

A Vietnam veteran comes home to his untold truth . . .

This has been
stalking me for
many years, beginning in

1969

up until the present time.

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The bumps will always remain, but the ride is a bit softer! Page 8

I'm **60** now and this is my **black dog** story, and have not discussed this with a lot of people. I have however, spoken at length with a Doctor (Psychologist) who I have little or no faith in as he does NOT understand veterans. I am sure he is very qualified, however he just doesn't do it for me unfortunately, only veterans seem to understand veterans (there may be a couple of exceptions) . . . sad but true.

I had a normal upbringing and was the youngest of three children. I attended a Catholic nuns school, to class six then a Catholic college up until year three, or NSW intermediate certificate. I was only an average scholar and got little or no encouragement at home.

At **15** I wanted to leave school and I dreamt of being a jeweller/watchmaker, however I had a relative working in the bank who suggested to my parents, me applying for a job there. My parents thought it best I start there, as it was a secure job with a good future (for life . . . ha, ha, ha). I rose through the normal ranks and was due to start training in the overseas bills and foreign exchange area, then . . .

During the start of **1968**, my birth date was picked as eligible for national service, in the Royal Australian Army. After three months basic training at Kapooka (Wagga, Wagga) I was sent to Puckapunial in Victoria for another three months Corps training. It's interesting here to note that at no time, were any of us told, we were to be sent to South Vietnam and to a war.

Maybe we were just dumb or gullible? During the summer of 68/69 I was posted to a unit in Western Sydney for further training - life was great! During March 1969, I was posted to Canungra Qld special jungle training unit for three weeks intensive training and we found out later, that apparently this is where **ALL** soldiers were sent, prior to embarking for foreign shores - Vietnam. We didn't even know where Vietnam was !!!!!

At this camp we were brainwashed about the domino theory and communism in South East Asia. We were all 21 by now, puffed up and very fit, full of bravado, most having our 21st birthdays during field battle training in the jungles of Queensland . . . anyhow, we thought we were doing the correct thing by Australia AND we thought, how bad could South Vietnam and this war be ?????? . . . we soon found out!

Sights of unfortunate villagers were dealt with 'black humour' and if a body was sighted, the term "a dead *nog*' is a good *nog*" was used to deal with it!



Every day, I struggle to comprehend the massive loss of life on both sides of that bloody conflict, in particular the millions of civilian women and kids . . . lives taken for no good reason.

My story from here on is much the same as most all other veterans and some days and nights, were very interesting indeed . . . we found out these little buggers were serious and were actually trying to kill us! . . .

. . . only after a few weeks settling in and an enemy mortar bomb slammed into our area, very early one morning. A NASHO digger from Tassie ran out and screamed;

“Hey, that’s not fair . . . I’m a conscript!”

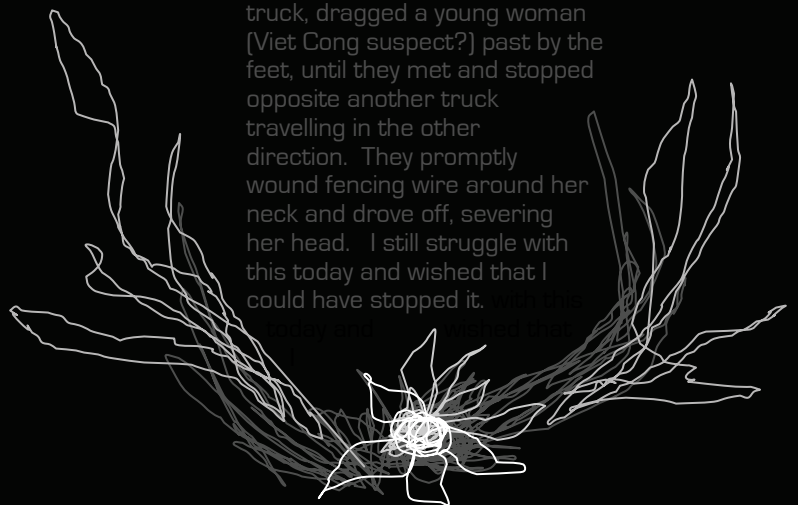
. . . he soon scurried down a bunker hole when another one exploded close by a few moments later . . . reality had just struck home!

