

Family Honours Indigenous Aussie Vietnam Vet Victor Simon
Di Campisi: Daily Telegraph August 15, 2020 - 6:00AM

Victor Simon was one of five Indigenous soldiers who fought at Long Tan, surviving the bloody encounter in 1966. But at age 74, he lost his battle with cancer five months ago. As Australia commemorates Vietnam Veteran's Day, his family want his story, and those of other Indigenous Diggers, to be remembered.

"Dear Mum and Dad, I received your letter about four days ago but went directly out on an operation. By the time you receive this letter you would have known what went wrong. I am okay but not fighting fit anymore."

It is August 1966 and Private Victor ('Vic') Simon's eardrums have just been perforated by a mine explosion during the battle of which he writes to his parents. Eighteen of the young Worimi man's fellow soldiers are dead; 24 are injured.

On August 18 Victor and 107 young and mostly inexperienced soldiers (105 Australian and three from New Zealand) held off an overwhelming enemy force estimated at more than 2000 battle-hardened Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops in pouring rain in a rubber plantation at Long Tan 4km from the Task Force Headquarters at Nui Dat.

The battle lasted about four hours and was one of the most savage and decisive engagements of the Vietnam War.

One of five Indigenous soldiers who fought at Long Tan, Victor survived the bloody encounter to eventually make his way home to Sydney, discharged as medically unfit.

Five months ago, aged 74, he lost a second fight for his life — this time against cancer. Only 10 mourners were permitted to attend his funeral, in keeping with COVID-19 social distancing restrictions. Victor's family live-streamed his service to family and friends who could not be there in person.

But as Australia commemorates Vietnam Veteran's Day and Long Tan Day on Tuesday, they want his story, and those of other Indigenous Diggers, to be remembered.

Victor was just 20 when he signed up to the army to fight in Vietnam.

Born in Taree to Toki and Joyce Simon in 1945, he was raised on the Tobwabba Reserve in Forster by his parents and his grandparents — 'Ma' Tilly Simon and Robert 'Barney' Simon.

The family came to live in Sydney in the early 1950s, firstly near Hyde Park, then at Merrylands and finally Matraville. Victor attended Maroubra Primary School and South Sydney Boys High School.

When Victor finished school, he got a job in a printing factory but it wasn't long before he came home and announced he had joined the army.

The Simon family had a strong tradition of military service. Victor's great-uncle, William 'Nip' Simon, joined the army in 1916 aged 20 and was in the 20th Battalion/Regiment 6564, serving in France until his discharge due to illness in 1917.

Victor's father, Toki William Simon, enlisted in 1941 and was in the 2/3rd Battalion/6th Division, serving in the Middle East. One of the famed Rats of Tobruk, Toki then served in Papua New Guinea before returning to Australia in 1945.

Victor's uncle, Robert Simon (brother of Toki), joined up in 1941 and served in the 2/18th Battalion in Malaya. Captured when Singapore fell in 1942, Robert spent three and a half years as a POW in Changi.

After enlisting, Victor went to Holsworthy military barracks in southwestern Sydney, then to the army training centre of Kapooka, southwest of Wagga Wagga. Then he went to Puckapunyal training base in central Victoria before shipping out to Vietnam.

His post-battle letter tried to spare his family much of the horrors of that day.

"I saw that many VCs it wasn't funny. Our company moved out on the 18th, when we came across 12 Viet Cong. So we followed them and walked straight into a regiment of VCs. So, you can see the odds, we had near a hundred blokes and the VCs had near 1500," he wrote.

"Our two forward platoons got trapped: one of the platoons got out, but one was still trapped. Well, they sent my platoon in to get them out. We were about there, when fire came from all directions. We were surrounded and fought solid for four hours before reinforcements arrived.

"You should have heard the yells when the APCs came in with 'A' Company inside. When the VCs saw them, they pulled back. I let out a yell that could be heard back in Australia. "The next day we swept through the area, we captured a lot of weapons, all machineguns.

"We got congratulations from "Old Holt" (prime minister Harold Holt) and our general and the Yank general too. We came back to camp yesterday, and we were treated like kings. Blokes from other companies coming up shaking our hands. Last night we had free beers for two hours.

"I can go on writing about this for hours, but I don't think you want to know about it. I am glad to see camp. They'll have to cut off my arms to get me out again — I'll be holding on to that many things.

"Tomorrow we go on leave for two days in Vung Tau, all the boys in the company need it. They said that a few medals will be handed out, but you can guess who will get them ... the officers. That's enough of that.

"I received Gail's parcel and I enjoyed every one of them. Well time's going by, into my fifth month now. I'm going to Hong Kong on the September 21. My mind's not clear at the moment, I can't think of anything to write, so I'll have to say goodbye, see you in just over seven months' time. Give my best to Dad and Gail and the crowd. Vic."

Victor's good mate Pte. Paul Large, who also served in 12 Platoon, Delta Company, 6RAR in Vietnam, was one of those who never made it home.

Large had departed for Vietnam on his 21st birthday and died 10 weeks later at Long Tan, the last Australian killed in action during the final minutes of the battle.

Victor would place a poppy in memory of his mate every year at the Anzac Day service in Kensington.

When Victor was finally safe home with his family, his mother noticed strange noises in the house at times. She would find her son trying to fit into the kitchen sink. Another time she found him sleeping on the ironing board.

After his army service, he worked as a cable joiner for Sydney County Council for 30 years until his retirement.

Happiness came in 1973, when on a visit to Yarra Bay Sailing Club he met Beverley Williams, as Dharawal woman through her paternal and maternal grandmothers; Dhungutti through her maternal grandfather and Gomilaroi through her paternal grandfather.

They were married within 12 months and together for nearly 46 years during which time they had one daughter together, Victoria, and raised Beverley's two young sons Thomas and Jonathan.

In early 2020, Victor faced another brief and intense battle — with cancer.

Though it was a very difficult time for him, the devoted lifelong Rabbitohs fan was thrilled to receive a visit from superstar Latrell Mitchell in hospital the week before his passing.

Victor's granddaughter Sophie Youngberry says that in his final weeks, her grandfather was also presented with a Quilt of Valour, given to service members and veterans of the Australian Defence Forces in recognition of their sacrifice for Australia while deployed on combat operations.

"These quilts recognise the fact that those who serve in theatres of war so often return with demons. I guess my Pop's kitchen sink story demonstrates his demons to some extent," Youngberry said of her beloved grandfather who loved listening to jazz great Louis Armstrong and taught his grandkids many clever tricks, including how to win at noughts and crosses.

“Our Pop kept his mind young. His daily routine was to wake at 5am, go get his newspaper and read it from cover to cover, complete the Sudoku inside, then head off to be with his friends and have a few beers at Matraville RSL, where he served for many years on the Board. He taught us the meaning of being a kind, caring and respectful gentleman.”

*** Di Campisi is a Sydney publicist and friend of the Simon family**