

SINGAPORE - 1973



Memories: This article and others like it *are based on true events. Readers are warned that some of the material may be inappropriate. Material is somewhat unchanged to reflect the behaviour, expectations attitudes prevalent at the time.*

First Day. Pete woke to the sound of the pilot advising the passengers that they would be landing shortly. Pete stretched his small wiry frame and yawned. His body was fit and muscular despite his skinny frame. He prided himself on his fitness and proud that he was part of the Royal Australian Regiment.

Duty First meant a lot to him. His mind sometimes would drift to his old mans advice. "No matter what you do in life son, never bring shame upon the family name, only honour." Well, Pete took the motto (DUTY FIRST) of the Regiment to heart, but kept it to himself.

Pete stretched again and sat up in his seat and looked down on the island of Singapore and was captivated by all the bright lights emanating from the tall buildings. Each light telling its own story to the watcher in the air. Pete glanced at his watch and it was exactly 6.00 PM local time and 8.30 PM Australian time. It was a far cry from his home in Townsville where Mount Stuart glared down upon the two Infantry Battalions as they went about their daily tasks.

Pete sighed, as he knew that he would miss his mates in his previous Battalion the 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment. (1 RAR) Pete felt a sense of pride to have been selected. He had gone through Recruit Training, which was not so bad as he had previous Citizens Military Forces experience. Even Initial Employment was not bad. It was when he arrived at 1 RAR that his training really began.

His teachers were soldiers who had served in Korea, Malaya, Borneo, Sarawak and Vietnam. Pete benefited from their experience and loved the jungle as if it was his second home. He hated barrack life and the routine tasks of guard duties, parades, and the infernal painting of rocks white. Why in heavens name did God make rocks for, certainly it wasn't for painting them bloody white.

He had already missed out on going to Vietnam to do his bit like countless other before him. He had even been posted to the 2nd Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment, (2 RAR) but there was a change of Government and the Labor Party came to power. His old Battalion the 1st Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment was suddenly overnight depleted of all their National Servicemen.

Pete lost count of the many exercises they went on. All that he could remember was the bloody route marches, the digging, patrolling was good as he enjoyed the tactics. He always wanted to meet the bastard who made all these decisions about walking, walking and more bloody walking. Everyone could see that we enough trucks to carry the blokes to the battle. He remembered his CSM's Wayne Aitkenhead a (Angry Ant), Barry Tolley and he never forgot his first RSM, Jack Currie.

A few exercises had stuck in Pete's mind as Berne, Basch and Berry in the lead up to Exercise Treble Change in New Guinea. New Guinea really taxed Pete, both physically and mentally. Those early exercises gave Pete the will power and faith to keep going and never to give up on himself or his mates. Little did Pete know that the training he was receiving would hold him together later on his life on a personal level.

Another sigh came out of Pete as he looked down again at the landscape below. He wished he could have a smoke or do something as he always became edgy when an aircraft was about to make its final stage of the journey. Carefully surveying the scene for something familiar. Everything appeared strange, but he couldn't put his finger on it. The plane descended slowly and circled to make its final run onto the runway.

The windows began to fog up from the heat outside. The aircraft touched the tarmac and began its remaining journey. The pilot applied the brakes which brought on a screech of tyres, the screeching went on for some time until the aircraft slowed to a crawl. "Shit" said Pete to himself, "I hope the bastard knows what he is doing."

The aircraft came to a halt and everyone began collecting their belongings. As they stepped of the aircraft the heat and smells hit them like a tidal wave. Pete took stock of his surroundings and was surprised to find the airport somewhat similar to LAE, New Guinea whilst on exercise Treble Change. On the fringes of the airport there were the usual palm trees swaying in the breeze, the animals eating alongside and the locals going about their business.

Our guide from the Battalion took us to the main foyer for a customs check. We had brought with us all our equipment, webbing and personal clothing, as was the custom amongst infantry soldiers when posted to another Battalion. We waited as the equipment; webbing and personal items arrived from the aircraft. Some of us smoked and watched the locals going about their normal tasks. The airport guards were armed with automatic weapons and despite their youthful appearance, it was evident that they would use them if necessary.

