

## Part One of the interview with Michael von Berg

### SPEAKERS

Michael von Berg, Megan Spencer

This is an interview with Michael von Berg MC OAM, conducted by Megan Spencer on behalf of the Virtual War Memorial Australia, on the 25th of August 2020 in Sellicks Beach, South Australia.

Michael was born on the 7th of November 1943 in Germany, and enlisted in the Australian Army on the 25th of January 1962, Service Number 216701, serving with 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (5RAR) in Vietnam. The topics covered in this interview are the experiences of Michael von Berg, as an Australian Army soldier and officer during the Vietnam War between 1966 and 1967, and the impact of service before, during and after deployment.

This is Part One of the interview.

**Michael von Berg 00:49**

My name's Michael von Berg, I'm 77 years of age this year. I was born in Germany, but came to Australia in 1950, [to country] New South Wales, just outside of Wagga Wagga, then to Sydney, then the Army, and now retired in Adelaide.

**Megan Spencer 01:10**

And Mike, rewinding to when you were 19 and just before enlistment into the Army which you did in Sydney... Can you give me an idea of what kind of a young person you were?

**Michael von Berg 01:22**

Oh, I thought I was a hot shot! I was doing accounting, I was in my second year; I was playing rugby and water polo and swimming and all that sort of stuff. So I was a bit of a "jock strap" I think. And I wasn't half bad at it. And you develop a certain self-confidence and arrogance I think. So before joining the Army I was probably a bit selfish and self-centered, you know - "Look at me, [look at] how good I am"?

And it sort of gave me, if you like - I had a different attitude to life before the Army to after the Army.

**Megan Spencer 02:03**

So in other words, you're saying that deployment and service changed you, did it?

**Michael von Berg 02:08**

Absolutely. No question about it. I've said this quite often when I talk to young soldiers or community groups, that my service and Vietnam made me a better person.

Although it was, for all of us who served in Vietnam, a horrendous and now in retrospect, an unnecessary war, it certainly made me - and I think many others too... I mean, yes, many came home me included, with some inner demons - but overall, holistically as a person, it made me a much better person.

**Megan Spencer 02:41**

Well, let's unpack that a little bit. So you say that you were pretty 'cocksure', you were sporty, you were fit, you kind of had life by the tail, that kind of thing.

**Michael von Berg 02:52**

Yep!

**Megan Spencer 02:53**

So what was it like when you first entered training? What was your experience? And how did you approach it?

**Michael von Berg 03:00**

Well, I mean, I basically went from Watsons Bay - which was the Recruit Depot in Sydney - got onto a train with a bunch of strangers. I didn't know anybody but I'm a pretty open sort of person and at that stage of my life, pretty mischievous. We had a few beers here and there. And we arrived at Kapooka [Army Recruit Training Centre]. And I was looking forward to the challenge. I didn't find anything too hard. I was really looking for the challenge in terms of the discipline, in terms of the uniform, in terms of being part of something. And for me, being part of family, another family if you like.

So for me, it was not a wake up call, at all. I suspected that it was going to be tough. And I suspected that we would have to 'toe the line' to get through, which we did after three months,

**Megan Spencer 03:54**

Because you were doing accounting back then - bookkeeping - do you think you were looking for something that was a bit more exciting?

**Michael von Berg 04:03**

Certainly, and interestingly enough, in my three-odd months at Kapooka - nearly four months - I went on to represent Army at two sports whilst a recruit, pretty unheard of really. And I was very fortunate because I had a terrific Section Commander. He was a Bombardier, Bombardier Kelly, I'll never forget him! And I had a wonderful Platoon Commander who actually was an Olympian.

So when they saw a young bloke [who] played a fair game of rugby, and when they saw a young bloke [who] could swim, and I was selected for the those respective inter-service teams in 1962 - both of them - they encouraged me to go. They encouraged the CO to let me go. But then what was fantastic: when I came back, rather than see me 'back-squadded' because I'd missed so much Recruit Training, Bombardier Kelly and in particularly an artillery chap, [they] helped me with my further training that I had to pick up on, otherwise I wouldn't have graduated with my mates.

**Megan Spencer 05:10**

So, if you're okay with it, maybe you could tell us a little bit about your background in terms of your family? You were a single child at that stage, and there was just you and your mum. So, maybe you could give us a little bit of a snapshot of that, just to give us a context of how the Army did change you?

