



KAPOOKA AND BASIC TRAINING 1971

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This article is dedicated to all those who have served this nation, whether it has been in uniform or not. It is also a reminder that no matter our station in life, it what we choose as a vocation and what we contribute to the security and longevity of

the nation we call home, Australia that is important. I thank my instructors, managers and all those who had a hand in making me who I am today. This article is for you.

Preamble. I was talking to the old man (still alive and kicking at close to 89 years old) the other day about the weather in Victoria and I said, dad, I cannot remember winter being so bloody cold. He agreed with me and as usual we changed the topic to other matters concerning our joint health and family issues. After our conversation, I reflected on my comments about winter and I said to myself, that I think I told a big fib to the old man.

I can remember some 45 years go to the day, 25 August 1971 as a young fella being driven to Collins Street which at that time was the local Army recruiting Office and presenting myself to the bloke in uniform at the desk. It was a freezing cold day that sent slivers of cold steel through our clothing and striking at the centre of our body, send chills up and down. Not a good feeling or a good start to a new career, I can tell you.

Recruiting centre. My life long childhood friend Barry Ziebell had driven me in and like old mates do we promised to keep in touch. I can say that with some degree of confidence after all those years we are still in contact. Allan his brother had been called up and was serving with 8 RAR at Enoggera barracks. Sad to say Allan was tragically killed in a vehicle accident when he completed is national service. But that's another story which will come later.

At the recruiting centre, the bloke or NCO in charge went through the nominal roll that he had and called out our names. I don't remember his name but he was a pleasant chap and the bus from Melbourne to Kapooka was a quiet one, looking out the window thinking of nothing in general other than the life we left behind.

The trip to Kapooka.

We travelled through many towns and small village like structures, all green because of the winter, stopping of a quick dash to the ablutions and a splash at the porcelain or dropping a cake on the pavement so to speak. Yes it was cold, but nothing to what was to greet us at Kapooka.

Kapooka is located mid between Melbourne and Sydney and don't quote me on the mileage as I was hopeless at map reading and navigating. Kapooka is a cold windy bloody place and I for one do not understand why basic training could not have been located on the God Coast or sunny Queensland for that matter. Maybe the powers to be thought that by training at the luxury resort of Kapooka we would become acclimatised to the rigors of battle that some would eventually face.

You will be sorry. At Kapooka we disembarked and immediately a swarm of NCO's shepherded us into some form of line and we addressed by the RSM (Regimental Sargeant Major) whom I have forgotten and then I am of the belief by the Commanding Officer. Both blokes appeared to be ok and reasonable with none of the hard handling that I had earlier experienced when I did my basic training with 22 RVR (Royal Victorian Regiment) some two years previously at Puckapunyal when I was in the Citizens Military Forces.

Our names were called out and were we broken up into various groups and marched towards our lines. As we walked towards our lines, (ours was 8 Platoon B Coy), scores of blokes had opened up their windows leaning out and gazing upon us as we marched by. We met with howls of laughter and shouts of "you will be sorry". I looked up and stared at them, wondering what the laughter and howling was all about.

Mates.

If you ask me I reckon that this may have been the first time I may have met Mark Stephens or Stevo to his mates. Mark had enlisted on the 18 August 1971, a mere 7 days prior to me and something he has never made me forget for the past 45 years. Get a bit time up he would often say and I would retort back with I was in the Army long before you were cobber. His response would be that Choccos (CMF – Citizens Military Forces) don't count. To this day, I always thought that Mark was in my platoon, he swears that he was in another, and to be honest with the passing of years I cannot remember other than there were instances which made me believe that we were in the same platoon. I was allocated a room with another blokes called Don Norman who we still keep in touch after all these years. We will hear more of Mark Stephens in another article of his own.

Conscientious Objector. Kapooka was tough, cold, windy, refreshing for some. Challenging for others and for a tiny minority not the place for some young men. For example one young National Serviceman went continuously AWOL, (Absent without leave) at every opportunity that he got and on each occasion the MPs' (Military Police) brought him back none the worse for wear.

He was a young bloke from Western Australia and the last time he got caught was in his home State. How he evaded the guards, the police and the Military Police to get that far in those is beyond me but a measure of his tenacity not to undertake national service. He was against the Vietnam War and made it plainly felt that he did not want to be with us. Nothing personal, but that's how it was for him.

This young National Service man who had kept going AWOL, was given a broom stick on his return as a rifle and went on parade with it when we did our rifle drills. Over a period of few weeks somehow he was able to be discharged as a conscientious objector and allowed to return home. How he was able to accomplish that was beyond my understanding.

It appears that his time in the Army was spent on escaping, being captured and the cycle repeating itself. You got to give it to him, he did not give up and one can imagine that he could have made a great soldier if he had put his efforts into being a soldier instead of escaping. I reflect back on that time and always wondered what happened to him.

