Dear Cannonball Readers,

In this edition of Cannonball we have a variety of excellent articles for your enjoyment. What interests me is that we are able to present a broadening view of history through different analytical and descriptive approaches. Ian Ahearn's personal approach in recounting the history of 28 ANZUK Field Regiment is complemented by Mark Jamieson's presentation of his Oral History studies and the biographical portraits by Mark Cameron and Arthur Burke. Every account will draw you in through quite different perspectives and provide you with rich historical knowledge.

But it doesn't end there; David Pearson and Kevin Browning have provided yet another view of gunnery history through an archaeological lens and Nick Floyd opens the WWI series with a dissertation on the forces and events that shaped Australian Artillery doctrine.

I hope you enjoy these articles as much as I have and I think this edition provides a taste for the follow-on articles from the history seminars. For the IG/SMIGs among us I hope to get more of David Pearson's articles in the future as I was impressed with his approach and method giving the object, the gun, the inanimate machine, significance and meaning through the context of human endeavour, forces in conflict and the involvement of Australian troops.

My thanks again go to Chris Jobson for his contribution to this edition on the Truths and Myths about Gallipoli. For the contributors of Vale, Arthur Burke, John Batayola and John Fairless I offer my sincere thanks for their thoughtful work.

My thanks go to all contributors to this edition and my apologies to those few who didn't make it in this edition; they will however have pole position in the next. Please send any contributions for the next edition of Cannonball to me by Friday 14th August 2015 and I hope you enjoy this edition in the meantime. Keep your articles and recollections rolling in.

Late breaking news; our graphic designer, Felicity Smith, has accidentally broken some bones in her wrist/hand and is currently off work recovering. I'm sure you all join with me in wishing her a speedy recovery. Felicity has done a fantastic job since she started and I have always looked forward to seeing her next cover design. As luck has it she finished this edition before damaging her wrist but unfortunately she didn't get around to cloaking the naked men in one of the photographs. Ah well, that's how it was.

Ubique

Steve Nicolls
A National Service: Gunners in Vietnam

Mark Jamieson

Purpose of Oral History

The experience of serving in Vietnam is viewed differently by those who were there. As Paul Thompson states, oral history has been, and remains in many ways, a principle source of communicating past human experience. It offers insight into areas of history not always covered by the written records. Nigel Hunt extends Thompson's insight by offering that, oral history is not an objectification of the past, but more an acceptance of events as seen through the eyes of the participants. It provides a voice for those who, more often than not, remain faceless, but who are no less important than the leaders whose lives are recorded in the written record. This article therefore provides a voice for three National Servicemen (Nashos).

The interviews conducted with the veterans' reveal an important caveat that, regardless of agreeing or not with National Service, they answered the call. The soldiers interviewed come from 12 Field Regiment, 102 'CORAL' Battery and 131 Divisional Locating Battery (131 Div Loe) of the Royal Australian Artillery, viz: John 'Blue' Ericsson, Stan Carbines and Graeme Dignam.

National Service

National Service was, and can still be, a contentious issue surrounding Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. For the first time, conscripted soldiers were sent to fight outside the Australian territory by the government. They became colloquially known as Nashos, and the process of selection was known as the 'Birthday Ballot' for the very reason that the ballot resembled a lottery draw and the numbered marbles represented birthdates. Two ballots were held each year and the marbles were randomly drawn from a barrel. All 20 year olds were required to register, and those whose birthdates drawn were officially advised by the Department of Labour and National Service (DLNS) of their need to participate in the scheme.

In 1964, Prime Minister Robert Menzies referred to the developing hostilities in Asia as 'aggressive communism' stemming from incidents in Indonesian policies. This was the catalyst for the introduction of the National Service Scheme being passed in Parliament on 5 November 1964. The reasoning was adequate manpower in the defence of Australia, and the need to increase the Australian Army to 33,000 personnel by 1966.

