



Robert John Lubcke

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Robert John Lubcke...There is a street named after him, a plaque in centennial park, and his name will be projected at the Australian War Memorial on Monday the 9th of December at 11:02pm. Despite this... he is a digital ghost.

There wasn't any type of researched timeline of Lubcke's life, he did not exist on any family trees and creating this biography was a real challenge. Looking beyond the digital world, I tracked down paper records and letters from the national archives giving me dates, time and places. I managed to discover a first-hand account and ended up interviewing two 5 RAR veterans that trained and fought with him. I had to re-create his life from places, dates and background information to prove he was more of a person than a name.

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His life didn't start on the battlefield.

Robert John Lubcke was born on the 2nd day of July in 1943, in Whyalla, he had 2 siblings, Sylvia and Trevor. As a young boy growing up in Whyalla with his father, Edwin Walter Lubcke, Robert loved the freedom of the coast. His mother and father decided that the children would benefit from living closer to the city, so they packed up their belongings and left for the working-class suburb of Port Adelaide.

At 15 years old, Robert left school to earn some money and learn to support himself. Managing to work as a storeman at 'Hoopers furniture' where his father worked. To him, it seemed a dead-end job and he wanted to see the world, have some responsibility and 'make something of himself'.

By the age of 19, Robert was strong, with brown hair, brown eyes and applied to the army to give him a career, a regular paycheck, and an opportunity to travel.

A tour of Malaya...

Private Robert John Lubcke was now officially a part of the army, a soldier of Australia. He trained for months and was later ordered to do a tour of Malaya. The Guerrilla war there waged between the Commonwealth forces and the Malayan National Liberation Army for 13 years with thirty-nine Australians killed and 27 wounded on Australia's withdrawal. This conflict in Malaya would prepare him for the fighting style needed in Vietnam.

Training at Holsworthy...

Soon after he was sent back to Australia for 6 months of rest, then started training in New Guinea, which he excelled at, because of his jungle warfare in Malaya. As the conflict in Vietnam heightened, he began training in Queensland preparing to fight off the threat of communism in South Vietnam.

He arrived in Holsworthy, surrounded by men older than him and others quite young at the age of 19. Some were soldiers and other conscripted boys from small towns and large cities from all around Australia. Lubcke, as a South Australian, became a part of 5 RAR, training beside people that may have lived near him or knew someone he knew, bringing a stronger connection between the men. The soldiers trained in every position to make sure they were

able to step up if required. Lubcke as a former soldier was already trained with a rifle and general guerrilla tactics.

The army never knew about his secret fiancé and how Lubcke never slept at the training camp instead slept at her house. He made use of as much time together as he could before the inevitable deployment.

His knowledge and experience in Malaya were vital to those who had no idea about jungle warfare and humid living conditions. He finally got the responsibility he wanted as the conscripts looked to him for training and guidance as an insight into the fighting which was yet to come.

Arriving in Vietnam...

In May 1966, Lubcke arrived in Vietnam as part of 5RAR, a mix of regular soldiers and conscripts ready to take on the North Vietnamese.

These soldiers would establish the raw living conditions of the Nui Dat base, the jungle camp, they would call home. Their job was to patrol regularly for Viet Cong to gain the trust of the local villagers, intel about Viet Cong movements and secure the area.

As the weeks went on the soldiers listened for strange sounds while patrolling the jungle, watched for traps and kept a heightened sense of awareness around them. Soldiers from 5 RAR had already been killed and seriously injured. As events turned out the soldiers were unnerved by the realisation that death would come into this war without any warning and without any knowledge of what the Viet Cong intentions or numbers were. This was the unease of guerrilla warfare and not a task to be taken lightly. Each soldier carried heavy packs with rations, supplies, ammunition, and boots heavy with mud. Lubcke was on day 61, there was rain, humidity, mud, insects, illness and sheer exhaustion.

The Final Patrol...

On the 2nd of July 1966, D company patrolled the steamy terrain, legs soaked from the rice paddy fields and 100% humidity. Lubcke, was at the back of the line with a rifle, bringing up the rear, listening for every sound, movement in the jungle and any signs of enemy contact. He heard rustling in the jungle behind him and swivelled his head and looked around for the Viet Cong. Although none were seen, the faint sound of talking could be heard. It was not English that was being spoken, it was Vietnamese. Lubcke knew they were in danger and immediately warned the others. He tells the other men "I can hear them, they are following us, they are talking behind us." The other men passed this information up the line of soldiers.

As the talking behind them got louder and closer the group splits in two. One half of the company, containing Lubcke, continued walking with rifles ready through tall grasses and the other half veered in a horseshoe direction back the other way with a machine gun. They would try and ambush the Viet Cong before they had a chance to open fire on the Australian patrol.

The group that continued forward, dropped to the ground as the talking stopped. It wasn't the noise that scared them it was the silence. They look around in the scrub and the jungle prevents them from seeing any Viet Cong. Suddenly, rifles and automatic weapons open fire, the Viet Cong were coming from the left side. Lubcke stands up to shoot back, protecting the patrol and his mates, and with a single bullet in his chest, he fell back into the grass.

The fire fight raged on and the first group opens fire on the VC with the machine gun and killed the 10 Viet Cong that were attacking them. The other half remained in the grasses and waited for medical aid as Corporal Sullivan had been shot in the neck. It was then realised the bullet in Lubcke's chest had killed him instantly. He was the second 5 RAR Australian casualty in Vietnam.

Private Ian Cranwell was told to find Lubcke and sit with him. Although he was already dead, no fallen soldier should be left on his own. Private Cranwell had known Lubcke from their time in the Nui Dat Base, training at Holsworthy together and it was now his job to sit with a mate who had done his best to help the patrol. They called for a helicopter to take Sullivan to hospital, he had a nasty neck wound. Lubcke was taken back to base, waiting to be transferred home to his family.

At the base Private Ian Cranwell walked back into his tent to see all Lubcke's belongings had already gone, packed up and whisked away as if he had just disappeared, creating an empty bed for the next soldier to take his place and join 5RAR.

Nearly 6000km away from his family, surrounded by his mates. Private Robert John Lubcke died on his 23rd birthday.