



Taipan

The world's most venomous snake

SNAKES TALES

Peter Adamis Abalinx 16 January 2017

Working in the heat today under the shade of the grape vine and lemon tree, my mind roared back to a time long ago. I felt the same sensation that I had when patrolling in the wilds of far north Queensland. That sensation reminded me of the Taipan, the world's deadliest and most venomous snake to be encountered by man or beast.

As always, the article is a conglomeration of snake tales along with interesting tales of a bygone era and a tribute to the men I served alongside with. My first encounter with snakes was as a three year. My Dad had not been long home after his stint in the Greek Regular Army and time served as a right wing irregular against the communist forces during the Greek Civil War. I can remember aspects of my childhood in Pellana a village, reputedly to be the Birthplace and home of Helen of Troy whose father was King Tyndareus. Pellana during the Mycenaean period was the administrative capital of Lakonia, the future region to spawn the famous ancient Spartans upon the arrival and integration of the Dorians.

Dad one day was climbing the cypress trees at the bottom of the property which was located some 500 metres outside Pellana proper and the home which was a stable inherited by Mum from her father was located on the hill. My grandfather had this property for many years and it apparently it was situated on a cemetery. During my grandfather's youth he worked on the property clearing the headstones and the collecting the skeletons dug up by the plough. He would gather all the skeleton bones into a bag and slowly haul them to the new cemetery located about one kilometre to the West and on the old road Sparta. As for the head stones, Grandfather would gather them and neatly place them on the ground row by row and created a wheat threshing and winnowing floor which was utilised by the Pellana locals. The area was and still is referred to as the "palia-lo-na" (old lawn) in Greek. All this labor was carried out by my Grandfather on his return from fighting the Turks during the ill-fated expedition to Asia Minor (Turkey) in 1922

Once I had purchased the property next door to my parents in 2013 from my cousin, I took photographs of the headstones that I found. I am of the belief that these headstones are far older than people believe but as yet no archaeologist has yet to put a date on them. Those headstones that I was able to save now ring around the olive tree on my miniscule property. I guess that one day some enterprising archaeologist will come along to inspect the gravestones and make an educated guess to which period they belong to. When that time comes, I will probably be buried and my bones becoming dust.



CONDOSTERI

Leopard Snake considered venomous

Although I have digressed much it is worth noting the background to my initiation to snakes modest as it is. On this particular day, as Dad was half way up the tree he called out to me to go inside the cottage and fetch his rifle. I never hesitated for a moment although not knowing why he wanted, other than by the tone of his voice it was urgent. Now how fast can a three year old run may I ask? I guess to my Dad it was probably a long time while I thought I was fast.

Running with Dads rifle dragging in the dirt and slowly handing it to him I must have thought I was fast. He had climbed down by now and was looking up at the cypress tree and watching a particular region which I could not see from my short height. All of a sudden this huge snake, (to a three year old it appeared huge) poked its head out from amongst the leafy green leaves and Dad automatically raised his rifle, aimed and shot the snake in the head. As it fell to the ground, I rushed over and stood behind my Dad looking at the snake still wriggling and writhing in its death throes.

The snake called condosteri was considered deadly in the region and on reflection I wonder whether it was considered deadly in the absence of any snake anti venom. Ever since that time, I have never been afraid of reptiles, especially snakes, but I must add I respected their space and always when possible avoided them in order not to antagonise them into becoming aggressive because they felt threatened.

Having stated the above it should not come as a surprise to the many encounters one would have whilst serving in the Australian Defence Force. For those who have been in the jungles, the deserts, the sea, mountains and in whatever other environment whether in Australia or overseas, I am sure everyone would have a snake tale to tell. All the following snake tales may appear tall but the long and the short of it is that they are all true. Each one is comical to say the least as fear was the last thing from our minds at the time. It is also an indication of how well we were trained and what precautionary measure we were trained in to prevent and to administer first aid regarding snakes with emphasis on the Taipan of far North Queensland.

