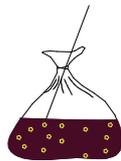
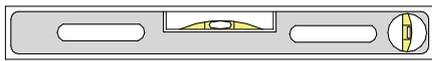


ANYONE FOR DRINKS?

There are many, many stories stretching as far back as the First Fleet, and one should imagine still coming out of Afghanistan to this very day, that tell of the extraordinary efforts some people will go in order to get a drink. Here are two such tales about our own sappers in Vietnam. One concerns 17 Const. Sqn., the other 1 Fld Sqn.

The boys from 17 Const. Sqn. had started the building of a new hospital at Baria. The work was hot and dry and Dick Hall had a thirst – a real thirst. Sometimes he would down tools and ponder as to what he would give just for a nice chilled coke with a dash of “something” in it to stiffen it up. Then, in a stroke of genius he devised a brilliant plan that may be the original inspiration for today’s Alcopops. That night Dick got hold of a full bottle of B&W whiskey. The next morning he strolled across the road to one of the little shanty bars that had sprang up opposite the building site. There he struck a deal with the mummasan: she would guard the bottle, and on receipt of an agreed price she would pour a can of coke into a small plastic bag, add a dash of the whiskey and some ice, put in a straw and tie it off with a rubber band. When Dick and/or anyone else got thirsty, which was often, they would send one of the ubiquitous kids that were hanging around across the road to the mummasan. A few minutes later the kids were back with a nice cool whiskey and a few extra dong in their pocket. Which probably explains why, to this very day, at the Baria Hospital the windows always jam and the doors don’t quite shut. Bloody Uc Da Loi – number 10 tradesman.



The two types of spirit levels used by sappers in construction of the Baria Hospital ‘70–71’.



John Radford and Bill Abbott discuss the finer points of bricklaying to the Australian Ambassador Mr Ralph L. Harry—Baria Hospital 1969. Photo: AWM

Meanwhile back in 3Tp., 1 Fld. Sqn. the sappers were up to their tricks as well. When out on ops, and provided the system was working OK, you sometimes got a warm can of beer hidden within the resupply courtesy of “Pom” – the 3 Trp. storeman. This is how it worked. Before going out on ops you would hand into Pom a set of greens that had your ID plastered somewhere in big black TEXTA. For the trousers, it was on the back of the waist band, and for the shirt, on the tail. Just before resupply day, Pom would deliver a kit bag of engineer stuff, including the clean clothes, to the battalion concerned, and out it would go either by truck, tracks, or chopper. At the resupply point, rations, ammo and such things were distributed, and also a fresh meal. Usually, or more truthfully always, the meal consisted of two salad buns and a carton of milk – with a bit of

luck this was chocolate (the white stuff was un-drinkable). However, unbeknown to anybody but the sappers, there were two cans of beer in amongst all the goodies. Pom, at great expense to himself, use to put a can of beer in one leg of the trousers and tie it off at the cuff. The clean shirt was then stuffed down the same leg to keep it in place. Now, to be honest, on one level it was the most tasteless beer you could ever wish for. But, on another it was sublime. Picture it, sitting there under a bush somewhere out in the Long Green. Back up against your pack, remnants of lunch beside you and wrapped up in your scrimmage scarf so as to hide from everyone else other than your number 1 or 2. You clutched a symbol that stated that despite where you were or how you got to be there, you were still able to beat the system. It wasn't the beer that tasted good, it was the smug feeling of triumph.