The first night. My first night I stayed up with my mate Don Norman and spit polished our boots. I don't why I did it other than to demonstrate that I had some knowledge of being a soldier. It made little difference and all the hard work was for nothing. Those who have gone through Kapooka will understand that getting up in the middle of the night clutching your bed-sheet and running out into the night to line up at the parade ground in order to be counted. Or when the platoon corporals would come through and inspect our rooms and throw our beds upside down, pull out our carefully laid out cupboards, smear our boots and say that they need cleaning.

Inspections. Regarding our bed inspection, if the coin did not bounce on our bed in accordance to the satisfaction of the NCO, it was ripped apart. There was a lot of finger pointing, shouting and screaming down our throats and yes the odd baton would be thrust into our chest and the NCO would scream into our faces. But we took it all in as that is what was expected and we took it all on face value.

Mind you there were times when even we felt that some bastardization was being carried put to the glee and smirks of the NCOs', but they few and far between. There was fierce competition amongst all of us to excel and the more they threw at us we became tougher, meaner and far more efficient at our tasks.

Conditioning. What we did not know is that were being slowly and carefully conditioned for the rigors of Army life and that the life we once knew would become distant memory. Our lives now became dedicated to military arms and combat. Basic training was designed to bring out your best, challenge you in areas that you thought were not possible, push you to the limit and still find that you had something in reserve. The training was hard, extremely tough mentally as well as physically to the point where you just wanted to scream out and say I had enough and yet you kept going, looking at your mate next to you knowing that he too was not giving up. He was probably not giving up because he probably had the same thoughts.

Competition. Later this toughness would bind us as a team and after each gruelling exercise or challenge the closer we became. It was also here that I met Ron Lovelock, and Greg Carthew and a host of other blokes whose names escape me. Both men were older than me by a few years and especially Ron who was at least 10 years older was the "father" of our group Ron had served before and had discharged for family reasons before deciding to come back for another stint. The competition was so fierce, that it left no room for weaklings or who could not find the tenacity and the conviction not to give up. It was about being able to withstand the intense pressure at all times without giving up in the face of the endurance tests specifically designed to break you down slowly and condition you to the rigors of Army life.

Duties and expectations. Everything had its place and you were expected to ensure that those expectations were not only met but were surpassed. I lost count of the running, the exercises, the guard duties, the mess duties, being thrown out of bed, all our gear pulled out, shouted at, running all the time, when to smoke, when to shit, when to shower, when to open your mouth, the endless drilling on parade, the fighting amongst us and still finding the time to lean out of our windows and shout at the new comers, "You will be sorry". Some new blokes would put their fingers up and give us the sign to piss off while others just looked bewildered.

Bastardization. There were incidents that we would now call bastardization amongst males in the barracks and I will only write of one incident here. It was in the lines (barracks where a pack of young blokes got one young fella stripped him and black balled him. (Smearing his genitals with shoe polish). This young bloke the next day was discharged and we found out later that he came from a well-known Army family which may not have been good for his self-esteem to return back home. When I witnessed such inappropriate behaviour I realised that not only had I to be tough on myself but tough with others and never be pushed around, stand up for myself and fight the good fight if I was to earn my peers respect.

Confrontations. I would clash in the mess (eating area) with Archie Lundani and cut his face with my fists, and altercation which almost came to blows with Lance Hume, (West Australian aboriginal Golden Gloves boxer), shatter another blokes jaw at the boozier (drinking hole), punchups with a score of other blokes, all to keep my head above water and to demonstrate that despite my little size I was not going to be beaten by any bastard no matter what his size was.

To be honest I copped a belting once or twice so it did not go all my way. I became very very fit, lean, wiry and my strength become one like iron. Strength and endurance would become very handy in later life at a time when I was being sorely tested.

Friendships. Life was tough that is all. Archie Lundani and I met again many years later at a leadership course and we instantly recognised each other and became staunch friends. Archie ended up in catering corps and made it to the rank of WO1 (Warrant Officer Class 1). Lance Hume and both became friends at Ingleburn, Infantry Centre and then at 1 RAR (Royal Australian Regiment). I met up with Lance Hume again when I was posted to West Australia in 1981.

Lance had since left the Army and was finding it a struggle outside the confines of the Army family. Sad to say I was advised by his brother Woody Hume, another mate from 6 RAR that his brother Lance had passed away. As for the bloke whose jaw I shattered at the boozier, it was a silly thing on my part and although I was to keep on fighting, I regretted belting the bloke. I just did not like his remark that 8 Platoon blokes were as weak as piss. So fierce was the competition to excel and i had much to learn.

ZULU. Whilst I was Kapooka I even tried for Officer training, only to be gently let down by John Best who said that being an officer was not for me and that I should be looking at becoming a Warrant officer instead. Disappointed I was I must say, but I took it on the chin and went on with the rest of the training somewhat downcast. Being down did not last long after seeing the compulsory movie, ZULU, with Baker, Cain and company being the lead actors.

My favourite was the Colour Sargeant who was exemplary throughout the whole battle only to find that he was not awarded the Victoria Cross because he was just doing his job. After watching the movie and being inspired by the courage of the Colour Sargeant, I said to myself that if I was to make the Army a career, then I was going to be a Warrant Officer.

