



WILLIAM JAMES CUNNEEN

Adrian d'Hagé 7 January 2017

Today we farewell 25597 William James Cunneen, and in doing so we might note a service number with just five digits. For fifty years, 'Billy' as he was affectionately known, dedicated his life to his country.

Fifty years of truly outstanding – indeed unparalleled service in infantry, in the corps of Public Relations and in the wider Australian Defence Force.

I first heard of Billy Cunneen when I entered the Royal Military College in 1964. Back then, Billy was already widely known throughout the Australian military as one of, if not the best of our combat photographers. I thought I went back a bit, but when Billy joined in 1949. I was 3, and for the younger members of Public Relations farewelling Billy today, your parents had not yet met.

Bill was born in 1933, and as a teenager, he quickly became enamoured with amateur photography. I have not been able to determine the family's reaction at their home in Willoughby to Billy commandeering the bathroom for use as a dark room, but perhaps his brother Chris can shed some light on that after the service. But Billy was also attracted to all things military, and if we do the math – for someone born in 1933, and joining up in 1949, I suspect there might have been some creativity on Billy's part as to his date of birth.

Billy first saw combat as an infantryman in 3RAR in Korea in 1952, and I gather the severe winter of that year ensured he would never take up skiing. But during his time with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan, he further developed and refined his love of photography.

This led to a transfer to Army Public Relations, and the beginning of a long and distinguished career as a combat photographer – it's a calling that has its genesis in the likes of our World War II photographer, Damien Parer, who was killed by Japanese machine gun fire on an island of Palau, and Neil Davis of one crowded hour fame – 'sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife, throughout the sensual world proclaim, one crowded hour of glorious life, is worth an age without a name.'

We would be here for a very long time, if I were to detail Billy's service record, but as well as serving with the British occupation force in Japan and 3RAR in Korea where he earned his infantry combat badge, Billy served on operations with the 1st and 3rd Battalions during the Malayan Emergency and in Borneo during Confrontation between Indonesia and what was then Malaya.

In 1965 he commenced a series of special service deployments to Kuching, Sarawak, Brunei, Terendak, and Jesselton. On return to Australia, ever with his hand up, Bill deployed almost immediately to Saigon where he joined the headquarters of Australian army forces in Vietnam from whence he was detached to 1RAR. At Biên Hòa his brilliant photographic coverage provided a unique window into the 1st Battalion's tour.

Later that year he was detached again, this time to work with the newly arrived 6 RAR at Nui Dat. When that Battalion's D Coy was pitted against an overwhelming force at the Battle of Long Tan, the next morning, in true Billy Cunneen style, he managed to get himself on one of the first Hueys into the rubber plantation. His now famous series of photographs were featured in last year's 50th Anniversary of the battle, just one of many testimonies to the longevity, and value of his highly professional work. After returning to Australia, he deployed again to Singapore, and then again to Vietnam, where he stayed for back-to-back tours.

In all, Bill was on active duty in Vietnam for 907 days. During his time in uniform, Bill spent more than 10 years on active service in multiple theatres of war around the world – a record that would be rarely matched – then or now. On his retirement in 1982 as a WO2 – then the highest NCO rank you could reach in PR, Bill took up duties as a defence civilian at the RAAF's operational command headquarters at Glenbrook where he was given an honorary rank of FLT LT. but as he never wore uniform, this was not widely known. On the one ceremonial occasion where he was required to put it on, the RAAF brass at Glenbrook were astonished to find this FLT LT coming toward them wearing five rows of medal ribbons.

Today, as the digital age gathers ever more momentum, there are pros and cons to portals like Facebook and Twitter, but in the past week, those who have frequented these arenas could not fail to be impressed with the outpouring of admiration for Billy Cunneen. For those of us who have served in the military, when we think back to the days when we first enlisted, on day one, the military can appear to be a very daunting challenge. In recent days, many officers and NCO's, have posted their gratitude over the way in which Billy took them under his wing and showed them the ropes.

One of the many qualities of this fine combat cameraman that has been elucidated on the pages of Facebook was his absolute professionalism and dedication to getting the right shot, often to the frustration of section, platoon, company and Battalion commanders alike – frustrations that Billy studiously ignored.

Dick Palk, whom many of you will know, is just one of those to express his admiration and gratitude –and I'm paraphrasing: "in the time honoured tradition of the service, Bill would take – in my case, a young captain under his wing and teach us a thing or two about Army Public Relations and how to do the job properly!" As to getting the right shot, as a young PR officer in the early eighties in Brisbane, Captain Palk accompanied Warrant Officer Cunneen on a landing craft with a platoon of soldiers from my old battalion, 6RAR, on what was meant to be a day long amphibious training exercise on Moreton Bay.

Bill's task was to photograph the infantrymen storming off the craft on to a small deserted island that was actually not much more than a sandbar. Bill insisted, as only Bill could, on multiple takes with the craft's ramp down for each shoot. Bill took so many takes before he was satisfied, that no-one noticed the tide had gone out and the heavy landing craft was stuck fast. Nor did they possess any night time navigation equipment for the midnight tide. With no rations, and only the clothes they were in, they were there until well into the following day.

