THEY WERE FOREMOST AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS
An oral account of Aboriginal and Thursday Island soldiers who served in
Malaya and Vietnam: 1957 to 1967

Colonel O.M. (Max) Carroll (RL)

I am a retired infantryman of the Australian Regular Army in which I served as a
commissioned officer for over 30 years and during this period saw active service on two
separate occasions. The first was in Malaya from 1957 to 1959 during the Emergency. At
this time I was a platoon commander with the rank of lieutenant. Malaya was a nasty little
war which received relatively little publicity. This is probably due to the fact that the
Australian component serving there involved regular services personnel. My second period
of active service was in Vietnam from 1966 to 1967 as a major. In addition to being a
support company commander and battalion operations officer, I later on was commander of
a rifle company. This was a war of a much larger scale which received extensive publicity,
particularly through the medium of television. During both of these conflicts soldiers of
Aboriginal descent or Thursday Islanders served with me. I knew some better than others,
particularly those who were in my platoon or company. I am happy to provide my
recollections of these Aboriginal and Thursday Island soldiers. Before beginning this
account, however, I would make the point strongly that the men I am referring to were first
and foremost Australian soldiers. There is no discrimination in the Australian Army on
account of a man's background, his race, his colour or his creed. In an operational infantry
platoon, company or battalion we rely on each other too much, as lives are at stake, for
there to be any nonsense, such as misguided prejudice. A man is accepted for himself, his
abilities, his skills and his contribution to the esprit de corps of the battalion. During my
service we trained, fought and played together as a team. Mutual liking and respect was the
norm. Today, in March 1992, I am deeply saddened by the recent adverse 'police versus
Aboriginal' publicity in NSW. This goes against everything that we achieved in my units.
Mutual respect between our many diverse cultural backgrounds was a reality. I'm talking of
soldiers of not only Aboriginal origin but also British, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, French,
Italian, Dutch, Turkish, Maltese, Greek-Egyptian and Chinese. These were my soldiers and
they were all Australian. What is more they were mates. When we meet occasionally at
reunions or for the Anzac Day march, the strong bond of those who served together remains
intact. It is this mutual respect which must be retained for the sake of our nation and all
future Australians.

I shall speak now on the Aboriginal soldiers with whom I served. Firstly in the 3rd
Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR) in the Malayan Emergency. There
were five soldiers whom I can recall quite vividly. In my platoon, which was 4 Platoon, B
Company, I had three Aboriginal soldiers. They were all Queenslanders, but this is not
unusual as two-thirds of the whole platoon were Queenslanders. The three, whom I am
speaking about, were Private N.G. (Noel) Brown, Private A.H. (Ham) Hamilton and
Private K.H. (Kenny) Williams. I will deal with these first because again we served
together for the best part of the first year in Malaya but, preceding that, there was the year
of training in Australia to get us up to operational standard before we went overseas. Noel
Brown was in the platoon when I joined it in November 1956. At this time the platoon
was at a pretty low ebb because it had been without an officer for about eight months.
When the battalion returned from Korea in late 1955 their training had not been organised
and most of their time was spent painting stones white. (A typical army way of keeping
soldiers occupied!) Noel Brown was a bit of a scallywag although a likeable kid. At the time that I knew him he would have been about 19 or 20. As I came to know him better my respect for him increased. He was an extremely good soldier in the bush, using all of the natural skills he inherited. On account of his bushcraft skills he was a point scout throughout the tour in Malaya and proved to be a first-class soldier on operations. There is one instance which springs to mind in which my platoon had to take a surrendered terrorist back into the bush in a hurry to get to an arms dump that he had revealed during his interrogation. It was essential that we got there first, before his fellow terrorists woke up to the fact that he had absconded and could reveal where the weapons were cached. The terrorist, a Chinese, was not a particularly reliable or likeable character and, as a safeguard, I had one soldier walking two paces behind him with strict orders to keep a close eye on him and if he made any move to escape to kill him. He led us a bit of a dance initially. We entered the jungle at 4 o'clock in the morning and by 5 o'clock that evening I had a group of very tired soldiers and we still had not arrived at the weapons cache. I decided to base the platoon and go on with a small party with the surrendered terrorist, as he assured us it was not far away. I took the terrorist, a Chinese interpreter, an Iban soldier who was a Sarawak Dyak (these people were used as trackers) and Noel Brown as the other Australian soldier in the party. This emphasises the trust I had in him. We proceeded to follow the terrorist and as darkness was descending the Chinese interpreter fell over, I suspect deliberately because he was tired, and sprained his ankle. I left Brown with him and I pushed on with the terrorist and the Iban. We eventually recovered the weapons and came back in the dark, picked up Noel Brown and the Chinese interpreter and made it back to the platoon. The point I want to make here is that out of a Platoon of Australian soldiers I selected Brown because I trusted his bushcraft, and I also trusted his ability as a soldier to back me up if I had any trouble with the others. I mentioned earlier that he was a bit of a scallywag. Most young soldiers, irrespective of background, when they are overseas tend to play up while on leave. In all the time I knew Brown he was never up before me on a charge. He knew just how far to go. Nevertheless, he was a first-class field soldier and I have never had cause to change that view.

