



Tunnel duty was the worst job in Vietnam

The Courier Mail (Australia)

August 4, 2024 Sunday

CourierMail Edition

Copyright 2024 Nationwide News Pty Limited All Rights Reserved

Section: AGENDA; Pg. 68

Length: 747 words

Byline: Jayne Keogh

Body

WAY WE WERE with Jayne Keogh

Imagine standing looking down a deep, dark hole in the ground in the middle of the jungle, knowing that the enemy who have been killing your mates, the Viet Cong, are down there beneath your feet. It is your job to climb into that dirty tunnel head-first and crawl along with a torch and a handgun and sometimes a telephone line to communicate with your mates on the ground.

You have been chosen because you are tough, short and slim, similar to the enemy, but at times your shoulders scrape the sides.

It is pitch black, smells like sewerage, and is cloyingly hot. It is hard to breathe as you get further into the abyss and you wonder if you will run out of air or breathe poison gas.

You have a huge adrenaline rush as you edge into the hole, on high alert, in readiness to face the mortal danger of booby traps, grenades or a gunfight with the enemy.

The bomb, which is disguised as a Coke can, must be defused in the dark or you will be blown to bits.

There were no good jobs in the Army in the Vietnam War. If you were there as a regular, a conscript or as an entertainer, then you served your country. But most in the military would agree that the worst job in the Army was the 'Tunnel Rats', or officially the 1, 2 and 3 Field Troop, 1st Field Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers.

These are the men who went bush with the Armoured Corps and Infantry, staying out in the jungle for four to six weeks as Infanteers, both engineers and infantrymen.

They carried out mine and booby trap detection and clearing, tunnel and bunker searching and demolition, plus bomb disposal.

Tunnel duty was the worst job in Vietnam

The first tunnels appeared during the Japanese occupation of Vietnam in WWII. When the French Vietnamese War began in 1946, the use of tunnels by the Viet Minh expanded and the French formed their own specialist units to search and destroy the deadly pits.

Then when the Vietnam War broke out in 1967, the Viet Cong created a whole underground network that hid their snipers who shot the Australians and Americans and then disappeared underground.

This story is told by one Tunnel Rat, Queenslander John (Joe) Cazey on an oral history recording for the State Library of Queensland.

Joe was a regular Royal Australian Engineer, the corps that built roads, bridges and airfields in Vietnam. His unit was the 1st Field Squadron, were also responsible for destroying the tunnels inflicting casualties on our troops.

On the 18th of August 1966, Joe witnessed the Battle of Long Tan being waged from 2-3km away, and assisted with running additional ammunition to those involved.

Another Queenslander, Bombardier John Burns, was in the thick of it at Long Tan, second in charge of gun Number 5, 103 Field Battery in the Royal Australian Artillery with seven gunners under his charge.

He describes a quiet afternoon at Nui Dat, gunnery secured for the night and on his way to enjoy a cold one.

"I didn't even get a sip when the channel barked out 'fire mission regiment' and I just ran to my bay as all hell was breaking loose. D Company RAR was out there on a patrol in the rubber plantation in extreme danger surrounded by an estimated 2000 North Vietnamese troops en route to attack the Australian base." He loaded **shell** after **shell**.

"We were working in a fog of burnt cordite and smoke, which couldn't get away because of a heavy downpour. As we fired **shell** after **shell**, the gun was white-hot and the troops ran in with ammo and I was worrying that we would run out." The fire order 'danger close' was given to him and his blood ran cold. "The North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong were advancing so close to our guys that we had to ensure that our shells didn't hit our own men," he said. "Your training just kicks in; you are totally focused on the job. Prepare, load, fire, check, adjust, repeat. But one thing that sticks in my mind is that at one point I looked around. Every single person on base was helping, admin people, cooks, they came from everywhere and I felt so much pride that I was part of this Army. We all were trying to save our mates out there. In doing so, Long Tan probably saved the whole base, had D Company not stopped them they could have wiped us out." On Vietnam Veterans' Day, the recalling of a single battle on one afternoon in August 1966 commemorates and honours all Australians like Joe and John who took part in that conflict.

CONTACT JAYNE KEOGH If you have an idea for a Way We Were feature or want to get in contact, email Jayne Keogh at waywewere@news.com.au

Load-Date: August 4, 2024