



## NEVER JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER - A TRIBUTE TO OUR MILITARY TRAINING, MEDICS, MATES AND THE ANZAC SPIRIT 1973

Peter Adamis 5 June 2014

We were always told that our medics in history displayed bravery and courage and fire. We always held our medics in the highest of regard. There is a moral to this story and that is never judge a book by its cover. This was a good lesson for me to learn early in my young life as a soldier.

In Malaya 1973 on our last exercise, I was "casevaced" out of the jungle in the dark of night under difficult conditions and treated all along the way. At the time we had been transferred to 6 RAR A Coy from 1 RAR A Coy. We had already been in the jungles of Malaya a few times and this exercise and we had completed our stint in early April at Butterworth. This exercise was no different other than it was to be our last Company exercise in a foreign country for some time. I must admit that the jungles of Malaya were in no way as difficult to patrol than the jungles of Papua New Guinea, but one has to acknowledge it was not easy either.

During the course of this exercise, we had cleared some twenty to thirty metres to our front of any foliage, created our fire lines, dug our pits during the night, (I hated digging and still do except gardening) put out our listening posts, set up our claymores, early warning devices, comms cord, piquet rosters made out, checked ammunition, water supply, and put out our patrols. I loved patrolling as it got me out of the routine of sitting on your arse and doing nothing but in your pit looking to your front and not being able to smoke without it being seen. When it came to our turn for the listening post it was a welcome respite of the boredom in the pit we had dug and to do something different. In this case, I cannot prove it but I believe that I was on the listening post with John Cech (South Australian) another good bloke.

As its commonly known a listening post is located to the front of the perimeter and out far enough to provide ample early warning to the main party to the rear. In this case, I was laying down in a shallow hole listening post we had scraped out with our entrenching tool), listening and observing to the jungle around us. We would not move at all so as not to give our location away. Insects were crawling and flying over us, the heat was unbearable, the morning ground mist was slowly rising and dissipating into the atmosphere above, we had just received our normal drench of Malayan shower so there was no need for a bath. I was thinking of the Dear John letter that I had received from a girl that I was sweet on and wondering why on earth would she want to go back to Scotland when she had a good Aussie like me. Couldn't she wait a few more months.

Whilst deliberating in my mind about my Dear John letter some bloody spider "just happened" to take a detour from his normal journey and decide to crawl across my face. I let the bastard crawl across my mouth hoping he would just hurry up as it was becoming a nuisance. He (I think it was a male spider but then again you never know in the jungle who you are going to meet). In any case this bloke, the spider decided that he would spun

a web between my face and the foliage around me. This was just too much for me and I tried blowing through my mouth, twitching with my face and even moved a bit to give it a hint to get off my bloody face and create a nest somewhere else. The stupid bastard would not take a hint so I took my hand of the SLR (self loading rifle) and tried to brush it aside without losing focus to my front. It was at this moment that I felt a slight pin prick, but thought nothing of it because I naturally assumed it was one of the leaves from the foliage around us.

After our shift was over and we were relieved some two hours later we returned to our gun pit and carried on with our normal routine. I was in the same gun it with my mate Jock (Eddie) Bryson the Scotsman and yes you are correct in thinking it was his sister I was sweet on. It must have been some four hours later that began to sweat profusely, feeling lethargic and unsteady on my feet. Jock looked at me and thought that I was pissed or on some drug which I was not but for the sake of the story it is another explanation. I then picked up my SLR from the side of the pit and went to look to my front, whilst doing this I collapsed in the pit and began frothing from the mouth and feeling somewhat dizzy.

It is my understanding that Jock pulled the comms (communications-hootchie cord ) cord between our pits and called over the section 2IC who I believe at the time may have been Ross Seath (another good bloke). Both of them looked at me and passed the word up the chain of command that I had collapsed but that they had no idea what it was. Some may have thought I was bitten by a snake, others may have thought was pissed or on some hallucinating drug and I guess some could say I had a heart attack. Whatever the case may have been, their thoughts were to get me out of the area and to the rear as soon as possible. I can only assume in retrospect that John Gurney the Platoon Sergeant must have discussed my dilemma with Joe Cool (Lieutenant Ralph) and decided to have me relocated to the rear.

