

# BREAD and BUTTER

WORDS AJ SHINNER PICS ADF AND SHINNER COLLECTION

It's been said that you can sail past it, fly or drive over it, but the ground will never belong to you until an infantryman stands firm and digs a hole in it.

*The author on guard during an aid task.*

While respecting the other services and supporting corps, I must say I believe this statement is true and that even in the most non-conventional situations this is still and will probably always be the case.

But I'm also a firm believer in Mr Murphy, whose holy laws of combat don't always shine down in favour of the lowly infantryman.

After two solid years of close-country and jungle warfare training with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, I probably should have expected that we were going to be deployed to the desert in northern Africa – thanks Murphy.

From day one in country we did it all – humanitarian missions, defended water points, protected convoys, manned vehicle

check points, kicked in some doors and yes, even dug a few holes.

Somalia in 1993 could never be considered a conventional old-school infantry operation, but like so many times before, the adaptable Aussie Digger put on his boots and learnt on the run.

While no strangers to low-level ops and humanitarian training, the only thing that we were truly prepared for and masters of was patrolling.

I personally felt we were never more in control of the ground than when we were on the streets of Baidoa getting our GP boots dirty.

Even more so while 'down town' lurking in the shadows and darkness at 3am and, quite frankly, we wouldn't have wanted it any other way.







The author geared up for patrol.

Although we took to the urban patrolling tasks in Baidoa – or, more correctly, in AO Falcon – like fish to water, the first few night patrols were a tad surreal.

While patrolling on the main streets and market places before 1am or so, we were surprised to find throngs of people still moving about, conducting business and socialising, most of them relatively unconcerned by our presence or passing.

It's easy to appreciate, after spending even the shortest time in Somalia, that many people living in hot arid countries prefer to move about on the streets later in the day and at night to avoid the oppressive heat.

One of the compromises we were forced to make while moving through these crowded areas came after the realisation that certain section weapons were instantly limited to the point of being virtually unusable.



Axel takes 5 during a cordon and search.

As gunner, I voiced my concerns to our section commander, Mac, about not being able to deploy my Minimi effectively while being boxed in by civilians.

It was made very clear to us before deploying that regardless of red or yellow cards, all contacts resulting in casualties or fatalities would be investigated fully and charges would be made if negligence or wrong-doings were discovered.

Letting rip a three-round burst in a crowded market place was never going to be justifiable and was definitely not going to win anybody's hearts or minds.

Opting for personal protection during these parts of the patrols, I ended up slinging the Minimi across my chest while carrying the Browning pistol and a torch in my off hand.

With Polly and his night-vision scope out in front of the section, followed by Gus and his goggles, we'd sift through the crowds and weed out any likely candidates for a random search.

On queue, I would then move to one side and illuminate the suspect with the torch as the rest of the section went into all-around defence and covered us as the boys carried out a quick search.

Of course, we were warned pre-deployment, that we were going to see a lot of weapons on the streets and it was stressed that not all of the people carrying weapons would be bad guys. We were told to be prepared for it, not to freak out and instinctively fire when seeing a weapon, to stick to the rules of engagement and not to fire unless fired upon and blah blah blah blah.

The fact is that nothing can prepare you for that first time – or second time for that matter – that you see the barrel of an AK47 being raised towards you at close range.

As a 17-year-old tourist in Sri Lanka I had taken a photo of a Naval Commando on a street corner in Colombo, which unfortunately resulted in me looking cross



Cav support.

eyed at an AK foresight no more than half a metre from my face as he screamed, "No pictures please, thank you sir!" Suffice to say, the undies I was wearing that day ended up in the bin.

Six years later, on one of our first night patrols in Baidoa, this time thankfully armed to the teeth, we were moving out of the crowded market area heading east on the main road.

I was about to re-holster my pistol and start patrolling with the Minimi again when Gus stopped in front of me and looked into the blackness of an open compound doorway.

In a very animated comical way, he proceeded to bob his head from side to side like a pigeon, as you do when you're wearing the crappy earlier generation night-vision goggles and can't see shit through the fuzzy green snow storm.

