Part Two of the interview with Michael von Berg

SPEAKERS
Michael von Berg, Megan Spencer

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

Megan Spencer 00:14
I would like to come back to that integration part of things - how you 'put it all together' - maybe a bit later on...

Michael von Berg 00:21
Yep.

Megan Spencer 00:22
But let's stay on the linear timeline for the moment... So you go through this mental training, physical training - this particular, I suppose, 'attitudinal approach' training - to becoming a soldier, becoming an instrument of war if you will.

And then you went to Vietnam. And… you were [initially] in 1st Battalion [1 RAR, pre-Vietnam, then] 5 RAR, SAS [Special Air Service Regiment] and 2 Commando [Company] in in that order.

Michael von Berg 00:51
Yep.

Megan Spencer 00:52
That's on your record -

Michael von Berg 00:53
- But also, from 1 RAR, I went to O.C.S. for 12 months, Officer School - Officer Cadet School. And I was a Lance Corporal then. I went to O.C.S. in 1965, January '65, and graduated December 1965.

And again, you see, in all of my military service, there's always been a challenge and something to achieve, you know? Not in terms of 'tickets on myself'; purely in terms of, "I've done it, I can do this, I'm going to do it".

So in 1 Battalion, of course - you know, in those days, it was 1500-strong, it was a pentropic battalion - I played rugby for the battalion swam, played water polo... I mean, just fun! Training for war, but we had a lot of fun.

But then I had a wonderful Platoon Commander, and a wonderful Section Commander in 18 Platoon, 1 RAR. And I was very friendly with [Kevin] "Dasher" Wheatley, VC. And all these guys knew that I had the education and [with] all the sport that I was playing, [they said], "Why don't you go to Portsea [officers' school]? [I said] "Oh no, I only joined for three years, you know..." [They said], "No, no, no, no, seriously!"

So I thought about it. And then I looked around the battalion and I saw some of the Platoon Commanders, and I looked at them in a sort of - not a judgmental way - but purely, "Well, if you can do it, I can do it". So I applied for Portsea, and graduated fairly well I think in those days in Portsea. Again, lots of sport [laughs], lots of sport! And from Portsea I was posted straightaway - obviously [remaining in] Infantry - and straight to 5 Battalion.

I graduated in December '65; I was in Vietnam April '66. Four months after graduation, I was in in Vietnam.

And so, you know, I've achieved - I've done this, I've done that, I've now become an officer, I'm now with 5 Battalion. And, I was the first in my class in Vietnam. That's another achievement - purely by luck! Purely in terms of posting! And purely - the fact is that they made a big mistake. They sent me back to a battalion that I should never have been sent to in the first place. Because, I came from 1 Battalion which was pentropic, 1500-strong, which then went back to being a normal 'tropical' battalion - 800, or 750 [men]. So half [were] 1 Battalion which went to Vietnam first in '65 to Ben Hua, and the other became 5 Battalion.

So I mean, I went to 5 Battalion as a Platoon Commander - I knew everybody! So, you know, a lot of people would say, "Oh, you know, familiarity breeds contempt. And you're gonna struggle..." I didn't struggle at all. You know, I mean, I was very, very lucky, where the soldiers - [who] I'd been friendly with, and played rugby with, and drank with and got into punch ups with and god-knows-what-else at the Railway Hotel - they all were mature enough to understand that I was still a mate, but unfortunately, on the parade ground, I was a Platoon Commander.

So we had that sort of mutual respect, which I'm forever grateful for. So although the system should not have posted me to 5 RAR, I was delighted that they did, because of the many people that I knew in the battalion, but also because on that first tour, we had a wonderful battalion. We had wonderful officers. Yeah, some officers fell away. But we had basically a terrific battalion and it was also the first National Service battalion. So 50% of the soldiers were National Service.

So that whole integration and training and - a bit like me [laughs], being an accountant student for two years and all of a sudden you find yourself in infantry - well, we had probably three or 400 of these in the battalion, who came from all walks of life! And they were definitely not there to soldier. They were there to complete their service. But once they'd been, if you like, inducted and trained and everything else, I mean, our National Servicemen were just outstanding. All of them were just outstanding.

Megan Spencer 05:24
So Mike, you've gone from graduating Officer School, cadet school in -

Michael von Berg 05:30
- Victoria -

Megan Spencer 05:30
- Yeah, December '65. A few months later, you're on that plane in April '66 to go to Vietnam. Do you remember what you were feeling on the plane ride over? And what was it like that moment when you stepped off the plane and you were in that country?

