

104 Field Battery

ARTILLERY LENDS dignity to what would otherwise be a vulgar brawl, says the unofficial motto of the Royal Australian Artillery.

The gunners of 104 Field Battery did not lend much dignity to events during their stay in South Vietnam, but they did lend direct artillery support to 4RAR/NZ(Anzac) Bn on all the battalion's operations.

While giving that support the battery established a reputation for rapid and accurate artillery fire which they treasured far more than any notions of dignity. Despite the gunners' disregard for niceties, they formed an extremely efficient and hard-working unit.

At the same time the battery developed an extremely close bond with the battalion—a relationship much closer and deeper than would normally be expected between units from different corps.

The "germs", as the gunners were known, had little time for what they called parade ground nonsense. They were always at their best when they escaped what they regarded as the petty restrictions of base life and could work in conditions they and the infantry understood.

The battery was commanded by Major M.C. Crawford, an RMC graduate, who came to the battery shortly before it left for Vietnam. Before this he was an instructor at the School of Artillery and this accounted for the enormous degree of technical competence he brought to his job. At all times he provided precise and exact artillery advice to the battalion and he set a particularly high standard of gunnery.

He had warmth, humour and a taste for civilised living which never deserted him, even in the scrub. The warmth and humour emerged when he was talking with the soldiers. The taste for civilisation was frequently seen at lunches at remote fire support bases when tins of oysters, crab and cheese would appear miraculously.

The battery commander's role meant he spent most of his time with the battalion commander, and it was the battery captain, Capt Peter Sharp, who took on the day-to-day running of the gun position. Capt Sharp was responsible for the administrative efficiency which stamped the battery. He was also responsible for moulding the battery to a stage

where it could deploy astonishingly rapidly and effectively in any conditions.

Peter was nicknamed "The Man." This was a reference to the popular song "I've been working for the man," which many a sweat and dirt-stained soldier sang ruefully to himself while digging a hole or filling sandbags.

Nobody ever resented the demands he made—mainly because they resulted in a base's defences being quickly established. So quickly, in fact, that on that inevitably nervous first night in the bush there was always wire, bunds and overhead cover.

The BK's off-sider was WOII "Ben" Bennett-Burleigh, an experienced veteran whose first experience in the armed services was as a sailor in the Second World War, where he rose to the rank of chief petty officer.

Indeed, it was not unusual for a parade to be addressed with a raucous shout of, "Adjust your dressing fore and aft." For the newcomer who found the orders difficult to understand there was always a collection of saltier naval terms to help him out. His experience and wisdom made him a valuable source of advice to both soldiers and young officers.

Ben was christened "Father," and if he was the father of the battery, the battery guide, WOII Alan Price was "Mother." Another veteran, Alan, too, was renowned for his efficiency and his understanding. He had been in the army for more years than most soldiers had been months—and his experience was available to everyone.

Battery gun position officer was Capt Ian Taylor. The job of a GPO in Vietnam is demanding and although Ian occasionally lost his temper he never lost his sense of humour. His mania was cooking—at FSPB Betty he built a stove with RAEME assistance. Incredibly, it produced scones, fruit pies and even a sponge.

The members of the battery were noted for informality and it was probably this that led to the close relationship between officers and men. The younger officers managed to become good friends with their soldiers and yet still retain the soldiers' respect.

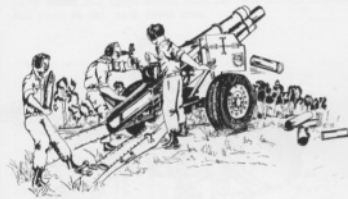
Of the Right Section sergeants, Sgt Peter Tilbrook, the oldest, was a veritable efficiency expert who treated gunnery and deployment problems as a subject for time and motion

studies. Sgt Tim Perrin (demon fast bowler) achieved much with his dry sense of humour. Sgt "Goof" Haak was "The Dictator" to his detachment and demanded absolute obedience from his men. He was also quite willing to risk his stripes for these same men.

In the other section the gun sergeants reflected different personalities and approaches. Sgt Ted Watson, promoted in theatre, moulded a young detachment into one of the best on the gun position.

Sgt "Johnno" Johnston, the youngest of the sergeants, lacked experience but made up for it with enthusiasm. Sgt "Blue" Biglands was a father to his detachment. Outsiders were sometimes amused by the way he cared for his "family" — even to the extent of ensuring that individuals cleaned their teeth.

Personality could, however, be a problem at times and the battery command post reflected the effect of putting a group of well-educated people from different backgrounds together. The arguments ranged over subjects as wide as politics, religion and sport, and they raged from stores tent to living areas to base.



