The Diggers’ wish: set the record straight

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This paper explores the issues of the participant interviewer in a military history context. Participant interviewers may have a stake in the results of their work, as they are part of the story that is under investigation and can influence the result to fit their prejudices. This paper focuses on the strong desire that the interviewees have to correct errors in the official record. As Alessandro Portelli says, 'oral history is not just a collection of stories, but also their interpretation and representation.' A narrative recorded by a participant may produce a realistic interpretation of battlefield events rather than the official, battalion, or a popular military history of those times. This article is based on oral histories of national servicemen, regular soldiers, non-commissioned officers and officers, and gives an exposure of the issues involved in a participant interviewer taking oral histories.

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Introduction
I served as platoon commander of 2 Platoon, Alpha Company, Second Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2RAR) in Vietnam during 1967, with a group of thirty-three men under my command. My platoon was one of the uncelebrated sub-units of the Australian Army’s deployment in the Vietnam War. Unfortunately however, it came to prominence as the result of an incident causing the deaths of Vietnamese civilians. This incident has been discussed a number of times in newspaper articles and military history books.

These accounts, often based on scanty information, quickly acquired the status of history.

My desire to offer an alternative account, based on the experiences of eyewitnesses, was the genesis of my recording the oral histories of my platoon and the reason for assembling their views of the facts as the participants believed they occurred. Eighteen of the thirty-three soldiers in the platoon consented to provide oral histories of their experiences during the war. Each oral history interview was conducted using a questionnaire covering their service from their initial contact with the Army until discharge. Of these eighteen veterans, ten discussed the killing of the four civilians in their accounts. This article focuses on the relationship between the interviewees and me as the interviewer. For concise and easy management, this article will explore one particular incident that occurred of which the narrators spoke.

Methodology
The main methodology used was the narrative interview. A questionnaire was designed based on one in an annex to Gary McKay’s Fragments of Vietnam - four pages of questions divided into specific sections. It was an extensive set of questions divided into sub-sections with specific queries, starting with entry and induction into the Army, and ending with their discharge. Questions were aimed at eliciting information on service life following the veteran’s path from their initial training through to their final training as part of a battle-ready battalion, and then their deployment with that battalion into Vietnam. The veterans’ opinions on their service and their return to Australia were sought.

These veterans’ narratives could then be compared with archival records to situate and verify details. The main archival record was the commander’s diary, which is available on the internet in digital form. Some documents, like the description of a soldier’s wound, needed an off-line search in the National Archives Collection, mainly at the Australian War Memorial (AWM) Canberra.

The method moved to an ethnographic one where the narratives and the documentary evidence were then tested against the societal, cultural and ritual norms of the veteran world. As trauma was involved, some research also required consultations with psychological papers and experts. Further reading was conducted on the assumption that post-traumatic distress disorder has a spiritual dimension.

My process was to record the veterans’ narratives using the questionnaire. One other member spoke to me by telephone, but an oral history was not recorded. Two participants were killed in action during November...
1967. Three others have died since their return from Vietnam, one of whom took part in this research. The ‘chronological method’ as outlined in Alistair Thomson’s book *ANZAC Memories* was used as a guide to conduct the interviews. I began with the open-ended question: ‘Where did you join the Army?’ Some participants needed no further encouragement to start their army narrative. If the narrator stalled, I was able to offer a further question that returned them to their account. On occasions I moved from the chronological method to the popular memory approach to ascertain further details. The popular memory approach is discussed in *ANZAC Memories* and frames questions in accordance with my recollection of events. This process focuses on a particular event and explores that incident. This brought further information forward that may have been missed in following the chronological format. Most of the veterans were initially reluctant to talk about the accidental killing of Vietnamese civilians, which has become known as the ‘Bamboo Pickers Incident,’ showing that it was a part of their battlefield experience they wished to forget. Most did not speak of this matter until the mode of questioning was changed from chronological to popular.

**To Accept or Not To Accept?**

All interviews except two were conducted in the interviewees’ homes, which gave the veteran a relaxed and familiar location in which to recall their memories. When a narrator invited me to stay at his home I accepted, as this placed the narrator in the role of the host, and I became the guest. This helped to change the power dynamics, as I then had to fit into the narrator’s routine, rather than the other way around, with the narrator controlling the environment. This meant that our recording sessions were subjected to the domestic routine of the household, such as meal timings. The breaks to accommodate the domestic events resulted in round table discussions with the wife or partner, which added some interesting details. On one occasion, the wife declared that she had heard more in forty-eight hours about another ambush, than she had in the previous forty years. The different ambush was central to that narrator’s war chronicle. She also claimed that the narrator had not fully informed his psychiatrist of certain facts. Some expeditious computer research resulted in the veteran taking additional information to his next consultation, and as a result, gained an increase in his pension. Frequently there was a comment on the next day that the veteran had had his best night’s sleep since leaving Vietnam. At one breakfast the partner declared the same had had his best night’s sleep since leaving Vietnam.  

