

INDEBTED

**From a Quaker Schoolboy
to an Australian SAS Soldier**

by
Col 'Sketchy' Moyle

INDEBTED
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to an Australian SAS Soldier

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Dedicated to

My 'bride' Noeleen Faye Nielsen Moyle (deceased)

'Her boys' and now, 'my men' –

Leigh William Moyle and Heath John Moyle

Noeleen's family, my family

and 'The Family'.

'The warriors', past, present and future of
the Australian Special Air Service Regiment,
and their lovely and resilient women – mothers,
wives, partners, fiancées, girlfriends, sisters and daughters.

and thanks to

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and Peter Cosgrove for his time, inspiration

and the book's Foreword.

Indebted

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His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd)
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

Foreword to 'Indebted'
by Colin Moyle

In my present job, there is a strict policy constraining me from contributing forewords to publications, for all kinds of good reasons. But there must be exceptions for folks like Colin Moyle!

Colin and I went to war together, many years ago. We were both new boys in among much more experienced soldiers, both infantrymen in that infantry war, in South Vietnam 1969-70.

I'd had six months commanding a platoon (and even for a period a company!) in Australia and Malaysia. He'd come straight from the training pipeline as a reinforcement. My first battle was also his. From my initial reservations about his physical robustness (thoroughly debunked by his performance by the way), I was immediately and profoundly impressed by his coolness and skill under fire – he was a natural. I came to rely strongly on his remarkable aptitude for the war we were fighting. We served together throughout my time in Vietnam and he stayed on for another six months of most dangerous duty. It didn't surprise me in the slightest to learn that he'd graduated to that elite unit, the Special Air Service Regiment, in which he spent the rest of his long and illustrious Army career.

I remarked that he was a 'natural'. If you could bottle 'essence of Moyle', I would inoculate every Army recruit with it on Day 1. They'd get courage in abundance, wisdom and shrewdness, toughness leavened by compassion and endless good humour.

I loved this book. It is pithy and pungent, always insightful, often hilarious. Col's love of family, the Army and Australia calls from its pages. It is a fascinating and compelling yarn.

Well done Col – you stand in the front rank of the soldiers with whom I have had the honour to serve.

Peter Cosgrove
One-time Platoon Commander of extraordinary diggers

PROLOGUE

To put my story into perspective: I spent most of my working life as a soldier. I joined the regular Australian Army in 1969. After a short training period, I was sent to Vietnam as a reinforcement and was on operational service for eighteen months from 1969-1971 as a basic infantry rifleman. The Vietnam War (1955-1975) was fought between North Vietnam, supported by China and other communist allies, and South Vietnam, supported by the United States and other anti-communist countries. Australia's involvement was from 1962-72.

After returning from Vietnam, I attended the Special Air Service (SAS) selection course, which I passed. The Australian SAS was formed initially as a company in 1957, and later increased to a regiment in 1964. This unit was modelled on the successful British WWII unit whose motto is 'Who Dares Wins'. As well as drawing upon the philosophy of the British SAS, the Australian SAS drew upon the experiences of our special forces in WWII. These included the Service Reconnaissance Department, Independent companies, Coastwatchers, and the M and Z Special Units. More importantly, the ethos of the Australian SAS was to select soldiers that exuded the best of Australian character and culture. That is, resilience, mental and physical toughness, mateship, improvisation, a can-do attitude, accept a no nonsense approach to superiors, and a sense of humour, to name a few.

I served predominantly with the SAS until my discharge from the regular army in 1993. From 1993 to 2015, I served with both the Commandos and the SAS as a reservist. In 2015, I had reached my use-by date, or as the Army puts it – mandatory retirement age for the Australian Army Reserve, that is, sixty-five years of age. I could have been given a waiver for a few more years, however, I was happy to leave after forty-six

years of service. I now have little to offer the military, but am grateful to have more time to write and tell stories.

Caveat

To my Army mates and colleagues:

Some details in my memoir are sketchy. To those for whom these cause sleepless nights, I say, 'don't waste time (or your life) pole vaulting over mouse shit'!

