

"Dear Mum and Dad," wrote gunner Lance Grimstone, a surf-mad national serviceman from the Gold Coast. He was bubbling with excitement - he had found surf, and surfboards, in Vietnam! His seventh letter home from Nui Dat, on June 7, 1970, said: "Just on three months in country and I got a weekend off ... Did a bit on the board in the old South China Sea, out three-four hours a day. Only two-foot slop but it was gas to feel the movement under the feet again."

Five months later, he wrote of a "beach party weekend" at Vung Tau: "Spent all the time in the sloppy three-foot mush that was tripping through. Still it was outasite, though."

Then - Cowabunga! - just a few days before his 22nd birthday in November, 1970, he made his third trip to the beach: "The surf, believe it or not, was fantastic (for Vietnam anyway). On the last day it was a solid four foot in the sets and glassy all day. Stoked! ... They had just had a new consignment of boards from Gordon Woods in Sydney and was beautiful to ride a really good board in, at least, an acceptable surf by hometown standards."





*We gotta get out of this place  
If it's the last thing we ever do  
We gotta get out of this place  
'cause girl, there's a better life for me and you...*

From the unofficial anthem of the Vietnam War, the Animals' 1965 hit,  
*We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, written by Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil



SAME country, same war, same soldier, but two vastly different Vietnam days for Gary Lovell, 131 Div Locating Battery, in country 1969-70 ... his view from a chopper over the Mekong and, on the right, enjoying himself on a glassy little wave in front of the Badcoe club. "I only went surfing once, but it was my best day in Vietnam," he says. "I remember it clearly after 40 years." (Photos: Gary Lovell)



*...and the place they went to was called the Peter Badcoe Club. It was a brief respite from the war, this unique Australian enclave, a beach resort with barbed wire, machine-gun emplacements and its own lifesaving club. Here was a sanctuary which offered surfboards and a swimming pool, hot chips and hamburgers, meat pies at times and cold beer always. Never mind the snakes in the water, or the rumble of bombing runs on the Long Hai Hills just up the coast.*



*'It's the off-duty playground for Australia's fighting men. Relieved of the tensions of war in Phuoc Tuy Province to the north, Diggers romp over the beaches of the Vung Tau Peninsula, sail boats, water ski, play a host of other sports, sleep in peace without the proverbial reveille of the wee small hours or simply take in a little sightseeing of the important Vietnamese coastal centre which is Vung Tau.'*

Vung Tau, as described in the Australian War Memorial's summary of a 30-minute Army film, made in July, 1971, featuring the 1st Australian Logistic Support Group



*DAWN PATROL: It's early morning on the Australian stretch of Back Beach, Vung Tau, and surfers are already out in the water looking for the first waves of the day.*  
(Photo: Paul Haw)



(Photo: Kerry Seebohm)

THE gung-ho Lieutenant Colonel William Kilgore ("The 1st of the 9th, Aircav, son – airmobile"), played by Robert Duvall, got to deliver some of the greatest lines in Francis Ford Coppola's epic 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*. The swashbuckling American colonel, both surf-crazy and downright crazy, fitted so well with the movie's dark war-is-madness theme. This was the soldier who loved the smell of napalm in the morning. To him, it smelled like victory.

For Kilgore, Vietnam was simply a big playground. Like when, walking through a fresh battleground littered with Vietnamese bodies, he tells a young soldier: "We do a lot of surfing around here, Lance. I like to finish operations early and fly down to Vung Tau for the evening glass." The dialogue continues, inaudible as they walk away. After all, there is a war going on at full volume in the background.

That evening, there is a barbecue at the landing zone, the men lounging in chairs around the fire, drinking Budweiser. Kilgore is in jungle green, but barefoot, and wearing a Yater Surfboards T-shirt, strumming a guitar. The film's voiceover says: "They turned the LZ into a beach party. The more they tried to make it just like home, the more they made everybody miss it." But Kilgore has a plan: he orders his men to take a gunship back to base and collect their surfboards, because they're going surfing at a new spot the next morning.

One of his unit, Tom, doesn't like the sound of this: "I don't know, sir. It's ... it's ..."

Kilgore: "What is it, soldier?"

Tom: "Well, I mean it's hairy in there. It's Charlie's point."

Kilgore: "Charlie don't surf."



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*RIGHT: Likely LADs ... members of the 12th Field Regiment  
Light Aid Detachment, Royal Corps of Australian Mechanical  
and Electrical Engineers, and mates, pose with some of the early  
Badcoe boards, believed to be around July-August, 1968.  
(Photo: John Phoenix)*

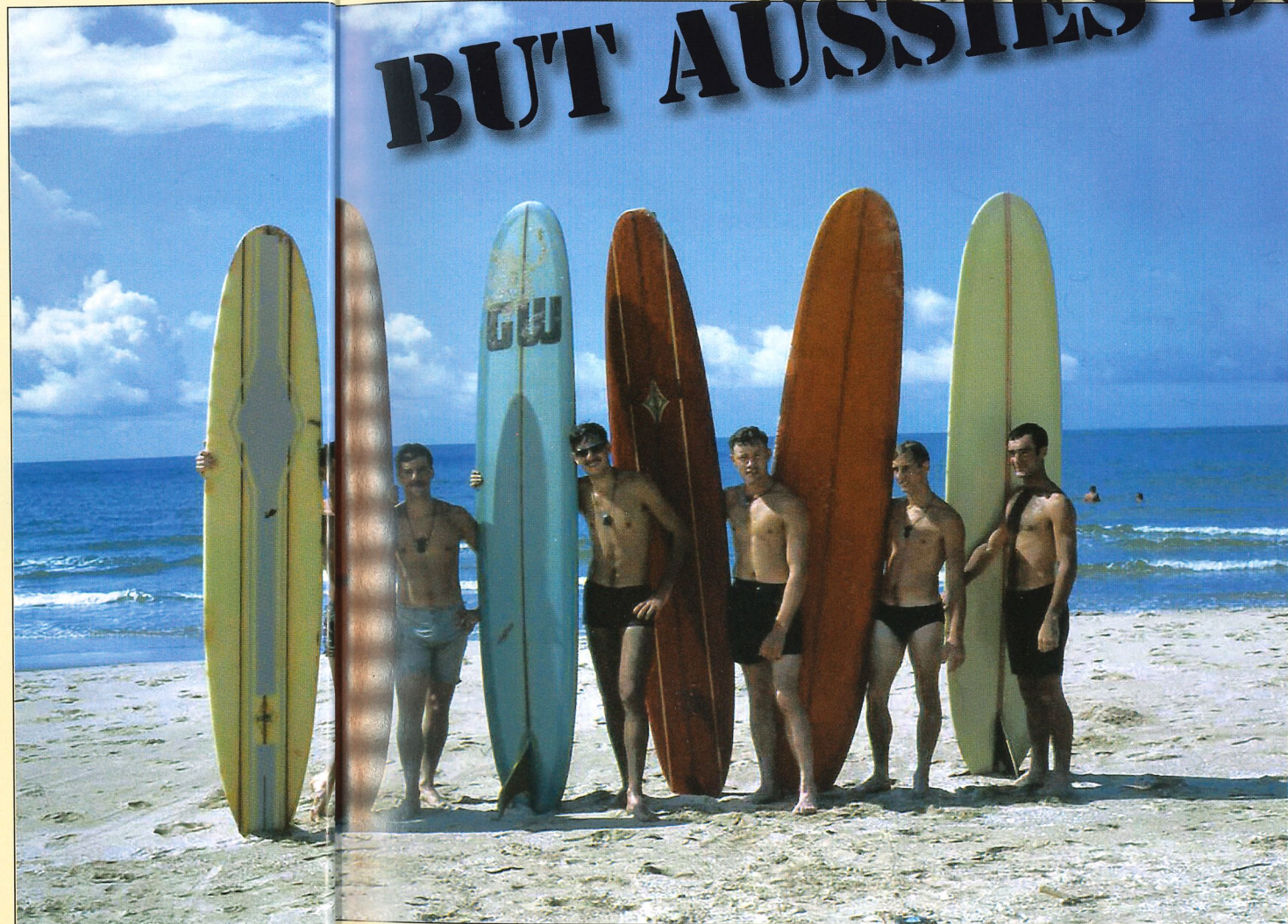
*COVER main photo: The day's surfing is over, so time to go back  
to the war. A Digger brings a malibu longboard back inside the  
wire after a stint in the South China Sea, November, 1968.  
(Photo: Kerry Seeborn)*

*COVER inset: On the truck bound for Nui Dat after a rest-in-  
country break at the Peter Badcoe Club's beach annex, Stuart  
McKeown and Alan Floyd of 102 Field Battery can see the funny  
side as beer from the opened cans in their pockets soaks their shirts.  
(Photo: Paul Haw)*

*BACK COVER: Soldiers with surfboards, and a chopper in the  
air. The Aussie beach scene, September, 1968.  
(Photo: Paul Haw)*

*BACK COVER inset: Leigh Floyd, then a 21-year-old infantry  
private in 6RAR, comes in through the shorebreak on a Badcoe  
club board, around 1969-70.  
(Photo: Leigh Floyd)*

# Charlie Don't Surf BUT AUSSIES DO



Tall tales and true from the Peter Badcoe Club,  
1ALSG, Back Beach, Vung Tau, South Vietnam

STUART SCOTT





(Photo: Russ Morison)

LYN Guy, with a surfboard instead of a rifle at his side, takes things easy on Back Beach in front of the Australian gear shed, early 1970. "I was a bit of a learner surfer at that stage – I knew how to surf, but hadn't been on a board for years – so we went surfing when we had a bit of spare time," he says.

Guy, a Service Corps sergeant with 25 Supply Platoon, 1969-70, says his chance to hit the beach came on a break of a couple of days spent in Vung Tau. "I had been in country about nine months at that stage and hadn't had time off, so went down and did the recreation sort of thing.

"Being from Queensland, I much preferred the surf and the salt water to the pool."

The surfing side of the recreation centre was very well run, he says.

"My very word. You had to sign for the surfboards so they could keep track of who was in the water."

And the change from everyday army life was refreshing. "Going to the Badcoe club really was like walking through an invisible door. It was so different from everything that was outside.

"Ninety-nine percent of your time in Vietnam was spent in uniform, so it was such a change to be in civvies. Down there, it didn't matter whether you were a private soldier or a colonel: all hats were off."

## Chapter One

# Australia's Beachhead

It's January, 1970, and the Vietnam War is grinding on. The 1st Australian Field Hospital near the beach at Vung Tau is packed with wounded men when the Army's director-general of medical services calls in to inspect the facilities. Among all the wards full of wounded soldiers, there is just one RAAF serviceman, so Major General Colin Gurner, CBE, and his entourage head for Bob Meyer, a 22-year-old instrument technician from Melbourne, lying there in bed, head heavily bandaged. "What happened to you, son?" asks the visiting general. "Got hit by a surfboard, sir," says Leading Aircraftman Meyer.

Between 1962 and 1972, some 61,000 Australians served in Vietnam – 520 died, 3129 were injured. And quite a few went surfing.

After all, these were fit young men, most in their early 20s – and, as the song says, many were only 19 – plenty of them plucked straight from Australia's beaches and then-booming early surf culture. They found themselves in a foreign land where the water was warm and, even if the sand might contain mines, at least there were waves lapping ashore.

The Australian Army took over an empty stretch of beach, protected it with barbed wire and machine guns, built a recreation centre and barracks so the troops could take rest-in-country leave, put in a swimming pool and even provided the surfboards and other playthings.

The Peter Badcoe Club that was constructed on the sand dunes at Vung Tau was no Club Med – B52s pounding the Viet Cong strongholds in the hills just up the coast were something of a distraction, and straying too far outside the protected area could get you killed. But it was a welcome sanctuary in a dangerous land, an Aussie enclave where you could relax with your mates and, at least for a brief time, get away from the reality of war that was just beyond the barbed wire entanglements.

"Whoever thought of setting it up did a good job," says Bruce Young, a Service Corps captain who arrived in 1969 to join the large Australian base's Amenities and Welfare Unit which ran the Peter Badcoe Club. "It was a bit of an experiment for Australia and I'm sure it saved a lot of kids from getting in mischief. It was a place where they could have a drink where they were safe, rather than getting knifed in a back alley or hit over the head with an iron bar. These guys had been in the scrub for months, so they wanted to relax and have a drink."





*LOOKING NORTH: Lots of empty beach, lots of barbed wire, with the Long Hai Hills, stronghold of the Viet Cong, in the distance.  
(Photo: Paul Asbury collection)*

Ah yes, don't overlook the beer. Though soldiers and surfboards didn't feature together before the '60s, of course there was a long military tradition of drinking. And other activities. As one former Amenities and Welfare Unit commander, Major Lyndsay Daniels, says: "A soldier would be looking for booze, a swim and a root, and not necessarily in that order." The Badcoe club took care of two out of three, and nearby Vung Tau did a brisk trade in providing for the third.

Infantryman Kev Gillett, a 7RAR Recce Platoon corporal in 1970-71, recalls a stay in the barracks at the Badcoe club as an extremely pleasant change after sleeping out in the jungle or under a roof of sandbags. "It was like an oasis," he says. "The rooms were fairly good and clean and tidy, and even had proper toilets. We got drunk and went swimming, as soldiers do. We were promised they'd give us 36 hours leave every six weeks, but that didn't happen." Instead, they were sent there "about three or four" times. "When we did get there, a lot of young soldiers would treat those 36 hours as though they were their last. They'd drink, eat and do those other things that young soldiers do."

And with hordes of cashed-up American servicemen on leave nearby, no wonder Aussie ingenuity found an opportunity to have fun and make a profit. One Badcoe club regular tells of a lucrative scam operated by a group of soldiers around late 1971. "They'd get a surfboard, paddle it around the wire to the American R&C centre, and sell it to an American on the beach. Then they'd come back and tell the military police: 'Hey, there's a Yank down there with a surfboard which belongs to our Amenities Unit,' and the MPs would go and get it." He laughs at the memory. "That was pretty common, a regular occurrence, every Sunday, at one stage."



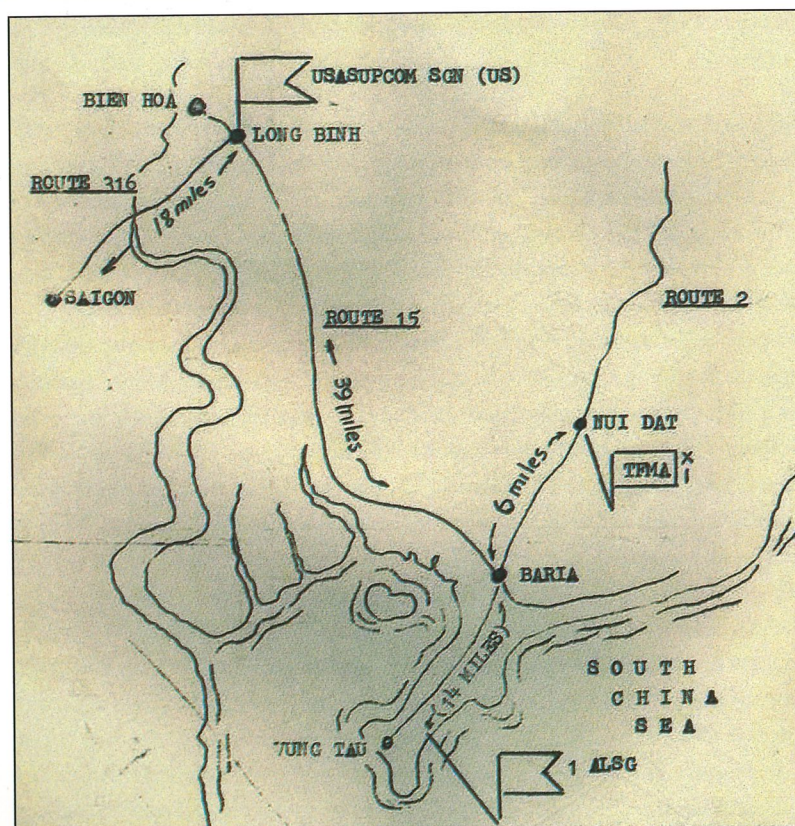
*LOOKING SOUTH: Two surfers bring their boards back to the Badcoe club shed, with the Korean, US and Vietnamese zones in the background, and Cap St Jacques on the horizon.  
(Photo: Paul Asbury collection)*

When Australia's involvement in Vietnam was coming to an end, Graeme Loughton's unit, the 2nd Advanced Ordnance Depot, was given the task of packing up the stores and equipment to bring it all home. Then a major, he was in Vung Tau until February, 1972, and has fond memories of the final days of the Badcoe club. "Just about the best feeling in the world was sitting in the sun around that pool, a can of green (Victoria Bitter) in your hand," he says. "If that's how it felt to me, I can only imagine what it was like for the fellows who had just come in from the bush."

Vietnam was Australia's longest-running conflict, so gave the military machine the opportunity to make itself at home in one place. And it tried to make the boys feel at home, too. For example, various Army and RAAF units were allowed to have their own barbecue areas under the trees along the foreshore, and over the years these spots acquired official names – Coolangatta, Bondi, Cronulla, Collaroy, Portsea, Anglesea, Cottesloe, Glenelg etc – as reminders of favourite beaches back home. Eventually, what started out as just a place to have a beer and a snack overlooking the South China Sea acquired its own lifesaving club, surfboat, rescue reels and lookout tower, dozens of surfboards, a fleet of sailing boats, power boats for water ski-ing, the swimming pool, a gymnasium, tennis and squash courts, a concert stage. Brightly-coloured umbrellas gave shade over lounges on the beach. Go-karts would tear up and down the sand when the tide was out, while off-duty soldiers played on the mini-golf course, or launched themselves with varying degrees of grace from the pool's high-dive board.

The Army had the time and the will to set all this up because, of course, Vietnam wasn't like other wars. No well-defined front line here, nor the usual constant to and fro of armies moving





*OFF to the beach:  
A convoy of men  
stationed at Nui Dat  
hit the road on a  
Sunday "swim trip"  
to Vung Tau and the  
Peter Badcoe Club.  
(Photo: Gerry Lloyd)*

*AUSSIE  
TERRITORY: Phuoc  
Tuy province, and  
Vung Tau (bottom  
centre), showing the  
road leading north to  
Baria then Nui Dat.*



*POOL PARTY: Taking a high dive into the Harold Holt Memorial Pool at the Badcoe club, a refreshing change from the heat, sand, dust and mud of Vietnam.  
(Photo: 1st Aust Fd Hospital Assoc - Vampire)*

on as territory is won or lost. Instead, with Vietnam, the largely-invisible enemy was on all sides. Even when found and defeated, he would melt away, only to return later. So the visiting forces built major bases which they could protect, and kept them in place, expanded and improved year after year, sending men out to engage the enemy.

Vietnam is a narrow strip of a country – shaped ominously like a fishing hook – running along the South China Sea, and the Australian military took responsibility for what was then a new province called Phuoc Tuy, a rural-jungle-mountain area roughly 60km east-west and 40km north-south. One of 44 provinces in South Vietnam, it was slightly smaller than the Australian Capital Territory, with 106,000 people, in the bottom corner of the country just southeast of Saigon. The Australians found two types of weather there: hot and wet (the monsoon season, May to October) or hot and dry (November to April). The military set up its administration headquarters – the Australian Force Vietnam (AFV) – in Saigon. A combat operations base – the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) – was established in the heart of its territory at Nui Dat. And a back-up centre – the 1st Australian Logistic Support Group (1ALSG) – quickly sprang up at the port of Vung Tau, strategically sited at the mouth of the Saigon River and on the tip of a small peninsula protruding from the southern edge of the province.

It was at Vung Tau (Vungers, in Digger-speak) where *HMAS Sydney* arrived in 1965, landing the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, to begin Australia's major combat role in South Vietnam. More voyages were to follow (so many that *HMAS Sydney* became known as the Vung Tau Ferry) and in 1966 Australia's contribution was increased to a two-battalion effort at Nui Dat, while at Vung Tau work started on the huge logistic base, which would be home to more than 1000 servicemen and a handful of women. And in the southern corner of that 40-hectare compound, the Peter Badcoe Club would be built in 1967, along with nearby accommodation blocks so up to a company of men at a time could have a brief respite from the hardship of life and



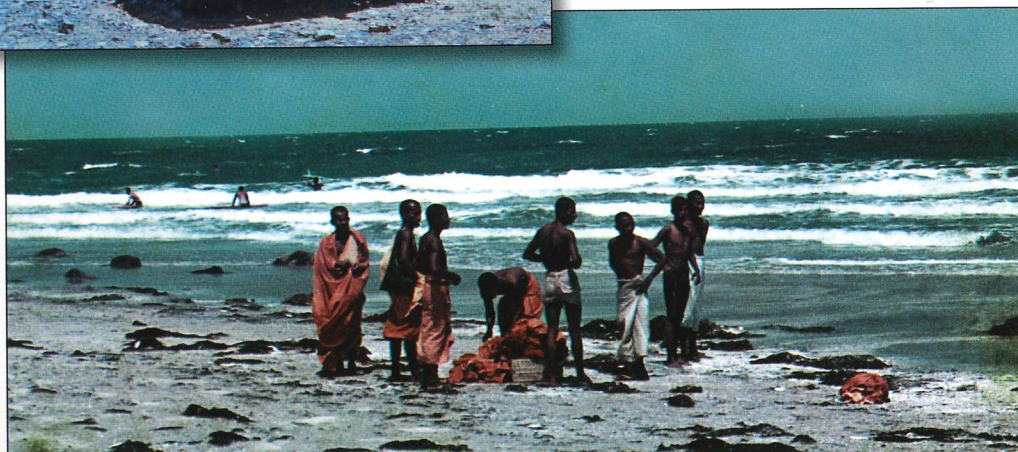


*BEACH BUSINESS: A pineapple and coconut seller does the rounds of off-duty soldiers sunbathing on the Vietnamese section of Back Beach.  
(Photo: Kerry Seebohm)*



*IN THE PINK: Dennis Norman and Peter Blizzard try the cut-down Land Rover used for towing the club's boats across the beach.  
(Photo: Dennis Norman)*

*THE contrasts of Vietnam: Monks on a swimming trip to Back Beach, while soldiers play with surfboards in the background.  
(Photo: Gerry Lloyd)*



*BEACH TOY: Go-karts were allowed to race on the northern section of the Australian beach, with several units putting a lot of work into their playthings.  
(Photo: Robert Smyth)*

war in the bush and at Nui Dat. As though completing a neat set of bookends to the war, it was from Vung Tau that *HMAS Sydney* brought home the last shipload of Australian troops in 1972.

The Vung Tau area had been a popular seaside resort since French colonial times. Their villas remained in the 1960s, looking grand but gradually deteriorating, and by then the town was known as a favourite holiday spot for Vietnamese from Saigon. However rumour had it that they weren't the only ones on vacation in Vungers. According to Peter Scott, the lieutenant colonel commanding 3RAR when it arrived in 1971: "I think, as well as it being a rest and recuperation area for Australia, it was also for some Americans and also for the Viet Cong." He laughed when telling the South Australians at War oral history project conducted by the state's library: "Our enemy used it as their rest and recuperation area as well." Perhaps that old rumour was true, and it might explain why, if both sides regarded it as a good spot for a day off, Vung Tau remained a comparatively safe place in a decidedly unsafe land.

Three years before the arrival of the main 1RAR contingent in 1965, Australia's contribution to the American-led war began with small groups of "advisers" – the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam, going down in legend simply as "The Team" – to help the South Vietnamese forces. Their bravery over the years made the unit the most-decorated in Australia Army history.

Even among this band of heroes, Major Peter Badcoe's exploits stand out. After risking his life again and again, he was killed in April, 1967, and was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. Ironical that a non-drinker's name was put on a recreation centre where drinking was one of the most popular activities. But perhaps that shouldn't be a surprise, given that the Peter Badcoe Club was soon joined by the Harold Holt Memorial Pool, named after a prime minister who had drowned



*'Major Badcoe set a magnificent example of brave leadership and determination, and throughout every action exposed himself to danger without any regard for his own personal safety.'*

– Prime Minister Harold Holt's recommendation of a posthumous Victoria Cross for Major Peter Badcoe, August 24, 1967



*AT HOME on the range: Major Peter Badcoe takes aim on the Holsworthy rifle range, around 1966.*

*(Photo: Australian War Memorial, negative number 044465)*

## Chapter Two

# The Galloping Major

He was short, and short-sighted, wearing thick glasses: legend has it that he had to memorise eye charts to pass the Army medical examination. No way did he fit the usual stereotype of a macho Aussie military superhero, and even his widow – they married when she was 17, he was 22 – said he looked more like a suburban bank manager. But when bullets were flying so thickly that all the local troops around him fled or hid, Major Peter Badcoe rose to the occasion again and again. Eventually his extraordinary courage would cost his life, and earn him a posthumous Victoria Cross, the second of the Vietnam War.

Badcoe wasn't like Australia's three other Vietnam VC winners, sturdy blokes who looked like they would be handy to have in a footy game or on your side in a pub brawl. He wouldn't have been in the bar in the first place – he was quiet, a non-drinker, a non-smoker, and enjoyed reading military history.

"Soldiering was his life," said his widow Denise Clark in 1996, when visiting his grave at Terendak in Malaysia. He had enjoyed his time stationed at what was the large Commonwealth base there, and told his wife he wanted to be buried there if "anything happened". When he left Australia for Vietnam, he told her: "If I die, don't have a military funeral. They're horrendous." The epitaph she chose for his headstone says: "He lived and died a soldier."

He died aged 33, on April 7, 1967, after rushing to the hamlet of An Thuan to help a South Vietnamese unit pinned down by machine-gun fire. Rising to throw a grenade, he was shot and killed. He had been "in country" eight months as a member of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam, and on the day he died had written to Denise: "It's time I came home. I'm getting bitter and cynical ... I can see more and more good about the Vietnamese and less and less about the US advisers."

