

## Part Three of the interview with Michael von Berg

### SPEAKERS

Michael von Berg, Megan Spencer

This is Part Three 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**

So, you get to experience all sorts of extraordinary things during war - the good, the bad, the ugly, everything in between -

**Michael von Berg 00:23**

Yep.

**Megan Spencer 00:23**

It's a big spectrum. And it does change you, doesn't it? How do you think you were changed by your experience as a soldier during Vietnam?

**Michael von Berg 00:32**

Well, I've always said to people - and yet they don't see it, but I see it, because, you know, I know me - I think the Vietnam War definitely made me a better person.

Not necessarily as - how will I best describe it? Not necessarily as a father or a husband or anything like that, because we all went through our, you know, difficult periods. But I think it made me a better person in realizing that it's not all about me? You definitely are less self-centered. You're certainly less selfish. In fact, you become very giving... giving of yourself and giving of other things.

You become more philosophical, I think, about life. And in particular, you know, some people have a bad day, they might have a bad day because 'so and so is wrong', or 'that hasn't worked', or... You know, like today, our heating hasn't worked, you know? And I say, "So what? It's not the end of the world". And there's an old saying - the Americans use it - about Vietnam. Something along the lines of, "Don't give me a hard time, I've been to hell and back", or something like that? I can't recall the exact quote.

But, when you've been through a lot, like all of us Vietnam veterans - not just Vietnam: World War Two, Korea, Borneo, Malaya - when you've been through that sort of very intensive period in your life, you tend to reevaluate. And I think that's what this lockdown has done, as well. I mean, I've had an opportunity to reevaluate lots of things, and you just change very much the way that you are.

And I think it's to the positive. I mean, for me, yes, Vietnam, there was lots which you could say, is not healthy mentally. I mean, you know, the demons are within us all. But overall, I think it definitely made me a better person.

Now, a lot of people mightn't say that - or see that. But I know internally, in terms of who and what I am, it made me a better person.

**Megan Spencer 02:57**

So what were you like when you got home? You've spoken a bit about 'inner demons' and PTSD. You did carry that... And going back to something really amazing [that] you said earlier - crucial I think - which is 'integrating' that mental conditioning into a society where you're not at war, or into a situation. Like, you [were] a programmed war machine in a sense - I don't like using that word because you're human -

**Michael von Berg 03:22**

Yep!

**Megan Spencer 03:22**

But the conditions you worked in, you had to bring a certain -

**Michael von Berg 03:27**

You were programmed.

**Megan Spencer 03:28**

Okay.

**Michael von Berg 03:29**

Yeah. When I came home, I was totally irresponsible. I was single, I was wild. I was irresponsible. Almost on a death wish, in terms of my driving – drunk - which we did in those days. And I wanted to go back to Vietnam. I badly wanted to go back.

And it was almost like, "Well, you know, I'm having a bit of a break, I'm gonna have a real ball here! And then do it again".

But it was a period, I think, in my life... I really didn't leave Vietnam behind? [Laughs] Just about everything I did, I was sort of in in a mental state [where] I was still in Vietnam... I mean, over-drinking and gambling and women, and just being irresponsible, you know?

And when I think back on it now, I mean, I would say, looking down upon myself, I'd say "You're an idiot!" But then when I look at the reasons why, I'd say well, "You're an idiot, but it's understandable", you know? I think we all went through that.

We all went through it. I know I certainly did.

And it was a period where... you're still in the war zone. You are still in the war zone and you tend to be programmed, still programmed on the "kill, kill, kill" side, rather than the more genteel, relaxed, sort of civilian side.

And of course, then I went off to SAS, and that compounded the problem, not in a bad way, but in terms of fitness. It got me off the booze, which was terrific - it didn't compound the problem, it made me better because I had to pass and do all that sort of stuff. And, of course, then I was running the selection courses in SAS.

**Megan Spencer 05:44**

This is back in Australia?

**Michael von Berg 05:45**

Yeah, back in Australia, I was running a selection course.

And, yeah, that made me think about things differently as well, you know? I mean, I drove a very hard course. Because I believe that to be in that unit, you simply must be the best, both mentally and physically. So I drove a pretty hard course.

But in terms of getting back to caring, although you can be hard on the surface, you're quite caring underneath it? So if I found that there was a soldier who for no reason - no risk, or no fault of their own - if they had badly twisted an ankle, and they couldn't continue, I wouldn't just send them back to their unit. I'd say, "Mate, you've been doing very well. Reapply. Come back next year or the year after [and] reapply".

Or if there was a person that was just too young, you know I'd say "Mate, go back to unit, mature and reapply".

