

WHY ME?

By

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This has been a very sad time for us in the small Queensland town of Gayndah. We have just buried one of our young men, Spr Jacob Moreland killed along with his mate Darren Smith in Afghanistan. It was a big event for such a small town and even smaller sub branch of the RSL. There were dignities of all sorts in attendance from the then Prime Minister to various other politicians and military brass.

I have been a Christian Pastor to this community for more than twenty years but am now retired due to ill health. My role at Jacob's funeral, in this regard, was that of a mourner and I hope that of a comforter to those I could reach out to.

Later my thoughts drifted back over the years and to some of the events that led me to choosing a life dedicated to God and to the service of people. As I considered this I thought of the article I have just written for T.P.T.N. and, as if by Divine Providence, and how timely the content is, for I am sure there will be many confused and bewildered people asking the same question. "Why me Lord – why me?"

This is not a question of petulance as in "Why did I get mess duties again?" "Why do I have to fill sand bags or why do I always seem to get the mid-night picket on the line?" No, this is a far more profound "Why me?" This is one that many veterans have encountered and have been unable to come to terms with. It is distressing to the mind and soul and is the unanswerable question. "Why was I spared, when (whoever) was hit and killed or injured?" In the heat and the terror of the event there is no time for such thoughts, survival and training kick in and the task at hand needs your full concentration. But, in the aftermath, at the debriefing, when time permits, the question begins to surface and begs an answer. Some may say it is luck or fate and dismiss any further considerations. But in the quietness and silence of one's lonelier moments it can easily bubble to the surface again and once more seeks an answer. Some turn to alcohol, drugs, or work in an attempt to drown the silent voice within, but we know this only postpones the inevitable.

I had this emotion on two significant occasions during my tour in 1969-70 with 1 Tp 1 Fld Sqn. I share these stories with you now some 40 years later in the hope that others may not only agree but find some meaning in some of the terrible events that happened then, and sadly, are still happening to our lads even today in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Some details are a bit vague but the event is starkly clear. Maybe others who were there might be able to fill in some of the gaps. On October 22nd 1969 during an operation coded 'Kings Cross' I was part of a combat team called out to destroy a bunker system located in the Light Green by elements of 5 RAR. In 1 Tp our usual support was to 6 RAR/NZ and I can't remember why we were called out this time to 5 RAR, but when the order comes you go.

As I recall it was a large bunker system and when we arrived with all the gear - C4, detonating chord and fuse – the infantry had already deployed around the perimeter as protection. We could work in complete safety! When the charges had been laid and the det. chord ring run out, the only task left was to cut the fuse and crimp on the detonator and wait for the 'all clear' to light the fuse. Air clearance was probably being sought so no aircraft would fly over and be surprised by this sudden updraught from the fireworks.

I clearly recall speaking to my mate Tony Lisle and asking what would he like to do, stay and set the charge or go with the APC on a circuit to pick up the infantry out on the perimeter providing us with protection. I don't recall his exact words but it was something along the lines, "I'll go for a ride." So off he went sitting on the driver's hatch cover, as we did, and probably another sapper on a second APC, to

collect the grunts. While they took off I made myself busy measuring out fuse cord and crimping the detonators. They had not been gone long when about 2-300 meters away we heard a loud explosion followed by machine gun fire which seemed to last only a few seconds and then silence.

Moments later the radios crackled – “CONTACT, WAIT OUT.” There was no more gun fire, but the voice on the radio continued, “Lead track hit by RPG, driver KIA, several WIA, call for dust off.”

When we arrived at the scene it was a bad situation. Most of it has been lost to my memory, but it was discovered that the lead APC had been hit by an RPG on the top in front of the crew commander and to the right of the driver Albert Casey. He, sadly was killed instantly and Tony sitting on the hatch cover behind him was critically injured. The ‘dust off’ happened as quickly as possible and Tony along with the others was taken to Vung Tau. Despite every effort, Tony died some 20 days later, a tragic and sad loss. Once the scene was cleared we were then given the OK to set off the charges and then in a state both subdued and shocked we were air lifted back to 1 Fld Sqn.