Exactly one month earlier, he led a series of charges on Viet Cong positions, saving the Quang Dien district headquarters. And two weeks before that, on February 23, 1967, in the Phu Thu district, he ran across 600m of open ground under heavy fire, took charge of a pinned-down local unit and led the attack. Despite heavy volleys from the dug-in enemy, he rescued



# Vietnam Timeline

- 1962, August: The first Australian military advisers ("The Team") sent to Vietnam.
- 1964, November: Australia introduces conscription.
- 1965, June: Australia's first battalion arrives, to be stationed at Bien Hoa.
- 1966, January: First 1RAR soldiers go to the "rest and convalescence" villa in Vung Tau – and they find wooden surfboards.
- 1966, April: 1st Australian Logistic Support Group begins to set up at Vung Tau and the 1st Australian Task Force gets established at Nui Dat.
- 1966, July: Sydney surfboard makers donate boards for the troops.
- 1967, January: Work begins on the "Australian Forces Club".
- 1967, April: Major Peter Badcoe is killed in action.
- 1967, September: Soldiers start using the club.
- 1967, October: Posthumous Victoria Cross awarded to Peter Badcoe.
- 1967, November: The club is officially opened, and named the Peter Badcoe Club.
- 1967, December: The Australian Task Force is enlarged with a third battalion.
- 1967, December: The surf life saving club is getting underway.
- 1968, May: The Badcoe "beach annex" accommodation blocks are completed.
- 1968, August: The Harold Holt Memorial Pool officially opens.
- 1971, November: Task Force withdraws from Phuoc Tuy province.
- 1972, February: The Badcoe complex is handed over to the Americans, but Australia retains ownership.
- 1972, November: The US hands the centre back, and it is given to the Vietnamese.
- 1972, December: Conscription ends.
- 1973, March: Last US troops leave Vietnam.
- 1975, April: Communists capture Saigon.



(Photo: Paul Haw)

a wounded American adviser and retrieved the body of another. Badcoe was nicknamed "the galloping major" because of the pace he set when attacking.

No wonder that Ian McNeill, author of *The Team – Australian Army Advisers in Vietnam 1962-1972*, wrote: "Always in the forefront of the troops he advised, and distinguished by his red beret, Badcoe seemed to have a conviction of invincibility. Indeed, he infected others with his optimism and was often able to carry the day by his courage and audacity." His courage never ran out, but unfortunately his luck did.

His Victoria Cross citation reads: "In recognition of his extreme bravery ... His magnificent leadership and determination will always stand as examples of the true meaning of valour." As well, the United States awarded him the Silver Star, and the Republic of Vietnam awarded him its National Order, three Crosses for Gallantry and the Armed Forces Honour Medal.

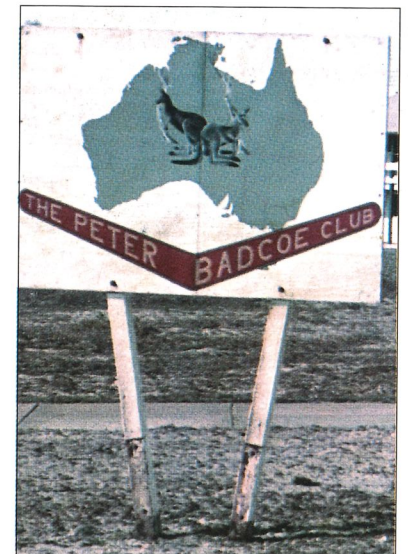
Peter Badcoe was a South Australian who joined the Army in 1950, after a brief stint as a clerk in the public service. He graduated from the Officer Cadet School, Portsea, in 1952, served as a captain in Malaya 1961-1963 – and in the middle of that posting, visited South Vietnam for a week. He was promoted to provisional major in 1966 and was sent to Vietnam on August 6 that year.

The National Archives in Canberra contain a slim foolscap folder marked "Secret Honours: Governor-General's Office No. 5/5/33 Subject: Victoria Cross (Posthumous) Major Peter John Badcoe", and inside are 12 dog-eared pages of official correspondence, the paper trail which leads from Saigon to Canberra, from Prime Minister Harold Holt to Governor-General Casey and on to Buckingham Palace, then back again.

The sequence begins with Form AF-W3121 "Recommendation for Honours or Awards", dated June 17, 1967, when the Adjutant-General, Major General WM Anderson, approved the Victoria Cross recommendation made by Lieutenant Colonel Martin Tripp, commander of the Australian Army Training Team, and Major General Douglas Vincent, commander of Australian Force Vietnam. The recommendation's final sentence says of Badcoe, the quiet hero: "His valour and leadership were in the highest traditions of the military profession and the Australian Regular Army."

However the wheels of bureaucracy turned slowly, because it was August 24 before PM Holt, following advice from his Defence Minister Allen Fairhall, signed a single-page letter to the Governor-General, marked "CONFIDENTIAL" in capital letters, recommending the VC. The Prime Minister said: "Major Badcoe set a magnificent example of brave leadership and determination, and throughout every action exposed himself to danger without any regard for his own personal safety."

In turn, Lord Casey – who served in World War I – personally wrote to London, to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, on September 8, saying:



*PROUD name: Major Peter Badcoe's Victoria Cross was announced just in time for the official naming of the club, which previously was called the Armed Forces Club then the Australian Forces Club.*

(Photo: Gerry Lloyd)



"My Prime Minister has recommended the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross to the late Major Peter John Badcoe, Australian Army Training Team, Vietnam. I endorse this proposal in recognition of Major Badcoe's extreme bravery during three separate exploits against the Viet Cong. I should be grateful if you would cause the papers to be placed before Her Majesty for her pleasure at the earliest practicable date."

That letter (Secret Honour Despatch No. 7) ended with a stately flourish – "I have the honour to be, Sir, your most obedient, humble servant, Casey" – but Buckingham Palace apparently didn't treat the Victoria Cross request as a priority matter. The paperwork in Canberra reveals that soon the Prime Minister's office was becoming impatient about hearing nothing back, running short of time because America also wanted to award a medal to Badcoe, plus the Australian government was making behind-the-scenes plans to send his widow to the inauguration of South Vietnam's President Thieu on November 1, 1967.

Protocol collided with politics, and Murray Tyrrell, the Governor-General's official secretary, had to tell Noel Flanagan, a branch director in the Prime Minister's Department, in a confidential letter: "I shouldn't like to have to send a reminder to The Queen at this stage and I do hope you will be able to avoid the American entanglement somehow or other."

However the PM's office eventually got its way because on October 6, Government House in Canberra fired off what amounted to a hurry-up letter to Buckingham Palace: "I should be most grateful if my recommendation which I sincerely hope Her Majesty will approve, could be dealt with as a matter of urgency." This worked. On October 9 the Governor-General received a coded telegram, marked "In Confidence", which brought the news: "The Queen has been pleased to approve of award of Victoria Cross." Six and a half months after he was killed in action, the awarding of Australia's highest gallantry medal for Peter Badcoe was gazetted on October 17, 1967.



*HERO HONOURED: Accommodation blocks at the left and centre, a swimming pool in the middle, and the Peter Badcoe Club itself on the right ... fitting tribute to an amazing soldier. (Photo: Kerry Seeborn)*



*BADCOE'S MEDALS: Victoria Cross, Vietnam Medal, US Silver Star, South Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Gold Star, South Vietnamese Government Campaign Medal.*

*(Photo, and inset Page 16: Crispin Savage, South Australian Museum)*

However the VC delay caused headaches for the military in Vietnam because from early October internal messages had been starting to refer to the near-completed beach facility at Vung Tau – originally called the "Armed Forces Club", then the "Australian Forces Club" – as the Peter Badcoe Club. Officers even began drafting an account of Badcoe's heroism to go on the club's name plaque.

This had to stop, ordered Army HQ in Canberra, wasting no time in sending a message in cipher to Colonel Edwin Griff, the force's chief of staff in Vietnam: "Whilst opening of annex for business may proceed as planned, official opening and more particularly its naming is to be deferred until further notice ... Publicity which would follow official opening or constant use of Badcoe's name would be untimely and may be prejudicial to current recommendation for award.

"Suggest you use cover story: 'Official opening of annex is to be deferred until suitable representative from AHQ can attend.' " The Army's original copy of this message has survived, complete with the classification "Secret" stamped twice in purple ink, plus seven "Restricted" stampings in blue ink. Clearly it wasn't meant for the outside world to see at the time, and remained in a closed file for decades, marked "not yet examined" until the Australian War Memorial opened it as requested when research was being done for this book.

Once the cover story was in place, the club's official opening – which had been set for October 25, 1967 – was called off on October 11, though soldiers were allowed to go there for a drink, or to go surfing.

Finally, once the VC had been approved, Major General Vincent was able to write to Mrs Badcoe on November 1: "We have taken the liberty of naming the Forces Club at Vung Tau in honour of Peter as a small token of the esteem in which he is held by all ranks of this command." The club was officially opened the following Sunday, November 5, 1967. Certainly Badcoe's name was the obvious choice, though it could have been an embarrassment: his surname originally was Badcock, but he changed it to Badcoe in 1961 to put an end to the obvious jokes.

More than 40 years later, the saga of that bronze gun-metal cross with its crimson ribbon continues. In May, 2008, Badcoe's Victoria Cross, along with other medals and letters he wrote home to his family, came up for auction and seemed likely to go into a private collection or overseas. However the South Australian Government and Seven Network boss Kerry Stokes jointly paid \$488,000 so it would remain in Australia. The VC went on display in South Australia before being passed on to the Australian War Memorial.



# Surf's Up ... Or Maybe Not

*"The surf was usually warm or hot, three to five foot, with plenty of sea snakes. They used to be grabbed and thrown on to the barbed wire fence and left to dry in the sun."*

– Richard McGoogan, in country 1967-68

*"The surf was quite good. There were 4ft or 5ft waves, offshore wind, a bit of a peak. There were a few breaks on the beach."*

– Harry Wall, in country 1968

*"The surf could be alright. It wasn't big, maybe up to a metre and a half. There was a point break outside our area, but we weren't allowed there."*

– Bob Meyer, in country 1969-70

*"When there was surf on, in the monsoon months, it could get up to 6ft. You had to be lucky to strike it."*

– Rick Paxton, in country 1970-71



**POPULAR PASTIME:** At least 13 surfers are already in the water, and another is heading out with a red longboard ... shame there are no waves. Looks like a fine day for water ski-ing. (Photo: Gary Grant)

*"It wasn't exactly a perfect beach – it was full of snakes and barbed wire – but I went there every day for a few months. The surf over there was not all that good for body or board as the wind was a pain in the arse and the sand went out forever. You'd walk out for miles before you'd hit a wave."*

– David Cripps, in country 1967-68



**INVITING:** Smooth water and clean, though tiny, surf ... the Australian stretch of Back Beach, complete with a spare sailing boat and empty waves. (Photo: Gary Lovell)

*"Sometimes there was nothing, flat as a pancake, but any beach can be like that. Mostly it would have been half-metre to a metre. There were very few days I saw when it was rough – the biggest swell I saw was one metre, maybe one and a half metres."*

– Mike Chudiak, in country 1969-70

*"It was a neat little wave that probably peeled for 50m or something. It wasn't too shabby at all. You could walk around on the board, stuff like that."*

– Gary Lovell, in country 1969-70

*"The surf was very ordinary and the water was quite brown. The waves were non-existent the times when I was there."*

– Normie Rowe, in country 1969

*"It wasn't very high surf. The beach changed every time the tide came in."*

– Lyndsay Daniels, in country 1970-71





*SKELETON: The framework of the clubhouse stands forlorn in early 1967.  
(Photo: Stan Middleton collection)*

*'The CGS was more than a little put out by the lack of progress on the Club ... A malaise seems to have set in.'*

Major General Merv Brogan in Canberra writes to Major General Tim Vincent, commander of Australian Force Vietnam, about the Peter Badcoe Club, April, 1967



*NEARLY THERE: Almost completed at last, the clubhouse in the second half of 1967.  
(Photo: Phil Noble)*

## Chapter Three

### *Building Badcoe*

Like a scene from a John Wayne movie, the troops climbed down the nets hanging from the side of *HMAS Sydney* into a flotilla of landing craft which surged ashore at Vung Tau. The men had weapons ready as they hit the beach, only to find it already occupied – American soldiers were lounging on the sand, drinks in hand, reclining under beach umbrellas.

Welcome to Vietnam, lads. Obviously this was to be no normal war. Nor was it an easy start for those 1000 servicemen arriving to make up the 1st Australian Logistic Support Group base. There was a mammoth headache in creating – from barren, wind-swept sandhills – a fully-functioning, town-sized military complex. The officer in charge, Lieutenant Colonel David Rouse, began his first “commander’s diary narrative” – his monthly report – with a lengthy tale of woe: “Practically no stores had been pre-positioned in the area to cater for the arrival of the force ... There was no rain during the month and temperatures were over 90degF in the shade during the day with night temperatures averaging 80degF. An added heat hazard during daylight hours was the reflection of sunlight off the sand creating temperatures of well over 100degF. This combined with a continuous requirement for work to establish the area, with the added lack of proper accommodation and washing facilities plus US rations to which the troops had to get used, caused considerable hardship to all troops, and in some cases exhaustion.” It was so stinking hot that official work dress during daylight hours included “shirt (optional)”.

Just one scrap of good news: they had a beach, and Rouse soon was making the most of it. He moved into Vung Tau from Saigon at 2.15pm on April 25, 1966, and held his first commander’s conference at 8 o’clock that night, wasting no time in issuing a string of instructions on how things would be run. Some items on this list of routine orders – VT-1 – might prove difficult to implement: “All ranks are warned of the dangers of sunburn and are advised not to expose themselves to direct sunlight for extensive periods.” Not so easy when there’s hard work to be done all day in a heatwave. However, under the heading “Daily Swimming”, came the instruction: “Duties permitting, all ranks are to avail themselves of existing bathing facilities. Transport to the beach will leave daily at 1600 hrs and return at 1700 hrs.” It may have been the last item on the list, but at least it was there: An hour off work each day for a dip in the South



China Sea. So the Aussie military tradition of going swimming at Vungers was enshrined almost as soon as the troops settled in.

Little time was wasted in staking out their favourite spot. Just five days later, Major Robert Sinclair, commanding officer of the 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit, reported to the commander's conference that a suitable swimming area had been "tentatively selected", and the American area commander would be contacted to make sure the Australians could use it. Having dealt with that important topic, Sinclair mentioned that the base didn't yet have a general alarm system for sentries. Interesting that securing your own stretch of beach for a swim came before warding off the enemy.

Next came the task of making the "Australian Swimming Area", as it was designated, like home. Some reports suggest that the initial plan was to have nothing more than a shed to store gear at the beach but, sparked by an RSL offer to donate money so there could be a recreational centre at Vung Tau, it was decided to build a two-storey clubhouse overlooking the surf. Tentative suggestions that a warehouse down at the wharves might suffice, or maybe a shed at the airfield, were rejected out of hand. And the brass quickly decided that it would have to be a good-looking building, because the civic fathers of Vung Tau already were claiming that some of the RAAF buildings were unattractive. Odd, that, since no-one recalls Vungers itself being exactly a beauty spot. Anyway it was decreed that the "Armed Forces Club" or "Australian Forces Club", as it was variously known in those early days, would be along the lines of a surf lifesaving clubhouse. Plans were drawn up by the grandly titled Directorate of Fortification and Works at Australian Army Headquarters, Canberra, and were approved in late 1966. To set the right tone, it would have "motel-style tables and chairs as used in Australian beer gardens".

News of the Vung Tau beach and its waves soon filtered home, such as when *Surfing World* magazine ("Australia's surfing monthly") in October, 1966, had a full-page story, *A Surfer In Vietnam*, telling of a Sydney surfer, identified only as Rus, who had been called up: "Rus now serves in Vietnam and is a mortar man". The article included an excerpt from a letter home: "Well boys, this a ---- of a place. The temp always 100 and the sand hills worse than Wanda. But there are some good things. Firstly, there is a good constant 2ft left and right about 50 yards from my tent. On Tuesday it was blowing offshore and there was a very good left. Next they have moved the PX (grog) and it is only one tent away." Writer Lester Brien ended the article with the comment: "Rus is having one hell of a time. Sometimes it is one hell of fun. Sometimes it is just hell. I hope to see Rus again soon. I hope he will still like to surf when he gets back. I agree with the war in Vietnam. I support the USA wholeheartedly. I'm sure as hell glad I'm not over there. It must be hell there, knowing your buddies are surfing, when you are the one allowing them to surf and when you know they don't realize it."

Meanwhile there was a war going on just outside the base's barbed wire perimeter, and plenty of activity inside: buildings and defences were underway, communications were being set up, machinery had to be repaired, shiploads of supplies kept arriving, stores and materials had to be constantly sent on to the fighting force up at Nui Dat, men were being treated for injuries from action in the jungle or with the bargirls of Vung Tau. Plus there were the usual problems for an army operating far from home, such as the month in late '66 when the base faced four critical shortages: beer, soft drink, boot polish and envelopes. No prizes for guessing which one the men considered a crisis. It was solved, temporarily, by getting extra beer supplies from the Americans.



*BEACH RETREAT: The Badcoe complex from the air ... the club is in the centre foreground, concert stage to the left, and accommodation blocks are across the centre of the picture. (Photo: 1st Aust Fd Hospital Assoc - Vampire)*

Against this background, levelling of the club site began in late December, 1966, and the optimistic timetable called for the steel to be going up within a few weeks; electricity and refrigeration to be in during March, along with the interior lining, joinery, plumbing and windows; work on stairs, railings, floor covering, and the painting, to be underway from mid-April. The prefabricated building was to be completed by April 30, 1967. A fine plan, but of course that didn't happen. Though the site preparation was finished and the footings were down in early January, work dragged on from there. With manpower and material in short supply, at times non-existent, progress slowed, often grinding to a halt.

However this was more than just a mere boozier at the beach. Instead, the building project came to be seen as a symbol of Australian military efficiency, or lack thereof. Soon it was the subject of a steady flow of correspondence between Vung Tau, Saigon and Australia, growing more impatient, reaching a peak in April, 1967, with a stern letter from Major General Merv Brogan in Canberra to Major General Tim Vincent, the commander of Australian Force Vietnam. "The CGS (Chief of General Staff) was more than a little put out by the lack of progress on the Club at Vung Tau," Brogan wrote. He said the CGS had let it be known this was considered a high priority, and it had been a "pet project" of Vincent's predecessor. "A malaise seems to have set in and the structure stands in skeleton form as an unfinished symphony and a sad testimony to the construction ability of the sappers," Brogan wrote. He told Vincent it should be considered a "rush project", and said HQ regarded the affair as a "sad saga".

But even after a rocket like that - in reply, officers in Vietnam said they had difficulty getting material etc, and it was not the construction unit's fault - work on the club dragged on. Around mid-1967, with the scheduled completion date long gone, Austforce Vietnam could do



little more than send a soothing message to Army Canberra saying it was “known that Minister and CGS very anxious that the club be opened quickly and be a success”. In August, a colonel who wanted more funds sent from Australia advised in a memo: “Hastening action has been taken.” Of course it would, with heavyweights right up to the Army Minister, at the time a young politician called Malcolm Fraser, looking over everyone’s shoulder.

Though generals and their sidekicks were exchanging stern words about the lack of progress on the club, the men of 17 Construction Squadron who were on the job were unaware of all the fuss. Electricians Alan Rustichelli and Phil Noble, of 17’s Resources Troop (motto: “You want it, we get it. Maybe.”) recall it as just one of a never-ending list of projects, though bigger than most. “A rush job? We never heard about that,” says Rustichelli. “There was a war going on – we’d be waiting for materials, doing other jobs. We’d often be called away and would be chopped out to do other work like fixing generators. At any one time, there might have been a dozen people working there. Sometimes we’d be there for a whole week.”

When he was assigned to work on the clubhouse, the building was mainly up, with the roof on, but not all the outside walls sheeted up. Of course there were typical SNAFUs: after placing some electrical wiring in the club, he was sent to Nui Dat for another job, and returned to find that the carpenters had sheeted in the walls without bringing out the wires or marking where they were hidden. So the lining had to come off, or holes had to be made to find the wires. “Luckily we had a fair idea where they were,” says Rustichelli.

On starting work there he found there was no plan for the electricals. “The staff sergeant just said: ‘We want five fans in this room’, or seven fans and five lights, things like that, and I worked out where they’d go. There wasn’t a great deal of proper planning – only the kitchen was planned.

“The club wasn’t our main job, just one of many. It was no Taj Mahal, and it wasn’t complicated, but at the time it was the biggest project we were working on. It was handy because we could walk from our tent to the Peter Badcoe Club. It was being built so they wouldn’t have to send us to hotels and motels for R&C. In ’67, when I left, things were still pretty basic at Vung Tau – we’d started off in tents then moved into huts at some stage, but that was about all.”

Fellow sparkie Phil Noble says: “We were keeping electricity up to the whole camp, so the Badcoe club was probably our lowest priority. Work on it was done in dribs and drabs – you’d put in a couple of days then be seconded off elsewhere. Getting cable for the place was a drama. You had absolutely basic gear to work with, and the workforce was anyone who was available, not doing anything more important.

“Towards the end, more workers seemed to be put on it. That’s when there was a rush to get it ready to open. All of a sudden there was an influx of electricians coming out of the woodwork.”

He worked seven days a week at the beginning of 1967, getting “the odd Sunday” off by late that year. There was nothing but sand dunes at Vung Tau early on, he says. And strong wind – “It blew its bum off.” And crook food. Noble says: “At first, there were no buildings at all. We were just living in tents, looking after generators and hooking up power to tents.”

He recalls one day, with the project almost complete, when he was ordered to go to the site because an Army photographer was coming. “I was told: ‘Get down there. The Badcoe club’s become a hot potato. Have a yarn to him about what you’re doing and what part we took.’”

However the workers’ efforts were eventually rewarded, with one of the first decisions of the club’s board of management to approve spending \$US84.20 on “entertainment” and



*FINISHED at last, and proving popular. Soldiers gather outside the Badcoe club in the early 1970s ... and by then it even had a fountain (at far right).  
(Photo: Robert Smyth)*

“refreshments” for 17 Construction Squadron. Plus there were lighter moments, such as the time the men decided to replace their worn-out Land Rover. “We swapped a few slouch hats for a brand new Jeep from the Americans at the airport,” says Noble. “We put our ladders on it and used it to carry our gear. It was great, but our workshop was just below the base head office, so they saw it and made us give it back. We probably only had it for two days.”

Meanwhile, when the Badcoe building was finally well on the path to completion, the Army set about getting some toys for the boys. So in July, 1967, the Amenities Unit compiled its wish-list, and the following month Lieutenant Colonel L. C. Chambers, at HQ 1ALSG, Vung Tau, sent it up the chain of command, to HQ, Australian Force Vietnam, in Saigon. And what a list it was: three power boats, five 60hp outboard motors, 20 ski ropes, five sets of water skis, 12 buoyancy jackets ... and even a piano. Also among the requested equipment were a dozen surfboards – six “long” and six “4-5ft short”. Plus, obviously expecting a lot of wear and tear, there was a request for enough fibreglass repair kits to maintain six boats and 18 surfboards. Chambers added a note: “With the opening of the Armed Forces Club, it is intended to centralise all boating and surfing equipment. One immediate effect of this is to make surfing and water ski-ing more readily available to all troops from 1ATF. It is expected that the demand for this type of equipment will increase rapidly. A requirement already exists for boating and surfing facilities for 1 Aust R&C Centre, and this activity is most popular.”

Just 10 days later, Air Commodore J. F. Lush, administering command, Australian Force Vietnam, forwarded the request to his superiors with some changes – no longer was there a piano on the list, however four “yachts” (a Corsair, a Gypsy and two VJs) had been added. And when Lush passed this ambitious shopping list on to Canberra, asking for an approach to the Australian Forces Overseas Fund committee for money to buy the equipment, he already had an eye on the future: “As water sports are extremely popular in this theatre it would be appreciated



if replacement channels could be established for replacement parts ... and surfboard replacement of at least one per month."

Lush's list emerged from the Vietnam Command Amenities Fund meeting in late August, 1967, with the word "approved" written beside most items, including both sizes of surfboards. Within a matter of weeks they had been bought and were on their way to Vietnam. The archives of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra contain folder after folder packed with the original paperwork, right down to the lobbying over what sort of sailing boats should be bought. A stream of messages went to and fro, complete with boat brochures sent from Vietnam to Canberra. Then there was the debate over the design and construction of a fountain, correspondence about buying a billiard table and poker machines, and of course much discussion about how everything would be transported to Vietnam.

Finally, on September 21, 1967, all was nearly in order so a notice was sent to all units, telling them the club would be open from 10am to 10pm, with hot and cold showers, bar and snack bar facilities, and with "water ski-ing and surfboards available". It went on: "In the future, swimming trunks and towels will be available." Still trying to round up equipment, Chambers the following week signed an order telling the various 1ALSG units at Vung Tau to hand over "(a) all boats; (b) all surfboards; (c) all fishing tackle". They would be held by the club, and be available seven days a week, he said.

Being the Army, some rules and regulations were called for, so the club's "Charter of Establishment and Operation" was drawn up. At this stage it was simply called the Australian Forces Club, Vung Tau, "for the use of all members of the Australian Forces serving in South Vietnam and their invited guests".

Prices were to be kept "as low as possible" – beer at 15¢ a can, soft drinks at 10¢.

The charter, signed by Major General Vincent, said: "Members and their guests are required to observe and uphold the standard of conduct and dignity expected of members of the services and associated organizations." No weapons or ammunition were to be carried on club premises – all would have to be handed in at the Armoury. The first warrant officer manager was Allan Chapman, with Sergeant Henry Marchment as his assistant, and Private Kevin Bayley in charge of boat handling.

On October 11, the base's weekly commander's meeting was told there would be an "unofficial opening" of the club on the following Sunday, with civilian dress, from 1100 hours. The official opening date had yet to be decided, but HQ told all units to put on their notice boards a flyer announcing the "Australian Forces Club, Back Beach, Vung Tau, will be open for business". The notice said there would be a bar and snack bar, recreation room and reading room, men's and women's changing rooms, "hot and cold toilets" ... presumably they meant showers. Last on the list of attractions, it had in capital letters "SURF BOARDS AVAILABLE". The club would be open every day from 0730 to 2200 hours, the men were told, "available to all Australian Servicemen, attached Philanthropic Representatives and their INVITED guests". At the following week's meeting, the date of the official opening was "still to be determined", but obviously the partying had already begun: the unit commander was ordered to make frequent inspections because "conduct of members still leaves a lot to be desired".

