



BURT FRANKS

Peter Adamis 24 January 2017

Who was Burt Franks readers would ask. Only those who knew him, served with him, trekked through the jungles, drank with him, fought with him, laughed with him and stood by each other would know of him. A man's man, a legend in the eyes of the younger soldiers like myself seeking that father figure who would guide us through the perils, and difficulties of what soldiering was all about. I first met Burt in 1974 on our return from Singapore and Malaya.

He was a tall lanky bloke, tough, chiselled rough features, typical Aussie that reminded me of Chips Rafferty of the cinema and he even spoke like him. He reminded me of my own Dad and as such whenever he gave us an order or simply directed us to do a task we did it without question.

Burt was married to Dawn and they had no children. I guess with Burt being overseas on much of his Army career, married life would have been tough for Dawn. Whenever I saw them at functions they were a happy couple and always seemed to be in high spirits. As the Company Sergeant Major, (CSM), during my time with him, he guided, trained and would often give me tasks which I can say with all honesty was to test me and influence me to develop my skills. Like Barry Tolley who was my CSM in A Coy 1 RAR, it was the same with Burt Franks. I would say that Barry and Burt were the two blokes that saw that my aggressive behaviour could be managed and channelled into other areas.

Although they have both passed away, far too early in my book, I cannot thank them enough for saving me from myself. Burt along with Ron King who was our Company Quarter Master came to our wedding which was a civil one in the Brisbane CBD and officiated as our witnesses. I still have a very brief video on super 8 film of that day. In fact, when I think about it, I also have a super 8 film of our time in the Jungles outside of Brisbane where Burt and others of that era are in it.

Whenever were in the jungles training, it was customary at the end of each training exercise to have a BBQ, beer, soft drinks and huge fires to be lit. Around those camp fires, the older soldiers would use the time to talk to us younger blokes about the more experienced soldiers that had seen service overseas. With the wisdom of years, I can now say without a shadow of doubt that soldiers like Burt Franks would effectively use that time to mentor us younger soldiers and advise us without big noting themselves what soldiering was like during their time.

One time I remember asking Burt what was his most horrible experience that he had come across whilst he was in Vietnam. While he paused momentarily, looking at me with his almost hawkish eyes, gleaming through the smoke that was rising up towards the canopy of trees above us, I thought he was going to talk about his battles with the Vietnamese. Burt sighed and told me this story. Pete he said, I remember patrolling through the villages in one of the provinces and stopping in the village while it was being searched for weapons. While we were on the ground looking towards the jungle others were searching the huts and speaking with the locals.

Burt said that he was on one knee looking towards the jungle when the kids from the village came out of the huts towards us. There was one young girl, probably about five bringing her little baby brother who was merely two years old towards me, laughing and giggling. They had innocence in their eyes and one could not but help feeling something for these kids stuck in a war which was not of their choosing. I beckoned with my hand to come towards me and I held out some sweets that I carried with me to give me energy. They both took the sweets, smiled and then returned back to their parents.

We then moved on towards another objective and did not return for some weeks later. On our return the same village had recently been hit by the Communist irregulars (Viet Cong) who had shot, killed and terrorised the villagers for allegedly supporting the Australians who were looking after them. As we moved through the village, we came across the bodies of the two year old and the smashed and broken body of the little girl. Burt said in a quiet voice that that memory had haunted him ever since and despite all the horrors of war, it was these two young kids that had stuck in his mind.

Having said the above story, I am reminded of two other mates, Dennis George and Gary Adams, both Vietnam veterans who were in my opinion typical Aussies bloke that called a spade a spade and did not put on any airs that they were superior because they had witnessed and survived the two way range. I write about these two blokes simply because I was always under the impression that they had a hatred for the Vietnamese and I cannot remember seeing much of a soft side to their character whilst I was serving with them.

As we all grew with age and the wisdom of years takes its toll on our youthful outlook and devil may care attitude we develop a sense of brotherhood and come to realise that what we thought initially was not the case. Gary Adams in my book was a thorough gentleman who had a positive outlook on life, could see through the foliage to see what was on the other side and make valid judgments that war was but a part of life and need not negatively influence him. He was probably one of the first to be responsible for conducting tours back to Vietnam for soldiers wishing to return to a place of their youth. This is not an easy task when you reflect on Gary time in Vietnam. But then again Gary was always that quiet achiever saw life for what it was and just got on with the job.

Dennis George on the other hand, was your rough and tumble type of soldier that you would want by your side if you happen to be in a difficult situation and need guidance. Mind you, George was not above being a larrikin of sorts if he wanted to be. He was always around to provide mentorship to the younger diggers and like Gary he would call a spade a spade. Dennis was never afraid to speak his mind and yet there was a quiet reserve to him which I just could not fathom. Yes like many others of his and my generation, Dennis was as tough as they come.

It would be many years later when photographs of him would surface of him seen talking with the young Vietnamese village children and/or in photographs that showed a completely different character. I saw the caring and compassionate side of Dennis and I was somewhat taken aback that all these years George was hiding his caring and compassionate side. Another lesson learnt by me through life.

Now although I have written about Gary Adams and Dennis George, it is because these two blokes were younger than Burt Franks who was their senior and also one would say had accumulated far more experience than the both of them put together. The point that I am trying to make here is that all three epitomised the typical Australian soldier, who was tough and tenacious in battle and at the same time could see the futility of war for what it was and still be able to demonstrate care and compassion. No wonder the diggers whilst serving in Vietnam under difficult conditions hated with a vengeance the Wharfies and the Posties back home for delaying and/or sabotaging material from being sent to Vietnam to support the men and women serving there.