He then turned to me and whispered, "There's two guys sitting against the wall in there, zap them with the torch and check them out mate."

Gus moved to the other side of the opening, I moved up to the doorway, aimed the torch with my left hand and my pistol with the other and hit the switch.

For a split second the two locals seated not more than 5 metres away on a bench looked like Roos in a headlight, eyes as big as dinner plates with jaws open.

The next second the AK47 and SKS assault rifles they had resting on their laps were being raised towards me.

"WEAPON!" I dropped the torch which turned off as I released the button and, in a practised motion, brought both hands together, swiped the pistol's safety and pulled the trigger as I dove painfully onto the ground on top of the Minimi still slung across my chest.

As Murphy's Law of Combat dictates, the safety stuck and the Browning 9mm pistol sat quietly in my hands and, for what seemed like an eternity, I lay totally exposed in the doorway.

## THE NEXT SECOND THE AK47 AND SKS ASSAULT RIFLES THEY HAD RESTING ON THEIR LAPS WERE BEING RAISED TOWARDS ME

My brain was screaming as I tried to carry out the immediate-action drill on the pistol while digging in with my eyelids.

Cocking my head to one side I tried to use my peripheral vision to scan the darkness, suddenly aware that the next thing I should be seeing was the twin muzzle flashes of the assault rifles being fired at me from point-blank range.

In reality, only a few seconds passed as Smurf scrambled onto some rubbish to cover over the 6-foot wall as the section trampled over me in the doorway and burst into the compound.

As the last pair of boots passed over my back I tried to mentally stop the flow of adrenalin which was flooding my system and I joined the section in securing the two men and the warehouse compound.

Now shaking and full to the brim with adrenalin, I let rip a string of obscenities and abuse at the two males as Rock and Abs patted them down.

I was furious that the pistol's safety had stuck, totally pissed off that the incident had been a near fatal fuck up, ecstatic to still be alive, but completely embarrassed that I had ended up rolling around on the ground while the section did the deed.

In retrospect, if the pistol had worked and by some miracle I had actually hit my intended targets – which is highly unlikely – would it have been seen by the green machine as a lawful act of self-defence?

Bugged if I know, but thankfully there were no muzzle flashes or cracks of automatic fire. In their wisdom, the two locals, who turned out to be legitimate security guards, had thrown their rifles down as soon as they heard me scream in English.



Flatley, Billy and Meehan outside a house they assaulted.

For the second time after a close encounter with an AK, I changed my jocks, chalked it all up as a learning experience and never again, while deployed, used the safety on the pistol.

While night patrolling in AO Falcon, which was the eastern end of town, the three sections of Call Sign 3-2 were housed in walled NGO compounds close to each other and each in turn rotated through patrolling, gun pickets and sleeping.

A section would finish each patrol by dropping their night-vision goggles, radios or any other shared items off to the next section, pass on any relevant intelligence and then head back off down the road to find their fatter sacks. With the wisdom of hindsight, it's absurd to think that we were forced to juggle the most basic pieces of kit used by well-equipped modern armies.

Randomly, Mac, our section commander, would pick a guy to stay in the compound to man a radio and ensure our gear didn't get knocked off while the rest of the section kitted up and headed out into the darkness.

Although not as tactically productive as the earlier or last patrols of the night, the graveyard shift around 0300hrs was my favourite.

During these times, when the streets were clear of people, we could not only move around quickly and quietly, but we could also pop in and out of the labyrinth of alleyways without being easily monitored by the clansmen and their lookouts – a nice way to earn our bread and butter.

One very dark, moonless night, we were near to completing one of these tension-



filled graveyard-shift patrols when a torch popped on about 20 or 30 metres ahead, on the side of the road, about 3 or 4 metres off the ground.

Gus and Polly instinctively trained their weapons onto the torch and slowly went down onto their knees.

Expecting the worst, I moved a metre to my left to clear Gus and lowered the Minimi slightly, clicked off the safety and adopted the textbook standing position for night firing.

Although we must have been at the maximum range of illumination of what appeared to be a hand-held torch, it never wavered and stayed firmly fixed on Gus and myself.

Then I became aware of a strange noise from the direction of the torch and it suddenly hit me that something was incredibly wrong.

