

## **'There were Viet Cong everywhere': Long Tan's sole Indigenous survivor**

On the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan, NITV takes a look at the single Indigenous survivor Uncle Vic William.

Victor William Simon is a Worimi man and was born in Taree, New South Wales.

Victor's family had a strong tradition of military service. His father and uncle had both served in the Second Australian Imperial Force. His father was one of the famed Rats of Tobruk, and his uncle had spent three and a half years as a prisoner of the Japanese in Changi.

So it came with no surprise, that one day, in 1965, when Victor was walking down York Street, Sydney and saw a poster calling for volunteers that he decided to enlist.

In 1966 he was sent to Vietnam as a reinforcement for the 1st Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment. When 1RAR were relieved by 6RAR, Victor was still early in his tour of duty so he was posted to 6RAR.

Victor was serving with D Company when it fought in the battle of Long Tan on 19 August 1966. Searching for Viet Cong in the rubber plantation at Long Tan, from where mortars had fired on the base Nui Dat the previous day, the 108 soldiers of D Company were ambushed by a large enemy force, estimated to be over 2,000 strong. They held off the attack for three hours in the tropical downpour. Victor says it was an intense time with hours of solid fighting in the pouring rain.

"You didn't seem to worry about how scared you were when you were involved. I was dirty on two little instances. One Charlie was crawling along the ground and I had a couple of shots at him but I seemed to have missed him all the time. Another bloke was there with a bugle and he was giving out what to do for the Viet Cong. I had a shot at him and I only found out later why I missed him. The sight on my rifle had come undone and it was just on its last link before it fell out. When I picked it up, took my hand off the rifle, the next minute the sight's stuck in my finger – so that explained why I missed him, that's the reason. I was pretty dirty because I missed him. And I was supposed to be the platoon's marksman!" he said.

"D Company managed to hold off the attack and were greatly assisted by a timely ammunition resupply by RAAF helicopters, close fire support from artillery, and the arrival of reinforcements in APCs as night fell. The artillery was very good. Even though the shells landed pretty close to us, they saved our lives, so we were and still are very grateful for the artillery ... As I say, they were landing close and if they hadn't, we wouldn't be here."

A fond memory of his from the battle was the bravery shown by D Company Sergeant Major, Warrant Officer 2 Jack Kirby.

"I don't know how he didn't get a VC. When the ammo drop finally came, Jack stood up and collected the ammo and started distributing it. I had very little ammo myself and thought we would be done for, but Jack got the job done and without any worry or fuss. Jack was that type of soldier, it just needed doing so he done it."

When the Viet Cong withdrew at nightfall, they left behind 245 dead, but carried away many more casualties. Seventeen Australians were killed and 25 wounded, and another died of wounds several days later.

Victor survived Long Tan unscathed but was later wounded when the explosion of a Claymore mine perforated his eardrums. After ten months in Vietnam he returned to Australia to recover at Concord hospital and then spent the rest of his service based at South Head barracks.

During his time in the Army, Victor did not experience any racism, in fact he says, they were all buddies.

"There was none whatsoever and when we all went from 1st Battalion down to 6th Battalion (there was four of us) they put us in the same tent and we sort of unofficially ran the platoon. We were like self-appointed runners... we had the sly grog out and were running card games and crown and anchor – we done all that sort of thing in our tent. The rest of the guys, they knew all about that."

Victory recalls the reaction to veterans returning from Vietnam and says it took a while for people to respect what the soldiers did for our country.

"When we come back it was sort of like the public was having a bit of a dig at us: we shouldn't have been there and whatnot and 'Our lads are getting killed for nothing' and all this – and it just wasn't right..." he said.

"A few years later they finally recognised the battle of Vietnam and we did a march through Sydney. That was unbelievable, the people that showed up and they were running around, giving you a hug and all this, and it just was an unbelievable day I was glad to see. This march was a real tear-jerker and it's hard to describe what it meant to me and my mates."

