

2014 Premier's ANZAC Spirit School Prize

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LOXTON HIGH SCHOOL



MICHAEL FRANCIS WOOSNAM

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Defining the ANZAC spirit. It's beyond the comprehension of most and more than any words can depict. I believe it's the courage to fight for your beliefs, even if it means venturing into the unknown. It's the will to achieve, the strength to carry on and honouring the bond of mateship, no matter how dire the circumstances. It's these traits, these qualities that have secured our freedom and provided us with the sanctuary and opportunity we share as a nation today. The ANZAC Spirit is the unique bond shared between the Australian and New Zealand soldiers, who fought so valiantly for our country and our freedom, side by side. It is what links the modern day soldier to the soldiers of the past.

Michael Woosnam was born on November 16, 1944. His father Francis was away fighting in the Second World War at the time and his mother Daphne was from Loxton, South Australia. Michael's childhood was one of a typical rural boy. Hunting and shooting rabbits, playing sport and

working on the farm after school with his father. He attended Alawoona Primary School and Loxton Area High School.

In 1963, Michael was eighteen when he travelled to Keswick, Adelaide to enlist in the Army. Shipped off to recruit training at Kapooka, he underwent 3 months of intensive training before continuing onto the rigorous core training. Michael enlisted because he was "in a hurry to see things" and was seeking a life of adventure away from rural Loxton. Growing up listening to the stories of his forebears who had also served, Michael was intrigued.

The ANZAC Spirit was exemplified when the first, second and third battalions had a brawl on the train heading to Woodside. Upon arrival, they were trucked to Woodside and marched onto the parade grounds nursing bruises and black eyes, each wearing his respective battalion lanyard. Paddy Brennan, the Regimental Sergeant Major walked along each rank and symbolically ripped off the lanyards. "There is no one battalion, two battalion, three battalion in MY battalion," he stated. "This is the 4th battalion." The scarlet lanyards were doled out and the 4th battalion was born.

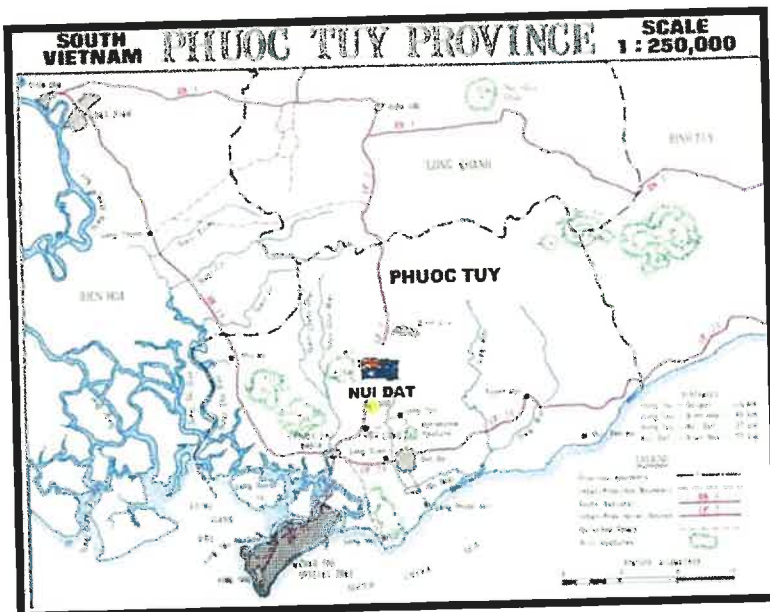
Michael Woosnam was a member of this 4th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (4RAR) which was raised on February 1st, 1964 in Woodside, South Australia. This was the first regular infantry battalion raised on Australian soil and they initially spent time serving in Malaya and Borneo.

The Vietnam War was sparked by America answering South Vietnam's call for assistance to defend against the North Vietnamese Army, the Viet-Cong and communism. Australia and America had a mutual commitment to support each other, and we originally sent troops only to assist with training of South Vietnamese forces and the security of American bases. However as the war progressed from defensive to offensive, Australia sent more infantry battalions, this also allowed for rotation. Meanwhile, the anti-war movement which began in America was gathering momentum in Australia and controversy ignited. The Australian government was afraid that if Australia didn't help South Vietnam thwart communism, it would extend to our shores.