Or even if there was a person that was not suitable, you know... The instructors - I wasn't just me - [there] was terrific bunch of NCOs who were helping. And even if one of the NCOs came to me and said, "Oh, you know, Skip, so-and-so's struggling"... I mean, even that person I'd sort of quietly have a yarn to, and say, "Look, you're not going to make it. Go back to unit, you're going to be a lot better when you go back to your unit. More importantly, I think you should be commended for getting out of your comfort zone and having a crack at this, but you're not going to be an SAS trooper".

You know, "Go back to your unit, to the battalion, you've got more knowledge going back and you'll be a better soldier".

And, that was a sort of a change in me? Where again, you drive people very hard but then you realize that we're all different. We're all different in terms of makeup, but we're also very different physically - some people can handle the hard stuff. Some people can't. And because they can't doesn't make them bad people. They just can't handle that stuff. So you just counsel them out, I think that's the word I'm looking for.

**Megan Spencer 08:10**

Did it make you more compassionate? Is that what you're trying to say? Or at least empathetic?

**Michael von Berg 08:15**

I think empathetic more than compassion. Compassion, I find - I mean, I agree, obviously, with the term 'compassion'. But I think compassion is probably in a more different environment? 'Empathy' in this case I think because again I put myself into their shoes, you know? "That could have been me", or, "That was me", or whatever, you know?

And so I think a degree of empathy, but also not completely destroying people. You know, because they were all soldiers. They were all volunteers. And they all came - in my day - they all came from the from the infantry battalions. And we need good soldiers in the battalions!

So, you don't want to destroy somebody on an SAS "Carta" Course as we used to call them, and then send them back to the battalion as broken people. I mean, that's not what it's about. Let them leave with a bit of self-esteem, and self 'net worth' - "I've achieved at least this" type of thing?

So no, I think it was just a certain... empathy. But again... although I did lots of mad things on this course to make life difficult for people - I mean, one particular person who's still a good friend, actually, Chris Roberts, he's in Canberra, [a] retired Brigadier. I put him through his [SAS] selection course. And he ended up being a Commanding Officer of the SAS - he was also commander of Special Forces. And I put him through and I made him work! And he still talks about it today.

But one thing he'll always say is, "Mick, you were fair". And I say, "Yeah I was a fair prick, I was a fair prick!"... [Laughs]. But as I say [we're] still mates today.

And again, you push them really hard, but you've got to be fair. There's got to be a cutoff point...

**Megan Spencer 10:11**

What did you bring home with you, do you think? What did you carry with you back from Vietnam into civilian life?

**Michael von Berg 10:22**

Oh, look, I came home at a difficult period in terms of society. The social aspects were not all that friendly. You know, I mean, the demonstrations and moratoriums. It was an unpopular war! And now in retrospect, I understand why. I also understand now in retrospect, that it was a wasted war, no question about it. But I wouldn't have missed it for quids. You know, I mean, it was just the way that I was at that time.

But now in retrospect, when you look back, you can sort of understand why there were moratoriums and demonstrations. You can understand. The loss of life - over 540 I think killed - and for what purpose? When you analyze it today, [for] what purpose?

I think for me, besides being into [laughs] too much booze and being reckless, and somewhat stupid... the main thing it brought back for me - because at that time of my life, I didn't understand properly the demonstrations - what it made me realize is, and one of my ex-NCO's, Blue Mulby, always says this, and it's a wonderful saying: "Denigrate war, but do not denigrate the soldier".

And that made me realize that the society that I belong to, was ungrateful as to the sacrifice that we had suffered. And we had suffered, because we're soldiers. We do as we're told. And if the political class at that time believed that 'this is what we should do' - and we did it - don't denigrate us.

We did our job. We did our job with dignity, with honour, with empathy. And, lost 540 [people] I think. And a lot more now since! I mean, many died of wounds, and many have taken their own lives. Don't denigrate us. We were purely doing as we were told! It's not as if we all banded together in the pub one night and said, "Let's go to Vietnam and fight a war". I mean, that's not what we did.

So... when I came home, I was really angry about that. And, even when we had our - because I was overseas for 15 years. And I didn't have a lot to do with big groups of veterans, you know?

**Megan Spencer 12:51**

This is post-war, you mean?

**Michael von Berg 12:52**

Post-war, yeah. I didn't have an opportunity to sit around with great groups of veterans. But I know when I was living in London, Australia House would always get me to - because they knew where I was and what I was doing - they'd always get me to lay a wreath at Fairfield Hospital, which is outside of London. Which used to be a World War One hospital where we've got, I think, about 54 graves of World War One Australian soldiers that were killed.

