

BRINGING AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS HOME by Brian Manns

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Anzac Day 2007.

It was hot and humid at the bottom of a hole on the side of a hill north of Bien Hoa in southern Vietnam and Tony Lowe, the archaeologist with an Australian Army recovery team, was carefully removing soil from the excavation when he began to uncover nylon cord at the bottom of the hole.



The Army recovery team and Operation Aussies Home (OAH) members at the battlefield grave of LCPL Parker and PTE Gillson of 1 RAR killed during a contact with a VC force during Operation Hump in Vietnam in 1965. The remains of the two Australians were repatriated to Australia and buried in separate funerals with full military honours. Left to right: Jim Bourke; OAH; Tony Lowe, archaeologist; Denise Donlon anthropologist; Matt Blenkin (RAN) forensic odontologist and Russell Lain (RAN) forensic odontologist. Photo by Brian Manns

To the former soldiers working close by the find was exciting and encouraging and they were all quick to tell Tony of its significance. It was a small piece of Army issue general purpose nylon cord (hutchie cord) that was the universal means of holding soldiers' identity discs around their necks in 1965. The team leader, Brian Manns of the Army History Unit (AHU) jokingly told Tony he was to stay in the hole until he had uncovered all of the cord. The hope of the entire team was that identity discs of either LCPL Richard 'Tiny' Parker or PTE Peter Gillson would be attached to the cord. Late that afternoon the 'dog tags' of PTE Peter Gillson were in the Team leader's hand.

The Team along with members of Operation Aussies Home (OAH), a group of Vietnam War veterans, was into the third day of an operation to recover the remains of the two Australian soldiers from A Coy of 1 RAR killed in action but whose bodies were not recovered during Operation Hump in 1965. The team consisted of Mr. Brian Manns and Major Jack Thurgar of the Army History Unit, Mr. Tony Lowe (archaeologist), Dr Denise Donlon (forensic anthropologist) and CMDR Matt Blenkin and LEUT Russell Lain (forensic odontologists) of the RAN.



The Army recovery team and Operation Aussies Home (OAH) members at the battlefield grave of LCPL Parker and PTE Gillson of 1 RAR killed during a contact with a VC force during Operation Hump in Vietnam in 1965. The team has just completed the removal of the remains of the two Australians from their battlefield grave. Left to right: Tony Lowe archaeologist; Jim Bourke OAH; Matt Blenkin (RAN) forensic odontologist; Peter Aylett OAH; Russell Lain (RAN) forensic odontologist; Denise Dnlon anthropologist; Le Tu Binh (Australian Embassy Hanoi) interpreter; Brian Manns (Army History Unit) team leader, Jack Thurgar (Army History Unit). Photo by Brian Manns.

For several years OAH and, lately, AHU had been investigating the cases of those Australian servicemen who were killed in action, but their bodies not recovered during the Vietnam War. OAH had carried out a detailed search of the area of a contact between A Coy of 1RAR and an enemy force in an area north of Bien Hoa (detailed in an accompanying article). Their search had proven to be successful and AHU had quickly deployed a recovery team to respond to the find.

Within days of the discovery the team arrived in Bien Hoa late in the evening of Sunday 22 April 2007. By Friday 27 April it had completed the recovery of two sets of human remains from a former Viet Cong weapon pit that had been used by the enemy force to bury the two Australians. On the last day the identity discs of Tiny Parker were recovered along with a Zippo cigarette lighter.

The team's forensic experts then worked through the weekend to identify the remains, which were found to be those of LCPL Parker and PTE Gillson.

On Monday 30 May the custody of the remains was transferred to Vietnamese officials and Vietnamese forensic experts in Hanoi confirmed the original Australian team identification. Army Headquarters and the Defence office at the Australian Embassy in Hanoi immediately commenced making arrangements for the repatriation of both sets of remains to Australia and to families that had been waiting for more that 42 years.

