

## AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

### Neville William Tickner

**"A man of peace borne out of war"**

**28 June 1945 – 26 January 2020**

**By Peter Bruce**



Nev was a Queenslander, born in Mount Morgan in the cooler part of the year on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 1945. He grew up on his grandparents' farm and at 13, he left school to work on properties. At 17 years and three months, he joined the Australian Army on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1962.

After recruit training at 1<sup>st</sup> Recruit Training Battalion, Kapooka, Nev was allocated to Artillery and was posted to the School of Artillery North Head, where he completed his initial Gun Number course on the 25 Pounder Gun. Nev would return to the School of Artillery several times over the years and completed Artillery Surveyor training and driver training. Nev's first unit posting was to Wacol in Brisbane with 4<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment in March 1963. Nev worked with 101<sup>st</sup> Field Battery and was employed as a Signaller. After nearly two years with 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Nev was posted to 111 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery which had deployed to Butterworth Base in Malaya as part of the protection unit for the Base. Nev remained with the Battery and occasionally worked as part of an Infantry style platoon attached to B Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion to work in an Infantry role. Nev returned to Australia with elements of the Battery in June 1966 and was posted back to 4<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment in Wacol where he joined up with 106 Field Battery. This Battery, along with 108 Field Battery were scheduled to deploy to Vietnam the following year.



In April 1967, Nev and other members of 106 Battery deployed to Vietnam as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Task Force. They were based in Nui Dat which was the main base for Australian Forces in Vietnam although throughout the year, the Battery deployed to the Horseshoe, and many temporary Fire Support Bases throughout the Australian Area of

Operations. Les Winton said of Nev: *"Being in the 106 Battery command post in 1967-68, I didn't have much to do with Tic, but the few times I did, I found him helpful, open and forthright, and I liked him for it. Although he was a bit older and an already experienced regular soldier, he seemed to welcome us national servicemen for who and what we were, younger blokes just doing what we were expected to do, and I learnt a lot from him, and memories of him have popped up many times over the past half-century."* Nev is shown in this photo (no shirt on) with other Battery members and a visiting United States Soldier. Nev returned to Australia on 5<sup>th</sup> March 1968 and took his discharge from the Army on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1968.

## AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE



This photo of Nev was taken in Vietnam by Ted Sawyer during "Operation Ballarat" on 6<sup>th</sup> August at Fire Support Base Giraffe north west of Nui Dat. 106 Battery were providing artillery support to 7 RAR and fired 859 rounds to support the Battalions contact as directed by their Forward Observer, Nev Clark, MC. Nev's experience saw him helping out on several

guns during that operation.

Nev was out of the Army for some five years but re-joined in January 1974 when he was again posted to 4<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment but this time in Townsville. He remained with the Regiment for three years, during which time he played Rugby for the Regiment and tried his hand at athletics. However, things had changed somewhat in the Army and Nev took his discharge again in March 1977.

Nev's Honours and Awards include:

- Australian Active Service Medal 1945-75 with Clasps Malaysia and Vietnam
- General Service Medal 1962 with Clasp Malay Peninsula
- Vietnam Medal
- Australian Defence Medal
- Vietnamese Campaign Medal
- Pingat Jasa Malaysia
- Returned from Active Service Badge.

Post army discharge, Nev took to raising a young family in Blackwater, Central Queensland, in the late 1970s and 1980s. Nev galvanised the community and amongst other activities, started up the Blackwater Basilisks Rugby Union Club. In 2017, Nev returned to Blackwater to celebrate the 40-year anniversary of the Basilisks Club. During his Blackwater years, Nev was an active member of the RSL, heavily involved in local Anzac Day commemorations, raising funds and organising the construction of the Blackwater RSL Club (later the Workers Club) with a War Memorial designed by Nev (inspired by the one in Ulverstone, Tasmania). Nev was also instrumental in fundraising for a Miners' Monument to commemorate those who lost their lives in the Central Highlands mining industry (including those lost in a tragic underground incident at Cook Colliery - workmates of Nev).