Michael von Berg 05:45
I was just exhilarated with the whole thing. I mean, for me - and I don't want to be flippant or sound flippant - but to me, to go to war with 5 Battalion is the same as being picked for the Army into service side. You don't you don't play rugby to sit on the bench - I mean, sometimes you might have to - but generally speaking, you know, you play rugby to play! And as a young officer or Platoon Commander, I wanted to command a platoon on active service! I mean, that's what I'd been trained for. I didn't want to sort of be a Platoon Commander, not an active service or not [in] Vietnam.

So for me, firstly to be in the battalion that was next to go to replace 1 RAR, for me it was exhilarating. I was just so excited. Because I was naive: I was young, I was naive. But I was trained, I was fit. And I was ready to go! I mean, when it comes to 'close with and kill the enemy', I was ready to go, you know?

And at that time too, you're far more idyllic in terms of your thinking… You really don't understand the horrors of war, you know? I mean, watching a movie is one thing, but in reality, it's another. And as a young person [who's] sort of trained right up to almost the peak of your efficiency - as a young person, a young officer - you can't wait to go away with your guys, and to basically do the job. So had I not been able to go as early as I did, I would have been terribly disappointed.

Getting off the plane at Tan Son Nhut airport - Bob Kearney [5 Battalion comrade] says this all the time, and I say it as well [laughs] - the smells, the smells and the heat! I mean, we flew up in a 707. And we had nice little Qantas hostesses looking after us. And as soon as they opened that door at Tan Son Nhut - there were no sort of 'telescopic', air-conditioned [tunnels] to walk into the reception lounge [laughs]... They opened the plane, and there were these steps they rolled over. And the heat! And the smells - I thought, "God, how are we going to cope with this for 12 months?" You know?! It's the first thing that hit me!

Then of course once you've absorbed that, then you can't wait to, you know, get with the - we were on the advance party. So I was down with A and D company separate in 1 RAR. You can't wait to talk to other people who had been through everything for the last 12 months, just to absorb all of their knowledge, etc.

So for me, it was initial shock of heat and most the putrid of smells.

Megan Spencer 08:51
And on your way over there [even though you're a trained soldier]… Does it ever occur to you that something might happen to you or the other people that you're going to fight with? Does that ever cross your mind?

Michael von Berg 09:05
Look for me, I was hell bent, hell bent on bringing my blokes home. Me included! [Laughs]. I mean, I wanted to do the job.

But one promise I made to myself very early on in the piece was, "Nothing stupid". "Think about it very carefully, tactically." And, a hundred of theirs is not worth one of mine". You know, we're there to do a job but we we're there to do a job and hopefully come out alive. And I was hell bent on not losing anybody.

I know it's difficult, and it rolls off the tongue very easily, you know, "I didn't want any of my chaps to be killed". But I had that always in the back of my mind. Always I had that in the back of my mind, "I'll do anything to protect my blokes". And obviously me protecting my blokes, I'm also protecting myself.

But again, it's an innate thing? I think it's in all of us - and I was certainly not chasing medals or being a hero at all. I just wanted to do the job and bring my boys home, you know? And that's always been, if you like, my way of doing my job, my way.

And for the life of me, I simply cannot understand - and this is not meant to be a criticism of other battalions, because they all did an outstanding job - but I simply cannot understand a Company Commander telling me as a Platoon Commander to attack a bunker system... That is not a Platoon job, that is a Company job you know? Or a Battalion job in fact, the bunker system. Or, what I would do is just pull back, put in [for] an airstrike or put in artillery and go and clean up. But to attack an enemy that is entrenched in a protected bunker system is suicide.

Megan Spencer 11:10
Is that what happened to you? I think it was with 2nd Anti-Tank Platoon? Is that what happened?

Michael von Berg 11:15
No, no.

Megan Spencer 11:16
Maybe you can tell us a little bit about what happened around losing one of your men?

Michael von Berg 11:23
Well, I got into - I was initially in 2 Platoon, A Company. The Company Commander and I just weren't working out. So I was moved to Anti-Tank Platoon, not knowing that Anti-Tank Platoon was going to be Reconnaissance Platoon.

