

# D Company



IT WAS A MOMENTOUS tour in South Vietnam. And D Company had many moments—of high humour, sorrow, achievement, hard work and sheer alarm.

Every rifle company during a 12-month tour in Vietnam had its ups and downs, moments when it felt invincible (usually after a successful contact), moments when it realised it was human and subject to error (usually after a not too successful contact), times when it felt it was the best, and times when it realised it had much to learn.

Operating by itself most of the time, a rifle company knitted into a close family, living within itself, and only in the periods between operations did it realise it was only a cog in the operational wheel.

Operation Trackduster gave Ten Platoon a good laugh which rounded off nicely a bit of hard yakka. The platoon found a cache of 15 tons of rice and was having an exhausted rest after loading the rice into APCs when a bearded news photographer asked it to unload a few bags, then reload them so he could finish his film. "Just throw them as if the camera wasn't here," he said. Pte "Blue" Boyd did exactly that, but the photographer and his camera were in the way. Mumbling into his rice-splattered beard, the cameraman said, "I suppose I asked for that." Must have been a fine action shot.

Another time, "Spook" Lucas requested a bale of hay in the maintandem so he could bait his elephant trap. Apparently he caused great confusion—not to the elephants, but to the battalion signallers who couldn't understand the commodity code word HAY.

There were moves afoot to put Cpl Charlie McKenzie up for a lifesaving award. While crossing a creek the section was given the enemy, freeze, sign. Mac looked around while the enemy was being checked out and counted five heads and a swirl. On checking the swirl he found Pte "Pusta" McDonough had frozen—with his head two inches under water. Mac rescued him in case there was a contact.

And then there was the time Ten Platoon ambushed itself. A chopper pilot on the lookout for VC who had escaped from a Twelve Platoon ambush, saw Ten Platoon and dropped smoke near it. The platoon went into an

immediate ambush and waited in vain for the enemy. Finally, two sections swept the area, hoping to drive Charlie into the third section. Still nothing. Then the forward scout mentioned the smoke grenade had almost hit him when it dropped from the chopper. Mystery solved, and the red-faced "enemy" continued its patrol.

There were many more, of course, which received reactions from stark despair to hysterical laughter.

We cannot pass from humour without mentioning one of the outstanding characters of the company, Pte "The Bear" Winchester, as King of Comics. The Bear was able to, and often did, take more than an hour to explain a mildly funny incident. In its original state the tale would barely receive a smile, but in the hands of the master it turned into an hilarious pantomime which had everyone in gales of laughter. He was well challenged by Pte Peter Slattery, whose comments on the Army, Vietnam and the world at large became worn-out clichés by the time D Company had finished with them.

Pte Don Tate also deserves a mention for displaying his large repertoire of falls. He often demonstrated he could fall from any position at any time. Not hard, you say? Well, can you fall backward while leaning forward?

Eleven Platoon staged its own immediate operation on one hike. It started when a poor innocent fowl wandered into the platoon harbour. Now, most of the blokes had been without fresh rations for some time, and the poor old chook hadn't done much running for some time, so.....hotly pursued within the perimeter, the fowl put to work every bit of bushcraft it had learned from the VC.

Despite vicious attacks with bayonets, machetes and a few rocks it eluded capture for more than a day and a half. In went a sweep but, again, the chook sneaked out just in time. Another disappointment, and Six Section sat down to plan new strategy and sharpen its weapons. But the war had to go on, so amid these preparations Pte Curtis moved out to take over the sentry post, stood on the chook's head and killed it instantly. Apparently the old dodger was a bit tough, until someone hit on the idea of stewing it for a couple of hours, and then, mmmmm.

D Company had its share of contacts, some of which were moments of achievement. Others were more like a stampede. One even had an audience. That happened in Bien Hoa Province when the company was on a small hill called Nui Khy Lan. Four or five VC moved into the paddy below and began talking to civilians, so Twelve Platoon was sent out to engage them. The CO happened to be visiting the company, and when the first shots rang out he and the OC were able to watch the drama. It was a good chance to learn many lessons from an uninvolved position.

One of the worst days spent by Twelve Platoon in Vietnam started when VC engaged the platoon with an 82mm mortar bomb, a claymore mine and small arms fire. The actions of Lcpl Dick Foster, then a private serving as platoon medic, will always stay with the men. As soon as the firing started he moved among the wounded giving sorely needed first aid, for which he received an MID.

Among many lessons learned the hard way was one which afforded much enjoyment to the troops. Company headquarters pitched camp in a dry creek bed one night, but during the night the rain tumbled from the sky, water tumbled down the creek, and the illustrious group tumbled to a quick conclusion. As Eleven Platoon filed past headquarters next morning, grinning at the obvious discomfort of the OC and CSM, Cpl "Dusty" Miller had the temerity to remark, "Day one, basic fieldcraft, sir. Tch, tch." The platoon laughter was reduced to sick grins at the response, but incidents like this did wonders for the Diggers' morale.

