

THE SCHEYVILLIAN
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of
'Down from the Mountain:
The Path of a Baby Boomer'
by
Brian Vickery

Reviewed by

Alistair Pope

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*Down from the Mountain:
The Path of a Baby Boomer*

by
Brian Vickery

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Prologue

Brian and I both graduated from OTU Scheyville (albeit in different years) and then spent a year together in 1981 at the Australian Army Staff College, so we have a long association, but that has not biased my review of his autobiography.

In some ways our experiences are entirely different, but in others they are similar. Before joining the Army neither of us found any real satisfaction in the routine civilian jobs we had, so paradoxically, the Army was our saviour. Selection for officer training was a bonus, but from that point on life is what you make of it. No matter who, or what you are, the Army is either a cornucopia of opportunity or a living nightmare.

National Service Officer Training and the Road to Vietnam

Once in the Army as a National Serviceman, Brian revelled in the challenges and opportunities to achieve goals that before enlistment had not ever been dreamed of. I found it a little disconcerting that several pages are spent recounting how he tried to avoid being called up, then, when that failed, doing the minimum to get through and finally applying for Officer Training because he '*was bored out of his socks*'. Curiously, Brian considers that he was selected that he '*was telling so many lies*' to be selected as '*the truth would have totally destroyed [his] chances of getting out of this place [the Recruit Training Battalion]*'.

I think Brian greatly underestimates his capabilities and the ability of an Army Selection Board, since time immemorial to find the qualities they were looking for from among applicants.

Gradually, Brian comes around to accepting that the struggles and harshness of Scheyville were worth it as he finishes his chapter on his officer training with '*... so this chapter in my life was complete – an experience well worth the undertaking. The unseen bonus in this experience was that the friends I made at Scheyville were to become friends for life.*' So, in the end the Army had achieved its aim and turned the reluctant 'mountain' boy into a man and a warrior. Amen say all of us who shared the experience...

Postings to 1RAR, the Infantry Centre followed, before volunteering for a tour of duty in Vietnam lead to his transfer to 9RAR as it prepared for war. This meant doubling his National Service commitment from two to four years.

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Vietnam Operations

Arriving in Vietnam on *HMAS Sydney*, the battalion was convoyed about 30km to the north of Vung Tau and 5km from the Provincial capital of Ba Ria to the forward operating base at Nui Dat,. Their first operation was to set up an ambush in a 'safe area', but they surprisingly had a contact with about 40 enemy. The result of this unexpected clash highlighted many shortcomings in their deployment and use of Claymore mines in unfamiliar terrain.

This chapter of the book is probably the most interesting as it is where all the training, tactics, risk (and one must say), *adventure* comes together in the real world. The downside is that soldiers are wounded and killed, while close calls heighten the nervous tension and demonstrate the part that pure luck plays in the life and death of frontline infantry soldiers.

There are also anecdotes but the unusual incidents, such as a tiger quietly walking past just meters away, the terrifying charge of a huge boar and the inevitable humour (and sometimes a 'dark humour') that soldiers always seem to be able to find in most situations, no matter how dire.

Mines and Casualties

Once again, the fear of casualties from mines affected the mindset of the soldiers, but to their credit, all soldiers accepted the risk, carried on and did their duty. Brian was wounded by a fragment from an RPG that hit his head, *bounced off* and lodged in his shoulder! On finding out that Brian had survived a Section Commander showed all the expected empathy of soldiers for junior officers when he exclaimed "Lucky you were there, sir! Otherwise it would have been me". Brian was evacuated in a 'dustoff'ⁱ helicopter to the Australian Army Field Hospital in Vung Tau.

A Career of Interesting Highlights

When his Vietnam tour was over Brian was lucky to have a series of interesting postings to the Jungle Warfare Centre (Canungra), Darwin in the capital of Northern Territory, Hong Kong, Brunei and on exchange to Fort Carson in Colorado when posted as a Company Commander in the 5/7RAR (Mechanised) Battalion. However, after 26 years' service, at 47 years old, LtCol Brian Vickery retired from the Army and returned to the civilian world.

Epilogue

In some ways, life 'on the outside' proved more challenging (though without the threat to life and limb) compared to the regularity of life in the Army. In the Army, you knew the rules, you were always paid on time and friends and colleagues were generally reliable.

Life appeared to have gone full circle as business and financial struggles clouded their life. Fortunately, Brian and Carole & their family have survived the difficulties of the business world with the resilience honed by years of experience in the hash world of the military where families constantly have to pack up, move and adjust to new environments every 2-3 years. Do that ten times and you can take anything thrown your way. As Brian says on the last page "Life is what you make of it" as he quotes President Ronald Reagan: 'Some people spend an entire lifetime wondering if they made a difference in the world. Veterans don't have that problem.'

I recommend 'Down from the Mountain' as a good purchase for those who like to read firsthand accounts of soldiering and just of a life well lived.

ⁱ 'Dustoff' was slang for the medical evacuation helicopters on call.