On 24 November, the National Service Act 1964 was passed in Parliament. Males aged 20 years were to serve, if selected, for a period of twenty four months in the Army. The Defence Act was then amended in May 1965 to include overseas active service as part of the conscription process. Then in March 1966, it was announced by the then Prime Minister Harold Holt, that conscription would now extend to the war in Vietnam, and National Servicemen would be fighting with regular Australian Army units.

Registration was compulsory, and over 800,000 men from 1965 to 1972 registered for national service, but this was only a requirement of the Australian Army. The Navy and Air Force provided the option for 20 year olds to elect, a year before the ballot to serve in the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) for six years, thus fulfilling their national service requirement. Of the 800,000 registered men, 63,735 were conscripted and 15,381 served in Vietnam.

Our knowledge of the anti-war movement and the opposition to conscription grew from the activism predominately orchestrated by student activists and the peace movement of the 1960s and 1970. However, our knowledge and understanding of the experiences of those men conscripted and sent to Vietnam is far less understood. Conscription changed the lives of the Nashos who were sent to fight the war in Vietnam, just like the war changed the lives of the regular enlisted soldier. The difference is that the Nashos no longer had control of their life's direction after their birthdate was plucked from the barrel. Some were happy to go, for others being compelled to serve overseas were seen as unfair by themselves and their families.
want me to sign these papers or do you want to get out? That was what he said to me he gave me an option and I said where do I sign, it was the best thing I ever did. So I signed up. They sent me to Kapooka and I was in 15 Platoon Charlie Company and 10 weeks later I marched out, I got most outstanding soldier.\textsuperscript{14}

A benefit of passing out as the top recruit meant that Blue could choose what Corp he wanted to go to and Blue thought that the Artillery sounded pretty good. His reasoning for this was:

\begin{itemize}
  \item [a)] you don't walk anywhere, and
  \item [b)] it's at North Head and I lived at Collaroy Plateau so this is looking good, and I was thinking North Head would be where you stay and this is how I ended up in artillary.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{itemize}

At the School of Artillery, Blue was given the option of either doing Survey or Signals, and Blue chose Signals. The benefits of being at North Head didn't last too long as Blue was posted to 104 Medium Battery at Holsworthy as a gun number where he did further training as a Forward Observer Assistant (FO Ack), and then a bombardier course. With a wry smile Blue tells:

\begin{quote}
The long and short of it is what happened, they put me with the bloody infantry and I had to walk anyway.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

When Blue went to 104 Medium Battery, he was adamant in his agreement with the politics of why Australia should be in Vietnam, and if he was going to be there, he knew he needed to apply himself to what he was tasked to do. With this solid belief, Blue transferred from 104 Medium Battery to 102 Field Battery, knowing that they were the next battery going to Vietnam.

Landing in Vietnam was a different experience, not just because of the war environment, but the flight over sticks in Blue's mind:

\begin{quote}
When we landed, we were all wearing white shirts, so you would be 'a political', so when you land at Singapore on the hop over to Vietnam you would get off the plane and you would be in your greens, but you would have a white shirt, and I think we had weapons as well. It was all very strange.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

While in Vietnam, Blue went to Gavin Andrews and asked if there was another job for him, as Blue was organising the Signals (Sigs). The only job Andrews had was as a Sig Assistant (Sig Ack) with Delta Company with the junior officer at that time, Gordon Alexander. Blue quickly took the position
and remembers Alexander being a brilliant officer. Blue also appreciated the more tangible benefits of the move as he recounts:

Delta Company was just outside of Nui Dat in a really flash facility. No bloody tents there mate, it was a mobile track artillery unit just outside, but still within the wire on the way to Baria. It was all huts, a sophisticated boozie, nice showers and all that stuff.18

There was always some light hearted moments for the men while in Vietnam, be it out in the bush, back at Nui Dat in the boozie, or on a break in Vung Tau. Before Blue went to Vietnam his relationship with his now wife Anne was just evolving. Anne and Blue kept up their correspondence and with Anne writing on red stationery, and Blue writing to her on Army green stationery. As Blue recalls:

Anyway, so when they called out mail, I would see all these red envelopes and it was worth 20 press ups. Ray Dial or someone would say righto bomber give us 20 and you’ll get your mail. I should have ended up with a huge physique but I didn’t. We have two shoeboxes at home full of letters green and red.19

As vivid in Blue’s mind today as it was back in 1968 is a bayonet charge that was called. The company had just come upon a large clearing, just like a golf fairway, and Major Tony Hammett said that they were going to fix bayonets. At this stage, Blue had been experimenting with different weapons. Initially he had a Self-Loading Rifle (SLR) like all the diggers, along with the radio and all the other equipment he needed to carry. Considering this, Blue however, decided to opt for an F1 submachine gun, a 9mm, a bit like an Owen gun, and lucky to kill a rabbit at 20 feet. Blue used that for a while, but it was hopeless and he needed something that was going to look after him so he ended up with an Armalite M16. Blue recalls the humour of the bayonet charge:

So, here I am with my Armalite and Hammett says righto fix bayonets. I’m looking around and Hammett says what are you doing Blue, and I said I’m just looking for the cameras boss. Hammett responds with get that bloody bayonet on. He is dead serious and I am thinking where the movie projector is, and my bayonet would be as useless as an ashtray on a motorbike as I have an M16 and a SLR bayonet. So I’m ambling across this bloody rice paddy and feeling like I am nine foot seven tall and I don’t have my bayonet on. By god you felt like you were naked in the middle of Martin Place as here is this open space and

John ‘Blue’ Ericsson out on the track, South Vietnam. (John ‘Blue’ Ericsson, personal photograph.)

a whole company is moving across in a bayonet charge.20

The Vietnam experience effected soldiers in many different ways. The politics and general lack of support or interest by the government, and the general public at that time cut deep. Blue came home on a commercial aircraft arriving at 2:30 am, and was greeted by his family. No military personnel were there to greet him or to offer their thanks for a job well done. Disembarking from the plane Blue recalls:

There was this great expanse of grey linoleum and there was a bloke there, and I’m not sure why you keep remembering this stuff, but there was a bloke there with a commercial floor polisher polishing the floor. Now that might not sound like a big deal, but I’m thinking huh, I had just come from Disneyland (Vietnam) and the contrast is that this man who got up
and started work at eight o'clock and he is polishing a floor. Suddenly I'm recalling all the things that I had been involved in and things that I had done and it was really weird for me.21

To finish out his service, Blue returned to South Head and recalls it being a pretty unpleasant period. They gave him a group of men to supervise cutting down lantana from the surrounds outside on the road. Knowing he was on exit route from the Army, whatever they said he did.

So you had this group of blokes and you're out on the road and come 10 o'clock it's like, ok enough of this, down to Bondi Diggers we go. We get pissed [sic] then we come back in time for the last parade and then you go home and I'm thinking how long does this last?22

Blue remembers the moment he left the Army, and the feelings that he experienced at that time have stayed with him for all these years.

The sergeant came down and said 'Ericsson', and I said 'yeah' and he said 'you can go' and I said 'where do you want me to go?' and he said 'you can go home', and I'm like 'yeah okay, back tomorrow morning' and he said 'no that's it you don't have to come back any more'. And that was it, no thank you, no nothing. It was like you were free-falling. You had been trained to do all this work to be able to work efficiently to ultimately meet the criteria and then it was all gone.23

Stan Carbines had just embarked on a new career at the Wollongong Teachers' College. Life was relaxed and pretty much carefree, but all this would soon change. As his 20th birthday approached, Stan did what all 20 year olds were required to do, and that was to register for compulsory National Service. The ballot draw resulted in Stan's birthday coming up and he was duly informed by mail, that he needed to attend a medical. Having passed the medical he was now required to fulfil the two year commitment to the Army.24 Stan served from 1 February 1967 to 31 January 1969. As Stan recalls:

It was not such a joyous event as I had not planned for this and it put me into the unknown. I was no longer in control of my future.25

Stan was able to defer his national service as he was half way through his final year at Teachers' College, but in January 1967, the military machine called and the seventh intake began. Stan now joined the rank and file and he questioned his future:

National Service did have a big impact on his studies and outlook in general. My attitude changed, I slackened off with my studies as my future was no longer heading down the teaching path. It just didn't seem relevant anymore.26

Arriving at Tan Son Nhut airport Saigon, Stan and the others disembarked from the Qantas flight and were met with the might of the military. There were fighter planes and an assortment of military vehicles parked on the tarmac with helicopters flying overhead. The men changed into their army greens and boarded a military Caribou that would take them to their home for the next 12 months, the First Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat. One of Stan's first jobs was to sand bag the walls of his tent and construct a timber floor with his mates. Stan was in the second tent row as the first row was allocated to the gun crews as they needed to be closest to the 105mm M2A2 Howitzers.

Before leaving Australia, the men were informed about the enemy and what they should expect them to be wearing, either green army uniforms or black

Stan in the lines at Nui Dat looking lean and fit, South Vietnam 1968-69. (Stan Carbines, personal collection [2015]).
pyjamas, with a straw hat and a rifle over the
shoulder. Passing through an unfriendly village
Stan, in the back of a military truck realised things
weren't going to be so 'clearcut':

There were two men in black pyjamas, with
straw hats on and rifles slung over their
shoulder, and at this I tightened the grip on my
rifle, and a bit confused as the men were not
interested in our vehicles.27

Stan soon found out that this was also the clothing
worn by the local militia and was commonly worn by most of the Vietnamese.

While in Vietnam, Stan saw heavy action with the
battery, and this further strengthened the bond with
his fellow battery gunners. Another bonding
experience was counting down the days until they
were to fly home. This generally started as 365 days
and a wakey, the wakey being the last day in
Vietnam.28 For Stan, the wakey came around 15
December 1968 while he was at FSPB Diggers Rest.
On 17 December the returning men were driven to
Luscombe Field and flown to Tan Son Nhut and
from there they boarded the freedom bird, the
Qantas 707 taking them to Australia. For Stan, the
arrival home meant safety:

When the planes wheels touched the Sydney
tarmac in the dark of night, there was a
spontaneous cheer from those onboard. It was
hard to believe that that very morning I was in
the lines at Nui Dau with a loaded rifle over my
shoulder, and now I was safe at my parent's
home.29

Unsure of what to find back in Australia, and like
many returning veterans, Stan found the transition
from the Army to civilian life difficult. It was
assumed by many that life would continue where it
left off over two years ago and everything would go
back to normal. This certainly was not the case for
Stan:

I was out shopping at Roselands and I felt
uncomfortable with the people around me and
found myself walking with my back to a wall
and returning home without any shopping.30

Stan was discharged from the Army on 31 January
1969, just as the school year was commencing. Stan
and other returning soldiers who were also teachers,
were offered a refresher course at Armidale
Teachers' College, however it wasn't what was
expected:

It was a waste of time as the lecturers were not
really interested in teaching, also there was no
appreciation of what we had gone through in
Vietnam or any thought on what areas of
teaching we may need brushing up on.31

As a battery surveyor for the 105mm Howitzers,
Stan was as good as the best in the world at his job,
but returning to teaching he was now at the bottom
of the pecking order and this knocked his
confidence. Compounding this was the fact that 102
Field Battery were still in Vietnam and Stan's mind
was more often than not thinking about the guys he
had lived and fought with:

I did not realise at the time that my
experiences in the army could not be pushed
aside. The experiences were going to stay with
me for the rest of my life.32

This was just a few of the experiences Stan faced in
Vietnam, and the time he served with 102 CORAL
Battery are well-remembered and cherished.