Jungle Fighting pits. We were in our fighting pits, deep underground facing the enemy so to speak, whoever they may have been at the time and behind us in another fighting pit in defence were two Battle Instructors. (Time unfortunately has ravaged my memory and I have forgotten their correct titles) While darkness began to envelope the jungle as the sun went down over the jungle canopy, the noises of the night jungle took on their own rhythm and blues. We could hardly see twenty metre in front of us if we were lucky. Fingers on the safety catch, rifles pointed forward, wearing our basic webbing while our big pack was tucked in the back of our sleeping bays, we watched and stared at then inky blackness, waiting, waiting and more waiting. If you watch long enough, your eyes can play tricks with you and you can see imaginary objects move that is until you get your night vision.

All of a sudden huge loud bangs could be heard near our pits exploding one after the other and they appeared to be getting closer and closer. The night light began to become day again after clusters of flares were sent up in front of our fighting pits in order to give us the visibility in front of us and to observe any moving targets and shot according to rules of engagement. So much for our hard earned night vision. More whiz bangs were thrown around by the Battle Instructors creating an environment that was designed to confuse and redefine the moment similar to real life two way firing range and to harden us and get use to battle noises. That was fine, we could handle that, except when one of the Battle Instructors thought it would be a good joke to throw a "whiz bang cracker grenade" into our fighting pit. All that I could remember was a huge flash, losing sight my eyesight for a while but still standing to, with my finger on the safety catch. I yelled out some profanities that the whiz bang had landed in our weapon firing pit and that we could not see. I was not a happy bloke and I could not give a shit if the bloke who threw it was an NCO or an Officer. (Fuck wit came to mind)

After a short while our vision returned, by placing water on our sweat towel and dabbing it on our faces. I turned around and called the Battle Instructors Fuck'n idiots and didn't give a shit whether I was charged or not. When I had looked back in the direction of the two Battle Instructors I noticed through the light of the flares that they had been standing behind their weapon pit throwing the Whiz bangs to simulate mortars, grenades, bombs and other fragmentation ordinance.

At that very moment a Senior Instructor came up and ordered those two to jump into their pit and join the rest of us poor mortals who wearing the brunt of the whiz bangs. Well, well, God is a much benevolent being and karma at its best. When these two blokes jumped into the pit, they found that they had jumped onto a snake and they reason they knew it was a snake was by the thrashing and wriggling around their boots. Never in my life have I ever seen two blokes jump up in the air so quickly and scramble out of the pit.

That night those two Battle Instructor blokes were the only two in the whole battalion to sleep under the stars while their equipment lay at the bottom of the fighting pit. Our section I am sure must have prayed for rain that night so that the two bastard Battle Instructors got what they deserved. After all does it not rain in the morning when you are operating during the monsoon season? Our prayers were answered the next day, when the normal shower of rain came and we undertook pit maintenance, the two sheepish Battle Instructors came back to their fighting pit to find a two metre Taipan curled up amongst their equipment. How they got their equipment back and how they got rid of the Taipan is anybody's guess because we did not help them. The long and short of it all was that we had something to laugh about for a change.

On patrol at High Range. Eddie "Jock" Bryson, my mate in 1 RAR and I were on a patrol somewhere on the High Range, North of Townsville. It was a very hot and humid day and we were all exhausted from the incessant patrolling throughout the day. As we were emerging from the jungle we came across a track that appeared to have animal tracks and the faeces of small animals. The track itself was an extension of the jungle track except that it was over open ground of no more than thirty metres. Tactics dictated how we crossed it and in true form, one behind the other at interval with our arcs of fire covering both side of the clearing. In other words, each man in the section pointed his rifle in the opposite direction to the man in front, watching their arcs of fire. This was normal stuff and we moved according to the silent signals from the Section Commander. No problems crossing the open space at all.

My time with 1 RAR will forever be my first family Battalion where I met and trained with some wonderful blokes whose names escape me but their memories live on with me. Noggie Norris, Ron Thompson, Mark Stephens, Craig Youll, Mick Olsen, Graham Tucker, Dennis Dyce, John Arena, Ron Lovelock, Andy Pring, Jock Bryson, Greg Pike, Jock Smith, Barry French, John McCausland, Mick Strong, Richo, blokes from the Black watch, the Irish Guards (from Hong Kong), Warren Payne, Big Macca, Bill Davern, Bond, Bolitho, John Chislett, Peter, Bob, and many many others. How I wish I could remember their names. They all deserve a mention for if it was not for them life would not have been the family Battalion we all cherished and stood by each other when needed. "Duty First" really meant something in our day and I do hope the same bond and spirit is to be found in our brothers in arms of today.

