

*Fergus Thomson Book Review:*

*Captain Bullen's War The Vietnam War Diary of Captain John Bullen* 2009 Harper Collins Sydney

First, a bit of military trivia. Most soldiers know that *Ubique* is the Latin motto of the Royal Australian Artillery. Aptly, it means *Everywhere* (Infantrymen have another, more vulgar interpretation: *All Over the Bloody Place*). However, it is less widely known that it is also the motto of the Royal Australian Engineers from which the Survey Corps was formed in 1915, operating independently until being disbanded in 1996 and the pieces returned to the RAE.

Captain John Bullen was not in the Engineers; he was in Survey, and the motto *Ubique* (in its correct translation) could also be applied to him, for his daily diary, edited and annotated by Paul Ham, reflects a year's observation of Australia's war in Vietnam through a multifaceted prism. From his arrival on 1 February 1968 to his departure on 15 February 1969, Bullen's keen eyes were everywhere, missing little that happened during his war service there: funny, quirky, moving, bawdy or just incongruous.

Bullen's introduction to his book sets the context. His early background as surveyor and mapper in Western Australia gave rise to his habit of keeping a daily diary, and he continued with this when posted to Nui Dat as Officer Commanding the Survey Troop. However, as he points out, 'In Vietnam life was always busy, often desperately demanding...' and maintaining a daily diary was not easy. Thus, in effect, his diary was an on-the-spot record of his impressions, and Bullen laments that it often lacked the full story, and the benefit of later analysis.

He should not be troubled by this.

There are usually two kinds of war diaries; on the one hand those that record meticulously and often tediously the 'full story' and details of an event; and on the other, those that reflect the author's personal, perhaps highly idiosyncratic, perspective on it. The former are usually best laid to rest in dusty departmental files; the latter, if they have brief, thoughtful but spontaneous observations, with an appropriate balance of humour and seriousness, can sustain interest for many years. Fortunately, Bullen's diary is one of the latter.

And 'later analysis' would almost certainly have destroyed the diary's spontaneity, which is perhaps its most attractive essence.

Randomly selected and slightly edited examples of his observations, some humorous and some serious, provide a taste of the diary's scope and the dramatic contrasts provided by war:

### **High Level Jinks**

In late September 1968, a visit by several Very Senior Officers was attended by the Task Force Senior Medical Officer Major 'Digger' James who had suffered total amputation of one leg below the knee and partial amputation of the other foot as the result of a land mine in the Korean War. As the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Band played march music, Digger started marching, and, to everyone's delight, grabbed the Task Force Commander and insisted that he march with him also. Brigadier Hughes had little choice, but could not drill nearly as smartly – and neither could former CGS Lieutenant General Pollard, whom Digger dragged in a minute later. The music then changed to a Scottish reel. So Digger immediately did the Highland Fling, a remarkable feat for a man with artificial limbs.

### **Close Quarters and an Ill Wind**

Viet Cong tunnels have been discovered right on the edge of the Australian perimeter at Nui Dat. Several Australians have been killed and wounded in recent clashes nearby. The Viet Cong mined the school at Dat Do today and blew up six children, two killed.

As I write (28 February 1968) rifle and machine gun fire can be heard quite close... in addition to the normal artillery pounding which has been heavier than usual for the past week... (Our) aircraft doing a leaflet drop misjudged the wind and showered the Task Force HQ Sergeants' Mess.

They all surrendered immediately, hoping for monetary reward

### **Ap Suoi Nghe Village Chief Murdered, Again**

(The village of Ap Suoi Nghe, near the Australian Task Force HQ, was constructed by Australian soldiers to house several hundred South Vietnamese refugees relocated from a Viet Cong-controlled area).

On Monday 17 August 1968 the Viet Cong entered Ap Suoi Nghe Village and cut the throats of the village chief and his deputy. This had also happened six months previously... this latest affair is a heavy blow to the long-suffering refugees in the village.

### **Very, Very Big Mosquitoes**

(Early on 27 February 1968, a B-52 strike took place a mile or two from Australian Task Force HQ). Bullen records: "The concussion from these explosions was very heavy indeed and shook our flimsy buildings and their contents... This coincided with an American C-123... barely above tree-top level... spraying insecticide over the Task Force area and surrounding villages, including Hoa Long, now being strafed and bombed.

Meanwhile, a circling Cessna was announcing in Vietnamese: 'Have no fear. We are merely spraying a harmless insecticide. It cannot hurt people. It only hurts mosquitoes'.

Must be big mosquitoes here".

Some, reading the diary, may cavil at its occasionally earthy observations. They should remember that a soldier at war wrote this diary.

They should remember, too, the words of George Orwell: *People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.*

However, the Australian military contingent in Vietnam comprised not just rough men, but included a wide cross-section of the general Australian community, both men and women. Their often-shameful treatment by a part of that community on return to Australia is probably better reflected in the words of the English poet Francis Quarles (1592-1644):

*“Our God and soldiers we alike adore, ev'n at the brink of danger; not before:*

*After deliverance, both alike requited, Our God's forgotten, and our soldiers slighted”.*

Fergus Thomson  
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***Disclosure: This reviewer, a member of the Vietnam Veterans' Federation (ACT Branch) is mentioned several times in this book, including (ambiguously but probably accurately) as a 'lawyer and actor'. None of these mentions alone, however, would justify a favourable review!***

Word Count: 1015 words