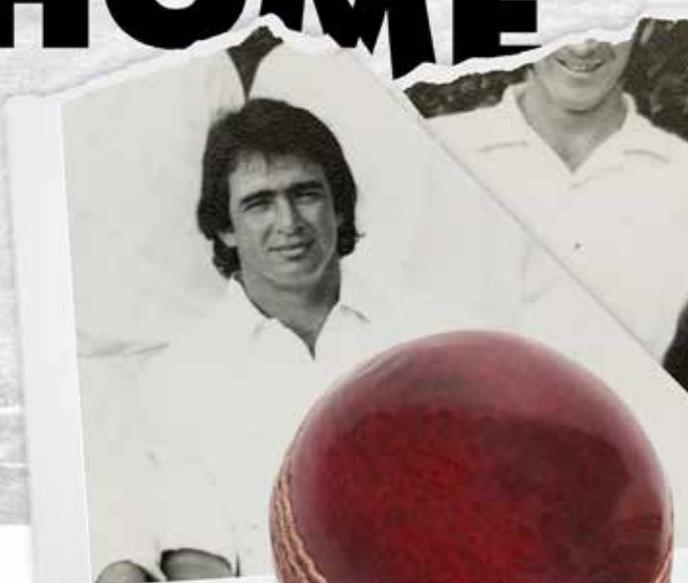
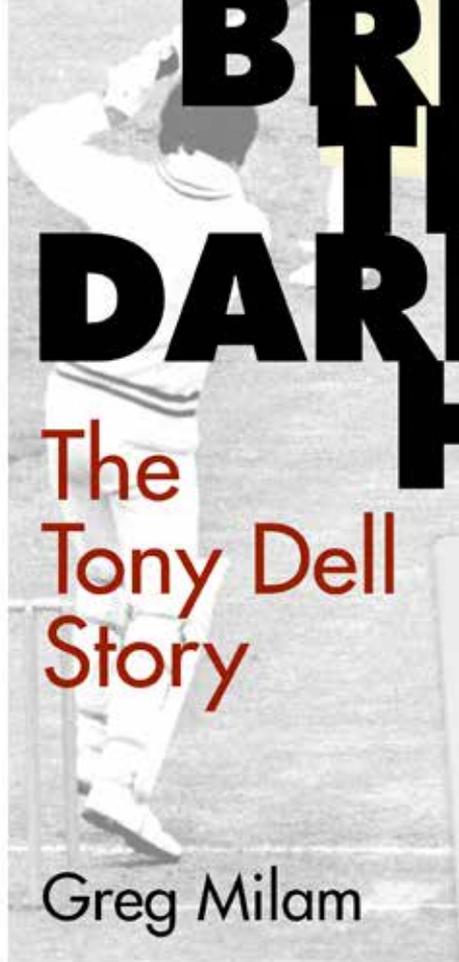


AND BRING THE DARKNESS HOME

The
Tony Dell
Story

Greg Milam



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IT WAS, everyone could agree, no place to get lost. In the dead of night, in the depths of the jungle, at the very moment a bloody war was intensifying, the men of C Company of the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment were adrift in Vietnam.

What had started out as a routine patrol suddenly had the potential to become a massacre. Private Tony Dell, 22 years old and just a few days away from leaving the war zone of Vietnam for good, was one of them. So close to home he could almost smell it and yet now looking death in the face.

It should have been straightforward. As usual, soldiers nearing the end of their tour were given a mission close to their camp. This one: to prepare an ambush on a trail where, intelligence officers believed, communist forces would be tramping through to the village of Hoa Long. The Aussies, half a dozen of them, would be lying in wait. There was a protocol to follow, to head out in the late afternoon to a designated spot and wait for nightfall. 'That was the time the enemy was most likely to strike you,' Dell remembers.

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Only, on this night, the corporal in charge got lost. As his men waited in the darkness, he set off to find the ambush point and came back empty-handed. He then tried and failed again. ‘We got to the point where he just gave up and said, “Well, let’s stay here the night and we’ll go back to camp when the sun comes up.”’

This was March 1968 and the Vietnam War was at a turning point. Just weeks earlier, the North Vietnamese had launched a surprise wave of attacks. The Tet Offensive brought assaults on a hundred cities in the south. It was to fail in military terms, the attacks repelled by South Vietnamese, American and Australian forces, but it did succeed in dramatically changing public opinion in the West about how well the war was going.

