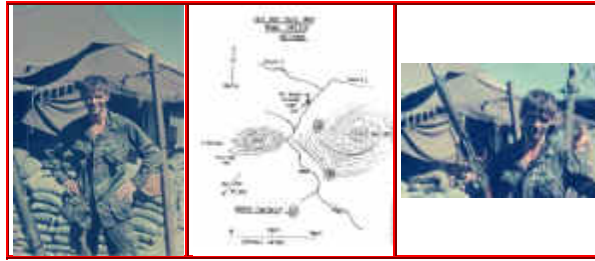


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During our second tour to Vietnam and around the turn of November/December 1970, we tried to infiltrate two or three patrols into the Nui May Tao-Nui Be areas ('nui' meaning hill or mountain), but with none lasting too far past the infiltration stage. The May Tao Mountains area - in the main a set of tortoise shaped highlands with the head facing west - was about 45km North East of Nui Dat and with most of it in the adjacent Binh Tuy Province to us. The smaller May Tao or 'the head' bit feature, was in actual fact the topographical junction point for Long Khanh, Binh Tuy and our own Phuoc Tuy Province.

Then as the norm, a further two patrols were tasked to go in, myself a member of one. But what the main tasking was, apart from the standard reconnaissance phases, I can't recall, but a large American operation was taking place in and around the other and northern side of the May Tao's about the same time. They'd been relatively successful but had also taken a few casualties in the process, particularly during an assault on a VC Sapper Recon Training Camp - possibly Dong 10 cadre - a few clicks in from the northwest base of the larger Nui Be spur. But whatever the plot! Around the 26th. December 1970, eight M113 Armoured Personnel Carriers of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment were ordered up to a small hamlet called Ap Rung La astride National Route 1 (the "La Rue" 1 or "Street Without Joy" of French times) in Binh Tuy, and there to RV with United States forces in situ and in turn with two of our patrols; **Alan 'Junior' Smith** (Bravo Nine Sierra 14) and **Jack Gebhardt** (Bravo Nine Sierra 21) to be lifted in by helicopter a day or so later and with views to carrying out a 'northern approach' ground infiltration and patrol as opposed to the helicopter mentioned. There were in fact three 'Ap Rung La' hamlets cum villages in a neat row along this point of the highway, but with the Vietnamese language's liking for inflections, all no doubt sounding different. But whichever! Our main interest lay in the small sou'eastern one; the one alongside Nui Be and our RV with the APC's. As an additional aspect to the cover and deception plan of our infiltration. We were all to be dressed in our standard issue greens as opposed to our normal SAS camouflaged gear, and to appear for all intent and purposes, as no more than part of an Infantry support group allotted to our APC's protection. At this point in time I was a member of 14 patrol, having rehearsed the drills, but as the situation developed down the line, this aspect was to change. We were picked up at Nadzab by a lone re-supply helicopter - all-further adding to the theme - and headed out towards Xuyen Moc before turning NE for Ap Rung La and the RV. And an indication of things to come appeared a short time later, around Bau Ham Lake and swamps, and where we spotted a group of VC on the move. We landed in a cloud of dust in the middle of the Cavalry Leaguer and were greeted very happily, for it turned out that the expected tanks and support of the United States group had had to leave almost immediately on our APC's arrival, and leaving them with an anxious night a long way from home and without any ground support, in the menacing lee of a 847m Nui Be summit. From where we lay near Ap Rung La - at about a few clicks down the road to the SW - we could also make out the equally ominous entrance to the May Tao-Nui Be Pass. In reality, the pass was no more than a ten click strip of rough oxcart plus width piece of rough red Viet dirt, but where it lay as in the VC's back yard, always made it 'Tiger Country' and to the fullest. And although the main peaks either side were over a dozen clicks apart, the jungle covered slopes running down to the edge of the track, however, also always gave it all the very distinct smell of a VC ambush about to happen. Putting all this out of mind - as we did - the APC

crews still nethertheless voiced a few very legitimate concerns, about the possibility of the odd land mine being left lying about for us.

Both our patrol drop off points were give or take around the halfway mark into the pass - a nice thought as we checked and rechecked our weapons - with Junior and us off first for the southern slopes of the May Tao feature, and Jack's start three or four clicks lower, as his Area of Operations lay by a huge re-entrance and the Suoi Tram stream at the SW spurs of the Nui Be. And so the next step was departure for our respective AO's and the APCs to get going on their return leg to Nui Dat via the pass and infiltrations - a rehearsed drill which generally allowed us to slip away unnoticed - and after which they would carry on with the given impression of everyone having left the area for good and continuing on to the track's end by Heip Hoa on Route 23 for night harbour. Or at least, that's what the plan was at that stage. The Cavalry Officer Commanding, a very composed major and in overall charge of the infiltration, was keen to get going and to have everything over and done with. And as there was still plenty of daylight left. It was a point we were in total agreement with.