On Monday 4 June 2007, the remains of LCPL Parker and PTE Gillson were placed into a RAAF C130 with full ceremony for repatriation to Australia by a bearer party of soldiers from 1 RAR. Present was the then Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence, Hon Bruce Billson MP, the Land Commander MAJGEN Mark Kelly and the Australian Ambassador to Vietnam, Mr. Bill Tweddle. Also present was PTE Gillson's widow (Mrs. Lorraine Easton) and her son Robert, along with representatives from the Department of Veterans' Affairs, OAH and the Vietnamese veterans' organization. Mr. Brian Manns and MAJ Jack Thurgar were the two escort officers.

After the moving ceremony, the aircraft left Hanoi and flew to Darwin where the widows of both men and their extended families were able to have some quiet time with them. The C130 then continued its journey to Sydney where an equally moving ceremony of welcome was held at RAAF Base Richmond. Several hundred Vietnam War veterans, as well as serving men and women, were present to welcome home the two Australian soldiers.

LCPL Parker was buried in Canberra and PTE Gillson was buried in Melbourne in moving funeral services in the course of the next few days.



Army team leader Brian Manns of the Army History Unit (right foreground) and anthropologist Denise Donlon (left background) assisted by Vietnamese workers excavate the site of the helicopter crash that claimed the life of LCPL John Gillespie, RAAMC in a helicopter crash in the Long Hai Hills in Phuoc Tuy province of Vietnam in 1971. The team successfully recovered LCPL Gillespie's remains which were repatriated to Australia where they were laid to rest by his grateful family. Photo by Tony Lowe

For AHU it was back to work. The team now returned another Vietnam missing case, that of LCPL John Gillespie. LCPL Gillespie was the medic on board a RAAF 'dustoff' helicopter that was shot down over the Long Hai Hills in Phuoc Tuy province in 1971. OAH had already identified the crash site and the AHU team had carried out an initial examination there earlier in 2007. Now it was time to carry out further investigation and a full excavation of the site in search of the remains of LCPL Gillespie.

In November 2007 the team (Brian Manns, Jack Thurgar, Tony Lowe and Denise Donlon), augmented by two members of OAH (Peter Aylett and David Thomas), returned to the Long Hai Hills, now called the Minh Dam Mountains. Against all odds the team was again successful and on Wednesday 5 December 2007 the Vietnamese forensic experts in Hanoi concurred with an earlier identification by the Australian team that the remains were those of LCPL John Gillespie. Arrangements were quickly made to enable the family to have John Gillespie home for Christmas. The new Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Hon Alan Griffin MP and the Commander 1 Division, MAJGEN Richard Wilson (representing CA) accompanied LCPL Gillespie's widow (Mrs. Carmel Hendrie) and his daughter Fiona Pike to Hanoi where another ramp ceremony hosted by the Australian Ambassador was held. Present were representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs, OAH and the Vietnamese veterans. A bearer party of soldiers from 1st Combat Service Support Battalion (1CSSB) carried LCPL Gillespie's casket onto a RAAF C130 aircraft which departed for Australia on Monday 17 December. Brian Manns was LCPL Gillespie's escort officer for the flight.

After quiet time in Darwin for the extended family, LCPL Gillespie's remains were welcomed home in a moving ceremony at Pt Cook RAAF Base near Melbourne on Wednesday 19 December 2007. Again, a large crowd of Vietnam veterans and currently serving service men and women were present to see another Australian casualty of war finally brought home to rest. The officer commanding the honour guard for LCPL Gillespie's return was 2LT Robert Gillson, the son of PTE Peter Gillson.



A bearer party of soldiers from 1CSSB carries the coffin containing the human remains of LCPL John Gillespie, RAAMC onto a RAAF Hercules aircraft at Hanoi's Noi Bai International Airport in December 2008 prior to the repatriation of his remains to Australia. LCPL Gillespie served with 8 Field Ambulance, an antecedant unit of 1CSSB, and was killed in action in the Long Hai Hills of Phuoc Tuy province in 1971. Photo by Brian Manns.

LCPL John Gillespie was buried in a private ceremony in Melbourne on Saturday 22 December 2007.

There remains one other Australian soldier listed as killed in action whose body was not recovered from the Vietnam War. He was PTE David Fisher, SASR, who was lost when he fell while suspended below a RAAF helicopter during a 'hot extraction' of his SASR patrol in 1969. Work continues to try and account for his remains.