Part One – Introduction

AS LONELY AS A BASTARD ON FATHER’S DAY

‘As lonely as a bastard on Father’s Day.’

This is such a great saying. However, in this day and age it is probably obsolete, but still humorous. It reminds me of the storytelling that coloured my years as a boy growing up in the family pub on the west coast of Tasmania, and later as a soldier in the Australian Army, where such phrases



*Our cherished family photo. My ‘bride’ Noeleen, and ‘our men’,
Heath and Leigh, 1991.*

were thrown in to embellish tall stories. However, ‘There I was as lonely as...’ has a more poignant significance in relation to the extended periods of time I was away from my original family and, later, my new young family. During my 24 years as a soldier in the regular Army, the preciousness of time at home was most evident when my ‘bride’ Noeleen lost her battle with breast cancer.



Our shared passions were bush walking and travelling. This is Noeleen, in her element, on the Tasmanian Overland Track, Easter, 1995.

Noeleen’s mental and physical toughness and determination to live life as normally as possible, despite the many heartaches and extreme physical and psychological pain, was truly inspirational. Her terminal diagnosis was the greatest shock for both of us, as I was always destined to die first. Apart from the fact that I was a male, many of my SAS colleagues had been killed, and I had survived numerous near misses. Words are inadequate to describe Noeleen’s fight for bonus time against all medical expectations. I had been ‘around the traps’ and seen some impressive deeds of courage, but none, in my eyes, rivalled hers.

So many ‘average’ people fighting a terminal illness show such remarkable determination and courage to the end. It is at times only

INTRODUCTION



Noeleen, helping with our bathroom renovations.

Note: Like many military wives and partners, bringing up young children, Noeleen was isolated from immediate family with little military support. In our time in the SAS, as soldiers we spent more time away than at home.

When I was home and 'reorganising' things, as men do, Noeleen would cheekily say, "Just remember that you are only a visitor"!

recognised by the close family, friends or the medical fraternity. Noeleen's brave fight for life, whilst maintaining her dignity, was motivational, and fired me up to do many things, including writing this book.

The other catalyst for writing this memoir is Peter Cosgrove. Along with thousands of soldiers and average Australians who have come to know him, for many of us he is the only person we can legitimately 'name drop'. In my case, I was fortunate to have served with him in Vietnam. Peter refers to me in his autobiography, *My Story*, so I believe this gives me a right of reply.

Chapter One

THE BEGINNINGS



Zeehan, “where men are men and the sheep are ...”

I was born in 1949. When writing this book in earnest, I had celebrated over fifty birthdays – all good things to have! As a soldier, I have been unbelievably lucky and surprised to have survived all those years in such a risky occupation. Whenever I was asked where I came from, I would normally reply, “Zeehan, on the west coast of Tasmania... where men are men and the sheep are nervous!” This, however, was an exaggeration, as the weather is so bleak on the west coast and the land so hostile that it is one of the few places in Australia where sheep do not survive. During a

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secondment to the British Defence Force in 1983-84, I would tell the Brits that I came from “Zeehan-on-Pea-Soup-Creek” to follow the English practice of completing place names with the river they are on i.e. London on Thames, Newcastle on Tyne. I think most of them realised I was taking the piss. However, I did not make up the name entirely as there is a Pea Soup Creek running through Zeehan. Zeehan was predominantly a mining town and the creek derived its name from the brownish-coloured water caused by mineralisation.

I had a fortunate and unique upbringing in Zeehan. My parents owned and operated a successful pub, the Zeehan Central Hotel. I was the middle of five kids, Jill, Bill, me, Ian and my little sister, Robyn. Zeehan was a wonderful place to grow up and we had many great times and adventures. However, at 13 my life was absolutely shattered. Well, I thought it was! It was my turn to go to boarding school, as Zeehan had become a virtual ghost town. This had a great impact on me. It was the first time in my life that I recall being very sad.