The eight APCs looked, felt and sounded menacing as they entered the pass. The snarls and pitches of their motors as they positioned or negotiated their vehicles over rough bits of track - particularly as the pass gradually closed in - sounding twice as loud as normal. They were spread out over 250 metres in their "action" mode and with an 81mm mortar crew on board as well as ourselves, we had manpower between us for an SAS troop and feeling extremely confident. This confidence ebbed somewhat, as the track became increasingly narrower, and to the point at times, where we actually had to lever foliage away from the APCs. We soon realised that we had come off onto a large eastern side track - very easily done as the pass had numerous unmarked run-offs and bypasses to cater for local movements and the wet season - and with daylight rapidly fading as it does in the jungle, we now suddenly found ourselves stuck in the bowels of the Nui Be somewhere. Our only tactical choice left, was to backtrack to the mouth of the pass by extricating ourselves from the extremely vulnerable position we all of a sudden found ourselves in, and to establish as secure a night harbour as possible for a further night and to try again in the morning. This we managed without any VC incident to our amazement - mine at least!! And also finding a reasonable clearing to suit near the mouth.

A relatively large APC leaguer needs a good visual buffer zone between itself and any potential attack. This as totally opposed to the tiny and secretive "lying up place" that we were used to and which was generally placed in the thickest and dirtiest patch of the jungle about. But whatever the tactical differences! We were warned out for 50 percent "stand-to" for the night hours to come.

At around 0300, during my second or third shift on one of the APC's .30 calibre machine guns, I spotted movement down in the tree line to the SE. It was a pretty clear night and before I needed to get all the tricks of night vision going - glancing away from the target and then back or looking out of the corner of the eye to give the rods and cones a better chance - it was all confirmed. Two NVA or VC or whichever, the left one with what looked like a profile of an AK47 slung downwards over his left shoulder, standing there quite passively and looking at us. Or at least, the left bloke was. The right one seemed to be engaged in some kind of animated cum soundless argument with the first VC: facing the main bloke as he went about it, and gesturing away clearly at two to the dozen in the shadow of the trees, as if to make his point. You didn't have to be Einstein to work out who or what they might be talking about, and I expected the whoosh of an RPG or three incoming any moment. But at the same time and for the time being. I also realised, that in all probability, it would be no more than a passing VC reconnaissance party or standing patrol. This is what I instinctively felt it to be, and that the VC also knew, that we or at least that some of us, were also right into them. A night attack then and there however, and depending on the numbers, could have very easily given us a severe bloody nose all the same. With all this prognosis computed through the mind in a matter of seconds as I fumbled for the safety catch of the .30 calibre machine gun, not even knowing if it had been fully cocked by our first man at the start of the shift! While also trying to get the "thumbs-down" enemy

signal around - all in the relative darkness to half asleep blokes and with the other half facing the other way. After a few more minutes of 'eyeballing' for this is all it seemed to be developing into for the time being; an NVA/VC reconnaissance party checking out the new neighbour. I climbed off my APC and approached the APC stand-to commander, a young corporal or lance corporal, to see what he wanted done about it. I queried as to giving them a good burst, but his immediate response was that I go and wake and brief the Cavalry Major ...in doing so I also roused Junior in passing. There was absolutely no shortage of "command" virtually lying about the place for want of a better word at this time. For apart from 3 Cavalry's own infrastructure and our patrol commanders, the OC of 2 Squadron, Major **Geoff Chipman** - and who were due to relieve us in the very near future - was also along on his in-country shakedown as a member of Jack's patrol, and sleeping alongside an APC with the rest of Jack's group. The APC Major was an impressively calm person, listening and checking his watch as I reported, and his final instructions were that first light stand to was to be brought forward to 0530, and that was that. Before he rolled over I asked him what I was to personally do in the meantime, seeing that my position was closest to the enemy in the set-up. 'Well what are they doing now?' was his query.

'Well nothing, just standing there and looking at us' was my reply.