But anyway, I got a terrific Company Commander, Max Carroll, who I respected and admired and also trusted. And we went on this operation up into the Nui Te Pai Mountains, and being Anti-Tank Platoon but operating as a Rifle Platoon. We were protecting Battalion Headquarters with the Assault Pioneers.

And we had to go up this 1 in 2 gradient, a terrible, terrible piece of real estate. And we got to the top without incident. And then once we'd got to the top we were to establish a bit of a safe harbor up there. There were shots down behind me where we had just come, and the battalion 'Sigs' [Signals] Officer was wounded.

And I felt real bad about that because we were supposed to clear the area. But obviously the enemy were waiting for something bigger and better, which was a Battalion Headquarter Group.

Anyway, I was ordered to come back down and clear the enemy... Which we did. Three-and-a-half-hours - there was a full on three-and-a half-hour battle, mini-battle, mini-battle... And we didn't know whether it was one or 30 [enemy] because they were all hidden in caves, etc.

Megan Spencer 12:05
Was this 'VC' - Viet Cong?

Michael von Berg 13:01
Yeah - ah, no! These were NVA, 274 Regiment –

Megan Spencer 13:05
So that's North Vietnamese Army -

Michael von Berg 13:05
- Yeah, they were NVA, 274, and good soldiers. Anyway, I deployed my platoon to try and clear this re-entrant where they ambushed Battalion Headquarters. And one of my NCOs, Normie Womal, was shot. He yelled out to me, "I'm hit, I'm hit Skip, I'm hit" - they call me 'Skip' - "I'm hit! I'm hit!" And we didn't know where he was. Meanwhile the enemy were just firing.

And well, look, bottom line is that we cleared that enemy position without further loss. We got Normie out. And that's when I saw one of the bravest things I've ever seen - my stretcher-bearer, which I'll come to - but sadly, we got Norm out and he passed away.

Peter Fraser my stretcher-bearer who, sadly I delivered his eulogy in Perth about five years ago; he was a National Servicemen. He was a bandsman, played the trumpet, the most unassuming young man you'd ever come across. Contrary to my orders, because I was worried if we went out to Norm - we found him on a flat rock and they were using him as bait, shooting around him? And I thought, "Oh God, you know, if we - " Peter and I tried several times to get out to him but no chance.

And contrary to my orders, Peter crawled out on the rock and started to dress the wound and talk to Norm. He put his body between the enemy fire and Norm.

And then we got a stretcher party down - and again suppressing fire - the rest of the boys just were fantastic in terms of their suppressing fire activities and responding to orders. But me shouting my orders in my best parade ground voice, of course, the enemy found out very quickly that I was the boss. So every time I shouted there was a round of fire coming my way. So I'd have to quickly move away to another position.

But anyway, look, we managed to do the job and then continue on to the top of the mountain. And that night I just pulled in my two Section Commanders [who] were left and my Platoon Sergeant and had a quiet chat. And I was really feeling miserable. And then that night, I just wrapped myself up in my little Poncho-type thing, 'hoochie' thing, and thought about Norm: married, four children.

And I mourned, I wept. I really did. And, I think that's part of our problem in Vietnam, we just didn't have the opportunity to mourn.

And I wouldn't mourn openly in front of my soldiers. I mean I [would have thought] that's maybe a sign of weakness. Or, you know, 'the boss is cracking up' or something? But being on my own, and in the protection of my own solitude, I felt that it was probably more than appropriate.

And so I had a quiet weep about Norm, but then the next day, back into, you know, 'close with and kill the enemy' mode. But at the time, I just felt terrible, I really did. Because not only had I known Norm as a digger - I knew him as a digger when I was a digger - and always respected him as a good soldier, and a good person. A really good person, you know? And a good looking dude, too, he really was a good-looking young man.

And of course, then I thought of his family, and four kids. And I thought, "God, you know, that's the sort of person" - you don't want to lose anybody, but if you didn't want to lose anybody, it shouldn't be Norm. And Norm was just so highly regarded and respected and admired in the battalion. When he was killed, the whole battalion mourned, because they all knew him. He was just one of those wonderful Indigenous people, that when he smiled, the whole battalion smiled. They all lit up with him, you know?

And so when that happened, I just felt terrible. But I then became doubly obsessed with not losing any more, basically.

Megan Spencer 17:30
So I guess, in a sense - not the 'unthinkable' - but the thing that you didn't want to happen, happened: you lost one of your men, which is natural in war -

Michael von Berg 17:42
- Yep.