By early the next month, in time for the official opening at 11.45am on Sunday, November 5, 1967, it was announced that it would be called the Peter Badcoe Club, and the Australian Ambassador to Vietnam, Mr L. H. Border, would fly in from Saigon to cut the ribbon. Clearly



*SOME orders were meant to be broken: such as those issued May 20, 1968: "A member in the Badcoe Club or in the R&C Centre is to be (a) Properly dressed if in uniform and, if wearing civilian clothes, be neat and tidy with footwear, trousers and shirt – swimming and sunbathing attire are not to be worn indoors; (b) Moderate in his behaviour, use of language and consumption of alcohol." The picture, taken the same year the dress code was issued, shows things were pretty relaxed in the upstairs bar of the Badcoe club.*

*(Photo: Kerry Seeborn)*

this was to be the social event of the year on the Vung Tau military scene: all units on the base were ordered to have screens around every urinal by that Sunday. The invitations told senior officers – major, colonel, group captain – they could bring wives to the opening ceremony and buffet lunch (the catering bill was \$1.50 a head). Each unit was allocated a seating area, with separate drinking and eating areas for officers, senior NCOs, and the rank and file. "Dress: Greens, hats KFF (or Corps/Regt headdress), pistol belt. Equipment: Weapons are to be handed in to the Arms Cote in rear of the Club by 1125 hours," said the invitations. There were 200 official guests, RAAF and RAN as well as Army, seated on the club patio. Spectators were welcome but the beach was briefly closed to all "unit swimming parties" while the speeches were going on – they weren't taking any chances of rowdy soldiers disrupting proceedings. The opening ceremony – "to be short and simple," said the order from HQ – was followed by a 15-minute tour of the club, then 1½ hours for lunch.

According to a doctor from 8th Field Ambulance who was there (in fact, attendance by all officers was compulsory, he later reported) the ambassador's speech indeed was brief, and the opening-day lunch was "magnificent".

It took two days for news of this event to filter back to Australia, and when it did, the AAP report said: "The opening ceremony was watched by several hundred 'Diggers' and officials from



the Embassy, the Australian Task Force based at Nui Dat, the First Australian Logistic Group at Vung Tau and the Commander, Australian Force Vietnam, Major General Vincent.

"The two-storey club, which features two bars, a snack bar, armoury and showers, opened for business about two weeks ago. It was built entirely of Australian materials and by Australian labour.

"In his opening speech, Mr Border said the Australian soldiers in South Vietnam 'well deserved the rest and recreation facilities the club will provide.

" 'Here they can relax, away from the pressures of the war,' he said. 'One most pleasing factor is that, in the true Anzac tradition, this club will be shared by the Australian and New Zealand forces in Vietnam,' Mr Border said.

" 'It is being named after Major P. Badcoe to ensure that his memory is perpetuated and honoured,' Mr Border said. 'It is fitting that this club should bear the name of Peter Badcoe. The Australian forces in South Vietnam are helping the people live free lives under the domination of no-one.' "

Still to come, said the AAP story, was an accommodation annex to hold an infantry company at a time, a swimming pool, and squash, tennis and volleyball courts.

Trouble is, two months later the organisers of the big day found they'd been ripped off. It was early 1968 when the Peter Badcoe Club board of management, at only its fourth meeting, reeled when presented with a bill from the Vietnam Command Amenities Fund wanting to be reimbursed for 150 posters which had been printed to advertise the club's opening. Fine posters they were, too, multi-colour and 65cm by 100cm, pasted up on unit canteen messes and noticeboards all over the 1ALSG base. Trouble is, the bill was a staggering \$US1017. Worse, the Vietnamese printer had already been paid by the VCAF, which now wanted the club to cough up. The board immediately passed a motion "that the cost of the posters is exorbitant" and a witch-hunt went on for some months looking for someone to blame.

However the club's patrons were happy. The service newspaper *ARMY* reported in February, 1968: "Soldiers in swimming trunks, sipping cold Australian beer under gaily coloured beach umbrellas, is not typical of the Vietnam War, but it is the brighter side of the conflict for the 500-600 Diggers who visit the Peter Badcoe Club at Vung Tau each weekend.

"Facilities at the club – which was named after Maj Badcoe, the latest VC winner in SVN – include a games room, change room, snack bar, surfboards, TV, and a beer garden.

"Planned improvements include accommodation for 150 men, a swimming pool, squash and tennis courts. The club also has 15 boats, for use when a boatshed is built and someone found to maintain them.

"The supervisor of the club, WO1 Merv Green, has a staff of 32 Vietnamese and five Australians – Gnr Phil Lewis and Ptes Norm Lubec, Noel Bainbridge, Tony Doherty and Kev Bayliss.

"Gnr Nigel Doyle, on his first visit to the Club, said: 'It's a hell of a lot better than I thought it would be and the beer's cheaper than in Australia.'

"Other comments were:

"Gnr Robert Hogan, 4 Fd Regt, RAA: 'It's the best thing the Australian Army's ever done for troops over here, and it's better than any Yank equivalents I've been to.'

"Pte Larry MacDonald, 2RAR: 'I like the place but I'd like to see more girls behind the bar. I'm sick of saying 'Give us a beer please, mate,' instead of 'Give us a beer please, love.'

*'Soldiers in swimming trunks, sipping cold Australian beer under gaily coloured beach umbrellas, is not typical of the Vietnam War, but it is the brighter side of the conflict for the 500-600 Diggers who visit the Peter Badcoe Club at Vung Tau each weekend.'*

From the service newspaper *ARMY*, February, 1968



*JUST the place to sit in the shade for a drink.  
(Photo: 1st Aust Fd Hospital Assoc – Vampire)*



"Pte Ron Mitchell, 2RAR: 'The Club's well appointed, the amenities are good and you can relax in it. It has all the things we don't have at Nui Dat although the menus tend to be American rather than Australian.'

"WO1 Green and his Australian staff work 16 hours a day, seven days a week, but for those who do go there to relax, it's a welcome change from the dust at Nui Dat."

No wonder the club was a financial winner from the start. The first month's report back to Canberra, urgently requesting more staff, said: "Club is most successful and popular with troops. Over 800 members attend on Sundays (mainly from 1ALSG). About 60 to 100 members on each weekday from 1ATF when units not involved in ops." It catered for thirsty, hungry Diggers from 10am-10pm Friday, 10am-11pm Saturday, and 10am-9pm Sunday to Thursday. There was seating for more than 30 in the upstairs "tavern", and another 150 on the breezeway and beneath beach umbrellas on the patio in front of the building. The policy was that "during quiet periods" up to 120 soldiers from one major and one minor unit based at Nui Dat would be allowed to travel to Vung Tau "for day visits" to the beach and the club.

And money was pouring in. Takings in the first two and a half months were \$54,110, while expenditure was \$33,854. By June, 1968, the club's board of management declared that it was self-supporting financially. The accounts show that the bars were making several thousand dollars profit most months, while food usually was a \$1000-\$2000 loss. Overall, though, the club came out nicely ahead, with its four 5¢ poker machines (a request to install more had been vetoed even before opening day) bringing in more than enough to pay for the bands which were hired for Sunday afternoon entertainment. Lieutenant Colonel Ian Gilmore of 1ALSG told the club's board: "As long as the overall operating profits on beer etc are maintained, small losses on catering are acceptable."

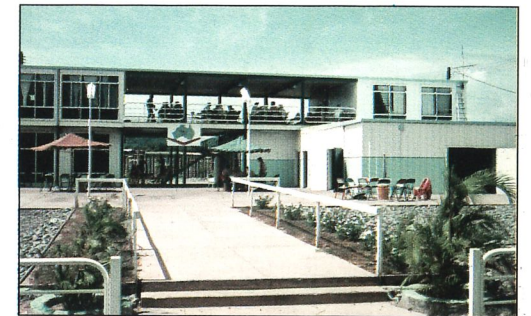
Once the club was up and running smoothly (well, mostly smooth: soldiers visiting from 1ATF on the Sunday after the official opening complained about that most terrible of hardships,



*HIGH jinks: The Harold Holt Memorial Pool's showpiece was this 3m diving board.  
(Photo: 1st Aust Fd Hospital Assoc - Vampire)*

beer that wasn't cold enough. The commanding officer of HQ Company 1ALSG replied: "It should not happen again.") it was time to put up some more buildings. HQ in Saigon told the engineers that high priority should be given to the task of constructing accommodation for men from 1ATF to use when standing down for a rest-in-country break. This way, a company at a time could be trucked to Vung Tau to stay a couple of nights and sample the delights of the Badcoe club and the town, instead of making just day visits.

The scheduled completion date was December 31, 1967, though no surprise that the "beach annex", a group of two-storey, motel-style buildings, did not open until the following May. Facing the Badcoe club were two buildings for other ranks; 18 bedrooms in each block, with four men per room, accommodation for 144 men. Further south, at the end of the line, was a building for officers/warrant officers/sergeants containing seven bedrooms, with two officers or three WOs/sgts per room. The officers/WOs/sgts had their own mess facilities and a shared kitchen; other ranks had a 108-seat dining room, plus a toilet/shower block (which one inventory pointed out had just 12 toilets, below the Army's correct ratio for 144 men. Not that anyone seems to have cared much. After all, it was luxury to sit on a dunny with a proper septic system, compared with Nui Dat or primitive conditions out in the bush).



*LANDSCAPED, with gardens and paths, the Badcoe club was a picture of neatness by 1970.  
(Photo: Paul Asbury)*

Even before work on the beach annex started, the Military Board in Canberra wrote to the chief of staff in Vietnam, Colonel Edwin Griff, to say there was a recommendation to expand it to have accommodation for 400 men, and "facilities" (presumably more bars, surfboards and sailing boats) for 1500. Griff also was told the Australian Services Canteen Organisation was considering taking over catering at the club, which it later did.

Canberra went on to say there was no doubt approval would be given for a swimming pool – deciding its size was the problem. The Sportsman's Appeal Committee for Servicemen in Vietnam, offering \$60,000 towards the cost of materials, said the 25m pool suggested by Australian Force Vietnam was not adequate. However the 50m pool proposed by the committee was not acceptable to AFV – it would require too much water and manpower. Maybe an eight-lane 33m pool would be the answer, the Military Board said. A grander L-shaped 25m design, with a basin for a 3m diving board, ended up being the compromise which kept all sides happy.

"Construction effort is big problem," the engineers told Canberra. The message went on: "Local labour makes poor concrete, has no equipment, and cannot do good plumbing or electrical work. Doubt if Aust contractor would get better results from local labour than we can after our six months experience with them. Therefore RAE would have to provide bulk of effort in any case." It was important to realise, the engineers advised, that in general money was not a problem, but construction effort was. Amenities projects – such as the pool – requiring construction effort and subsequent maintenance "do not help at all".



However the Harold Holt Memorial Pool was officially opened on August 25, 1968, with an inter-unit swimming carnival: \$1413.45 was spent on food, \$376.70 on "refreshments", and the then-cashed-up Peter Badcoe Club picked up the bill.

At the opening ceremony, Sportsman's Appeal co-chairman John Armstrong, a former Sydney lord mayor, was quoted as saying they had provided more than \$75,000. However Sydney papers had earlier reported that only \$55,000 was needed, while \$60,000 was available, so the remainder of the money would go towards a downstairs bar near the pool. Army officialdom began to get concerned that the Diggers' thirst was attracting too much publicity.

Nevertheless, in July, 1968, a "snack bar" opened in a converted ground-floor room, and the nearby patio became the relaxed drinking area while upstairs went, well, upmarket. The standard of behaviour on the top floor would have to improve, it was ordered. "Personnel are to be correctly dressed in uniforms or civilian clothing." Two months later it was noted that behaviour in the upstairs bar had "improved considerably".

Meanwhile, over at the accommodation annex, a routine was established that was as smooth as any beachside boarding house's. The normal stay for each company became two nights and one day, arriving at 3-4pm, leaving at 8.30-9.30am, at least a captain in charge of each group. Breakfast was 7.30-8.30am, lunch was noon-1pm, dinner was 5-6pm for other ranks, 6-6.45pm for officers, warrant officers and sergeants. The beach shed, to borrow anything from a surfboard or sailing boat to a football, was open from 8am to 5pm, though the beach itself was not closed until 6pm. The swimming pool was open from 6-7am, then 10am to 9pm. And business was brisk: 377 men a week stayed in the accommodation blocks in August-October 1969, and Lieutenant Colonel Graham Thompson of the Amenities and Welfare Unit reported: "Daily casual visitors to the club average 400 Aust and NZ members and 20 US personnel. On Sundays, the figure is approximately 800 and 100 respectively."

No wonder the idea of expanding the facilities kept being considered. In August, 1968, there were discussions – and even costings – about building a third accommodation block for the rank-and-file, and adding more room for officers; the following March, it was suggested that a "R&C officers club" be added to the Badcoe complex (this idea went far enough for engineering plans to be drawn, showing the proposed building close to the beach at the southern end of the site, down near the Korean boundary, almost as large as the Badcoe building itself); in early 1970, the Nui Dat-based Task Force asked for a "sergeants club" to be added (they were told to put in a request through staff channels, and the plan seems to have withered).

A scheme to enlarge the Peter Badcoe Club building also was on the agenda for years, with expensive consequences. The plan called for a 20ft extension to the end of the building nearest the pool, making space for another billiard table, a sauna bath and "hairdressing salon" downstairs, plus a large enclosed patio upstairs. Plans were drawn up by early 1969 and money doesn't seem to have been a problem – the Amenities Fund didn't quibble about footing the expected sub-\$10,000 bill – but other projects kept getting priority when manpower was being allocated. When it was still on the to-do list in early 1970, much of the material required for the extension was bought in Australia then shipped off to Vietnam. Steel columns and beams were cut to size, pre-stressed concrete beams were made, only to be frozen by a "full cancellation project" order in September. Then came second thoughts, then it was called off again in October, prompting an urgent hunt for some other use for all the steel etc sent from Australia. None could

be found, and it was decided there was no point sending it back to Australia, so \$6000 worth of construction material apparently had to be written off.

But perhaps the grandest, and shortest-lived, plan was the one sent up the chain of command by an Amenities Unit officer in August, 1970, asking if a breakwater could be built on the beach to make swimming conditions safer. According to his memo: "There are some very dangerous seasonal rips along the beach, particularly during the period Nov-May each year when, for safety reasons, the beach has to be closed for approx 4 days out of 7. During this period it is hazardous for both swimming and boating." It was suggested that about four old barges could be sunk on the northeast side of the beach, since the rip came from that direction.

No way, said Austforce Vietnam. "Exhaustive technical services would be required over very long period before proposal could be considered. Such studies would be wasted effort and regret project not to be considered any further." At least, that was the official answer. But a signed handwritten note attached to one copy of the reply went further: "There is a reasonable point in most things. We have provided reasonable amenities and this borders on the unreasonable."

No such concerns about constructing a mini-golf course in a vacant corner near the swimming pool. And hitting balls through the array of obstacles apparently proved a welcome break from the regular business of soldiering. The register of visitors to the beach annex contains the comment from an 8RAR major in charge of 144 men staying there in September, 1970: "Once again the company had a most enjoyable stay, this time improved by the popular mini-golf course." Then he put the boot in: "The snack bar however continues to provide an unservice as is the practice with ASCO institutions." But he ended on a positive note: "The Badcoe Club has been a most welcome break during our Viet Nam tour." The following month, a 2RAR/NZ major commented: "For those who contributed to the construction of the mini-golf course – thanks. It proved as popular as the pool."



*PLAYING A ROUND: The mini-golf course became very popular.*  
(Photo: Robert Smyth)





*BOUND for Vietnam: Nearly \$500 worth of surfing equipment is handed over for Australian troops in July 1966. Colonel Peter Tancred shakes hands with Brookvale boardmaker Denis McDonagh. The other surf industry leading lights are, from left, Lance Platt, Denny Keogh, Scott Dillon, Bob Brewster, Gordon Woods, Bill Wallace and Barry Bennett. (Photo: Australian War Memorial, SMT/66/0179/EC)*

SCOTT Dillon, who began making surfboards in the early 1950s at Bondi, and later opened a surfing museum at Coffs Harbour in northern New South Wales, still chuckles over the dress code when he and other Sydney boardmakers were invited to Victoria Barracks in 1966 to donate their surfboards to the army.

"We all had to wear suits," he says. "I can't even remember where I got that suit from. I remember I had a suit when I got married, but from then on I just wore board shorts and thongs."

According to Gordon Woods: "Everybody wore suits in those days. You'd put one on if you went into town. But it must have been just about the last time I wore a suit."

Another elder statesman of the surfing community, Bill Wallace, who eventually moved from Sydney to the Sunshine Coast, says: "How it all came about, I'm not quite sure, but I remember how we were all done up in suits. It was an official occasion with the top brass."

## Chapter Four

# Boards for the Boys

It was a cold winter's day, and Sydney's top surfboard makers of the 1960s put on their Sunday best – dark suits, ties, long-sleeved white shirts, shiny shoes – for the big trip into town. Quite a change from the usual T-shirts, shorts and thongs as Scott Dillon, Gordon Woods, Denis McDonagh, Bill Wallace, Barry Bennett and Denny Keogh left their factories in Brookvale, then the epicentre of Australia's surfing universe, while Lance Platt, dominating the fledgling surfwear market with Platt's Boardshorts, came from nearby Harbord, and Bob Brewster took a break from his Manly Surf Shop and Stor-A-Board in Pittwater Road.

This was Wednesday, July 20, 1966, and these surf industry pioneers – usually business rivals – all headed for Victoria Barracks in Sydney's inner suburb of Paddington. They came bearing gifts: six new surfboards, a kneeboard and a bundle of boardshorts, worth nearly \$500 in all. The Army had asked for a hand, and they were delivering. Public support for the Vietnam War was running high (until 1968, opinion polls found a majority in favour of the war, and conscription) and the boardmakers say they didn't hesitate when requested to help. The men of the Australian Task Force had stepped ashore from *HMAS Sydney* only a few months before, and the 1st Australian Logistic Support Group base was still very much a work in progress along the beachfront at Vung Tau. However someone in authority must have been thinking about watersport for the troops. Never mind that at the time surfing was rapidly gaining an anti-establishment image as a laidback life at the beach depleted the lifesaving ranks and seduced many of the '60s generation away from regular jobs and following orders.

According to Gordon Woods: "One of the Army blokes contacted us and said the soldiers wanted something to do in their recreation time, and could we help. I think it might have been Brewster who instigated it. It wasn't done with any business motive at all – we just wanted to help the boys. We were all pretty busy at the time, surfing was booming. Anyway, they took us in and we had a look around Victoria Barracks, and they sat us down in front of a fire. I recall the day well." The Army acting chief of staff, Colonel Peter Tancred, was in uniform to shake hands and make a speech.

Gordon Woods goes on: "I know the boards were a success over there, because they wrote to us and thanked us. They said they really appreciated the boards, and the boys were getting a



lot of enjoyment from them.” He believes that 1966 handover was the only time surfboards were donated, and though beach photographs show a variety of boards bearing his logo at the Peter Badcoe Club in later years, he has only a vague recollection of sending another shipment.

Veteran board maker Scott Dillon says: “Originally, there were only six surfboard builders in Australia, and we were all at Brookvale, funnily enough, and the Army came to us. They said: Would you donate some boards to the troops in Vietnam? There’s no waves, they said, but they’ve got a beach and they’ve got things like that. And we said: Of course. It was the right thing to do. It was just a one-off but I was happy to do it, so we all made the boards and took them in. At that era they were just basically malibu boards, long boards. They weren’t custom made – just the standard sort of boards we were making.”

The Army was busy building up the 1ALSG base at the time, and keeping the Task Force at Nui Dat supplied, but going surfing was on its mind. On September 6, 1966, when afternoon swimming on a designated stretch of Back Beach had been going on for five months, with military precision and armed lifeguards on hand, Lieutenant Colonel Rouse issued a note among his routine orders: “Units are advised that a limited number of surfboards are available for loan from the Australian R&C Centre.” (The Rest and Convalescence centre, operating from a villa in Vung Tau).

Those big old mals – most around 9ft 6in long, a sturdy redwood stringer down the centre, usually covered in twin layers of 10oz fibreglass, weighing 25lb or more – were built to last. Even in the early 1970s they were still in active service on Back Beach.

They got reinforcements, too. Newer designs were sent to Vietnam year after year, keeping pace with surfing evolution as boards became shorter, lighter and thinner, going through the scaled-down malibu era, the V-bottom, the tracker, the pintail and the stubby as styles changed. And they proved popular with the Diggers, as shown by a classic beach photo of members of the 12th Field Regiment Light Aid Detachment, Royal Corps of Australian Mechanical and



*STAND easy: Light Aid Detachment men, and mates, pose with boards in 1968.  
(Photo: John Phoenix)*

*‘As water sports are extremely popular in this theatre it would be appreciated if replacement channels could be established for replacement parts ... and surfboard replacement of at least one per month.’*

Request from Air Commodore J. F. Lush, administering command, Australian Force Vietnam, 1967



*READY to hit the beach: It’s October, 1967, and Sapper Jim Riggs of 17th Construction Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers, moves one of the Army’s donated surfboards into the amenities store of what then was called the Australian Armed Forces Club, soon to be named the Peter Badcoe Club.*

*(Photo: Australian War Memorial, THU/67/1021/VN)*



Electrical Engineers. Neil Mangels, Ian Callander, George Dapiran, Lachlan Donald, John Phoenix and others stood proudly on Back Beach with an assortment of boards they picked up from the Badcoe club, probably around July-August, 1968.

Phoenix recalls: "We just went down for about four days, just once in a year, staying in Vung Tau at the R&C Centre. We probably spent a day or two in town, and dropped into the Badcoe club for a drink and a get-together. On the day that photo was taken, we decided to go swimming, and found these boards in the shed so decided to go for a paddle on the boards."

Not that the Australian boards which were donated in 1966 were the first to reach Vietnam during the war. Drummer Leon Isackson of the Australian rock band The Rajahs, hired by the Americans to entertain the troops in country, writes of boarding a Hercules on October 13, 1965, at Richmond air base, NSW, along with 25 glum-looking soldiers and some unlikely cargo. "The loadmaster pointed to some daggy-looking parachute webbing on the side of the plane where we managed to find some sort of place to sit down. The rest of the inside of the plane was loaded up with all sorts of military baggage, including a surfboard. The war can't be too serious if they're taking a surfboard, I consoled myself ... If you sat near the front, you nearly passed out from the heat and, if you sat down the back, you nearly froze to death. I eventually found a use for the surfboard that was strapped on top of the cargo. I stuffed my ears with an extra wad of cotton wool, climbed up on top of the board and slept for a couple of hours."

The Herc made its way to the war via Pearce air base in Western Australia, Cocos Island, Butterworth in Malaysia. The Rajahs finally reached Saigon, met up with Lucky Starr – he amused the Yanks with *I've Been Everywhere, Man*, and *Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport* – then on to Bien Hoa and eventually performed at Vung Tau, putting on a show for the RAAF at the airfield, rudely interrupted by a mortar attack. When half the audience ran for the door, the band followed. Isackson then tells of hearing about Vungers' rumoured neutral status during the war. "The Viet Cong had a tacit arrangement with our side to share the local beach for R&R (Rest and Recreation). The Yanks and Aussies had it during the day and the Viet Cong had it during the night. So that's what the surfboard was for! Needless to say, we kept away from the beach."

Following the 1966 Sydney surfboard handover, by January 24 the next year, according to Vietnam Command Amenities Fund records, the Australians had 10 surfboards in Vietnam – six in the hands of the RAAF, four held by the Army on the 1ALSG base – ready to be transferred to what Amenities at that stage was calling the "Vung Tau boat club".

However by September, 1967 – when the "Australian Forces Club" had just been completed and was running, though not yet officially opened nor named – only five boards could be found to stack in the storeroom out the front. So a request immediately went up the Army chain: can we please have six more "long surfboards" and another six "short surfboards"? No worries, Digger. The Australian Forces Overseas Fund wasted little time and in October announced it had bought the lot, and the boards were being sent to RAAF Richmond so they could be moved on to Vietnam. Those surfboards were just one item on a list of playthings on the way, along with three power boats, five 60hp outboards, four 16ft Corsair sailing boats and three sailboards.

With commendable caution, the base insured its large surfboards against "loss and fire" for \$1.60 each in December, 1967 (it had accumulated 12 by then), with its six small surfboards covered at \$1.40 each. They even insured 60 beach umbrellas at \$1.10 each, and the now-yellowed telex message which reveals this unusual sidelight to the Vietnam War also suggests they were still looking for coverage for the surfboat, estimated value \$300, against "fire and hull damage".



*TREASURE TROVE: Sailing boats and surfboards fill the Badcoe club's temporary storage tent on the beach, September, 1968. Doug Carlson wonders what to choose first. (Photo: Paul Haw)*

Not that those dozen boards were enough. In April, 1968, the Amenities Committee's monthly meeting gave the go-ahead to buy another 24 surfboards for the Peter Badcoe Club. And 12 tennis racquets, by the way.

That month the Army had made a nine-minute, black-and-white promotional film, *A Day in the Life of the Badcoe Club*, in which cinematographer Kevin Thurgar found the boards getting a good workout, at least five of them in the water. The film shows the complex doing good business – beach umbrellas, swimming pool, poker machine, girls behind the bar serving beer, men drinking cans of VB at picnic tables on the balcony. Some are in slacks and white shirts, others shirtless, some still in jungle green. They are chatting, smoking, joking, drinking. It could be a Saturday afternoon beer garden scene anywhere in civilian life. There is an outdoor stage, a band performing, rows of seats with hundreds in the audience.

The waves we see are generally knee high, some even waist high, but they're crumbling and messy due to the strong onshore wind. The would-be surfers are mucking around on the boards, catching broken waves, trying to stand, instantly falling off. Then one Digger catches an almost-clean wave and heads right, riding the small wave until it fades away – it's an 8-second ride, crouched, beginner-style. Still, it looks like a hoot.

Two surfers are interviewed on the beach as they come out of the water. One has a dark-coloured bellyboard, and the other has a clear, single-stringer longboard. They seem to be enjoying themselves mightily ... and that's how the Army's film ends.

According to the official description: "Whether it be to get away from the dust at Nui Dat or the blowing sand at the Logistic Support base at Vung Tau, the ideal place to do it is at the Peter Badcoe Club. The club, named after Victoria Cross winner Major Peter Badcoe, is sited less





*ON THE BEACH: Surfers and sailors meet near the water's edge, with equipment and venue courtesy of the Australian Army.  
(Photo: Russ Morison)*

than 200 yards from the South China Sea. Two bars and a snack bar provide the Diggers with beer, soft drinks and a variety of light meals. A swimming pool is at present under construction and tennis, squash and volleyball courts have been planned for the future. But at present the most popular outdoor sports are swimming, surfing and board riding. Inside the Club a recreation room allows for table tennis, billiards and snooker and poker machines. Other facilities are an armoury and changing rooms while an accommodation block to house a company of troops at a time has almost been completed. Each Sunday, troops from throughout Phuoc Tuy Province who can be spared from operational commitments can be entertained at the club by a local band or a visiting United States or Australian concert party."