As stealthy as the patrol had been, the fact that there had been no moon meant that, as a group, we were dependent on Mac and his map to pin-point our exact location and steer us home.



Head and Axel chat with kids.



Day-patrol through a marketplace.



3-2 Bravo patrol a back alley.

Although we had regularly passed known landmarks at various times during the patrol, at the point of encountering the torch I didn't have a clue where we were, how far we were from home, or how close we were to friendly forces.

After hearing a louder click from up ahead and knowing Polly to my left in the dark and Gus at my feet to my right would be taking up trigger pressures, I took a massive punt and called out 'Australia!'

A muffled "Shit" could be heard and the torch went out.

We moved up and practically bumped into the familiar shape of an APC that was parked outside the compound housing our Company HQ.

With the light of a dodgy, issued torch and no moonlight to adequately use the night-vision goggles, the APC commander had only just been able to make out that we were armed men and taking up hostile firing positions.

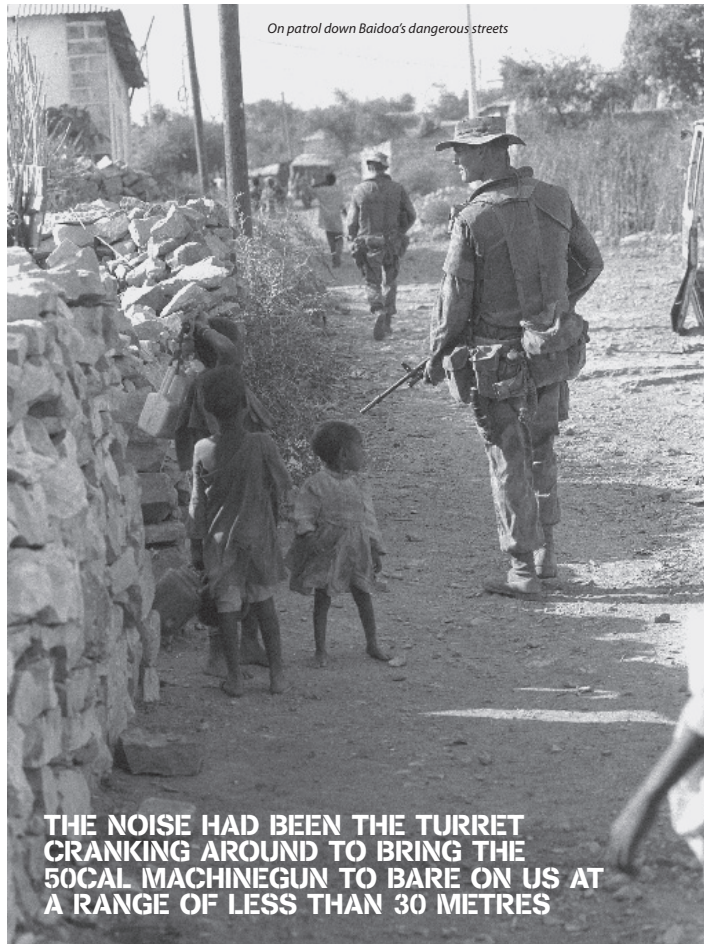
The noise had been the turret cranking around to bring the 50cal machinegun to bare on us at a range of less than 30 metres.

In our defence, on many occasions we were forced to operate without a GPS and, armed with only the crudest of maps, night navigation generally sucked and needed your full attention – even more so on a moonless night in the maze that was Baidoa's back streets.

I guess Mac had misjudged our position short by a few hundred metres and had not yet radioed ahead warning Coy HQ we were passing by.

I will be honest and say I had been rattled by the incident and made the effort the next day to find the person who had been in the APC turret.

Disturbingly, the Cav guy confirmed that we had scared the shit out of him and he was indeed bringing the 50cal to bear on what he thought was a group of bandits.



On patrol down Baidoa's dangerous streets

**THE NOISE HAD BEEN THE TURRET CRANKING AROUND TO BRING THE 50CAL MACHINEGUN TO BARE ON US AT A RANGE OF LESS THAN 30 METRES**

After a short conversation and a forced laugh, he looked me square in the eyes and confessed he had been very close to pulling the trigger.

