968-1969)

David Pannach	Overseas
(Hong Kong 0011 852 9646 4131)	
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 Vanderheiden	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 Claassen	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
Brian Lamb	02 6059 6947

### 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 Maret	03 9824 4967
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 Atrons	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
"Pedro" Piroanski	08 9306 8169

### 2 Troop (1970-1971)

Mick Rasmussen	0428 790 645
Denis Crawford	03 9497 3256
"Sam" Collins	08 8262 6107
Bob Hamblyn	08 8672 3930
Butch Marsden	08 9921 6183
Graham Besford	03 9439 2661
Des Evans	07 4128 2390
Jock Coultis	08 9279 1946
Keith Burley	07 5543 0990
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 McGlinn	07 5426 1597
Paddy Healy	02 4930 7541
John Smith	0400032502
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	Lost contact
Ray Fulton	03 6288 1176
Graeme Pengelly	03 5345 2397
Bruce Arrow	02 6288 3872
John Stonehouse	Lost contact
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 Bergin	03 5974 2175
Bruce Fenwick	02 4977 3530
Paul Jones	02 6231 5963

Peter Schreiber	02 6569 3390
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### 3 Troop (1966-67)

Ray Forster	07 3409 1907
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### 3 Troop (1967-68)

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 Breddin	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 9332 6410
Tom Simons	03 6344 6058
Norm Cairns	03 6267 4629
Peter MacDonald	08 9448 5418
Peter Perry	08 9756 7780
Kevin Shugg	0411144500
Ken Young	02 9602 5204

### 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
Ted O'Malley	07 4091 3561
Eric Banfalvi	07 5543 5230

### 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
Vin Neale	03 9786 1549
Leon Tuttleby	08 8952 6598
Roelof Methorst (Silent number)	

### Three Troop (1970-71)

John Beningfield	07 4778 4473
Rod Scott	07 4096 5372
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
Ian Campbell	03 9870 0313
John Davey	07 3378 4316
Les Shelley	07 3264 4041
Steve Armbrust	07 5545 1073
Paul Scott	02 6656 0730
Garry Lourigan	02 4844 5545
Kevin Hodge	Lost contact
Kenny Laughton	08 8297 4010
Steve Collett	08 9371 0075
Darryll Binns	08 8988 5827
Mike Barnett	02 9869 7132
Gordon Temby	08 9757 2016



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 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.

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 simply intense pride in what we did and a move to protect our status.

## VIETNAM TUNNEL RAT'S REUNION



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