So surfing was high on the list of approved pursuits. Maybe it was even too popular: In October, 1968, six months after the film was made, the Badcoe board of management was told by two officers – one Australian, one NZ – that it might be a good idea to count the surfboards because some seemed to have gone missing. The board report says: "In addition it was suspected that personnel of some ALSG units have been able to remove boards from the beach area and retain them for their personal use." Horrors! An investigation was ordered.

But not too many can have gone astray, because Chris Jones, a captain in 2AOD who ran the lifesaving club from May, 1971, says: "There were quite a few surfboards, a real mixture – mostly the older, larger type."

In September that year, a census of equipment – organised because the Army needed to sort out what it could bring home to Australia, and what would be left behind – found 31



*OFF the leash: Members of Tracker Platoon of 6RAR/NZ (ANZAC) on the Badcoe club beach with an assortment of new and old boards, around 1969-70. From left, Denis Lubrman, Gary Grant, John Featherstone, Larry ("Stretch") Holmes, Ian ("Ben") Hall, Jack Tunney. "I don't think any of them were surfers," says John Neervoort, platoon commander at the time. "Rather, it was the opportunity of mucking around with the surfboards, during the 36-hour leave we had in Vung Tau."*

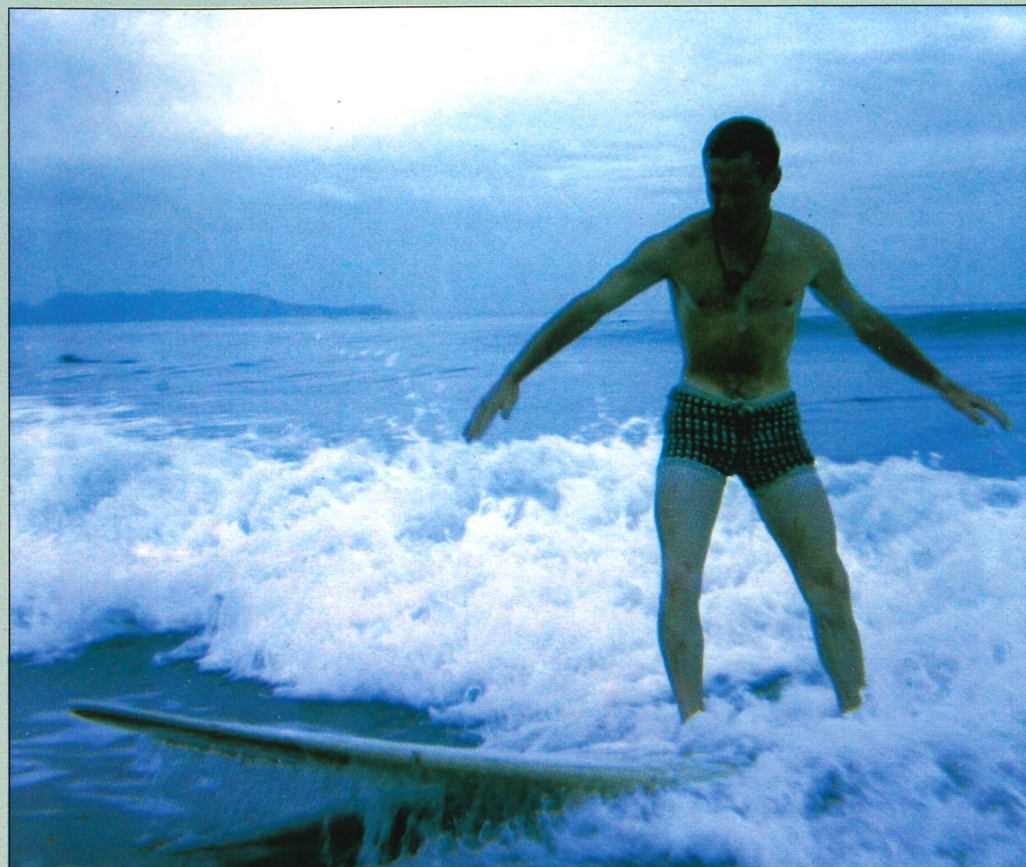
*(Photo: John Neervoort collection)*

surfboards. All were classified "unsuitable for movement out of the country" (as was the Harold Holt Memorial Pool, and little wonder since it was 25m long, made of concrete) so were left behind to be inherited by the Americans when they took over the Badcoe complex early in 1972.

The remarkable census shows how well stocked the beach centre had become – among the items on the long list are two Toppercraft boats, five various power boats, one 12ft aluminium dinghy, one Heron sailing boat, six Corsair sailing boats, 10 Bobcat sailing boats, seven outboard motors, six snorkels, 16 folding beach tables, 30 beach umbrellas ... not to mention minor playthings such as 18 indoor bowls sets, two javelins, 36 badminton nets, two saxophones and two poker machines.

The surfboard paper trail ends with memos from the Americans, reporting to Saigon about "excess and unserviceable" equipment they had acquired when the Australians departed. In July, 1972, the Americans said they were getting rid of a broken bellyboard (and four lifesaving reels, though these were in "good useable condition"). Then on August 22, 1972, US Major T Warner wrote to his Australian counterpart requesting the OK to dispose of 13 surfboards ("skeg are broken, fibre glass coat is badly damaged"). And being dumped at the same time was the old surfboat ("hull leaks, repair is not practical"). That's it, wipeout.





*(Photo: Leigh Floyd)*

THE old photograph shows Leigh Floyd, then a 21-year-old infantry private in 6RAR, balancing carefully on a big malibu board, coming through the knee-high shorebreak at Back Beach on a rare day away from the reality of war.

Not only has he kept the photo, which dates back to 1969-70, but he still has the boardshorts as well. "My wife has made me keep them, though I can't get into them any more," he says. "I don't even know why I took them with me to Vietnam."

Just as well he did, because they came in handy. "Most of my group tended to be more adventurous, and would go into town to the various

attractions there. I was one of the quieter ones. I tended to behave myself, and went surfing instead."

On a visit to the Peter Badcoe Club, he was "quite surprised" to find surfboards being handed out. "I thought: Gee, I'll have a go at this.

"I think they had several boards to choose from, plenty to go around, so you could pick one that suited you. There was never much surf, but the 1ft waves suited me just fine. It was not very big, and me being a novice, I at least managed to stand up.

"It was just totally different, the Badcoe compared with Nui Dat. It was basic motel-type accommodation, but it was a great change from the bush."

## Chapter Five

### *Ride the Mild Surf*

For keen young Australian boardriders sent off to Vietnam, it came as a shock to find a beach, occasional surf, and Army-supplied surfboards. John Bradford, a NSW nasho who became a lieutenant and administration officer of Headquarters Company, 1ALSG, in 1969-70, says it seemed unreal to be able to go surfing on a barbed-wire-enclosed beach in the middle of a war.

Trouble was, surfing was almost too popular. "At lunch, soldiers would come from all over the base," says Bradford. "In fact it was a bit of a race to get down there to get the best boards because there were quite a few surfers and there was a limited number of decent boards. I never ate lunch, but made a bee-line for the beach every day soon as it was lunch-time.

"There could be as many as 20 surfers, I suppose, on some days – on the weekends, anyway. That would be about all the boards we had. Some months of the year, as I recall, the surf was surprisingly good. It was never huge but it got to be three or four feet, sometimes a bit bigger, maybe the odd five-footer. And quite good-shaped waves. They were banks there, obviously. I was probably quite surprised how good the surf was.

"I went up there without any idea of it all. My first recollection of Vietnam is still very fresh in my mind, of de-planing from the Qantas 707 at Tan Son Nhut Airport, and standing there in the heat and wondering what I'd got myself into. The place smelled, and I thought: Am I going to spend a whole year here? I couldn't believe it. It was a culture shock.

"I probably found the beach the next day, I think. I was quite keen to have a look at the beach. It had a lot of barbed wire – you had to go through a barbed wire fence to get to it, which was open during the day, and closed off at night, as I recall. I think there were warnings about it being dangerous outside the wire; not that anyone took much notice of any of that. We were all young and silly. We weren't too far from where the Americans often dropped bombs from their B52s, on the Long Hai Hills, and the whole place shook, so it was pretty scary. We could hear them, and we could feel the vibrations as well.

"When I went to Vietnam I knew that the base I was going to was on the beach, but it never rang true until I got there and saw it that it was actually quite a pleasant place in lots of ways. It was hot, but there were nice sea breezes. It wasn't such a bad place to be, really. Surfing was my



sport and I was quite surprised to find that (a) there were surfable waves there, and (b) then to find that there were surfboards. That was all kind of pretty exciting.”

When there were no waves, Bradford turned to water ski-ing, an interest he shared with the 1ALSG commander, Colonel Max Simkin. “He was a fit young guy,” says Bradford. “I used to drive the boat for him.” That may sound like the young nasho lieutenant had found the perfect formula for career advancement, however one day he powered the ski boat away so quickly the colonel hurt his knee, leaving him limping for days, while Bradford became the butt of jokes all over the base.

He was the officer in charge of the lifesaving club, which brought a fringe benefit: being able to stash your favourite surfboard out of sight in the big gear shed on the beach. “That was the trick, if you could,” he says. “I probably did cheat a bit by driving down to the surf early in the morning, or when I’d make sure the lifeguard was on duty. I’d grab a board and try to put it aside somewhere so I’d have it there at lunch-time.”

An earlier lifesaver, John Meehan, tells of doing the same thing in 1968-69. He picked out his favourite surfboard, around 7ft, shorter than the older malibus, and kept it waxed and “tucked away” in the shed. Meehan, a corporal in 2AOD, says: “I reckon there would have been 30 boards there, in all shapes and states of repair. They were mainly malibus, nine-footers, and they were OK for blokes who just wanted to paddle around. You’d let these boards go out, then you’d have to keep an eye on them.”

For Victorian Meehan, who had surfed since he was 16, the Vung Tau waves were a wonderful discovery. “I’d go down the beach and surf during my lunch break if it was OK. I could see from my unit whether it was coming in. There used to be a few people riding boards.”

Like Bradford and Meehan, surfer-lifesaver Frank Ellis, a lieutenant in 2AOD in 1969-70, remembers the midday rush to get to the beach before all the best boards were taken. “At lunchtime we’d jump in the Land Rover. It was less than a five-minute drive. The surf was very small most of the time but there would probably be at least six to 12 people surfing. A lot of people learned to surf there, and went to the beach parties we had.”

2AOD even “acquired” its own gunboat. Ellis tells how nine pairs of sought-after Australian boots were swapped for 20 pallets of cement from an American unit, then the cement was traded for a fibreglass boat, about 18ft, and an outboard motor. “We mounted a machine gun on it and called it our safety boat. It was meant to be protection against something coming along the beach,” says Ellis. Not that it ever fired a shot in anger. Instead, the boat was used for water ski-ing, and towing people on surfboards when there were no waves. “We sent it home to Australia and it ended up on the Hume Weir.”

Another occasional lunchtime surfer on the Aussie beach was Coffs Harbour’s Richard (Rick) Paxton, who spent his first months in Vietnam at Nui Dat, in 1OFP, then was sent down to Vung Tau to join 2AOD and “help pack up” the 1ALSG base in the second half of 1971. Between work, he managed to go surfing as often as three or four times a week. “We only had the beach break to surf but some days, with the right weather, it could get up to 6ft,” he says. “Sometimes you could strike it OK late in the afternoon. There could be sand bars at times. You’d only see a few other people in the surf on boards. There were about a dozen boards, from old malibus to fairly modern ones – some of them were down to 6ft.”

Ted Crowther was a panelbeater/spray painter with 102 Field Workshop in 1971 – “I painted tanks, APCs, weapons, everything, getting it all ready to come home” – who found himself repairing surfboards when not riding them. The workshop, which had fibreglass repair



*SURFING, VIETNAM-STYLE: It's late September, 1968, on the Australian stretch of Back Beach. A military chopper flies overhead while members of the 102 Field Battery wait patiently for a wave to appear, and another soldier carries a then-new stubby shortboard along the water's edge. (Photo: Paul Haw)*

kits to seal rust holes around the manholes in truck roofs, would be sent the occasional batch of surfboards to fix as well. “They mostly got dinged in being moved around, or hitting the wire and the star pickets which held it in place,” he says. Crowther and another panelbeater would work on five or six boards at a time, reglassing them so they didn’t get waterlogged.

They even made some old malibus better than new. “We put *Playboy* centrefolds on the deck and glassed one centrefold on each, where the fibreglass had peeled off. We placed them so blokes could look at the girls when they sat on the boards. They became very popular.”

He was a surfer before going to Vietnam, and continued on there. “Four of us from my unit would go down there in a Jeep, mainly of a lunchtime or an afternoon. You’d get to the beach once or twice a week, if you were lucky,” he says. “They’d normally put five or six boards out, and if they were all taken, another five or six would be put out. You’d take a board out to go for a paddle, even if there were no waves.

“It was small to medium surf, never really good. Mainly half a metre, or a metre at best. Sometimes – not often – it would get to be OK. There were two dangers: sea snakes, dozens of them, everywhere, and the barbed wire.”

Crowther’s most memorable wipeout was the one where he hit a star picket which had been put in the sand to hold the wire in place. After almost four years in salt water, the steel rod had rusted and broken off below water level. “That’s what I tangled with. I came off the board and on to the star picket. I ripped a chunk out of my knee and had to go to hospital.”



But there were plenty of lighter moments, such as the day some men from his unit went out fishing in an aluminium runabout, which of course broke down. "There was a search organised, and a Yank helicopter found them and towed them home. They said they were almost flying."

Richard McGoogan, a RAAF radio technician with 35 Squadron in 1967-68, tells how he and his mates went to the beach whenever they had time off. "The end of the beach closest to Vung Tau was open to all, complete with bars, girls, Yanks, trouble and insecurity. Our end was fenced off and secure. One of the joys of rest-in-country was to be able to surf in the South China Sea with only sea snakes to worry about.

"The Badcoe was a good place to find people from home, have a few beers in a surf club atmosphere. I met blokes there that I had grown up with or gone to school with and hadn't seen for a few years: conscription bringing people together. The wounded from the Army hospital used the beach a lot as they were getting more mobile. Surfing with blokes with bullet wound scars is different. ... When you had been in the water for a while you could feel yourself sweating in the water."

Even if there was no surf, the servicemen found ways to amuse themselves. McGoogan explains: "The guys at 9 Squadron built a raft with two aircraft fuel tanks called the Albert T Ross. It had a small outboard, some seats and an Esky on it. They used to fill up and go past the break, lock the steering for a very large circle and go round and round emptying the Esky. You could jump off for swim and they would pick you up next time around."

RAAF Welfare provided a powerboat so the men could go water ski-ing in the mouths of the Mekong. Life wasn't dull, says McGoogan: "Packing cases floating like icebergs were quite often hit with spectacular results. In windy weather we could escape the chop by ski-ing in oilslicks which settled the water. On occasion we had rounds hit the water near the boat – some people don't like you having fun."

While the servicemen who were stationed at Vung Tau had the beach on their doorstep, with the chance to ride a wave when not working, the surf scene came as a bigger shock – a pleasant shock, that is – for men sent down on leave from the Task Force base inland at Nui Dat. Lance Grimstone was a full-on Gold Coast surfer before being conscripted: "The important items of life were surf, cars and girls. Study was a long way down the list. I had long hair, and my dad's advice was: 'Mate, get a haircut then shut your mouth. And after that, shut your mouth.' They were really good bits of advice." He still vividly recalls the day in 1970 when he discovered that the Army had its very own beach. "I saw this big shed, lots of barbed wire of course, a huge swimming pool, lots of typical layabout louts jumping in the pool with a beer in one hand. And we walked through the shed, on to the beach, and the first thing I saw was surf. It wasn't what you'd call a great day – it was howling onshore and there was just this 2ft slop shorebreak.

"But on my way through the shed, I'd noticed a number of surfboards, and I'd even joked to the guys: 'What do you use those for?' I came running back saying: 'Can I take one of these? How much does it cost to hire one of these?' They said: 'They're free, mate, take what you want.' The first thing I learned was that wax does not stick to a surfboard when the water temperature gets to whatever it was there. So it was fun and games, having to swap a couple of boards around to keep the wax supply up. But they had wax, tonnes of it, and you could wax the board up in the shed."

Grimstone, a gunner with HQ Battery, 4th Field Regiment, in 1970-71, ending up as a lance bombardier, says of the Peter Badcoe Club: "I think what they did there was just magnificent.

Hats off to them. When we went into the Army we didn't believe this thing existed. There was a genuine surf lifesaving tower and genuine surf lifesavers. They had surfboards, skis and all sorts of paraphernalia. But I don't remember a lot of boards. The days when I went there, the choice was relatively limited. Perhaps they kept the better ones for themselves.

"When I was there the first time, there were a couple of guys already in the water, probably only mucking around. They weren't genuine surfers, and it was mush that afternoon. The wind used to howl. It could get pretty blowy. The second time, when I went the next day, there was no-one surfing straight away, but there were guys later on in the day."

The stop-start trip from Nui Dat for a rest-in-country weekend at Vung Tau could be frustrating for an impatient young surfer keen to hit the beach. "It used to take us about three hours, easy," says Grimstone. "In distance, it's not that far. It's just the infrastructure, getting through. At times, the convoy would be stopped for no good reason. You'd have no idea what was holding it up. We were just driving in open-topped trucks. If you were lucky, you got one with a bit of shade.

"It wasn't like catching a bus or anything to the beach. It was: hop on a truck, 20 to a truck. The truck would go around, pulling out those rostered guys from the various units, so you very rarely went down with a friend. You went down with guys you didn't know. The first stop in Vungers was the Grand Hotel – that was our bunk. Then we'd head off to the beach, to the Badcoe club. Some of the lucky guys stayed at Badcoe."

On his first two beach trips "the boards weren't what you'd call top-shelf models", says Grimstone. "They probably had at least half a dozen boards. I remember I had my choice of boards." But on his third, and final, visit to the Badcoe club, in November, 1970, he got lucky. As he wrote in a letter to his parents: "The surf, believe it or not, was fantastic (for Vietnam anyway). On the last day it was a solid 4ft in the sets and glassy all day. Stoked! They

had just had a new consignment of boards from Gordon Woods in Sydney and was beautiful to ride a really good board in, at least, an acceptable surf by hometown standards." Looking back now, re-reading his old letters, he suspects youthful enthusiasm may have boosted his estimate of the size of the surf. "Take a foot off that," he says. "It could have been 3ft, or 2½ft."

Word of this sidelight to the war had been filtering back to Australia in other ways, such as when D. Allen wrote to *Surfing World* magazine in 1968: "I am a surfer in National Service just commencing a 12 month tour of duty in South Vietnam. On arrival here, I was pleased to find a few copies of *Surfing World* kicking around Nui Dat. I was also surprised to find that there's surf here in Vietnam and what's more, it's rideable." He even offered to send the magazine photos and a story about "the surf scene Vietnam". The editor replied: "Very interested, but somehow I don't think you'll get many surfers over there."

*I'd noticed a number of surfboards, and I'd even joked to the guys: What do you use those for? I came running back saying: Can I take one of these?'*

Lance Grimstone



Exactly two years later, another surfer, Private Mick Cottler of HQ Pl 1ARU wrote to the same magazine: "Being in Vietnam we don't see many surfing magazines but I just finished your latest one. I get a bit of surfing in at Vung Tau but it's slop ... From your latest issue surfing is changing and boards and styles so fast that I may have to learn again on returning to Australia."

Paul Haw, a gunner with 102 Field Battery, first saw the Vietnam waves from a wheelchair – he was wounded by a mine on Good Friday, 1968, and spent 15 days in the hospital at Vung Tau, wheeled down to the beach by the Red Cross girls to watch other soldiers surfing. "I was allowed to go into the water for the salt water to help cure my shrapnel wounds," he says. Coming from northern Victoria before being called up, the beach scene was quite a novelty. "I remember seeing people surfing, and I thought: 'Wow, fancy that.'"

And in September that year he returned to Vung Tau on leave – "About 60 of us went down there on the backs of trucks" – and hit the beach once again, but this time he was fit enough to have a go on a surfboard. "It was the only place I ever surfed," he says. "I remember it clear as a bell, how I enjoyed it. That beach had beautiful sand, and I went there on at least two days."

He also had time to take classic photographs of the men from his unit enjoying the waves as the sun rose. Army regulations of the time may have said that the surfboard storeroom, and the beach itself, opened for business at 8am, but Haw's shots prove that early risers could go out and crack a few waves at dawn. "And believe it or not, they rode some good waves in," he says.

His rest-in-country break at the beach also brought to light a fine example of how regulations could be beaten. "We weren't allowed to take full cans of beer back on the truck, so the men would open the cans and put one or two in every pocket. Some of them had six or seven opened cans, all making wet patches on their shirts. I think they spilled more than they drank." He was able to photograph this because "I was the strange fellow, the only one in my unit who didn't drink." At the time, a can of beer was 10¢, and soft drink was 5¢.

Gary Lovell, of 131 Div Locating Battery, says surfers were very much in the minority during his rest-in-country visits to Vung Tau in 1969-70. "I was the only one of my group interested in going surfing. Everyone else was saying: 'Let's go into town.' Ninety percent of the guys went there for drinking and the ladies, but getting wet in the salt water, that was the great part for me," he says. Lovell only went to the Badcoe club twice, and went surfing only once. "But it was my best day in Vietnam. I remember it clearly after 40 years. I got down there only for two days at a stretch, and it was straight into the surf side of it for me."

"It was a very small wave – it would have been lucky to be 1½ft – but it was very pleasant to get out of the jungles and down to the beach and into the water," says Lovell. "There were about a dozen or so boards there, and I'd just pick one out of the big shed. There may have been smaller boards there, but I was into riding a mal in those days. I got a Scott Dillon that had been donated, and that suited me. As a young fellow, I was right into surfing."

Harry Wall, of A Company, 1RAR, who came under fire from friend and foe alike while trying to resupply ammunition during the battle of Fire Support Base Coral in 1968, found the company's post-battle rest-in-country leave at the Badcoe club was much more relaxing. "As a relief driver, you'd have a day on duty, a day off, so I had a few surfs there." His job was to drive the truck taking other men from his unit in to Vung Tau to sample the delights there. "They'd run amok for the day, get on the grog and have a good time." Instead, he went to the beach and discovered the array of boards from all the major Sydney makers, so was in his element. At that early stage of the complex's development, the surfboards and sailing boats were kept in a large

tent beside the beach, replaced later in 1968 by an even-larger boatshed. Wall says: "There were probably half a dozen boards to choose from: You could just grab a 9ft mal and go out there. I remember wax was in a bit short supply, so you'd have to scrounge around to get some. Everyone used to go to the beach, and there would be half a dozen guys out there in the water surfing."

"I'd been surfing for probably five years before I went into the Army. I could surf all right – not like a world champion, but I suppose I was OK. I might have got lucky with the surf. Like any beach break, you could probably go there and find no surf, and onshore wind."

Victorian surfer Geoff Collins from Torquay, a sapper with the 1st Field Squadron and 17th Construction Squadron, in 1967-68, tells of spending "two weeks solid" in the bush, then getting a couple of days at the Badcoe club. "Once you knew the ropes, you could just go there and book a board out and ride it all day," he says. "There were a couple of boards we could borrow – they were average-type boards, 8ft or 9ft. Most of the time I was down there, only three or four people would be out in the water on boards, but there would have been a lot more just swimming."

"You'd get about two days at a time R-in-C, and I did that probably three or four times in the year I was there. The first thing I'd do is be down there, after breakfast time. I'd go to the beach. There was barbed wire which stopped us going just anywhere, and it looked like most of the better waves were along the beach to the north, out of bounds."

Roger Firehock, of B Company, 3RAR, was a surfer before going to Vietnam, and became a Gold Coast boardmaker when he returned. He remembers the South China Sea for its temperature, not its waves. "The water was so warm it was unbelievable, like a bath," he says of a five-day R&C stay in Vung Tau around April-May, 1968. "The surf was about 3ft when I was there, just OK, a couple of waves breaking. It was only a beach break, and pretty ordinary. The waves were wind swell, not ground swell."

The surfboards, however, were top quality: V-bottomed shapes in the "Plastic Fantastic" style that had only recently become all the rage throughout the surfing world. "They were brand new boards," says Firehock. "You'd just sign for one, no time limit, no money changing hands. There would be maybe 100 people on the



*THE beach with bite: sea snakes were a frequent worry for surfers and swimmers.  
(Photo: Mike Chudiak)*





*SMALL WAVE, big fun: Chris Jennings was thrilled to find the Badcoe club's surf and surfboards while on rest and convalescence leave in Vung Tau.*  
(Photo: Chris Jennings)

beach, most just lying around sunbaking, trying to clear up their skin. I was only 19 when I was over there, and I just wanted to grab a board and go surfing." On those few days in the surf, he was "the cleanest I was in that year, the whole time I was in the country".

A mate of Firehock's, Noosa Heads surfboard maker Mike St John, served with 2RAR and 3RAR in 1967-68 and says he has always thought of Vietnam as having no surf ... and his tour of duty and subsequent visits haven't changed that opinion. Though he rode "1ft wind swell" outside the Badcoe club while on a rare break in Vung Tau, he doesn't count that as real surfing.

St John tells of being one of four Diggers, with about 25 Vietnamese soldiers and their families, based at Lo Gom, a small village of 200 people at the base of the Long Hai Hills. "We were about 3-4km from the beach of Long Hai and I was the only surfer in the compound. We could never go there to the beach because it was too hostile.

"On the one occasion we did drive down in our Land Rover I saw a reasonable 3ft beach break. It was probably after a monsoon. We got ambushed on the way back from Long Hai to the Lo Gom compound that day. All but one of us ended up in hospital." It seems that, as in *Apocalypse Now*, Charlie owned whatever surf there was.

Chris Jennings surfed in Sydney in the early 1960s, then moved to northern NSW and became one of the early boardriders at Yamba-Angourie, but never expected to find surf in Vietnam when he was called up and became Gunner Jennings of A Battery, 1st Field Regiment, in 1969-70.