Megan Spencer 17:43
You can't hold back the tide and it's an extremely dangerous situation. But it happened. And then you had to work out what to do with your feelings and how to allow them to be there and then put them to one side.

But on top of that, your body was also going through a pretty big pounding: you were in bamboo jungle, you were moving at night. So all your natural rhythms were out of whack, because this is what you do as a soldier.

Michael von Berg 18:13
Yep.

Megan Spencer 18:14
So I'm wondering what kind of effect - on top of the emotional side of things, and having to compartmentalize it, losing a man - what was it like for you, what were you actually going through during the fighting, during that kind of guerrilla warfare? Which is what it was in Vietnam?

Michael von Berg 18:31
Can I just say something before I go to that?

Megan Spencer 18:36
Of course…

Michael von Berg 18:36
What I did struggle with, and I struggled for years and even probably still struggle [with] today [is], what could I have done differently, you know? "Could I have gone around the left rather than the right?" "Could I have gone up the guts?" Or, "Is there some other way that I would have been able to manage it?"

But, the more I've gone through it in my mind, and the more I've spoken to my peer group and my diggers, there's no other way I could have managed it, because of the nature of the terrain - very steep terrain and big boulders and big trees and the roots of trees intertwined with boulders... And it's just the sheer terrain I could not have - I don't think I could have done it another way.

But, when you lose someone, there's a guilt. "What could I have done differently?" You know? And I've struggled with that for years: what could I have done differently? But you know, at the end of the day, as you've rightly pointed out, you know, [in] war people get killed.

And you know, I'm sure there's lots of people that probably have the same thoughts as me, "What could I have done differently?" But it's not gonna bring Norm back. That's the tragedy of it.

Yes, [laughs] being in the jungle and being super-alert... There is a… I'm speaking purely for me now, I can't speak for others. But in my case, for me, it was 100% concentration. I mean, besides your body going through considerable fatigue with the humidity and the heat, and sometimes the monsoon rains, and just the atrocious conditions... Close-quarter country, whether it's going through prickly bamboo areas or lantana or Wait-A-While, all that sort of vegetation that is in the jungle... Physically, I don't think consciously that it affected me.

I think it's the mental more than anything. It's the mental pressure and the concentration that has [the] effect on the body, rather than the conditions around you.

And you know, there's the old saying, "Concentrate, concentrate", because if you don't concentrate, you or your mates are dead. So there is incredible concentration. And as a Platoon Commander, it was not just a matter of concentration in terms of what's around you, it's also concentration [on] 'what if' scenarios. "What if this?" "What if that?" "How will I react?" "What will I do?" "What support will I get?" "How will I get this chap out?" "How will I get that chap out?" Or, "Where should I be?", you know, "As a command group, where should I be?"

So there's all of these sort of, if you like, micro-management issues, going through your head, as to how you would react if there is all of a sudden, a contact front here, or an ambush on the right, or whatever the case might be.

So, the concentration, the constant concentration, takes a lot out of you.

But I believe also that constant concentration - and certainly in my case, that concentration, and the adrenaline rush, which is always going through your body, you're on edge all the time… and I talk about this now [in] some of the lectures I give, presentations - I think there's almost a sixth sense that starts to permeate and come through. And it's something that we've lost through evolution. And some people call it 'the third eye'. In America, they call it a "Spidey sense", and [they're] actually trying to teach it, and I'm trying to work with a couple of people here... I believe in it so strongly, I really believe in it.

And I think what happens is that - from my personal perspective and [from being in] my platoon - I think there were a couple of times where, I've just felt something's not quite right? And I've just said, "Halt" - or not "halt" but hand signal: stop, go to ground, cover your arcs, look around... "Listen, smell, observe", all those sorts of things... And sure enough, something's not right.

And I just believe that that whole time of constant [concentration]... I mean we had - and I'm not knocking World War Two, or anybody. I mean, World War One, holy hell, that was a hellhole! But in World War Two - I mean, you had soldiers go to the front, and then come back. And I'm not being derogatory of their efforts or anything else like that, but we were constantly on patrol. We were constantly out in the bush, effectively in danger.

And I think constantly being out, and constantly on patrol, and constantly being alert, I think that whole adrenaline and those old instincts that we've lost to evolution, - you know, fight flight, or whatever - I think it just basically creates another sense or feeling, that 'sixth sense' if you like, which we don't normally associate with our everyday sort of life.