The most memorable incidents from 3-2's night patrolling, and indeed the more interesting of all our contacts in Somalia, were undoubtedly the two involving 3-2 Charlie and what we all christened 'Billy's Contacts'.

Named after 3-2 Charlie's section commander, the two contacts in question occurred in 'Murder Alley' near the main marketplace, and both in the early hours of the morning.

The first of the two patrols was conducted from our tent at the airfield and was intended to cover the western end of town.

3-2 Charlie would leave via the front gate, head up towards the centre of town and pass down through the main market area, then pass along some of the southern back streets and back across the south bridge over the dry river bed and home.

Unknown to me because I was sound asleep and snoring my head off, Steve, 3-2 Charlie's lead scout had started to throw his guts up only hours before they were supposed to depart on task.

After finally convincing Steve that he wasn't well enough to go on patrol, Billy and Lively, 3-2 Charlie's 2IC, had a quick powwow and put Flatley in the lead-scout's position, and headed off into the night.

About 45 minutes later I was semi-conscious, laying on my cot, when the night was shattered by an intense fire-fight off in the distance.

Along with several other guys, I sat bolt upright. Knowing it must have been Billy's patrol, we quickly started gearing up and listened as the firing increased.

After the initial contact, where it was virtually impossible to pick out individual

weapons firing, there was a short silence then several long bursts from a Minimi followed by the louder thumps from what we guessed was an APC's 50cal, before there was finally silence.

It wasn't until I was pretty much ready to run out the door that it dawned on me that 3-2 wasn't the designated QRF and we were forced to stand and listen helplessly at the open end of the 11 x 11 tent.

It wasn't until Billy's section started filtering back into the tent after being dropped at the Coy HQ by APC that we understood what had transpired.

While patrolling along the infamous Murder Alley, Flatley had heard a weapon being cocked in a doorway in front of him and called out a warning.

The unseen gunman replied by firing a burst which hit Flatley's rifle, hand and night-vision goggles.

The section then put in covering fire so the scouts could move back to safety.

Day, the section radioman, was moving across the road to a new firing position and was hit in the shoulder. With his left arm starting to stiffen, Day called in a contact report along with his own casevac request.

As Billy got sorted and started withdrawing the section to the main road, Liveley and Blakey, with the section Minimi, laid down several bursts towards a few of the more bolder Somalis who were attempting to continue the fight.

During the fighting withdrawal, Day was continually on the radio vectoring in the APCs, which had started their race to the contact location as soon as the first rounds had been fired.

Hearing the APCs approach, Day guided them in the last few hundred metres and 3-2 Charlie loaded up.

After the section hit the ramp, the lead APC commander fired a few rounds from the 50cal to discourage several armed Somalis who had pursued 3-2 Charlie to the

extraction point. Unwilling to take on the heavier-calibre weapon, the bandits melted away into the darkness.

After a record-breaking run back to the airfield, it was confirmed at the RAP that Day had a clean entry and exit wound in the soft tissue of his left shoulder and Flatley, by some miracle, only had a chip out of his right hand.

The next morning we all inspected Flatley's rifle and goggles and were gobsmacked at how lucky he had been. Along with the three rounds that had destroyed his rifle and goggles, another round had passed through the blousing of his trousers above his left boot!

Call it Karma or whatever, but Steve was definitely not destined to go on that patrol and I'm convinced he would not still be walking this Earth if he did.

A day or two later the rest of 3-2 were moved into town to an NGO compound while 3-2 Charlie, Billy's section, stayed at the airfield to do a night patrol from there.

Later in our deployment this compound would become infamous for the 'Toga Party' that was held by several NGO groups. The hype built for several days about this party and we were disgusted to see vast amounts of money spent shipping in lobsters, steaks, beer and spirits from Kenya.

Actually, they probably deserved the distraction but, I think at the time, we were simply pissed that we weren't invited, although, at the very least, it was rather entertaining.

I can't help but smile remembering a group of us hearing a couple becoming very amorous and loud, enticing us to a side window where we watched the proceedings which ended in a female participant being left tied to a bed!