And I used to always go out there and lay a wreath on ANZAC Day. And little old ladies in the church hall would have their cups of tea, and scones and cream and strawberry jam and all that sort of stuff. And I went out there a couple of times with a couple of mates of mine, John McAloney, who's now no longer with us - he was a Platoon Commander with me.

And we would just be absolutely amazed at the friendship and the real admiration of the Australian ADF, of outside of London. Yet back here we didn't have it!

You know, so... no matter where I went in the world I'd always sort of commemorate ANZAC Day - in Nairobi, you know, in Vienna. And everybody was just so thankful, you know? "Yes, unpopular war! But you did your bit. And so, thank you for your service"-type thing.

But when I came home, I was really angry. I was angry with public at large. I was angry with that group calling themselves 'Save Our Sons'. I was angry with the whole moratorium movement. I just found [them] a lot of longhaired, dirty university students, [with] nothing else to do but denigrate soldiers. And that made me very angry.

And it wasn't until I managed to march in 1987, [in] the Welcome Home parade [Sydney], that... it sort of - it didn't ease everything but it sort of made me more relaxed, because it was fantastic march. Hundreds and thousands of people lined from Circular Quay right [up] to Hyde Park. And I thought, "Well, maybe it's too little too late? But thank you".

And I think that made everybody a bit more relaxed, and it certainly relaxed me.

**Megan Spencer 15:18**

You did have a bit of a dark night of the soul eventually, didn't you, when you realized you were suffering from latent the effects of the war, PTSD, and felt like no one understood you?

**Michael von Berg 15:31**

Yep.

**Megan Spencer 15:31**

So can you maybe tell us a little bit about what happened to you with that?

**Michael von Berg 15:35**

Sure.

**Megan Spencer 15:35**

And how did you overcome that?

**Michael von Berg 15:38**

Yep. I'll never forget this. I was the Group Marketing Director of the Hardy Wine Company at the time. And I got a call from a couple of old classmates of mine from Portsea [Officers' School] who were at Staff College in Queenscliff. And they wanted to come over and obviously catch up and have a wine tasting.

**Megan Spencer 15:57**

How old were you, do you think, around this time?

**Michael von Berg 15:59**

Oh, I was probably 40... Forty-three, 42? Something like that.

Anyway, I said "Yeah, sure". So I went and saw the boss and the catering crew and they put on a terrific tasting, and a snack and all that.

And I got together with about half a dozen - because most were students - but the guys I got together with were by that time Brigadiers, Colonels, all ex-peers of mine who stayed on in the Army and they were instructors at Queenscliff.

And of course, we started talking about stuff. And obviously, Vietnam was heavy in the conversation, because this was 1988.

So, I got horribly drunk, actually. Smashed. And got a driver to take me home. And I just sat in the living room at home. And I don't swear - I never swore in my own house. And I started to cry, and kept repeating over and over, "Nobody *effen* understands. Nobody *effen* understands. What's it matter, what's it matter... Nobody *effen* understands."

So my wife at the time was terrified because, firstly, [she'd] never seen me cry. And secondly, [she'd] never seen me swear. And she called Bob ["Dogs"] Kearney [former 5 RAR comrade and friend]. And Dogs came over and [said], "What's the matter, mate? What's the matter?" I said, "Dogs, nobody *effen* understands."

Anyway, I kept repeating this over and over and went to bed that night. And then Bob rang me the next day and said, "Mate, you've got a problem", you know, "You better go and see someone".

So a recommendation was made, and I went and saw a psychologist who thankfully happened to be an ex-Platoon Commander in 1 Battalion. And I had a really good session with him. And you know, we had... the form that you fill out, 'crosses and boxes'... self-evaluation. And he said, "Well, you know, Mick, don't cheat here. Because... say it how it is!"

Anyway, I filled that out. And he said, "You've got PTSD". And I said, "What's PTSD?" Oh I said, "What the what the 'F' is PTSD?! And he said, "It's post-traumatic stress disorder". I said, "What the hell's that?!" [He said], "Mate, it's this, this this..." And I thought, "Oh, dear".

At that time, you know, I'm a director of a fairly large company in a responsible role and job. I mean, I couldn't - you know, in terms of stigma - I couldn't sort of say, "Well, I've got a mental health issue", you know?

So what I did... I then started to go within myself in terms of a bit of self-analysis. I went and bought myself a stack of books - a stack of books on the subject. It's amazing once I then found out down at Dymocks how many books there were on self-help with PTSD issues! And of course, this is before being online, you know. I just sort of asked around and found a few books.