It was pre-mobile phones, and on shore, the local gendarmerie were dealing with calls from distraught families about their loved ones lost at sea. Bill's photograph however, ran on page 1 of the courier mail, and in the Macquarie book of events for 1983, you will find that same photograph illustrating the chapter dedicated to the army. Ever the professional, for Bill, the quality of the shot was all that mattered.

Indeed, when I first arrived in Public Relations, the digital revolution was in its infancy and film photography still reigned supreme. On operations, it was quite common for Bill to chew up two entire rolls of film on a single 'home boy' shot. I can remember remarking to Billy at the time, that when he eventually retired, I was convinced that the underspend in Defence photography would finally enable us to fix our submarines.

Over the past fifty years, there has barely been an operation, exercise or military event that has not been covered by Billy Cunneen. When he was covering one of the Duke of Gloucester cups, which is a rigorous military competition to determine our champion battalion of the year, in order to get the right shot, and to the bewilderment of competition control, Bill was last seen, cameras festooned around his neck, charging into a cloud of tear gas.

On Kangaroo 92, which was conducted in the top end that year, Billy Cunneen was attached to the media support unit under the command of Ms Lisa Keen, a dedicated Defence PR civilian who has also deployed on active service, and I would like to publicly thank Lisa for her untiring support for Billy in his later years. Lisa has many admirable qualities, but getting up before dawn is not one of them.

On kangaroo 92, Billy had been assigned to the maritime field team, covering the Navy, and in the early part of the exercise, the Navy's role was fairly quiet, only scheduled to ramp up in the second half. As Lisa puts it – try telling that to Billy Cunneen, champing at the bit to cover some action. Early in the exercise, Lisa had been up for most of one night editing footage with the chicken stranglers – an affectionate term we use for our special forces. She had just got to sleep on her stretcher outside the van when in the pre-dawn hours, Billy executed a crash halt and saluted.

After levitating a metre from her stretcher and fighting her way through her mozzie net, Lisa was confronted by Billy, dressed for action. "Bill Cunneen, Ma'am. Maritime field photographer, reporting for duty Ma'am, awaiting your orders for the assignments you have planned for me today. Ma'am.'

Lisa's response was ... colourful ... and included an even more colourful declaration relating to the necessity of coffee before she could function, let alone issue assignments, whereupon Bill disappeared back into the darkness. The next morning Lisa was again woken in the pre-dawn by the big PR 5KVA generator starting up. Vaguely thinking that material had come in that obviously required immediate transmission, she went back to sleep – only to be woken again 20 minutes later by the smell of freshly percolated coffee and Billy performing another crash halt and salute.

Our intrepid combat cameraman had gone into Darwin and purchased a professional 8-cup electric coffee percolator. From that day on, Lisa had Billy's assignments ready - at any hour of the day or night.

Strangely, a perusal of Billy's voluminous service record also reveals that 2 years before his retirement as a PR WO2, he successfully volunteered for a course at Puckapunyal on testing leopard tank equipment. The record does not show what the attraction at Puckapunyal was, or why he was successful in getting on the course, and I can only conclude that somewhere, a hard-pressed commanding officer sought to avoid the stranding of another landing craft on a Moreton Bay sandbar.

Time does not permit me to go into the technicalities of Billy's equipment, even if I understood it. Suffice to say, it was always the best and meticulously maintained. Such was his professionalism, he bought most of it himself so it was a cut above what was issued. The anecdotes are legion, but I will conclude with one that I was involved in on ANZAC Day in Canberra. The PR team, quite rightly, had decided they would march as a group, and as their commander, they asked me to lead them.

But Public Relations, as critical as it might be to a whole range of issues, including keeping the public informed and boosting morale, is somewhat down the pecking order in the seniority of Corps that runs armoured, artillery, engineers, signals, infantry and so on - and the military can be quite picky about this sort of stuff. As one of the more junior corps, on that ANZAC Day, we were last but one in the entire march. But this small, smartly turned out band of brothers and sisters was also one of the most decorated and beribboned - we had Billy Cunneen with us.

PR had never marched together before, and I am reliably informed that the Chief of the Defence Force of the day nudged the Governor General, drawing his attention to what was coming up the road. As we swung past the saluting dais in front of the national war memorial and I gave the eyes right, I winked at the Governor General and the CDF. When Billy Cunneen was marching with you, you could get away with that sort of thing.

25597 William James Cunneen. For fifty years his shutter recorded the actions and sacrifices of legions of Australian servicemen and women. It is a legacy that will remain part of Australian military history forever. Modest to the core, and a true gentleman, he was one of the finest combat cameramen this country has ever produced. 'Sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife, throughout the sensual world proclaim, one crowded hour of glorious life, is worth an age without a name.'

Vale Billy Cunneen, you will be sorely missed, but never forgotten.



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Today we farewelled one of the finest combat cameramen this country has ever produced - 25597 William 'Billy' Cunneen. He served for 50 (!) years, which included Korea, Malaya, Borneo and 907 days in Vietnam. One of the first into the aftermath of Long Tan, his coverage of the courage and sacrifice of legions of servicemen and women is legendary. My words, however inadequate, on this outstanding man, appear above.