Most of the company suffered private moments of sheer alarm during the tour, even if only while straining eyes and ears into the dark after hearing a noise while on night picket. But some had more cause and we all know where Pte "Mousey" Bunker was hit. VC hit Ten Platoon from ambush with rockets and small arms fire on Phase Two of Operation Goodwood, bringing death to the platoon for the first time. Retaliation was fierce and prolonged until the VC bugged out.

The platoon felt it avenged its lost members soon after in a river ambush near the infamous village of Thai Thien. A VC agent accompanied the platoon, but nobody came the first night. The platoon returned a couple of nights later and killed five or six VC in a "turkey shoot" at sampans.

The company, less Eleven Platoon, assaulted a bunker complex on Operation Stafford and spent two and a half hours pinned down fighting its fiercest battle. The enemy was an element of the elusive 274 VC Regiment headquarters, which had remained just a step ahead of the company for 11 months. D Company suffered five wounded, but inflicted heavy casualties on the VC.

Eleven Platoon had the company's most enviable record. It claimed as many kills and contacts as Ten and Twelve Platoons, but came through the tour without having one man killed or wounded.

The company had two OCs and three 2ICs during its tour. Irrespective of what these officers said, the turnover wasn't inspired by "company demons." Major J.P.A. Deighton took over Major T.R. Sullivan's post as operations officer early in 1969, and Major Sullivan resumed command of D Company.

Capt E. Quartermaine was transferred to 1ARU and his post was taken by Capt J. Becker. Capt C. Pepper did the

## The night before Tet

*'Twas the night before Tet  
And all through the village,  
Not a VC was stirring  
Not even to pillage.*

*Then along the dark river  
(The Song Thai Vai),  
Six loaded sampans  
Did Ten Platoon spy.*

*All lined up in ambush  
As quiet as can be,  
Was Ten Platoon, 4RAR  
Of Company D.*

*They smiled to themselves  
As the Nogs drew abreast,  
Then when Russ gave the signal  
They gave 'em their best.*

*Wesley and "Mouse"  
With their guns they did blaze,  
At the sampans and occupants  
Caught in a daze.*

*Then "Dibs" brought in flares  
From the arty nearby,  
Making shooting the Nogs  
As easy as pie.*

*Young Andy Harcock  
Perched on the bank,  
Spotted a sampan  
Which he promptly sank.*

*The anti-tank crew  
With their spintex let fly,  
And the Nogs joined their  
Ancestors up in the sky.*



"Ha ha, missed..."

## Guess who?

Who was the platoon commander who, after a good night in the company mess, punched hell out of an inoffensive banana palm which refused to move out of his way?

Who won that infamous raffle at the Peter Badcoe Club, then went to sleep and forgot to collect his prize?

Who was the potential veterinarian who had a set against "little white rabbits"?

Who was that intrepid platoon sergeant who received the message from his forward section, "Get us out of here, we're surrounded," and replied with head down, "You can all etc."?

Who came from Dalby and was a part-time signals NCO, swimming pool attendant, lifeguard, shearer, bookmaker, professional rugby player, amateur Aussie Rules player, great lover and con man?

Whose section was it that had more ways of hooking up explosives on its perimeter than "Gelignite" Jack Murray, and who had an outstanding soldier named "Bear"? It was said the only thing they wouldn't booby trap was a full can of beer.

Who was the soldier who was wounded in the posterior, and swears to this day he was heading toward the VC?

Who was called "Tripod"?

Who was the senior officer who, very late at night, swam two lengths of the Peter Badcoe Club pool in 54 minutes?

Who was the section commander sitting in a dark bar in Vung Tau who, when he saw the MP's enter, shrank down and whispered, "Meatheads," only to hear his fair companion repeat in a loud voice, "Meatheads," thereby causing his arrest?

Who was the soldier who was disbelieved when he claimed the artillery fire was too close, and went green

two days later when he pulled a piece of shrapnel out of his basic pouch?

Who was the dashing gunner who preferred to be called "Beauregarde," and claimed he had shares in Halvorsen's Boatyard?

Which battalion was rated as over-confident, but managed to pick up a kill the first night it sent out TAOR patrols?

Which battalion had its warm-up operation extended by three days?

Which company reported contact imminent, and still considered it so 12 hours later?

Which company really got on top of close air support? Which company fought the rear-guard action with the White Mice?

Which company was lucky enough to go to the Peter Badcoe Club straight after 9RAR?

Which company still hasn't beaten Support Company at Australian Rules?