Anyway, I read up on the subject and I realized, yes, that I did have a problem. And I realized -

**Megan Spencer 19:19**

What was happening to you at that time? Like, was it a mood thing? Were you having night flashbacks or things like that? Dreams?

**Michael von Berg 19:27**

Yeah. All of that. I mean I was certainly having nightmares and cold sweats, and also periods of anger. Which is not me, you know... And with my kids.

And I just realized that, you know, there is something dreadfully wrong here. I've got to fix it! So I read all these books and I realized then that there are certain triggers.

And I've identified the triggers in my life that are not good. So what I do is I avoid those triggers.

If however one of those triggers is activated, I have a toolkit - or I call a 'tackle box' - I have my way of managing it. So for me, it's not drugs, it's avoiding triggers. Like one of them is alcohol - and I mean in

large quantities! I have [laughs] a huge capacity. And I'm not proud of that, it's just my metabolism. I just got a huge capacity! And I never get lecherous or fall over. I just get horribly, horribly drunk and happy until I hit the 'black spot', you know? And it's not necessarily at the time, it's the next day.

So you know, things like alcohol, now no longer binge drinking and those sorts of things. I sort of enjoy it with my meal. And yeah I'll have sessions with mates, but I know when to stop, you know.

And there are a few other triggers. Like for instance I used to always stop for a road accident. Because that's, again, that's my instinct - you know, training. Now, if I see other people [attending], I don't stop. I keep going, because I've actually been first on the scene and administered first aid and stopped the bleeding and all that sort of business. And then I get into my car, and I've got blood all over me, and I'm shaking like a leaf, you know? So I try to avoid that. I'll never walk away if I see somebody dying and they're on their own... But then I have to manage that afterwards. But if I see other people around, and there's a guy on the floor with half his leg missing, I'll just keep driving... Nothing I can do. They've called 000, the ambulance is on the way, you know?

The other one is that I struggle with watching contemporary war movies. Colour in particular. I can't watch them. I mean I can't sleep for about three or four nights.

And the last one is a strange one - maybe it's just a bit of empathy coming through again - is that I hate to see both people and animals ill-treated. It really makes me angry. And by that I mean bullying in the workplace, or some little old bloke being knocked around by some younger person... Now, that's a trigger I don't avoid, you know, I step right in. But then I'm able to manage it after that.

And where I'm very thankful is that with this condition... The first thing that you need to do is admit there's a problem. And, when you admit that there is a problem, what you're going to do then is to find out how you're going to manage it.

In my particular case I hate drugs. I hate drugs, and any drugs I take now are drugs that keep me alive [laughs]. Blood pressure, you know, blood thinners, stuff like that. So, basically, my 'self medication' is my own inner self, my meditation. I love the ocean hence that's why we live here. I can go on the beach and meditate. I have my Buddhist nun right up behind me, she looks after me. And I can just meditate and quietly take in everything that's around me, which is nature and it's free, you know?

And... If I go out in my boat... I mean, a bad day's fishing is better than a good day in the office... You tend to relate to nature, I think, a lot better... Nature for me is a healer. And also, nature for me is my church, as well. I mean I can meditate and pray in that environment far better than the razzmatazz and the rituals of some church. And I'm a Catholic.

So it's something that years ago I would not have spoken about as openly? Because people think you're weak, yet people [who] know me know I'm not weak. I think you've got to be strong to admit this, and you've got to be strong to be able to manage it.



And in my case, now, with young soldiers, I talk to them on a peer-to-peer basis? Because I share their anxiety. I share what they've been through. I share what they're thinking. And you can only do that on a peer-to-peer basis [with] someone else who has been either an Infantry Soldier or a Platoon Commander, or Special Forces.

[With] all due respect, I couldn't see me being helped by a person who was counting blankets in [for example] '1 ALSG' [1st Australian Logistics Support Group]... I mean they did a top job, don't get me wrong, but we've got nothing in common.

So I think that whole peer-to-peer support is very important. And I think the psychologists are starting to realize that peer-to-peer support is very important. And for me, I quite openly talk to young people about the subject today.

And of course, you know, I'm also involved in [the] suicide and self-harm space as well. And it's interesting when you sort of sit and talk to people who are really struggling with their lives, how so much [of] what you've gone through, they've gone through.

But I've never had suicide ideation, I've just been able to manage it differently, whereas a lot of other people have not been able to manage it. And for them, the best way to resolve it is to 'get out of here'. And that's not right, you know?

Especially young people, it's a tragedy.

25:35 End of Part Three of the interview with Michael von Berg.