Instead of an enemy they had been told was fading, television viewers were shocked to see news coverage of a brazen counter-attack. Almost overnight, the questions about American and Australian involvement in the war became national debates. In February, Walter Cronkite, the journalist known as ‘the most trusted man in America’, had told his evening news viewers that he was ‘more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate’. Just as those back home were beginning to question the point of it all, the men of C Company 2nd Royal Australian Regiment were lost, slumped in the sweaty undergrowth of a pitch-black jungle night. ‘We were all just higgledly-piggledy in the bush,’ said Dell.

One of his fellow signallers in Vietnam that night had been at school with him in Brisbane a decade earlier. Corporal Kevin Alcock’s assessment was blunt: ‘They were late getting out there, late getting into position and were in the wrong place. They were stuck.’

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They all knew that only one thing could make matters worse.

‘All of a sudden a hundred or so Viet Cong just walked through our position.’

The enemy they were sent to ambush – the People’s Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam, the forces doing the bidding of communist North Vietnam in the south – had instead caught them unawares and unprepared. A comedy of errors in the jungle meant that one false move would have proved fatal for them all.

‘We just had to shut up and hope like Christ no one spotted us,’ said Dell. ‘If someone coughed or if the bloody radio had squelched, we were goners.’

It was a moment – one of two from his time in Vietnam – that Private Dell would later identify as defining the story of the rest of his life. The ‘abject fear’ that would scar him for decades.

Each of those terrifying seconds felt like minutes. The only sound was the grinding of the Viet Cong soldiers’ boots in the dirt and the clinking of the equipment they carried. Only those Aussies, trying hard to control their breathing, could hear the furious rushing sound of their blood in their ears. The prayers that their lives were not destined to end right there had to be silent. Kevin Alcock remembers Dell telling him: ‘I was afraid they would hear my heart beat.’

‘Unless you have been in that situation you have no idea what real fear is like,’ Dell would tell a newspaper in 2013. ‘I was absolutely shitting myself.’

There is the old cliché of life flashing before one’s eyes in moments of deadly peril. But for that group of young men, sent to fight in a war that the world was now questioning, in that moment everything hung in the balance: lives to live, dreams to

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pursue, loves to share, families to raise. Even cricket to play. One sound, one turned head, and it was all over.

It lasted for the time it took those Viet Cong forces to pass by. And then, as quickly as they appeared, they were gone. Somehow the worst had not happened. The men of C Company had survived.

As signaller, it was Dell's job to fire up the radio and alert the artillery, to call in an attack on the Viet Cong column as it disappeared into the night. 'I tried to get on the radio and I was so shit-scared I couldn't talk.'

The memory of that night, recounted 50 years later from the comfort of his home in Queensland, has become a touchstone in the life of Tony Dell. By his mid-seventies, he had learned what that journey had cost him. In old age he had to work through experiences his younger self could never have fully understood, unravelling the strands and laying bare his vulnerabilities.

Only those who have seen combat at first hand can really tell of its true horrors. They are also the only ones who can really know what it left behind physically and emotionally. Perhaps they see something familiar in the thoughts of American soldier Frank Gabell. Returning from his service in World War Two, his home life had fallen apart. He wrote: 'War stinks! May all political and religious war-mongers be consigned to eternal hell.'

So many who made it through the war found they could not make it through the peace. For some, like Tony Dell, that was a private war that has lasted a lifetime.

By the time of the night of that near miss in March 1968, Tony Dell had been in Vietnam for ten months. He was serving in what was known as the ANZAC Battalion, made up of

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Australian and New Zealander infantry troops, the modern incarnation of the 'Diggers' who had fought alongside each other in World War One.

Dell had been plucked off the streets of Brisbane thanks to the controversial lottery system introduced by the Australian government to select conscripts for Vietnam. Young men were asked to sign a register in the year they turned 20. If their birth date was drawn, they were eligible for the call-up. It was one of the more unforgettable birthday gifts any government has ever handed its young citizens.

As it turned out, fewer than ten per cent of those eligible for National Service ended up getting the call. Tony Dell was one of the 15,000 'nashos' who went to Vietnam. 'It's the only lottery I've ever won,' he said. 'Pity it wasn't the one for \$2m.'

