



LEN Opie hexed people. When someone crossed him – be it a relative trifle such as borrowing his gear without asking, or if they let him down in battle – they ran the risk of the Opie hex.

As a young private in World War II, Opie hexed a man in the New Guinea mountains. The jinxed man was killed a few days later. In Korea, Corporal Opie cast his spell when a “comrade” left him for dead in a blizzard. The man was later shot dead by a bullet that whizzed over Opie’s shoulder.

When Gough Whitlam restructured the army in the 1970s, tossing old Diggers such as Opie onto the scrapheap, Opie pointed

THE DEADLIEST SOLDIER

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You didn’t want to cross SA Digger Len Opie. He hated to see animals in distress but never had trouble killing the enemy in three wars

the bone at him too. That particular hex failed. Or did it? After all, some claim the CIA had a role in the dismissal. Opie fought for the CIA in Vietnam. A comrade believed that association continued after the fall of Saigon.

Perhaps the hex was Opie’s little joke on all of us. A joke that he took to the grave. It fitted with his sense of humour. Consider the time he sat quietly through a dinner party when the conversation turned to the 1972 Andes airline crash survivors who turned cannibal. A female guest pondered: “I wonder what human flesh tastes like?”

“Salty,” Opie said.

When recruits newly arrived in Vietnam said they had heard the Australians cut off their enemies’ ears to verify kills, Opie looked up from his dinner to say: “Well, you don’t expect us to lug their heads around in the jungle, do you?”

The Opie wit was dry as a limeburner’s boot. As dry as an Adelaide brickfield. One day in 2008, he said he was on the way out. He was handing in his gear. Going west. And he wanted his story told ...

THE thin old man ferried weak cups of tea back and forth to the guest in his little lounge room. His dog Sally sat snugly on the stranger’s lap.

Opie produced copious records of his army life; voluminous albums, an extensive library, diaries, newspaper clippings, army documents ... his life in fragments.

It added up to a grand tale. A scarcely believable story of a remarkable South Australian. A soldier who carved a fearsome reputation in three wars, starting in World War II New Guinea and ending in Vietnam with the CIA.

A comrade, one so tough he butted out his cigarette in a US MP’s face, said he was a saint compared to Opie: “He made me look like a boy scout.”

Another reckoned Opie “killed more Chinamen than cholera” in Korea.

Old Diggers still talk of Opie’s proficiency with highly unorthodox weapons, including a sharpened shovel and piano wire ... but surely this old man sipping weak tea was no cold-eyed killer.

He charmed with oft-told anecdotes.

Funny one-liners. Caustic observations of army bumblers. Here in this humble living room, in this humble unit in Mitcham, a grandfatherly old man was telling his story, a story without flourishes, without fanfare.

Here is part of the Opie paradox. Here was a kindly, endearing and gentle old man. He hardly seemed the ice-cold and ruthless warrior of army legend.

For there is barely a South Australian Digger aged over 50 who has not heard of Opie. The legend had its genesis in the New Guinea highlands in 1943. It grew at Balikpapan, where the biggest Australian invasion force since Gallipoli stormed ashore to break the unbroken Japanese.

In Korea, Opie and his fellow Diggers did not lose a battle in chasing the North Koreans up and out of the South. When the Chinese came to North Korea’s aid they were no match for Opie either. He almost single-handedly seized a fortified enemy hill that had held up to 3000 men. They gave him a Distinguished Conduct Medal. He should have had a Victoria Cross.

He excelled at Kapyong, when an Australian battalion took on a Chinese division. It was one of the Australian army’s finest hours. He was at the heart of the Maryang San victory; a battle that showed the Digger at the peak of his evolution.

“Their sheer guts is beyond belief,” the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel Frank Hassett said of his men.

Opie immediately volunteered for Vietnam, which brings us to another Opie contradiction. This supreme infantryman took great pride in always being a volunteer, and never a regular soldier. In this we see the Digger legend writ small, for the ranks of the Australian legions sent to fight foreign wars were filled with citizen soldiers.