Oral histories can provide a primary source of information about events, conditions and operations by soldiers on the battlefield. As Hagopian comments; … the value of the oral histories does not lie in their providing unmediated truths. ... Even when they remain true to events, veterans’ stories may adjust to societal expectations - or what veterans believe their audience wishes to hear. The stories may also respond to the other narratives that circulate around the storyteller …

**The Incident**

On 20th October 1967, fifteen members of the platoon and I commenced a patrol of the four thousand metre wide exclusion zone surrounding the Australian Task Force base area at Nui Dat, Vietnam. This exclusion area was designed to prevent the enemy coming close enough to the base to launch an attack on the Australian position. The exterior perimeter, called Line Alpha, was situated on the edge of Vietnamese effective mortar range, to prevent the enemy from providing fire support in an attack on the Australian base. Line Alpha did not follow any geographical feature or fence, and was not marked. It was only a line on a map. Between Line Alpha and the base perimeter fence was a ‘free fire’ zone, which meant that anyone or thing that moved within this area was a target. The local Vietnamese were banned from this area and this was communicated to them by various means. The soldiers had retrieved leaflets that were airdropped in the ‘free fire’ area warning the locals that they were in a prohibited area. Task Force headquarters advised that the relevant Vietnamese authorities had briefed the locals. Available information suggested that no friendly people would be inside Line Alpha. Constant patrolling prevented enemy penetration.

On the evening of 22nd October 1967, this patrol laid an ambush about one thousand metres inside Line Alpha. Early the following morning, a group of civilians entered the ambush area. One person in this group took a long object off his shoulder and waved it at the soldiers. The machine gunner opened fire, as he believed it was a weapon.

The firing lasted less than 30 seconds, and in that time the platoon’s machine guns and rifles had killed four civilians and badly wounded a fifth who later...
died. There were another six wounded. The order to cease-fire was given when it became clear that the platoon had fired on unarmed persons, including women and children. The platoon returned to base. Later we learned that the villagers had been looking for bamboo thus the incident became known as the ‘Bamboo Pickers’ ambush.

On the platoon’s return to the Nui Dat Base, the Company Commander suggested to me that the platoon should have been carrying captured enemy weapons to place on dead bodies. This would allow the battalion to claim these dead as enemy. The Australians had adopted the American system of rating an operation’s success on the body count. It seemed that the Company Commander wanted the company’s statistics enhanced.

In my opinion, this was deceitful and undoubtedly illegal. I was prepared to account for this incident and record the details correctly. During our discussion, the Company Commander instructed me as to how I was to write my report. This conversation was conducted out of hearing range of any other person. My report was written with a reference to the conversation about enemy weapons, but I was later ordered to sign a report that had my observations about these directions deleted. As I was uneasy with these instructions, I kept a personal copy of the ‘after action report’ in case I was ever accused of breaching the Geneva conventions.

The narratives I recorded during my research are all influenced by the ANZAC legend. A number of the narrators recall that their instructors during their initial training constantly repeated that they were part of the great ANZAC story. This theme of the ANZAC permeates their narratives.
have suggested that the Vietnam veteran was a member of the ANZAC story.\textsuperscript{24}

**What Did He Say?**

The transcribers of the veterans’ recordings experienced problems understanding the veterans’ language. These difficulties usually occurred when interviewees came to an emotionally traumatic event. Two things occurred simultaneously, firstly the narrator lowered his voice, and secondly he lapsed into a vernacular of the mid-1960s, which was a mixture of Australian Army jargon, Army argot, the language of Americans serving in Vietnam, and Armed Forces Radio Saigon speak.\textsuperscript{25} The battlefield moments that made the greatest impression had to be spoken in the idiom of their war. I was an insider, therefore I knew what they were saying, but an outsider like the transcribers did not. I believe that it was an effort by the veterans to keep the secrets in the ‘family,’ but also allowed them to discuss their service so the record could be set straight.\textsuperscript{26} This to the outsider may sound confusing but in the veteran world represents a path to achieve conflicting goals. Conflicting purposes were often the norm on the battlefield.

In August 1976, Dr Jim Cairns, a member of the Labor Party and principal organiser of the Vietnam Moratorium movement in Australia, alleged in a Melbourne newspaper that Australian troops in Vietnam had killed twenty-seven civilians and most probably declared them as enemy rather than civilian deaths.\textsuperscript{27} This caused a political furore and bought out the conflicting ideological positions of the proponents of a debate between the politicians, media and veterans.

