

Tribute to Max Cannon

Following his sudden death in May 2013

By Lawrence Appelbee

These notes are the thoughts from a then very junior officer who first met Max on a warm summer's day in early 1967 in the Woodside Army Camp, Adelaide, South Australia.

I had just graduated as a brand new Second Lieutenant from the Officer's Training Unit for National Service Officers in Scheyville, New South Wales.

On that warm summer's day in 1967, Max and I first met. On that same day, I also met two of Max's compatriots in crime, Corporal Graham Fox and Corporal Tony Ryan. The three were to become my closest advisers in the year that lay ahead. All three were senior, experienced soldiers, all having served in Malaya, undertaking counter-terrorism operations as members of the Australian Defence Forces prior to their posting to 3 RAR in South Australia.

How was I, a very junior newly commissioned officer, with little experience in the practicalities of soldiering, going to fit in? How was I to command and to lead this group of three, non commissioned officers, who even then were known as "Max's Mafia"? How was I, who knew "three fifths of the square root of buggar all" going to fit in and learn my trade?

I need not to have worried in those early days. Under the care of that experienced team of Max's Mafia, a new team was born, one which was to wander around the hills and dales of South Australia, Victoria and Queensland during 1967, slowly but surely learning the complex skills of the Infantryman before, in late 1967, we were advised that the battalion in which we were serving was to be sent to Vietnam.

Max, Foxy and Tony worked hard in the months of 1967, being ably coordinated and lead by our brilliant Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant Ray Ewell, to develop our skills and to learn the importance of working together as a team. It was a time of high demand on Max and his colleagues:

- ❖ National Service had been introduced to meet the demands of a rapidly expanding Army, a demand which required a continuously vigorous approach to the training and re-training of reinforcements to the Battalion, which included, of course, youngsters like myself.
- ❖ We had to learn and re-learn the knowledge of things military that most of us had not had any experience with before. This included the perils, the potential and the positives of working with our armoured cavalry compatriots, the Turret Heads of the armoured personnel carriers, who to us Grunts, seemed always able and intent on running us over.
- ❖ We needed to learn, and to constantly practice, the key Infantry skills associated with the conduct of Counter Revolution Warfare, this being the core task that we were to undertake in South Vietnam.

The implementation of these three considerations in our work during 1967 fell pretty much on Max's Mafia. Throughout this year, Max clearly showed his professionalism, his drive and his determination to get the very best out of his men, whilst at the same time, getting me, and keeping me, on the straight and narrow, and keeping me out of trouble.

In those days, like Foxy and Tony and Ray, Max drank like a drunken sailor and smoked like a Broken Hill chimney. Like us all, Max was regularly if not permanently on the look-out for any lady, preferably one of moderately ill-repute, and accommodating morals, to help him get through the cold chills of an Adelaide Hills winter night. There was many tall tales and true of the exploits of having to jump over back fences when unsuspecting husbands came home earlier than expected shared over a brew in one of the many training areas that we frequented that year.

Bold stories of vigorous run-ins with elements of the Military Police, both in Malaya and in South Australia, usually the result of bad manners fuelled by far too much of any form of grog, legal or otherwise, formed the basis of many an interesting discussion between members of the Mafia and me around a night fire.

I can't remember having to bail Max out of the company of either military or civil police in that year, or of having to tell too many fibs to more senior officers in order to help cover Max's tracks should a minor indiscretion be alleged to have involved Max in some way. I'll wager a cold beer on a hot day that such things must have occurred, but I just can't recall any detail.

By late 1967, we thought we were in good shape and ready to take on the world. Max and his Mafia compatriots had worked hard to build a strong, competent team. Much of our progress and our success was a direct result of Max's professional approach to his responsibilities: always keen, always enthusiastic and always seeking to get the best out of any circumstance or any situation.

We deployed to South Vietnam in December 1967, and very early, we recognised that we still had a lot to learn. Max's knowledge, enthusiasm, skills and leadership in this new and demanding environment quickly came to the fore, and within a couple of weeks, his troops had settled into the gruelling task of seeking out and destroying our elusive, communist enemy.

Max, Foxy and Tony, with a new Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant Merv Binning, set about the difficult job of commanding and leading young Australian soldiers at war.

Max did brilliantly well. His soldiers respected his knowledge, his experience and his ability in the bush. Furthermore, they clearly acknowledged Max's ability to acquire, normally by "liberating", the odd drop of sly grog on the occasion of any special event needing to be celebrated within his tent lines we called home when within the Nui Dat base.

In early 1968, our communist opposition believed that they had the capacity to capture South Vietnam, and planned to do so during the period of the Chinese New Year (that is, Tet) in February of that year. To counter this move by the North Vietnamese, much of the Australian

Army in South Vietnam was deployed well north of our traditional stamping ground of Phouc Tui Province into the Badlands of Bien Hoa Province, in order to assist the Allies to defend the southern capital of Saigon from the expected communist advance from the north.

It was during this deployment that Max, always at the front and always seeking to close with, and then to destroy the enemy, was shot in the thigh.

Max was medically evacuated from the battlefield, and via a number of Allied medical facilities over the next few months, finally made his way back to Australia, and there, to face his long, demanding journey on the way to recovery.

In the months that followed, Max vigorously fought off the Australian surgeons who were determined in their advice that the damaged leg should be removed. Max's response to such suggestions was essentially to "F### off".

It is hard to believe that all this happened some 45 years ago.

Where has Max been and what has he done over this long period?

Despite his intensive discomfort, he remained focused, professional and flexible, as he persistently worked through his constant battle with pain. His extensive injury meant that he could no longer remain as an Infantryman. He carefully examined his options, and he decided that a significant change in direction within his military career was both workable and achievable and could be developed.

And develop it did.

Max chose to become an Ammunition Technical Officer, a career change that ultimately introduced him to the world of counter-terrorism. As a direct result of his drive and determination, he became one of Australia's leading advisers to the Australian Defence Force, the Australian Federal Police and numerous State Police Services on matters related to the management of the non-legal usage of explosives, particularly within the counter-terrorism world within Australia.

During these years, he was progressively promoted within the Australian Defence Force, ultimately being appointed a Warrant Officer Class One, the highest and most sought after promotion within non-commissioned ranks.

During this period, Max's inventiveness in designing a revolutionary, cost saving piece of technology of great value to the Australian Defence Force was recognised by the Chief of the Army.

It was also in this period that Max drew some lucky numbers in a Lotto draw, the winnings from which he put to great use in his passion for collecting and trading in sought after stamps and coins.

The nation recognised Max's valuable contribution to the safety and security of our country by awarding him the high honour as a Member of the Order of Australia.

Max retired from the military in the late 1990's, recognised as one of the very best to have ever worn the Australian digger's uniform.

Max attended each and every C Company reunion across Australia in the years that followed.

He remained a vigorous supporter of those Vietnam Veterans who might have needed help. His considered, experienced and reliable advice was continually being sought from a wide number of professionals within the medical world, from within the Vietnam Veteran's community, and most importantly from my perspective, from those members of the Australian Army, myself included, with whom Max had served in Vietnam. For your consistently sound advice, Max, and for your guidance and advice and support in our time together, I will be forever grateful.

Max will long remain a champion of the Australian Defence Force, the Infantry Regiment and to Charlie Company, 3 RAR.

Rest well, my warrior friend.

Lawrence Appelbee
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