Detect, Detain, Destroy
The Vietnam War through the eyes of a Canine

Each day was different yet they all felt the same. We put our lives and noses on the front line, tracking for anything from the enemy, to hidden enemy bases and even bombs. My job determined who in our command would live through the Vietnam war; a sanguinary conflict that raged on for 19 brutal years, 5 nightmarish months, 4 strenuous weeks and 1 punishing day. As a committed member of the Australian army and only one of eleven, it was my job to detect, detain and destroy. This is why we should be honoured in Australia’s Wartime History.

1965 marked the turning point in the lives of many unwanted canines. Sold, some of us for the equivalent of two dollars, we were finally out of kennels, ready to contribute to the warfare effort in Vietnam. The eleven of us, almost identical, being black and of labrador or labrador cross breeds, started out in a training program at the Tracking Wing of the Infantry Centre near Sydney. The training was not as fun or as easy as imagined, but exhilarating it was. Our purpose for tracking and chasing at speed was soon realised. In the near future, our involvement would save lives and assist the bringing down of the enemy. Our role and contribution could determine the ultimate denouement.

Not long after April 1967, Australian tracker dogs and their teams were deployed to the south of Vietnam. The first two tracker teams which included the dogs Cassius and Justin, travelled to Vung Tan in Vietnam via aircraft. The rest of us travelled to Darwin, then to Vung Tan on RAAF C130 aircraft and finally to Nui Dat on RAAF Caribou aircraft. Arriving on the 20th of April, at the 7th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment support company lines, we were positioned far away from the anti-tank element of the platoon. We discovered, when we arrived, rows of tents, kennels, places for us to run and play, wash points and countless trees. It was here that we would be quartered for the rest of the war. Memories made would stay with us forever and eventually these kennels would haunt us. For now, we were ready to support Australia and prove our worth in this war.

Within two weeks, our first team was out and tracking. Cassius and Justin were the first two Australian combat tracker dogs in the Vietnam War. Many a time we were called to support armoured and engineer elements of the US Army. Since we never knew when an urgent call would come, we always had to be flexible and ready for rapid movement. Soon enough we were known for tracking the ones that got away. Our team slogan became ‘You lose ‘em, We find ‘em.’

Over the next few months we were deployed whenever a battalion entered the bush. Our supporting battalion was the Royal Australian Regiment 7th Battalion, or 7th RAR for short. The battalion, we were told, was raised on the first of September 1965. Their first tour of Vietnam began in April 1967, where the battalion relieved the 5th RAR. Based at our current location in Nui Dat, the battalion spent the majority of its time patrolling in Phuoc Tuy but was also deployed outside Phuoc Tuy with 2nd RAR from the 24th of January to the 1st of March 1968. This service saw the Regiment acquire battle honours for its involvement in the defense of allied bases in the area of Bien-Hoa and Long Khanh Provinces. During that time, there weren’t many men at our base and at 5:30pm, when the cheery officer of the 7th RAR who constantly recited ‘Waltzing with Matilda’ was not around, it was eerily quiet.
Even though we were the ones to put our heads, literally on the front line, it was the handlers and service men who should take all merit. Ready to creep in and attack only moments after I pointed, although they were well trained, their lives could be and were lost in split seconds. One tragic incident is forever vivid in my mind, when a young captain lost his life on our patrol. We were trekking through thick bushland for hours, uncovering only one food stockpile and a deserted base. Suddenly my bottom hit the ground and somehow ended up on the feet of my handler. My brain said go but my body was as stiff as a board. Something was wrong. The always eager and willing-to-impress captain moved forward, seeing that I had not pointed to indicate an enemy lying ahead. The next ten seconds happened fast in a very slow way. The poor boy was launched 10 metres into the air and as he turned and gravity kicked in, we all saw his eyes, wide and bulging out of his head and his mouth fully agape. As for the rest of him, there was nothing much else to see. The smell and sight of burning flesh is one that will forever prey on my mind. The boy couldn’t be saved but until his departure from life there was nothing the men could do but comfort him and hold together what was left of the lad. It was my job to protect my handler and the young men of the 7RAR. On that day, I felt as if I had failed.

The details of the incident still lingered in my mind as I completed following missions. My concentration levels rose to unknown levels, there was no way I would let my master down. Mentally, I was still strong and ready to work. That was until the passing of my good mate, Cassius. It had been a relatively quiet week and on this day Cassius, his master and coverman headed out to the sand dune to undertake additional training. We thought nothing of it. No one was perfect and sometimes a bit of practice was all that was needed. The details of the following events are confused but it is believed that Cassius began to show signs of heat stress. After a short break, the team decided it would be best to turn back towards the camp. Somewhere however, along the way, he collapsed. Not within an area of radio contact, Cassius’ master carried him back to camp. In spite of this, by the time Cassius was eventually transported to the American veterinary camp he had passed. Cassius, canine of handler Norm, was the only Australian combat tracker dog to cross the great divide during the Vietnam War.

Our service in the Vietnam war saved numerous lives and in due course, assisted in determining the outcome of the war. While lives were lost and wounds are still healing, we never regretted the job we did. By the time 1971 came around we were all sprouting grey patches and showing signs of exhaustion. Our job was done and we were ready to head home... Or so we thought. The afternoon was quiet and the air surprisingly crisp. Relaxing was a luxury that was not taken for granted. Suddenly woken by a warm and damp rush of air I realised sometime was wrong. Each handler approached their own dog slowly. Their breathing was heavy and eyes moist. With downcast looks they begged for our forgiveness. They had done everything they could but still they were not allowed to take us home. With 85% of Vietnam Veterans reportedly successfully transitioning back into civilian life, I knew in my heart that my master was doing the right thing. The right thing for him, I believed, but maybe not for me. During the war we had uncovered the enemy, weapons, explosives, campsites and bunkers, and together had saved innumerable scores of live. Yet we were torn from the ones we loved, trusted and cared for. The ones who had carried us through. Both man and canine cried that day.

As I live out the rest of my life in the care of a European family who, don’t get me wrong, treat me as I deserve, I can not help but to long for my master. Satisfied that my work is complete and my soul is
set for eternal rest, I leave only one trace of my being here on this earth; A footprint etched into the heart of the man who cared for me and fought for the freedom of the other.

Megan De Silva
St Patrick's College Sutherland
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Bibliography