'Well, bloody keep looking back!' was his final reply. I was as convinced back then, as I am today, that he was away and snoring well before I had time to climb back up to the .30 calibre. Something I also did ASAP for what little was left of the AM after my relief; for the NVA/VC soon faded out like a done with TV screen and like the Cavalry OC I never had any problems getting a good night's sleep on patrol - it's nowadays that this problem often persists.

We re-entered the pass bright and early around the 28th and during a particularly brilliant morning; much brighter than at any time the day before. The brightness added to our confidence - as the night had passed without major incident - but also adding to our alertness, as the lead APC came across enough signs and footprints to keep the slackest amongst us on the ball. For me, just glancing upwards to the left towards the Nui Be spot height, was more than enough to keep me focused. On the odd occasion - not often, as we made our way deeper into the pass, some of us from the SAS patrols were asked to dismount and to scout ahead or to double check some piece of evidence or suspicious sign, and I was amazed to find just how much more confident I felt away from the noise and clatter and the confinement of the APCs. But also very happy to have them close at hand all the same. This time, we made sure we went past our mistake of the PM before, but around approach to our drop offs - around midday at a time when we were considering changing into our camouflaged gear and paints and probably while on another wet weather side bypass - the lead or second APC threw its near track on a stump, and bringing the whole convoy to a sudden and grinding halt. Our APC of 14 Patrol in turn had come to its halt alongside a junction on the pass. Or, at least whatever bits or pieces of it pertaining at this point. And with the stem of the "T" junction a well-used footpath running eastwards and every bit an enemy track to and from the Nui Be by appearance, Junior quickly called me to grab **Billy Robb**, our patrol medic, and to move down it to provide some flank protection. And which I immediately did, rubbing some hasty cam cream on my face as I went. I placed Billy and myself on either side to cover a slight bend in the track, and although we had gone some 50 metres plus from the APCs, voices and the ring of an axe could still be made out behind us. This is why, or perhaps the very reason why it was, that I was extremely surprised to immediately spot two VC moving in in a completely non-tactical fashion, and heading towards the sound in question. And all of this even before I had had the chance to settle into my new position, I noted. I immediately realised from the movements of the lead Vietnamese - NVA by all appearance and this was to prove correct - and the VC in the typical black pyjamas following, that they either had no idea of our presence at the pass at the time, or that they estimated the axe-man to be one of their own woodcutters. But whatever! They were now approaching us and our group in general, at a fairly rapid pace. The lead VC-NVA trooper was a big man for a Vietnamese, taller, broader and at around 35 years, dressed in a proper bluish uniform not

unlike that worn by the Vietnamese seamen down at the naval base at Cat Lo on the way to Vung Tau, and from where the sappers of the VC Recon Company in the nearby Rung Sat Special Zone swamplands, sometimes 'acquired' their gear from. The second man was a typical Vietcong, slim, pale yet wiry, at around 25 years and wearing Ho Chi Minh sandals. And although I could clearly identify straps and pack equipment on the leading enemy, no visible signs of a weapon anywhere was to be seen on any of them. The lead VC also had a pair of around 680g sized rusty cans, one in each hand, and these were later found to hold freshly caught fish.

I had been working in the Squadron Intelligence Centre for my 1970 tour, with intelligence gathering (every facet) and the organisation of infiltration and exfil. of our patrols and liaisons with 9 Squadron RAAF amongst my main responsibility back at Nui Dat, and now I found this intelligence side colouring my thinking as it occurred to me, in a sudden rush of blood to the head - with all the armour and manpower and a direct link to Nui Dat on tap just a short distance to our rear and a situation unheard of in normal SAS patrol circumstances - that it would be as near an ideal time as any to attempt a capture. This would be no easy choice as I had a good position and the drop on the approaching VC, and although I hadn't been physically able for fear of giving our position away to signal Billy, I had absolutely no doubts as to his back up. Furthermore, between initial sighting and then, I had only about 45 seconds all up in which to make up my mind in.

I allowed the first man to come to within about two metres and challenged him with an amazingly loud and clear, "Dung Loi!" and which had an instantaneous effect as it echoed around the scrub - virtually rooting both men to the spot. Now the mind works in overdrive at times like this. And although I had achieved my original aim - halted and ordered the VC to surrender - their minds were still left in a confused state and as I realised, that they had definitely heard the command and responded, but hadn't in actual fact sighted me or anyone else as yet. So, the next step for me was to ease myself up from a very comforting log haven and into an upright and exposed position - and which I did, looking the first VC in the eye; fully hoping that Bill had the second one, and forcefully but not quite as loudly as before, repeating my initial command of "Dung Loi" - and also believing by this time that they would do as they were told.

