

LONG ROAD HOME

In 1965, two young Australians were left behind on a battlefield in Vietnam. Their mates never forgot them.

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Left: Former colleagues carry a mate home.
Below: 1RAR Honour Guard.



At 2057hr on 4 June 2007, the wheels of a 37 Squadron Hercules lifted off the tarmac of Hanoi's international airport and began a nine-hour flight to Darwin. At that moment, as if by some silent signal, every passenger on board stopped trying to get comfortable in the cargo-net seats, forgot the discomfort of the hearing protection inserted to muffle the engines' roar, and glanced toward the precious cargo secured at the rear of the airplane – the Australian-flag-draped coffins of Lance Corporal Richard Parker and Private Peter Gillson. Each knew they were privileged to be taking part in this special flight. After almost 42 years missing in action in Vietnam, Lance Corporal Parker and Private Gillson were coming home.

For Second Lieutenant Robert Gillson, it was an opportunity to share an adventure with the father he never met.

For four 1RAR veterans on board, it was a moment they'd hoped, prayed and worked toward for many years.

Jim Bourke, a former platoon commander in D Company, was joined by three former A Company members – from 3 Platoon, Private Gillson's platoon commander Clive

Williams, and from 1 Platoon, Gordon Peterson and Trevor Hagan, acting platoon commander and acting platoon sergeant the day their comrades were killed.

Jim, founding member of Operation Aussies Home, recalls the feeling in 1RAR after Lance Corporal Parker and Private Gillson were killed during Operation Hump on 8 November 1965.

"The battalion was very depressed after that. A big black cloud came down over A Company – over the whole battalion. They'd left two blokes behind," he says.

Following the loss of the two young soldiers, a plan was drawn up by 1RAR to return to the battlefield the following week to destroy the enemy and reclaim their mates' bodies. But this was abandoned because of a lack of air resources and because 1RAR was sent on another operation on 20 November.

Ever since, A Company members have gathered on 8 November each year for a few beers and to remember the two they'd left behind.

"They've just felt really guilty about it, and it's been nigglng at them for years," Jim says.

For him, the search for MIAs in Vietnam began in 1997 when he began searching



Gillson and Parker – welcome home.

for another lost mate, a US special forces soldier, Sergeant 1st Class Anastacio Montez, who he'd worked alongside during his second tour of Vietnam with AATTV.

Jim conducted a determined search which, although unsuccessful, provided valuable contacts in the US Joint POW MIA Accounting Command.

In 2002, the command approached him for assistance in gaining mitochondrial DNA from the families of the six Australian MIAs, to exclude the possibility that their remains were already held by the US.

This piqued his interest in the Australian MIA cases, and he began to investigate. Before long, Jim Bourke began campaigning for funds and support, all the while continuing to work on the cases of Lance Corporal Parker and Private Gillson and also that of Lance Corporal John Gillespie, who was killed on April 17, 1971, when the helicopter he was on crashed in the Long Hai Hills of Phuc Tuy province.

In November 2005, Jim returned to Vietnam with Trevor Hagan and Gordon Peterson where they met with a Vietnamese man who had knowledge of the 8 November battle and was able to put the team in contact with Nguyen Van Bao, commander of 1RAR's opposing force in 1965.

Mr Bao described the battle in detail and told the Australians that the bodies of their comrades had been buried after the battle in a pit. However, his estimation of where the battle took place later proved to be about 1400m further south than where it actually occurred.

Australia's officially recorded location for the battle was also incorrect, which Hagan and Peterson realised immediately when they arrived. This may be explained by the fact that maps used in 1965 were from National Geographic and based on aerial photography from 1961 when the terrain was primary jungle with a dense canopy and undergrowth.

"The maps were absolutely inaccurate, except for the grid lines," Jim says, "they bore no resemblance to the ground we were on."

The team walked toward the east for

400m until both Hagan and Peterson decided on a likely position. A search was conducted, but nothing was found.

In May 2006, the team returned to the site with Clive Williams. He concurred with the site chosen by Hagan and Peterson and picked the ridge he believed he had followed in an attempt at a flanking attack 40 years earlier.

Using metal detectors, they searched for the tell-tale signs of a battlefield, but only located post-'65 ammunition cartridges.

Jim says they logged about 20 potential points they considered could have been weapon pits or burial sites before they had to return to Australia.

"We had the right location – I was 99 per cent certain of that. But how the bloody hell do we find two bodies after all this time?"

Upon return to Australia, Jim had another battle to face – undergoing five months of chemotherapy to combat lymphoma.

Determined not to continue without their mate, the team postponed the next trip to Vietnam until Jim recovered.

This time, armed with ground-penetrating radar provided by the Australian National University, and joined by forensic excavation expert David Thomas, the team returned to the battleground in January this year. Unfortunately, the first and most significant problem they were faced with this time was gaining diplomatic approvals to use the radar equipment. A whole month was wasted in Bien Hoa as negotiations stalled.

Disappointed and out of pocket, the team was forced to return to Australia.

However, shortly afterward, Minister for Veterans' Affairs Bruce Billson reimbursed the cost of the mission and granted a further \$37,500 to the cause. A Queensland businessman, Paul Darrouzet, chipped in with another \$40,000 for the operation to continue. Through the good offices of Mr Billson, approvals to deploy the ground-penetrating radar were also secured and the team returned to Vietnam accompanied by ANU staff.

As it turned out, however, the usefulness of the radar was hampered by high levels

FINAL CHAPTER

"Mates lost – battles passed – but soldiers carried the weight and worry, without respite, of an invisible and unimaginable 'backpack' of unfinished business, of mates not returned.