As we were nearing the other side, one bloke called out snake and every bloke instantly jumped to their left, maybe out of fear, confusion, not knowing where the snake was and who knows maybe all three together. This was a reaction by most of us without realising why we went to the left, except for one poor bastard who jumped to the right and stood on the bloody snake. The snake recoiled back at him and struck at his General Purpose (GP) boots in one strike after another, before slithering away, probably in disgust at not having penetrated the GP boots. Suffice to say, the bloke was in shock until we inspected his boots and his legs to ensure the bite did not go through to his flesh. In the end we all started laughing at his expense which what we did anyway and the bloke that got bitten laughed along with us. Whether the snake was laughing or not we will not know but what I can tell you is that he must have found it hard to capture his future prey with only one tooth. The other had become embedded in the blokes boot.

Bribie Island. Our company had gone to Bribie island for a training exercise which was a far cry from the jungles that we had been used to. I was still in A Coy after returning back to Australia from Singapore and Malaya and Bribie Island even in our day was known to be a tourist haven and a place for families to go on weekends and spend an idyllic time with each other. During our time on the island we practiced our battle skills in patrolling, survival skills, navigation, weapons, first aid, hygiene and numerous other skills known to the infantryman.

At the cessation of our training it would be considered non tactical and as a result we would sit around in our sections on the beach with each section lighting their fires. In our particular section we had caught a couple of snakes and we were cooking them on over the coals in the fire we had made on the sand near the beach. A few of us had decided it was time we ate snake to find out what it was like. The snakes we had caught were approximately two and three metres long and the thickness of a small wrist.

As the coals were dying down, other wood would be put on the fire to keep the fire alight. The wood would be gathered from amongst the fallen trees, huge bushes that skirted the shore of the beach and in any case we did not have to go far and there were bushes lining the seashore which gave us some shelter from the ocean breeze. We skinned the snakes and began eating them, being careful to have removed the head first before tackling the rest of the body. I must say that my first taste was not what I expected. Some would say it would taste like chicken, others would admit to it being fishy and chewy and a few would admit it to being tough on the palate. As for me, I could not give a shit, I was starving and I wanted to eat meat if that is what it was called. I would say it was somewhat dry, chewie with a rancid smell but altogether edible and yes a tinge of chicken taste to boot.

My favourite wild food was frog's legs. I had tasted frog legs on Langkawi Island in Malaya during an introduction to survival training by the local tribesman. Talking about frogs, I was known to bite on cane toads when I was drunk whilst a young digger in 1 RAR just to prove I could do it. I was but a stupid bastard in those days. Dog shit sandwich was another past time to prove to one another how tough we were and why I did not fall ill is anyone's guess. I can only believe that the grog neutralised the dog shit. Yes life was tough, but we were amongst men who had seen the terrors of war and we who had not tried to emulate them. I realise that what I am writing appears farfetched but what I have written is mild compared to the antics of others who were in my eyes tough soldiers. Looking back upon those years, I wondered whether I would have done the same with the wisdom of today. Today people would think we were animals, but life was not easy and you had to be tough on yourself in order to survive.

Back to our snake tale, while we were eating the snake meat, one of the blokes asked me to grab some more wood and throw it on the fire. As the area was strewn with twigs and some broken branches it was not hard to reach out and grab a branch and drag it through the scrub. I grabbed this dark branch which felt soft and damp which I thought was wet and began pulling it towards the fire. The branch began to move away from me and it was by sheer luck that I realised that I had grabbed a huge black or dark coloured snake. Well I may have had no fear of snakes, but I was certainly no fool when it came to meeting face to face with a bloody snake, especially one that size. I let go of the bastard and ran to the other side of the fire watching it slither away into another direction. The blokes later would later laugh at me saying that it was only a bloody rock python. I could not care what it was, a snake was a snake and I would always pay respect to it defending itself. To date, despite seeing many snakes in my time, I can never tell the difference and always gave them a wide berth and the respect they deserved.