We were Methodists, which is ironic given the congregation’s attitude to the ‘demon drink’ and our family business. However, this did not seem



My favourite photographic composition whenever visiting Zeehan. These photos always contained family members under the Pea Soup Creek sign at the beginning of the town with Mount Zeehan in the background, 1996.



My parent's pub, the Central Hotel Zeehan.

to be a problem in a thirsty town such as Zeehan. Unfortunately for our parents, there were no Methodist boarding schools in Tassie so they eventually made an unusual choice for Methodist publicans. They selected the Quaker-owned and operated The Friends' School in Hobart that had a good academic reputation, although this was unfortunately wasted on me. This school also offered co-educational boarding, which meant all siblings could attend the same institution. You did not have to be a Quaker to attend Friends'. The only criteria were that you were from a Christian denomination, their religious rules were followed, and their fees were paid.

Many people confuse Quakers with other obscure religions. However, in the scheme of things the Quakers or 'the Religious Society of Friends', as they refer to themselves, are relatively straightforward. Quakers believe in a simple life, plain dress and they vehemently denounce violence. This is no doubt why, after joining the Army I no longer received correspondence regarding class reunions and other school events. However, I believe my period of 'incarceration' at Friends' prepared me extremely well mentally and physically for Army life, particularly for operational service in Vietnam and later as a member of the Australian Special Air Service Regiment (SASR). Boarding school taught me to be independent and to be comfortable in my own company.

THE BEGINNINGS

Today, I consider myself a 'born-again atheist'. Although raised on solid Christian values, my brother Bill and I, like most Australian boys back then, did not enjoy church or Sunday school. When I was about 10, I recall Mum giving us an ultimatum: "Go to church or help your Dad clean up the bar". The Sunday morning clean-up was a ritual, and no doubt an excuse for Dad not to go to church. So, the decision was easy for us. However, I did feel like an outcast and believed that I had severed all ties with God. I also had regrets for an entirely different reason. I believed the sight and particularly the smell associated with cleaning up stale beer, cigarette butts, vomit, blood, urine and excreta in the men's toilet after a big Saturday night was our penance for not going to church. Whenever I complained, Dad would say I was lucky, as the female toilets were always far worse than the men's. When I was 'old enough' to clean the female toilets, I indeed discovered that when the 'ladies' were on 'the lunatic soup', their personal hygiene habits left much to be desired. This is probably understandable considering the popular drinks of the day were Porphyry Pearl and Cold Duck. These were sweet sparkling wine concoctions, something like the modern day 'alcopops'. There was rarely a Sunday morning I didn't dry retch.

Another unpleasant job was emptying the 'pots'. As the pub originally had only outside toilets, there was a large ceramic pot underneath each bed so guests could relieve themselves in the comfort of their rooms. The contents of each pot was poured into a large square kerosene tin that had the top cut off and an improvised wire handle. The explicit instruction on where to empty this large amount of urine was, 'put the piss on the parsley'! In our garden we had the most magnificent sprawling crop of parsley which the hotel cooks dished up regularly in white parsley sauce. Whenever this was served, Bill and I immediately lost our appetite. In hindsight, however, I do believe these experiences prepared me, better than most, for what the Army and war had to dish out.

Not long after arriving in Vietnam in 1969 and after some lucky escapes, I abandoned the idea of being a non-believer. Following days of being physically and mentally exhausted beyond imagination, and continual close shaves, I recall one night conceding that this was going to be it! It was just a matter of time – a day, or maybe a week – and it would all

be over. I convinced myself that I would not live beyond the age of 19. In a half-delirious sleep, I mentally swore on a stack of bibles, 20 in fact, that if a miracle occurred and I survived I would be a devoted Christian forever. There may be some truth in the saying, “You will never see an atheist in a fox hole”.