The Minister for Defence at that time, the Hon. James Killen, a member of the Coalition Government which had committed troops to Vietnam, claimed that the allegations were defamatory of the nation and attacked the good name of the Australian Army.\textsuperscript{28} He related the Vietnam veteran to the ANZAC Legend. Killen’s position was that Australian troops would never commit such an ‘atrocity’ and promised a full scale inquiry.

The word ‘atrocity’ had been used by the media and the Minister, but not by Dr. Cairns.\textsuperscript{29} His allegation was simply that he had been told that Australian soldiers had massacred civilians. He had no proof to as to whether the dead were civilians or the enemy. These newspaper articles support Gary Kulik’s contention that in stories about war, most military history and discussions of events on the battlefield, tend to confirm the speaker’s ideology, political and social pre-conceptions.\textsuperscript{30}

Following the initial furore, there were claims and counter claims throughout the week until the Minister stated that he had not been given any specific details about civilians being killed so he was not prepared to convene an inquiry into Cairns’ allegations.\textsuperscript{32} On Sunday 8\textsuperscript{th} August the Sydney papers attacked Cairns for his naïveté and left-wing views, while the Brisbane Sun had a front page headline ‘The Atrocity is on File.’\textsuperscript{33} On that same morning I was contacted by Army Office and asked to report on the following day, to the Director General of Operational Plans.\textsuperscript{34} On the Monday, only a week after Cairns had made his allegations, I was searching the commanders’ diaries with the Army Historian, Major Ian McNeil.\textsuperscript{35} At the same time, the ABC program, *This Day Tonight*, was arranging for two of my soldiers to appear on their program in which they confirmed that civilians had been killed in the 23\textsuperscript{rd} October 1967 ambush by Australian troops. Their facts did not match Cairns’ numbers or dates; however it was an attempt by them to set the record straight.\textsuperscript{36} Prior to appearing on the program, one veteran rang the army asking for support but this was denied because he was now a civilian. There was considerable time separating the two different ambush events; one occurred on 23\textsuperscript{rd} October 1967, and the second on the night of 11\textsuperscript{th}/12\textsuperscript{th} August 1970.

At last, Minister Killen’s requirement for an investigation had been fulfilled – namely, the identities of two ABC informants and their unit were declared.\textsuperscript{37} However, a full enquiry failed to eventuate, and it was never clear whether any of the ABC informants (all four) were talking of the same incident referred to by Cairns, who was being castigated for his opposition to the war and political views. It appeared that the Defence Force’s rebuttal of Dr Cairns’ allegation was far more important than the facts about civilian deaths, which were not addressed. The simple fact that the protagonists were talking about several different events was lost in the debate.

Over the years, there have been suggestions at Vietnam Veterans’ reunions and other gatherings that soldiers’ histories have not been recorded correctly. While the veterans I interviewed were among those who made that complaint, it emerged during the interviews that few, if any, had read the official history, much less checked the commander’s diary that is accessible through the Australian War Memorial website.\textsuperscript{38} The unease that these soldiers have about the accurate recording of history, seems to have been formed from listening to other veterans speak, reading ‘populist histories’, listening to ANZAC Day orations or being informed by the media.

**Setting The Record Straight**

Forty years after Vietnam, I decided to attempt to change this situation. I enrolled at the University of Wollongong to study the history of the Vietnam War and veterans’ oral histories and set the record straight.\textsuperscript{39} While the narrators remembered there was media
coverage of the ambush, none were able to give any accurate dates, as though it was all too painful. None of the narrators were able to place the media interest accurately, and one participant said that this furore occurred two years after our time in Vietnam:

... two years after there was an article in a Sydney paper, Sydney Telegraph, ‘Australia’s My Lai’, and it was about that action. Two people that I know of for sure, Participant S and Non-Participant C, were contacted by the Sydney press about that story and both of them told the reporters to go and get rooted, that there was nothing in it.40

The non-participant spoke unprompted about the incident and like the rest could not remember the specific details like the date. He claimed the ABC approached him after Cairns had identified him. This puzzled me as Battalion Headquarters in Vietnam only received consolidated company lists and would not be able to determine an individual’s platoon. His identification by the media should be attributed to someone who knew who were members of the platoon but did not know that this veteran was absent on the day in question. The non-participant made the following comment:

... when I came back to Australia I was pursued [by] a fellow because he found out from a politician who found out that I was in 2 platoon. He pursued me for quite a long time trying to get, he had journalists from current affair programs on television and I can’t recall the title of the program on this particular day when they were really pressing me, and they said they’d have a helicopter, a journalist up there on a chopper from Sydney, ... and it would be on television that night. Anyway I refused again to say anything. Number one, I wasn’t there and I’d already told them I wasn’t there. And secondly I didn’t want to talk about it. It’s not ... right to talk about those sorts of things in my opinion because who’s going to prove what those people were anyway... Anyway, they eventually got a fellow and I can’t recall who it was, up further north, up the coast in Townsville or Ayr or somewhere up there to talk to them on TV, and I actually saw him being interviewed but I can’t recall what happened.41

While lacking details about the incident, he gives the background to the time and cultural detail, which is one of oral history’s features. With another interviewer, it is possible that he may not have raised the issue of the ambush at all, as he said:

... I thought very strongly about not talking about those sorts of things to anybody.42

The relationship between the interviewer and narrator in this research is different from normal oral histories, in that the interviewer had an earlier relationship and they were participants in the events recalled. This relationship was partly defined by military law, and partly was built by working together in hard, harsh and difficult conditions, against a number of common obstacles including an enemy who was intent on killing us. This group welded together as a combat unit which shared a common military language, lore and tradition. We were of comparable age, similar cultural backgrounds, and had a deep knowledge of the events being discussed in the interviews. All were indoctrinated with the same warrior tradition and sense of belonging to the group. There were some differences; for example the platoon was divided into Catholics and Protestants, which was still an important distinction in the 1960s.

The situation was somewhat different to the existing literature on insider oral history collection due to the similarities between narrators and interviewer rather than the differences. This introduces a different focus and some new factors into oral history theory. There are a number of insider-outsider articles in the oral history literature but they tend to be based on gender, tribal taboo or generational parameters. While there were some similarities with these situations, it was different. It was all male, same age and similar background scenario.43

There was no formal debriefing of the patrol as depicted in Fred Allison’s ‘Remembering a Vietnam Firefight.’44 Allison’s methodology was to compare a patrol debriefing with interviews taken many years later. In this case there was no debriefing to consult. There had been no discussion at the time nor did the platoon openly discuss the event at reunions or other
gatherings. Generally snide comments were made by those in the know who wished to obtain a reaction from a platoon member generally by officers at officer functions. This incident was in the corporate memory but not fully documented.

Conduct Becoming an Officer

At the Royal Military College in officer training I had been indoctrinated with the idea that officers do not fraternise with soldiers. Normal convention was that officers socialised and lived in different areas from soldiers. Even in Vietnam, while the officers lived with the troops when on operations, there was delineation between officers and enlisted men in the Nui Dat base. Each company had its own officers’ and sergeants’ mess, separating ranks for meals, socialising and relaxing; but as a fighting group we were one inseparable unit and interdependent on each other. This interdependence was mentioned by a number of narrators. It highlighted the narrator’s role and a link with the interviewer.

These narratives crossed a number of boundaries in sharing events, secrets and feelings. As Paul Thompson comments, ‘the interviewer sits at the feet of the narrators and learns from those who know more about the subject’. Here, I was the former officer now collaborating with my former soldiers to produce a history.

In this research, I have moved from that position of command and absolute authority, to a situation of equality. I had to divest my authority and be surprised and on occasions where it occurred, to resist ‘correcting’ the narrative if my recollection differed from the narrator. I had to hear the interviewee, and not force their testimony to confirm my own recollections. I had to surrender my leadership role and become an equal participant in the interview with the narrator. This was not easy.

Prior to each recording, interviewees would ask what I wanted them to say. It sounded like they were seeking my instructions on how they were to conduct their interview. While such questions may be normal at the start of any oral history interview, in this situation it seemed that I was still the authority figure. Portelli suggests that some oral history interviewees require a mandate from the interviewer and will often try to tell the interviewer what they think they want to hear.

I would explain that I wanted to record each individual’s experience as he remembered it, nothing else. I made it clear that I was investigating private memory and not the public memory of the war. I clarified that I was conducting research, not a witch-hunt, about past events. This discussion gave them ‘permission to speak,’ and even though there was some initial awkwardness, all interviewees quickly became comfortable in their role. Some interviewees offered to use their diaries, notebooks and published works to help them remember. I repeated that I was interested in their unaided memory. Specific detail could be checked later but initially it was their private memory that I was pursuing.