**Michael von Berg 05:32**

Well, my mother married three times. I came to Australia with my mother and stepfather. Because, I'd always been told my father was killed in World War Two. And I suppose [I was] that sort of young migrant [from] Bonegilla Migrant Camp [and] as a little kid going to Irish Catholic school... In those days it was custom for a young minor to be on their mother's passport.

Now my mother had remarried a "Deak": D-E-A-K. And so I was on my mother's passport - for all intents and purposes - I was "Mickey Deak", you know, I was always "Mick Deak".

My mother at the time, unbeknownst to me - [due to] the acrimony with the divorce from my father... my mother at the time thought it would be wiser for me to go to an Irish Catholic school as a "Deak" in 1950, five years after the war [WWII], than a "von Berg".

And she was probably right for a while - except in an Irish Catholic school - not being able to speak English, I soon found out that I could have gone there with any name and it wouldn't have made any difference whatsoever.

So there was a fair bit of bullying when I was a little kid - understandable, that's what kids are like, I don't sort of hold out against that. But 'the brothers' taught me to box. And during that [time], learning to box and fighting against certain kids who were the bullies in the school, I accounted for myself fairly well. That gave me confidence in myself, but also it gave me more credos, if you like, with the larger group.

So, things like that in that first year - or the first 18 months - of [being] bullied as a young German kid who couldn't speak English, it dissipated pretty quickly when I found out how to handle myself. And I will forever, I will forever thank the Christian Brothers for that. And also I might add, they never put an indecent hand on me. They were fantastic. They were another family. And they taught me those sorts of things - football, the same thing, swimming the same thing. And I think they taught me a lot in terms of being confident, in being able to live in a new country with a new society.

**Megan Spencer 07:59**

It sounds like 'family' has loomed large in your life - that search for family - and you've just said you found it as a little kid at school. Also on that train going to Kapooka, and off to become a recruit and do training, and eventually [going off] to Vietnam; it sounds like you found a family in the Army.

Maybe you could tell us a little bit more about what you learned, what you discovered, when you did go through training at that particular time before being deployed to Vietnam?

**Michael von Berg 08:31**

What I did discover whilst in Recruit Training and then later in Corps Training - I wanted to go to infantry - at the School of Infantry what I did discover was that I think I was a pretty good student, and I think I was a pretty good soldier.

Yes, I got into trouble, you know, all of those sort of social indiscretions that young soldiers get up to! But in terms of being able to shoot, in terms of being able to dig a hole [laughs] and fill a hole in, and all of those infantry things that you learn - tactics, contact drills - I would like to think that, you know, I was pretty competent. Definitely, no question about it.

**Megan Spencer 09:10**

What's it like to discover that you're good at something when maybe you didn't realize it?

**Michael von Berg 09:15**

Yeah, it's it is unusual, because overall, I come from a very passive family. Although, on both sides of my family, we've got [laughs] numerous soldiers who served in wars going back 300 years! But coming from a fairly passive sort of family, I found it interesting that in soldiering, when it comes to, you know, 'closing with and killing the enemy' and all those sorts of things, you know, I was quite aggressive. You had to be. But [with] the whole training thing, I just found it almost like a relief from the accounting that I was doing. I mean, it was boring! And I was just so delighted to get away from that!

But, what sort of prompted me to join the Army... We lived in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. And I was on a tram in New South Head Road going home. And we were living at Point Piper at that time. And on the tram there were three diggers - in those days soldiers could go on leave in uniform, and airman and sailors. And these three guys - they weren't 'shyacking' - they were just laughing amongst themselves and they were just having an absolute ball... I'd just had a terrible day with my boss. And I'd had to do the 'stamp account' about four times. And I thought, "Why am I doing something I don't enjoy?"

And I saw these three fellows really having a good time. And I said, "You know what? I'm gonna join the Army!" So I got off the tram at New South Head Road, Edgecliff, where the Recruiting Depot used to be. And there I am in my suit and my briefcase. I went straight down the Recruiting Centre, and signed on. But I was under 19. And I needed my mother's permission. And I've got to say, she wasn't too happy. But that's what I did. And I said [to her], "Well, that's what I want to do, I'm not going back to work". So she agreed to sign the papers. And there I was as a young [man], I was just under 19.

I am, by nature, quite spontaneous. And I'm quite impulsive at times - probably why I'm still alive! And that for me was a real impulse: here's three young fellas having a terrific time. Here am I, bored, unhappy, dressed in a suit, carrying a damn leather briefcase, going home, having a meal, going to bed, getting up next morning to do the same thing again. And I said, "I'm not going to do it, I'm going to join the Army!"