As head of training for the CIA-backed Phoenix program, Opie schooled the men who would fight for Vietnamese hearts and minds. He saw action again; a lot of action. There was barely a South Vietnamese paddy or river or hill not traversed by Opie in his three tours of Vietnam from 1966-71.

Here he stalked through an *Apocalypse Now* landscape of river gunboats, SEALs and Green Berets as the US plummeted to defeat with dishonour.

In the years afterwards Opie volunteered to fight in the Middle East. At 80 he wrote to the army asking to be sent to Afghanistan. The closest he got was



1 The landing at Balikpapan, Borneo, most likely taken by Len Opie 2 Opie at his Mitcham home aged 84 3 At a Quang Tri chopper pad in South Vietnam 4 Blending in to the battlefield, wearing the black pyjamas used by Vietnamese villagers

“ I’VE NEVER SHOT ANYTHING OTHER THAN PEOPLE. BUT KILLING PEOPLE NEVER REALLY WORRIED ME

during a bush spotlighting expedition in his youth. “The sight of that rabbit still haunts me,” the old man said in 2008. “I’ve never shot anything other than people. But killing people never really worried me.”

And he was rather good at killing people. “It’s easy to kill people but it’s hard to teach people to kill people.”

When he was not fighting he was instructing. His legacy is imbued in the modern army – the highly trained modern army. Why was he such a good soldier? “I don’t know if I was a good soldier,” he said in an interview for the Australians at War Film Archive. “I only tried to be one. I used to say, when I was training people for Korea: ‘If you want to hate somebody, hate me.’ You know, you’ve got to focus your hate or desire on something so why not me, it doesn’t worry me. And afterwards if you come back and say ‘well, in spite of Opie I survived’ then that’s the thanks that I got.”

“And I’ve never had anybody come after me from any of the wars I’ve been in looking for me, and I’ve known that to happen with some people.”

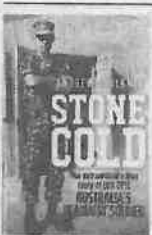
When asked in 2004 what, if anything, war proved, he said: “Well, we’re right and they’re wrong and you hope that the other side will make more mistakes than you do. That’s really what it amounts to. You don’t win a war, you only lose a war. Nobody ever really wins a war.”

RIDERLESS horse, gun carriage, rifle volley ... Opie’s full military funeral was a grand show. The Centennial Park chapel was brimming with brass and festooned with campaign ribbons.

Keith Payne VC said the nation had lost “a warrior soldier ... a soldier above soldiers ... The amount of training Len put into keeping other people alive and the example he set for the youngest generation of soldiers was outstanding.”

In his eulogy, Brigadier Laurie Lewis described Len as a “man of Sparta”.

A service was held in Tarin Kowt and an observation post was named the Len Opie OP. The biggest wreath came from the Diggers in Afghanistan. The soldiers’ message read: “Major Opie is an example and inspiration to us all. (His) actions and deeds ... helps us hold our heads high with pride as we try to live up to his example. May he rest in eternal peace.” ●



Stone Cold, Andrew Faulkner, Allen & Unwin, \$32.99



G O! The last shell shrieked over Len’s head as he ran up the hill. “There was arms and legs going all over the place,” recalled Private

Allan Bennett, who, like much of the rest of the battalion, had a grandstand view of the battle. “That was worth watching.” The battalion’s Vickers guns blazed away at the summit while Len’s section scrambled up as fast as they could. Despite the sharp climb and the need for speed, Len was weighed down with enough firepower to take on several Chinese armies. As well as his customary Owen gun, he had his ancient Keswick issue .303 – number 16809 – slung over his shoulder, and grenades. Bill Nimmo had taken the .303 when Len received an Owen upon his promotion to section leader. The Owen was good for close quarters fighting but the .303 had a greater range and packed more punch. As Len prepared for the fight, Bill handed it to him and said, “You never know; you might get a long distance shot.”

“As I went across the grain of the hill I noticed a couple of heads peering at me from a weapon pit up the hill to my right, about 10 feet (away),” Len said. He hurled a grenade at the slope above the trench. “It did the right thing and bounced into the pit just as it went off.” Immediately two men – one brandishing a tommy gun – popped out of a foxhole 20 metres away. “As I twisted to get out of the way of his fire, my foot caught in the fork of a small tree so that I fell pointing downhill with one leg in the air.”