We collected our belongings and made our way, one by one to the Customs Officer. When Pete's turn came it was simple enough. You opened up your bags and the Customs Officer checked through them.

The sausage bag with all the webbing had not been opened and the Customs Officer said what was in it. "**Webbing**" said Pete. "**WEAPONS**" said the Customs Officer as he looked up at the guard. Pete heard the distinct click of the safety catch, as it came onto fire, the stance on the security guard changed and his face grimaced. He cocked his weapon and moved forward. "OHHH SHIIIIIT" said Pete.

"**You have WEAPONS, WEAPONS**" said the Customs Officer almost shouting, the colour draining from his face and his choking voice attracting the rest of the security staff. "OH MY GAWD" Pete thought where is this bloke coming from. "**No mate, I have WEBBING, WEBBING, you know you wear it on you**", blurted Pete as he watched the security guard inch closer.

Pete undid the knots quickly and opened the sausage bag to show that it was webbing and not weapons. The Customs Officer began laughing and clearly he was relieved, the security also laughed, but no one had noticed that Pete had really shit himself, he thought that these blokes weren't mucking about. The Battalion representative came around and said "you all right Dig" "Yeah, Yeah, sure Sarge, I'm all right," said Pete. "Bullshit" thought Pete to himself. What have I got myself into?

After we had completed all the requirement of customs we were herded into one area and formally addressed by some bloke in uniform called LT Jones and the Battalion Orderly Sergeant. We as a group were shepherded onto buses. Four women put our belongings on the buses, a couple of them looked about eighty years old, and one of them was about twenty. Pete was not used to seeing women doing the manual work so he helped them load the equipment onto the military trucks that were being driven by Brit (British) drivers.

Pete tried to explain that the soldiers would carry the equipment, despite all his explanations, the women giggled and laughed. After a short time of trying to explain, it was evident to Pete that he was getting nowhere. Pete said stuff this and jumped on the rear of the truck and began to load the truck. Later they found that they had packed clothing and equipment belonging to other passengers that were still on the aircraft.

On each of the buses we had a Battalion representative giving us the rules of the game, i.e. what we could do and what we could not do. The do's and don'ts in case we ventured outside the camp area in the next few days. The first thing that Pete and his mates noticed was the terrible stench coming from the open drains. The odours were putrefying. They came from the various industries on the island, human waste and the shopkeepers refuse. Pete's nostrils flared up at such smells and almost vomited. "You may not think so, but you will get used to all the smells as time goes on," said LT Jones looking at the new blokes faces.

Arriving at the entrance to the barracks, one could not help noticing the security guards at the entrance to the camp area. They were manned by the local police and rotated every so often. The drivers took the buses through the gates and made their way to the Battalion Guard house located approximately 400 metres up the road.

Some of the guard turned out to see us as if we were from another planet. Some grinned, others shrugged their shoulders and went back to what they were doing. They had seen reinforcements to the Battalion before and we were no different. The guards' curiosity satisfied they disappeared inside the yellow building that looked more like a fortress with what appeared to be reinforced concrete.

We alighted from the buses and we were taken to Administrative Company lines for the night. We were issued sleeping gear and allocated our separate rooms. We were told that we would remain in Administrative company lines until the powers to be had decided which company we would be allocated. Pete, Eddie (Jock) Bryson, Rod Powell and Terry Whatshisname were allocated the same room.

Pete slowly unpacked and took out only what was required for the night. Pete lay on the bed dreaming of Margaret, his sweetheart he had left back in Sydney. Margaret was Jock's sister whom Pete met on pre-embarkation leave. Pete's was always a dreamer, and in this case he was dreaming of the future with Margaret at his side. Pete's last image was of Margaret as he slowly drifted into a deep slumber.

Postscript. *Pete did not marry his sweetheart as he received a "Dear John" letter months later. this letter left a void in him and it would take him some time to get over being rejected. Suffice to say Margaret went to Scotland for a holiday and when she returned she married an Royal Australian air force chap. they were divorced soon after with no children. as for her brother Jock, Pete occasionally still sees him at family functions that Pete has at his home.*



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