The preferred option was to say nothing if they wanted something left off the record. Silence was the solution most took when an issue arose that they preferred not to discuss. There seems to be an unwritten list of subjects that should not be spoken about that illustrates Thomson and Seal’s observations about conflicting parts in the ANZAC Legend. Some wished to only talk about that which added to the national legend. This produced an issue for the interviewer as to whether silences represent a lack of knowledge or protection of their preferred view of the war.
Past-Past

I was very familiar with the platoon’s actions since I commanded its operations. My responsibilities meant I moved around the platoon to make sure my plans were being executed, and adjusted them if necessary. My narrators could have assumed that I was a witness to most of their actions on the battlefield and I knew all the painful, unpleasant and ‘unsafe’ moments. Thus the narrator had an audience of one who knew the ‘essentials.’ While this was not always a certainty, it was a given to the narrator.

At times, the interview entered what may be called the past-past. We were actually back on the battlefield with some narrators telling me exactly where others and I were standing. We did not need the lens of the present for both the narrator and interviewer had been there and the lens of those days was used. However, facts were essential and necessary and this may explain why some wish to resort to published works.

How did my interviewees recall the ambush? Most remembered their role with a remarkable degree of clarity, confirming the literature that suggests that traumatic events occupy a special place in an individual’s memory. Portelli makes the observation that public opinion and the media may prefer fantasies, unreliable sources and myths to the reality of the soldiers’ world. It produces a far nicer picture of the war. On the other hand, when soldiers interview soldiers, there is a temptation to reconstruct a shared past that, consciously or unconsciously, may portray events in a light that flatters them and satisfies the expectation of their audience. Truth may not only be a casualty of war, but memories and some retelling of events may also damage it.

My own memories about the incident are vivid. The moment between the machine gun firing on the civilians and hearing the whimpering of children caught in the gunfire was very short but still remains with all. I knew instantly on hearing the cries for help that something was very wrong. I ordered the platoon to cease fire and ran towards the killing ground to assess the carnage I realised had taken place. I was confronted with a scene that will haunt me forever. As I moved forward I was inwardly hoping that the residual firing would kill me. It is testimony to the training of the men that I was not hit. Was it my learned skill to move among the weapons that prevented me being another death that morning or was it the skill of the soldiers who knew where I was heading? I often wonder.

Do We Really Have To Talk About This?

Only two narrators mentioned the ‘Bamboo Pickers’ of their own accord and one of them was not on the ambush patrol. It is possible that a non-participant interviewer may not have obtained details of this incident, as most did not discuss the ambush without a direct question. If the participant who volunteered...
information on the bamboo pickers was not interviewed then a non-participant interviewee would not be aware of the incident. This participant trusted me and therefore spoke about the incident. I doubt that any of the participants would have trusted a non-participant with these memories, and would have remained silent on this story thus leaving it hidden.

In the interviews I was asking my men to recall a matter which had confused me and which, like them, I had buried within me. This incident lasted less than a minute but its legacy lasted for years. One participant describes the ambush this way:

Very quick; not very long. Shit, how do you tell time in that. I would say it was all over in a minute, two minutes. There was, I mean it would have gone a lot longer if there had have been some armed men there but I think once it was really obvious there wasn’t anyone armed there that the shooting stopped pretty quick. Yeah that’s all that I can remember of that. I remember waiting for them to be taken away with the chopper, holding them up and ... I remember that guy with a sickle.

The same participant makes the suggestion that the ambush was a set up:

I don’t know what was behind that ambush; I mean obviously we knew they were going to be there, that was the way it struck me. So someone had organised for us to brass them up.

The non-participant mentioned earlier spoke in defence of our actions:

Because it was a three-day TAOR patrol and having been on quite a few operations I think we thought this was, ok we are being punished, but it was a safe country. I remember TAOR patrols had been through ever since the taskforce commanded it was a three thousand yard or metre no-go zone I think, free fire zone, so you really wouldn’t expect to see anyone there. I know they had to keep the patrols up but it was almost routine and if they hadn’t have kept them up it might have had more serious consequences.

Other narrators make a similar comment. It is as though the narrators needed an excuse. They believe that they should not have been involved in this incident. They were suggesting that they had no option about being there.

Examination of the Task Force Patrol Program however, suggests that the patrol allocations were distributed evenly between companies. The participant quoted above was located at the rear of the ambush setting, and so was not an eye-witness to the event, but spent considerable time in recalling the incident and theorising.

party.’ Anyway because someone had found beer in our lines, which was a very regular occurrence, they said, ‘Take half a platoon, get out on this TAOR patrol.’ It turned out to be a bit different with tragic consequences and I’m not sure whether it was on the third morning or the second morning.

Interviewer: Okay do you want to talk about what you remember of the Bamboo Pickers?

