

Interviews with War Dog Operatives

Series 1, Profile 8 – South Vietnam 1965-72

©

Lance Corporal Denis Ferguson - Royal Australian Infantry

Dateline for this profile is 07 March 2010.

Background

Lance Corporal (LCPL) Denis “Fergie” Ferguson was born in Carlton, Melbourne in 1947, but his family moved to Grafton in NSW when he was eighteen months old. Sadly, when Denis was four years of age his dad was thrown by a horse and died. His mum remarried when he was eight years of age, and they moved to Redcliffe near Brisbane. Tough times were experienced by the family and Denis left school when he turned thirteen years of age. He worked on a bakery run and then when he turned fourteen years of age, he worked in the woolstores at Hendra. At sixteen Denis had made it to the rank of foreman in the store. When he turned seventeen in late 1965, he joined the Australian Regular Army for three years.

Denis attended the 1st Recruit Training Battalion at Kapooka and graduated into the Royal Australian Infantry. His initial employment training (IET) was completed at the Infantry Centre in Bardia Barracks at Ingleburn in NSW. On graduation from his IET Denis was too young for overseas service and he was told that he needed to undertake further training course. He applied for parachute and sniper courses but was unable to secure a position on those courses. Then a Corporal (CPL) approached him and asked if he liked dogs. Yes he did. The CPL then took him to the Tracker Section and introduced him to the Tracker Dog instructional staff. That CPL was Arthur Eather.

Denis commenced his tracker training and was allocated a dog named Marcus. The dog was donated by the Governor of NSW, His Excellency, Sir Roden Cutler VC. Denis and Sir Roden appeared on national television as a part of the public relations exercise in support of Australian Military Forces. (NOTE: there has been some controversy about the identity of the original “Marcus” and there is evidence to suggest that there were two dogs named “Marcus” with the Infantry at that time). Denis is convinced that his Marcus was the one that was donated by Sir Roden.

Initial Dog Training

Denis was to team up with another dog handler and they became good mates. He was PTE Peter Haran. Denis had Marcus and Peter had a dog named “Caesar”. They both trained hard in the Ingleburn/Holsworthy/Darkes Forest areas of NSW. It was hot work and the dogs and handlers were under constant pressure to perform. The trainers were always instructing the two handlers to “read your dog” for alerts or prompts. Trails were provided by other soldiers and the dog teams would track them down. The “fugitive diggers” would double back in a wide loop in order to ambush the dog teams, but this ruse did not work well once the handlers had experienced several of their dogs’ pointing

and alert behaviours. The training lasted for nine months and the dogs were also trained in discipline, no barking and living in the bush.

At the end of the nine months training, Denis and Marcus, Peter and Caesar were posted to the 2nd Battalion of The Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR) at Enoggera, Brisbane. In quick succession, Denis and Peter attended advanced infantry training in 2 RAR, then battle efficiency training at the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra in Queensland (Qld) and then they were off to the war in South Vietnam.

Vietnam

In May 1967, Denis and Peter and their dogs became a part of the advance party of 2 RAR – to allow the dogs a period of acclimatisation before the remainder of the battalion arrived. They were airlifted by RAAF C130 Hercules transport aircraft from Brisbane to Darwin, then on to Butterworth in Malaysia (stop over for a day) then on to Saigon. The final leg of the journey from Saigon to Nui Dat where the 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) was located was by RAAF Caribou transport aircraft.

The dogs travelled in timber kennels made specially for the trip. They were rectangular in shape with a flat roof and mesh at the ends to allow the circulation of air to the dogs. The diggers travelled in the cramped webbing “seats” strung along the sides and centre of the aircraft. This allowed for some instant entrepreneurial spirit by the two dog handlers. As soon as the aircraft had climbed to cruising altitude and the diggers could unbuckle their seatbelts, the handlers lay down on the flat roof of the kennels and stretched out. Very comfortable. A lot better than the webbing seats. So, it didn’t take long before the other diggers asked for a turn on the kennel. And they were given it. Provided they parted with \$5 for the pleasure of it. Denis and Peter made some money by the time they arrived in Saigon!