We were 21, tough and fit however as the weeks turned into months, the dust turned into mud and the jokes turned into tears, it slowly but surely changed everyone

News and rumour [the bush telegraph] the numbers of wounded and KIA’s from various units, rose steadily and the air was thick with the smell of dust and death . . . diggers became very sullen. I think every soldier is changed for the worse, in a place like that, with a general feeling of resentment for the local people, who you could never trust and you dealt with them that way . . . on your guard 24/7!

During my service in South Vietnam I saw things that changed the way I thought forever, I never thought humans could treat other humans so badly.

One very hot dry day I was on my own in a vehicle, on a highway heading North. I watched helplessly, as some A.R.V.N. soldiers in a small truck, dragged a young woman (Viet Cong suspect?) past by the feet, until they met and stopped opposite another truck travelling in the other direction. They promptly wound fencing wire around her neck and drove off, severing her head. I still struggle with this today and wished that I could have stopped it.



On returning from active service, I spent some weeks with the Artillery Corp regiment and within days of being discharged from there, I immediately walked straight back into my job, that was being held for me by my employer.

From uniform to suit was a culture shock to say the least! Previous work acquaintances, from pre conscription days continuously asked stupid questions, such as, "Jeeze you look different!" or "Where have you been?", and *even* "How many did you kill there?"

I particularly remember my Father's words to me. He told me not to discuss my Vietnam war service with anyone and it was best not to talk to anyone about it to anyone !!! "It could really affect your job son" - whatever IT meant?

Very few Vets at that time would actually admit to being a Vietnam as it was all hush, hush and shameful. The public's perception of veterans was bad . . . that hurt us . . . it really bloody deeply HURT! After serving your country, to be shunned by one's family is one thing, but to be shunned by one's country is an abomination and unforgivable . . . It will just never go away, out of my head. . . hard to explain.

It was not long before I progressed to an administrative role, in handling movement of staff from metropolitan and country branches. It was here where things started to go pear shaped and it really hit the fan (as it were). It was a daily battle, very stressful, and when staff were in very short supply and things were tight, (due to various constraints placed on the industry by lower salaries etc, compared to up and coming new better paid positions in building societies and credit unions) branch managers were continually phoning and asking/pleading for assistance and to cover personnel shortages.



19TH MARCH 1975

It was the 19th March 1975 and I was in a very tight spot to fill a teller's position at Bondi (only a three handed branch) and after a lot of cajoling and promises, I managed to instruct a relieving staff member,

WILLIAM RICE

(Billy's name will live in my head forever)

to travel as quickly as he could from Penrith to Bondi. He did not want to go there and I almost had to beg. From memory I seem to remember he had a girlfriend at Penrith branch . . .



. . . He arrived at Bondi very late just before 11am and as soon as he was organised by the branch manager with his cash/coin, he commenced his relieving teller position. . . . The Bondi branch was at the same instant, inflicted with an armed hold up . . . Billy was shot dead at the counter with a sawed off .22 rifle . . . The branch manager phoned me in a frenzy and screamed down the line . . . "Get some f* * *ing help, get f* * *ing help!"

The time on my desk clock read **11:11am.**

It was here that my life changed forever.

The phone call was taken over by my office superior. I froze, unable to speak. Most nights since then, my nightmare takes me leaping down flights of steps from the 14th floor of Pitt Street and Martin Place, hailing a cab to Bondi . . . fast.

I stand outside the bank branch at Bondi surrounded by onlookers and all I can see is blood splattered up the wall behind Billy's now covered body. A Police officer tells me to return to my office in the city which I of course obey . . . No one actually notices my absence. I sit speechless and I am unable to hear anyone talking to me.

Things then appeared to be happening in slow motion and I remember the State Manager coming to my desk and asking if I was alright . . . My immediate superior said; "Of course he's OK, he's just come back from Vietnam, he's used to that stuff."

The guilt I felt and still feel today is sometimes overwhelming.

The dreams started and continue today. I got angry . . . really f***ing angry. Why was this happening to me? I even packed up the family and moved to New Zealand looking for, I don't what? . . . escape?

I returned to Australia from NZ after six months of wandering and unrest and I lasted until 1980 in Sydney and came home one day and said we have to get out of here . . . I was not even sure where HERE was? We had two children by this time and alcohol was becoming the centre of my life. We moved to the country and purchased a small business that did well as I was working 7 days a week . . . I had to keep working . . . HARD . . . KEEP BUSY! We purchased a second business and my wife ran one and I ran the other. I lost a lot of weight and the days seemed to merge into the nights. In 1985 we had sold both businesses, as I was offered a very good job managing a transport company. It was a fairly large family company and my salary was good.