Interviewee: Because it was a three-day TAOR patrol and having been on quite a few operations I think we thought this was, ok we are being punished, but it was a safe country. I remember TAOR patrols had been through ever since the taskforce commanded it was a three thousand yard or metre no-go zone I think, free fire zone, so you really wouldn’t expect to see anyone there. I know they had to keep the patrols up but it was almost routine and if they hadn’t have kept them up it might have had more serious consequences.
about the locals’ knowledge of the exclusion zone. He offered to produce a copy of a pamphlet, which warns the locals of their exclusion. He detailed the medical evacuation process and finished with a fantasised ending in which he incorrectly claimed the RAAF disposed of the bodies at sea. This is in conflict with the commander’s diary. The bodies were returned to their village. The participant verbalises and adapts a popular myth in Vietnamese, American and Australian literature that Vietnamese were on occasions thrown out of helicopters. He couldn’t recall where he sourced this myth. He confirms Hagopian’s observation that narrators often tell stories that circulate around them in their chronicle. He was wounded in the following month and he nearly died. It could be that this near death experience focused his attention on events that occurred just prior to his wounding.

Conflicting Points Of View

The non-participant may have been trying to change my point of view on events. This narrator and I had previously had a number of discussions, which had diverged along paths of opposing philosophies. One ANZAC Day, our discussion had reached a point that another platoon member had to separate us to prevent a physical altercation. I had wondered in my preparation for this research if this history between us would influence the final outcome of the interview. Portelli in his work observes that sometimes persons of opposing points of view may produce a good interview due to the fact that both sides are trying to win the other over, while reaching the satisfaction of having their view recorded.

The other narrator present at this ANZAC Day occurrence initially refused to discuss the ambush at all. However, after a discussion off tape, he gave the following explanation:

I’d like to backtrack. There was a question that Ben asked me earlier about the civvies ambush, and I said to him at the time ‘I’m not going to talk about it.’ The reason I didn’t want to talk about it was it affected Ben badly, and I didn’t want to offend him, so therefore I said to him ‘I’m not going to talk about it.’ I’ve thought about it since, spoken to Ben about it, and I’ll now speak about it because quite frankly I don’t believe that we were in the wrong. We were in the right when we opened that ambush up, because we were 1000 metres away from the nearest village; we had a dark to dawn curfew on all civvies; anything that moved in that period was enemy. When we opened the ambush up, when we had our targets in the killing area, it was just starting to break first light; and in that situation, I have no problems at all. I justified it to myself then, and I’ll do it again, now. We

Courier Mail, 10 August 1976.
were right in opening that ambush up. It was unfortunate that civvies, both old and young were caught up in it, but they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I’d just like to clear that point, because I know it affected Ben. It didn’t worry me at all, and it still doesn’t worry me today on that same issue. But we’ll move on from there.

This was the total of his words on the incident except for an emphatic ‘No’ earlier. He spoke about me in the third person as though he was correcting the record. He discloses it was an operational accident rather than intentional killing of civilians. He had set the record straight and he was not going to discuss it any further and the interview moved on as he had requested.

The majority of the platoon was censorious of the machine gunner, who initiated the ambush. As a participant said:

To this day, from what I’ve heard from others involved in that action it was totally unnecessary. The bloke on the machine gun was told not to fire by his Number 2, they were civilians, and he just opened up and I think we know who that person was ...

Later the same participant makes the comment:

Going back to the machine gunner (name given) I do remember now being told later on that he [the man with the stick] aimed and, it may have been the machine gun second in command, that he thought it was a rifle and you shoot first and ask questions later …

The soldier who most likely fired the first shot died before he could be interviewed. On this patrol the usual machine gunner was absent and he volunteered to take this position. His widow gave very specific details of this incident, telling me that she had learnt about the ambush by listening to her husband talking in his sleep. She claimed that he had never discussed the matter with her. Her knowledge was remarkably accurate and detailed.

Yet another participant, the number two on the machine gun, said:

I can remember the fuckin’ stick and I thought it was a rifle.

Well he was about from here to that post away from me. I could see the stick and I just kept quiet and looking around everybody and then someone opened up and that was it. Because they must have seen the same thing but I could see it was a stick. So everyone just opened up ...

**Interviewee:** Yeah it did. Once one bullet fired everyone went. All they needed was one bloke to pull the trigger.

This participant’s testimony suggests that he had seen what he believed to be a weapon, but had then identified it as a stick, before the firing started. He did not know what to do and was considering this aspect when the ambush was sprung. Confusion seems to be the one consistent feature of the narratives.

One participant brings the confusion theme out while suggesting that others were controlling the patrol:

… they were supposed to be in an unauthorised zone or something. No, we were never told anything; it was all covered up wasn’t it? I think after that they decided it was time for us to go back to camp; is that correct? They thought that we’d had enough by then and we had.