On arrival at the 2 RAR lines in Nui Dat, Denis saw rows of sandbagged four man tents, well constructed dog kennels and rows and rows of large rubber trees. Denis and Peter decided that they would take the first tent in their Anti-tank/Tracker Platoon area of Support Company, 2 RAR. They then set about “acquiring” their living comforts. One month later, the main body of 2 RAR arrived at Nui Dat. By that time, they had decent beds, a wardrobe each, a hard timber floor (ex-timber pallets), a brew making facility, a writing table, chairs, overhead electric light and a power point. Not bad for tented accommodation.

The month between Denis and Marcus arrival and the main body’s arrival gave the two tracker dog teams ample opportunity to acclimatise and chase “dummy” tracks in the rubber. It should be noted that these soldiers were also qualified to operate the 106 mm Anti-tank recoilless rifle (“rifle” is a misnomer. The weapon was the size of a lowered artillery gun) and the 84 mm Carl Gustav shoulder fired weapon. The 106 mm piece was capable of being fired from a purpose built Land-Rover or from a position on the ground and was used many times against enemy bunkers.

The patrol and tracking duty after the battalion arrived was fierce. The base (Nui Dat) was located in the province of Phuoc Tuy (pronounced fook twee) and 1 ATF had the responsibility to defend the entire province. It was a big ask. There were numerous callouts by helicopter for the dog teams and the dog handlers, at times, had to perform as infantry soldiers on patrols without their dogs. When this happened, the dogs were fed and watered by duty personnel in the base area at Nui Dat.

On one such mission, Denis and Marcus were sent to Fire Support Base (FSPB) Anderson. This FSPB is near the boundary of Phuoc Tuy and Long Binh provinces – a long way from Nui Dat. While there, Denis was ordered to lead a patrol out of the wire. In Denis' words: "I had to leave my dog behind and lead this patrol. I was considered to have a higher training base than the other diggers and so was nominated as the patrol commander. I collected my men, gave the orders and set off out of the wire. But, just as my patrol reached the outer edge of the wire, I was ordered back. A LCPL took my place as the patrol commander and he set off on his patrol route. I was called back to collect Marcus and head out on a chopper for tracking duty in support of an infantry platoon which had a "hot" enemy trail to follow. Marcus and I went to the platoon, picked up the trail and followed the enemy. At the end of the tracking duty with that platoon, I was told that the LCPL who had taken my place on the original patrol, had lost both legs when an M16 Anti-personnel fragmentation mine (a jumping jack) had been stood on by one of the patrol members and detonated".

Denis continues: "While at FSPB Anderson, I took Marcus by chopper early one morning to a platoon with a "hot" trail and we tracked the enemy to the point where the platoon was able to complete their mission. Then at about mid-day of that day I was picked up again by chopper to another platoon and we repeated the performance again. At about 1500 hrs (3.00 pm) Marcus and I were choppered to a third platoon, but this time the track was unsuccessful. At last light we returned to FSPB Anderson. Three tracks in one day."

Denis and Peter had a "bad day in the office". Peter and Caesar had just returned from a particularly nasty mission and Peter put a ground sheet on the floor and stripped his rifle for cleaning. Denis was sat at the table enjoying a mug of coffee and writing a letter to his mum. Peter finished assembling the weapon, cocked it, squeezed the trigger to ease the firing spring, and to his horror, the rifle fired. He replaced a full magazine on to the weapon instead of an empty one. The bullet smacked through the table and narrowly missed Denis. Denis hit the floor and tipped his coffee all over the place. Peter saw the fluid and thought that he had just shot his mate dead. Denis was not hit, and immediately tried to console Peter. In a flash the 2 RAR Regimental Police (RP) were at the tent and charged Peter with having an "accidental discharge" (a very serious offence). Peter was punished by his Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel C. Charlesworth, with two weeks of sand bag duty, supervised by the RP.

Denis completed thirteen months with 2 RAR at Nui Dat when his tour of duty came to an end. In June 1968, Denis said farewell to Marcus and handed him over to Private

Alvin Peterson without too much personal emotional because Marcus still had a lot of work left in him as a military tracker dog.