Killing a snake with a snake stick. This time we would find ourselves somewhere in Winton North of Charleville in West Queensland where the heat flies intermingled with the sweat upon our bodies. It was here that some of the old hands who had gone to Vietnam would catch up with the legendary Hans Fleur. Hans was by now a lieutenant and had come over to our company to see his old mates. I remember well his boyish looks, tough granite face with a smile on from one ear to another grinning as he spoke with his mates who were either NCO's, or SNCO's and talking to them as mates do. We were still young diggers then and had not long been back from Singapore Malaya, but even we had heard of Hans Fleur.

He was a legend even to us. Sad to say, many years later how would I know that Dave Piggott and I along with many others be attending Hans's funeral in Victoria. Back at our section there had been a lull in the training but we still tactical and lying flat on our stomach amongst the high grass looking towards our front. It was an extremely hot day and those who have been to Winton will know what I am talking about.

During the day we had practice numerous skills, especially jumping on and jumping off our trucks that were used to ferry us from one point to another. After all 6 RAR had been redesignated as the Motorised Battalion and we as good little soldiers just did what we were told. Our water bottles would be replenished daily by the water trucks being brought in by the Company Quarter Master and his side kicks. They would also bring in fresh food. Someone in their right mind (probably a boffin – nutritionist – scientist) came to the conclusion that our battle rations had to be supplemented by fresh rations. Along with fresh food we were now told that we had to drink water and not conserve it like we had been trained to do in the early years. So much for our training, one minute we were conserving our water training in the jungles and now in a different type of environment we are being told to drink water as much as we could to prevent sunstroke and dehydration. I am now going to blame the Army for putting on weight.

Digression is sometimes great but it can be boring if it happens consistently. As we were lying on the ground, a snake slithered in front of us meaning us no harm nor giving any signs of it being aggressive towards us. We were mesmerised by its beauty and stealth as it slithered along its body towards who knows, may be its intended prey we guessed. As it made a wide circle we could still safely observe through patches and tufts of the long tall grass, the body of the snake. Without us becoming aware of it and/or realising our proximity to the snake, we had underestimated how quickly it could move. It appeared to be heading towards our position, not mine of course but to some blokes adjacent to us.

As the snake slithered closer, one bloke was heard to say grab a dead branch and hit it out of the way. Well one enterprising you bloke got on his knee grabbed a “dead stick” and began flailing the snake in front of him to steer it to another direction. We looked on horrified as the bloke kept hitting or what appeared to be hitting the snake with a “floppy dead stick”. We noticed that the “dead stick” was not dead at all but another snake. I don’t know whether readers would believe me but unfortunately the tale is true. I am still chuckling years later.

How long the bloke kept hitting the other snake I don’t know, but what I do know is that the bloke who had the “dead stick” in his hand did not lose his cool other than to let out a yell and throw the “dead stick” metres away in front of him. As for the original snake, I cannot remember if it slithered away in disgust at probably losing its prey which was the other snake or left because it was afraid of being hit again. Some will accuse me of telling tall snake tales like the fishermen of old who would tell of the big fish that got away, but the story is true.

Bitten on patrol and First Aid. During our training we would often hear of blokes getting bitten by Taipans in the jungles of Queensland and being choppered out quick smart and flown to the nearest hospital. This quick action on the part of our medics, platoon staff and the Army chopper pilots gave us the confidence in our system that no matter whatever happened we would be in a hospital with two hours at the most. It was a comforting thought to say the least. In those days it depended upon which hospital was the nearest to our training region, Cairns, Katherine, Rockhampton, Penang, Brisbane, Port Moresby, Singapore, Lae, Sembawang, Perth, Townsville, Darwin, Sydney, Wagga Wagga, whatever the case, we as soldiers were in good hands.

I remember one bloke who was bitten by a Taipan while we were patrolling in the jungle. The company medic whose name escapes me applied first aid, the chopper was called for, using our 77 radio sets, a chopper coming to the pre-arranged rendezvous point and we as a platoon would act as relieving stretcher bearers until we reached the dust off location. Gone were the Wild West days of cutting the snake bite and sucking out the poison. That was an old remedy that ended in death for the man bitten and the man applying the first aid. In most cases the man applying the first aid may have had rotten or poor teeth and the snake poison got into his system. During our basic training and subsequently our Initial employment Training we were taught to apply a tourniquet. This method also lost favour with the medics and a new system of immobilising the bitten area with splints and tying the splints to ensure less movement slowing the venom from reaching the heart. As far as I know the latter is still being taught as the preferred method of applying snake bite first aid.

