



Gordon Benfell as a 20 year old corporal in V Coy Lines, Nui Dat



With Geoff Dixon in Malaysia just before deployment to Vietnam



1 Pl V4 Coy ready for light order patrol



We survived! Just minutes after arriving in the admin area after first six week operation

STEPPING ASIDE AFTER A LIFETIME OF SERVICE

By Judith Martin

After 52 years in an Army uniform, Gordon Benfell – Vietnam veteran, sharp shooter and a mate to many – is calling it a day.



Gordon Benfell's section

There's nothing frivolous about this gnarly sniper who has been the Army's sole remaining Vietnam War veteran in service for some years. The son of a freezing works manager and a whiteware dispatcher, he first donned a uniform at just 15. He was actually recruited before his 15th birthday to ensure all his documentation was ready before the January 1964 intake.

"I know it sounds corny these days but I joined for patriotic reasons – I really did want to serve my country."

He admits though it was hard work for a skinny kid who hadn't yet stopped growing and was at great risk of blowing away in a high wind.

Originally recruited to be a radio technician he realised soon after joining that he leaned more to the outdoors and the lure of a life based around weapons. "I'd had several iconic infantry mentors and knew I was in the Army for the long haul and needed to be doing something that thrilled me. I made the change and have never regretted it."

After three years as an RF Cadet he graduated as a Lance Corporal. His first RF infantry posting was to the National Service Training Unit in Burnham. He was nearly 18, had several infantry qualifications under his belt and was well prepared as an instructor, despite his age. Those skills were noticed, and he was quickly promoted to Corporal and soon found himself part of the Training Wing of the nearby First Battalion Depot. "It was a challenge, and a whole new standard. Soldiers from the Malaya and Borneo tours and the first returning Vietnam veterans did not readily accept an 18-year-old corporal telling them how it was. Thankfully I survived, somehow gained acceptance and mentally prepared myself to join the queue for overseas service."

The Vietnam companies were put together as training platoons in Burnham. What was to become Victor 4 Company was assembled in January 1968, trained together for 10

months and then deployed to Terendak Camp in Malaysia where the training intensified in the jungle heat.

Major Benfell had been married for just a few weeks when he deployed to Vietnam. "I never saw my beautiful son Andy until arriving home on the eve of his first birthday. Communication was by letter and there was no leave allowed back to New Zealand."

He served in Phouc Touy Province with V Coy 6RAR/NZ (Anzac) Bn within the 1st Australian Task Force, as Section Commander of 3 Sect 1Pl. "We had been Alpha Coy in Burnham, Charlie Coy and Victor 4 in Terendak and deployed to Vietnam as V Coy 6RAR/NZ (Anzac) Bn." He was the youngest Anzac Sect Comd of the Vietnam War, a detail he is very proud of.

"I believe the New Zealand companies (Victor 1-6, Whiskey 1-3) were as well trained for the Anzac role in the Vietnam War as they could be. In combat they performed admirably, with great courage and were held in high esteem by our allies.

"Our 'contact' reaction and other operating drills were instinctive. We had trained, practised and been tested ad infinitum for nearly 18 months to ensure this was the case. Our veteran trainers had pushed us hard in every aspect and hammered into us that nothing less would be good enough. They were right. We were in action just a couple of hours into our first operation and within a couple of weeks V Coy had been in combat many times. The nature of the fighting was varied and usually occurred within 10-20 metres. These were very intense on both sides and were sometimes over before anyone had time to do more than initial, immediate actions."

There were exceptions though. "Into the third week of our first operation our platoon engaged a regular North Vietnamese battalion of approximately 250-300 soldiers across a clearing some 250m away. Quite a battle followed involving great courage from our soldiers, very brave chopper crews free-dropping ammunition resupplies to us several times and expending several US and Australian helicopter gunship teams onto the enemy. Now supported by a second NZ platoon, we conducted a bayonet assault on the enemy position.

"NOTHING FOCUSES THE MIND BETTER TO WHAT IS TO FOLLOW, THAN BEING TOLD TO 'FIX BAYONETS'."



Major Gordon Benfell today

"I only ever heard the 'Fix Bayonets' command in combat that one time. It chills me to think about it even now. Many years later I was in a formal meeting and the question arose whether a new rifle being considered should be equipped with a bayonet. I was in no doubt whatsoever and would always advocate in its favour. The bayonet is an international symbol of the infantry and I have vivid recall all these years later that in the unlikely event that it was needed, nothing focuses the mind better to what is to follow, than being told to 'fix bayonets'."

On a later operation, he and an Australian Warrant Officer were accompanying a Vietnamese company as advisors. "On just one day we were ambushed three times. The first two were simply chaotic exercises in survival, a bedlam situation to get out and get others away from the total physical and mental disorientation of high explosives and all manner of small arms fire coming in from 10-15m away. On the third occasion we fought back and though still lacking the organisation that might have equipped us to do better, gave a good account. In hindsight I recall the experience of being ambushed to be the most horrific combat experience of all. Regardless of the amount of training, even the instinctive reactions that we prided ourselves on; nothing prepares a group unlucky enough to be caught in properly set ambush, to be immediately aggressive. The survival instinct can be very brief but it is addressed first.