After serving as part of the Far East Strategic Reserve in Malaysia from the August of 1965 to the September of 1967, Michael and the 4th battalion returned to Australia to prepare for Vietnam. The conditions in Vietnam were overpowering. Suffocating humidity, overwhelming heat and thick red mud clung to the soldiers. On June 1st 1968, the 4th Battalion relieved the 2nd Battalion (2RAR), based at Nui Dat, located in the Phuoc Tuy province (since renamed the Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province). Michael's battalion operated principally in the Phuoc Tuy province, constantly patrolling and

undertaking various operations. The region was one of the few provinces in South Vietnam that was considered 'dominant' at the time.

The 4th battalion became known as the ANZAC company due to two New Zealand companies, Whiskey and Victor joining Alpha, Beta, Charlie and Delta. The new additions made the battalion a very large one and they "integrated in a true ANZAC way – completing routine operations together and fighting side by side" explained Michael.



The battalion's first tour of South Vietnam was of 12 months duration throughout 1968 and 1969. Michael and the 4RAR took part in 11 major operations and spent 270 days functioning as a team in the field. During that first tour, 19 men were lost in action, 84 were wounded and more than 300 of the enemy dead. In June of 1969, the Battalion returned to Brisbane and prepared for their second tour of South Vietnam which would take place in 1971.

Their second tour of South Vietnam was intense and hectic. From June through December 1971, the battalion continuously engaged in staging ambushes, patrolling and attacking the adversary and their supplies. 9 soldiers were killed in action, 38 were wounded and over 91 of the enemy dead. In December 1971, Michael and the 4th Battalion came home.

For Australian troops returning home, it was an ordeal unlike that of any previous war. Rather than being shown the respect they deserved and being treated like heroes, they were shunned by their own country and burdened with a blame that was not theirs to carry. "The protest movement and

politics was the most disappointing thing” Michael says of his homecoming. He says that whilst serving, they figured that most of them weren’t fighting for their country anymore, they weren’t fighting for their people, they were fighting for each other, to look after each other. Most felt they had been betrayed by their country. Michael flew home on a Qantas jet and upon arrival at Sydney airport, was taxied to a separate shed, away from the main airport. He was instructed to change from his jungle greens to civilian clothes, given twenty dollars, his discharge, a medical examination and an x-ray – nothing else. He was left to deal with the trauma he had suffered on his own.

The war had a significant effect on Michael. He acknowledges that even though he didn’t understand it at the time, his demeanour had changed, his personality tainted. “Those who have seen war basically see it all the time. You can’t wash it away, it stays with you. After a while you learn to live with it. Putting it aside can be very difficult.”

I asked Michael Woosnam if he believes he experienced the ANZAC Spirit during and since his time serving. He revealed he had reflected on it a lot and believes the ANZAC Spirit was “even more magnified in the Vietnam War” because “after a time, they felt quite isolated” which was a direct result of so much happening back home in Australia concerning the politics shrouding the war. He believes the ANZAC Spirit is an exclusive connection he shares with those he served with, that he feels linked to them no matter how far apart they are or for how long, that when they reunite every two years, it is as though only a moment has passed since they were last together. “I’ve tried to explain it to people... it’s a



unique bond that only belongs to people who have served, particularly those who have seen active service. I can’t describe it and most people, civilians, will never experience it.” Michael and the 4th battalion truly exemplified every aspect of the ANZAC Spirit.

I cannot begin to comprehend how arduous Michael’s experience must have been. Ploughing through thick, all-consuming jungle, the terror of being shot at, the tension of ambushes and the strain of the physical stamina required to fight under these horrendous conditions. Those boys and men showed inspirational courage, resilience and determination, all ANZAC qualities. They endured not only intense days of fierce combat and volatility, but extensive hours of boredom and monotony, seeing and experiencing only haunting jungle. When reflecting on their circumstances, I appreciate how they became more than people fighting on the same side, wearing the same uniform; they became brothers and bonded for life.

Michael imparted anecdotes of survival and brotherhood, exotic tales of encounters with foreign species and remarkable injuries that border on comedic. I am honoured that Michael shared his

story with me and privileged to be given the opportunity to research his experiences. It has nurtured my immense respect for all the brave men and women who nobly fought for our country and freedom.

The ANZAC Spirit is something that you and I can revere, respect and honour through dawn services, memorials and in the way we live our lives. That spirit, woven through Michael's nostalgic descriptions, has carried soldiers through circumstances that we as civilians will never truly fathom. However you define it, the ANZAC spirit is alive and well. Maybe we can't see or touch it, but I feel I witnessed a glimmer of this remarkable bond that is frozen in time, impermeable by the passing years. It was there in Michael's story, a glimpse of the extraordinary spirit of a brotherhood fighting side by side, past, present and future.

By Annabel O'Malley



*"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother."*

Shakespeare's *Henry V*, 1598

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