Yet, despite the off-duty debating forum, the personnel in the command post formed a highly competent team which quickly produced accurate data for the guns. Sgt Rick Hampson, the survey sergeant, guided this motley collection with a mixture of sternness and humour.

Banter on the radio net between FOs and the command post was often as good as "Laugh-In." Once an American unit strayed on to the battery frequency. The unit's identification was Pumpkin and the control station was feverishly calling Pumpkin to no avail. After some time our command post pleaded with the Pumpkin control to leave the net. Back came a voice with a loud and astonished, "The Great Pumpkin, good grief."

The FOs saw many strange things. One night, one was convinced he had seen a green flare and that an enemy assault was nigh. Later he admitted it was, perhaps, ground mist and not a flare. Another FO immediately came up on the radio and said that that was probably true. "There must have been lots of mist," he pointed out, "or how else would you have missed the pregnant woman who just rode past your position on a bicycle."

Another time an FO reported elephant tracks and a little later a cache of peanuts. The command post greeted this with due scepticism, but the FO was adamant that it was true.

The FOs carried out some excellent work for infantry in heavy contact. Lt John Thornton and 2Lt John Burns both brought fire to within 50 metres of their companies, which were receiving heavy enemy fire.

The battery went to a large number of fire support bases — 17 in all. The conditions at the bases varied enormously. But whatever the conditions and wherever the base, the battery showed a talent for construction. It was even referred to as the engineer battery. The amount of work required to establish a fire support base was enormous.

On the first two days thick earth bunds were built around the guns themselves, wire was laid and shelters with overhead protection built for ammunition. Individual pits had to be dug and had to be covered with two layers of overhead protection by night one.

While this and other work was progressing, the battery had still to fulfil its primary roll — direct support for the infantry.

At FSPB Dyke, for Operation Merino, the guns were bogged down in mud. A flash flood filled the command post with water and surveyors and signallers had to dive into the water to recover the CP stores. When a gun fired it started a wash which rippled through the gun position. Despite this, the guns fired more than 1000 rounds in 24 hours.

Everybody, from gun number to medic, manhandled ammunition through the slush to the breeches. As fast as the ammunition was unboxed it was fired. All sorts of fuses had to be used — even concrete-piercing fuses. But this was barely enough and the GPO came within 11 rounds of having to report all high explosive ammunition expended.

This support was for the first set piece battalion attack since the Korean War. The second visit to Dyke was different. The heat was searing and the dust was thick. So thick that when the time came to leave the position the incoming Chinooks stirred up so much dust it was impossible to see the ground or guns. The guns had to be manhandled into a less dusty position.

This visit also saw one of the battery's most successful days of firing. The guns fired on an occupied base camp. When they stopped firing the VC reappeared and the battery started firing again. Again they stopped and again the battery reopened fire when the VC appeared. When D Company moved in and searched the area they found more than 12 fresh graves.

FSPB Flinders was dubbed "The Fortress" or "Sandbag City" by those who saw it. Twenty-six thousand sandbags went into the position. It began to resemble a mediaeval fortress — thick, high bunds surrounded by deep holes and thick sandbag walls. The whole position was surrounded by an enormous amount of wire, both concertina and low wire entanglements. F Detachment, under Sgt Blue Biglands, built a sandbag wall which Col Kelly, commanding officer of 12 Field Regiment, termed "The Wall of China."

If Flinders appeared impregnable, it still presented problems. The battery stayed there seven weeks while two operations were conducted in the area. In the middle of the seven weeks a malaria epidemic struck. Twice evacuation helicopters had to be brought in after dark to lift out seriously ill soldiers. Seven weeks of boredom and sickness really tested the morale of the battery. Toward the end of the seven weeks another problem arose — the position became infested by rats. Such epidemics were inevitable in positions occupied for long periods. No amount of attention to hygiene could offset them.

However, even this had its lighter side. The VC might not have worried the soldiers overmuch—but rats were a different proposition. The signals bombardier, Bdr Polley, suffered more than most with this problem, but he always fervently denied that the rats bothered him. His pit was close to the command post and everybody going on or off duty had to pass it. The CP personnel got into the habit of scratching his overhead protection as they went past. This resulted in a frenzied Polley, torch in hand, spending a fearful half hour searching.

At Flinders the battery fired its only linear target. In such a target, all the guns are aimed at different points along a feature such as, in this case, a road. This was done to prevent the VC from moving truckloads of supplies at night.

During the seven weeks many members of the battery went out on patrol with the infantry protecting the fire support base, with varying success. As one gunner remarked, "I was in the ambush when everyone else started firing. I thought I had better fire too. Never did see anything though."

Flinders tested the battery's morale—sickness, boredom, heat, dust and an enormous amount of work to build the position. The morale stood the test admirably. Flinders was virtually the culmination of the battery's application of the lessons it learned in its early months in Vietnam.