In 1987, Nev attended the Welcome Home Parade in Sydney for Vietnam Veterans and became instrumental in organising reunions with his fellow 106 Battery mates. In 1992, Nev and many other 106 Veterans attended the opening of the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra in 1992. Nev was always available to help his 106 Battery mates and was instrumental in helping several mates obtain their entitlements from the Department of Veteran Affairs.

## AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

While in the coal industry, Nev ran an environmental rehabilitation program for Cook Colliery with local schools in Blackwater entitled "Operation Forest". After Nev was made redundant in the coal mining industry in the early 1990s – allegedly because he was a union stirrer - he attended university as a mature age student. After the Port Arthur Massacre in 1996, Nev relentlessly campaigned for gun control appearing on national television on the Today Show, along with authoring many letters to the editor and being the subject of newspaper articles, advocating for stricter control of guns.

Nev completed a Bachelor of Arts with Honours (majoring in Cross Cultural Communications) in 1998 from the Central Queensland University Rockhampton. While Nev was studying as a mature age student at CQU, he also did a six-month international student exchange at Eastern Illinois University in the USA - not a bad effort for a mature age exchange student, taking his family to spend six months including in the US Winter- snowy and icy climes.

Nev then went on to study for 3 years for a PhD which he did not complete - he had other adventures to achieve rather than receiving a floppy hat! Nev often wrote poetry in his spare time, and enjoyed writing, however, this passion came to its fore with Nev's time devoted to writing and publishing peoples' individual stories and memoirs. Nev wrote three books with an old Stockman, Warwick Edwards, documenting his stories of the Kimberley, 'The Last of the Packhorse Stockmen' trilogy were: 'The City Kids Goes Bush', 'The Man Emerges' and 'The End of an Era'. Nev's Lecturer at CQ University, Dr Jeannette Delamoire, published a feature on Warwick and Nev in the "Outback Magazine."

Nev also wrote "The Bridge Carpenter" about a WW1 Digger - Ted (Edward) Goodwin, from Bluff, Central Queensland. Nev met Ted in person to discuss his memoirs before Ted passed away. Ted was a bridge carpenter. Nev also wrote many articles for "Enzine Articles", a forum for amateur authors to share their work, and self-published other books, documenting people's life stories.

In 2006, Nev decided to go back to Penang, Malaysia for a visit. Nev had gone to Penang on his R & R in January 1968 from Vietnam. Nev had discovered a passion for humanitarian work which he could conduct at a grassroots level where money went directly to local projects and communities which needed it. Before visiting Vietnam for his first post war visit in 2009, Nev's fundraising supported the Dalat School, an orphanage in Penang. Nev regularly went back to visit the Dalat School and to visit friends he had made in Penang. During Nev's travels in his last 13 years, he had also visited Dharamshala in India, the home of the Dalai Lama. Nev was inspired by the peaceful teachings of Buddha and the writings of Kahlil Gibran. Nev also taught English in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

From 2009, in Vietnam, Nev worked with two orphanages in Dien Bien Phu. He would take bread rolls and fruit to them on a regular basis and co-ordinated donations from Australian and American Veterans and Friends. Nev would also organise bus trips to mountain swimming pools for the orphans. Nev's Army mates, John Godfrey and Ben Burrow visited an orphanage with Nev in Dien Bien Phu and Nev arranged the distribution of sewing machines which John had donated, to the house mothers.

Nev was the recipient of a very rare award from Rotary International to recognise his humanitarian efforts - a Paul Harris Fellow (PHF) was awarded to Nev on 12 March 2018. He was nominated for the award by Rotary Redlands Sunrise Club Brisbane, to honour Nev's Humanitarian work in Dien Bien Phu, including funding of a new prosthetic leg and

## AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

construction of a weather worthy home with concrete slab, for an elderly lady living in a hut in a remote region of north Vietnam (who had lost her leg from a land mine during the independence war with the French in 1954), and raising money for wheelchairs.

