

# VIETNAM: STORIES OF SURVIVAL

Compared with the two world wars, which saw an outpouring of letters, manuscripts, memoirs and diaries, the Vietnam war, paradoxically, has been both the most publicised and least documented war in our history. The following observations by New Zealand army scout Mark Tiro, taken from conversations with staff writer Gordon Campbell, are the first comments of any length by a New Zealand participant to be recorded: Defence library archives do not, at present, contain even a single letter; the war has simply slipped from sight — leaving behind a variety of wounds.

**“THE WAY I got into this was almost a joke. I don't know if you remember but there was a depression on around '67, '68. I couldn't get a job here so I shot over to Australia. I was there for about six months and I couldn't get a job there either. So I starved. A group of us hung around Kings Cross. We'd sit up all night in coffee bars to avoid getting picked up for vagrancy; and then we'd go to the park or walk out to Bondi and sleep all day on the beach. I came back a skeleton. I was living in Aro Street and a mate of mine said, more or less as a joke, "Why don't you join the Army?" So, you know, I couldn't believe it was happening until I was actually putting on my uniform . . .**

**OUR TRAINING** all along was for Vietnam. Jungle training. Right from the 12 weeks basic we did at Waiouru; even more so in the core training at Burnham. The programme was based on what we'd learned with the British Army in Malaya, and in Borneo during the confrontation with Indonesia. And we had first-hand information: most of our instructors were Vietnam veterans. Even when we got back from Vietnam and were in Malaya the (mock) "enemy" were in black pyjamas and coolie hats.

We had six months of intensive jungle warfare training up in Malaya, before Vietnam — ambushes, patrolling, camouflage, radio procedures, and we were all expert in every weapon used by the platoon. I would go so far as to say we were the best soldiers up there. But it wasn't just training. Out in the jungle you were expected to *think*. You could tell a Pommy soldier to guard that lamp-post out there and he'd still be there three weeks later. That's not the way we were trained. Oh, back at base it was strict discipline. The sergeant would point at your rifle and go, "What's that for?" And you'd go, "To kill!" And he'd say "And don't you forget it!" But that was just to give you the grounding, so that you would know what to do, so that it came to you almost automatically. Not by reflex — a man who shoots by reflex is a dead man, the other guy will get him every time. But you had these two things, the expert background so you knew what to do by second nature, and yet out in the jungle things loosened up a little, and you were expected to *use* that, to think. Because Charlie is thinking all the time. Anything he'd do would have a reason. He'd fire and you might be by cover, a rock maybe, but if you went for it he'd have had it mined. So you'd go flat to the ground



Mark Tiro (centre) in Vietnam: "I can honestly say I hated the Viet Cong."

and return the fire . . . it was teamwork, and training, and the ability to adapt.

**WE WERE** known as the mercenaries by the other forces. We were the only wholly volunteer force up there. The Yanks had this magazine — *Stars and Stripes* — and a couple of their reporters did an article on each force, to see who was the best in the jungle and stuff like that. The Yanks were the worst. Here we're a lot closer to nature, but a lot of them were city boys, conscripts, going in there after 12 weeks boot camp, and you could hear them crashing round a mile off. The Aussies were quite good, but they couldn't hear us at all. Just the click of the secateurs as you break a trail. You couldn't hear the guys behind you. I remember being in a bar and this Yank called me and my mate over and he said to his mate: "These are those guys, the Kye-whys I was telling you about." You could tell he was really pleased. To actually meet one of us . . . And we'd find documents, posters on the NVA or Charlie and they'd warn each other about us. The black Kiwis they thought were cannibals. That they ate people. See that fellow? That fellow'll eat you!

I WAS back in New Zealand only a little while and I was talking to this girl in the pub and she asked me how I could possibly kill people. It may seem like a funny question to you. But I told her . . . that . . . it was easy. I killed and it was easy. Now that sounds callous. But it's true. It's

shot. You find a man or a woman 10 miles away from a village and there is absolutely no excuse for them being there. You don't take chances. You don't have time to check if they are armed or not, half the time it was just a head or part of a body through the jungle anyway. After a while there were a few cases of Aussies shooting each other up. We did it, too. So from then on it became find out if it was our guys before firing. But find out first.

**WE DIDN'T** see much of the villagers. The job was being on search and destroy and on times off you'd go down to Vung Tau, get drunk, get a girl and a room. There'd be a jeep up front with a couple of guns and the troops in open trucks, with their rifles and clean uniforms on. We had to leave our rifles when we got there. That felt strange. There were all these Vietnamese around and you didn't have a rifle. But if you stuck to the bars on the main streets in Saigon you were okay.

It didn't pay the Vietnamese, or the VC anyway, to knock you off while you were spending money. Because the VC would be getting a cut out of what you paid into the bar or gave the girl. We did have one operation around the villages. We were living in one for a month and we'd go walk-about every day with a couple of medics: we'd stop every couple of hundred yards and give away food, lollies, medicine. It was the Yanks' idea, the hearts and minds campaign. We were winning their hearts, but it couldn't work. You couldn't win a war with a rifle in one hand and a bag of lollies in the other.