But the nightmare continued. Over the next few days my mind was full of the incident at the bunkers and no matter how much I tried to rationalize the events the same question kept pummelling itself to the fore, demanding an answer.

“Why me?”

“Why did I give Tony the choice of what to do?”

“And anyway, who was I to even offer the choice?”

“Should I have gone on the track instead of him?”

“Why was I spared and Tony taken?”

I was single and Tony had a wife and child. These questions were still churning over in my mind 3 days later when on the 25th October 1969 I found myself along with Bryant Hansen on another task.

My life was to be spared again. Some details are blurred through 40 years of history. I cannot recall exactly where we were, but I think it was along Route 44 we had been called out either to investigate and clear a suspect looking road block, or just came upon it while escorting our infantry or ARVN in APCs.

We stopped about 50 meters from the obstruction which was mainly timber and tree branches. Bryant Hansen and I made our approach, most likely wearing flack jackets and tin hats. Nothing was obvious but what struck me as unusual and suspicious was the group of local young men away on one side of the road trying to look inconspicuous. We got to within a few meters but weren’t prepared to start clearing it until we were sure it was safe. I said to Bryant that I’d go back to the APC and get the grapple line from our gear and for him to keep an eye out to make sure no one came near.

When I was almost back at the APC walking away from the scene, we were rocked and shocked by an explosion that came from the road block. We ran to the scene to find somehow a device had exploded and sadly Bryant had been mortally wounded. Not surprisingly the group of young men had disappeared into the surrounding scrub. A chopper was called in to recover Bryant’s body and we proceeded to clear what was left of the obstacle. Fortunately nothing else was found but the cause of the explosion was not determined. A wire may have been tripped or the lads nearby may have command detonated it in some fashion.

Here was another occasion where I at some point asked myself – WHY? We could both have been killed or injured in that incident but I was spared.

There is a definite thankfulness and appreciation for having been spared. There has always been an equally definite sense of responsibility to do something useful and positive with my life. I have the certainty of God’s direction and found a purpose for my life and know that I am in His care and mercy. I have tried to use my life to serve others and to help them to also understand that God has a purpose for us all.

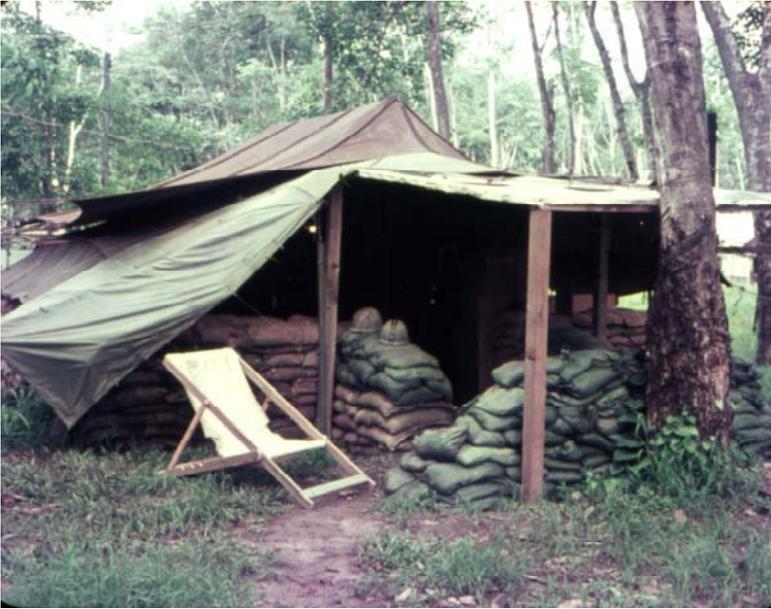
I still grieve when I think of Tony and Bryant and for the other eight good men we lost during my tour and the families they left behind. It is not wrong to ask why things happen. We need to accept for our good that we may never get the answer to that eternal question – WHY? However, we need to consider the question. “What now?”



Hoochied out in the scrub



Another Hoochie out scrub



My tent 1 Troop 1 Field Squadron



Bomb ready for demolition