So I signed on - at that time - for three years. And that's what encouraged me to join the Army in the first place!

**Megan Spencer 12:06**

Mike, you've spoken about 'mental conditioning': the mental conditioning that goes with training -

**Michael von Berg 12:13**

Yep -

**Megan Spencer 12:13**

- To get you ready for battle, I guess, as a soldier. What's involved in that mental conditioning? Maybe you could give us a bit of an idea - or paint a bit of a portrait - about how that might have changed you during that training section of your life?

**Michael von Berg 12:31**

Because you're in infantry, and infantry's role is effectively to 'close with', with the enemy, and kill them...

Killing other people is technically not in our DNA and our makeup. I mean... [Laughs] I don't leave my house in the morning and pop out and say, "Well, who can I knock off?" You know? I mean, it's just not in our nature. And the conditioning, the repetitive training that one goes through in infantry training - in contact rules, in bayonet drills we used to do in those days... What it does, it almost - it doesn't change your personality, but it tends to, basically, ingrain something into you, which in normal circumstances would be abhorrent and totally unacceptable.

But you choose to sign on and be an infantry soldier, and your job is to defend the country and kill the enemy! So it just shifts a lot of your - it never shifted my moral compass in any way at all. But, if I was being shot out, I'd shoot back. If I was being threatened, I'd threaten them very quickly.

And also a lot of it - because of the contact drills that you go through, and anti-ambush drills you go through - it's instinctive. You do it so often it is instinctive. You don't think, "Contact, front - gun to the right", you know, or, "Up!", and "Communications, everybody talking, everybody talking", and moving and getting undercover and shooting and moving to another piece of cover... It's all instinct.

And then when it's over, it's almost [sigh], you know? You sort of come down from that. And you then almost replay that whole incident in slow motion in your head.

So... it changes the way that you would normally be. But that is the profession that you choose. It's the same as a pilot in a jet: his job is to shoot the other jet down. Or if it's a gunner on a battleship, or on a destroyer: it's his job to take the other ship out, you know?

So it's what we do in the ADF: it is our 'mantra for being'. Our mantra for being is to defend our country from our enemies, and if necessary, we will kill our enemy. That's what we do. And that's totally foreign and different to what I was 'pre'-army; it was totally different in terms of... I must say, on the rugby side, sometimes it became [laughs] - I had a sort of a 'brain snap', I must admit!

But in terms of where I was before, to where I was after that period of induction, if you like, in the Army, you're almost... You're not a dual personality, but in effect, in a way you are... On one side, you are the sort of the quieter, humorous, laid back, happy-go-lucky sort of person. But as soon as someone crosses that line, that other side kicks in.

And I think all - all individuals who serve in war, have gone through that. And I don't mind talking about it, you know, because it's what we are, or, more importantly, it's what we became. And then the difficult thing is, once you become all of that, the difficult thing is then winding back and going back to what you were before.

That is still the difficult part about it. And that is too, I think, a lot to do with PTSD, where people have not been able to wind back. And I know, I was like that, I was like that for a long time, where you're always on edge: you will never go sit in a restaurant with your back to the door.

Even driving through the Flinders Ranges, which is just a beautiful part of the world, and I'm looking for ambush positions. As I'm driving my vehicle, I sort of subconsciously - or even consciously - I look at a bit of a range or ridge line, and I'd say "Oh, that'd make a good ambush position!" You know - and you do that subconsciously, it's really crazy! But it's the way that you've been conditioned for such a long period of time, where you live that. You relive that - you tend to relive that training that you've had. And I don't find anything wrong with it. You just - the difficulty with it... is processing it in your own mind, saying, "Why am I thinking this way? Why am I doing this?" [Laughs].

And the reason you're doing it is because you were conditioned for such a long time to operate, if you like, in that space.

And then of course when you've had your - in my case - nearly 14 months service in Vietnam, it does live with you. It does live with you for the rest of your life. Effectively, for the rest of your life. And... as I say - driving through the Flinders Ranges - it's not that you're not relaxed and happy, because I love nature and the outdoors... [Laughs] But one side of you then says, "Why am I thinking about ambushes? That was 50 years ago! Why am I thinking about ambushes?!"

I think it's something in the back of your mind, subconscious? The triggers - they're triggers, really.

And you look at the surrounds and you think, "Well, that would make a good ambush position"... But then you sort of say, "Well, it'd make a good place for stop and a barbecue too!" [Laughs]. It's crazy I know!

18:17 End of part one of the interview with Michael von Berg.