All that I can remember is that my body was dragged along the ground, with fleeting moments of waking up and seeing the jungle roof tops from the ground up and looking at the fading light as the sun was going down, my mates boots crashing through the undergrowth, some grunting from carrying or dragging me, their weapons, wearing their webbing and somehow eventually taken to the medics located somewhere to our rear. My big pack and other personal belongings were with the Company Quartermaster and his crew of which I was able to retrieve when all this was over. Whilst this was going on I was aware somewhat of what was happening but was useless in trying to respond in any useful manner and felt I had let my mates down by being dragged out of the jungle in such an unceremonious manner.

At the medics outpost, the Battalion doctor examined me and tried to ask me questions in the dark and all he got back was some gibberish that I had a splitting head ache, feeling cold, sweaty and trembling all at the same time. I can remember someone shining a torch in my face a number of times, feeling my body parts and examining me for any signs of I guess snake bite or any other tell tale marks that may indicate what my medical problem may have been. It was this stage that decision was made to take me back to Singapore and to the hospital locate in Woodlands where they had the facilities to provide better treatment.

All that I can remember of the trip back is being carried and dragged through the jungle until we reached a vehicle and being driven the long trip back to Singapore. I must have passed out a number of times, but I can still remember the vehicle travelling at a fast speed judging by the numerous bumps, trees flashing overhead, the occasional light of the moonlight appearing as we made our way back to Singapore. I don't remember much if at all anything of the hospital staff, being brought into hospital or what happened to me in those moments of being examined. In fact I don't even know what occurred during the night or how long I had passed out.

When I did wake up, I was in fresh clothing, my muddy boots, jungle greens, webbing and other belongings had been stripped from my body and was now lying on a bed in a cool room by myself. I felt funny but did not know what it was until I touched the side of my face and realised that one side of my face was big as a football. My lips were puffy, eyes a colour other than my natural blue eyes and still feeling cold. I started feeling sorry for myself and felt that I had let my mates down for being such a weak bastard and why could I not have stayed in the jungle and just shrugged off whatever I had. I must admit that even after some 41 years, I still feel that I was more worried about what my mates thought than whatever happened to me. I guess that my thoughts were as a result of the ANZAC tradition being embedded within me, a heritage that went down well with my Spartan origins and traditions.

The next few days or at least until I was to be discharged from the hospital, I was to endure some difficult times and encounter some interesting people who would leave me with a greater understanding of people and *"NEVER TO JUDGE ANOTHER PERSON BY THEIR LOOKS"*. It happened in this manner and somewhat unexpected. I must have been in a few days and whatever treatment I was under, it must have been working because the pain had subsided and it would appear after looking in the hospital shower block mirror that the swelling on my face was slowly subsiding and *I was returning back to my normal "good looking" face that I wore from time to time.*

I had not had a smoke for a few days and I was becoming nervous, twitchy, hyperactive and I guess a little too active for the hospital staff who wanted me to just sit in bed and rest and try and behave myself. I was alone and I must have been in isolation because no one else apart from the hospital staff would see me. My craving for a cigarette was too much and I had no money on me to buy any cigarettes or any other toiletries for myself. All our money had been left behind at Kangaw barracks and whatever smokes of tobacco I had was stashed within my big pack which did not accompany me on my journey to the hospital.

After another morning of going crazy without a fag (cigarette), I decided that I would ask one of the hospital staff if I could have a smoke if they had any on them. The first hospital staff that came in was a Nurse who was from Scotland and probably part of the ANZUK contingent from the British side. I asked her nicely if I could have a smoke, advising her that I had not had a smoke for a few days. The nurse was a great looking, very pretty woman with three pips on her shoulder indicating her military rank superior to me and I felt she may pity in some manner and help me out. Mind you, when I heard her Scottish voice, I thought she would be sympathetic with me liking the Scots and all.

What happened next shocked me and put back into the dark recesses of my mind. The Scottish nurse turned around to me and gave me such a tongue lashing that I just stared back at her and did not know what her problem was. She said that I was in hospital to get better, that smoking would ruin your health and that smoking in hospital was prohibited and blah, blah, blah and so forth. Geezes I said to myself, where did those demonic phrases come from and why the sharp tongue, had I belted her boyfriend or something or did she dislike us Aussies in general. Suffice to say, I just shut up and kept to myself for the remainder of the day reading whatever material I could lay my hands on.