After arriving home from Vietnam and reflecting on the carnage of war and religion in general, I reneged on my promise and I became a born-again atheist, for the second time. I appreciate how soldiers, sailors and airmen and women, who have done it tough in conflicts throughout our military history, swing from one extreme to another. I may seem like a hypocrite to some churchgoers as I have sometimes taken ‘my men’ to church. This is simply a legacy from Noeleen, who was very much a Catholic and received much comfort and inspiration from the Catholic Church and its local school community. I must confess, excuse the pun, that I enjoyed being entertained by Father Michael Richardson, the highly respected and humorous local priest at the time. Apart from that, the church experience for me has been a classic case of military tactics, ‘know the enemy’! However, I do admire those people who follow a basic Christian lifestyle, particularly those selfless volunteers who serve the homeless and destitute, elderly and others in need, without flaunting their beliefs. I am also envious of those who find great comfort from their god in times of sorrow and stress. However, I detest those who proclaim themselves to be outstanding Christians but prove to be true hypocrites.

In Vietnam, we were exposed to another god. He was very much part of our daily lives, watching over us from the heavens. He was ‘Huey’, the God of Rain. Soldiers know the embuggerance of rain. This was particularly so in Vietnam where we experienced torrential rain for days on end. The accompanying chill, because of our lack of wet weather clothing, was an added hardship – especially as we were already living off our wits – and it could easily have been enough to tip someone over the edge. When a tropical storm began, the old hands would yell out above the din of the rain crashing onto the jungle canopy, “Send it down, Huey”. This was very much an Australian soldier’s way of saying, “Is that the best you can do?” It was said in absolute contempt of the situation. I got to appreciate Huey, the God of Rain, and confided in him in matters other than inclement weather.

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If there were ever a patron saint for Vietnam veterans it would have to be 'Saint Huey'.

Back to Tasmania... After finishing at boarding school and on my return to Zeehan, I briefly worked in the family pub as a barman and as an accomplished female-toilet cleaner. I often found myself listening intently to the 'wisdom of the world' and the quick bar-room wit of the town folk. This enlightenment came predominantly from our numerous 'real' and 'not-so-real' aunties and uncles.

Through my parents' network, I was later employed at the Renison Bell Tin Mine as an assay assistant. The job involved analysing underground ore and mill samples for tin content. Using a Bunsen burner, glass beaker and acid, the metal powder samples were dissolved or, as the professionals would say, 'put into solution'. I would then slowly drip in another innocuous-looking chemical until the colour dramatically changed to a bright iridescent, which indicated the tin content. This was like magic, and the only highlight of my working day, which, in retrospect, was a bit of a worry.

It was quite unbelievable that my work as a 'mad scientist' later placed me in good stead with the SAS to study and eventually teach the art of HME/HMI (Home Made Explosives and Home Made Incendiaries); this was big boys' toys stuff. It was important training, which ensured a team operating behind the enemy lines could manufacture and use improvised explosives. The training consisted of a few informal chemistry lessons before mixing 'secret recipes'. These 'off-the-shelf' innocuous chemicals, when mixed correctly, became highly volatile explosives and incendiaries used to blow up or burn genuine targets on the demolition range. The targets included cars, industrial engines, sections of bridges and drums full of fuel. It was great fun and part of an advanced demolition training that lasted for several weeks.

Inspired by my grandfather, James Bruce McCulloch, a decorated World War I veteran, and believing it was my vocation in life, at 19 years of age I joined the Army in January 1969. For me, like all new soldiers, time seemed to move quickly; there was a war on, and the Australian military machine was in full flight. This national focus and urgency was an amazing thing to witness, particularly for a 19-year-old from a small town

in Tasmania. The minimum age for general enlistment was 17, but 19 for operational service. After just eight months of surviving all the military training in Australia and feeling a sense of achievement, this now small group of regular soldiers I enlisted with was deployed to South Vietnam on September 3, 1969.

At the infantry training centre in NSW we were told ‘confidentially’ by a sergeant instructor that all newly enlisted regular infantry soldiers would be deployed to Vietnam as quickly as possible. After basic training, soldiers were normally posted to a unit in Australia for months of further training before the next rotation. According to the sergeant, the reason for our



*My Mum and Dad with my younger brother Ian.
This was my first and last leave before being posted to Vietnam.*

quick departure was to decrease the high numbers of national servicemen (conscripts) in operational units in Vietnam. This in turn would offset the very politically sensitive national servicemen casualty rate. I was keen to go, as all of us ‘lifers’ were, but I was shocked when the reality set in that we were in fact being seen as more expendable. However, when I enlisted, I did feel a sense of pride and selflessness that I was taking a position that would otherwise be filled by a potential national serviceman, many of whom had no choice and no interest in soldiering or fighting this war.