Guard duty. In my first week of training I was placed on Guard duty. The guard house was located near the front entrance on the right of the gate. If I remember correctly followed by the magazine where the ammunition was kept a little further down the road. Each guard was allocated an area of duty and he had to patrol it for the next two hours. My first night on guard duty was to patrol the ammunition dump (magazine) and it got so boring that I counted every brick on one level horizontal to the ground.

In the guard house we were also guarding a coffin which had the remains of a young bloke who had been killed in a truck accident earlier in the day. The truck was returning to or from the rifle range and that when it rolled, crushing one young fella and injuring others. What was strange about this was that some blood and brains were still sticking out of the coffin. A strange feeling that I was not in for an easy ride and that mentally I had to toughen myself even further.

Silver City. One thing I was pleased about, was that when National service was introduced, new barracks were created to house the thousands of young men who had been "volunteered" to serve the nation in time of war. I say this because of the numerous runs that we would have to make almost on a daily basis to and from Silver City. Silver City were the metal igloo Nissan huts that were located outside the new barracks and a few were left there as a reminder to us and others of what life was like living under those conditions.

The Nissan huts were cold, draughty, open to the elements, Spartan in their outlook and downright gloomy even to look at. Still thousands were trained at Silver city and those who went through those conditions had earned my respect. It was a constant reminder to all of us in the platoon that life in the past was much more difficult and that we should be thankful that we did not have to endure such a harsh environment.

Answering the call. Whether I like the system or not is immaterial, what was important was that these blokes did not shirk their duty and answered the nations call. I found that interesting that these blokes did not want to go into the Army and yet when their number came up they rolled up and did what they were asked to do. To me that was the epitome of what it was to be an Aussie. That although we would bitch, complain, argue, fight but in the end, do what was expected in time of need.

I must admit that the Vietnam War was not a popular one, especially for those who felt the brunt of it when they returned back from Vietnam to be welcomed by a hostile public. Many would have nightmares, depression, suicides, family separations, homeless and those that had the support and family to ease them back into a civilian life managed to survive the pressures of a life that did not involve conflict and battle.

Adapting to change. The many tests that we were subjected to, the training, the drills, the physical aspects, such as body strengthening, swimming, running, marching, gymnasium, rifle shooting, weapon training, lectures, first aid, endurance training, how to dress, how to iron our uniforms, ethics, values, mateship, never giving up, being there for mates, never letting the team down, survival training, jungle training techniques, fording rivers, instruction in all types of weapons, grenade throwing and yes of course washing dishes, cutting vegetables, working in the mess and bloody guard duties all had a hand in adapting to change.

Time to leave. When it came to leave, it was preceded by filling out where we wanted to go to. I remember filling out my form as wanting Infantry first as like many other we all wanted to go to Vietnam which on reflection never happened. But that's another story involving 1 RAR and my first family battalion. It was also a time when we began to realise that the companions we had met, friendship we made and enemies if any would come to pass and we would be going our separate ways.

After all the Army and Australian and the world for that matter was a big place and no one knew what the future had in store for us. Many of us got pissed and made promises to keep in touch which never really happened unless you were posted in close proximity to another or were in the same unit. For others we would meet again after many many years had elapsed.

Apologies to Cobber Digger Mates.

I would like to apologise to all MY Army mates for not including all of the hardships, the training aspects, the laughter, the joys, the mates, the confrontations or even our instructors, but I must add the years have certainly condemned me to a life of forgetfulness. In spite of my forgetfulness, I can still remember my skin crawling with sweat, insects, and the veins sticking under when under tremendous pressure.

The tiredness in the legs, the back pain from carrying another mate or a stretcher, the endless marches, gasping for breath when we felt we had nothing else to give and yet found that other reserve we did not think we had and just when we thought we were about to give up we look around and see our mates struggling with packs, rifles and gear, we kept on going.

In conclusion, basic training at Kapooka was tough, but it was nothing to what we were about to experience during our Infantry IET (Initial employment Training) at Ingleburn followed by our training in the battalion. When we arrived at our subsequent destinations the new challenges we faced were going to be by far, more difficult to what we had already been subjected to. No wonder we felt like supermen after all the training. I say this because there are many times when I am asked by parents about their sons and daughters who are contemplating on a Defence Force career and what to expect.

I always tell them that this nation trains its Defence Personnel to a very high standard and expects them to act accordingly given the high standards. As such, I will always recommend a Defence Force career for any young man and woman considering such a move in that direction. I am convinced that it will be the best decision they will ever make in life as it will have a long lasting and positive effect on the well-being and status in their lives.

The last time I visited Kapooka was in 1990 when on a tour of military training centres as part of my Recruiting Course in an effort to understand and come to grips with the methodologies and concepts of what new recruits could expect from a Defence Force Career. Kapooka on a physical sense had not changed dramatically, but the training methods had improved and more scientific and psychological concepts were involved in getting the best out of each soldier.

As always, my apologies for the poor grammar, punctuation and savagery of the Aussie English language. All that I can say is that it is great to be alive and one does not give up in the face of adversity. Remember that life is still worth living despite the many challenges of life we face each day.



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