It had been considerably different at the battery's first fire support base, Thornton. The APCs had mechanical trouble and the guns arrived before the recon party. The forward observer of the company which cleared the site for the gun position put the guns into action.

However, if the soldiers were a bit unsettled on that first night, they felt more so when they made their first trip to "Rocket Alley," the area to the north of the giant Bien Hoa airbase. There they took over FSPB Concord from the Americans and rebuilt it.

After the initial apprehension, boredom again became a problem. Like many other soldiers in many other armies, 104 Field Battery gunners solved the problem with races. The gunners organised rat races. However, even these did not provide a substitute for one of the battery's main interests—the short wave broadcasts of horse races from Australia. At one stage the battery had four bookmakers serving about 50 punters.

Dean of these was Sgt Peter Tilbrook. Many of his punters had been betting with him since Malaysia. Bdr Frank Flegg and Bdr "Moto" Mottershead supplied the serious bookmaking competition, while Capt Peter Sharp, Lbdr Wally Procko and several of the sergeants provided the regular punters.

Gnr Gary Collins had an advantage over most punters—he was a jockey before joining the Army.

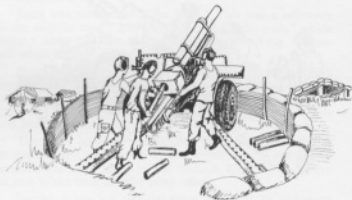
With the constant firing at Concord, the guns suffered heavy wear. It was so bad that the rounds began to fall in an unnatural manner. A helicopter pilot observing a normal concentration remarked after the mission that it was the best linear target he had ever seen. The guns were recalibrated and there were no more unintentional linears.

FSPB Gabo was originally an ARVN post and the local residents apparently imagined they still enjoyed the freedom of access they had had before. The bunds outside the guns were regarded as convenient short cuts and several times fire missions were stopped at the sight of a young Vietnamese woman strolling along the bunds. It was probably the VC's most effective secret weapon of the war.

While at FSPB Wattle for the first time the battery received a probe to the perimeter. The guns fired splintex—an anti-personnel round filled with thousands of ballistically-shaped arrows. This gave birth to the battery's theme song, "Little Arrows," a popular tune at the time.

The second visit to Wattle was somewhat quieter although there were moments of worry for some. The survey sergeant, Rick Hampson, and the assistant GPO, 2Lt Noel Turnbull, were sitting in the command post when they heard the whistle and explosion of what sounded like incoming mortars. They turned to each other ashen-faced. "What was that?" asked one. "Incoming rounds," was the reply. There was a fierce argument as to who should investigate before it was discovered that the battalion mortars were adjusting a very close DF.

We discovered a more primitive fear in Gnr "Jumpy" Jupp at Wattle. He used to spend all his time sharpening his machete. He did not like snakes and if he met one he intended to dispose of it with his razor sharp weapon. One day he spotted something black in the grass. He struck and cleaved the thing in two. It was the exhaust lead from the motor used to charge the batteries for the command post lights.



Some months after the battery returned from Wattle it made its second visit to "Rocket Alley" and established FSPB Betty. On this visit rockets were more in evidence and the battery spent almost every night firing counter-rocket targets.

The fire support base was established in the middle of an American land-clearing operation and throughout the battery's stay the Americans gradually cleared all the surrounding jungle until all that was left was an outcrop of scrub with the battery in the middle of it.

Despite the heavy firing, the days presented their usual problem—boredom. Yet the soldiers always managed to overcome it.

Month-long card games were organised by Lbdr Tony Skinner and Gnr "Brumus" Brooker. Unending chess games were started by Gnr Graham Floyd and Gnr "Rees" Chat-tillon. Hundreds of crossword puzzles were completed by Gnr Dave Thomas and Lbdr Herb Elliott.

Gnr Ken Burt, "Jumbo" Elphinstone and Bill Innes always seemed to find something to serve as a ball for a game of touch football. Gnr "Robbie" Robinson always managed to have an inexhaustible supply of books which he read and reread. Everybody had his own solution.

The soldiers, though part of a team, always retained their individual flair. Volley-ball, cricket, soccer, basketball and softball were all sports which were popular.

When playing volleyball, Sgt Blue Biglands' body and soul went into winning, and to lose was almost a capital offence. Gnr John Lyall always played with that laconic calmness which stamped everything he did. Gnrs Jock Boggie, Mick Longley and "Wes" Hall leaped with the grace of cats and the intent of hungry lions. It became the most violent non-contact sport ever played.