Until that birthday ballot rudely interrupted life, Dell's focus had been on turning his promise as a club cricketer into something more substantial. Things were now set on a very different course. 'I guess at that stage I was pretty pissed off that I was one of the ones that had to go,' he said. Because the 'nashos' all shared a birthday, Dell and four others from Brisbane could arrange shared celebrations. On 5 August 1966, they all jumped in a Mini and set off from the base in Singleton in New South Wales, headed for home. At midnight they pulled up in the tiny parish of Glen Innes, jumped out of the car and celebrated their 21st together with a beer or four. Training had begun earlier that year. Within months Tony Dell would be bound for Vietnam. 'I was a ready-made soldier.'

To this day that war remains one of the most divisive in history. To many Vietnam is a byword for military misadventure

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overseas. The stuff of countless movies was very real in the middle of the 20th century. At the height of the Cold War, the United States was gripped by the fear that Soviet influence would topple countries like dominoes under the communist spell. When the colonial French were defeated by the Vietnamese communist revolutionary Ho Chi Minh, the alarm bells were ringing in Washington.

Driven by the fear of Ho's North Vietnam taking over the south, American involvement began in 1955, exploded into all-out conflict in 1965 and would end in ignominy in 1973. By the time communist forces did take control of South Vietnam, more than three million people had died. Half of those were Vietnamese civilians and some 58,000 were Americans.

For Australians, the fear of that domino theory was an existential one. Geography alone was a reason to look nervously towards South East Asia. When the call for full support came from US President Lyndon B. Johnson (known as LBJ), the Australian government responded enthusiastically. By the time the last Aussie soldier left Vietnam in 1972, 60,000 had seen service there, 3,000 were listed as wounded and 521 had been killed.

The full cost for those who made it home would take years to reveal itself.

In 1967, the country of Vietnam certainly held little to impress a new arrival from Brisbane. 'It was hot and it was wet. The soil was red. It was dusty when it was dry or boggy when it rained.' One of the few comforts in the jungle was the tubes of condensed milk sent from home by his mother, a delight he later remembered as 'almost edible'.

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He almost never made it to Vietnam at all. During pre-deployment jungle training in Australia, Dell was climbing down a rope with his full kit strapped to his back when he lost his grip and fell. His leg was broken – ‘not a bad break’ – and, because he had not fully completed his training, he says he was offered the chance to skip deployment to Vietnam altogether. The option of 12 months of mess duty and parades held little appeal, though. Dell said he would go to war.

Home was the camp at Nui Dat, 50 miles south-east of the South Vietnamese capital Saigon. It was a place that had already given Australian forces a taste of the ferocity of the fight.

The location for the base was chosen because it was right on the doorstep of the Viet Cong. So sympathetic to the communists were residents of the two nearest villages – Long Tan and Long Phuoc – that the Australian commander ordered the entire populations of both be removed. Some 4,000 people along with their livestock were resettled and the villages destroyed without compensation. It doomed any effort to win the hearts and minds of locals. Building a camp on a key Viet Cong supply route was also guaranteed to prompt an enemy response. It duly arrived.

For weeks in the summer of 1966, Australian military intelligence had been tracking the movement of the Viet Cong towards the remains of Long Tan. A force of 2,500 were thought to have assembled ready to attack Nui Dat. But every Australian patrol that went out to look for them drew a blank. On the night of 16 August, the Viet Cong announced their presence. The enemy bombardment of artillery and mortars, launched from a mile away, injured two dozen Australian men, one fatally.

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In their pursuit of the Viet Cong forces the next day, a company of Australians barely 100 strong found themselves trapped and heavily outnumbered. As Viet Cong forces closed in for the kill, the men of D Company somehow held off a full assault until relief arrived. In the three days of fighting on that rubber plantation, 18 Australians died.

The story of the Battle of Long Tan would give rise to numerous controversies – not least over the wildly varying numbers of Viet Cong fighters who were killed – but it undoubtedly served as a warning for new arrivals that they were in for a fight, and that Nui Dat – literally translated as ‘dirt hill’ – was a hill men were willing to die for.

