

HAVE APC WILL TRAVEL

I guess you could say that in the early '90s many guys in the ADF – and I'd wager even a few Cav boys – found the humble M113 APC a tad lame and uninspiring.

If you found an old Janes Defence book dated from the late '80s or early '90s you'd see any number of first- (and in the case of the South African's) second-generation mine-resistant vehicles bristling with a plethora of large-calibre weapons.

Jealousies aside though, the fact remained that in 1993 the M113 was still the serving battle wagon of the then still tight-fisted ADF and would continue to serve us well for many years to come.

As an infantryman in the 1st Battalion, I'd seen a heap of changes after joining in 1990 – some good and some not so. I almost cried while handing in my SLR for the last time.

But, after years of post-Vietnam doldrums, it was nice to see the first of many serious attempts being made to improve the lot in life for those of us at the sharp end.

Strangely though, it was also comforting to know that some things would never change, as we held up our 1942-dated milbank filters for our final 100% DP1 kit check and rehearsed APC debus and contact drills on the footy field without actually having an APC there.

Of course, deploying without armoured vehicles into a place like Somalia would have been unthinkable and, I'm sure, was never seriously an option.

Apart from the physical protection they offered, we were never going to give up the visible deterrent that an APC sporting .50cal and .30cal machine guns gives.

Armoured vehicles are obviously intimidating to most civilians and, I'm sure, the mere presence of the APCs in town helped to deter troublemakers from having a go most days.

My feeble brain couldn't begin to comprehend the criteria or process involved in selecting and committing resources to a multinational mission, but I'd love to imagine a fat old UN big-wig in

1992 walking past a cluttered notice board and spotting a crumpled, poorly hand-written piece of paper pinned up, saying, "AUSTRALIAN ARMY, WORK WANTED: HAVE APC, WILL TRAVEL. If interested ring Paul (during business hours)."

How Aussie would that be?

I'm no expert on recent African history but an educated guess would say the war in the Ogaden between the Ethiopians and the Somalis must have been brutal, old-school warfare.

We kept finding all types of evidence of the carnage in the Bay Region – T34 and Centurion main battle tanks, old Russian artillery pieces and an alarming number of anti-tank weapons.

Luckily for us, most of the larger weapons systems were rat-shit long before we arrived which pretty much left us dealing with basic infantry and anti-tank weapons.

Unfortunately for us, these items were now scattered among the civilian population as if they were every-day household items.

The whole working-with-armor – or more correctly, the armor versus anti-armor love-hate thing we had going with our APCs, or as we affectionately called them, 'buckets' – came to a head for call-sign 3-2 or "The Body Snatchers" as we were known among friends in 1RAR, while we were operating out of the warehouse down in Burakhabar.

We had just turned north down a dodgy-looking track that ran off the main

ramp east of Ayers Rock when the boss called a halt just short of a shattered 4X4 body laying arse up beside the track near a nasty-looking depression in the ground.

As the ramps hesitantly went down and the engines were switched off, it became obvious that, although the incident wasn't fresh, it still looked ominous and demanded our attention.

Out of ear-shot the boss, sarge, section commanders and 2ICs had a chin-wag while the rest of us, not willing to disturb any concealed ordnance, stayed on the

ramps or hovered close to the buckets.

As our ears re-adjusted to the silence, we could just make out the distant barking of an agitated troop of baboons we had inadvertently disturbed, on a kopje (a rocky outcrop, pronounced kah-pee) about 1km off to the north.

After several minutes of debate and, I'd wager, a bit of bitching and moaning from a few unnamed individuals, with the good graces and approval of the boss, an old but not-forgotten Australian Army tradition came into play.

Whether it was trailblazing up the slopes at ANZAC Cove, lead scouting on the Kakoda Track, running ammo to the machine-gun pit in Korea during a Chinese assault or prodding for mines in Vietnam, it translated to the same few uttered words – "BUGGER THAT, GET ONE OF THE SINGLIES TO DO IT!"

So, with a bit of ribbing and banter, us single guys loaded up into the lead APC and the married guys jumped into the last.

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WORDS AJ SHINNER PICS SHINNER COLLECTION

As we climbed on to the top deck and the engines were kicked over, I quickly scanned the track north through my pocket binos and noticed the adult baboons on the kopje grab their young and move to the protection of the far side of the rock monolith.