The next day was even more difficult as the cravings for a smoke were becoming unbearable. We had a change of hospital staff over night and this time it was New Zealand's turn to look after the wards. I had my breakfast of a light meal as I was still sipping most of my fluids through a straw and eating soup due to my face not yet returning to its original form. Those who have been smokers will know that after a good meal, it's always great to sit back, relax and have a smoke and in this case it was no different. The new nurse came in to pick up my tray and I noticed that she like her predecessor was a captain and that her shoulder flashes were New Zealand. Beauty I said to myself, the old ANZAC spirit is back and I felt comfortable enough to risk asking again if I could have a smoke or at least if it's possible to obtain one.

Well, I am not saying I deserved what was delivered but I certainly know from my years of mentoring others during my life time that the response I received only made me sceptical and review the traditions and paradigms of the ANZAC spirit and what we stood for to be and questioned it. This was not the first time as at another incident involving the Kiwis, where we were left in the lurch. (An incident that's already been recorded that involved my mate Terry Styles, Kiwis, and the local population, but that's a story best left alone to be read at another time.) Mind you this latest incident with the NZ nurse did not dampen completely my respect and faith in the Kiwis as a nation for my respect and value for them as a people remains the same to this day.

The Kiwi nurse gave me a tongue lashing similar to the one given to me by Scottish nurse and that to me was the beginning of what I thought was to be for the remainder of my treatment whilst in hospital. I had thoughts of getting out of bed, putting on my jungle greens, putting on my webbing and walking back to Kangaw barracks. I was not going to put up with this shit and who the bloody hell were they to treat me in such a manner. All that I asked for was for a bloody smoke. I guess on reflection who knows what the doctors had told the nursing staff regarding my treatment. Maybe smoking was out of the question, maybe it was to interfere with my recovery, I would not know at the time and in any case the nursing staff hospital bedside manner left a lot to be desired. So much for the ANZAZ and ANZUK spirit I said to myself at the time.

Another day without a smoke and I was going round the bend. My thoughts were with my mates again in the jungle and why the heck did I not persevere and stay, why I could not smoke, why did I have to put up with this hospital bullshit, why did I join the Army, they could all stick it up their arse for all that I could care, I didn't need this bullshit and I wanted to scream out and tell them all they were a bunch of arseholes. Did I do any of that, of course not, for we had been trained to control ourselves and our emotions and to hack it under any circumstances, and not be perceived as weak and or "wusses" so to speak.

Yep, I was just a good little digger that just did what I was told and yet I felt so down and alone in an environment not of my own choosing. I sat in my bed, feeling sorry for myself and not wanting to interact with the rest of the world. There s nothing worse tan being alone and not with your mates, especially when you have been with them for a long time. Only those who have been in similar environments (civilian and/or military) would truly understand those thoughts and feelings.

In the evening as the sun was going down and a cool breeze entered the ward, the night staff were beginning to make their rounds I was advised that the hospital Matron was to be visiting and to answer any of her questions if she should happen to come in. I was still in isolation and therefore did not expect anyone to come into my room, so I slumped back into my bed, pulling the white sheets and the thin cover with the hospital logo on it towards my chin and stretched my legs. I could hear in the background outside the ward that there was movement and took no notice of what was going on. It was then that someone poked their head around the door and noticed that I was in alone and in doing so they walked in and came to the bottom of the bed, to look at the chart regarding my prognosis and treatment.

I looked at the nurse and she had a crown indicating her military status as a Major and that she was an Australian. So I naturally assumed that it was the turn of us Aussies to take over the hospital routine. I looked at her face and I must admit that it was not a kind face, nor was there any signs of any humour or indication that she was sympathetic. On her uniform she had a row of ribbons, some of which I recognised to be Vietnam and that she had served her time in a hostile environment. In just a few words, she was what I would describe a "Battle Scarred Battle axe". My mind recoiled back as I was not going to open my mouth again and ask for a cigarette and get my head chewed of again.

I must admit again that after 41 years, I still choke with emotion of my memories back then of what happened in the next few moments. The matron walked around to the side of the bed and the expression on her face changed dramatically. Gone was the battle axe look and replaced with the biggest, cheekiest beautiful grin I had ever seen. She was just too beautiful and all that I could see through the battle axe look was just pure loveliness shining through. The matron in a beautiful soft voice said, "How are you dig, are you well?" Yes maam I said. "Are they treating you all right in here?" "Yes maam" I said. "Can I do anything for you dig" "No maam" I said. "Do you smoke dig"? "Yes maam" I said. "Would you like a smoke dig" I didn't know what to say for a moment and stammered "Yes please maam". The Matron took out a packet of cigarettes from her uniform and gave me a cigarette and then the packet to go with it. I could not believe it, I still can't after all these years. "Do you have any money dig:?" " No maam" I said, its left back at Kangaw barracks". Well we can't have you like this, I will return later and give you some money to see you through until you get back to your unit.