1992 was a turning point.

Strange things started happening. I began to get faint and drank heavily. I smoked up to 60 cigs a day. My wife had to rush me off to the local doctor's house, because I had stopped breathing in the middle of dinner one evening. She thought I was choking . . . he said it was just a panic attack.

I was driving a bus load of kids along one morning, when I glanced up into the internal mirror and the ENTIRE REAR of the bus was missing! . . . At least that's what I thought I saw? I realise now that these were only symptoms and as time moved along things got worse. Alcohol became very important to me. Sleep was impossible, and I started to become paranoid and withdrawn.

The crunch came on the 12th March 1992. When prompted by a particularly nasty phone call from one of the company's directors, who got joy out of continually tormenting me, over one thing and another. (He even mocked Vietnam veterans, in general!) I lost the plot here and I quickly drove into town where this director was situated. I confronted him and savagely punched and knocked him down . . . twice. The end came swiftly and I was asked to resign by the company board. They stated that they KNEW I was under some type of stress and gave me a cheque for a pittance. I fought them and ended up receiving three times what they had offered . . . I was now unemployed and in shock. . . i had never had anything but accolades from an employer, now I had a great big 'BRICK BAT'.



I declined into severe depression. I was admitted to hospital by my Doctor and told to contact the Veterans Affairs Department, pronto! Eventually, I sought assistance from the Vietnam Veterans Federation and long story short, I was awarded a TPI pension, by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Not a lot of money, however we had no debts to speak of and this, I thought would solve everything, however the bad dreams, nightmares and guilt continued. Things got worse . . .

I joined a local veterans group and spent the next 10 years volunteering and assisting other vets. In 1996, I decided to return to Vietnam with a number of other vets and found that it was probably a good thing, although I did struggle while there at one point. The jury is still out on that one! I did discover that my dreams were REAL! I remember visiting some areas around Dat Do, Nui Dat and Barla and thinking, hey, that's the stuff I see every night.

I was invited to attend a three month course on PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) by the DVA sponsored and run by the Wesley Group. The leader, was a founder in treatment of veterans with PTSD and over the three months . . . I found I wasn't the only one who had thought they were going crazy.

There were veterans for Vietnam, Korea, the gulf war, Malaya and WW11. All had similar stories to tell . . . Some could not tell their stories at all . . . there were many private tears. The course was really beneficial and as a group, we still meet for lunch and a beer, every so often. It's like a therapy of sorts.

Unfortunately there is no cure all for everyone and one of our participants passed away, during the course. However I did come to understand a few things and how to cope with them. Medication has a place and it took some time to work out what and how much was right for me. I look at the clock every single day and the clock shows a time of 11.11— I have only just realised in the last few years . . . why!

I now realise what it was and is like for my wife and children and I feel really bad about that.

Lately, I find that I am still withdrawing from everyone and everything. I have no joy out of much anymore. Life now is a continuing *balance*, between wanting to carry on, being with my wonderful wife, family and grandchildren or just not . . . It's as simple as that and . . .

I take every day, one day at time

11.11



Footnote on next page . . .

Footnote:-

Writing my story has been a cathartic journey for me and was made possible by the encouragement from Janine Browne and my new Psychologist and confidant Ted Campbell.

I have discovered “getting it off your chest” can actually mean, accepting life the way it is and dealing with the bumps in the road with some better suspension . . .

The bumps will always remain, but the ride is a bit softer!

My wife convinced me recently to participate in a war veterans and partners lifestyle course. A five day residential experience where I actually gained a good insight into why I am like I am and come to understand that

I am basically a good person, just carrying heavy luggage that needed some wheels under it.

It also gave me a number of ways in which to cope with bumps and explained why my physical health has now been so adversely effected by my previous military training and war service. The experience since the war had just put an extra lid on the can of very active worms.

The bondage of guilt and sorry I feel each day remains and will so forever, however the ropes are a little looser now.

I remain concerned that my experiences, both in the military and afterwards has badly affected my two sons—I hope not. My wife remains ‘the rock’ that I can continually lean on from time to time and picks me up when I ‘hit the wall’.

I still glance up at the clock at 11:11 each day however I no longer wear a wrist watch these days.