NOT MANY people realise that it



NZ soldier and Vietnamese peasant: the hearts and minds campaign couldn't work.



A New Zealand patrol — rifles at the ready: "You couldn't hear the guys behind you."

was the Koreans who caused that My Lai thing. They were based there, and they treated the people something terrible. The Yanks had put such a lot of importance on body counts that the Koreans would just wait at the edge of the village and shoot the civilians. Twenty bodies, two rifles. It was obvious what was happening. By the time the Americans got there that whole area was pro-VC. Well, the Americans were a new company, greenhorns right from the States, and they were losing men by the dozen. Without ever seeing anyone they were walking into booby-traps. Snipers were pot-shooting them. I could understand them under that kind of pressure turning round and

wiping out a village. It was that kind of war. You couldn't say he's a friend and he's not. Everyone had to be treated as possible enemies. I can understand it. I know how they felt.

I WAS there for a while before we first fought the North Vietnamese Army regulars. The Viet Cong were nothing, next to hopeless. Local boys forced, or dragged into it, with a minimum of training. Half of them had rifles, but they didn't know how to use or maintain them. They only looked good because the Yanks were so bad. Badly trained or doped up, or walking along with their transistor plugs in their ears. The VC wouldn't tangle with us, but they'd seek out the

Americans. The NVA used the VC to collect taxes from the villagers, or for creating terror. But the NVA, by God they'd hit back, *they'd* assault us, even charge straight at us!

I can honestly say that I hated the Viet Cong. Not for what they did to us, you expect that, but for what they did to each other. The people lived in terror. The VC ruled by terror. The war caused the hatred and mistrust they showed to each other but . . . there was this old guy in the village and the VC slit his throat. We'd been doing our hearts and minds bit, and this old guy had seen one of the American films and he'd gone and told the Americans about a VC house on the perimeter where the VC came at night; there were mines around it, and a storage bunker underneath. The reason he told was that the VC had taken his daughter six months before and killed her. This was his way of getting back. And that night the VC came and slit his throat. I suppose that was fair enough, an eye for an eye, but they went further. They mined the hole. His grave. And round about it. And that way they killed another 11 or 12 of that family.

IT WAS the same thing with the NVA as well. We had an ex-NVA scout that we called the Kit Carson scout. He'd been wounded by the Yanks and changed sides, and he told us that their cadres operated in groups of four. Each one would watch the others. And you know the Americans would go over dropping leaflets: it was the Chieu Hoi pro-

gramme and they were always trying to get NVA and VC to come in and surrender. They offered money.

They'd pay for a rifle if they brought that in, and they'd try to relocate them in another area. So they had a chance to surrender. But the way I understand it, not many could. They watched each other, you see, within the cadre. And maybe all four wanted to come in, but they couldn't talk about it. And they knew too, out in the jungle in the normal firefight situation, that we didn't take prisoners.

Oh, you'd be told that if you can take prisoners, take one. Get the documents and so on. But the time I finished there up top, as we used to call it, our platoon, maybe even the company, had not taken a prisoner. For various reasons. You'd have to look after him and feed him, and with what? With what you'd been jumping through the jungle for the past few days. You could chopper them out, but that might mean a march of four hours to a suitable clearing.

If they gave up during a contact, and that was damn hard to do, considering you'd been raking a whole area with automatic weapons, their reason to do that was that they wanted to live. Not that they wanted to change sides. And there were chances that if you had to keep him any length of time he'd try to escape and kill someone in the process. It just wasn't on. The only way would be if they walked into a base waving a Chieu Hoi sticker or if we came across a static base of theirs, like a

## CHIEU HOI



## THE WINNING TICKET

Chieu Hoi surrender ticket: an inducement to the VC and NVA to turn themselves in.



New Zealand troops moving out from Luscombe Field, Nui Dat.

hospital. Even if they'd gone down in the bush you'd shoot them before you'd walk up to them. In any case they were lying on a grenade. Or they might roll over and shoot you if you walked past them.

THE VC came in all ages, men, women, old and young. We killed a kid in an ambush once and he looked older, maybe 15 or 16. He'd been hit by a Claymore mine. That was set to go off at waist level and he'd really been cut in half. But we found documents on the other one that was killed, and they showed that kid was only 12 years old. They'd come down the path to the village so that he could visit his sister. That made you feel really bad. But you couldn't let it affect you much. Up there a conscience was a luxury that you couldn't afford.

YOU HAD to admire their guts under the bombing. Most of the area we were in was heavy bush, secondary growth. I never saw a tree that touched in some way by the war. The B-52s — we had to be out of the flight path of a fighter-bomber strike for a certain distance along the path and double at the contact area — and the distance almost doubled again for a B-52. One time someone forgot the B-52s were coming and we got to two miles away before they hit, but we were bounced right off the ground for 20 minutes even then. And that was two miles away. And they lived through it. The trees, bush, everything would be holes and mud and turned upside down. He's a hard man to kill, the Vietnamese. We could never have won that war. They've been fighting it all their lives, and it's still going. They're not bowing to the Chinese and they want the rest of that area, too. Laos. Cambodia. They'll get it, too. We couldn't beat them. They couldn't beat us, either. If we'd stayed, if the Americans had put in another million men, it would have gone on another hundred years. It wasn't like World War II, where you kill so many that one side has to stop.