Victor still remains involved in the local veteran community where he serves on the Matraville RSL sub-branch board and the board of the Matraville RSL Club.

Anzac Day is always an important occasion for Victor, he says it's an opportunity to meet old friends.

"It's hard to imagine all the other wars because they must have been different to our war. It's just getting together; that's the good part about marching in town [Sydney], you get involved with all the other war veterans. Yes, it's good just to get together again and just have a bit of a yarn and a drink. "

Vic's letter:

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 OK, but not fighting fit any more. I saw that many VC's 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 VC's. So you can see the odds, we had near a hundred blokes and the VC's had near 1,500.

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 APC's came in with "A" Company inside. When the VC's 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 machine guns.

We got congratulations from "Old Holt" [the prime minister] 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 5th month now. I'm going to Hong Kong on the 21st Sept. 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 7 months' time. Give my best to Dad and Gail and the crowd.

Vic.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in Vietnam:**

In 1962 Australian armed forces became committed to a ten-year conflict in South Vietnam. Once again, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people answered the nation's call. Research is continuing, and at present it seems that as many as 500 took part in the Vietnam War.

Those in the RAAF, although fewest in number, were spread across all three flying units and the Operational Support Unit sent to the war. The navy men also matched the general outline of RAN involvement.

As the service with the largest presence in the conflict, the army shows the greatest Indigenous participation.

Military historian Dr Chris Clark says the numbers recorded would have been even greater, but that a lot of Indigenous people concealed their heritage and also that on enlistment forms it wasn't compulsory to identify as Indigenous. Dr Clark has been researching and writing Australian military history for more than 40 years and says we need to know more about our Aboriginal heroes.

"We need to know more about our Aboriginal heroes... both men and women who served overseas and made a difference... We need more people researching and contributing to this field, we need help from the families of these men who know of their service and are proud of it... They need to make sure

everyone has the details so this can be recorded," he said.

"I'm saying this because the official records are not particularly helpful - contrary to what people say, the service itself was not all that interested in whether a man was of Aboriginal heritage once they were accepted for service... We've only started asking their heritage for the last 40 years."

In addition to providing soldiers for each of the nine infantry battalions rotated through Vietnam before Australia began withdrawing its forces in 1971, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander personnel served in most of the supporting arms and corps that made up the 1st Australian Task Force at Nui Dat and the Logistics Support Group at Vung Tau: armour, artillery, engineers, ordnance, transport, ambulance, and hospital. The first published account by a black digger in Vietnam was written by a member of 1 Field Squadron (engineers). Members have been identified in the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam and detachments of the Special Air Service Regiment.

At least seven Aboriginal men were killed (although not all were combat casualties) and three were wounded in action. Two were present at the momentous battle of Long Tan in August 1966. Awards were relatively modest compared with earlier conflicts (one Indigenous man was Mentioned in Dispatches and one received the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry), but more than anything, this reflects the different intensity of fighting in this theatre. The highest rank held by an Indigenous Australian man appears to have been Warrant Officer Class I (the most senior non-commissioned rank). Interestingly, considering that the *National Service Act 1964* exempted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the requirement to register for national service, no fewer than 18 Indigenous Australian men were in Vietnam while completing national service obligations.

Dr Clark was an officer in the Australian Army and later worked in various government departments as a strategic analyst and historian, and at the Australian National University and the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. He's currently a Visiting Fellow at the Australian Defence Force Academy says war and battles are about celebrating and reflecting.

"The thing to emphasise is although we've settled on the anniversary of Long Tan to celebrate the battle, it's also an opportunity to reflect on the service of a great many more Aboriginal women and men, who served not just in Vietnam, but the Australian Defence Force...There were a lot more Aboriginal men and women who contributed to the deployment in Vietnam than you think," he says.

"The Australian community, and the Aboriginal community in particular deserves to know much more about the men who serviced because the Australian people didn't and still don't have extensive documents providing details and the exact truth."

*First published in Wartime issue 75 pg.40, special thanks to Michael Bell and Matraville RSL Club*