"Eternally bound by a shared experience and the motto of the Royal Australian Regiment – duty first – Operation Hump has continued, the return of their mates an enduring commitment.

"For more than four decades, much of this story has been written and settled, yet incomplete. The chapters already written record the service and sacrifice of Lance Corporal Parker and Private Gillson, their courage and commitment; the loss of a husband, a brother, a father, a son, a mate. How mates, veterans of A Company and Vietnam more generally, held fast to a conviction to get them home – to finish the story of these two diggers – the conviction that has not wavered or waned, despite the slow passage of many, many years, that a new chapter need be written – a conclusion.

"A chapter largely penned by the passion and perseverance of mates who never gave up and rarely let a day escape without remembering and committing to their goal.

"So today, the new chapter, the final chapter, is further written.

"Let the final chapter read and record: two brave servicemen lost; now forever young; never forgotten; found, recovered and repatriated with great care and dignity; carried home by the hands of mateship; returned to those who love and were loved; honoured and laid to rest by a grateful nation; at home at last, always remembered."

Extracts from a speech by Minister for Veterans' Affairs Bruce Billson



An emotional return at RAAF Base Richmond



of iron in the soil. Undaunted, the team persevered with the assistance of local labourers and an excavator, and spent two weeks digging several likely pits.

With only four days left, Jim Bourke remembers that morale was starting to flag as the prospect of another unsuccessful mission loomed.

"That Saturday night, we were really ticked off with one another and the whole thing – it was the hardest man-management job I've had in my life."

David Thomas suggested searching some of the sites they'd already dismissed so, the next day, the team went out to take another look at old ground.

On the Sunday afternoon, in the sixth hole they'd dug that day, the team finally found evidence of what they were looking for.

"Out the side of the hole popped a boot. It was Parker's boot," Jim recalls.

At 190cm, Lance Corporal Parker must have had trouble fitting into standard-issue boots because these didn't appear to be Australian. But there was no doubt the team had hit pay dirt, and excitement was high.

Soon, they found what was eventually identified as Parker's second boot and, before long, a second set of boots appeared, protruding from the dirt.

With Thomas supervising, the dig continued the next day and bones were unearthed. But it wasn't until Wednesday that the grave revealed its most telling evidence yet – an almost-perfect-condition talc-covered map of the AO (area of operations) for Operation Hump.

"It was covered with contact on both sides – you could see the boundaries marked," Jim says.

When the two young soldiers had been buried more than 41 years earlier, the area had been covered by thick jungle. Since then, heavy machinery had cleared it for cultivation, dramatically changing the ground. Depressions left by stump holes had led to several false readings from the radar and several fruitless searches. The actual pit containing Lance Corporal Parker and Private Gillson had a large rock on top of it that Jim Bourke assumes was inadvertently pushed there by machinery when the jungle was cleared.

"We'd actually identified that area in May. We'd probed it, but obviously we'd hit something hard and moved on."

All agree there was a good degree of luck, and perhaps "a little help from the man upstairs" in finding the remains. Nonetheless, here they were at last.

After finding the map on 17 April, Jim Bourke called Australia's Defence Attaché in Hanoi who alerted Brian Manns at the Army History Unit. Well aware of the Operation Aussies Home mission, Brian had been hoping for this call.

"I briefed the deputy chief of army at 0800 on Wednesday, and by 0830 walked out of his office with a task order to get a team over there as quickly as possible," Brian says.

Tasked with formally identifying and repatriating the two, the team included AHU's Major Jack Thurga, archaeologist Tony Lowe, physical anthropologist Denise

Donlon and forensic dentists Commander Matt Blenkin and Russell Lain.

Upon their arrival in Vietnam, Jim Bourke handed over to Brian and his team. On Anzac Day, Brian's team accessed the site and began a slow, painstaking process of carefully excavating with trowels and brushes to finish what the Op Aussies Home team had started.

It wasn't long before they found even more exciting evidence. "We discovered a set of dog tags," Brian Manns says.

"When we got the dog tags out, they were still wrapped in tape, but they were rusted to buggery – you couldn't read them at all."

Attempts to remove the tape began to damage the discs, so the suggestion was made to X-ray them using the dentists' equipment.

"When we X-rayed the discs, we could clearly read Gillson's service number and, from another angle, we could clearly read GILLSON."

By the Friday, the remains of Lance Corporal Richard Parker and Private Peter Gillson were fully removed from their burial site – but the dig could not be considered complete until the archaeologists had reached undisturbed soil at the bottom of the pit.

"When we did that, we came across a second set of dog tags. They were stainless steel and in perfect condition."

Amazingly, Lance Corporal Parker's stainless steel dog tags only needed the tape removed and the mud rubbed off to return them to perfect condition.

Further dental and forensic examination of the remains were conducted and a positive identification was eventually and officially declared.

With this chapter of a continuing quest closed, both Jim Bourke and Brian Manns say the high level of cooperation they received from contacts in the Vietnamese government means there's a much improved chance of accessing information and sites where the four remaining Australian MIAs may eventually be found.

Jim is already back on the trail, continuing his search for Lance Corporal John Gillespie and believes he has located the crash site, after finding scraps of a Huey in the right vicinity.

As two flag-draped coffins touched down at RAAF Base Darwin on 5 June 2007, Jim Bourke's dogged determination in his search is perhaps best summed up in his own words when I wish him luck – "You can sit around crying into your beer, or you can get on that hill, the right hill, and dig a hole. Then you've got a chance to find them."

Thanks to Jim, his team and the support they gathered around them, 15,153 days late, two fallen comrades are home at last.