To a 21-year-old newcomer, life as a private had a familiar routine, shaped by the landscape of south-eastern Vietnam. Those plantations were dark and deadly places, offering the perfect cover and clear field of fire for an enemy hidden within. The rice paddies were no safer, open and exposed, and heavy going in the monsoon rains between May and October. ‘I remember one night we had to “stop and prop”. We had to spend the night in six inches of water,’ says Dell. Changing clothes was a luxury: ‘You might have a couple of pairs of socks because your feet were always wet but not much else.’ Every evening would also bring the routine of removing the half a dozen or so leeches from some of the more delicate areas of the body. A lighted cigarette was found to be the most effective means.

Dell was sanguine about life at war. ‘The more I got into it, the more it appealed to me. I thought, “Let’s make the best of it.” We were playing real soldiers. It was a boy’s own adventure. In fact, my main memory of it was that I didn’t mind it one little bit.’

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Dell's schoolfriend Greg Delaney remembers asking him about his first contact with the enemy in Vietnam. 'He said he dived behind a log and another bloke called Joe did the same and they came face to face. He said it was raining leaves from the bullets flying over the top of them. He and Joe was just inches apart and, he couldn't understand why, but they just laughed. Maybe it was sheer terror, but they just laughed.'

Being 6ft 5in tall had its advantages and its drawbacks. 'You're an easy target when you're such a tall bugger wandering through the jungle,' said John George, a lieutenant who would go on to become second-in-command of C Company. 'Luckily he had a great sense of humour about it.'

His height was more useful elsewhere. The battalion's official history reveals improvised games of cricket took place in between the lines of tents at Nui Dat. Years later, looking at an action photo of a group of his mates, stripped to the waist, with a plank for a bat and boxes for the stumps, Dell was perplexed. 'Seems we DID play cricket,' he said. 'A number of guys have told me since about facing me in the lines, but I don't remember.'

Camp life did offer some relief from the strain of combat. There were good-humoured hostilities inside Nui Dat over whose music should be played loudest. It was dubbed 'The war of the tape recorders', the Beatles versus Peter, Paul and Mary, and was eventually settled amicably, one soldier said, according to the rules of the Geneva Convention.

Attached to headquarters company as one of the two signallers, Private Dell's life was much like that of the thousands who served in Vietnam, governed by the search for an enemy more used to the surroundings. 'We would go out on search-

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and-destroy missions, we would go through villages and you'd never know who was a normal villager and who might be Viet Cong by night. We'd be looking for weapons and they'd have these things stashed away. At night-time they'd get those out and do stuff with them.'

That 'stuff' was the insurgency they had been sent to counter. From the moment they embarked on their adventure in Vietnam, the Americans knew they had little experience of jungle warfare. They also knew the Australians and New Zealanders did have it. Both countries had fought alongside the British during the Malayan Emergency, a guerrilla war also fought in a landscape of plantations.

The first Australian involvement in Vietnam had been a small team of advisors sent to train Americans on the tactics they had learned in Malaya. Like the US though, the Australians would soon realise that those first few teams of advisors were never going to be enough. This was a conflict that would ultimately require thousands.

It was apparent to everyone on the ground that this was an uneven fight. On those ambushes, they set traps on trails identified as likely to be used by Viet Cong. Dell said: 'Sometimes we just felt they were there sitting watching us.'

It was on Australia Day, 26 January 1968, that the second of the incidents took place that would burn itself into the consciousness of a young soldier. He may not have known it at the time but it would haunt and shape the rest of Dell's life.

The men of C Company had been deployed to a province north-east of Saigon to support American and South Vietnamese forces preparing for that expected Tet Offensive. Operation

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Coburg was to cost 17 Australians, two New Zealanders and one American their lives.

In one assault, soldiers from C Company took on a bunker believed to contain as few as a dozen Viet Cong soldiers. They were wrong and what followed was a 17-hour ordeal as wave after wave of Viet Cong counter-attacks poured in and the Aussies clung on for life. The platoon commander later told a reporter: 'Our spotter plane flew over and told us there were thousands of them swarming towards us.' John George remembers that day clearly. 'I recall telling the sergeant major, "The rounds are ten feet high, the bastards can't shoot." With that a burst of machine-gun fire cut the bushes in front of us. The sergeant major pushed my head to the ground, fell on top of me and said: "They're not ten fucking feet high now." That company sergeant major, in the eyes of George and Dell, saved many lives that day: 'Without Reg Jones we would have been fucked.'