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In Vietnam, I was posted to the aptly named Australian Reinforcement Unit (ARU). It was formed to supplement the operational units that had high attrition rates. We 'Reos' undertook some build-up training while acclimatising. This was our final stage of an extraordinary period of training for war. Although apprehensive, I was quietly confident about going on operations. In sporting terms it would be referred to as 'peaking' at the right time. Credit must go to those senior soldiers who devised such a program, and those dedicated, competent and good-humoured instructors who delivered the training that helped most of us survive. *Indebted*. On our last day at ARU, our decorated Korean War veteran instructor's final motherly advice was, "If you don't stuff up and your officer doesn't stuff up, you'll be okay". The next day I was posted to the 9th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (9RAR) and my officer was a Lieutenant Peter Cosgrove.

After a 12-month operational tour I extended for a further six months and returned to Australia after 18 death-defying months. Upon my return, I volunteered and was selected for service in the SAS Regiment and spent the next twenty-one years predominantly with the SAS, continuing to 'defy death'. I left the regular Army in 1993 and became a public servant while doing Army Reserve work with both the SAS and the 1st and 2nd Commando Regiments, 'defying death' only on weekends and other holidays.

Chapter Two

THE COMMANDER

Before joining his platoon in Vietnam, I had never met Peter Cosgrove, I had only heard about him. I became aware he was also a reinforcement replacing the previous platoon commander a few weeks earlier. I recall walking back from the diggers' mess when I first arrived and overhearing two old battalion hands talking about our new platoon commander. One said to the other, "Once we are in contact, this new bloke wants to employ rugby tactics. He wants us to rush forward straight away and take on whoever is there. The bastard will get us all killed!"

This sporting analogy was explained again by our corporal the next day, on our first section brief. There are three ten-man sections in a platoon. When we were patrolling in the jungle we walked in single file, one section behind another. The platoon headquarters, comprising the platoon commander, the platoon sergeant and support personnel such as the medic, signallers and engineers, were behind the first section. As soon as we were in contact, the platoon commander wanted the first section to fan out and move forward with 'fire and movement' as quickly as possible, like the forwards in rugby. This was to continue until this section over-ran the enemy's position.

It was then to be followed by the second section (the backs) sweeping around in front of the forward section to take out any enemy still fighting or fleeing. This would take a lot of nerve, trust, and, for the old platoon hands, acceptance. This aggressive and intuitive tactic employed by Peter Cosgrove became very significant in all our lives. To the many old and not-so-old Australian soldiers, this type of aggressive tactic is not new. However, at the time it had been diluted or discarded by some units in

THE COMMANDER

Vietnam. Although the risk was a concern to me, in hindsight I am glad that we did not use the alternative.

I believe that due to the political furore caused by the death of a soldier, particularly a conscript, there was pressure from the political and military hierarchies not to take risks. I have no hard evidence, but I believe in some cases the commanders in the field succumbed to this false proposition, and became very cautious and tentative when they first contacted the enemy, and did not take a calculated risk. They would stop and probe the enemy, to gain more information and generally fuss about. Unfortunately, this had a negative effect. They seldom gained the initiative, which led to many soldiers being killed, particularly those brave soldiers and junior officers doing the probing.

Our section was the first to implement the new platoon commander's tactics in combat. After our first main contact we talked about how unbelievably difficult it was to get up after instinctively dropping to the ground when the first shots were fired and then getting up to run towards the enemy, who were firing back at very close range. We all realised aggression, aggression, and controlled aggression, speed and a fair bit of self-discipline was the way to go. Our platoon also had a few other things in its favour. Firstly, it previously had a competent and popular platoon commander, Ivan Clarke. Secondly, we had good training, good leadership, good luck, and no unconvinced old hands. This led to all of us holding our nerve in each contact. I believe these aggressive rugby tactics employed by Peter Cosgrove is why no Australian soldier was killed under his command in Vietnam.