*AUSSIES DO SURF: A mate of Chris Jennings' waded out in the warm, shallow water and took photographs as he surfed past.*  
(Photo: Chris Jennings)

So he didn't believe it when two mates, surfers from the Gold Coast, returned to Nui Dat with big news after going to Vung Tau on a truck convoy. "They said: 'We got a wave down there. We've been surfing.' I said: 'Get away.' I thought they were pulling my leg." Jennings dismissed their story about the Badcoe club as simply another Queensland versus New South Wales practical joke. "I thought, no way, we're in an Army war zone."

Then he was sent to Vung Tau for about a week on rest and convalescence leave ("I had rashes and sores all over me from the rain and the heat.") and was stunned to find that the stories were true. "I saw these guys surfing, and thought I was seeing things. A sergeant said to me: 'You can grab a board and go surfing. The boards are in the shed.'

"I just went in there and picked out a board. I was so excited. There was some swell on, with good little waves coming in, so I went surfing every day I was there. It was unbelievable, like a dream come true, doing something normal amid the abnormal."

He stayed at the Australian R&C Centre in Vung Tau. "We got totally looked after ... Went to the markets, had a look around, bought presents to take home. The other guys went drinking and carrying on, but I went surfing. I just went down to the Peter Badcoe Club on a little Lambretta taxi every day."

Jennings recalls there being about half a dozen surfboards which could be borrowed ("They were brand new boards, tracker-style. I think one was a Peter Jackson.") and he was issued a small one. "It took me a day or so to get used to it because I'd been riding bigger boards before I went in the Army. There were some American guys in the surf, and a little Vietnamese guy, a really



hot surfer. Sometimes the Americans would come across into the Australian beach, depending on where the waves were.

"The water was really hot but the surf there was just like anywhere else – it would go off when the wind came up, so we'd try to get down there early. When I first got there, the first couple of days, the swell was bigger, about 4ft, but it varied, up and down on other days. The pictures show what it was like most days.

"We didn't even expect to have time off; we thought we'd get called back at any time. But I got surf every day." And his Vung Tau surfari – his first, and last, time there – had another good result. "The sun and the salt water, between the two of them, cleared the rashes up."

Around the same time, Ramon More of 6RAR, a private in a rifle company, wandered on to the beach with his Super 8 movie camera and a clear military objective: "We just went down there to see if there were any girls in bikinis," he says. His film reveals that there weren't, but he did find surfing. The flickering images show waves that are knee-high, at most, breaking gently over a sandbar. About half a dozen longboards are in the water, being ridden with varying degrees of success. A goofy-foot on a blue board is going left, but the waves aren't co-operating, collapsing in the shallows, so he's getting only a short ride. But a big chap, in dark trunks and riding a clear board, obviously knows what he's doing. In fact he's a stylish surfer, riding that borrowed malibu with nonchalant ease. He has found a crumbling little right-hand break and works his way along the face, then wheels the big board around in an effortless cutback before the wave fades away. On the beach, small groups of people lie on the sand, some under red beach umbrellas. Someone is water ski-ing in the background; a sailing boat is being launched through the little waves. It really doesn't look like there is a war going on anywhere nearby.

Terry James, a popular member of the DV8 Malibu Riders Club, based in Shellharbour south of Sydney, died of cancer in 2002 but more than a decade earlier had written in the club newsletter about his time surfing in Vietnam as a young nasho. He told of being sent to a firebase with 103 Battery, then managing to be re-assigned to an administration unit at Nui Dat and, within 24 hours, conning a lift in a convoy down to Vung Tau. "I had heard there was a club of sorts on a beach somewhere, where you could borrow boards. If there were boards then logically there had to be surf. But this was the Army – nothing is logical."

He told about the drive: "It comes upon you quickly – the town on the right, military installations on the left, the ocean straight ahead. The ocean was dark-green with a touch of a stormy look ... we kept heading toward the coast, around a left and a right – STOP! Six to seven foot, hollow enough for tube-rides, long walls just holding up with the offshore, easing out to a beautiful shoulder for some great cutbacks and perfect nose-rides." However having to sit and watch perfect surf going to waste was like torture. "Here I was, no board and no way of being allowed to leave the convoy."

James wrote that he had to return to Nui Dat, but a week later was granted 36 hours in Vung Tau. Having missed all the convoys, he got a lift in a chopper going to pick up some officers. "The surf was just the same. The sand-over-rock-bottom was holding and still producing those magic waves ... After signing in at the club and dumping my gear, it was straight out to grab a board, a 9ft 6in Bennett. Nothing special, just your everyday, standard 9ft 6in board that you'd expect to find lying on a South Vietnamese beach in the middle of the war zone. It sure brought back memories of home and gave me a warm feeling of security. Paddling out, I could feel my sanity returning with every stroke. Out through the channel you could see the beautiful



*GONE SURFIN':  
Stills from a movie  
shot by Ramon  
More show several  
boardriders on  
malibus making  
the most of the  
windswept waves  
in front of the Peter  
Badcoe Club.*

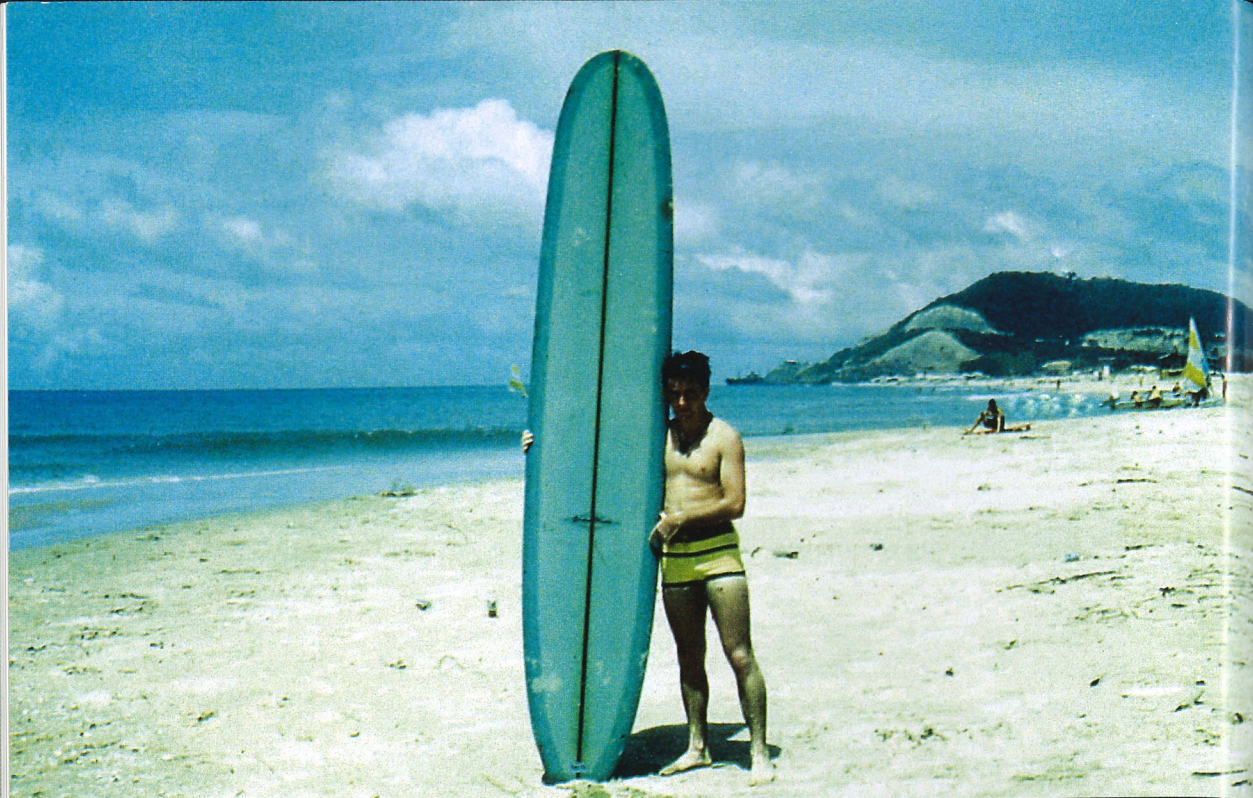
shape of each wave as it broke. In my mind I was picturing an imaginary board on each unriden wave – turning, climbing, dropping, stall, crouch, grab the rail, cover up – whoosh! – blown out the end to the serenity of the shoulder, stand up again, let the adrenalin return to the wobbly legs, cutback, turn again and line everything up for a 60-70 metre nose ride.

"That's how each wave could have been ridden, the only thing stopping me was ability. And the presence of a blasted sea snake. Now over there you don't have to worry about sharks – no one has ever seen one. But they all said: 'Watch out for sea snakes, they're vicious.' I didn't get close enough to tempt fate, so for the next few hours I surfed and surfed."

Sitting in the water on an Australian-made board, with Australians on the beach watching, with the Badcoe club in the background, with an Australian flag flying: "I even tended to forget where I was ... Hell, I could have been anywhere at home. But I wasn't and I certainly made the most of it."

In his story – which had the titles: "Blast from the Past" or "What Did You Do In The War, Daddy?" or "Sanity Too Far Away" – James told of other wild times until time was up for the 12th Field Regiment. "And although I had only been in the country for seven months, 18 days and two hours, I learnt that I was going home with them. We left that stinking little hell-hole without so much as a backward glance ... First off the aircraft, I actually kissed the ground, as did many others."





(Photo: Terry O'Brien)

IT'S late June, 1968, and Signalman Terry O'Brien of 110 Signals Squadron, based in Saigon, has been sent to Vung Tau for rest and convalescence leave ("You did not have to have been wounded, just survived.") and has found Back Beach and one of the Badcoe surfboards, a classic 9ft 6in Gordon Woods malibu. "I had never surfed and the waves were very tame so I had a go and enjoyed it," O'Brien says. "However I never had another go again."

He can't recall how he found out about the surfboards, but it probably was through the R&C Centre. "It would not have been too hard for a 22-year-old Aussie to find a club where there was plenty of grog and a lot of other Aussies.

"The quote from my diary says: 'Woke up about 10 and caught a Lambretta (three-wheeled motorcycle

taxi) to the beach. Got a lend of a surfboard and had some good fun.'

"From memory, most blokes on R&C just went into Vung Tau to the bars for the four days and found more interesting things to do than go surfing.

"My memory of seeing the beach at Vung Tau was that it was like another world. In Saigon we had been through the Tet offensive for most of February and early March, 1968. Things were just starting to settle down when along came the May offensive which was pretty big in Saigon ... It was a busy, noisy, stinking, hot place and the onset of the wet season made it even worse.

"So turning up at Vung Tau, into a safe place with a quite beautiful beach, was like walking into another world. Imagine what it was like for the poor blokes who just came out of four to six weeks in the jungle."

## Chapter Six

# Learning Curve

"I learned to surf at Vungers," says ex-nasho Mike Chudiak from Victoria. "It was the first time I tried surfing. It was a bit of a giggle – I'd just got out there, watch everybody else, see what they were doing. After that, I couldn't get out of the water."

From April to November, 1969, when stationed at 1ALSG, he found an unexpected way to pass the time between shifts on guard duty: "Any chance we got, we'd go to the Badcoe club for a surf. I'd shoot down there at lunch-time for half an hour to cool down and get away from the humidity – it felt like you were cleansing your body in the salt water. If you were lucky, you might squeeze in a couple of waves in your lunch break."

Chudiak, 21 at the time, recalls having to sign for the Badcoe club surfboards when borrowing one. "There might have been 20 or 30 there, the older type of boards. I tried a few to find out which one suited me and got used to one in particular. So I'd take that one out if someone else wasn't using it. You could choose any one you wanted, depending on your capabilities. On the board, I could stand up and ride in.

"The boards were big and buoyant – you could fit three guys on one without it sinking – so I'd be standing up for maybe five or 10 seconds. It was a decent length of ride, and it was fairly smooth; ideal conditions if you were a learner."

However there were drawbacks. Such as all the snakes on the beach and in the water. And the occasional American Phantom jet making a pass so low that it upset the water, taking ages for the waves to settle down. "The Yankee boys were a bit crazy," says Chudiak. The downdraft from the jets had enough force to flatten any of the little waves that were coming in.

After his time stationed near the beach, being posted to 6RAR at Nui Dat came as a nasty shock. "I hit the scrub, and the first day out, we had contact. I thought: What have I got myself into? It was spooky out there. It was such a contrast from Vung Tau and the Badcoe club. It was like walking out of an oven into a freezer."

Indeed, the Australian War Memorial has a copy of a film which shows just how pleasant an interlude at the beach could be around Chudiak's time. The 25-minute, Super 8 colour film made by Graham Hale of 9 Squadron, RAAF, in January-February, 1969, includes a segment showing the Badcoe club on a Sunday: men and women on the beach, sun lounges on the sand,



a lifesaving reel, sailing boats skimming along, the crews wearing bright orange life jackets. Out to sea there are speedboats and water ski-ers. It is a wide, flat beach backed by sand dunes and low hills ... it could be a beach scene anywhere. Well, anywhere on a flat, choppy day. At least four surfboards are being used in the feeble surf, with no success in the ankle-high waves. The men playing on the boards clearly have never tried surfing before. Still, looks like they're having fun, and it is a peaceful scene.

For many young soldiers like these, the Badcoe club provided a rare opportunity to have a go at surfing, still a comparatively new sport in the 1960s. Typical was the experience of medic Bob Rosier: "I think I tried to go boardriding a few times, but I don't remember much of it other than that I wasn't all that good. And I don't think the surf was that great – it depended on whether there had been a storm.

"It was more or less the first time I tried surfing, and I wasn't much of a surfer, but I lived within walking distance of the beach so I'd do that or take out a sailing boat. They were fun. There would be someone on duty and you'd just sign in. When the surf was up, we'd try, but I think I fell off most of the time."

Red Cross field force officer Margaret Young, who worked at the 8th Field Ambulance from 1967, says the beach was both rehab centre and playground for the injured. "They'd be in the recuperative stage, just about ready to go back to the sharp end, as we used to call it," she says. "A lot of patients were allowed to go to the beach for R&C, but not to the Badcoe club, because of the alcohol there. Patients were on medication which wouldn't go well with drinking. There were all these rules to be followed. We were hospital visitors, strictly not allowed to do any nursing, not even straighten the sheets on someone's bed.

"I'd take groups of eight or 10 to the beach, drive them down in a Kombi or a Land Rover for an hour, maybe an hour and a half, at the beach. They'd be having a paddle on the beach, sitting in the sun, out in the fresh air, doing a bit of beachcombing, going for a swim.

"The patients couldn't go into the club but they could help themselves to surfboards, though maybe most weren't supposed to. There was always a surf there for them to ride, and a couple of times I had a go at riding a board. Some of them tried to teach me to surf, but it was a disaster – I lost my costume."

She had about six attempts at surfing – "and I got to the standing stage" – but vividly remembers her most spectacular wipeout, thrown into the water from the board on about her second try. "When I came to the surface, there was this Kiwi waving something around, and I wondered if it was an eel or a snake. Turned out it was my swimsuit. I was devastated at the time. When you lose your tops and bottoms, it's a bit embarrassing. I thought everybody in Vietnam would hear about it. Rumours travelled fast, especially about the women, whether they were true or not."

With only a handful of Red Cross girls and Australian and New Zealander nurses on a base with more than 1000 men, of course they were always the centre of attention. Like when she would leave her group of patients on the beach with an officer in charge, and go to the nearby Badcoe club to get soft drinks for all. "I remember walking into the bar to be greeted by all the guys, the drinkers, chanting: 'Marg-gee! Mar-gee!'"

Some days patients couldn't be taken to the beach because there were too many sea snakes. "You'd see them in the water, and hanging on the wire." However they weren't the only danger, as Young discovered with a convalescent soldier who wasn't keen to go into the water, though

*'A couple of times I had a go at riding a board. Some of them tried to teach me to surf, but it was a disaster – I lost my costume.'*

Margaret Young, Red Cross field force officer, Vung Tau



WASHING TIME: Margaret Young, in bikini and Red Cross hat, at the washing line with nurse Jan MacArthur at "Fort Petticoat", the women's accommodation block at 8th Field Ambulance. (Photo: Marie Boyle; Australian War Memorial, P02017.022)



she persuaded him to. Wading out, he promptly stood on a ferocious stinger, known locally as a "Vung Tau Warrior", hidden in the sand. Young says: "He was in complete shock, so I had to race him back to the hospital." She broke all speed records driving back, blurting out "I've got a casualty!" as she took the poor Digger in. "Everybody was chiaking me for about a week after that."

He wasn't the only casualty. In late 1969, Lieutenant Bill Kernoczy, of 2nd Advanced Ordnance Depot, suffered the same fate, standing on what he believes was a stonefish while learning to surf. "I felt this sharp prick, and about 10 minutes later my legs started shaking and I was feeling crook," he says. "It was incredible, excruciating pain, and I must have been there by myself, because I remember somehow driving to the hospital. They filled me full of morphine and applied ice, but discharged me after one night in hospital. I'd been looking forward to a few days off work."

The puncture mark in his foot lasted for about 10 years; his memories of surfing at Vung Tau don't seem to have faded at all. "I hadn't surfed before, but we had an hour and a half off for lunch so you'd get in the Land Rover and go down the beach. I had friends who were surfers, and they got me into it. So I gradually learned to surf. The boards were 9ft, 10ft ... I remember carving the waves up."

"At one stage they changed the duty officer system, so if you were on at night you didn't have to start work until 10 the next morning. That meant you could get down there in the morning for a surf before work."

"There was a period of a few months when there was no surf at all, but other times, it was reasonable. I remember some idyllic days when the surf was perfect, a metre or so high."

"On a good day, at lunch time there might be 10 to 15 hardcore regulars in the surf, and you'd have to race down to get the good boards. There was a green one, that was everybody's favourite: I think it was Number 63. The board rack in the shed was about 12ft wide and three boards deep, so there were quite a lot of them."

Though he enjoyed the beach, he wasn't a Badcoe club regular. In fact, few officers went there, he says. "It was mainly a place for other ranks. It was better to stay clear because if someone got full and ended up punching an officer, it would be a serious matter."

Out in the water, however, everyone was equal says his former surfing mate, 2nd Lieutenant Zorro Tarnawsky, also of 2AOD. Other ranks wouldn't think of passing up the wave of the day just because an officer wanted it. "Oh no, they'd tell you to stuff off," he says. "Some of the people who knew how to surf and were competent would get slightly annoyed at the beginners."

"I learned to surf there, on what now probably would be called a mini-mal. There were only about two boards that were shorter than it, about 6ft. There would have been about 30 boards all up, and about 15 favourite boards among those, with people dodging around to get the best ones. There was quite a lot of competition for the surfboards, like a race. The boards were in good condition, and new ones turned up in my year."

"A bit of a blow outside, like a typhoon, would bring up the surf. Otherwise there wasn't much. There was some really big stuff, rotten-looking surf but you could ride all the way in from out the back, so we got quite a few good rides. You generally could go and surf most places you wanted to, if the beach wasn't crowded."

"We'd get to the beach whenever we could at lunch time. My unit would have had five or six people who'd go there on a regular basis."



*SAND and surf: Back Beach, 1967, ideal place to learn to surf so long as you don't mind snakes in the water and stingers in the sand.  
(Photo: Phil Noble)*

Electrician Phil Noble of 17 Construction Squadron, based at Vung Tau in 1967, tells of a mate who fell victim to another of the fearsome underwater stingers while surfing. "He stepped on something and it punctured his foot. He said: 'Something's stung me, the bastard.' By the time he got out of the breakers, his foot was aching, burning. The next thing, he's passed out on the beach from the toxin and had to be taken to hospital."

Noble, one of the crew who built the Badcoe club, says: "I can remember getting a surfboard from the club on one occasion, but I fell off it too many times, so I put it back." No matter, because Noble, born and bred on the Gold Coast, liked bodysurfing better. "We went to the beach at every opportunity – there was nothing else to do other than going into town. The beach was much preferred."

"The waves were quite pleasant, and came in over the sand flats. It was all very shallow, so when the surf was up, it would roll in from hundreds of yards out. You could ride them for ages but it was not big surf, generally speaking. Just on some days."

"We used to go to the American forces club just down the road for a swim, and being Australians, we liked to swim hundreds of yards out to sea, then bodysurf in. That used to worry the American lifeguards – they were sure we'd drown, so they'd be waving and threatening. The Americans would put a toe in the water then run away like girls; being Australians, we'd go out the back. There was none of that tippy-toeing in the shallows for us. We had a ball teasing the Yanks."



*BUSINESS can't have been too brisk, because the bar girls of Vung Tau had time to create their very own song. Some translation is required: "Uc dai loi" is the Vietnamese term for an Australian; "P" stands for piastre, the local currency; MPC is a Military Payment Certificate, which the troops used instead of cash; "Saigon tea" was the drink, supposed to be whiskey and Coke but usually no more than coloured water at an inflated price, which the girls demanded to be bought. Now, all together, to the tune of This Old Man (Knick, Knack, Paddywhack) ...*

*Uc dai loi, Cheap Charlie,  
He no buy me Saigon tea,  
Saigon tea costs many many P,  
Uc dai loi he, Cheap Charlie.*

*Uc dai loi, Cheap Charlie,  
He no give me MPC,  
MPC costs many, many P,  
Uc dai loi, he Cheap Charlie.*

*Uc dai loi, Cheap Charlie,  
He no go to bed with me,  
Bed with me costs many, many P,  
Uc dai loi, he Cheap Charlie.*

*Uc dai loi, Cheap Charlie,  
Make me give him one for free,  
Mamma-san go crook at me,  
Uc dai loi, he Cheap Charlie.*

*Uc dai loi, Cheap Charlie,  
He give baby-san to me,  
Baby-san costs many many P,  
Uc dai loi, he Cheap Charlie.*

*Uc dai loi, Cheap Charlie,  
He go home across the sea,  
He leave baby-san with me,  
Uc dai loi, he Cheap Charlie.*



*THE locals were friendly ... some of the girls of Vung Tau.  
(Photos: Paul Asbury)*

## Chapter Seven

# Sex, Drugs, Rock 'n' Roll

**T**hough the VC was a dangerous foe, VD claimed more casualties among unwary soldiers who strayed from the safety of the Badcoe club to enjoy a night (or afternoon) in the anything-goes town that was Vung Tau.

The Army, with its love of gathering statistics and compiling reports, attached to the November 1967 routine orders a neatly typed one-page sheet, titled "Sources Of VD Contact", listing the dozens of Vungers' bars, restaurants, hotels and bath houses "that have been reported as sources of contact of venereal disease" the previous August and September. Like the map of a minefield, it reveals that the most dangerous place to visit was the #37 Barber Shop (19 cases of VD reported), followed by the Star bar with nine cases, the Cherry, Que Huong and Starlight #2 bars (eight cases each), then the Eden hotel, Ponderosa and Spring Happy bars and the ominously named Back Gate (seven cases each). The Grand Hotel, where rooms were reserved for officers to stay, was well up the list, with six cases of VD reported.

Clearly this was an army caught with its pants down, casualties mounting – enough to fill a ward of the hospital – despite endless warnings of the dangers. The routine orders for all men arriving at the Peter Badcoe Club's beach annex and the R&C Centre in Vung Tau were: "All brothels are out of bounds ... Do not frequent out-of-bounds establishments or pick up street walkers." Then, as if knowing those words would fall on deaf ears, the instructions went on: "Take normal precautions if members do have intercourse." Before men were allowed to go into town, there came the fatherly warning: "The only safe way is not to do it." And since this advice obviously wasn't widely heeded, condoms were distributed as freely as ammunition. When, in February, 1971, a lieutenant visiting from 1ATF mentioned in the beach annex's guest book: "A pleasure to be down here. French letters are in short supply and a quantity could be held here," re-supply action followed with military efficiency. A Badcoe club officer added the instruction: "Procure 6 gross checkers." And another note on the page, in pencil, says they were ordered the same day that the lieutenant sounded the alarm.

Such defences had been needed from day one. As early as May, 1966, a senior medical officer and a civil affairs officer "carried out a recce of Vung Tau with the aim of implementing effective





*ONE-FINGER SALUTE: One of the Vung Tau girls extends a finger skyward to show what she thinks of the Australian taking a picture.*

*(Photo: Paul Asbury)*

measures to cut down the VD incident rate". Judging by the scorecard of the 1967 toll, they weren't terribly successful. And as the years rolled on, the losing battle continued. For example, almost four years later, the instructions for 8RAR men staying at the annex still contained dire warnings: "The incidence of VD in Vung Tau is extremely high and some strains are difficult to cure. All soldiers are to be warned of this before proceeding on leave." The report of the commander's briefing on February 12, 1971, says: "The seriousness of the situation demanded maximum effort on the part of OCs and officers. The more sports and hobbies in which a soldier was encouraged to engage, the less were the possibilities of the spread of the disease."

And when stern orders weren't sufficient, the Army tried education. The 1ALSG base commander decided on a series of lectures about "Venereal Disease in Vung Tau ... to acquaint all members of the effects and implications of this disease". When the four 15-minute lectures had been prepared, they were "tested" on an audience of officers "for comment and amendments as necessary". Then every soldier in 1ALSG was ordered to turn up at the Kevin Wheatley Gymnasium on a Tuesday afternoon every three months to hear the speeches: An MP from the provost unit spoke about VD in Vung Tau, a chaplain discussed "moral considerations of promiscuity and VD", a doctor spoke about "medical considerations and preventative measures", and an officer explained the "command and military considerations".

Here was an enemy which inflicted a high casualty rate when contact was made, and had the advantage of numbers. At one stage in 1971, the provosts reported, more than 1800 "registered" girls had been tested for VD in a month - 320 carried the disease - while there were up to 800 other prostitutes "who are not registered and over who there is no medical control. Of these girls

80 per cent are infected with VD." Not long after, more than 2200 girls were being checked in a month, and the VD rate continued to climb, often 25 per cent among even those who were registered and had medical tests. Among the streetwalkers, it was thought to be much higher.

In 1971, the Americans turned Vung Tau into a major leave centre, sending up to 1500 off-duty soldiers there at a time. The vice trade expanded to cater for all these new clients, and reports by the Australian MPs reveal an additional 100-200 girls a month were coming from Saigon to work in the Vung Tau bars, with others arriving to work in the streets. Soon the MPs were blaming an increase of VD on the heavy influx of Americans, new bars which had opened, more girls operating from the streets and doorways, and the new girls not having check-ups. They painted a picture of a wild town spinning out of control, the war against sin a losing battle.