Ham Hamilton was a quiet lad, effective, never any trouble, reliable and a good soldier. Again he fitted in very well in a mixed platoon, and all members respected him.

Like Ham Hamilton, Kenny Williams had joined the battalion as a reinforcement at the time I was building the platoon up in the early part of 1957. It was a hard training year at Canungra, and both responded extremely well to the training program. I'll spend a little more time on Williams because I had him as a Bren gunner. He was a big man. I'd put Ken at 6 feet, solidly built and a very impressive character. Again quiet, a most competent Bren gunner and thoroughly sound and reliable soldier. There were never any disciplinary problems with Ken, which is more than I can say for a number of his colleagues from other Australian states of Caucasian origins. I liked Williams the same as I did Hamilton and Brown, but there was a solid reliable streak to Ken, and I would rate him as NCO potential. I lost track of these people after I returned to Australia at the end of 1959 and was promoted and posted to Western Australia.

We served together as young men in the closeness that a rifle platoon makes possible. Trust is complete at this level, you have to rely on your fellow soldiers, and rely on their instincts. A professional officer is always proud of a good platoon for it shows the results of hard training and hard work by all ranks. I was very proud of 4 Platoon, B Company 3RAR. We won the champion platoon of the battalion in 1958, being assessed as the best platoon in the battalion in training and operations. Soldiers such as Noel, Ham and Kenny made this possible.
Plate 1. Bruce Fletcher, Landing at Xuyen Moc, Operation Paddington, 1967 (AWM, oil on canvas on hardboard, 102 x 133.3 cm, 40578). Inscribed 'Helicopter assault landing/Xuyen Moc, Phuoc Tuy Province Vietnam' on verso. 'Darky' Butler is third from the right.
Plate 2  Bruce Fletcher, *Private 'Darky' Butler*, 1967 (AWM, oil on canvas on hardboard, 74.5 x 59.4 cm, 40565).
ABORIGINAL SOLDIERS IN MALAYA AND VIETNAM

The other two Aborigines in 3RAR were not in my company so I cannot speak of them with the depth that I could of the preceding three. One was a chap by the name of Corporal H.W. (Bill) Power of A Company and the other was a Private W.H. (Billy) Saylor who was in the Administrative Company. Both of these soldiers were Thursday Islanders. Although not having such a close association with them I do recall Billy Saylor was an excellent footballer. He seemed to spend a lot of his time in the battalion's rugby team. He also played the guitar and ukulele and his island songs were those that were the most popular. Bill Power was a corporal; he was a section commander and thus commanded eight other Australian soldiers. He was an exceptional soldier, a first-class NCO highly regarded by his officers and colleagues in his company. Again I have not seen or heard of him since those days. The five Aboriginal soldiers I have mentioned were good soldiers and ones of whom Australia should be proud.

During my tour of duty in Vietnam (1966-67) with the 5th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regional (5RAR) my time as OC of both Support Company and A Company (a rifle company) allowed me to serve with a further four Aboriginal soldiers. In the case of the first two soldiers the tragedy is that both were killed in action. Corporal N.J. (Norman) Womal was a Queenslander, he came from Bowen and is buried in the Bowen cemetery. He was one of my NCOs in the Anti-Tank Platoon. He was smart, well turned out, always immaculate in presentation, and a good instructor. I had cause, whilst in Australia, to send Norman to run a short course of a few days for some Royal Australian Air Force ground defence people on the 106 mm recoiless rifle with which the Anti-Tank Platoon was armed. He went off on his own taking his stores and weapon with him. The letter of commendation and appreciation that I received subsequently from the Royal Australian Air Force warranted me parading him, and reading to him the contents of the letter. It also allowed me to thank him personally. Being a shy person, he was embarrassed, but that was Norm Womal, a first-class junior leader. He was most effective in the field and I had cause to see his work at close quarters when he was in my company. On 17 October 1966 at a place called Nui Thi Vai, which was a mountain complex in South Vietnam, in Phuoc Tuy Province, the Viet Cong (VC) were located in caves and were hard to locate. We were ambushed as we were sweeping up a ridge line and the signals officer was shot in the chest. The Anti-Tank Platoon, which had been leading the battalion headquarters group, had been allowed to pass through the VC ambush before it was sprung. I summoned the Anti-Tank Platoon to back down to try and take out the enemy position from above and it was during this action that Womal was hit. He was shot in the throat and, although mortally wounded, he literally held his throat together with one hand whilst he was lying in an exposed position and continued to direct the fire of his machine gunner, relaying information to both his platoon commander and myself. It was because of this extremely courageous action that we did not suffer further casualties. He was still alive when we recovered him but he died as he was being evacuated by helicopter. Everyone within 5RAR respected Norm Womal; he was a first-class junior leader and, as a result of his actions on that day, was awarded a posthumous Mention in Despatches. Sadly only an MID and/or a Victoria Cross can be awarded posthumously. Had he lived, there is no doubt in my mind Norm Womal would have been awarded a Military Medal. It was a privilege to serve with such a fine soldier.

