

Ben Cat, Vietnam 1965: A personal account

A special report from Chris Turver

It's 48 years since New Zealand woke up to the harsh reality of war in Vietnam with this report from Chris Turver, the NZPA's first war correspondent attached to 161 Battery for three months in 1965:

Dateline Ben Cat, NZPA Correspondent, Sept 14 - Two New Zealand gunners were killed instantly late yesterday morning when their ammunition-laden Landrover was blasted apart by a Viet Cong-planted landmine.

They are Sergeant A.J.S Don, married, of Porirua East, and Bombardier R White, married, also of Porirua East.

The blast of the mine blew all four occupants high in the air and sections of the Landrover were strewn over a 30-yard radius . . .

That was the start of a report which captured the front page headlines of New Zealand newspapers on September 14 1965 and graphically brought the Vietnam war to family, friends, and all New Zealanders.

The report went on to recount that this was 161 Battery's first operational assignment, forming part of a convoy from its base at Bien Hoa with American, Australian, and South Vietnamese forces, to subdue a Viet Cong stronghold at Ben Cat in the notorious Iron Triangle.

In that one operation New Zealand lost two killed, with several seriously wounded by booby traps.

Al Don and Jock White were the first of 37 New Zealand artillery and infantry troops to be killed during New Zealand's seven-year involvement in the Vietnam war.

As a survivor from that landmine explosion you would think the details were vividly etched in my brain but instead I was out cold, concussed from the force of the blast, and never heard or saw a thing for several minutes.

On meeting the families of Al and Jock at Parliament during Parade 2008 I was able to tell them from first hand experience that their husbands would not have known or felt anything. They seemed to take comfort from that.

At Ben Cat, I slowly came to in rubble on the side of the track with a slashed forehead, smashed spectacles, and worrying more about finding my portable Olivetti typewriter and camera – both located totally undamaged.

It didn't cross my mind until later that fellow survivor Lance Bombardier Roy Edwards and I were particularly lucky to be alive after sitting on live 105mm shells in the rear tray when the landmine was electronically detonated by a couple of Viet Cong, subsequently tracked down and killed.



Landrover Romeo 2 was blown to pieces and only later did I appreciate the value of the Aden configuration, with lots of sandbags on the base of the tray before the shells were loaded!

While L/Bdr Edwards was uninjured and stayed at the 'front' (later to be injured by a booby trap), I was fixed up with a field dressing and

packed off to Bien Hoa Field Hospital in the same chopper carrying the bodies of Al and Jock.

They say war always has its funny side.

I was laid out on a bed and covered with a dark green sheet, virtually from head to toe, with a just clear space at head level for the medic to stitch me up.

Unknown to me, the Battery BK, the late Capt Murray Connor, had been sent to track me down and check my condition. He came through the tent flaps and all he could see was a body covered by a sheet with a pair of boots facing him.

“Is he dead?” a voice asked in hushed tones. “Not ready yet Murray” says I.

Later that day I was driven in to Saigon to file my story of the tragedy through the Reuters office and the next day bludged a chopper lift from Ton Son Nhut back to Ben Cat to rejoin the operation for another week.



Back at Ben Cat with the faithful Olivetti portable and a new set of specs

The irony of the Ben Cat experience was that I had just been cabled by the NZPA managing editor in Wellington with a message encouraging me, for my own safety, to limit my coverage to the security of 161 Battery!

Until Ben Cat, the Battery had been working up at Bien Hoa and I had broadened my coverage to show what the allies were up to.

This included a search-and-destroy patrol close to the Cambodian border with a US Special Forces team; flying on board the USS Independence to observe takeoffs by fight-bombers to North Vietnam; sailing on board a South Vietnamese junk on a coastal interdiction patrol; flying in a US Skyraider dive bomber to saturate a jungle clearing in the Iron Triangle; and patrols with our Battery Forward Observers with the 1 RAR and US 173rd Airborne Brigade.

The NZPA Board had expressed concern that I could be at more risk covering the allies than sticking with the Battery!

As things turned out I was switched to Borneo in early October to spend a month covering the last rotation on to the border of 1 RNZIR including one long-range infantry patrol, an interdiction patrol on board HMNZS Santon, and resupply flights by the RNZAF Transport Squadron.

Throughout all my “service” with the New Zealand artillery, infantry, air force, and navy (including Mururoa in 1973), I came to have the highest regard for the absolute professionalism and comradeship of our people.

I always felt safe . . . and that’s probably the highest tribute.

Chris Turver

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