Even the system of registering the bar girls so they could be regularly tested at the VD clinic backfired, with the press back in Australia sensationally reporting this as the Army running a prostitution ring. "That caused quite a furore for a while," says one officer. "In fact the Army was organising medical checks for the girls, trying to reduce the amount of VD among the troops." It was merely a press beat-up, he recalls, like the similar scandal when it was claimed in the media that more beer than ammunition was being shipped to Vietnam. The officer says: "After that expose, the beer consumption rate became something of a secret document. The rumour was that some smart alec wharf labourers had reported it. It was all rumour, of course, but everybody ducked down low for a while."

Beer, however, definitely was a high-priority item for the troops and the military establishment. Like one early crisis which confronted the Peter Badcoe Club: the bottle cooler could not chill beer quickly enough to meet demand. It took two days to chill beer from room temperature to serving temperature but, according to a report signed by Lieutenant Colonel G Thompson "the demand from soldiers on rest from Nui Dat is such that the contents of a refrigerator cabinet bottle cooler are used in less than one day". Thirsty work, soldiering. To keep the beer flow sufficiently cold, an extra refrigerator was promptly ordered. The official policy on beer sales, enshrined in the Badcoe's original charter in 1967, a month before it officially opened, back when it was merely called the Australian Forces Club, was: "Prices are to be kept as low as possible."

But a near-tragedy came in the lead-up to Christmas, 1969, with a sobering announcement: "Because of delays in Australian shipping it is regretted that sales of Australian beer are to be temporarily restricted. In order to ensure that every man receives his fair share of existing stocks, issues are to be limited to two cans per man per day." But no need to panic, lads: "Ample stocks of US beer are available to supplement Australian supplies." The only troops allowed an increase in rations were those from Nui Dat on leave at the club's beach annex ("max five cans per man per day") and those staying at the R&C Centre in Vung Tau were allowed three cans a day.

*'All brothels are out of bounds ... do not frequent out-of-bounds establishments or pick up street walkers ... the only safe way is not to do it.'*

Briefing instructions for men going on leave in Vung Tau, August, 1970



However using beer as a universal lubricant naturally caused some problems and by the following year, troops visiting Vung Tau were being reminded that excessive drinking could have unfortunate consequences: "If you come home at night under the influence, use the toilets for the purpose they are designed, ie, for the removal of body waste including vomit, otherwise you will find it a most unpleasant task cleaning the area the next morning."

There was a serious side to going on the town: "Don't talk 'Army' in front of bar girls or other nationals. Talk may cost your mate his life." And take care of each other: "Don't leave your mate on his own if he is drunk. Get him back to camp."

This briefing continued with wise words about the cost of being drunk: "The smaller bars and street stalls will rarely bargain – why should they sell at a lower price when the next American/Australian under the influence will pay the higher price. Many US and younger Australian personnel display no idea of the value of money and they are the ones that cause the high prices, especially of Saigon Teas."

As the war wound down, the military found a novel problem with liquor: how to get rid of their stocks, and the funds accumulated by various units. Jim Berry, then a 2nd lieutenant who was the accountant for the Australian Services Canteen Organisation, the body running the Army bars and shops in Saigon, Nui Dat and Vung Tau – including the Badcoe club bars – says it was a hectic time.

"ASCO supplied grog to all the canteens and because there was no tax in Vietnam, they had cheap prices," he says. "Towards the end, the messes would have cheap grog every night to get rid of the money they'd made. You had to use up all the money and stock, because it couldn't be brought back to Australia. Some of the stock was sold to the Vietnamese, and any grog that might have been suspect, that might have gone off, was buried in the sand."

It was also the era when Australians discovered Bacardi. "So we did deals with the Yanks. We'd exchange a couple of semi-trailer loads of our VB for their Chivas Regal and Bacardi. I forget what the rate of exchange was." He tells of beer and spirits getting as cheap as 5¢ each, and bottles of wine being posted home inside spent artillery cases.

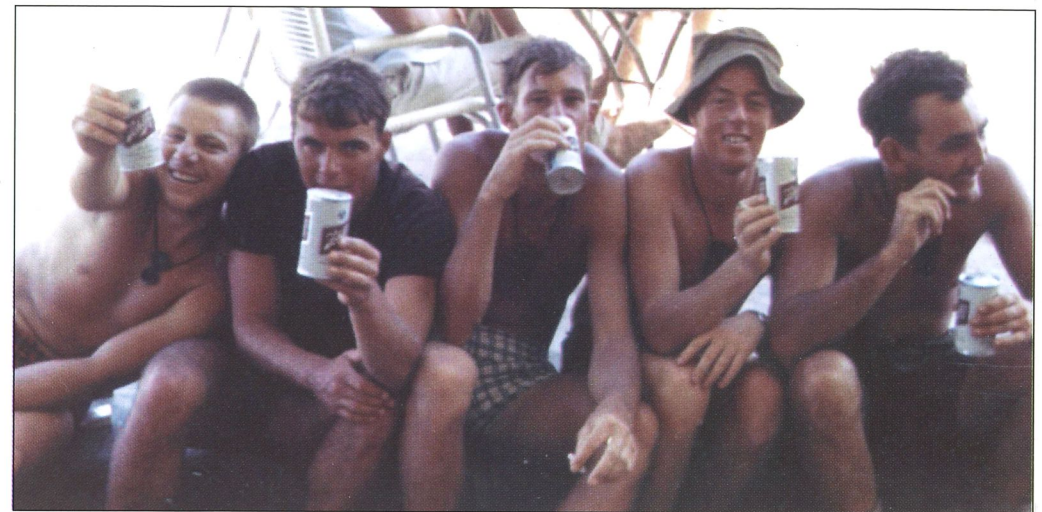
Bill Denny, a 2nd lieutenant in 86 Transport Platoon until February, 1972, at the very end of the war, recalls prices getting even lower. "Everything was closing down, and beer became free," he says. "They had to get rid of it, and they stopped taking money for it. We knew the brands by the colours – green, red, white – and all the good beer went first."

He used the South China Sea only for water ski-ing ("The boat was a fairly primitive old thing and you had to go through the Army machinations of being licensed to use it.") and the pool "only infrequently", but recalls pleasant times at the Badcoe club.

"When the war was winding down, we'd start work at seven in the morning and finish at lunchtime, then go to the Badcoe club for a meal of deep fried prawns and a drink, and be back at work by 1.30. It seems pretty hard to reconcile that sort of existence with the bronzed Anzac tradition. We got a little bit cavalier near the end.

"The Badcoe club was fairly relaxed and the staff were pretty tolerant and understanding. They were dealing with young men who had come out of the field, who were pretty wild and wooly. It was primarily for troops coming out of the bush.

"To me, it wasn't Hayman Island or South Molle or anything like that. All these bloody sea snakes would wash ashore after a storm, and there were huge bloody jellyfish with tentacles which went for metres and metres."



*HERE'S CHEERS: A group of drinkers enjoying a cold one (or two) at the Badcoe club.  
(Photo: David Cripps)*

He tells of the tradition of "trailer parties", casual gatherings down among the casuarina trees along the beachfront, when the unit was welcoming or farewelling a member. "We'd get a one-tonne Army trailer filled to the brim with ice and beer, and drive it down to the treeline. Someone would swap a hat or beer for a box of steak from the Americans so we could have a steak and eggs barbecue. After the speeches, you'd get thrown into the trailer, which was quite unpleasant because you'd land on this pyramid of sharp ice and full beer cans."

His parting memory of the Badcoe club was just weeks before 1ALSOG closed in 1972, when he and four other young officers "broke out" and had their own picnic at the old French gun emplacements then on Cap St Jacques. "We took a Land Rover loaded with grog and five serves of prawns and salad from the Badcoe club, beautiful individual meals under plastic. It was one of those days you don't forget."

While beer obviously flowed freely during the Vietnam years, drugs seem to have been in much smaller quantities. And, among the Australians in Vung Tau, they seem to have been the softer variety, with hard drugs largely an American problem. By 1970, the briefing for men going on leave admitted that marihuana was "freely obtainable" in Vung Tau, but pointed out that it would be a very serious offence to be found in possession of it. Then came some fatherly advice: "Members should not try smoking marihuana as an experiment or for fun. They should also dissuade their friends from buying the drug or trying it." Nevertheless, the provost marshal's weekly report around that time often was along the lines of "a member was found in such and such a bar with a cigarette suspected to contain marihuana". Some weeks two, or even three soldiers would be caught with marihuana, but being drunk was much more common. It was only as the war was winding down and temptations increased in 1971 that it was reported: "The number of cases of marihuana detected in Vung Tau has increased sharply."

Anyway, there were other pressing matters to deal with – such as the dress code. MPs found themselves the Army's fashion police, and saw a lot they didn't like. Take one provost unit report to a commander's briefing in 1971: "The general conduct of our troops has been poor... The wearing of hippie style dress whilst on leave is becoming prevalent and impossible to police. It is



obvious that units are not enforcing matters of dress. The standard of dress and general conduct of V Company, 2RAR, who were on leave over the weekend 27-28 Mar 71, left much to be desired."

From the early days, the routine beach annex command had been: "Hippie-style dress is not permitted. In Vung Tau, members may wear shorts and long socks until 1900 hrs. After 1900 hrs they must be dressed in long trousers and shirts. Ties need not be worn, and short sleeves are permitted."

Meanwhile, at the Badcoe Club and R&C Centre: "A member ... is to be (a) Properly dressed if in uniform and, if wearing civilian clothes, be neat and tidy with footwear, trousers and shirt – swimming and sunbathing attire are not to be worn indoors; (b) Moderate in his behaviour, use of language and consumption of alcohol." Well, there's several rules which soon would be broken.

And – Shock! Horror! – in 1969 it was noticed that some soldiers were going in the swimming pool in their underpants. The commander, at his regular weekly conference, ordered that to cease. "Suitable bathers are to be worn while swimming in the Harold Holt Memorial Pool. In future the wearing of underpants, cut down greens or sports shorts military will not be allowed."

But out in public things were worse, with the commanding officer of the provost unit reporting at one point in 1970: "The standard of dress for personnel on two days' leave and who go into Vung Tau is outlandish. Headbands, necklaces and frilly leather type jackets are getting worse by the day."

And a classic example from another provost unit report, this time in mid-1971: "The dress of V Coy 4RAR leaves much to be desired and was not the leave dress as laid down in 1ALSG standing orders. The dress of this particular leave party was a mixture of normal dress, cowboy, hippie style with feminine accessories. It was impossible to police."

Far better, then, to entice the men to stay around the Badcoe club as much as possible. That way they weren't catching a dose of the clap or being mugged in a Vung Tau alley. Putting on Sunday afternoon shows, where soldiers could be entertained while having a drink among mates, was the answer from day one.

A report which has survived from early 1968 shows that at that stage, "imported" groups cost at least \$275, and up to \$400, because the US authorities fixed their prices. So the club's plan was to spend up to \$1000 a month, enough for one or two imported shows, with "local" shows on the other weekends. It was acknowledged that the quality of entertainment mattered. The example was quoted of an overseas group which was booked, its show widely advertised, only to be cancelled when the cost was deemed to be too high. The board's report says: "This show was subsequently presented at the Beachcomber and was attended by many discontented members who had originally turned up at the Peter Badcoe Club. As the Beachcomber sells spirits and permits local females to attend its functions, it is considered preferable to provide suitable entertainment at the Peter Badcoe Club where a greater degree of control can be exercised."

Profits from the club's handful of poker machines comfortably paid for the Sunday shows, either on the little outdoor stage near the pool or inside the huge gymnasium. However Lieutenant Colonel Gilmore told those running the Badcoe club to keep a close watch on the concert bills, with frequent reviews of the system. They needed to make sure "that money was not spent needlessly on entertainment for entertainment's sake", he said. Shows ranged from

*'A better class of entertainer has been provided. Units are advised that the entertainment presented will depend largely on the behaviour of the troops. In the past some entertainers have become frightened by the conduct of some personnel.'*

Amenities Unit report to the 1ALSG commander's weekly briefing, April 10, 1970:



*AUDIENCE participation: soldiers in Speedos join the go-go girls on stage at the Badcoe club. (Photo: Gerry Lloyd)*





*SHOW TIME: Normie Rowe on stage at the Badcoe club with a visiting Australian group, the Hi Lites, June, 1969*  
(Photo: Australian War Memorial, P00800.068)

visiting Australian parties – blonde and bubbly Lorrae Desmond, in particular, seems fondly remembered – American and Filipino groups or Vietnamese, and the occasional strip show.

According to Lyndsay Daniels, a major in charge of the Amenities and Welfare Unit, 1970-71, up to 1500 spectators came to one show, though audiences in the hundreds were more common. "I'd spend \$450 on an act," he says. "I was negotiating with the Platters at the end of my time, but they wanted \$900, which was about twice what I was allowed to spend."

An infantryman who visited the Badcoe club only a few times recalls a strip show on one occasion. "I've never seen so many cameras with telephoto lenses," he says. "Guys were climbing out of their chairs on all sides."

Obviously it could be a wild scene at times. Like in January, 1969, when Corporal Jim McElhinney of 17 Construction Squadron, an IALSG representative on the club's advisory committee, spoke up to ask why the upper patio had been closed to other ranks during a recent Sunday evening show. The club president, Major Francis Mitchell, commanding the Amenities and Welfare Unit, said there was a good reason: "It had been found in the past that when the patio had been opened for use by other ranks, members used the high ground to gain better elevation for throwing empty beer cans at members below." Corporal McElhinney came up with a compromise – allow everyone to use the patio during concerts, but no beer to be sold or

consumed there – and that was accepted. Equality restored. However the concert audiences must have remained a tough crowd, judging by a Amenities Unit report in April, 1970, which said: "In the past some entertainers have become frightened by the conduct of some personnel." The base commander's weekly meeting was told that a "better class of entertainer" was being provided, and units were advised that the entertainment presented would depend largely on the behaviour of the troops.

Australia's most famous nasho, pop singer Normie Rowe, had forgotten the afternoon in 1969 he sang on the outdoor stage with the Hi Lites, until shown the Australian War Memorial photograph which was unearthed for this book. In fact he had forgotten there was even a stage at the Badcoe club. "Forty years will do that to you," he says. "I would have been in the audience that day. Performing wouldn't have been a pre-arranged thing."

Rowe was an APC driver for two months, the radio operator for the troop for three months, and spent the rest of the time as a crew commander.

"We'd go down to Badcoe one section at a time, so six or seven men, and I probably went there four or five times. It was supposed to be once a month, but we didn't even get back to Nui Dat once a month. Our unit, even when having light operations, was busier than a one-armed bricklayer in Baghdad."

"When I first went to Nui Dat, we were in tents. I just slept there one night, then went out on ops and didn't get back for two months, and by then, there were huts."

"From my point of view, I was more on alert in Vung Tau than in the jungle. It was easier to hide in the jungle. In Vung Tau, you were just right out there, and anything could happen at any time."

"Being the non-drinker and smitten with a responsible character, I was the guy who looked after the blokes who remember nothing of their R & C. In Vietnam, when there was a purchase going on, I was the person brought in to make sure we weren't ripped off, because I was the sober one. I didn't touch alcohol until it was almost time to go home."

He tells of going to the beach with a mate, and how the surf was "very ordinary" that day. "I even swam in the Harold Holt pool. How ironic is that? Now I've played him in a film." Rowe describes Holt as "a prime minister who wasn't as good a swimmer as he thought he was".

And though he did not recall going on stage, one afternoon at the Badcoe club stands out for Rowe: "There were a lot of Maoris, in the infantry, from New Zealand, and of course Maoris have a pretty warlike background. But I remember a group sitting around this big table, with two guitars, one at each end, and four slabs of beer. They'd pass the guitars around, and everybody would play, everybody would sing. It was just a happy time."

"That was the good thing about the Badcoe club. It was an excursion from the real business of war. It was a mind warp, at the least."

*'We'd go down to  
Badcoe one section at  
a time ... Our unit,  
even when having light  
operations, was busier  
than a one-armed  
bricklayer in Baghdad.'*

Normie Rowe





(Photo: Australian War Memorial, ERR/68/0998/VN)

CORPORAL Bob Rosier waxes his board before going surfing ... or at least that's what Army public relations said in this official photograph's caption.

Not so, says Rosier now. He was a medic who probably merely happened to be on the beach that day in November, 1968, seeking some peace, unwinding after night duty, when the visiting photographer asked him to pose with the Gordon Woods V-bottom board.

And instead of board wax, that's a rock in his hand.

Back home, his wife knew nothing of the photo shoot until a neighbour one morning called out: "Hey, your husband's in the paper! And he's going surfing!"

As a final indignity, the Army spelled his name "Rozier" in the caption, and left it that way for almost 40 years until the mistake was noticed when research was being done for this book.

## Chapter Eight

# On The Beach

Not everyone went surfing. For many Diggers, of course, the bars of Vung Tau and friendly girls (well, friendly at a price) beckoned. Some soldiers went swimming in the pool, drove go-karts on the beach, went water ski-ing, tried sailing, shopping, watched a band on the little stage beside the pool, or down at the American-run Beachcomber, or just had a drink with mates in the safety of the Peter Badcoe Club.

Or some, like Bob Rosier, found the beach the best place to unwind. "You'd go to the beach to get away from things for a while," he says. This former medic at the 1st Australian Field Hospital explains: "I worked the night shift, and when you finished work you'd still be a bit awake, so you'd go to the beach to clear your head. You imagine working in 30deg heat, or hotter sometimes depending on the season, knocking off at eight o'clock in the morning, or whatever time you knocked off, and then trying to sleep. You might go to bed for two or three hours and wake up in a sweat.

"You're in a barracks, so you slept when you could and if you woke up and couldn't get back to sleep you'd go for a wander, go down the beach or whatever, then come back when you were tired and try to have more sleep. It was the normal routine thing."

However it was impossible to escape the reality of war. "There were guards walking around with loaded weapons, though we were more or less in a safe area. You could see the Long Hais from the Vung Tau beach, and action used to proceed there."

The beach was the playground for Australians even before the Badcoe complex was built. Eric Reiman, a 6RAR private stationed at Nui Dat in the second half of 1966, remembers fun and games when sent to Vungers for a few weeks to get stores. "Back Beach had just been set up, and 6 Battalion had just started moving into the rubber," he says. "A few of us would go down to the section of beach we called the Australian beach. We used to go swimming and get stung by jellyfish."

When "larking around" down there one day, someone found a plank, and they had the bright idea of using it like a surfboard on the sand. Reiman says: "We'd tie a rope to a Land Rover, and choof up and down the beach being towed along on the plank. We'd do this along all three beaches – the Australian, the Vietnamese and the American – then turn around and come back.



"The Yankee beach had mostly officers on it, and they'd get their cameras and film us as we went past, and say: 'Those crazy Aussies!' An American major and a French chick came over and asked if they could have a go. We told them they could get hurt, but they wanted to try anyway. Of course they couldn't control the board and ended up losing a lot of skin.

"After that, the American beach was closed to us, and we wondered if it was because of that major. We didn't have surfboards, but it must have been the first lairising, bugging-around on that beach."

Certainly Back Beach became the place to go, whether getting away from the war, or recovering from it. Russ Morison, a corporal in 25 Supply Platoon, in 1969-1970, tells how he spent time there while on rest and convalescence leave after being injured. "You'd go for a run on the sand to strengthen the leg muscles," he says. "It was a good little beach, but it was odd to see all the wounded men on it, there to recuperate.

"The beach reminds me a lot of Adelaide. You'd go out for a long way before the water drops off into real depth. There weren't too many people during the week, but it would be quite popular on weekends."

And it was to the beach where 2nd Lieutenant John ("Doggy") Neervoort, of Tracker Platoon, 6RAR/NZ (ANZAC), and his men went on a sentimental journey when it was time to farewell their dogs – Marcus, Milo and Trajan – before leaving Vietnam in 1970. "We drove down to the beach, with some grog, to a barbecue area, not the Badcoe club, to say goodbye to the dogs," says Neervoort. "It was RTA (return to Australia) for the men, but because of quarantine, the dogs had to stay behind in Vietnam." And to this Aussie-style beach party they also brought along the unit's two ex-Viet Cong "bushmen scouts" who had been captured and decided that working with the Australians was better than any other fate.



*A RARE day on Back Beach together. Red Cross workers Robin Harris, Marie Hunter (later Boyle) and Janice Webb (later Hilton) take a break. Looking back at the 1967 photo now, Boyle wonders how all three managed to be away from duty at the same time. "That's naughty," she says. "There must have been no one at the hospital at that time." (Photo: Marie Boyle)*

Neervoort says: "It was the only place we could go out and relax, have a barbecue, sit and drink and chat and feel safe. It was an emotional time, and we wanted to do things in a very Australian way. Nui Dat was an Army camp, and you couldn't get away from the Army there, but Vung Tau was a sort of holiday area. We were on the Back Beach, and Front Beach was where the Viet Cong would have their recreation.

"Typically, we'd have 30 days on ops, 10 days in Nui Dat, then back into the bush. At times we'd do a double operation, so spend 2½ months in the bush. You'd be out there and get a change of clothes maybe every week, maybe every fortnight. But two or three times we got down to Vung Tau for 36 hours. We used to go down in jungle green, then change into civilian clothes and try to look like tourists, but there was no way, with our short back and sides. First up, you'd go for a swim and a surf before heading into town. After lunch, you'd be in town until curfew. Basically, for us, the bars were the high point of Vung Tau. The beach was secondary."

Marie Boyle, the Red Cross commandant at 1ALSG on a two-year contract in 1967-68, tells of it being "quite a good beach, apart from the sea snakes in their season. You'd see them tangled on the barbed wire." The Red Cross girls, in their distinctive blue uniforms, did invaluable work at what started as the 8th Field Ambulance, and grew into the 1st Australian Field Hospital, writing letters for the patients, distributing cakes and biscuits, moving patients around ... and even taking them swimming. "We used to get patients in from the Task Force, coming in for rest and convalescence. They'd stay at the hostel, spend the day at Badcoe," says Boyle.

"You'd go to the club to have a beer, or go to the beach, just to get out of the hospital. And we'd go to barbecues on the beach on Sunday. But somehow I didn't go to the Badcoe opening – I must have been busy that day." In the early days, there were just four Army nurses, and three Red Cross women, at 1ALSG. "Being so few women, we could have gone out to dinner every night," says Boyle. "There was a war on, but there was time for socialising."

That war would constantly intrude into even casual activities such as a Sunday "swim trip" from Nui Dat, as storeman Gerry Lloyd, of 106 Field Workshop in 1968-69, found. Only when the convoy he was in returned from the Badcoe club did he notice the bullethole which had appeared beneath where he was sitting in an open truck. "I didn't hear a thing. I was the only one sober, sitting up straight. All the others were in the bottom of the truck, so I would have been the obvious target," he says.

Not that Back Beach was a dull place, either. He recalls seeing a monk set himself on fire, making no sound while being consumed by the flames. Australian soldiers tried throwing sand to put out the fire, but without success.

And even the surf held danger. "I only went swimming in the sea once, and found a snake in the water with me. After that I confined myself to the pool at the Badcoe club. That seemed a lot safer.

"You'd go to the armoury to leave your weapon, and change to civvies to go into town. We'd drop our arms there because you couldn't go to town with your arms. I don't know why we bothered getting out of uniform, because it was still terribly obvious we were soldiers. We wouldn't have been fooling anybody, the enemy would have known who we were.

"A Sunday swim trip didn't happen very often, maybe every six or eight weeks, but a chance to get out of the Task Force area was always a bonus. Most of the men would head for the bars, and there were Sunday afternoon concerts at the Badcoe club. There would be a tour party from Australia, or a local band, or Filipino entertainers."



Vung Tau-based Mike Page, of 102 Field Workshop in 1970, had the Badcoe club much closer to hand. "You could duck down for half an hour," he says. "You'd slip down in your lunch hour for a quiet swim, because it was always so bloody hot. There might be three or four of us would jump in a Land Rover.

"We'd go in the pool 98 per cent of the time. By the time you got a surfboard out, you'd think: What's the point? Besides, the beach was a bit dirty-looking, and had scrubby-looking trees.

"At Badcoe, there was always someone there from some unit on R&C. The place was like a big motel."

For 2nd Lieutenant Paul Asbury, of 85 Transport Platoon in 1969-70, Vungers was "a great change" from life at Nui Dat. "We didn't have mod-cons like running water up there," he says. "Going down to Vung Tau was just a chance to get out of the jungle for a while and be civilised.

"Badcoe was intended mainly as a place for people from Nui Dat to stay. Apart from the pleasure of going surfing or for a swim, it was another way of keeping them off the turps in town." For him, the swimming pool was a greater attraction than the beach. "I don't think I bothered going surfing."

Stan Middleton did, and regretted it. A private in the 2nd Composite Ordnance Depot, not far from the Badcoe club, in 1967, he went for a swim on a deserted stretch of Back Beach one day and soon found himself caught in a rip. "I thought that was going to be the end of me," he says. "It was innocent-looking water, it didn't seem dangerous to me. But I was from Mildura, and my swimming had been in the Murray River so I didn't know much about the undertow in the surf.

"There was no-one else down swimming who could help me – they were all in the bloody bar. I was in a fair panic, but I remembered having heard someone say something about swimming sideways, instead of against the current. So I started to swim sideways to get out of it. It seemed like forever before I got in far enough to touch the bottom again.

"Eventually I got in, but I was pretty exhausted. I had to sit on the beach to recover, and after that, I only went in the water when there were other people around."

Most soldiers, though, had no such concern. From January, 1966, when men from the First Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, and supporting units, started being flown down to Vung Tau from Bien Hoa for a week's R&C leave, the water was a big attraction. They could swim, water ski, go sailing. And, even in those early days, surfboards – of a sort – were provided. After six months in the heat and dust of their base, groups of about 40 would stay in the stately ex-French villa which the Army leased, overlooking the ship-filled harbour at the base of Cap St Jacques. This scheme was launched a full year before work on the Peter Badcoe Club even began: Australian surfing in Vietnam was off to an early start.