On the next day, the 18 October 1966, I lost my second Aboriginal soldier, a lad named G.H. (Gordon) D’Antoine. Whereas Womal was of Aboriginal descent, Gordon was of mixed racial original. He came from the northwest of Western Australia, in the vicinity of Broome-Derby. He was hit in the same area where Norm Womal had been the preceding day. We were systematically clearing out the caves in which the VC had their complex.
Gordon D'Antoine was a member of the Assault Pioneer Platoon: these soldiers being experts in de-activating booby traps and explosives. We were searching the caves to delouse these devices when D'Antoine was shot in the back, from below, at a distance of no more then ten feet. This was the extent of cover the enemy had in these cave complexes. By the time we got him out he had died. The rest of his platoon were extremely angry and savagely went through the place making a frontal assault using flame throwers. Then followed a search of the three levels that existed in one particular tunnel and cave complex. All we found were blood-stained bandages, abandoned equipment and signs of a hasty exit. Obviously we had hurt the VC but to what extent we shall never know. We could not have hurt them hard enough to make up for the loss of these two fine young Australian soldiers. I must also mention a stretcher-bearer, a young man named Peter Fraser, who went in and got Womal out. Fraser placed his own body between Womal's and the enemy who were firing at him until he got Womal free from the rock crevice in which he was wedged. Fraser had his equipment shot off him whilst he was retrieving Womal from the crevice. For this action Fraser was awarded a Military Medal, but it also helps to demonstrate that Australian soldiers worked together without any thought of racial distinctions.

Of the next two I will deal with there was a young lad named J.R. (Sam) Davis. Sam was slightly built, a 'full blood' Aborigine and came from Atherton in North Queensland. A quiet lad, he was a member of A Company, 5RAR when I took command in October-November 1966. Davis springs to mind particularly for an action that took place in late March 1967 in an area between Dat Do and Phuoc Loi where we were building a large wire obstacle as part of a task force plan. This involved constructing an extensive fence. Security elements were posted while we proceeded with the physical task of laying wire. We had piled arms at various places so that they were close at hand in the event of an attack. One section of fence had been completed and a group of about a dozen soldiers, including young Davis, were recovering their weapons before moving on to the next section. I also was close by. Suddenly, in a firm quiet voice, Davis called out for everyone to stand still and not move. In the middle of the group, barely protruding through the sand, were the three prongs of an M16 jumper mine. It was obvious that the VC had estimated the line that our fence was going to take, and even though this area had been cleared beforehand, this mine had been missed. If it had not be for Davis' sharp eyes I estimate that all of the group, including myself, would have been casualties. Everybody carefully recovered their weapons and gingerly walked away from the area, having marked the locality of the mine for our sappers to delouse. B Company, who replaced us on the fence a few days later, were not so lucky. They had a young officer named Rinkin killed when another one of these jumper mines was activated. It was Davis' sharp eyes that saved the lives of many of his mates. I also owe him my life.

The last one I wish to mention is a chap named R.L. (Zeke) Mundine, again a Queenslander. Zeke was related to the family of boxing Mundines. At the time I served with him he was a junior NCO, a lance corporal, in the Administrative Company. He was friendly, cheerful, an obliging NCO. Zeke stayed on with 5RAR, after its first tour of duty in Vietnam, and went back to Vietnam for a second tour with the battalion a couple of years later. At this time he had been promoted and was with a rifle platoon. Sadly during his second tour he participated in a particularly savage action, was badly wounded and this resulted in him losing a leg, I believe below the knee. He was medically evacuated back to Australia. I next served with him in 1970-71, on the staff of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, where he was a staff sergeant in the Q store. With his physical disability, he had been down-graded medically to an administrative post. To the best of my knowledge Zeke is still serving in the Australian Army and I believe he is now a warrant officer. I have met...
him periodically, at Royal Australian Regiment reunions, and he is still the same Zeke - cheerful, good natured, and an outgoing person. I have the highest regard for him, as did everyone in the battalion who served with him on either the first or the second tour.

The theme I have used in this account is that the nine Aborigines I have served with were foremost Australian. They were good soldiers, two gave their lives for this country. One was awarded a posthumous Mentioned in Despatches. Finally, they were proud of their regiment and their regiment was proud of them.