I remember first seeing Peter Cosgrove in September 1969 when he was giving his final brief to his platoon before leading it into combat. For some of us this was our first operation and his brief had a great impact on me. He first introduced the reinforcements and I was last in line. He explained that I was a Tasmanian. He then told a joke at my expense, by asking me if I knew that only one Tasmanian soldier had served in WWI, and asking what were both his names? Everyone laughed at the predictable old joke that all Tasmanians are inbred and therefore have two heads. I was not impressed and suffered in silence, particularly as my grandfather, James Bruce McCulloch, who had the greatest influence on me in becoming a

soldier, had served in WWI. In Tasmania, he was regarded as a war hero, having been awarded three military medals.

Our platoon commander then talked about where we were going and what we were doing on this operation. He commended all of us for completing the very difficult training and for joining him on the operation. This I found interesting because we had no other option. He finally said that he had not been in combat before and was not sure what to expect. I recall our platoon commander then saying with a sincere touch of emotion in his voice, “All I can say is thank you and good luck”. I have never forgotten that moment, or the next.

Army bond clear as Cosgrove catches up with mate

DIGGER mates chatting together over a cup of tea was how it was after the Governor-General completed his official duties in opening the QVMAG's World War I commemorative exhibition.

In the crowd, Sir Peter Cosgrove had noted a familiar face – a fellow soldier from time served with the army in Vietnam, back in 1969.

The camaraderie was clear. His mate was Colin Moyle, invited to yesterday's opening in honour of his grandfather:

“That's how it is with fellow – soldiers, your mates,” the Governor-General said.

“You may not see each other for five years, but you pick up conversation where you left off, no commas, no full stops – there's a special bond.”

“Great to see you, mate,” he said, after a hearty hand shake.

“Colin served in Vietnam, the bravest soldier I know.”

On noticing Mr Moyle initially, Sir Peter filled in the audience as to his link to the exhibition.



Lady Cosgrove and QVMAG director Richard Mulvaney watch on as Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove catches up with old army mate Colin Moyle at yesterday's opening of the QVMAG's World War I commemorative exhibition.

Mr Moyle is the grandson of James McCulloch, who was 19 when he enlisted with the 12th battalion 22nd Light Horse Regiment and served four years on the Western Front. As a result of extreme bravery and heroism on

April 15, 1917, at Lagincourt, he was recommended for the Military Medal. He later received a bar to his Military Medal and was then recommended for a second bar on May 1, 1918, which he received. He was

recommended for, but did not receive, a third bar. “You get the Military Medal for gallantry,” the Governor-General explained to the audience. “You get one bar for operating under severe pressure, to get three bars, you

know that soldier must have been gallant beyond measure many times.” In 1920, McCulloch returned to the family farm at Albotsham on the North-West Coast, suffering all his life with damaged lungs due to mustard gas attacks.

Governor-General Peter Cosgrove opening the WWI exhibition at the Launceston Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, August 2014, where my grandfather's donated bravery medals were on display.

No doubt, Peter had forgotten the joke he made at my expense in Vietnam. The text is reproduced below.

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In 1920 McCulloch returned to the family farm at Abbotsham on the North-West Coast, suffering all his life with damaged lungs due to mustard gas attacks."

As our new platoon commander was giving his speech, extra ammunition was issued. It seemed to me that I was getting the bulk of this. As I was standing, it was forced into my pack and put over my shoulders by obliging members of the platoon. This included a second M72 rocket launcher, an extra claymore (directional) mine, and four belts of machine gun ammunition, and a few more grenades. All soldiers know that officers do not understand the meaning of brief. As the long brief went on, and the extra ammo was added, the weight became unbearable, so I knelt down. When the platoon finally started to move off, I could not get up. With all my effort and using my rifle as support I could still not stand. Those watching laughed at me until I was assisted to my feet by members of my section. *Indebted.*



John Grace was one of those not so rare national servicemen; he was a very good soldier. We became close mates in D&E (Defence and Employment) Platoon in Vietnam, patrolling as Hawk Force.