Grahame Dignam was employed by the
Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA) as a clerk
prior to being called up for national service. He was
fortunate that the CBA was one of the few employers
who "made up" pay so that employees were not
disadvantaged financially during the course of their
service. On discharge from the Army, the CBA
guaranteed placement in a job comparable to that
held prior to Army Service which Grahame accepted.

Before registering for the national service ballot,
Grahame and his older brother by two years joined
the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) with the
Parramatta Lancers as a possible saver to being
called up. Both underwent the required medicals,
but Grahame was turned down and classed unfit for
service, while his brother was accepted.

Enquiring as to the reason why, he was brushed
aside and simply told to "accept it". Always in good
health, Grahame was puzzled by the failed medical,
and felt that he was a good chance of missing out on
national service if he had passed. Grahame
subsequently registered for the national service
ballot and got lucky. He was drawn in the third ballot
on 11 March 1966, and after the usual medical
checks, was accepted as fit for service. The reason
for his rejection by the CMF only dawned on him
much later. His brother had a turn in the shape of his
foot from a childhood accident and had trouble
walking long distances as the foot would play up and
cause him pain. Grahame had been ruled unfit for
the CMF as they had mixed up the medical results
for the two brothers.

Grahame was part of the fifth national service intake
and was ordered to report to the Marrickville
Recruitment Depot on 13 July 1966. When his
birthdate was drawn from the barrel, despite some feelings of trepidation, Grahame was accepting of the situation and felt proud to serve his country, and an opportunity was knocking for an experience not to be missed. Today, Grahame is still in favour of a limited form of compulsory service for those physically fit and, voluntarily for the mildly disadvantaged, with service performed in the military, for State or some Local government agencies:

I was in favour of it [National Service] as it matured me earlier due to having to cope with the lifestyle changes and discipline required in the Army. I felt that a good number of my friends would also have benefited but sadly they missed out.32

The next stop was recruit training. Like all those before him Grahame marched, saluted, ran, marched and marched some more until the time came to pass out with the other recruits and head to Corp training. Grahame chose to go into either Transport or Engineers, but of course the Army decided Artillery as they were looking men with with higher educational skills sets. This was due to the maths required for conducting Survey and Radar operations which were being introduced into the Army in South Vietnam.

With that being decided Grahame was trained as a Signals Operator for Artillery Intelligence or Survey, and worked initially in that role in Listening Posts (LP’s). With training complete 131 Divisional Locating Battery (131 Div Loc) were ready to head to South Vietnam arriving on 5 May 1967 in Vung Tau at 1400 via a Hercules from Darwin. As Grahame recalls:

When the ramp went down we were confronted by black pyjama clad locals just like those we were supposed to kill. They however sprayed the plane for bug control. Heaven forbid if we were to import any ‘nasties’ into their ecosystem.34

The role of 131 Div Loc in South Vietnam began on 22 April 1966, when an advance party departed Sydney on HMAS Sydney. Then on 4 May 1966, the remainder of the advance party departed the Richmond RAAF base. The Detachment remained in South Vietnam until May 1971. Their service in South Vietnam ran from 1966 to 1971; this made Detachment 131 Divisional Locating Battery the longest continuing Detachment in the Royal Australian Artillery. They were deployed for a total of five years and two months, totalling 1886 days.35

While In South Vietnam, the role Grahame was initially tasked with changed at the end of June 1967. A clerk was required for the Orderly Room and Grahame knew what a typewriter looked like and what it was used for, so he was allocated the position. His days were now spent typing Operational Reports, manning schedules and charges for misdemeanours to be dealt with by the Officer Commanding. As it was not always busy in the Orderly Room, Grahame also spent time doing four hour shifts as a Sig in Artillery Tactical Head Quarters (Arty Tac HQ) manning the radio net at night or as required in LP’s.