For the first time while deployed we rode unprotected sitting up on the bucket's decks and, with Steve and Polly up next to the driver scanning the ground, we slowly picked our way north along the track.

For hours we crawled along at an agonising pace, expecting each passing second to be our last on Earth, fully expecting to enter Valhalla at any moment and in several pieces, char-grilled and still smouldering.

But, as was the case most days in Somalia, the mental anguish of impending doom finally lifted with a Skooby-Doo

I'm not sure what the user's manual says the top speed of an M113 APC is over rough ground, but it was bone-jarringly impressive.

To top off the excitement, was the occasional ear-splitting 'TING' on the side of a bucket's hull.

It happened a couple of times while we were there, and was usually just a rock thrown up by the tracks or something equally as non-threatening. But, every time, I'd sit there shitting myself, waiting for a fiery, bloody death, thinking it was a .50cal spotter round from one of the many 106 recoilless rifles that called Somalia home.

Luckily, I was up top in the hatch that day, while the other poor bastards were being rattled to death in the claustrophobic interior.

It was very visually impressive having the four buckets in line abreast, bouncing along over the rough ground.

motioned towards us as if trying to shoot away a small dog.

Silly old bugger.

Trying to keep my balance, I held on to the frame holding down extra ammo boxes on the top of the hull with three fingers and, as best I could, lined up the old guy, pool-cue style, with my Minimi while he zipped past between our ride and the bucket to our left.

For a split second, time stood still and, to this day, I have what would surely be a Pulitzer-Prize-winning image in my head of the man defiantly standing with arms raised high and his wrinkled, weathered face contorted in what I can only describe as total despair.

It wasn't until he was gone out of my sights, and we had left him in a cloud of dust, that a chill went down my back bone.

minutes, we acted as a blocking force at the edge of the village.

Gus, Polly, Axle, Abs and myself were leaning against the side of the bucket, in the narrow strip of shade it provided.

Trying to make ourselves more comfortable, we leaned back on our Kevlar vests, which we rested against the Bucket's tracks and road wheels.

As our glorious leaders Mac and Rock stood with open note books talking in front of us, we raked through our webbing to find something edible, and generally goofed around.

The encounter with the old arm-waving silly bugger was forgotten and not even mentioned or commented on.

Gus and myself were going through a *Lethal Weapon* phase and we were annoying everybody by throwing out movie quotes in rapid succession.

home in a box. Now that's tough love.

Anyway, with Rock now hovering over me like an eager vulture, I opened a can of what Jerry assured me was cheese, and inspected the contents.

Admittedly, after not washing properly for a week or so, we all smelt like shit, but my nose started picking up something far more rank than usual.

Even Rock, who had been ready with a Yank plastic MRE spoon, took a step back. Unnoticed by us until then, the CAV driver had been doing a walk-around of the bucket and now crouched next to me inspecting the tracks.

He quickly stepped back, gagging and, with the colour draining from his face, stammered, "Umm...you guys might want to move!"

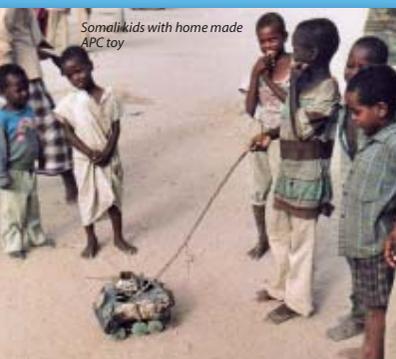
Not fully understanding, I dutifully stood up but kept sniffing at the can of cheese,

As call-sign 3-2 Bravo collectively gained clarity and recognised what was literally in front of our noses we all stepped back in unison.

Those of us chewing food spat it out as if it had suddenly turned to poison. As a means of mental self preservation while we all rode that deployment rollercoaster of highs and lows, we cracked the standard jokes, put up the façade of indifference and coolness and each in their own way quickly moved on.

Recovering from the initial shock, I defiantly scooped out a spoonful of the rubbery cheese and forced it into my mouth.

Suddenly, the old man popped back into my head. It dawned on me that he had probably been praying at one of the 100,000 or so mass, shallow graveyards scattered across the drought-decimated countryside and the poor bugger had been



Somali kids with home made APC toy



Charlie Coy HQ compound at Burakabar



Bucket at a vehicle check point at Burakabar



M113 in local cam

ending as six hours or so later, we rolled back onto the main paved road.