Snake bite prevention. During our initial introduction to first aid, snake bite was the common and considered a non-battle casualty that we had to learn. Along with first aid we learnt how to identify and steer clear of known snake infested snake nest or habitats. One of the funniest training advice we were ever given was that before we went into our sleeping bags we were advised to belt our sleeping bags with a stick or our shovels to ensure no snake had slithered into the bag. We did this religiously on a nightly basis even though I was apprehensive that if a snake was in the bag, I was a goner no matter how many times I belted my sleeping bag. It was not long before I made my own mind up to leave the sleeping bag remain in my big pack until I was ready to crawl into my sleeping bag. I felt that was a better way of approaching the matter.

When we moved into our nightly harbour or our defensive position and had to dig throughout the night, we looked out and identified any likely snake habitats and reported it to the platoon staff through our Section 2IC and/or our Section Commanders. Sometimes we would find ourselves digging metres away from a known snake habitat but we had to dig our weapon pit where our Platoon Commander or Platoon Sergeant advised us. It was up to us to monitor the snakes and to ensure that they did not slither toward us which they sometimes did in search of prey at night.

Snakes in general. Throughout my Army career, snakes were just that, snakes and not to be feared. I would often take my sons down to Beech Forest, a jungle type of setting that was inland from Apollo Bay in South West Victoria. I would teach my sons the basics of survival in the bush and/or jungle settings and how to make the jungle your own by not being afraid and to respect the creatures no matter who they were. Whenever we came across snakes, I taught the boys not to be afraid but to respect them and to avoid them if at all possible. I must say I have wonderful memories of our training in Beech Forest.

Beech Forest was also a place where I would train soldiers and conduct survival training with my old mate Peter Hatherley who was then the Adjutant of Deakin University Company. I may have been the Chief Clerk but I had learned my survival skills well as an infantry man during my time with 1 RAR and 6 RAR, enhancing those survival skills during my time with the Reserve battalions. I remember when posted to West Australia, we conducted a training exercise on Rottenest Island under the leadership of Major Nick Norris who was later to die along with his grandchildren in that ill-fated downing of the Malaysian MH17 aircraft over the Ukraine many years later. As we were sailing across to the island in the Army water craft, I peered down into the water and what did I see but a bloody snake. It was swimming alongside us and I wondered whether it had lost its way and heading out to an ocean where there was no return or was it truly a sea snake that knew exactly where it was going. I wrote this because I found it unusual at the time.

Another time when I was undergoing leadership training for Sergeant at the Infantry Centre located at Singleton. (Infantry centre had been relocated from Ingleburn), I was fortunate to come across a visiting American Ranger who was posted to the Infantry Centre as an instructor. He also was also instrumental in demonstrating to us his skills as a Ranger (Master Sergeant) which were similar but somewhat different to our training methods. His name was Dave Dalton. Suffice to say he and I over the years kept in touch until we lost contact some years ago. A top bloke and well respected by his peers.

We had all but completed our training and taking time out from the last phases of training being the Bush phase where each NCO was required to lead a patrol and selected members would be required to conduct the ambush. Suffice to say, we all passed and I will add that although I was selected to conduct the Ambush, I could not have done it without the help of mates. The only reason I was selected was because my plan differed from everyone else. I had got the idea from my father who shared with me some his battle tactics during the Greek Civil War and I must say in my case it worked.

I chose to fire against the sides of the hill instead of firing from the heights with the flares facing the hill thus dazzling the enemy. I remember well Dennis Dyce who was now with SASR getting down to business and creating the mud map and taking directions as were the others during the Ambush briefing. I said to myself that Dennis, who I had not seen since 1 RAR was destined to go places. From what I heard, he did well.

