

# SINGAPORE ANZAC DAY 25 APRIL 1973

## THE TAXI RIDE

Dedicated to Ron Shepherd



**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.*

Pete knew the night before that today was ANZAC day. Therefore he woke up at 6.00 AM so that he and his mates could have an early start on the day. Seize the day, so to speak. Approximately 9.00 AM the new members of the Battalion was issued their clothing allowance, which was approximately \$60.00 Australian while the local Singaporean currency it was \$180.00.

Pete had spent his allowance in Australia prior to departure, so he borrowed some money off his mates and made plans to familiarise himself with Singapore and any other exotic place that was close by. Prior to leaving the barracks area Pete and Jock found two of their mates they knew from their previous Battalion, 1 RAR. They were John Rickwood and John Shepherd who had come over much earlier.

At 11.00 AM Rod Powell, "Fangs" Aitken, Eddie (Jock) Bryson, John Rickwood, John Shepherd and Pete made a beeline towards the main gate to hire a local taxi. The first taxi they turned down because the driver had asked for too much. However Rick took it at the price the driver wanted. Pete and his mates did not have to wait very long as taxis were always going past the barracks.

Either they were travelling from the centre of town out towards Woodlands, Sembawang and or the Causeway or heading into the city, passing Nee Soon on the way. Pete and John took the next cab and told the driver that if he overtook the taxi containing Rick and his mates, he would receive an extra dollar. Man o man, Pete had been on a few joy flights.

Remembering the time in 1968 when he was 18 in a Morris Minor with the driver (Fracassi) being drunk. They were travelling down Chapel Street at about 80 km an hour's and everyone was pissed. The passengers told the driver to turn left at the last minute. The driver took the corner too fast and rolled the car.

The Morris Minor rolled about twice before slamming into three cars. Pete (Bunny), Mick Fracassi (Fracassi) Con Mercuri (Scar), Barry (Trees) and Allan Ziebell (Big Al), and the "Pig" had been on a night out on the town were on the way to a local dance at the YCW. How they were not killed that night was anyone's guess.

Well the ride provided by this Singaporean driver was very similar and Pete regretted giving an incentive to the driver. The taxi driver nearly bowled over four pedestrians almost rammed a car when he took a sharp corner, and scared the "shitting" daylight out of a number of motorcyclists. What struck Pete as odd was the lack of emotion on the driver's face, it appeared as if he had a death wish. Maybe it was all right for him to have that wish but Pete was not in a hurry to die for anyone.

Twisting and turning, down one alley, chickens and people scurrying out of the path of the maniac taxi driver and that hapless passengers hanging on for dear life. Looking back at the path of destruction Pete saw shopkeepers waving their fists, and women and children throwing vegetables and other items at the departing taxi.

The passengers were laughing, but the taxi driver didn't know that they were laughing out of fear. After a very hectic ride through the back roads, we finally came to the main roads and caught up to the other taxi with our mates in it. We passed it at high speed, past the local copper with a whistle in his mouth directing the traffic. Past some huge buildings and Shopping Malls.

Pete was amazed, even in Australia he could not remember such beautiful buildings. These all smelled and looked like being new buildings. The driver came to a sudden stop outside Supreme House, which was a department store. The driver was grinning from ear to ear at the passenger's relief from fear. The diggers all chipped in and paid him and the extra dollar for his incentive and driving skills.

As they stood on the pavement watching the taxi driver drive his battered old Mercedes into the traffic, one could smell the diesel fumes coming from his exhaust. John Shepherd looked at the taxi and muttered; those bloody Gooks (Asians) are all the same.

The group from both taxis came together and ribbed each other as to who won the race to city. The diggers in the other taxi approached Pete and his group and said, "Geeze you blokes were bloody flying as if you had the devil after you. We thought you were going to be rolled. Pete and his mates had recovered sufficiently from their fear and put on an act.