As for Burt and his wife, my wife and I at times would often see them at military functions or at the local pub outside hours and I got to know them well as a young digger and I found that they always had time for me if I needed them. Burt was also of the same generation as "Warrie" George Mansford and Burt told me of a funny story where he and George Mansford happened to be drinking with Yanks somewhere in Asia. Somehow the drinking got out of hand and as normal it turned into a brawl. Both "Warrie" George Mansford and Burt Franks who were both Corporals at the time, I was led to believe became involved in the melee that followed. Both men could certainly handle themselves.

The Military Police were called in and everyone but "Warrie" George Mansford had been arrested. Burt ended up losing his stripes and "Warrie" George Mansford got off scot free with Burt saying a word that his mate was involved. When I asked how "Warrie" George Mansford got off scot free, Burt smiled and said that "Warrie" George Mansford was able to slip under the tent and nick off before anyone could spot him. Burt in the end obviously won his spurs back and "Warrie" George Mansford ended up becoming an officer. Now although my wife and I have visited "Warrie" George Mansford in his lair in Cairns and he knew of Burt well, I never got the opportunity to corroborate the story from "Warrie" George Mansford point of view.

Another time, collusion between the Commanding Officer (CO) Tony "Harry the Hat" Hammett and Burt Franks would lead me to having tea and biscuits with the CO up at Battalion Headquarters. Tony "Harry the Hat" Hammett would ring various companies and speak to the first bloke who answered the phone. He would ask military and tactical questions to see whether we knew the answer. It was his way of gathering information on the depth of our knowledge. The CSM and in this case Burt Franks would be in on it and played along. This time it was my turn and I was asked size were the mortar rounds that were fired by the Battalion mortars and role does the rifleman have in a section. These and other questions were asked of me. I thought that the bloke on the other end was bullshitting me and I said I will get back to him.

I raced into see Burt Franks who listen to my story and said go and find the pamphlet on the subjects, read up on them, get back to him and that he will arrange it so that I could speak to the CO in person. Shit I said to myself, how I am supposed to about the bloody mortars and why did the CO have to pick on me. The long and the short of it all was that I read up on what I was by the CO, went back to Burt Franks and told him what I had learnt and them made my way up to Battalion Headquarters. I marched up to the Headquarters, past the Chief Clerk (Dick Spain - now deceased) who pointed me in the direction of the CO's office where I was met by the Assistant Adjutant and ushered into Tony "Harry the Hat" Hammett office.

I ended up staying in his office for an hour having a cup of tea with the "Boss of bosses" so to speak. During that time I was grilled in a friendly fashion, of who I was, where I came from my back ground where I had been and what did I want to do in life. Although the story is to be repeated when I write about Tony "Harry the Hat" Hammett, its best left alone and say that he made me feel welcome and my respect for him went through the roof. The rest is history as he became an influence on my life after that. It broke my heart to hear of his passing in that tragic aircraft crash.

With Burt Franks, I went to his office on my returned and dutifully reported to him all that I had done with the CO. Burt looked at me again through his hawkish eyes and chuckled at my expense. Burt would send me up to the CO's office on errands that I began to realise after a period of time that he was mentoring me in a manner that I had not been used to, that quiet leadership could achieve wonders. Although I retained my aggression, I had learn through persuasion and influence of an experienced soldier to channel my aggression to other productive areas.

Well what I can say but to confess that I let Burt down as I got involved in a huge punchup with some locals at Canungra. Although it all turned out well, I must say Burt was just bloody terrific tome after it was all over. I have wrote a story about it some years ago and it can be read by visiting clicking on [CANUNGRA HOTEL \(QLD\) BATTLE - 1974](#). As the years went by, much changed with me and my bitter divorce affected me very deeply. I lost contact with many as my mind was on fighting for my four sons. A battle that was to cost me much of my military career, loss of self-esteem, loss of confidence and it would take many years before I was able to get back on track. By the time I was on my feet again, my mates had surpassed me in rank and in various experiences which robbed me of the chances to go overseas on a number of opportunities that arose from time to time. Looking back on those times, I have no regrets as I was able to get custody of my kids after a four year battle and start anew.

When I did manage to get on my feet, I began to reengage to try and find old mates and mentors, especially those who had exerted positive influence upon me. Barry Tolley, I spoke with two days before he died and unfortunately I was never given the chance to meet up with Burt or his wife Dawn to thank them for having a hand in my military upbringing. Every time I would go to Brisbane or Far North Queensland I would always ask the same question? Does anyone know the whereabouts of Burt and Dawn Franks. I would make enquiries and use my computer knowledge to try and locate them. On every occasion I came to a dead wall and was often told that they had indeed both passed away. Such is the way of life. Such is the way of the soldier. This is my tribute to Burt Franks. I welcome constructive criticism, witty anecdotes, photographs and any comment that will enhance the tribute to Burt Franks. Any errors are mine and mine alone.

2015 and 2016 for me were years of reflection, treatment and recovery. Not to dwell on what could have been but to ensure that whatever time we have left is not squandered in futile objectives that lead to nowhere. I intend to make life more meaningful and worthwhile, worthy of those who had a hand in making me who I am today. Life as we know it can only be sustained by vigilance and with that vigilance comes responsibility. Let us hope that 2017 is a good one.



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