Len’s military career appeared about to end with him hanging upside down on a Korean hill. Despite his ungainly and precarious position, he started duelling with the tommy gunner. “I fired a burst and the chap disappeared, only to pop up again a few seconds later. This time I had a shot at him with the rifle and the same thing happened. By now I had freed my foot, so I estimated the time he would pop up again and fired at the parapet of his pit where he had disappeared.” Len shot the man between the eyes. “I tossed another grenade in and continued on my way.” But only after helping himself to the occupant’s weapons. As well as the tommy gun, the enemy soldier had somehow come upon a US Garand rifle and an M1 carbine. Len also grabbed some Chinese grenades, but left the tommy gun behind. Presumably the

Owen gun was also left, but not before Len pulled up a shutter door and “filled the dugout up with a magazine”.

At least seven Chinese lay dead.

The Chinese replied with their own grenades, rolling them down the hill. It reminded Private Osbourne “Ossie” Hughes of another war.

“It was like fighting the nips in the islands,” the ex-commando said, “everything started to happen at once. A chink threw three grenades and Len Opie threw one back to him. Then a Chinese appeared out of the ground behind me.”

As the soldier took aim, Private Charlie Thorburn “ran him through” with his bayonet.

“Charlie Thorburn was behind me and the next customer was in a one-man foxhole with the muzzle of his rifle sticking out,” Len said. He blazed away with the captured rifles and tossed Chinese grenades. “As fast as his gun ran out of ammunition he picked up another weapon,” Hughes said. Hughes, Thorburn and Len were in the thick of three strongpoints when, according to Len, Thorburn went too close to the one-man foxhole. The enemy soldier fired, “hitting him in the shoulder and dropping him”.

Cue one of the best examples of Len’s dispassionate coolness in battle. Thorburn was seriously wounded. But lying between Len and the shooter he was also in Len’s line of fire. “I grabbed him by his bad arm and dragged him out of the way,” Thorburn cried out in painful protest, while Len explained it was for his own good. He was not a cruel man. He did what was needed to save both their lives. “I had called for more grenades and by now had some extras so I threw one into the pit and sorted the chap out.” They paused briefly before charging again, with Len in the lead, of course. They crested the peak and charged headlong into an enemy group.

Hughes was blazing away with his Bren when Len yelled, “Grenade! Grenade!” Hughes was flattened by the blast, leaving Len on his own on the summit. It mattered not. The Chinese had fled.

Hill 614 had fallen. And it had fallen not to a division, brigade, battalion, company or platoon, it had succumbed to a section – Len’s section. ●

Extract from Stone Cold

giving a speech to 7RAR when it left for the front from Darwin in 2008.

Addressing a new generation of Diggers, he spoke of duty, regardless of the consequences. He spoke of honour. He said death was part of the game. “His visit made a huge impact on the team prior to deploying into what was a new mission,” 7RAR commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel David McCammon said.

Major Len Opie died soon after his return to Adelaide. He was 84.

THE Opie roll of campaign honours reveals a Digger of uncommon valour. A Digger in the finest traditions of the AIF. Cast in the larrikin mould, he railed against martinets and parade ground soldiers.

The Opie story reaches way, way back: As a cadet at St Peter’s College, his instructors taught him all they had learned at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. One of his teachers had fought in the Boer War. Young Opie lapped it all up.

He was a supreme fighter, be it hand-to-hand or with a .303, an Owen sub-machinegun, an M16, an M1 carbine, a Bren, a rocket launcher ... Opie was a master of all weapons. In all this he was the archetypal Digger. Yet his other traits were at the opposite pole to the Anzac legend.

He didn’t drink, didn’t smoke, rarely swore and was in no way a womaniser.

His chief love was the army, but he also loved trains – a room was devoted to model trains in his parents’ house – and animals. Anyone who mistreated an animal ran the risk of being hexed. As did anyone who dared mistreat a prisoner.

Born in Snowtown, Opie was horrified when he saw a rabbit in its death throes