Moving around in the Somali countryside could rarely be done stealthily and was usually very much a 'balls-out' affair.

I remember longing for the comforting concealment of the north Queensland jungles when regularly trapped in the belly of the beast while out on our daily excursions – and doubly so on that particular day.

At the other end of the spectrum was the adrenalin-induced buzz fuelled by working with the buckets on offensive missions.

On one of these gigs we were packed into buckets charging across the countryside towards a target village. The only thing missing was the *Apocalypse Now* soundtrack and Robert Duval standing, bare-chested in a Cavalry hat screaming "I love the smell of Napalm in the morning!"

From my position up in the left corner of the hatch I held on for dear life and did my best to cover the ground between our bucket and the next as the village rapidly drew nearer.

As I scanned the crew commander's blind spots, I briefly trained the Minimi's barrel at each new obstacle or item of interest as ditches, camel-thorn clumps and crumbling mud-hut ruins sped by.

And for about the thousandth time I cursed the Minimi's plastic 200-round assault box, which decided to fall off and hit Jerry in the head as we bounced over a particularly deep, dry, irrigation ditch.

Screaming curses into the wind, I finally said 'fuck it', picked the centre of the 200-round link, snapped it off and draped the detached section around my neck, vowing to never use the stupid box again.

Seemingly from nowhere, an old guy stood up from the shade of a low, camel-thorn bush about 50m in front of us and, while holding a walking stick out,

That didn't look good! Was he waving us away from a minefield?

As my bum's pucker factor went up to about 10.5, I willed the approaching village on and tried to work out how the hell I was supposed to go limp, if we hit an anti-tank mine, when trying to stay upright in the hatch.

I inadvertently clenched my teeth and waited for the bang that thankfully never came.

Frustratingly, as is the way with my recollections of Somalia, I have only a vague memory of the uneventful sweep and search through the village after the ramps went down that day.

I think we found a few boxes of RPG rounds and an old, rusty, recoilless rifle and mount, questioned a few guys who were of recruiting age and slapped them on the wrist. But, in the general scheme of things, nothing too interesting.

My next clear memories of that day were a few hours later, back at the APC, while trying to find some shade and relax for 15

The day before, I had scammed a Frog ration pack off a Legionnaire and I was hesitantly looking through it, reading out words, ridiculously trying to impersonate Danny Glover who, in turn, was trying to impersonate a Frenchman. Yes, I'm an idiot.

Jerry, who was manning my Minimi up on the hull next to the turret, stuck his head over the side and was attempting to translate my gibberish.

Jerry's family was from Belgium and his father had been a paratrooper in the Congo with their Para Commandos in the late 1950s or '60s.

The night before shipping out, Jerry and his father were having a few drinks and a D&M about soldiering in Africa.

The very old-school soldier's advice and reminiscing ended abruptly with him standing, and in no uncertain terms, saying that if his son couldn't uphold the family's honour, serve his country with distinction and without cowardice, he should return

still thinking it was the source of the offensive odour.

Like morons, we all leaned in closely to inspect the track that the driver was still pointing at.

Mixed with the dirt, small stones and twigs that regularly get trapped in the APC's running gear, there was a strange grey-green substance intertwined with pieces of ripped cloth, smashed bone and squirming maggots.

It would be technically accurate and clinically correct to say that the smell was just like the smell of decomposing animal matter – like when the dog dragged in that dead rat, or that time the freezer full of meat blew up while we were away for two weeks, or when the possum died in the roof.

But, as we had quickly learnt, the smell of a decomposing HUMAN flesh can't be compared to anything, and can really only accurately be described as the smell of death.

trying to wave us off from inadvertently defiling what was probably the final resting place of several, if not all of his family and loved ones.

Of course, we couldn't have known that. The OC had been given a mission. He had planned it well with limited local intel and crude military 1:100,000-scale maps that had little interest in something as non-tactical as a graveyard in the middle of a proposed line of advance.

While the driver miserably attempted to remove the majority of human remains from the bucket's tracks with a stick, we moved away and tried to find a new place to sit in the scorching midday sun.

As we settled in again, Gus got back in the zone and threw out one of our regular *Lethal Weapon* quotes and I obligingly threw back the correct, expected, worn-out reply.

Chuckling, I tried my best to look indifferent as I rubbed my flack jacket in the dirt to remove a nasty piece of goo and a lone, plump, wiggling maggot.