THERE WAS the dry season and the monsoon. In the dry season there was three or four months of red dust everywhere. No rain. And you sweated. And in the monsoon it rained all day, every day. So you were soaked, either in sweat or with rain all year round. And the leeches. You put your foot down and you're covered. When we'd stop you'd go through, check your hands, your neck. You'd roll up your socks and they'd be hanging there, bloated. They'd go through socks, pants, everything. You could get infected if you pulled them off because the head sometimes stayed in you. The insect life was *fantastic*.

DRUGS? No. You know how it is, you get stoned and you're still feeling it a day or two later. With booze you can put it away all right, and when you're fit you can drink an amazing amount. But you can shake it off in a couple of hours. In Singapore it was different, every other person smoked up there. For some it was like a once-in-a-lifetime experiment before they came home. But we wouldn't do it up there. I remember one time this Negro GI got left behind by a chopper, by mistake. He looked round back of where we were and saw these big high plants, and he went, "Hey man, don't you guys turn on?" And he went at it, had it all cut down and stuffed into bags and took it off with him.

WE LOST a lot of guys, KIA or wounded, through mines. A lot of them were Aussie mines that the VC had dug up and reset for us. The Aussies laid them in a line from the Horseshoe right down to the sea. You could say it was a little like the great Australian rabbit fence. The VC went round it, or dug it up, even when the Aussies started putting grenades underneath the mines. Once they knew that we didn't use the paths, they started putting them anywhere. One Aussie guy sat down on an old anthill right out in the middle of the jungle and got blown to pieces. You

could look for wires on booby-traps at places like the edges of clearings; wherever Charlie felt there was a sharp contrast between the jungle darkness and the light of the clearing to dazzle you, so you wouldn't see it. But really, if your number was up there was nothing you could do. There were mines and booby-traps you didn't have a hope in hell of seeing.

MORALLY . . . I don't know about saying this but I would say the majority who went there did not regret going. A few did, and you could tell which ones they'd be. We went . . . out of curiosity . . . to see what it was like. And to test ourselves. There were a lot of Maoris there. One reason — I'd like to think it was the only reason — was they couldn't get jobs. I can't judge anyone. It's bad enough being here and judging myself. But the mentality was important. You did not find many people of high education in the Army. If they were, they were officers. The bulk, if you saw them on civvy street, would be labourers. Now I'm not being derogatory. There was an IQ test, but hell, a monkey could have passed it. As long as you were fit, okay. What



NZ soldier with Claymore mine.

they didn't like were prison records, signs that you were a rebel in society. The whole business was survival and on the money a labourer gets he learns about survival. He's the man to go to war with.

YOU KNOW we felt New Zealand owed us a hell of a lot. We all had different reasons for being there, we had volunteered to go, but if New Zealand hadn't been involved that chance wouldn't have been there. I thought we should have been treated as heroes. You wanted that. I mean the last thing a man does is blame himself. But I felt this really strongly. Anyone who would look at me in a bar, I'd feel like smashing him. A lot of very angry young men came back from that war.

SOME OF the good RSA clubs sent us beer and the focal papers. But you know, the RSA doesn't like long hair. In Wellington, me and another guy went into the RSA. I had joined only that morning. And we walked in with our long hair, and we were at the bar for a while and a guy came up to find out what right we had to be there. And I said, "Vietnam". And he said, "I thought so". And how sorry he was but someone had made him come over. So we drank up and got out of there. Same thing happened in Stratford. I'd been up there for a while and this elderly guy kept asking me to join the RSA. I went to my one and only dawn parade there. When they lined us up for the march they put me right at the back. My friend came round from the front and stood next to me. I took my discharge papers down to join up, but instead of signing me up they said they'd post me the application but they never did. I think it was because of my hair or something. I don't know why. But one night, when a mate and me got really drunk, we walked in there in our dirty work clothes and long hair and we drank down a brandy and walked out of there. And I've never been back.

WHEN I came back I wanted to forget the whole bloody lot. But now I realise that this was wrong. I mustn't ever forget. In a way I agree with Anzac Day, but for different reasons. The RSA have a way of glorifying war. They say it's for those that have fallen. And I do remember my dead mates. But it shouldn't be a matter of reverence. That's not it. We should remember the carnage. We should always remember the killing, we mustn't forget wars. A new generation comes up and a war is someone else's experience. A war is something that you have to experience to understand. The things we do to each other . . . I look at this book (battalion history) and it's just statistics. It doesn't say anything to me. There is nothing about the suffering that was caused, the kind of horrors that went on. I think that I'll probably go back to the Cook Islands. It's taken me 20 years to realise that I don't like this kind of system. I come from Aitutaki, that's Henry's island. I went to see Tom Davis when he was here, and I told one of his men that I was from Aitutaki and he looked at me, but I said, it's okay. Some of us are all right.