***ANZAC DAY 2023***

***Michael ‘*John’ *Sonneveld, Vietnam Experience 1970/71.***

I was an Army Pilot, not RAAF. Army pilots were trained as Infantry Platoon Commanders before learning to fly. We were called Possum Pilots.

I arrived in South Vietnam on 1 November 1970. In my first 9 months, I flew 900 hours in a Bell 47 Sioux helicopter. In my last 3 months, I flew 260 hours in a Kiowa.

A typical week as an Army Pilot with 161 Independent Reconnaissance Flight, based at Nui Dat, was as follows:

Day 1: I would be assigned to fly two reconnaissance missions, known as recce flights. Each area I studied at tree-top level was 2 km by 3 km.

Our Army helicopters were unarmed except for the pilot’s M16 sub-machine gun and his Browning pistol. On the seat beside me, was a box of smoke grenades used to mark targets for my top cover pilot. The box also contained high explosive, incendiary and white phosphorous grenades.

Day 2: I was probably allocated as the Direct Support pilot to one of our Infantry Battalions. An Infantry Battalion included about 793 men. For most of my year, there were 3 battalions. An Army Helicopter was allocated to all battalions every day.

Day 3: I would probably be assigned for ‘hash and trash’. I would take off just before dawn and fly less than 2 metres above ground level along the main north south road and then the main east-west road checking for mines. I also delivered Intelligence Summaries to outposts manned by Australian Army Advisers.

After the first light recce the ‘hash and trash’ pilot remained on duty for any other tasks such as:

Directing ship fire from one of our Australian ships.

Navigating for Armoured Personnel Carriers which were blocked by large bamboo clumps. Sniffer missions. Special recces after American red eye infrared night flights.

Delivering parts to Centurion Tanks. Once I couldn’t find a patch of land suitable to land on. So, I landed on the bridge of a Bridge Layer tank.

Taking Special Air Services chaps on reconnaissance flights.

Flying an Artillery Officer as he directed gunfire. Assisting the Signals Corp or the Engineers’ Land Clearing Team.

Flying someone to Saigon like a taxi service.

On another occasion, I was sent out with a mortar platoon commander. I was flying at about 1500 feet above the ground. The mortar platoon commander was about to give the command to ‘fire’, when I glimpsed something moving under the trees. We postponed the shoot and I descended for a recce. I counted 32 peasants and 17 ox carts. While I flew very slowly at tree-top level, the mortar platoon commander waved his hand outside the open door to direct the people. They were met by armoured personnel carriers and escorted to safety.

In each week there tended to be three recce days, three battalion support days, plus a hash and trash day. I once went 19 days without a break.

I vividly recall events when soldiers were killed in action or killed accidently. Battalion Commanders knew all their subordinates like family. Their prime objective was to bring all their troops home alive.

One night, when I was rostered on as the duty pilot, I was called out. Viet Cong terrorists had attacked a village compound. The assumption was that the Viet Cong had run south after the attack. I was tasked to conduct low-level reconnaissance at night under the light of canister flares tossed out of an Army aeroplane flying at 4,000 feet. While I was flying below 50 feet over mountainous terrain, some of the flares were duds. They were meant to reach the ground before burning out. Suddenly I saw a sparkle of red lights. I banked violently in pitch black conditions to avoid what looked like tracer bullets. I then referred to instruments and climbed rapidly. I felt a slight ‘thud’. I cut the mission short and returned to Nui Dat. The large parachute used to slow the descent of the faulty flaming out flare had flicked off the top of my helicopter's main rotor.

One day, when I was rostered as direct support pilot for 7 Battalion, Col Grey assessed that the Viet Cong, after attacking a compound during the preceding night, would head east using foot trails. Grey requested a troop of Armoured Personnel Carriers to set an ambush on a track near Xuyen Moc. These fleeing Viet Cong ran straight into the ambush. Just after daylight, I flew Grey to the ambush site and while flying at treetop level very slowly, we counted 21 dead Viet Cong bodies.

On the 21 September 1971, I was rostered as Direct Support Pilot to 4 Battalion which encountered a very large force of the North Vietnamese Army. I flew over 11 hours that day, mostly doing reconnaissance. Second Lieutenant Gary McKay’s 11 Platoon of D Company was pinned down. His Platoon almost ran out of ammunition. On three occasions, I resupplied his platoon with ammunition. As I hovered at treetop level, Corporal Neal dropped sandbags full of loaded magazines and lots of grenades from the back of my Kiowa. Years later, I learnt that a North Vietnamese soldier was firing a 12.7 mm machine gun at my helicopter.

I was one of fourteen 161 Independent Recce Flight pilots who were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. For a long time, I told no one that I had a DFC because, for many years, Vietnam veterans were treated as outcast Australians. Back in Australia, people told me that the Vietnam conflict wasn’t a real war. In the Battle of Nui Le, 6 Aussie soldiers were killed and 30 wounded. 5 killed were from Gary McKay’s platoon and 23 of his men were wounded. A platoon is made up of 33 men. Gary was shot twice and miraculously survived. He was subsequently awarded a Military Cross. Apart from the ammunition used by soldiers on the ground, the following rained down from the air:

967 high explosive rockets, 120 flechette rockets, 5400 40 mm high explosive rounds, 143,500 mini-gun bullets, 28 pods of napalm, four 500-pound bombs and 2000 rounds of artillery. Perhaps it was a real war after all!

You are probably wondering about my dog, Benson. He is a therapy dog funded by Department of Veterans‘ Affairs. A couple of years ago, I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress which I knew I had for over 50 years. In recent times, the Australian Government has been shocked by the high rate of suicides amongst veterans. At last, Vietnam Veterans and later Veterans have been getting more help. By the way, I am not suicidal.