Nev's last major effort for deprived kids was to raise money for a five-year old ethnic minority Hmong boy "Quang Man Thanh Dat", (Dat), from a remote mountainous region of Vietnam, who was born with congenital corneal defects. Nev discovered Dat's case part way through 2019 and through his relentless efforts, raised more than 40,000 Singapore dollars through "Give Asia Kindness" ([www.giveasiakindness.org](http://www.giveasiakindness.org)) to successfully take Dat to Singapore for corneal transplant by Professor Tan, an ophthalmologist. This was Nev's most ambitious and heartfelt project since commencing his humanitarian efforts in the province of Dien Bien Phu. Dat lives in a remote mountain area and although his parents had consulted with Professor Tan on a visit to Ho Chi Minh (HCM) City, the corneal transplants required could not be carried out in Vietnam. Nev raised the impossible target and travelled with Dat and his family to Singapore in November (a very costly destination) so that Dat could receive the gift of vision at the age of 5 years. Nev went back to Singapore with Dat and his father so that Dat could have the post-op stitches removed, one week before his passing, and for Dat to receive critical check-ups on the transplant. This was an incredible achievement of Nev.

Dat returned to Singapore with his father in early April 2020 to be specially fitted with glasses, where his eyes had to be measured on account of the transplant, and he received check-ups with specialist equipment. Dat is due to return again soon when his doctors in Singapore want to check his transplant under general anaesthetic. In the meantime, he has eye drops to keep the new cornea in good condition. Nev's family and friends are continuing Nev's grassroots fundraising so that Dat can continue to receive critical check-ups in Singapore on the wellness of his corneal transplant over the next two years or more.

Nev died in Dien Bien Phu (Vietnam) hospital on the morning of 26 January 2020 from cardiac arrest. Nev's Grandad, (Billy Lee) was born on Australia Day so he left on his grandfather's birthday. Before his death, Nev had indicated he was coming back to Queensland in March/April 2020 for "irregular maintenance" and was looking forward to staying on for the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment's sixtieth birthday celebrations.

Nev was honoured and very respectfully cremated at 2am on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January in Hanoi, after an 11-hour journey through the highest mountains in Vietnam. Nev's partner, Heather Cabus and Vietnamese friends from Dien Bien Phu followed all the way in a mini-bus and went on his final journey with him. Before travelling with Nev to the crematorium, Heather and the same friends conducted an all-night vigil with him at the Dien Bien Phu funeral parlour on Sunday night, 28 January. We are honoured by this. Nev's ashes (along with his titanium knees!) were flown home to Australia and a service and wake were held on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2020 in Rockhampton. Nev was laid to rest on his grandfather's old farm.

The Office of War Graves is arranging for a war grave plaque to be placed for Nev in the North Queensland Garden of Remembrance, Anzac Park, The Strand, Townsville, which will happen later in 2020.

There will also be a memorial paver laid for Nev on the Australian Memorial Walk, North Head Sanctuary, Manly in Sydney.

## AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

Since Nev's passing there has been an outpouring of grief in Vietnam, as well as Australia. Nev was deeply loved by his three children, Chelsi, Roxanne and Rolley, his nine grandchildren, Elise, Imogen, Matilda, Darcy, Nina, Saxon, Oscar, Aleska, Astrid and the children of Vietnam. Nev is survived by his siblings, Jeff, Wayne & Lyn. Nev's brother, Jeffrey Tickner, is also a Vietnam Veteran.

"In a **gentle** way you can **shake** the world."

### **Acknowledgements:**

- Nev's daughter Chelsi Williams for her support and providing much of the information for this obituary – email: Chelsi.williams@bigpond.com
- Ben Burrow, fellow 106 Battery Veteran from Vietnam days and close friend of Nev's.
- Les Winton for his recollections of Nev.