



Private James Keys and Corporal Mal Grey, D Company 2RAR, 'hold the line' on exercise in Tully, Pic Sergeant Al Green 1998

High Standards

Shane Van Duren saw service as part of the International Force East Timor as a rifleman in 3RAR, and later joined the French Foreign Legion.

During a lengthy interview for another story in this special issue, I felt some of Shane's insights on infantry life were too good to cull, yet didn't quite fit into the flow of that other story – 'More arse than class; Timor and beyond'.

Here, therefore, is what Shane Van Duren sees as the essence of service and the high standards maintained by the Royal Australian Infantry Corps.

WORDS SHANE VAN DUREN AND BRIAN HARTIGAN PICS ADF

When you went to East Timor, was there a sense of 'this is the real thing' as opposed to just training?

"I don't think anyone ever treats soldiering as anything other than the real thing. It's always the real thing – we are not doing it on a chess board or in an office.

When you jump out of a plane in Shoalwater Bay, the ground is just as hard as it is in Timor or anywhere else. When you fall over, you fall over. Breaking a leg is never not a painful experience – no matter where you do it.

There's a very fine line between pleasure and pain. You work this hard and you get the job done and everyone looks good. But, you work just a little bit harder and you go down with heat stroke and you have a bag shoved in your arm. Flirting with that line is the level we always work to, regardless of whether you are in Australia or overseas.

Going down with heat was probably the biggest threat in Timor. Wearing body armour and carrying all that gear in 30 degrees and high humidity, we were more concerned with hydrating than we were with getting shot.

When it happens, you eventually get back up – it's not good for your brain of course – but you do recover and get on with it.

That's the standard we work to, and I don't think we'll ever go below that. From the day I joined – well, actually, Kapooka wasn't that hard – but Singleton certainly was. I had mates go down in Singleton, cerebral fluid coming out their eyes, their ears, their noses – but, after they recovered, they just got on with soldiering again.

They went down with heat stroke because that is how hard a man can work before he dies – and that's the standard we maintain – that's the standard that wins.

So to say that Timor was the 'real thing' and training isn't, is just way off track. That's how we train.

The Vietnam vets who trained us worked to that standard and maintained it all through peacetime – because that's the standard. Anything less is not acceptable. It's certainly not the standard in most government offices or civilian workplaces – but it's the standard in the infantry.

That's why the Veterans' Entitlement Act used to cover service both in Australia and overseas, in training or on operations. But now, all those soldiers who maintain that standard all through peacetime are not being looked after.

A good friend of mine went down with heat. When he was a young lad, he used to be under-12 chess champion of England – represented his country in chess. So there's no denying he had aptitude. But after he went down with heat that day, he was medically discharged from the Army with ADHD, and has never settled down since. I get emails from him from the jungles of Africa where he's training rebels, or from other parts of the world where he just bounces around, not able to settle down.

If he discharged before 1994 he would have been covered by the Veterans' Entitlement Act and got a medical gold card and be looked after. But because he discharged in 1997, he's not entitled to anything.

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God knows what will happen to him. I might find him in the gutter one day – but hopefully not.

One thing I can say about him, though, is that he knows the standard and still works to it. He works hard.

I could not say I worked any harder in Timor than I ever did in Australia just because Timor was the 'real thing' – it is always the real thing, especially for infantry.

You know, I nearly died at Singleton. We were set up for an ambush at night and the temperature suddenly dropped to minus 7.

You lie there and you get to that point where it's so cold you feel like your fingers and your toes and then your whole body is being crushed in a vice. Then you get to that point where you're shivering uncontrollably. Then that goes away and you drift off to sleep.

I woke up, with the rest of my section, wrapped in space blankets being worked on by medics around a fire.

We were screwed that night – the whole section – until someone decided to come and get us.

But, during the ambush, no one got up and said 'Oh, this is too cold for an ambush'. That's the standard.

The standard is – you work to the point where either you die or the system steps in and doesn't let you die. It happens quite regularly. That's the standard."



Privates Mick Holecek and Craig Mercer, D Company 2RAR, take the lead under load in Tully, Pic Corporal Darren Hilder 1998



Having worked that hard for however many years, did 'the system' look after you?

"I think 'the system' in Australia could do more to repatriate people after they do this kind of work.

After 1945, legislation came into parliament that basically said, if two people are going for a civil-service job, and one is a veteran and all else is equal, you must give the job to the veteran. I think they realised that if you put people to work and used their skills it would be better all 'round. And let's face it, that was an era when a lot of stuff got done in Australia. Remember, these were motivated and skilled people with very high standards. They knew what hard work was and they worked damn hard.

The main regret I have is that I haven't been utilised after my military career.

Being here at uni keeps my mind active and gives my life a sense of purpose. It's important that I feel I have a use, or a future use, to society other than being a 'grunt'.

'Grunt' is an American term that I don't like and gets associated with my generation of infantry and, frankly, I think it underestimates our ability.

A lot of good blokes I know are working in tyre shops and the like. With their skills, I can't fathom why. And it's not their fault – society just doesn't recognise these people for who they are or what they can do. I think there's very little respect in Australia generally for soldiers – and less so for former soldiers.



Privates Corde Wilkes and Matt Thorpe, D Company 2RAR, in deep in Tully. Pfc Corporal Darren Hilder 1998

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Many of us can prove that we are capable and intelligent. NSW University just offered a mate of mine an honours degree, for example. If he tells anyone he has an honours degree from Uni NSW, they'll automatically respect him. But if he says he used to be a rifleman in an infantry battalion, they're not going to respect him as being intelligent. But he's got the same mind now as he had then."

Why did you join the army in the first place?

"My initial motivation in joining the Army was to serve – it certainly wasn't to make money. My family runs a business that probably paid more in tax last year than I made in my whole career in the Army. I could have stayed in that line of work and done quite well.

I think any young man with red blood in his veins likes adventure, and the Army certainly advertises itself as adventurous. I think that that adventure appealed to me, and the fact that that adventure could be beneficial and have a strong sense of purpose for my nation and for other countries was a bonus.

I could have become a policeman if all I wanted was to carry a gun, have adventure and serve my nation. But the Army offered a little more. I wanted to do things for people in countries that didn't have the stability and security that we take for granted. That's where you can really make a difference to humanity. I think that's why Brad Pitt and others go to Africa and build houses for people. Little things like that make a big difference to the global community. And if everybody did just a little bit in the course of their lives, then the world would be a better place."

So, you joined the Army to serve your country?

"To serve? I'm not really the serving type. I don't like being told what to do generally. I don't think anyone does. It's not a natural thing. I didn't want to be told what to do at every minute of the day and be micromanaged like a sardine. I wanted to be a professional and do my job to the best of my ability. I didn't want to be treated like a lemming, as the Army can sometimes do – in fact, the Air Force calls the Army a bunch of lemmings, and it's probably true sometimes.

It wasn't about serving or being subordinate. It was about doing and achieving things that I could be proud of in old age.

Young people today have great opportunities to join the Army, go to Iraq or Afghanistan or somewhere else and make a difference that will be put down in history and remembered. You can choose to be a part of it or not.

The war in Iraq will never be forgotten. Afghanistan will never be forgotten. As individuals we will all be forgotten, but the things we do in life will not. That is history, and you can either participate in it or read about it.

I chose to participate.

You can call that 'service' if you like, but that might indicate that I was subordinate. A few of my commanders might not agree with that. I was a little shit!

But I did my bit, I think I did a good job and I'm proud of what I achieved, even if it did cost me a lot."