During that attack Graham Norley, a 24-year-old corporal from Adelaide, was shot and killed as he was chatting with a colleague. John George remembers a sentry slumping next to him having been shot through the nose. As George wrestled with a field dressing and told the stricken soldier to lift up his hanging nose so he could bandage it in place, the soldier wondered aloud: 'What's my mother going to say about me not having a bloody nose?' Lt George summoned up the company medic, Private Jock Davison, to help remove the bloodied soldier from the firing line. Davison, 27 years old and on loan from another company, was shot and killed. Years later, George said: 'I blame myself for his death.'

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They had lost others too. In September 1967, privates Leslie Weston and William Brett were killed alongside an interpreter in an ambush of their Land Rover at a checkpoint.

For Private Dell, the sudden and violent loss of comrades put the reality of death right in front of him. In the heat of battle, there is no time to stop and question the freak nature of why one lives and another dies, why one returns to his family on his own two feet but another is carried home in a box. There is no time to wonder either about the mental scars all of this will inflict. Those questions are for later.

And it was not the deaths of men on his own side that would cause the lasting nightmares for Tony Dell. In fact, decades later he remained matter of fact about it. 'It is sad that they're gone. It is the worst part of the job. But you get on with it.'

It wasn't meant to sound callous; his affection for his comrades had never dimmed. 'If you're in the army, especially if you're deployed in combat, there's nothing closer than the mates you had.'

Lt John George, a man who was to serve for a quarter of a century in the Australian Army, explained: 'I've had guys killed next to me. Look, you accept it as a soldier. It is a tragedy. It's upsetting. It happens. It is war. You can never let it get to you. You can't worry about it. If you're not focused, you could be next.'

For Dell it was deaths on the other side that would leave the scars. Like that brush with death as the Viet Cong tramped over their heads in the bush, to Dell's mind, the sight of dead enemy caused the lasting psychological damage. The aftermath during Coburg in a Viet Cong camp was particularly affecting.

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Forty years on, Dell's voice would become strained at the memory, the words trailing off. The gruesome reality of war: the backs of heads that had been blown off, brains splattered everywhere, soldiers shot in the chest and their backs exploded by the force of the round. He saw it all, more than once. 'You see all the blood and guts but it doesn't hit you until later. You see it everywhere. It doesn't affect you greatly at the time because it is part of the process. But it is a horrific sight.'

He would come to understand what it had done to him. Back then, he didn't have a clue. 'You're never able to process it because you've got a job to do. You just carry on. There's always another search and destroy to be done. The story was that there were thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail to take over Saigon. You just have to get through it.'

It is a story that generations have told. The job that had to be done. No time to wallow in the fear or loss, certainly little chance to talk about that to your mates.

It is a different story to the one told in a documentary film released by the Australian military in 1968. The 30-minute film showed those back home what the 'Diggers in Vietnam' were up to. It was a 'complex and ever-changing environment of a strange war', the film cautioned, but it painted a picture of a reassuringly neat end to every day. Once the casualties had been mopped up and the enemy prisoners searched and refreshed with a kindly cigarette, when the 'diggers return to base, they'll talk over their experience with their mates, just as their fathers did in wars gone by, the things they did, the places they've seen'. Maybe those soldiers, their nervous smiles and eyes full of trepidation for the

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cameras, did talk things over on those long nights. That was not what Tony Dell remembered. 'My recollection is that there wasn't a great deal of discussion amongst us.'

According to the soothing voice on the film, being on the move in the jungle offered soldiers some respite from the nervous tensions of war. Far better than worrying about what dangers lurked in the shadows, it said, was to be out there actually confronting them for real. That way the physical problems outweigh the mental strain.

Any positive feeling on the ground had much to do with the story those young Australians had been told about the reasons for the war. If there was a civilian ambivalence back home, no one in authority was taking any chances with the mindset of the soldiers. 'It was drilled into you. You were going to fight the red peril. This was a time of "reds under the bed", the Cold War and all of that. There was the thought that the communist Chinese were going to march down through Vietnam and Indonesia and populate Australia. That was the theme. To a point we were brainwashed. By the time you had finished training, you hated them.'

It was the sort of mentality, he says, looking back from the distance of five decades, that would lead to war crimes in that conflict and elsewhere. 'It's not until you come home and hear a few truths and see what the rest of the world is saying that you have second thoughts about "should I have even been there?" I was just a private doing what I was told.'