Return to Australia (RTA)

Denis RTA aboard the HMAS Sydney and came back to ten weeks accumulated leave. He went home to his parent's home at Gordon Park in Brisbane, settled down for two weeks, and then decided that he was bored. He needed a job. And he got one with the Golden Circle pineapple factory at Banyo. Denis worked there answering a telephone. The job was very primitive, but there were plenty young ladies around and this made up for the simplicity of the job. After six weeks, Denis left his civilian employ and returned to duty with 2 RAR at Enoggera. In 1969, his three year engagement with the Army came up and he elected discharge.

Denis worked in various jobs for about twelve months but found it too boring and he missed the camaraderie of Army life. He went to the recruiting office in Brisbane and signed up for another three years. A short familiarisation course at the Infantry Centre in Ingleburn later and Denis was posted to 2 RAR at Lavarack Barracks in Townsville.

Vietnam, Second Tour of Duty

In May 1970, 2 RAR was deployed to Vietnam for its second tour of duty. Denis flew from Townsville to Darwin then on to Butterworth in Malaysia and on still to Saigon in South Vietnam. Caribou from Saigon to Nui Dat and it was all just as he had done on his first tour of duty. But a number of coincidences were about to play a huge hand in Denis' life.

On arrival at Nui Dat a Land-Rover picked Denis and his mates up, and took them to the Support Company lines, where he was shown his tent. It was exactly the same tent as he lived in three years previously. Even the same bed. Same chair, same table. His platoon Sergeant took Denis to the dog kennels and said; "That's your dog there". Denis felt a huge wave of emotion go through him. It was Marcus.

As Denis approached the kennels, Marcus was faced in the other direction and did not see Denis arrive. Denis had a special whistle he had used, years previously, just for Marcus. Marcus heard the whistle and his head went up. Denis whistled again and Marcus spun around, saw Denis and bolted for him. The dog had tears running down its face. Denis had tears running down his face. Who says dogs can't cry? There were hugs and dog licks and the two mates were a tracker team again.

Denis was promoted to LCPL in the field but that did not stop another incredible coincidence from happening. His tent mate PTE Ron Johnson came into the tent while Denis was sat at the table writing a letter to his mum. Ron was very tired after an operation in the bush and after entering the tent he had an accidental discharge with his rifle. This bullet whistled passed Denis and into the sandbags protecting the tent. It was like hitting "Replay" on a tape recorder, and the RPs were around looking for the culprit.

Denis was starting to look over his shoulder every time he wrote to his mum, and one of his mates entered the tent with a rifle.

One incident on his second tour with Marcus involves an enemy minefield. Denis and Marcus were called to support an infantry platoon on the trail of a Viet Cong (VC) soldier who had been seen crossing a wide open field in full daylight. The sighting was close to Nui Dat so the team deployed by vehicle to the area where the VC had been sighted. The platoon spread out, Denis and Marcus moved to the front and the dog was cast to pick up a scent. Marcus ran from here to there and gave a multitude of alerts at the end of his 12' (3 metre) tracking lead. Denis knew from Marcus' behaviour that there was trouble at close quarter and advised the platoon SGT. Denis ordered Marcus to "Sit" while the situation was checked by radio. It was then confirmed that the platoon had entered an enemy laid minefield. Denis carefully walked to Marcus picked him up, and returned using his own footprints in the dirt. The combat engineers from the 1st Field Squadron arrived under the command of a Captain (an engineer Troop Commander) who spoke to Denis and then deployed his Troop on mine clearing work. Denis and this Captain were to meet again in passing in 1986 at the Logan RSL club where they reminisced over a couple of beers. The engineers cleared a large number of mines from that open field. It was intended to use this field as a part of an operational deployment by A Coy, 2 RAR set for the next day. Thanks to a tracker team, Australian lives were saved.

Then an unusual letter arrived for Denis, forwarded on from his mother in Brisbane. It was a letter advising him that his birthday number had come up and he was obliged to report to the authorities for National Service (birthdays drawn from a lottery barrel were used to select the next group of young Australian males to report for the possibility of National Service). Denis seized the letter with glee, demanded a parade with the Support Company Officer Commanding (OC), and when he "fronted" the OC, Denis asked to be sent home so that he could comply with the direction. It didn't work. His OC advised the authorities that Denis was a Regular soldier on active service in South Vietnam.