Readers can make their own mind up what it all must have meant to me at the time. All that I can say is that my mind which was once flooded with all negative thoughts were replaced by such positive ones that anyone would think I was on a high on drugs. Suffice to say, it did not take me long to get out of bed and hurry over to the porch outside the ward and have my first smoke for days. was a smoke junkie, you bet I was and I can still remember inhaling that cigarette feeling how great t was to be alive. Mind you I no longer

smoke, giving up the evil weed back in 1988 after obtaining custody of my four boys to raise them alone for the next twenty years.

Years went by and I often wondered whatever happened to that Aussie matron. I never got the opportunity to thank her for her kindness not to repay her for the money she gave me at the time to see me through. I must admit the Matron did say to me at the time not to mention it to anyone as it was against hospital regulations to provide such funds and that at the time the interaction between the ranks was somewhat frowned upon which I found to be a little outdated by my standards and upbringing. That is until many years later when I was posted to Melbourne, Victoria, I happened to be visiting the RAP located within Victoria Barracks for my Annual physical that I happened to bump into this female nursing Major.

We both looked at each other and smiled. here was look of recognition on both our faces, but neither of us said anything at that moment. I saw that she wore ribbons similar to those I remember the matron wore back in 1973 and wondered whether she was the same person. I took courage that it would not hurt to ask her some questions regarding her back ground without being too forward. I said, "maam, were you ever posted to Singapore in 1973" She said yes she was. I said, "maam can you ever remember treating any Aussie soldiers whilst you were there.?" She said there were many Aussie I treated. I then went on to remind her of the incident back then and of the Aussie Matron who was kind to me at a time when I was down and what it all meant to me. What is your name she asked. I said Warrant Officer Peter Adamis. She said the surname is familiar but I don't know why as I have treated many Aussie diggers throughout my Army career. She smiled and also said that she appreciated that someone could have remember such a small incident and that it meant much to her to hear it from me.

After some small chit chat as to why we were both at the RAP, we both went our separate ways in life. The Matron had also come into get her final medical as she was retiring and I had a few more years to go before I took the same path towards a civilian career. I never knew whatever become of the matron, but I will never forget her kindness. Again in retrospect, I forgot to repay her back her the money she had given me so many years ago. My faith in the Aussie traditions, my faith in Duty First, my faith in my mates never diminished, I am thankful to my training instructors and military training, I am glad that we have such brilliant medical staff, many of whom are never acknowledged and last of all the ANZAC spirit still going strong after so many years. What does all this mean to me and what is the moral of this yarn? It is obvious is it not.

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## POST SCRIPT COMMENTS

Gary Adams. 5 June 2014. That looks pretty good Peter.. Do you remember the rotund little Ray Brown who was in A Coy. I remember one day we were cross graining , up one side of the ridge and down the other only to have another steep climb in front of us over and over again, one of those tough days that tests out everyone's fitness. On about the 4th ridge for the day we were to take a resupply by chopper.

Ray Brown had decided enough was enough and went down in a heap claiming to have chest pains.. Pom Hewitt would have none of this, he knew he was faking and laid in the boot.."Get up you fat cunt, there is nothing wrong with you. You are not going out on the chopper". Needless to say after a couple of well directed kicks Brownie was up on his feet and making his way up the hill at the rapid rate. The heart attack had miraculously vanished.

This was the same helipad where we had to cut down trees with bush saws and machete's ... Doc Wright had also feigned some illness and Lance Larcombe, a very pissed off CSM had no alternative but to send him out... Doc was sitting on a log with a smirk that went from ear to ear.. we all knew he was faking it.. The helicopter flew over and the pilot gave word it was okay for a winch point so we stopped cutting.

One tree had been sawn half way through... the water and resupply came in and Doc Wright was still sitting on the log and thinking about getting out of the bush when the half cut tree came down on top of him...so his pretend ailment became a real ailment with a tree across the head.. he was dusted off then and all of us who witnessed this, including the CSM were rolling on the ground laughing. Justice had been done.