Stored downstairs in the research centre of the Australian War Memorial is a 10-minute Army film – "propaganda" might be too harsh a word to describe it, but the grainy 16mm pictures certainly are meant to show the service in a positive light – titled *A Break From Fighting*. Made on March 29, 1966, it has no soundtrack, but really doesn't need one. It shows the 1RAR men arrive at the tall white villa, play snooker, go water ski-ing, buy fruit from vendors on the beach, eye off the Asian bikini girls ... and go surfing. Well, sort of. The surf this day is small and choppy, with feeble waves like you might find in a large lake. No matter, really, because their "surfboard" also leaves a lot to be desired. It's a crude-looking hollow wooden affair, about 10ft long, dead flat



*EASY RIDERS: Heading for the surf with hollow wooden boards in January, 1966, were Sergeant Don McDonald, left, and Sapper Bruce Lauder, among 40 Bien Hoa-based soldiers in the first party to stay for a week at the rest and convalescence centre, a villa in Vung Tau. (Photo: Australian War Memorial, SHA/66/0082/VN)*

and painted white. Obviously homemade, it appears like it was put together by someone with only a vague idea what a surfboard should be. More a water plaything than a surfboard, it sinks when a couple of men try to sit on it at the same time. They climb on, and it shoots away like a watermelon seed, obviously slippery. Fortunately the Army has preserved all the out-takes from filming, so we can see lots more skylarking on the board, but no successful attempts at riding it. Two, even three, men try to clamber on at once, with no sign of any catchable waves. The footage contains a couple of minutes of "surfing" in all, though mere seconds of that sequence ended up in the finished film.

But the water could be a dangerous playground. Just a month after the R&C scheme began, 20-year-old Private Edward Grills, of D Coy, 12 Platoon, 1RAR, from Lyndhurst, New South Wales, accidentally drowned in the surf. He had been shot in the hand and right leg on the first day of Operation Crimp in the Ho Bo Woods, in January, 1966. Then, on February 12, on his 251st day in Vietnam, while recuperating at Vung Tau, he got into difficulties and disappeared while swimming off Back Beach. Another soldier tried to rescue him, but was unsuccessful. Helicopters, a coastguard vessel and beach patrols searched for his body, but could find nothing. Grills became the first – and only – Australian soldier to drown in the surf during the war. But as more and more men poured into Vung Tau, and on to the beach, the Army saw that lifesavers were essential.





ARMY AFLOAT: Lifesavers from the 1ALSG club prepare their surfboat for a training session in September, 1969, while a string of boardriders wait for a wave to come along. Back row, John Green; middle row (from left) Greg Nowlan, Mick Kendal; front row, Gary Outram, Kevin Parkinson.

(Photo: Australian War Memorial, COM/69/0629/VN)

*'I look back at the surf club part as a bloody good time: We had some fun, did some good work. It was just a little oasis among all the wastage that was going on in the world.'*

*'We had this magnificent surfboat, and we'd paddle it out, and sit out the back in it, and say: 'How tough is this? We're at war!' The club, the beach, the comradeship – things like that got us through. It gave you a break from the crap side of things.'*

Ex-lifesaver John Meehan

## Chapter Nine

### The Clubbies

Geoff Schuberg, a 21-year-old national serviceman from Sydney who became a 2nd lieutenant in the Provost Corps, stood on the beach in front of the Peter Badcoe Club one day in late 1968 and was not happy with what he saw. The call had gone out for any 1ALSG men with lifesaving experience to join the club he was running, but the pre-Christmas bunch who had volunteered were hopeless. They picked up the rescue reel the wrong way 'round, couldn't put on the belt and line – clearly they knew nothing about lifesaving. "Right," he said. "If you buggers are here, you're going to learn the proper drill. I'll turn you into lifesavers."

And he did. One of those buggers, John Meehan – a nasho corporal from Victoria, just a few months younger than Schuberg – talks about his lifesaving days with affection. "We could all swim – we were all good swimmers – but it was a con job," he says. "For me, it was a bit of a joke. This order came around, saying they were looking for lifesavers, and I thought: 'This could get me out of my routine work.' So I gave it a go. You'd be down at the beach, doing something healthy, and you could learn a thing or two. The second-louie wasn't real happy with us at first, because he'd been the skipper or vice-skipper of a surf club back home, and knew what he was doing. So he got right into us, but Schuey was a decent bloke and he had us going, doing things properly in a couple of days."

The surf club recruiting drive had been prompted by a discussion at a 1ALSG commander's conference in late November, 1968, when officers assembled for the weekly briefing were told that a notice soon would be sent around – "promulgated" was the term used in the official papers – about SLSC activities. "Present rough surf conditions which will persist for some months make it necessary for patrols to man the beach during peak usage periods," pointed out Lieutenant Colonel John Stevenson. "Units are to give the club wide publicity and encourage unit members to apply for membership. In addition to meeting the practical requirement for beach patrols, I consider the surf life saving club is an extra-regimental activity which should be encouraged." Training was from 9am-noon every Sunday.

By then, the 1ALSG Surf Life Saving Club had been in operation for almost a year, and business was brisk. Meehan recalls the main task was keeping drunken soldiers from being swept into the barbed wire at the southern end of the beach, separating the Australian section from their



neighbours. "It was a really dangerous scenario, especially on Sundays. After the floor show at the Yanks' Beachcomber Club, late in the afternoon they'd stagger back and you just knew they'd get into trouble. A lot of the time we'd stop them in the shallows. There'd be soldiers going into the surf in full gear, boots and stuff, and trying to swim back to Australia. They'd just walk into the water, then start trying to swim. They'd take one stroke, then go under, take another stroke, go under again. They'd be drunk, saying things like: 'I'm going home to see my girlfriend.' We were hauling them out all the time. Some of them would be in a bad way – we'd have to pump water out of them. The hard part was getting them off the wire when they got tangled in that."

He still has scars on his right wrist from that barbed wire, though it was an after-hours injury, not from his lifesaving duty: he got snagged on the wire while trying to sneak back into the base one night. "It was pretty sharp," he says.

While soldiers in Vung Tau normally worked 6½ days a week at that stage, the lifesavers got Sunday mornings off to be on the beach, and took it in turns to be rostered for Saturday stints as well. Meehan, of the 2nd Advanced Ordnance Depot, where he was an internal auditor of stores, found another bonus. "You could spend Saturday night in town, then just front up at the club for your Sunday morning patrol without going back to your unit. If you got a mate to take your leave pass back, you could walk in along the beach in the morning." There were a few other fringe benefits, such as beach barbecues. "We had an American officer who had some link with the club, and he'd bring steak. When we knocked off, there were always a couple of slabs for us. Someone provided them – they might have come from the Badcoe club." But the job was taken seriously, and there was no drinking during lifesaving hours. "On the weekend, you'd get plenty of blokes on the beach, if they weren't in town for jig-a-jig. Being Australians, they'd rather swim in the sea than the pool though it was sickly warm water in the surf."

The club at that point had enough members to field four seven-man patrols, taking turns to watch the beach from 8am-noon and noon-4pm on Saturdays and Sundays. These part-time lifesavers had a surfboat, power boat, lookout tower, surf skis and rescue reels – even caps and costumes in the club colours of red, white and black, plus a Land Rover, cut down and painted brightly, to tow the surfboat down the beach – but Meehan believes they generally didn't get enough support from the powers-that-be. "There was heaps of equipment, but not enough of it was in working order. The motorised boat was out of order for some time. They didn't seem to have any system to get things repaired. The government only considered the repair and maintenance on their own equipment. The club wasn't a priority. They didn't care about it so long as no-one drowned. This was a huge Army base, with all sorts of tradesmen, so how hard would it have been to find someone to repair things?"

However clearly the Army didn't want anyone to drown. "A problem in beach safety has arisen," said the weekly report from one of the commander's conferences in early 1969. "The new boat master is not a qualified lifesaver and is only an average swimmer. Units may be required to provide assistance." It didn't mean assistance if the poor chap was drowning, but assistance with capable back-up. It was announced that Schuberg was looking for help so would be conducting a survey around units "on behalf of the commander". Obviously the little club had friends in high places.

Ever since the 1ALSG base had started taking shape, with officially-approved swim trips to the stretch of beach which Australia made its very own, the military mind had been looking for ways to keep the men safe. As early as April 30, 1966, at the very start of the Aussie build-up in



*ON PATROL, on the beach: Army Minister Phillip Lynch checks out the surf club's reel in April, 1969, with 2nd Lieutenant G.E. Schuberg, Signaller A.C. Dungey, Sapper J.L. Zaward, Corporal J.A. Meehan, and Corporal B.S. Van Der Vlag. In the background are the minister's private secretary, Pat Wagner, and Lieutenant Colonel Graham Thompson. (Photo: Australian War Memorial, LES/69/0223/VN)*

Vung Tau, an officer was assigned the task of finding rope and lifesaving reels. Having brought all these men to Vietnam, it wouldn't be a good idea to lose any in the surf. After all, the drowning of Private Grills in early 1966 had made front-page news back in Australia.

So in May that year, 1ALSG commander Lieutenant Colonel Rouse issued "Instructions for Swimming", putting in writing "the conditions governing swimming by Australian troops ... applicable to all ranks". And few swim spots can have been as well protected. "Duty lifesavers will carry personal weapons and filled magazines," said Rouse's orders, and the men also had to have an assault boat ready on the beach. "Swimming will not take place unless two qualified lifesavers are present on duty, an ambulance is in attendance, two white flags are displayed indicating the swimming area. While swimming is in progress, one lifesaver will remain in the tower and be alert at all times for signs of distress.

"One lifesaver will patrol the waterfront to keep swimmers within the marked area, ensure that swimmers do not go out deeper than waist height (or the marker buoys when installed), render rapid assistance to any person in difficulties. The security guard will be armed with a personal weapon, be located in the tower, continuously observe the beach area, be prepared to give defensive fire in the event of attack upon persons swimming."

These gun-toting lifesavers – later it was stated that they should be other ranks, and "need not be qualified lifesavers, but they must be strong swimmers" – had the job of checking the



beach before any swimmers arrived, putting up white flags at each end of the swimming zone if it was safe, or declaring the beach closed and erecting black flags if it was considered unsafe. The only stretches of beach where Diggers could swim were the United States zone, about 100m south of the Republic of Korea R&C Centre, open from about 9am to 5pm, and what was called the "Australian swimming area", open from 2pm to 5pm daily. "This may be extended as more troops become available for safety duties." The 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit had the task of organising equipment and rostering lifesavers from various units on a weekly basis.

Late the following month, June, 1966, even more precautions were added: the unit providing the lifesavers each week also had to send a Land Rover for use in an emergency, and the 2nd Field Ambulance was told to have a medic "with appropriate medical kit" stationed on the beach every day during swimming hours. By then, 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight had the task of arranging the equipment and duty roster, as well as being responsible for cleanliness and tidiness of the beach area. The system was still to have two "beach lifeguards" with personal weapons, plus the airmen had to patrol the water with an assault boat whenever swimming was in progress. And with all these safeguards in place, the swimming period eventually was extended until 5.30pm each day.

Perhaps the Army wasn't being over-cautious, because the calm-looking waters of Vung Tau claimed many, many lives. As Lieutenant Colonel Chambers reported, on January 14, 1967, there was the 27th drowning in the area since July 1 the previous year. All except one death had been in off-limits areas. And when there was another drowning on the American beach in late 1967 it became obvious that better safety was needed because by then the newly-opened Badcoe club was attracting more men to the surf. Immediately a joint Australian-US lifesaving patrol was proposed, and a call for any soldiers with lifesaving experience went out in December, 1967.

Help was on the way, even if it was only a handful of Diggers looking for an agreeable job. National serviceman David Cripps had arrived in Vietnam the previous month and tells how, after a stint in Nui Dat, he volunteered to go to "a place called Vung Tau". He says: "I was always told by wiser people 'never volunteer', but being a young fella with a sense of adventure did anyway." He and a few mates were sent to 1ASLG, and placed in D&E Platoon to guard the base and do other work.

"Most of our duties were pretty boring – patrolling the perimeters of the base, erecting a barbed wire fence along the beachfront and in the surf, filling sandbags, checking for contraband stuff that the Vietnamese workers on the base were always trying to knock off." Cripps remembers his boss, Captain Peter Mazengarb, as a sports lover. "A great way to get out of the base and do something different was to play in his footy team (rugby union) against any team that wanted to have us on. I think we played the Yanks at one time – that makes me an international.

"Three of us approached Captain Mazengarb and warned him of the considerable dangers the surf would present for the Diggers coming down from Nui Dat on R&C. The good captain thought this was a great idea and we set about forming the Vung Tau Surf Club ... One of the guys, Chris Sharper, had a bronze medallion which was eventually sent over from Australia by his mum; Jim Bell and I told fibs and said ours were on the way."

Army records show that the first meeting to organise a surf club "to patrol the beach at weekends and possibly at lunchtime" was on Friday, December 22, 1967. Major Mark Hulse asked all units to encourage men to attend, and said those who signed up "will get certain privileges". More volunteers – such as bronze certificate holders Privates David Scott, Robert

Manning and N.A. Bryden from the 8th Field Ambulance – came forward but the inaugural meeting was not a great success, with only 12 of the 20 men nominated for the club showing up. This was not good enough, said base commander Lieutenant Colonel Ian Gilmore: "A similar occurrence is not to happen."

In his routine orders on January 30, 1968, he announced that a club "to be known as the Australian Surf Life Saving Club, ALSG, Vung Tau" was being formed within 1ASLG. "The primary purpose of the club is to patrol and provide life saving measures at the Australian beach, Vung Tau, on Sundays, special occasions and, possibly, each day, from 1200 to 1400 hrs. A secondary aim of the club is to assist US and RVN authorities, by request, if and when our life-saving resources permit."

Surfboards and rescue equipment arrived, and the handful of clubbies were set. Cripps says: "I was a very keen body surfer prior to being called up and surfed on the beach in Vungers every opportunity I had ... We went down to the beach every day with our boards, Eskey of beer, beach umbrella, reel and eventually a surfboat that only one of us had any experience riding. Very few people surfed the beach and those that did went to the Yank club down the beach 500 metres, which was out of bounds to us Diggers but had a bar with cold beer and pretty girls with very short dresses." However the Australian beach became more popular when the R in C (rest-in-country) accommodation blocks built behind the Peter Badcoe Club became operational. "And no, we never rescued anyone," says Cripps.

"This lifestyle sounds idyllic but in fact we were all turning into alcoholics and getting burnt into a crisp. The lifestyle was extremely hectic as we would go AWOL every second night and disappear into town for a bit of recreation, getting back in time for a nap and a few beers on the beach. In April I eventually got the transfer I was looking for and went back to Nui Dat and served as a member of the 3rd Battalion just in time for the battle of Balmoral. Shit happens."

In May, 1968, Lieutenant Colonel Gilmore launched yet another surf club recruiting drive, sending all unit commanders a notice which said: "As you are no doubt aware this club was formed some months ago to provide trained patrols for the Australian Beach, but due to postings to other areas and RTA (return to Australia), the number of trained members of the club has been reduced considerably.



*TAKING time off: Some of the first lifesavers around December, 1967 – Phil Mawson, Jim Bell, Warren Taylor and Chris Sharper – enjoy a drink at the Badcoe club.*  
(Photo: David Cripps)



"You should make these facts known to troops under your command and encourage members to enrol. The only qualifications required are the ability to swim in surf and a willingness to learn basic R&R and boat drills. ['Rescue and resuscitation' in this case, not 'rest and recreation'.]

"Training is conducted from 0730-0930 each Monday and Friday; certain members, as they become qualified, are nominated for beach patrols each Sunday. Obviously the greater number of trained members available the less patrols each individual is required to undertake.

"You are to institute follow-up action to ensure any potential member is encouraged to join this important activity when he marches in to your unit."

Queenslander Mike Sheahan, a qualified lifesaver before going to Vietnam with 17 Construction Squadron, spent most of his time at Nui Dat, but found himself helping with the Vung Tau beach patrol a couple of times early in 1969. "Instead of another day's work, we'd do the lifesaving," he says. "There wasn't much surf but you'd keep an eye on people swimming around the wire. Your main duty was handing out surfboards. Guys would come up and say: 'Can I have a board?' I don't remember even signing them out. You'd be lucky if you had half a dozen people in the water, surfing."

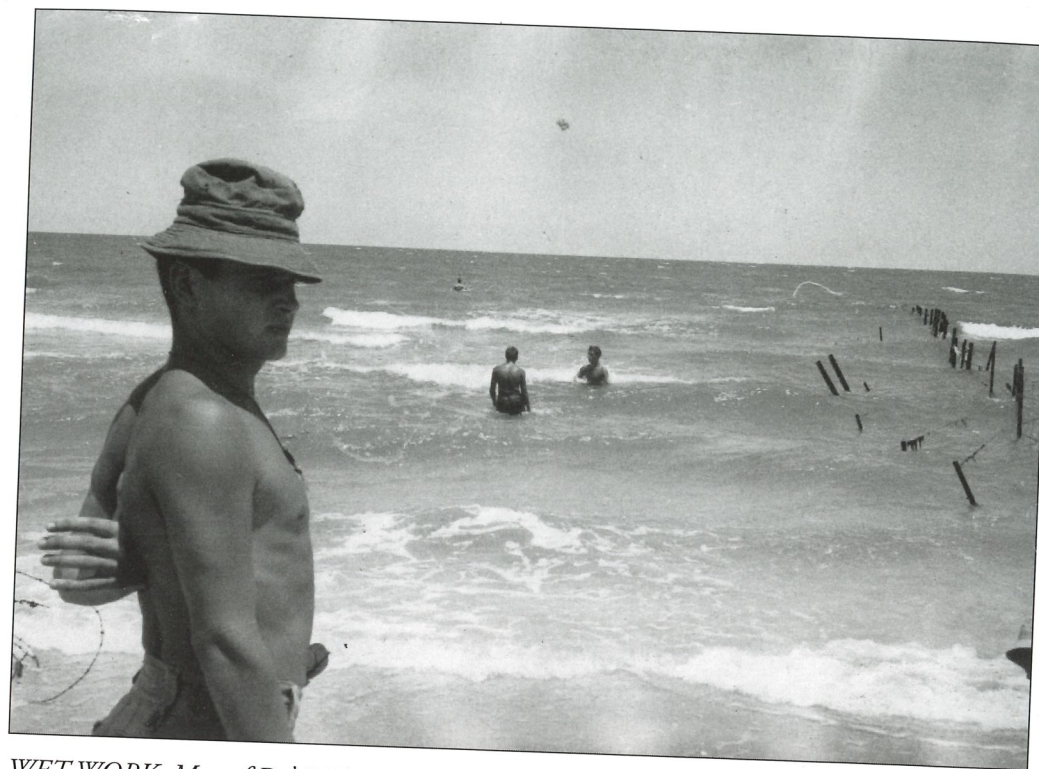
Water and lifesaving obviously were still on Sheahan's mind when he went back to Nui Dat, so he and some mates decided to form their own surf club for fun. It was a fixture on the base's dam every Sunday afternoon for several weeks around the third quarter of 1969. "The dam was right on our wire, not far from our tent lines, and we'd go down there to keep cool. There were about half a dozen of us. We made a raft and paddled that out, painted the club's name on some tyres. When anybody else came down, we said we were the Nui Dat Surf Club."

Of course it was too good to last. The Army decided that the "surf club" on the dam had to close. Sheahan says: "They were a bit sceptical about safety, and we heard several reasons – it wasn't secure because it was outside the wire, they reckoned, and someone could manage to sneak up under cover of darkness and put a mine in. Also they were concerned about herbicide."

Meanwhile, down at the beach, the little Vung Tau club would prosper and falter in a regular boom-bust cycle over the years. Membership would gradually dwindle, then pick up when some keen officer arrived and managed to get things organised again. One of them was John Bradford, a nasho who became a 2nd lieutenant then a full lieutenant, the administrative officer of Headquarters Company, 1ALSG. He had been a surfboard rider, not a lifesaver, before being called up but his brothers were top Sydney lifesavers, and that was good enough for the Army, so he found himself in charge of the lifesaving club in 1970. "I guess I was the logical one to take it over," he says. "It was just a logistical task, finding people who were qualified to be lifeguards and making sure someone was down there every day."

Never mind marksmanship or junglecraft – surely one of the Army's more unusual questionnaires of the war was the one which asked: "Can you row a surfboat?" This was part of Bradford's surf club recruiting drive, sending out membership application forms. The Australian War Memorial files still have 15 of them, unused. Looks like he was ready to accept all offers, because in answer to the question "Into which category do you class yourself as a swimmer in surf?" candidates could answer "strong", "better than average", "average", "weak", or "can't".

Bradford says: "We didn't even really mount patrols. At weekends we might have had three or four lifeguards on the beach, but other times I struggled to get one down there. My brief was to have at least one lifeguard on the beach during daylight hours all the time. I'd come up with a roster, and I think we had quite a few men, but I'd have arguments with the different officers



*WET WORK: Men of D&E Platoon erecting the barbed wire entanglement out into the water, around Christmas, 1967.*  
(Photo: David Cripps)

around the place who didn't want to release their troops sometimes, because everyone was very busy. I'd be on the phone pleading with them to let Private So-and-so have the day off at the beach. Sometimes I'd have to go to one of my superiors and say would you mind speaking to Major So-and-so to get Trooper So-and-so on the beach today, and it would take a little bit of doing.

"The club was a social outlet for a lot of people, and there was a bit of fun. Because I was a national service officer, I never felt that I was cut off from the other ranks to the extent that some of the other officers might have been. Some of the private soldiers and others, particularly in the surf club, became quite good friends. When we were off duty I was able to mix with them and relax with them. I remember a number of times we had barbecues down on the beach.

"People who haven't been in the Army, or been to a war, probably don't appreciate that there are some good times to be had ... There were always lighter moments." Unfortunately there was also a tragic side. "When I was in Vietnam we were losing quite a lot of Australians each week, and Americans were going down in the hundreds.

"The surf was pretty mild there most of the time, so it wasn't as if we had dangerous conditions. The most dangerous situation was somebody coming out of the Badcoe club and deciding to go swimming. As an officer, I guess I had the status to ask people to behave themselves. I'm sure there were some rescues, and there was some supervision of the beach, but I think it was as much as anything a social outlet for people who had surf club connections – a place to have a little bit of home away from home."



Bradford tells how the lifesavers used to “play around” with the surfboat – which by coincidence had been donated by Sydney’s Collaroy Surf Life Saving Club, where his brothers were members, and the club of which he became president after the war. He also remembers an old line and reel: “I don’t know that it was in such great working condition, because it probably wasn’t maintained that well. So I don’t think it would have been too serious an option to use in rescues.”

When Captain Terry Forde took over responsibility late in 1970, things were at a low point: the surfboat couldn’t even be found. “It wasn’t much of a club at the time. In fact the club had gone – stopped operating – and we re-started it,” says Forde. “I was with 102 Field Workshop, and we started the club up again with volunteers from the workshop. We probably got some more members from the ordnance depot – it was always difficult to co-ordinate rostering. I think we got dispensations from work sometimes early on the Sunday.

“There were about a dozen members in my time. A lot of the men were volunteered, but others were interested, and keen to join. I got the job because I could swim. I guess my boss went to a CO’s meeting, and when they wanted to start the club up again, he mentioned someone he knew who could do it. So I suppose he volunteered me – that was usually how things worked in those days, but I didn’t mind. I enjoyed the club and it was good fun.”

Once put in charge of the club, his first task was to find some equipment. “There were three surf reels, but the surfboat was in a state of disrepair. It was in one of the units, not in the boatshed. We had to search around to find it, then get the boat repaired. It was a very unwieldy thing, so heavy after it was repaired with fibreglass. It weighed twice as much as it should have. But we used to take the boat out and row it around like we knew something about it.”

This was a club run by the book – Forde got an instruction book from the lifesaving association in Australia, and used it to train the men to what he presumed was bronze medallion

standard. “We used to do drills on the beach, all the lifesaving things. We even got a swimming costume designed and sent up. None of us were ex-lifesavers, so it was all from the book, and having watched surf clubs in action when we were growing up.

“We all practised being on the line, and on the belt, and as the patient. That involved wading out as far as you could go then kneeling down so it looked like you were in trouble. If we had a crew spare on the beach, we’d go to the Americans and give them lessons with the reel. I think we left one with them, but I don’t think they ever used it. They couldn’t get out past the waves with the belt, even though there wasn’t much in the way of surf. The Americans even had a paid lifeguard on their beach, where we were all volunteers.”



*RARE RELIC: The IALSG Surf Life Saving Club's cloth badge which some of the early members had made in Vung Tau. (Badge: John Meehan)*



*A DONATED runabout on the sand just inside the wire. The sign shows whether the beach is open for the various activities: swimming, surfing, boating, skiing, yachting. (Photo: Paul Haw)*

The beach was popular in those days (“There could be hundreds of people on the beach on a weekend. Other days, there’d usually be dozens.”) and the self-taught Aussie lifesavers were kept busy. “We often rescued people – there were plenty of rescues,” says Forde. “A lot of American Negro soldiers who couldn’t swim would get into trouble, even though the water wasn’t deep. A lot of the ‘rescues’ were just someone going out there and helping them get back in. But if there wasn’t anyone from the surf club on duty, the beach was closed.

“On Sunday afternoons, everybody would be down there. People even used to fly down from Saigon to the beach, because it was patrolled, and they could have a swim in the ocean, perhaps go to a concert. They’d come down in the courier aircraft, and fly back late on the Sunday. They’d be people like embassy staff – they were a slightly higher plane than the average soldier, so we didn’t have much to do with them. The Diggers who came down from the jungle, from Nui Dat, would spend their days on the beach.”

Before being called up, and becoming a driver with 5 Company RAASC Workshop in 1971, Clyde Poulton had been not just a NSW lifesaver, but a beach inspector. “I got there fairly late in the war, when they had started pulling us out, and one of the first things I learned was that there was a surf club,” he says. “Somebody told me about it, and I remember saying: ‘A bloody surf club? You’ve got to be joking!’

“It may have been more structured in the early years, but it was a very loose relationship while I was there. It was very much ad hoc and voluntary. The flags were up, and they had a reel, but that was about it. I still had my white beach inspector shorts, and most Sundays I was able to



sneak down and help out. There would be people getting hurt on boards and boats. On the beach there would be tens of people, not hundreds – probably the most I saw was 25.”

Poultou tells of being frightened by sea snakes, being bitten by sea lice, catching some waves on a board, doing some body surfing. “It wasn’t a classic beach – a bit dirty, wind-blown. It would be difficult to get into trouble, unless you were drunk, and a lot of people were.