Another remembers:

And we had to get up and fuck off and head straight back to Nui Dat. Yeah; straight back.

One participant is certain that he had killed two young girls that day. Their wounds were consistent with the ballistics of his weapon. I was amazed by the detail the veteran was able to remember:

To this day I believe I was responsible for killing two teenage girls. I was the only one in the unit [sic] with an armalite and one of the girls had a bullet in the head, just a little black spot; if she had been hit with a 7.62 she would have had a hole in the back of her head and there was nothing. The other one was the same situation, shot in the chest just above the breast and there again just a little black hole and the size of an adult Vietnamese from that range a 7.62 would have taken half her back out, but there was nothing, just those two little black holes. I was the only one with an armalite, there were no F1s, no 9 Mil weapons there that day; the rest are one M60 or me with the armalite.

After the platoon had returned to base, one participant threw his machine gun down in front of the platoon sergeant and exclaimed, ‘I am a murderer.’ The sergeant addressed him by his first name and said, ‘Pick up that machine gun and come to my tent.’ The participant did so and they had a discussion about civilians killing a soldier. The sergeant stated that these civilians were in a prohibited area and could have been VC supporters. He then advised the soldier he would take no action over the mishandling of his machine gun if the soldier went and cleaned the weapon and relaxed while pondering the sergeant’s advice.

After return to Australia, another participant had this experience during a visit to the local markets:
I remember one day down here at the markets when I was going through a rough time, an Asian woman in a blue shirt like that woman had on came walking through the crowd and you know I really believed it was her. I thought she was going to come over and tell me off. I thought, she’s gonna fuckin’ give me an earful that woman, that’s how my head had gone stupid.72

Discussion

While my research presents a less than glowing picture of our battlefield experience, it is not my intention to question the courage or bravery of our soldiers. Some historians may challenge this research because it ventures into the psychological realm. The details embedded in these oral histories are the narrators’ realities, and in this case the facts tallied with the commander’s diary and other official documents. At the same time it must be accepted that oral histories are not necessarily the absolute truth. Anyone dismissing oral history because the narrators detail some mythical explanations may be discarding some good primary source material.

The keynote speaker at the 2014 Barcelona International Oral History Conference73 stated that people who have a hidden history which is brought into the public record are living in heaven, for their hidden history had been recognised. This research suggests that a hidden history which continues to be denied puts the participants of that history into a living hell, as their life is not recognised, especially if that denial comes from official sources.

One member of the ambush patrol refused to take part in this research for he did not want the story of the Bamboo Pickers or another incident not explored in this article to be known in his hometown. He lives in fear of his history in the war being exposed, and shown to be different from the sanitised version of the Vietnam ANZAC legend. He lives this legend in various clubs, but lives in fear of exposure.

The longest and the shortest speakers about this incident had made contact with me some time before the Welcome March in 1983.74 They had formed working relationships with me. One was where cooperation between two government departments was the basis for our friendship renewal, and the other was co-membership on a committee of a branch of the Royal Australian Regiment. This later narrator arranged for my appointment as our battalion representative. Both relationships were on an equal basis, rather than one being in a position of authority as was the case in our time on the battlefield.75 This equality was demonstrated by one exploring the Bamboo Pickers incident taking as much time as he wished, while the other was prepared to dismiss the incident as it took the gloss off his ANZAC legend.

This later narrator preferred providing a positive image of his Vietnam experience, like the majority of my narrators. I was forced to ask questions to elicit discussion of negative aspects of their war service. The need to keep parts of his history hidden was made evident; he had written a chapter in Bill Parry’s book Just A Nasho.76 He wrote about his life as a national serviceman and he cited two incidents, both of which fitted ‘the Bean template’ for ANZAC military history.77 His refusal to discuss unpleasant aspects of our life on the battlefield is supported by non-participant D, who stated that this type of incident should not be discussed. However, this person goes on to discuss the incident, thus illustrating Portelli’s thesis that opposing parties are trying to win the other party and the readers to their point of view.

Alistair Thomson’s hypothesis that veterans tend to craft a history they can live with became clear to me when presented with peer review comments about this article. Most comments touched the points that I was keeping hidden in my own narrative. The reviewers were not pointing to my lack of disclosure, but rather raising points to improve the article. However, when I reflected on the comments there were areas that needed to be discussed that I was hoping to leave undiscovered. These comments have resulted in additions and better explanations in this article. Some material would not have been included if the article had it not been peer-reviewed.