To cut a long story short. The ambush was a success and everyone passed with flying colours. I was recommended to return back to the Regimental stream, but the powers did not want to lose all the training I had been given as an administrator and it was never meant to be. What has the above to do with snakes? Nothing except that straight after our bush phase we all headed towards a nearby river hole which had a waterfall and everyone jumped in to cleanse themselves. I was no exception. As I came out and began to dry myself, I noticed this large and very long snake making its way towards the swimming where the rest of the blokes were. I shouted out a number of times snake, snake. But all I got was laughter and bullshit Pete. Well I kept on pointing to the snake and still yelling snake as the snake slid into the water and swam towards the blokes. There was nothing I could do. The blokes must have realised that I was not pulling the wool over their eyes or bullshitting for they all came out and saw with their own eyes the snake. Not much of a snake story but it's true, so there you have it.

I remember my mate Bonnie Wasiu, from Thursday Island, (Now deceased) a real tough bastard and great in the jungle run from a green snake which was harmless. I wondered whether it was a cultural ting or was Bonnie really concerned about snakes. I have seen a number of Tiger snakes in Victoria and some very close to our married quarters at Macleod which was adjacent to Watsonia Barracks. I used to worry about my four boys playing amongst the dense trees and foliage which also had a small lagoon and who knows what reptiles if any were harbouring in the undergrowth. Still my boys turned out fine and I guess some my training may have rubbed off on them.

I enjoyed survival training that much that I had made it into a hobby and wrote a brief book on urban warfare and survival skills when I was posted to 8/7 RVR and I believe that Pup Elliot, another good bloke (Adjutant) sent it up the line. It was at 8/7 RVR that I met again with Warren Payne and Mark Stephens (both ex 1 RAR). Bill Yank Akell (ex D Coy and Long Tan veteran) who I first met in 6 RAR Singapore had also been posted to the unit as the Quartermaster. Together with Peter Vesely, (who rose to the rank of Captain), Kevin, Rocky McKelvie, Geoff Hallam, PRC Smith, Paul Pricket, Dave Lewin and many others whose names who I have now forgotten. We were first led by an ex SASR CO and ex 5/7 RAR CO whose name escapes me; followed by Lieutenant Colonel Doug Ball (rose to the rank of Brigadier and my boss again in later years) who put the Battalion back onto the map so to speak.

Doug Ball had the right sort of leadership that we as the Australian Regular Army Cadre staff could work well together and cohesively to become a very strong and united reserve Battalion. Our Commanding Officer was awarded a medal who I must say displayed it to us, saying that the medal belonged to all of us. The Battalion under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Doug Ball and Warren Payne the RSM did well during exercise Kangaroo 89 at Katherine in the Northern territory. Not to forget Dave Lewin who was the senior ARA member who was an inspiration to the men and the families. As for Exercise Kangaroo 89 in Katherine, there are plenty of snakes up there I can tell you. The deadliest and most venomous snake of all, the deadly Taipan.

The last survival training I conducted was while I was with 5/6RVR and that was also in the South west of Victoria. Although we saw many snakes in the wild, I would only speak about skinning, cooking, eating and keeping the skin as a resource. All other survival skills and techniques were more about wild food and making of snares. Other matters I can remember from that exercise is hiding a note under a rock on top of a mountain promising the finder a carton of beer if found. I confess when more than ten years later the note was found I failed to keep my end of the bargain. The other was my astonishment at finding that Victoria had some many wild goats roaming the countryside. I was able to obtain the horns and skull of a huge wild goat which is now hanging somewhere at home. I wish I could mention the names of many other mates for the sake of recording their names but as I have written on many occasion, times has ravaged the mind. So much for snake tales.

As always, apologies to purists for my poor grammar and savagery of the English language. I wish you all well and hope that this article does not cause ambiguity in the minds of those who read it.



Peter Adamis is a Journalist/Social Media Commentator and writer. He is a retired Australian military serviceman and an Industry organisational & Occupational (OHS) & Training Consultant whose interests are within the parameters of domestic and international political spectrum. He is an avid blogger and contributes to domestic and international community news media outlets as well as to local and Ethnic News. He holds a Bachelor of Adult Learning & Development (Monash), Grad Dip Occupational Health & Safety, (Monash), Dip. Training & Assessment, Dip Public Administration, and Dip Frontline Management. Contact via Email: abalinx@netspace.net.au