The look of utter disbelief and horror that next crossed the VC's face - as he fully realised what in fact was going down - was, and is to this day, unforgettable. And I have often wondered how I must have really looked to him. As I assure any movie or TV watcher or anybody else!! That it's a whole lot different doing it in real life. But the next flashes did come in slow motion as if in the movies; as the NVA soldier clutched at an AK47 tucked away around his back and firing one handed hip upwards in the same motion as he did; as I watched his spent cartridges - one after the other from a burst of around seven rounds - arc majestically through the air to my front before falling away to the ground; feeling the full blast and muzzle power of his weapon to my left and past the top of my head; while watching my own heavy 7.62 rounds impacting into his left torso - left breast down - and spinning him around with effect and arms and legs moving as if to run; then watching Billy's burst literally driving him into the bend, arms and legs still moving in exactly the same manner. My last glimpses were that of a pitiful human being, grovelling about on all fours, vomiting out large volumes of blood. At least this is how it all passed before me. While all in the same split second! I was back on the ground firing at the second VC as Bill - and who had also been hit in the melee and had gone for the security of the bend - and then suppressing the whole area beyond it with what I had left in my magazine to stop any other VC from coming forward as I had seen or felt, what I imagined more people moving about in the vicinity there. All this with **Les 'Bluey' Cullen**, the 21 scout, and Jack appearing right and left, and also getting into it, 'You OK there, Paddy?' was Blues's reassuring shout, which I answered in the affirmative. 'And what the f*** were you doing shouting at the bastards for Paddy?' from Jack right beside me. As he puffed and panted and struggled to get his breath as he had cricked his back while leaping down from the APC. Also with a 'too much bloody Intelligence section or what?' dig thrown in for good measure, as he smiled and giggled away to himself. 'F***** horse shit Jack' was my

half indignant and adrenaline fed reply, ' I couldn't see their bloody weapons and wanted to grab 'em and bloody near had the bastards in the bag aye? That's f***** what mate!'. But by which time the smoke had cleared and revealing two tins like mini goal posts in a back street football game, an AK47 flat down along the track, and a dark pack riddled like a sieve nearer the bend. I also called out my concerns about more probable enemy past the bend, and so under Billy's cover and reinforced by Junior, Chippy and **Ed 'Bart' Mavrick** 2I/C 14 Patrol - and heart in mouth as only those who have had to go forward under what they believed was another man's lead right on them would know, we extended line and advanced down on the bend to clear and secure it. We saw where our VC's had been dragged along and then picked up by about half a dozen others, before being carted off at some speed by appearance. All in amongst large puddles of blood to the side as well as distinct blood trails.

On my way back to the APC to reload my 30 round "panic magazine" and which I had stuffed down my shirt during the change over, I picked up a handful of spent 7.62 short AK47 shells off the road and, walking over to where Billy was still doing his job covering and offering him some as a souvenir - as he had just had his first contact in country and done extremely well - and jokingly kidding him as I did, as he selected one, as to why he hadn't opened up a bit sooner.

'Well, how the f*** could I?' was his reply, with that slow Billy Robb grin that would become legend in the SAS, 'It was like watching the gunfight at the OK Corral'. And with this laconic bit of humour, providing just the right pressure release valve to suit the occasion for both of us. In fact the top of Bill's wooden SLR pistol grip had swelled in the humidity - not an uncommon thing - and he had to force his safety catch onto 'fire before anything else.

The Cavalry OC insisted on an infantry armour follow up, and Blue and I elected as scouts. But it soon proved a futile exercise in the ever closing slope's edge and re-entrant type terrain we were in. In the meantime up front - and again due to the terrain - Blue and I had either found ourselves unable to hear anything due to the many reverberations about, or found ourselves completely cut off whenever we had tried to edge forward. And this right alongside an enemy track; one on which we had just had a contact, and also expecting to be hit by some fixed positions or other at any moment. Unbeknown, we were in fact curving downhill towards the Sapper Recon camp to the east.