A short time after finishing National Service, John joined the regular Army and passed the SAS selection course, and we met up again. Indebted.

Never, ever from that time on would I falter carrying heavy weights. I was determined to become stronger. Eighteen months later this was put to the test in the SAS. The weight I had to carry was much greater, with many a bigger man than me faltering and failing the initial selection courses.

After Vietnam, Peter and I went our different ways. Peter stayed in the mainstream Army and I was posted to Special Forces (SF). Although we seldom crossed paths, one time, when Peter was high up in the command chain, he visited the SAS. Duncan Lewis, the Commanding Officer for the SAS, saw the opportunity to either impress or scare his superior officer by organising a parachute jump, Peter's first. Parachuting

is seen as the main difference between SF units and the basic military. It is also viewed by some as the closest thing to combat, as you must make a commitment regarding your fate. However, a familiarisation parachute descent, for which Peter had volunteered, is fairly mundane in terms of the SAS. These jumps could only be performed in daylight hours, into water, and in benign conditions to minimise the risk of injury. These 'famil' jumps were incorporated in our annual requalification program designed as a reward for those non-qualified support members, both male and female, who had given good service to the unit and wished to scare themselves. The total of first timers on this day was about twenty.

Duncan reassured Peter that John Grace, who had also served with Peter and myself in Vietnam, would be in charge. At the time John and

THE COMMANDER

I were both highly qualified in parachuting and water operations. This activity was straightforward and had been done many times before without a major incident. Unfortunately however, some official from the Army parachute authority had just changed the compulsory training before such a jump. The previous safe and efficient water jump training took a couple of hours. It was changed to a series of long-winded and over-the-top sessions that would take at least a day, with the jump on the following day. This meant another sleepless night for those parachuting. When John and I met Peter and explained how long the ground training and jump would take, he was concerned that he might not be able to attend all his pre-arranged commitments. We informed Peter that we would give him some personal training. By cooking the books he would need only to be available a few minutes before the aircraft was due to take off. Peter arrived at the planned time. John and I went through a few basic tricks he needed to know. This was the fastest water jump ground training I had given.

Peter, like all the participants, was understandably anxious. This jump was to be out of a C130 Hercules military aircraft. The plane had a ramp at the back, which was lowered for the parachutists to launch themselves from before getting their 'knees in the breeze'. Being a static line jump they were not required to pull a rip cord handle, as there was an umbilical cord attached to the aircraft which would automatically pull the chute open, then detach itself.

In the aircraft, Peter changed his demeanour and became totally focused; this absolute determination I had seen before, in combat.

The exit is the most difficult part for first-timers. Some baulk and a few have their legs give way and require assistance that can vary from a firm push or a kick in the back. Very few do exactly what was instructed. For most novices their uncontrolled hop off the end of the ramp ends in uncontrolled spins, and sometimes a spectacular somersault. Peter instinctively displayed that typical Australian military characteristic of being nervous, but controlled when in a life-threatening situation. His exit was perfect. As the number one dispatcher I observed a copybook parachute exit. I do not have a short memory when it comes to the absolute fear you have when parachuting for the first time; I was impressed. He also survived the landing and didn't 'crash and burn' or drown, which was a relief. This

was another example of his leadership – he could have easily opted out, but took up this difficult personal challenge, a challenge that most soldiers, including senior officers, would not accept. He gained credibility from the Special Forces soldiers, which would have been useful, as he was a senior leader who had some control over the destiny of the SAS Regiment.

It is interesting to reflect on Peters Cosgrove's qualities when he was a junior leader given that he went on to reach the highest public position in Australia, as Governor-General. I have one personal recollection from Vietnam I find particularly amusing. When Peter and I were both in Defence and Employment (D&E) platoon, a new corporal who had just joined us had an indifferent opinion of officers. This was not unusual for many NCOs. This corporal also made an impression on me in a, 'try not to get too stressed, even in a war', sort of way. He was posted to us in the field while we were on operations. Any new corporal was appreciated as we were very short on experienced Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs). Often the privates filled some of the senior positions such as Section Commander and Platoon Sergeant. At the time, I was a private acting as a Section Commander, well above my training, so I was quite relieved when we were informed that the new corporal would be taking over my section.

