

Bill Denny



Bill Denny AM served for 21 years in the Australian Regular Army and attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He subsequently worked in real estate and transport, and studied law at university. He is now Ministerial Adviser to the Attorney-General of South Australia. He is a Director of Reconciliation SA, Chairman of the SA ANZAC Day Committee, Chairman of the SA ANZAC Eve Youth Vigil, and Co-Chairman of the SA Vietnam Veterans Memorial Committee.

86 Transport Platoon, RAASC, 1971-72

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January 1972.

We were going home. The 1st Australian Task Force had been withdrawn in October, and the 1st Australian Logistic Support Group at Vung Tau was packing up. It was a year since I headed out to Adelaide airport on 26 January 1971 - Australia Day, how appropriate! I had farewelled my family, friends and sweetheart Clare, and boarded Ansett Flight 241 to Sydney; then Darwin and on to South Vietnam. I was 21 years and 3 months, a 2nd Lieutenant, posted as second-in-command of 86 Transport Platoon.

It seemed unreal. The heat, the dust, the humidity. Within days I was detached to Nui Dat as Operations Officer of the Task Force Maintenance Area, coordinating helicopter resupply of units in the field. In July back to Vung Tau, and endless convoys - Saigon, Long Binh, Baria, Xuyen Moc, and down to Lang Phuoc Hai or up Route 2 past Binh Ba to Garth. I got back to Aussie in September for R&R. Wild days! Except at the Adelaide Show I broke down when the fireworks started - still on a 'hair trigger' it seems. Back to Vietnam and detached to an American transport battalion at Long Binh. We did a long convoy up to Bao Luc, a few hundred kilometres north-east of Saigon. Cobra gunships covered us as we drove along narrow, dusty tracks through the mountains, bamboo pushing in from every side, past burnt out vehicles - relics from a convoy ambushed the previous day.

You see the big picture in transport - the villages and the people. I think you understand it all a little better. The 'grunt' on the front-line, I imagine one bit of jungle looks much like any other. Watching the Americans interact with the locals, you saw they had truly lost their way, morally and militarily. Their cultural arrogance and extraordinary disrespect for the people they claimed to be 'protecting' was mind-blowing.

Back to 86 Transport Platoon. We were still doing convoys and it was a bit more dangerous now that the enemy knew we were leaving. The locals knew too. It was good to be going home, but sad to be leaving the South Vietnamese to who knows what fate. They deserved better. Lockdown. Confined to base until our departure. Time to get the huts ready to hand over to the ARVN. Only six beds and six lockers to be left in each hut - no exceptions! And what about all that extra equipment the boys had added over the last five years? Could we give it to the orphanage? 'No,' said Headquarters, 'smash it, throw it into the dam, and that's an order.' Bullshit! Time to call in the Padre, Father Bernie Maxwell.

'Leave it to me,' he said. So we loaded up a truck with tons of gear, stereos, fans, TVs, fridges, et cetera. We got to the front gate and were stopped by a big MP: 'I have to search the truck, Father.' I could see a court martial looming! Father Bernie asked, 'Is that really necessary, my son?' As if touched from above, the MP paused and responded, 'Well, if I can't trust the Catholic padre, who can I trust? Pass through, Father.' Whew! Divine intervention and the orphanage was so grateful.



2nd Lieutenant Bill Denny, 86 Transport Platoon, 1971-72

86 Transport Platoon was one of the last units to leave. They were a wild lot and it was sad to see the boys go - Chongy, Deadly, Fish, Goldy, Cannonball, Blue, Torana, Mick, Ghengis, Bill and the others. If it wasn't nailed down, they would eat it, drink it or steal it! But they were fair dinkum, true blue, just like their fathers and, I imagine, their grandfathers before them. I was privileged to be their OC.

Last day.

Walking through empty buildings, this seemed a special moment in time - doors banging in the wind and the base eerily deserted. **Vietnamese** workers were crying and distressed. I lied to them, reassuring them that we would be back 'if the VC come'. As it turned out, the Viet Cong did come - four weeks later - but we were never going to go back. I never really got over the friends I lost in Vietnam, nor the desertion of those we had so comprehensively fought to support and protect. The last of us formed the final convoy and headed down to De Long Pier, then by landing craft out to HMAS Sydney. Our vehicles came out on barges. We weighed anchor on Tuesday 29 February 1972 and gave the liver a 'flogging' on the way home - nearly fell overboard one night - reaching Sydney twelve days later.

First week back.

On leave in Adelaide I went to a disco with a mate.

Didn't enjoy it too much, so we went downstairs for fish and chips.

Waiting in the queue, my mate asked about Vietnam.

A girl our age just in front of me swung around and asked if I had been there.

When I nodded she slapped my face and screamed, 'You baby bayoneting bastard!'