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BOOK REVIEW

Starlight: An Australian Army Doctor in Vietnam

by Dr. Tony White, AM, RFD

Copyright Publishing: Brisbane; 2011; 183 pp; ISBN 987 1 876344 689;

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Major General W. B. 'Digger' James, AC, MBE, MC (Ret'd), in the foreword, provides the reader with a glimpse as to why Colonel Tony White RAAMC (Ret'd) felt compelled to write this memoir. "His military service in South Vietnam in 1966-7 had a lasting and profound effect on this young doctor". The narrative was largely prepared from the formidable, detailed correspondence between Captain White and his family, who always grumbled about the snail-like pace of the postal-services of the Australian General Post Office to the forces in Vietnam. The title, *Starlight*, refers to the battalion medical officer's radio network call sign. It also underscores a doctor's lifetime all-hour subordination to telephone requests for their medical services.

White begins the book by outlining his peripatetic early life: born in Perth; moving to a ranch in the northern Kenyan highlands; boarding school at the Duke of York School in Nairobi, Kenya; and studies in medicine at Clare College, Cambridge University, where he found time to join the Royal Air Force and learn to fly. His Cambridge studies, however, were interrupted after three years by a family decision to return to Sydney. This defining event was to shape White's immediate life story.

White accepted a Defence Force Undergraduate Scholarship in the Army to permit completion of his medical studies at Sydney University. Following a gruelling year's residency at Sydney Hospital, he was posted as Regimental Medical Officer (RMO) to the newly-formed 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR), at Holsworthy Barracks. Soon after, in May 1966, flying aboard a QANTAS Boeing 707 into Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport brought the young 25-year-old RMO into so-called *Sufferer's Paradise*. The Vietnam War, in essence a civil war, was to be the longest and most controversial of Australia's conflicts.

White devotes 12 of the 17 chapters to his 1966–1967 war-time experiences with 5 RAR in South Vietnam. Sick parades, hygiene inspections, attending acute trauma and other duties marked his work at the Australian base at Nui Dat, in the coastal Phuoc Tuy province. Hard work, mixed with doses of fear during the numerous battalion operations in the 'bush', was offset by the endless number of health clinics in villages and towns as part of the medical civil aid programme ('medcaps'), often within Viet Cong (VC) controlled areas.

The battalion took many casualties during its deployment. White attended no less than 80 per cent of

the wounding events. February 1967 was the Battalion's critical period when two tragic episodes beset the unit – White describes them with sensitivity, compassion and yet with an air of despair'. White also describes many anecdotes, personalities, and foibles within the battalion using terminologies and descriptors that fitted the mid-1960s. He reflects, too, on the perceptible changes that crept gradually into the behaviour and mood of the 5 RAR personnel as the last two or three months ticked over before coming home. Unlike many subsequent Australian military units returning from Vietnam, 5 RAR was feted by a huge Sydney lunch-time crowd as the battalion proudly marched through the city. For the excellent performance of his medical duties whilst deployed to South Vietnam, Captain Tony White was mentioned-in-despatches (MID).

The concluding segments of the book are devoted to White's subsequent civilian medical career in dermatological practice in Sydney, particularly noting a later involvement in the management of skin disease in remote area communities and skin-care education in the Pacific Islands. In the last chapter, he provides a precise description of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and offers a personal view as to why there is a high incidence of it within the Vietnam veteran community.

This hard-covered compact book is well illustrated with both monochrome and coloured plates and a map. It contains a handy list of abbreviations and terminologies, together with a comprehensive index. The text is supported by appropriate endnotes.

There are not many published personal accounts of the life experiences and duties performed by Australian medical officers during service in Vietnam. This story by a young battalion RMO is a truly excellent account and contains many facts and descriptions which, at the time, unfairly escaped publication within the Australian media. I commend *Starlight* most earnestly. It should be prescribed reading for today's Service health providers at all levels of proficiency and experience. It is equally recommended to the wider readership, both to those who partook or remembered the Vietnam War era, as well as to today's younger generation.

Bruce Short²

¹These two minefield episodes are described in White's paper herein (pp. 13 – 16), which is based on his book.

²Bruce Short served as an Air Force medical officer in South Vietnam (1968) and was later Surgeon-General of the Australian Defence Force (2001 – 2005).