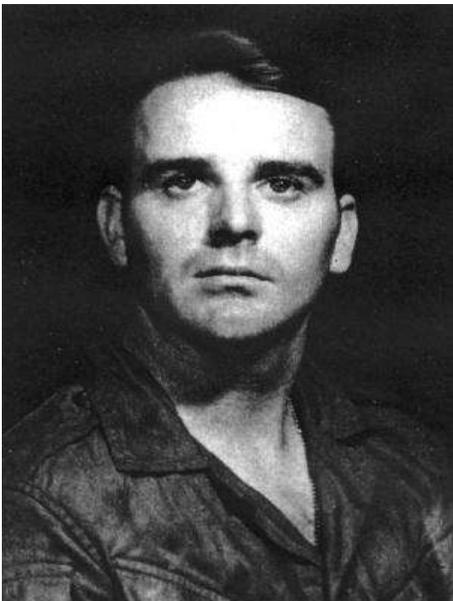
On a second incident, Denis and Marcus were in support of an infantry platoon following up a blood trail when Marcus indicated on some camouflage on the ground. The camouflage was pulled away and a tunnel entrance was exposed. The Platoon Commander asked Denis to send Marcus down the hole. Denis refused with the words: "My dog is not a cat – he can't see in the dark". The officer then gave Denis his pistol and a torch and told him to check the hole out. This was something new for Denis, so he decided to have a go. In his words: "The hole was narrow and dark. As I inched into the darkness with the torch, the beam of light picked up a fishing line stretched across the tunnel. A booby-trap. It was easily disarmed, but then another twelve feet on, I came across a second fishing line. This was getting a bit grim. Then I saw that the line was attached to a net in the roof of the tunnel and there was something moving in it. A closer look and I saw a small snake. I pulled the line and the snake fell to the floor still wrapped up in the net so I smashed at it using the officer's pistol as a club. There was snake blood all over the handle of the pistol. That was enough for me, I felt ready to puke and so backed out. I told the officer "this is bigger than you think!" He wasn't too impressed with the blood all over his pistol handle". The officer called for engineers and when they

came, they captured a hospital complex under the ground with medical supplies and equipment set up for medical treatment. This success was again due to the work of a tracker dog team.

In 1971, Denis' tour of duty was up and he was to RTA. Marcus was showing signs of aging and Denis wanted the dog to RTA with him. He requested permission and offered to pay the \$700 quarantine costs to get Marcus home. But he was given a firm "No!" The dog would stay in Vietnam. Denis was angry. He loaded a full magazine on to his rifle and approached the 2 RAR Headquarters. But he was seen coming and the intent was transparent. He was ambushed by two Military Policemen (MP) who disarmed and apprehended him. He was immediately put on a helicopter which flew him to HMAS Sydney. The words of farewell came from one of the MP who said: "Son, it's all over". But it wasn't. The thought of abandoning Marcus haunts Denis to this day.

RTA in 1971

HMAS Sydney delivered 2 RAR back to Townsville. Shortly after, Denis was transferred to 8 RAR at Enoggera and from there to 7 RAR in Holsworthy. Denis wanted this so that he could be near his fiancé who lived in Sydney. Denis still had twelve months to serve and found himself allocated to the Regimental Police. Denis is five foot four inches tall! But he was a LCPL with two tours of duty under his belt, and was respected by the other diggers. Denis served out his three years and elected discharge. He was a newly married man and wanted to settle down and raise a family. He worked in a variety of jobs in Sydney and eventually moved his family to Logan in Brisbane. Denis is retired, and although he is divorced, he and his ex-wife are still good friends. Denis' two sons have their own families and live in Brisbane. Denis provides voluntary work for his local RSL and lives at Caloundra with a view of the Glasshouse Mountains.



Private Denis "Fergie" Ferguson, 2 RAR Tracker circa 1967. Courtesy of Denis Ferguson 1967.



D6N06 Marcus circa 1967. Courtesy of Denis Ferguson.



2 RAR Farewell Parade at Enoggera, May 1967. Major General T.F. Cope (General Officer Commanding Northern Command) speaks to Fergie and Marcus. Courtesy of Denis Ferguson 1967.



LCPL Denis Ferguson, Marcus and an unidentified RAAF Caribou pilot, 1970/71.
Marcus gives the pilot a lick on the hand. Courtesy of Denis Ferguson, 1971.