His name was Jack Hammer – yes, Jack Hammer. When he introduced himself, I was not game to ask him if this was his real name, or whether he was taking the piss.

As I was happily delegated to the second-in-command (2IC) position in the section, it was now my duty to arrange the nightly piquet (sentry roster). The best night shift was the first, which started after last light. As you were still awake, it was easy to do a couple of extra hours, without interrupted sleep. I thought it was only fair to put Jack on top of the list as it was his first night with us.

There was quite a commotion first thing the next morning as none of our section had been woken for piquet. This was considered a serious security breach. Also the section had never had the chain broken before. After a quick investigation it was obvious that Jack had not woken the next soldier, indicating he may have slept on piquet. This was a very serious issue and a chargeable offence under the military law. When I tentatively queried Jack, he explained he did not wake the next soldier because, "Just as



This clever cartoon is ironic. Apart from serving with Peter Cosgrove in Vietnam, I was introduced to Dean Alston, the cartoonist for the West Australian newspaper, by his dear friend Ewan 'Monty' 'Big E' Miller. Ewan was nicknamed 'Monty' by his many civilian friends after his adored father, and called 'Big E' by his SAS mates because of his stature, both physically and in spirit.

you all went to sleep I heard the enemy moving around in the far distance and decided to keep an eye on the situation all through the night". We were most impressed.

The following night I put Jack on top of the list again, only to be fair as he was up all the previous night. Once again no one was woken, but all was well. I did not approach Jack, just continued to put him on as first piquet. I was relieved that he was such an experienced soldier and knew when we were in danger of being attacked by the enemy. On the odd occasion when Jack did wake the next person on shift, we all became very vigilant. I learnt later in the SAS that when you were well hidden at night and there was little enemy threat, the patrol could sleep, albeit very lightly. Our instructors would say, "A good night's sleep, (if you can get it) is the next day's work!"

A few days after having long, uninterrupted sleeps we had a situation that revolved around good communications in leadership. All the senior members were summoned to an O group (Orders group). This means information developed at the highest level in the military hierarchy that is filtered down through a series of meetings, ending with the corporals briefing the privates at the bottom of the food chain. All the platoon's senior soldiers were sitting in a semi-circle around Peter Cosgrove, including my new corporal, Jack Hammer. Each section commander would in turn have their section commander's O group and pass the relevant information from the platoon commander's meeting.

Peter Cosgrove was in his element, commanding a platoon – in a war – and giving orders in the field to his senior subordinates. Now that Jack Hammer was in my place I was no longer privileged to attend such a meeting. I was a little jealous not getting this information first-hand as I had previously. I viewed this meeting from a distance as the rest of us guarded the platoon's perimeter. I can still picture Peter Cosgrove in the distance relishing this situation, communicating his intentions. In one hand he had an open military green note book and map, in the other a stick. He used the stick to point to a mud map drawn on the ground. This O group went on for some time, to say the least, and we planktons became quite agitated, believing the longer the orders went on, the more difficult the future was going to be for us.

After about two hours the meeting was wrapped up. The amount of time spent on orders, in our minds, equated to a horrendous and difficult mission ahead. I was the first to meet Jack as he strolled back. I asked him the obvious question, "What's happening?" The reply was a shock to myself and those close enough to hear. "Don't worry about that – that was a load of bullshit!" I was speechless. There was no comeback. Needless to say our section didn't have an O group and spent the next few days going from pillar to post wondering what we were doing. There is an old saying, "No news is good news" – not in this case. On reflection, and at Peter's expense, I would always have an inner giggle when hearing, "His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK, MC (Retd) Governor-General of Australia", address many thousands if not millions of Australians and recalling Jack's comment.