Early childhood taboos clash with Army training to kill, and this causes conflicts in remembering, especially when it involves the killing of women and children. This dilemma is minimised by embracing the national legend; however this is not a lasting solution to alleviating pain.

Amongst the platoon, there was acknowledgement of the effect of the ambush on me, and I was aware that this could introduce a bias into this research. Where the narrators were attuned to my sense of guilt, they did adjust their narratives to fit what they thought I needed to hear, being careful not to offend me. The participant, who initially refused to say anything about the ambush, changed his mind after I stated that I would not be upset by discussion about the incident. He was not alone in acknowledging my psychological state after the incident, and another soldier claimed I had become a changed person after the incident. There seemed to be a concession that most of my soldiers knew I was distressed by the incident, and as a result they were prepared to comment when I questioned them on it. I was an impediment to full discussion, it seemed.
Many of the narrators who took part in the ambush were angry. A number stated that the system failed to support them and their mates during the public disclosures on civilian deaths. In this case, these oral history narratives may correct the speculation and ill-founded assertions of both the politicians and the media reports of August 1976.

It seems as though they had to place their anger, shame and guilt onto a scapegoat. They found two. The machine gunner who sprung the ambush and the system which the soldiers believed had not been honest with them. Anger is clearly present in the narratives, and the guilt and shame are less obvious but suggested by the fact that most did not wish to discuss the matter, and had to be questioned to obtain information. Yet all are sure that the rules of engagement were observed.78

Conclusion

My narrators preferred providing a positive image of their Vietnam experience and I was forced to ask questions to elicit discussion on negative aspects of their war service. While my research presents a less than glowing picture of our battlefield, participants’ courage or bravery is not questioned. The details embedded in these oral histories are the narrators’ realities, and the facts tallied with the commander’s diary and other official documents. Oral histories can be accepted as a perceived truth.

When telling their stories, veterans tended to prefer to follow the theme of the national myth, the ANZAC legend. In this research the majority avoided disturbing and unpalatable memories of the incident in question. They demonstrate Thomson’s hypothesis that memories are composed so the owner can live with them. A non-participant interviewer may never have been told about the ‘ambush’ incident.

(Endnotes)

1 Alessandro Portelli, The Order has been Carried out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome, Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire, 2007.

4 Alistair Thomson, ANZAC Memories: Living with the Legend, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 239.
5 ibid, p. 228.
6 ibid.
10 ibid., pp. 242, 260-261.
11 ibid., pp. 242.
15 2 RAR Commander’s Diary, AWM 95-7-2-45 part 1, 1 ATF Rear Patrol Programme for the period 200800H to 260800H, dated 19 October 1967, Folio 26.
18 This was in accordance with the Task Patrol Plan 200800H October 1967 to 260800H October 1967.
19 Barry Corse interview by Ben Morris, West Perth, 23/01/09, tape and transcript held by author.
21 Brian Donald Gordon, interviewed by Ben Morris, Minden, 18 April 2007, tape and transcript held by author.

Portelli, Battle of Valle Giulia, op.cit., p. 12.

Anonymous, participant E, interviewed by Ben Morris, name and date withheld, tape and transcript held by author.

Anonymous, participant A, op.cit.

Anonymous, participant F, interview by Ben Morris, name and date withheld, tape and transcript held by author.

Anonymous, participant G, interview by Ben Morris, name and date withheld, tape and transcript held by author.

Anonymous, participant F, op.cit.

Anonymous, participant A, op.cit.

Anonymous, participant H, interviewed by Ben Morris, name and date withheld, tape and transcript held by author.

James Edward Langham, interview by Ben Morris, Townsville, 31 July 2012, tape and transcript held by author.

Anonymous, participant B, op.cit.


Ross Horne, ‘A Nasho’s Story,’ in Bill Parry, Just A Nasho, Mr W O Parry, 36 Ruby Street, Mango Hill, Self-Published, 2011, p. 38.

D A Kent, ‘The ANZAC book and The ANZAC Legend: C E W Bean as editor and image-maker,’ in Historical Studies, vol. 21, no. 84, 1985, pp. 376-390; Alistair Thomson, ANZAC Memories, 2nd edn., 2013, pp. 54-55, 233, 236-237; Frank Bongiorno, Labour and Anzac: Historical Reflections, Honest History Lecture Series, Manning Clark House, 15 June 2014. Charles Edward Woodrow Bean was the first official Australian war correspondent. He focussed on the heroic achievements of Australian soldiers at Gallipoli to distract from the unpalatable aspects of warfare, including defeats, death, disasters and the sheer brutality of war. Bean’s image is of a brave bronze patriotic bushman who marched off to war, fought courageously and returned home to a hero’s welcome.