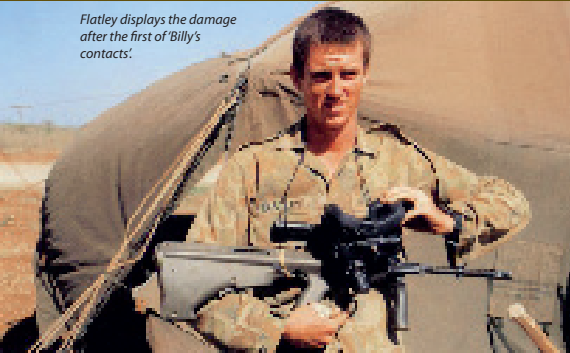
Anyway..... that's another story.

So, just a few days after the platoon's first major contact, Billy's section again geared up, left the tent, and headed out the front





Flatley displays the damage after the first of Billy's contacts.



LAAW damage on a roof after missing the door.



gate at the same time of night, on the same patrol route.

I vividly remember lying out in the open, on my cot, stunned to see the sky light up seconds before the thunder of the initial contact reached us.

As the first exchange of gunfire started to die, only about a kilometre away there was another flash in the sky and an ominous boom.

I heard someone in the darkness yell RGP, as we all scrambled for gear and weapons while Sarge screamed his tits off about mates dying due to our lack of professionalism and speed.

This time we were the QRF and it somehow felt very right to be running towards the APCs to go help our mates who were deeply involved in another major shitfight.

The drive took only minutes, but in that time a million pictures flashed through our heads about what we'd see when the ramps came down.

We had definitely heard one anti-armour weapon detonate, or at least a grenade, which we knew no one in Charlie Coy carried. We were expecting the worst.

When the ramps did come down we all carried out our drills and found cover, only to find the party very much over.

Steve would explain later that as they had cautiously come up to the same spot as the first contact, several locals had started shouting at them from doorways.

After a shouted warning back from Steve that they were Australians, the yelling increased, and an automatic burst from an AK erupted from a building at an intersection to their front.

After going to ground in the same spot for a second time in the space of only a few days, 3-2 Charlie was not keen to do the Harold Holt.

This time, the section laid down heavy fire and Billy directed Meehan to fire his 66mm

LAAW [light anti-armour weapon] at the door of the building.

The crack-boom of the LAAW's rocket had abruptly ended the firefight but, from only 30 or so metres away, Meehan had missed the door. For some reason the rocket had veered off and hit the edge of the corrugated-tin roof, sending sparks and debris out across the street.

After missing the door with the LAAW, and the opportunity for a quick, dynamic building entry was lost, Billy took stock of the situation, opted for safety and waited for us to arrive.

While waiting for the familiar noise of our approaching APCs in the ensuing silence that followed the 66 blast, an eerie light started emanating from the building's windows. It turns out that the contact had happened at such close range that our tracer rounds were only igniting and whizzing around the floor after the rounds had been spent, bouncing off internal walls, passing through the door, walls and windows.

After we were all on the ground and Billy brought the Boss up to speed, he ordered 3-2 Alpha up.

From my vantage point, covering down the road, I watched as Tom and his boys kicked the door in. There was a pregnant pause and then a loud, "Check this shit out."

The rest of 3-2 Alpha filed in, followed by the Boss and Sarge.

J Conway would comment later on how surreal it was finding four wounded locals laying on the floor inside.

Comically, the four were all lying on the floor in a row, rigidly at attention, their eyes wide open, covered in a fine white dust that had fallen from the ceiling when the 66's rocket had impacted.

As they lay there, weapons neatly stacked off to one side, each man held his ID up, ready for inspection.

Only in Somalia.

*This story is the fourth from AJ Shinner, then a private with 1RAR, and the 20<sup>th</sup> in an ongoing series of personal recollections from Operation Solace in Somalia – the first 16 instalments provided by Lance Corporal Wayne Cooper, a crew commander in a 3/4 Cav Regt APC. AJ Shinner's recollections from Somalia will continue to run in CONTACT Air Land & Sea for the foreseeable future.*

Abs outside a clan meeting place.

