

From Long Tan to Bribie

Dad spent eight and a half months on active duty in Vietnam from June 1966 to 18th February 1967. Being a naive country boy who had become an orphan, Dad discovered life is not always easy, especially in Vietnam. He explains it in this way “God had placed me in good company. My Platoon Sergeant, Frank Alcorta was not only a brilliant soldier, but a fearless leader on the battlefield.” As a soldier he relied on the comradeship of the men he fought with, but Sergeant Frank Alcorta held his utmost esteem and respect.

It was quite often pitch black in the rubber plantation, and the relieving soldier had to go and wake up the next man to go on guard duty after him. This was achieved by holding onto your mate’s rifle as he held it upright, and being led back to the picket. After two hours guard duty, his night vision would be better than yours.

When it rained the pits filled with water. The men used an elaborate device called a “picket puffer” to smoke while on guard duty. This involved cutting a can, binding with medical tape to enable the smoker to smoke his cigarette inside the can. Without this device a cigarette could have illuminated the gun pit position on the front line.

For our men would never be the same, emotionally. In the first horrific hour of Bribie Dad was wounded, but according to official records the battle was a fierce six hours ordeal. Eight Australians were killed and twenty-seven were wounded.

“You couldn’t hear yourself think because of machine gun fire.” He adds, “I heard Frank yell fix bayonets. To this day I do not know whether the command was to encourage us, but have to admit that I was hoping and praying he would not say charge. In Bribie it seemed that every time I moved I was caught in machine gun fire. I believed I drifted in and out of consciousness.”

When Dad was wounded, he went to an American hospital. There were pancakes and syrup for breakfast. He says, “I had fifty nine stitches and a bag of wool inside me. I walked out on crutches one night, and looked up at the night sky. I liked to think about Australia. How did I end up here?”

My father was asked by his commanding officer whether he wanted to go home. Dad inquired “When is the next plane leaving, Sir?” The transport plane was a Hercules. It had wheels as high as a house.

After recovering in Hospital, Dad worked at Watsonia Army barracks in Melbourne. In the X-Ray centre he made morning and afternoon teas. After a well-deserved rest, he thought about starting a new life. “It was strange”, he says “In a matter of weeks I had been caught in a crossfire of six machine guns, then found myself a civilian once again”