Megan Spencer 24:09
So it almost sounds like - because it is like a hunting environment isn't it?

Michael von Berg 24:14
Absolutely -

Megan Spencer 24:14
- The hunter and the hunted. And maybe you're tapping into ancient ‘embodiment’ stuff that used to go on when people were out on those plains looking for food, or, they were going to be somebody's food!

Michael von Berg 24:27
Absolutley! It is, it is very much a hunting environment. Although, I think we've got to be careful how we term that: it's not fun. It's not sport.… I mean, in all my time I've never been one for 'body count'; I've been one for doing the job and coming home.

You know, some people at ANZAC functions... Occasionally I hear - I must admit not many of my blokes - but you sort of hear, "We got 17 here and we got 18 there." And I thought, “That's not what it's about". That's not really what it's about, you know?

I mean, yes, [they] may have been very fortunate, where, yes, I know there were some very successful ambushes [with] maximum casualties on the enemy. And you get kudos for that, especially if you do it without losing anybody. But you know, when you have people who discuss ‘body count’ almost as if it's 'the Olympics of war', I just don't accept that.

I just - it's not me.

Megan Spencer 25:49
So Mike, just on that, mentioning the enemy and casualties on the other side... I'm guessing that in a war context, you don't allow yourself to think about that too much. But it's certainly the reality of war: you will kill others and you will see the aftermath of that, too - that human experience - which is what war is.

Michael von Berg 26:10
Yep.

Megan Spencer 26:10
So maybe, could you speak to that a little bit?

Michael von Berg 26:13
Sure.

Megan Spencer 26:13
About how you managed that side of things? And maybe what effect that might have had on you?

Michael von Berg 26:18
Yeah, look, I remember my first contact. [It] was in A Company and I saw what a 7.62 round does to the back of an enemy's head. And I thought, "Hmm, we're not… we're playing a serious game here". So every contact after that I went to ground very quickly.

You know, initially, you're a little bit - not ‘cavalier’ – but… sort of, "It's never going to happen to me". So in contacts, you tended to sort of walk around a bit and direct the battle with the troops. When I saw that, what it did to the back of that person's head - a fellow human being, although he was enemy - I thought, "I'm gonna go to ground very quickly", you know?

The other thing is that, when a person's dead, they're dead. And what we always used to do was bury the dead. We would always respect that, you know, not just leave them on a track somewhere. And we could afford to do it, because even with Reconnaissance Platoon, we had pretty good security to be able to do that.

And then we get into enemy wounded, well then it becomes a totally different scenario. It's the rules of engagement and the rules of war.

Now, the rules of engagement, rules of war - and this is the difference with Vietnam, to what I see at the moment in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, in particular, and Iraq, when that was going - where we were in Vietnam, our area of operation was always declared a Free-Fire Zone. So anything that's in there is fair game, right? However, I've had a couple of episodes, where, had we not paused and looked, and then studied what [was] there, we could have quite easily killed some innocent people.

Because when we used to do pamphlet drops to warn people not to go into an area, not everybody's going to read that pamphlet. And in one particular incident, we heard some chopping. And it was very thick jungle. And we thought, "Oh, that could be the enemy chopping wood for overhead protection or a bunker system”. And it would have been very easy with an M60 just to open up. And when I quietly went forward and looked through the jungle, there was a mother, father and two little kids collecting firewood. I've never forgotten that, never forgotten it. So in that sort of a scenario, you have the rules of engagement - yes, we had the Free-Fire Zone - but even in a Free-Fire Zone there are innocents. And providing they're not a threat to you, you just walk by, you know?

In terms of the rules of war, we have the Geneva Convention when it comes to prisoners, when it comes to wounded. And there I believe very much in the old biblical statement, "do unto me as you would do unto others", or, “do unto others as to me". And when there's a person there with a gut wound, you've got to get a dust-off chopper out for him. That's what you do! You don't just let him die! You know, that could be me? That could be me in the reverse situation.

And again, it's something that is in our DNA, you know? And Australians in World War Two went through such horrendous situations. And then you look at the Jewish people, what they went through, you know? And you sort of put yourself into their shoes, and then you think, well, "Two wrongs don't make a right", you know, this person is wounded and you get the person out. And who knows - that person alive, in terms of intelligence might be worth a hell of a lot more [alive] than dead.

So they're the sorts of things you got to think about, not just body count.

30:44 End of Part Two of the interview with Michael von Berg.