His family, he said, had shown no animosity towards the authorities for dispatching him to war. A father who had joined the navy at 15 and found himself in World War Two five years

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later would have known a thing or two about service. His mother was not one of those to join the 'Save Our Sons' movement that filled Australia's newspapers. A picture on one front page showed a woman refusing to let go of her 20-year-old grandson as he awaited the troop train at Sydney Central. On the inside pages, organiser Joyce Golgerth told a reporter: 'These boys are healthy, strong, on the threshold of their lives and they could come home maimed, blinded or they could die in a war which has been described as a bottomless pit of violence and horror.'

As it was, the story of the Vietnam War was one of a slow dawning of reality, a gradual ebbing of belief and a realisation that many of those who survived it were scarred for life.

At least in the field there were efforts at maintaining morale. A unit newspaper was printed, named *Ringo* after the battalion march, and copies were hard to get hold of. Passed from man to man and sometimes sent to wives and girlfriends back home, the poems, stories and cartoons poked around in the dark humour of life at war.

To the tune of 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' were the lyrics for 'Twelve Months in Vietnam': 'On the first month in Vietnam, my CO said to me: A sniper in a bushy-topped tree.' So it went on. No geese a-laying, gold rings or calling birds, instead 'six sex-starved soldiers, five Hershey bars and four gunships gunning'.

Alongside the laughs though, readers might have swallowed hard at some of the truths told in *Ringo*. In particular, the poem 'Mates in Vietnam' was stark: 'It's hot, it's dark, it's eerie, it's calm. The VC jungles of Vietnam.' The fear pours out of every word. 'When suddenly your heart is thumping, the blood to your head swiftly pumping, your mouth is dry, your nerves are taut,

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for you've heard a sound that you should not.' The soldier-poet writes of opening fire on a Viet Cong fighter – 'You shoot twice more and watch him die' – but others have gone to ground.

That awful feeling you had before
Is returning more and more.
I can't see them, can they see I?
Please God above, don't let me die.
When suddenly machine guns burst
And above it, Aussie Diggers curse:
'We've got the bastards, don't worry mate.'
But you don't hear, you say a prayer:
'Thank God above, my mates were there.'

There is no way of knowing how many men read those words, credited to the 'Gaspers Group', but they would hit home for those who did. They might very well still gnaw away in the minds of some of the thousands who were there.

'They went away as boys but came back as men,' said the narrator on that Australian government film, as pictures rolled of soldiers disembarking the troop ship HMAS *Sydney* on their return home. Much more had changed for many of them, invisible to the cameras or even the eyes of those family members who clamoured to hug and kiss them. What darkness they had brought back with them.

The battalion history book contains two photographs of Private Dell in Vietnam. In one, his hulking frame is perched on a stack of boxes, hunched and facing away from the camera. In the other, he is too tall to fit in the frame of the photo. As with

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any photo where the face is obscured, it has an elusive quality, a moment in time that tells some of a story but leaves so much more unsaid.

Another of Dell's schoolfriends, Bruce Tanner, remembers reading a letter he had sent from Vietnam. It told of 'blokes trying to kill you, you shooting back but you just can't stop them'. Tanner says now: 'It was so poignant. Here was this big, jovial, gregarious bloke we were used to seeing laughing all the time, and he was scared shitless.'

By the time he headed home to Australia – that moment soldiers in Vietnam called their 'wake-up' – Tony Dell had done his bit for his country. The battalion history gives us a list of the bald facts: 28 of 2RAR dead, 122 wounded. They add up the successes too: 2,648 pits and bunkers destroyed and, somewhat oddly, 11 ox carts put out of use.

But like the other 'nashos', there was no military unit for him to return to – it was straight back to civilian life. What he calls that transition story, as much as the horrors he confronted during that war, played a part in how his life unfolded. His mates in the jungle saw nothing in his behaviour to make them concerned for him but, then, they were all looking out for themselves too. How can anyone really know what is going on in the mind of another when it is hard enough to know what is going on in your own?

More than 40 years later, Tony Dell told a reporter: 'I saw things in Vietnam that the human brain is not meant to experience.' It had taken him decades to work through to that conclusion. His impression of service in that war, on landing back in Brisbane in 1968, was pointed but telling: 'I got home safely. Physically.'