Although I fully understood the principles involved, it always seemed incongruous to me that humble men encased in wafer thin shirts and with thinner skins still, should have to work ahead of these lumbering armour plated giants like that which an APC or any armoured vehicle represented. But that's how it all went! And I always suspected that it really came down to the dollar value. Then with all VC signs becoming harder and harder to spot under the ever-dimming light of the jungle canopy, and with the fading light itself becoming a problem, Blue signaled me over for a confab. And 'what bloody tracks, where?' was the immediate and joint consensus, as we gave the circular hand signal to indicate a turnabout. But about this time a signal had come down from the rear anyway, indicating the same thing, as some of the APC crew had found a large cache of rice and explosives back at the 'T' junction. It appeared a VC re-supply point; with the goods neatly stashed and camouflaged on either side of the track and HQ (1 Australian Task Force) was now interested in the checking of this new situation rather than anything else. With Jack's injury debilitating and with the ongoing activities in the vicinity of our pending infiltration points, a request was put to 1 ATF regarding the aborting of our Ops on the grounds that the AOs could by then be well and truly compromised. But this was met in the negative. And so we accepted the umpire's decision and making good our final prep in the back of the bouncing APC and heading on down the pass for the grand finale.

Within hours we were inserted in our AO on the Soi Tram - more or less into the "V" shape of the west sides of the Nui Be. Also within the hour, at around 1530, fully aware that we'd acquired a tail' from the tracker's signal shots in the vicinity of our entry point. And although we had worked hard in covering our entry; an absolute essential in any SAS patrolling, it was impossible to hide the APC's

tracks and this was the weakness and we knew it. Our evasive efforts thereafter - in the even more ever rapidly fading light - soon found us caught in a used track complex and up against a suspected VC camp on a spur as well as our tail; but who we hoped, we had shaken off by then. Earlier on, we had spotted VC moving about on a SE rise to the front - possibly on a hill track leading up from the southern most junction of the pass and only a few clicks to the south - and based on the clinks from dixie's and other utensils following, we estimated an enemy transit camp cum outstation. But be this as it may, we had a relatively comfortable night - I certainly did anyway and in spite of being put by one of the unavoidable smaller tracks in the vicinity of my flank's area. **Ian Bullock's** grinning last night brief, was that a passing VC would surely kick me in the head and so the alarm raised. And Ian, a good mate, was now running 21, as Jack had to return to Nui Dat with the APCs for treatment on his back. He was also my new "on the spot" patrol commander as well. As earlier on I'd been asked to change over to 21 to take Jack's place; a most unusual occurrence in the SAS, as each patrol studies their specific AO's, rehearsed different drills as a rule and geared for the particular job on hand. In fact, I had had to refer to a strange AO on a borrowed map, as we settled down for the night. But it really wasn't a big deal, just another point to come to grips with. But whichever! Our patrol was now Ian, Geoff Chipman, Blue Cullen, National Serviceman and "Australian" journalist **Bill Grey**, and myself. But still unbeknown at the time however, was the fact that Bill and I would be sharing the precarious fold out blades of a Jungle Penetrator winch seat under somewhat more aggravated circumstances the following day.

The next morning, the 29th, was a typical one of 'first light' and other drills and out of the tracks and on towards the spur, but it also developed by around 1300 hrs that we had only temporarily shaken off our tail of the previous day. To a degree it was expected and had come to a head and did, after a relatively calm Nui Be midday LUP - and as we tried to close with the camp - and at which point we were forced to ambush our shadowy half; with the claymore blasts sending at least a couple of black clad bodies hurtling back down the hill. Then in a number of rapid jungle moves and flanking fire skirmishes. In my case also throwing more grenades than at any other time of my service. And during which the lead chopper coming into assist also drew AK47 fire from the vicinity of our old LUP. We were extracted by JP winch in the way best described by the clear clinical tones of 9 Squadron RAAF's 'Summary of Events' Log for 1970 and from which I quote:

' 29th. December 1970 - SAS call sign 21 were encountered by enemy and requested immediate extraction from YS817861. The lead chopper had unfortunately become unserviceable and required an A/O swap. Albatross 02 (Sqn Leader D.C. White,) and Albatross 03 (Sqn Leader R. Klitscher RNZAF) were scrambled in company with the light fire team. On arrival at the contact area, SAS had 2 VC KIA and the LFT commenced suppression on a suspected enemy camp SSE of the patrol. Albatross 02 with 03 covering him then commenced a winch extraction of the five-man patrol. During the winch, the patrol reported light automatic fire aimed at the chopper and Bushranger 71 (Flight Officer W. Bowen,) and 72 (Flight Officer D.C. Freedman.) As the chopper completed the winch and the B/R's had timely expended and before leaving the area, marked the target with smoke for the Jade A/C' Per unquote.

At the bottom 31st. December 1970 entry of Squadron's log sheet it commented that with the squadron averaging 1236 air hours per month, that November had been the heaviest with a total of 1443 and just another subtle sign perhaps - who knows! About how the war was eventually to pan out for us in the long run.