As with most soldiers, their first operation experience holds some significance as this is the first time that they step out through the wire at Nui Dat and enter an operational phase. For Grahame, this was an RE-supply trip to Fire Support Patrol Base Wilton on the 28 and 30 October 1967. This was part of Operation Santa Fe.

Grahame at Nui Dat in August 1967 prior to a trip to Vung Tau or Vungers as it was generally known. (Grahame Dignam, personal photograph.)

As with all soldiers, there are always standout moments or quotes that are remembered for good or bad. Grahame remembers a few:

‘An army marches on its stomach’ and ‘It takes nine people to keep one soldier in the field’, maybe because of the huge logistics machine that chugged along in the background appearing to achieve not much, and I was a part of that.36

The diggers at Nui Dat were also treated at various times to concerts by many famous and some less famous Australian entertainers. These entertainers
volunteered to perform for the diggers in Vietnam. These concerts lifted the morale of those in South Vietnam and were thoroughly enjoyed by all who could attend. Between 1967 and 1971 some 50 troupes left Australia for Vietnam.37 One particular concert that was put on by 131 Div Loc in October 1967. 131 hosted the cast of the Melbourne Show after their performance at Luscombe Bowl with a BBQ. The group comprised 'The Strangers', Patti McGrath and Denise Drysdale. There were other shows during Grahame's tour in country, but this was 'Our Show' as he recalls and the men thoroughly enjoyed it.

From memory, the steaks were traded from the US Artillery down the road probably for some Aussie beer. They were great guests and joined in the banter and they did not want for attention - we didn't get to see too many women and 'Round Eyes' were especially scarce around the rubber plantation.38

With 356 days completed in South Vietnam, Grahame departed on 19 February 1968 around noon and arrived in Sydney, emerging from Her Majesty's Customs at midnight. He then went on leave and returned to Eastern Command Personnel Depot, and was there about a week. Grahame then agreed to a request to fill a vacancy at Kapooka as a clerk in the Regimental Aid Post. He recalls:

That was better than bludging around Watson's Bay, so I accepted the offer, and I drove to Kapooka and completed about 10 days there.39

Grahame's main task was assisting in the administration of the multishot of needles given to the new recruits during their initial training. The recruits lined up Indian file coming in one door passing like battery hens between two 'experienced' soldiers who were administering the flu, hepatitis, and other shots required at that time, then filing out the other door. As he recalls:

About ten recruits per needle then change - OH&S wasn't invented yet.40

With his time served at Kapooka, Grahame, like all other returning National Servicemen needed to readjust to the civilian lifestyle. Returning to his previous occupation in the CBA, he was put through a re-education course that was designed to cover the changes that had occurred in banking procedures in the intervening two years. Part of that was to re-engineer the acceptable language used (no swearing), getting used to the banker/customer relationship again (they were not the enemy) and re-accepting those on higher Grades who were their superiors, but as Grahame puts it:

Whom we knew were 'dickheads', 'suckholes' and 'deadshits' without being too hard on them. Like everything, if you don't rebel you fall back into the system.41

Reflecting on a past war, Grahame sees the military achievement as appearing quite small when compared with the effort and cost expended in running it. The duplicity of the US government in its dealing with its Allies was disgraceful and as Grahame stated, 'we deserved better.42

At the time when Australian troops were heavily engaged in the war in Vietnam, the popular press was so complacent in delivering the message of the day, little regard was paid to the truth. As a result of this, even today the general population are short-sighted and have little understanding of what really occurred in South Vietnam. In total, Australia lost 520 good fighting men (numbers vary depending on website accessed), and from that number 210 National Servicemen died as a result of active service in Vietnam.43

Although this article has only captured the events of three Nashos who did their bit when called to serve in Vietnam, I hope that others may come forward to tell their story. There is so much more that needs to be told about Australia's involvement in Vietnam from the soldiers' perspective. This is what we need to embrace and applaud.

Author
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Endnotes:
4. ibid., p. 68.
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Dignam, Grahame. (personal collection), 2015.
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Books

Journal Articles

Websites