Which company never reached its own AO on Operation Merino?

Which company found the black Citroen missed by two others?

Which company threw the best parties in 1ATF?

Which company beat off a "two-and-a-half-pronged" attack?

Which company specialised in blowing up APCs?

Which company annihilated a deer?

Who was the officer after whom the expression "doing an Underwood" was named?

Who did not have R and C, but spent more time in Vung Tau than he would have, had he taken R and C?

Who was not a flower child, but was still called "Petals"?

Who were called "The Girls," but turned out to be pretty durable characters?

Who was the willowy pioneer who turned up at D Company to find himself forward scout in a rifle platoon the next morning?

Who eventually captured the title "The Jack Merchants" from C Company?

Which CSM, on arrival back in Australia, sent another all his spare MPC—the whole \$2.25?

Who organised the redoubtable band of men known as the "Trentham City Council"?

Who was known as "King Dagger"?

Which company could not convince another that one can of beer was all it found in a cache?

Who was known as Reg Ansett?

Whose deceptively quiet manner misled the Kiwis..... until the first punishment was handed out?

Why was Thai Thien selected universally by 4RAR/NZ(Anzac)Bn as "the village in Vietnam in which I would most like to live"?

Which company shot and killed someone (?) at 600 plus metres with an M60?

Who was known as "Whimpy"?

Who was called "Super Ears" and why?



## A soldier remembers...

A SOLDIER MULLS OVER HIS FEELINGS AFTER TWO MATES DIE IN COMBAT. IT WAS WRITTEN ON PHASE TWO OF OPERATION GOODWOOD, THE DAY AFTER TEN PLATOON, D COMPANY, HAD ONE OF ITS BIGGEST CONTACTS.

"They think Sammy and Joe wore it." I knew Whitey and Willy were hit.

Shrieks spiced the last shots crashing through the jungle around us as the mouthful of fear I held for my own safety plummeted to the pit of my stomach and I felt violently sick. I knew we'd been ambushed. I knew what happened to an ambushed patrol. We were all old hands at dishing it out. But this time we were on the receiving end.

I used every bit of the ounce of coward's courage I possessed to crawl through the jungle, shots and shrapnel to reach an effective position up front. There was nothing left to face the thought that Joe and Sammy had worn it. But it was a fact. The section had Joe's body. Sammy's was just ahead of them. Bloody, raw, unrecognisable. It was incomprehensible. They couldn't be. Not dead. We'd had three wounded and had killed at least two enemy in four contacts since yesterday morning. Wounded mates or dead Nogs aroused sympathy, pity, an uneasy feeling. But Joe and Sammy.

Sammy was on gun picquet with me the night before. I rested my head on Joe's hat, with its three inches of brim turned up at the front. Sammy was so gay, carefree, cheeky. Joe so quietly friendly, considerate, continually dropping wry comments from the corner of his mouth. Those limp bundles being wrapped in ponchos. Not Sammy and Joe.

Eleven Platoon and company tac. reinforced us and we plodded back the 200 yards to base. A numbed rifleman stumbled ahead of One Section, disbelievingly taking over Sammy's job as scout. "Mousey" Bunker carried Joe's gun

like a ton of lead. Wounded once himself, Bunker was the only one left of the One Section which sailed from Australia eight months before. His face was grey; eyes glassy. Perspiration ran from him, mirroring his agony—agony echoing through every other man in the patrol. Four times Mouse had tried to retrieve the gun. Four times Joe's body had shuddered against a burst of automatic fire. The platoon crept back, stunned, each man examining the clawing jungle minutely for signs of fresh disaster.

We all felt sick. Decimated. Unable to grasp it. Death. Of course blokes are killed in Vietnam. It is sad. Bad, even. Be careful. Keep your head down. Pass the jam please.

But as little habits, typical acts, recent conversations, Sammy and Joe alive, surfaced from the nausea, the horror, senselessness and utter ridiculous futility of this whole mess flooded over us. Even as I helped slide the limp, bloodied ponchos aboard the evacuation helicopter, the tags—Graham S. Ramsay J.—shouted, "No. Not dead. Not Sammy and Joe."

Helping out the wounded, I became aware of myself and everyone else. We reeked of death and Nog. Filled with grief and fear, and repulsed by my own smell and feelings, I joined the rest of the platoon to worry the afternoon away.

Outbursts of artillery and airstrikes on the huge bunker complexes nearby started us into violent jumps and dives for cover. The picquets that night set an unprecedented state of alert. Sleep was fitful. Once awake, bloody, unreal pictures flooded in. The distant sound of rifle fire brought on choking despair. Many a tiny radio earplug was shoved deep in its owner's ear to block out the agony and claw back sweet oblivious sleep. Not Joe and Sammy. They were so alive. No.

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