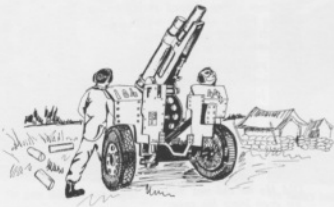
The only time the battery's morale ever really suffered was at FSPB Wattle when an infantry team defeated a battery team.

The battery may have had a loss at volleyball, but its cricket team never suffered defeat. It was an intra-battery match, however, which provided the sporting excitement of the tour. After four hours of play the scores were tied with one side having three wickets to fall. Shy and retiring Gnr Joe Kannar came on to bowl the last over. One loose ball and the game was over. In the best tradition of cricket fiction he took three wickets for none.

After scrounging materials from here and there a work party under 2Lt Ernie Byron built the only cement basketball court in the task force area.



"Now let's give them a taste of our air power."



Nui Dat was a place for creativity, apparently, because it was there that the battery newspaper, "The Germ Journal," was launched.

If Nui Dat was a place for creativity, rest and recreation, Vung Tau, the official rest centre, was not the same. At Vung Tau the soldiers conducted a war which was far more enthusiastically fought than any with the VC. The war was with the Vung Tau MPs.

One night one of the MPs burst into a room full of soldiers from the battery. Weapon clutched in his hand, he uttered a line made famous by a hundred B-grade Hollywood movies—"Okay you guys, up against de wall." In between roaring with laughter, the soldiers obeyed.

Whether the battery's problems were MPs, sickness, boredom, homesickness, the conditions or the enemy, it overcame them all, and thoroughly deserved its reputation of being "one of the best batteries to go to Vietnam."



Airstrike.

The Rats of Concord

*It was boring up at Concord
'Cause it was an isolated joint,
Beyond the Long Binh complex
On the east flank's farthest point.*

*It overlooked the Song Dong Ngai
Indeed, a pleasant view,
From on the hill where Concord lay
In the monsoon's heavy dew.*

*They called it "Rocket Alley!"
What a very inapt name,
'Cause we didn't see a Charlie
Oh Concord was so tame!*

*As the tedious days passed slowly
To find more things to do was vain,
Until one day the rats appeared
To overrun the whole terrain.*

*'Twas no Pied Piper available
So another way was tried,
A bloke named Floyd set a trap
And got a rat inside.*

*He was big and rough and ugly
(The rat, of course, I mean),
With ears as sharp as razors
A body long and lean.*

*"Look at 'im," cried Floyd in glee
"A beaut for sure is he,
He moves like lightning in his cage
'Cause he's built for speed you see."*

*Then Tilly standing by the way
Had a bright idea,
"I'll bet I can catch a rat
That could show that thing its rear."*

*"You're on," said Floyd, "it's a bet
There ain't a rat could outrun Ho,
Look at the way he fights the wire
Boy, he could fairly go."*

*Tilly set the cage that evening
The bait, an apple core,
Any rat that fed on apples
Would have a tiger's roar.*

*All night he watched and waited
Until he heard a scurry there,
When he heard the cage door crash
He had a rat within his snare.*

*"How can we lose," said Tilly
"Pher Rat will be his name,
He'll even go down in history
Might reach the Hall of Fame."*

*My, he was sleek and sturdy
With nimble and agile limb,
A pure-bred I shouldn't wonder
Judging by the silver-grey of him.*

*His tail was long and thrusting
His beady eyes were black,
It was obvious he was a racer
By the clean curve of his back.*

*Old Tilly's mind got working
"How we going to win this race?
First we've got to build a track
In the coolest, flattest place."*

*So he collected some old canisters
The type the rounds came in,
And cut them down the middle
Phar Rat in these would win.*

*He joined them all together
With a transparent plastic top,
So that backers could see the action
When the barriers got the chop.*

*That day the punters gathered
To see Ho and Phar Rat race,
The betting started early
At a pretty rapid pace.*

*The cage doors slipped their catches
Sprung free to clear the way,
Seconds lapsed before the start
Of a new historic day.*

*Then Phar Rat from his barrier
A frightful streak of grey,
Leapt forth, a flying image
To blur the light of day.*

*In seconds it was over
Phar Rat had reached the end,
Twisted to a skidding halt
He'd flashed round every bend.*

*Old Ho he did not bother
To even leave his cage,
Causing all his backers
To fly into a rage.*

*"The Chink's a flaming letdown
He couldn't run a yard,
Keep the ruddy stewards away
Or else he will be barred."*

*But Phar Rat was soon to vanish
From the vital winning place,
Ho went on to prove his fame
For he won many a rewarding race.*

*Although Ho went down in history
And Phar Rat's fame had died,
The Chink was not the champion
Of the first race of the pride.*

*But the same fate was to claim them both
For they were fired from Bluey's gun,
Phar Rat he landed far ahead
Like the first race he had won.*