"Naah" said Pete "it was bloody nothing". Pete made a mental note of the taxi driver and the battered Mercedes so that he never hired him again, but he knew that it was useless, as all Asians looked the same to him. The young diggers entered the department store. "Fang" Aitken and his mate went looking for a beer. The remainder of the diggers sauntered through the stores. Pete ogled at the women. "My Gawd" said Pete to himself, "they certainly were bloody beautiful."

We had christened Fangs his name because the middle of his teeth were missing and when he removed his false teeth, the remaining teeth resembled fangs. John Shepherd was Shep; John Rick Wood was Rick and so forth. Pete's nickname with his Army mates was "Pete the Greek" amongst his closest mates because of his Greek heritage, (Bunny ceased to exist as it was his boyhood nickname.)

If anyone called him a Wog or Dago, his mates would punch their heads in or Pete would do it himself. Pete would not take that shit from anyone. He was either an Australian or a Greek, but never a Wop, Spag, Wog or a Dago. Pete had grown up in the streets of St Kilda, Windsor and Prahran and was a street fighter.

He could analyse the strengths and weaknesses of his opponent very quickly. He knew that you had to have your wits to survive in those days. He always stood his ground and not afraid to have it out with the best of them.

One shop they entered was catered for by two young ladies and man who were selling all the "In "gear of the times. This was nothing out of the ordinary until the two girls recognised that we were new to Singapore and thought that they could sell us a product or two. Well they came over and started swearing in English as if to make us feel at home. Fuck this and Fuck that, we have fuck'n everything you fuck'n want. They really turned Pete and his mates off.

The girls then came up to the boys and started to fondle their penises from the outside of their loose clothing. This was really a turn off for the boys, as they did not expect this to happen to them. The aggressive sexual nature of the two salesgirls really scared the shit out of them.

The boys made a hasty retreat from the shop amidst the giggles and laughter of the two sales girls. "Bloody shit" said Pete. "What the fucks going on, I hope that they are not all like that?" The diggers were not interested in burning a hole in their pocket, just because some bloody females accosted them; after all, it just was not on for females to become so aggressive. Pete certainly was not used to it.

Pete went into another store and found that Indians ran it. He spied a skirt that was in fashion at the time and bought it as present for Margaret his sweetheart in Australia. He remembered that Margaret collected postcards and so he bought a number of them to send to her.

The diggers found each other again and went strolling through the department store looking for a restaurant. The restaurant looked like palace and Pete thought that he would not have enough money to pay the bill, however as it turned out the bill was small.

Pete's problem was that he was comparing the Australian standards against the Singaporean and had yet to grasp the differences. Still it was fun to be served like a king. The meal was superb and fit for royalty. When they left the restaurant, Pete was told that the price they paid was too high and that they had been played for suckers. This advice came from his mates who come to the Battalion earlier. Still Pete didn't complain and just a mental note for the future.

**Postscript.** Except for Jock Bryson, I lost track of the other Army mates. Mick Fracassi (Fracassi), completed his apprenticeship as a chef and joined the Australian Army (influenced by me and his mother never forgave me) as a cook and completed 20 years service. Mick and his second wife are now living in Queensland.

Barry (Trees) completed his metal trades apprenticeship and went on to travel the world and on his return married Pauline from Malta and raised four girls. Sadly, Pauline passed away with cancer leaving Barry with his four daughters. Barry remarried again and is with his wife Sue, living live in Melbourne.

Con Mercuri (Scar) completed his electrical apprenticeship and married Margaret. they had two girls and one son and all live in Melbourne. I keep in touch with Con Mecuri and Barry Ziebell some 57 years later.

Allan Ziebell (Big Al) [My childhood best mate] was called up as a National serviceman whilst working in a bank as a teller. He married Anne whilst he was in the Army and completed his two years obligatory service. Sadly he was killed in a car accident as a passenger in which his wife was driving.

Bob Roger ("Pig") completed his apprenticeship as a carpenter, joined the Army and rose to the rank of Major. He left the Army after 20 years service and is currently living in Canberra.



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