"Nothing really prepares a soldier completely for actual combat as training can't quite duplicate it and nothing certainly prepares us to carry some of the later burden of simply doing our duty. I found that I could handle all of the activity involving operations against male enemy combatants. Engaging with them is what we trained for and there is a quick maturing effect; a coming to terms with the sights and sounds involved. I am however deeply saddened by the inadvertent involvement of innocents, particularly women and children in any conflict."

While well-trained, the experience was to leave an indelible mark. "We are civilised and educated people within a society of values. Our duty requires us to carry out actions that are absolutely necessary at the time and in accordance with our training and at the direction of our government. Those who have been involved in combat as we were can be very proud of doing their duty but do carry an additional, inescapable emotional burden."

Major Benfell eventually returned to New Zealand. "I felt good about surviving and going home but such a deep sense of guilt about leaving my mates behind."

On his return he was appointed platoon sergeant of a newly assembled platoon, taking them through the same training he did less than two years earlier.

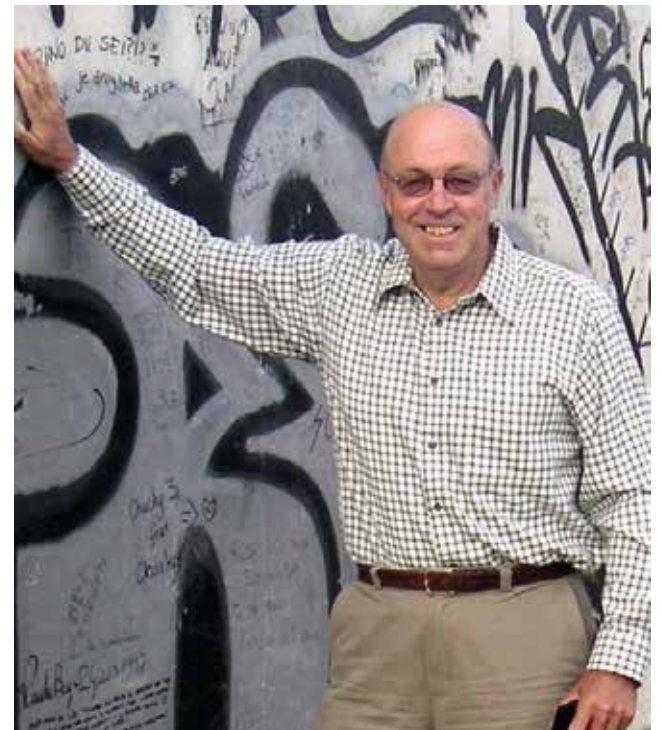
"We stayed together as before and prepared for Vietnam at Nee Soon Camp and Dieppe Barracks in Singapore. This company would have been next into Vietnam but the Government announced an end to the military commitment to the Vietnam War."

He went on to deploy to Singapore again as a platoon sergeant with 1 RNZIR and later as CSM Charlie Coy. In 1979 he was attached to the UK School of Infantry to assist with the development of sniping and a formal Sniper Course. At that time New Zealand's reputation in sniping was well established. This tour eventually involved mentoring work with teams from Australia, US and Canada. He deployed to East Timor as OC of the Small Arms Training Team in 2003 and joined Crib 18 in Afghanistan in 2011 to introduce the new Designated Marksman's Weapon, which he had been closely involved in developing.

In recent years he has focused on the development of shooting skills and the small arms weapon capability of the NZDF. He holds the Queen's Medal as an Army Champion



Preparing for a short vehicle escort patrol in Vietnam



At the Berlin Wall during a break in the Small Arms Conference, 2008

Shot, and captained the highly successful New Zealand Army Combat Shooting Team between 1995 and 2005. He was made a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2007.

So how do today's soldiers differ from those of yesteryear?

"I have the utmost respect for our soldiers of today. Soldiering is significantly more complex now with more technology for and against us; personal and collective responsibilities are more complex but conducted within the same life-threatening backdrop of 'kill or be killed' that has not changed over the history of combat. I believe our soldiers have always been as good as any anywhere, and better than most. New Zealand is so well served by its Defence Force and can be rightly proud of its service people."

While Major Benfell is bidding farewell to the Regular Force, he is not making a total departure from all things military. He is becoming a Reservist and will be involving himself in welfare matters and advocating for ex-soldiers in his community. He will be working with international manufacturers and writing privately about weapons, hunting and shooting matters, generally.

"I also intend to do more fishing and hunting, and being a grandfather that my grandchildren love and are proud of."



With a fellow international team captain at Bisley, 2004



Chatting with Prime Minister Helen Clark at Vietnam Welcome Home function