“The water was warm as a bath, with wind chop, so if you were a surfer it was a disappointment. The waves would have been lucky to be 2ft. But after one particular storm, I remember some nice little lefts.

“It was a bit surreal, the whole thing. You’d be lying there and out to sea you’d see *HMAS Hobart* shelling the Long Hai Hills. For a 21-year-old, it was weird.”

Trying to organise the club around this time was Captain Chris Jones, administration officer of 2AOD, who took over the task of training lifesavers and getting a surf squad to patrol the beach in May, 1971. He says: “As we could not find sufficient soldiers from the local units who held SLSC qualifications, the intention was to train some personnel to bronze medallion standard, have them tested and then put them on beach duty.”

He wrote to his former lifesaving club, Somerton in South Australia, and they got the Adelaide HQ of the association to send over copies of the official how-to “Blue Book” so the budding lifesavers, in their black trunks with a red stripe down the leg, could learn the proper techniques. “But in the end it was a disappointment for the blokes who did the training,” says Jones. “We couldn’t get permission to bring a SLSC rep into country to oversight the testing and as a consequence the whole thing pretty much dissolved when the soldiers saw that they wouldn’t gain their bronze qualification.

“Then a soldier was appointed as a lifeguard to open and close the beach and manage the sports equipment – surfboards, yachts, etc – and he used a few of his off-duty unit mates to help him patrol the beach, as well as with some back-up from the physical training instructors who ran the Harold Holt Memorial Pool at the Rec Centre.

“Unless he, or a PTI, was available to man the beach, then the beach gate was kept closed. As I had an SLSC instructor’s certificate, I was given the extra-regimental appointment of checking on the lifeguards on the beach. And a very ‘onerous’ extra duty it was too, having to knock-off and go down to check beach conditions and as well randomly do spot checks that the lifeguard was performing his duties!”

Jones recalls “a few” rescues. “Mostly blokes who were down there on the booze and went for a swim when they shouldn’t have. Most of the guys were used to looking after each other as soldiers, so that’s what they did on the beach.” Then one day a Korean nurse was swept into the Australian zone from the other side of the wire barrier, and needed mouth to mouth resuscitation. “The Korean people who with her were dragging her out of the water, but didn’t know what to do,” says Jones.

Typical of the soldiers who found themselves guarding swimmers on the beach in 1971 was Victorian Chris Barrett, a lance corporal in 85 Transport Platoon. Thanks to his SLSC bronze medallion, he was rostered as a lifesaver one day every fortnight, a welcome break from his usual job driving a truck. “There was never a crowd on the beach, the temperature was around 85, and the surf would have been lucky to be a metre on a good day. But it was quite a nice little ride – you could go 50m or so. It could be glassy, and the water was shallow with a shelving bottom.”

*‘Duty lifesavers will carry personal weapons and filled magazines ... One lifesaver will patrol the waterfront to keep swimmers within the marked area, ensure that swimmers do not go out deeper than waist height ... The security guard will be armed with a personal weapon, be located in the tower, continuously observe the beach area, be prepared to give defensive fire in the event of attack upon persons swimming.’*

Instructions for Swimming, May, 1966, issued by Lieutenant Colonel David Rouse



*READY FOR ACTION: The lookout tower, soon dubbed the Eye-Full Tower, and the pink cut-down Land Rover used to tow the surfboat and other boats across the beach. (Photo: Gary Lovell)*



He recalls a supply of surfboards ranging from then-outdated malibus down to short boards. "Occasionally you'd get two or three people borrowing boards. There'd be half a dozen or so to choose from, and the NCO would sign the boards out. I found one around 7ft that suited me.

"Basically my work consisted of riding surfboards all day."

Everyone tells how the Vietnam War wasn't like any other. And obviously lifesaving there was just as different from everything that had gone before. Perhaps because of the nature of the conflict, perhaps because of the era, there was a constant struggle to find enough lifesavers, either already qualified or keen to learn. This was the opposite of the situation during World War II: from the beaches of New Guinea to the Pacific islands, in the Middle East and even England, lifesaving thrived. Clubs were formed in some of the most unlikely places, droves of qualified lifesavers and officials took part, lives were saved, huge surf carnivals were staged. The base at Vung Tau, with 1300 men on hand, often couldn't scrape up a patrol of six men, yet in late 1941, Aussie soldiers were able to stage a carnival at Tel Aviv, with more than 160 entrants in the open surf race, 24 teams in the rescue and resuscitation drill and 28 teams for the beach relay. Cronulla lifesaver Warrant Officer Rupert Michaelis, after leaving the siege of Tobruk, wrote home: "Palestine is chock-full of surfers." Lifesaving in the Middle East was such a success that at least four major carnivals were held in 1941-42 – one even had a surf race for female nurses; one was attended by General Sir Thomas Blamey, with Lady Olga Blamey presenting prizes, looking fetching in her uniform.

As far back as World War I, a mere decade after the first surf lifesaving clubs appeared in Sydney in 1906-07, Aussie soldiers had a club going in the Middle East. A photograph of a life buoy from the 1st Light Horse Regiment's "Palestine Surf Club" on a Mediterranean beach near Hkan Yunis on the Sinai Peninsula, has survived. The Australian War Memorial's Rebecca Britt, curator of the *Sport and War* exhibition, says: "Whenever they were near water, and it was a recreational area, the Army would set up a lifesaving club. The clubs gave the men something to



*HELPING hand: An Aussie lifesaving reel, donated by the 1ALSG surf club, stands ready outside the lifeguard hut on the US stretch of beach ... but the Australians suspect the Americans never used it. (Photo: Tom Woods)*

*'Present rough surf conditions which will persist for some months make it necessary for patrols to man the beach during peak usage periods ... In addition to meeting the practical requirement for beach patrols, I consider the surf life saving club is an extra-regimental activity which should be encouraged.'*

Lieutenant Colonel John Stevenson, 1ALSG commander's conference, November 29, 1968

do, and kept them safe. It was also about winning the hearts and minds of the locals – by holding a carnival they could put on a show for the locals, integrate with the people."

The 1949 book *Surf: Australians Against the Sea*, by lifesaving historian C. Bede Maxwell, tells of one colourful Army lifesaving character, Private Jack Wilson, ex-Victorian professional middleweight boxing champion, one of the squad watching a beach near Gaza in WW2. He apparently relished being given a whistle and the job of keeping all swimmers, many of them British, between the flags. He told of having to swim out to one disobedient English group and announcing: "You swim between them there flags, see, or I'll hook you out, so I will!" Private Wilson went on: "And they sneaks a look at me and sees I mean it, and up they goes and gets back where they belonged, 'tween the flags."

He had similar success on the beach, and reckoned his finest moment was whistling back the depot commander, the second in command and a brace of majors. "See me make the trumps get between the flags! Strike me pink – first time I ever made a 'brass hat' do what I told him!"

For some, lifesaving wasn't such fun. Even in the Changi prisoner-of-war camp, Diggers formed a club and trained in secret for the coveted bronze medallion – their rescue rope was a clothes line, and the reel was a stolen Japanese signals drum.

Lifesavers serving in the RAAF stationed in England asked for their own sport facilities, like cricketers, footballers and tennis players had, so a hotel at Newquay in Cornwall became a "Surf Leave Camp". The men organised carnivals on a local beach, attracting crowds of up to 5000.

Over in the Solomon Islands, by mid-1945 a club at Torokina Beach had 280 active members, more than 100 of them bronze medallion holders. When they staged a surf carnival, over 5000 spectators turned up. Aitape, New Guinea, had eight lifesaving clubs.

In 1945, the 9th Division put on a surf carnival at Labuan Island, Borneo, with none other than Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, supreme commander South East Asia, on hand. So no wonder the 1ALSG clubbies felt shortchanged when the grandest dignitary who came to visit was politician Phil Lynch.



*'Remember  
that the Vietnamese  
women of the staff  
are here to serve  
meals, clean your  
quarters and serve  
beer: and nothing  
else.'*

Instructions for soldiers on stand-down  
in Vung Tau, January 9, 1970



PICTURED here wearing her *ao dai* beside the Harold Holt Memorial Pool in 1970, Nguyen Thi Sinh (now Sinh Middleton) started working at the Peter Badcoe Club as a 15-year-old waitress and soon moved to the orderly room as a clerk-typist, interpreter and co-ordinator for the 300-plus Vietnamese employees at the club and R&C Centre.

She says the Vietnamese workers liked the Australians and all say that was the happiest period of their lives. They loved the Aussie sense of humour, and missed the Australians terribly when they went home. She

says the Australians treated them as equals, and behaved well.

Sinh also worked with the Americans when they took over the club in 1972, and tells of them treating her very well. Though other Vietnamese might not feel the same about some of the Americans, she says, that wasn't her experience.

The difference between the Aussie Digger and the Yank GI, she says, was that the Americans were paid a lot more and would splash their money around. The Aussies were a lot tighter, more down to earth.

(Photo: Stan and Sinh Middleton collection)

## Chapter 10

### *Rules 'n' Regulations*

It's a surfer's dream to have your very own beach, with outsiders chased away. And so it was on Australia's stretch of Back Beach. Ralph Darlington, a former major who had the imposing title of 1ALSG deputy assistant adjutant and quartermaster-general ("I was like the mayor of Vung Tau," he says of his 1968-69 job) remembers the Badcoe zone fondly. "It was a lovely beach," he says. "The only thing was, you had to watch out for funny-looking boats, though the local fishermen would generally keep well clear. One came in too close once so a gun Jeep was sent down to rip off a few rounds. The twin-mounted Jeep MGs chewed up the sea in front of them, and they got the message."

Not that gunplay was common. "Badcoe was very relaxed," says Darlington. "It was meant to be a home away from home, and it was a lovely place. The troops wanted a place to relax. It was built to take an infantry company at a time from Nui Dat, to take them out of the line and give them a break. Soldiers used to enjoy getting into town after time in the bush. It was a place they could go to have a drink and have a swim.

"The OC used to say he ran the roughest bar in the South China Sea, but actually it was run very well. We had wire all around the place, and strongpoints along the beach. Soldiers would be out after curfew, drinking at the Korean bar, then try to sneak in over the wire.

"The beach was patrolled, but you could stroll down there if you had time off. There was a halfday a week stand-down, if you weren't busy. With our mob, in headquarters, we'd try to give them Sunday afternoon off.

"I might have got down to the beach there a few times," says Darlington, and a particular incident stands out. "There was one day when I was on the beach with my boss, the lieutenant colonel, and another major. We were just lying around when I noticed someone out on one of the sailboards seemed to be not getting anywhere, not coming in. I used to be a bit of a yachtie so the other major and I got a sailing boat and went out to him. I said: 'You right, mate?' He told us, very sheepishly: 'I can't quite get back in.' So we towed him back to the beach." In swimming trunks, on an Aussie beach, all ranks become equals.

Russ Morison, a 25 Supply Platoon corporal in 1969-70, sent to Vungers for R&C leave, witnessed a keep-out warning like the one Darlington saw. "You'd go there in the mornings and



see the duty officer in his gun Jeep firing his M60 at the sampans," he says. "They were probably only fishing boats, but he'd give them the message: 'This is Australian territory, so rack off.'"

Ex-nasho Mike Chudiak is another beachgoer who recalls the occasional angry shot being fired. "One day there was a sampan just sitting there off our beach. It didn't look friendly, so the boys from D&E Platoon came down and fired a few shots across its bows from an M60 mounted on a Jeep. It got the message and moved away."

On the other hand, he tells how welcoming the Badcoe zone could be if you were an Aussie. "Being at the club was safer than going into town. You could have a game of pool, a couple of beers, and chill out. It was a great place. There was also the R&C Centre in Vung Tau itself, and the men had the choice of either that or Badcoe. Most chose the Badcoe club because it was a lot more free and you didn't have to worry about anything. It was friendly territory."

However keen Gold Coast surfer Lance Grimstone, on a rare break from his Nui Dat-based artillery unit in late 1970, learned that things could turn unfriendly if your love of waves led you to stray. He found small surf in front of the Badcoe club at the start of a two-day break in Vung Tau, so was eager to ride some more the next morning. "I got there early, stamping my feet on the ground waiting for the bloke to unlock the shed, then grabbed a board because the water was actually fairly glassy," he says. The swell that had been coming in the previous day was still there, but the waves looked better-shaped further down the beach in the American sector. "I just paddled around the barbed wire and was taking these rides, probably 50m. They were just little 2ft things, but a reasonable little shape."

"About a half-hour into my session, a Jeep trundles down from way at the other end of the beach, parks itself just short of the tide line and starts to announce: 'Now hear this. Now hear this. You are in a prohibited zone.' It went on for the best part of an hour, and I'm going: 'Get out of your Jeep, you lazy bastards. You could walk out here and bloody arrest me.' They had a 30-calibre on the back of the Jeep so they could have done some damage. Probably they didn't have any ammo for it."

"They stayed there, and kept telling me to get out of the area. I'd just wave at them. I'd be no more than 30 or 40 metres from them. All they had to do was get their feet wet, but they didn't bother. All I remember is, I just paddled to the better wave, as any surfer would do. It was actually a good little wave."

Likewise, 7RAR's Kev Gillett remembers finding himself on the wrong side of the barbed wire which ran down the sand and into the water. "I went out on a board one day and the current pushed me along the beach, past the barbed wire, into the ROK, Korean, zone," he says. "That scared me, because they tended to shoot first and ask questions later. So I paddled my arse off getting out of there."

The Australians, too, sometimes erred on the side of caution. Old hands laugh about the tale of the corporal who was doing sentry duty on the beachfront one dark night, and saw vague figures moving up the sand – Charlie! – so opened fire. Daylight revealed that he had killed four dogs. Not that the poor creatures would necessarily have fared any better if they'd made it into the base. The minutes of one commander's weekly briefing in 1970 contain an interesting item: "Dog shoot: Efforts will be made to destroy all dogs in 1ALSG area on afternoon 16 May 70."

However every effort was made to protect swimmers and surfers. "The big issue was safety," says Bruce Young who, as a captain, was second-in-charge of the Amenities Unit for most of 1969. "We had one bloke who got lost while I was there. He fell off the back of the ski boat,



*SAFE HAVEN: Seen from the Badcoe club verandah, the gate leading to the swimming-surfing beach, surrounded by barbed wire. "It was a lovely beach," says Ralph Darlington. (Photo: 1st Aust Fd Hospital Assoc –Vampire)*

and by the time they turned around, they couldn't find him. So the alarm was raised, they put a couple of choppers up in the air, and everyone ended up on the beach, searching. At one stage we had about 20 officers looking intelligently out to sea, hoping they could spot him.

"I was thinking: I wonder who'll get court martialled over this? Everyone was there. I remember the colonel standing on the side of the China Sea and asking: 'Who's responsible for this?' Since I was probably the only captain there, I thought I'd be the one who would cop it. It was getting darker, and I'm thinking: We're in strife here. But eventually a local fisherman picked him up a few kilometres down the coast, and everybody breathed a sigh of relief."

Most times, though, his was "a bloody good job", says Young. And it was one he almost didn't get. "When I arrived, there was a Kiwi guy on the same plane, and he shafted me so he got the Amenities Unit job and got me shoved off to the bush. I thought I was a bit old for the jungle, around 33, not looking forward to stepping on a land mine. In Nui Dat I got a staff job, and after four months the brigadier said: 'You've done a good job. Is there anything we can do for you?' So I said I'd like the Badcoe posting. It was quite a comfy job, not one of those jobs you skite about among all the other fellows on Anzac Day."

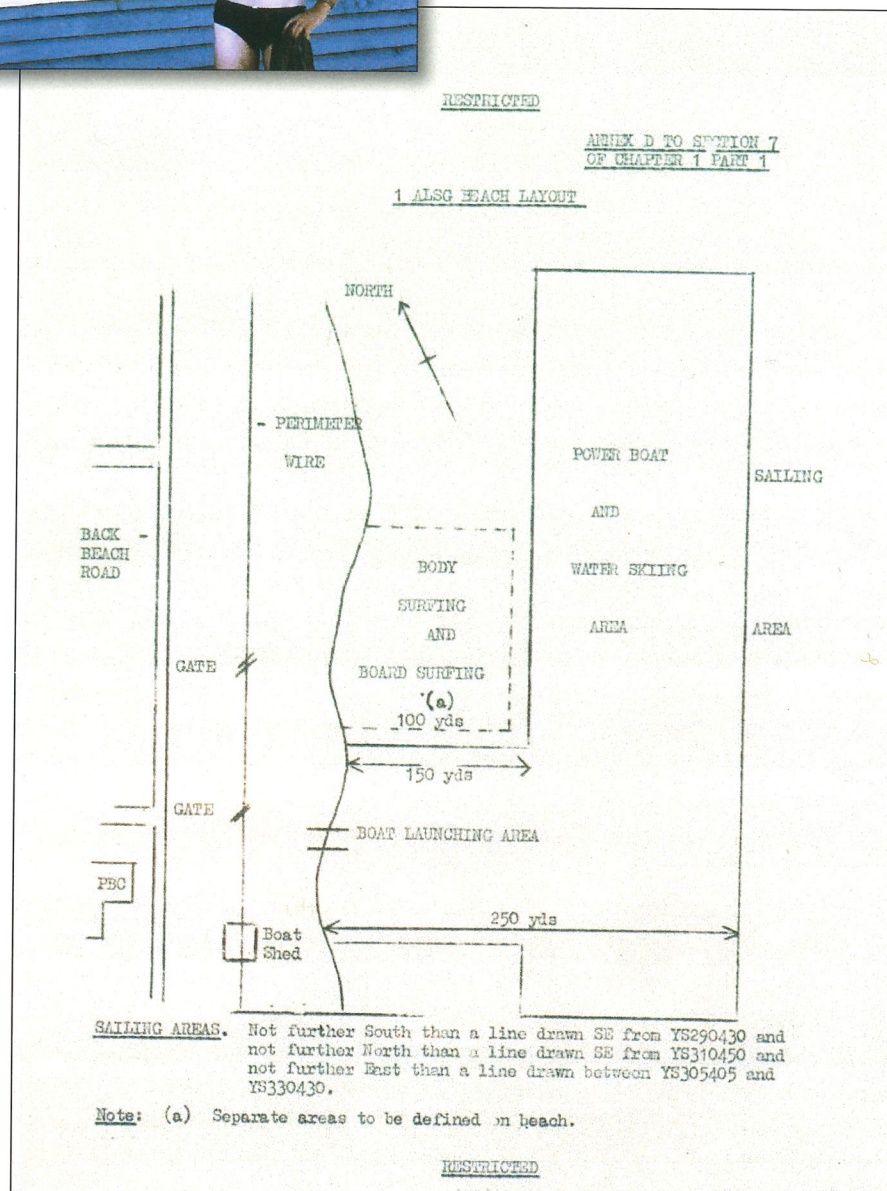
He says the club's purpose was to keep soldiers out of harm's way. "It provided facilities for the guys to come down from the bush to let their hair down for a couple of days. And no doubt about it, the theory was that you'd encourage the guys to drink in camp, rather than go into town. This way, if they got pissed, someone could just roll them into bed. If they got a bit exuberant, at least they were within the Army family. They were among their mates, so nothing was going to happen to them. In town, soldiers would stand out with their short haircuts, and could get in trouble."

"So the idea was to make the place as comfortable and welcoming as you can. We used to show movies every night, and that was relatively popular. Maybe 50 or 100 would turn up."





DO'S AND DON'TS: Paul Asbury beside a prominent warning sign on the beach gear shed. (Photo: Paul Asbury)



THE standing orders issued in October, 1968, marked "restricted", covered every detail of the 1ALSG base – what to do in an attack, passwords, ammunition, and even where to go surfing. The map, Annex D to Section 7 of Chapter 1 Part 1 showed, in the centre, the portion of beach reserved for body and board surfing. The Peter Badcoe Club (marked "PBC") is at lower left.

There was a budget of \$2000 or \$3000 a month to spend "so we could feed the guys pretty well. They didn't like the American steak because it was too tenderised, so we'd get rump steak from Australia, and frozen meat pies. We even made meat pies once. We tried to lift the standard of meals so the soldiers got a better deal while they were away from the bush."

It was a busy unit, Young says, but usually pretty relaxed. "There was no running around and saluting everybody. In the main, it was easy going. We were in uniform, but civvy clothes were the order for the guys, for the Diggers."

"Units were responsible for their own discipline, and that worked well. If someone got out of line, usually their own officers or sergeants would step in and sort things out. In the months I was there, there would have been only half a dozen blues. There were only a couple of times it got to the stage where we had to call the provosts."

After medevac from Malaya, Lyall Guley was classed as HO ("home only") by the Army, but couldn't resist the invitation to go to Vietnam in 1969 to manage the Badcoe club and R&C Centre in Vung Tau. This former staff sergeant with the Australian Services Canteen Organisation says: "They said: 'We're having a lot of trouble with this job, would you mind going?' It was the first time I ever volunteered for a job, and the last, and I was in the Army for 22½ years. The Badcoe club was the biggest job I ever took on."

In his day, there were about 20 Australians on the staff, with a major in command, a physical training instructor sergeant in charge of the boatshed and pool, "and lots of Vietnamese women, girls in the bars and cleaning". He says: "I never had any trouble with the Diggers. Well, only when the guys got a bit drunk ... Unless there was a show on, the guys would have a shower then head into Vung Tau and the birds there."

"It was well funded, and we never seemed to be short of anything. We had to keep it run along military lines, and had to maintain a bit of discipline, because you weren't sure whether you'd get mortared at any time. It was lit up so well at night it would have been an easy target."

News of this refuge from the war reached Australia's allies. "The Americans used to come out to the Badcoe because they liked our beer," says Young. "They were very amenable, and the odd American would come and stay. We had a sort of relationship with them; it was pretty open slather. Occasionally we'd find an American Jeep they'd left in the car park, and forgotten about. At one stage we must have had about a dozen of their Jeeps roaming about the camp, and we had to ask them to come and take them all back."

"At times, I'm sure about a third of the people around the pool would be Americans. But once they were in civvies you had no way of knowing unless they opened their mouth."

However the upper echelon grew unhappy. Near the end of Young's tour, in November, 1969, HQ of Australian Force Vietnam received a message from 1ALSG commander Colonel Max Simkin: "Concern is being felt at the increasing use of Australian beach facilities by US personnel, particularly on Sundays."

"Agreement has been reached with local US forces that US use of the Australian beach and related facilities may only be by personal invitation or, in some cases, by special approval. This also applies to Australian use of the US beach and facilities."

"Normal entry into the 1ALSG area can be controlled by gate guards, however, on Sundays, helicopters from areas outside Vung Tau convey numerous US servicemen to 1ALSG without prior clearance from HQ 1ALSG. Some units run a ferry service to St Kilda Pad while others leave helicopters on the pad all day. As Sunday is the most popular day for 1ATF and



1ALSG patronage, any increase in use by US personnel could cause the facilities to become saturated.”

Apparently the keep-out message was ignored, because just the next month the Amenities Unit's Major Don Moore reported that the club was in danger of being over-run. By allies, not the enemy. The problem could be “the national characteristic of US personnel of swamping and dominating any facility to which they have access,” he wrote. “There have been several clashes of personalities resulting in fights between Australian and US personnel and Australian and Vietnamese staff.

“At times the facilities of the club are saturated as the news is spread that ‘the PBC is a good place’ and visitors from throughout Sth Vietnam arrive in droves. In the past many US servicemen have had to be asked to escort their Vietnamese lady friends from the area.”

Instead of getting better, the invasion seems to have stepped up, especially from the air. The Amenities Unit's Lieutenant Colonel David Allen noted the complaint about American choppers in November, 1969, followed by another in March, 1970, and added his own gripe to the list on April 7, 1970: “There have been numerous (almost weekly) incidents of what could be termed dangerous flying of helicopters ‘beating up’ the Amenities Beach area and the Peter Badcoe Club of a weekend, particularly on Sundays.

“Adjacent (ie approx 250 metres away) to the Peter Badcoe Club is the St Kilda helicopter pad which is an unrestricted pad. As a result, US helicopters often ‘drop in’ with uninvited US servicemen who make illegal use of the Aust facilities, incl the swimming pool etc. The downwash from the blades of low flying helicopters also causes damage to the furniture and umbrellas in the Peter Badcoe Club area and on the Australian sector of the beach.”

The Amenities Unit sent a plea to Australian Force Vietnam about “helicopter drivers buzzing friends” at the club and on the beach. “It will be appreciated if action can be taken to curb aerobatic displays over the Amenities area.”

Early documents suggest the Peter Badcoe Club was originally thought of as a centre for Australians only, but New Zealanders were added to the approved list as opening day neared (seemingly as something of an afterthought) and were given a say on the board which ran it. They also could stay in the accommodation annex, though Americans could not. Vietnamese, meanwhile, were not even allowed on the beach unless they were cleaning it. The situation changed drastically when the Americans turned the complex into their own recreation centre in 1972: Then women were allowed in rooms until 11pm.

And from the very early days, the Army came up with a sea of regulations covering what was allowed on the beach and in the water. The May, 1968, general staff instruction headed “Aquatic Safety – Provisional” announced that the person put in charge, given the imposing title of beach master, had the task of declaring the beach open (with red and yellow flags to show the swimming area) or closed (black flags to be flown). Just so there could be no confusion: “Surfboards may only be used in the area indicated by the ‘Surfboard Area’ sign which will be in the vicinity of the bathing area.”

Unfortunately surfboards and bathers don't go well together. No wonder that at the 1ALSG commander's conference on July 4, 1969, it was reported that “several personnel” had been injured by surfboards in the past week. So from then on the Australian beach was divided into two sections – multi-coloured flags marked out the swimming area, single coloured flags showed the boardriding area.

*‘There have been numerous (almost weekly) incidents of what could be termed dangerous flying of helicopters ‘beating up’ the Amenities Beach area and the Peter Badcoe Club.’*

Official complaint about low-flying helicopters, April 7, 1970



*AIRBORNE ASSAULT: A would-be surfer sits on a board on the beach, looking hopefully out at a dead-calm sea, while another waits patiently in the water. Meanwhile, another of those annoying choppers makes a low pass.*

*(Photo: Mike Page)*



The next set of standing orders, issued in November that year, filled nine pages with "minimum safety requirements to be observed in the use of aquatic facilities" and moved the surfboard zone from north of the boatshed to directly in front of it. "Failure to comply with the provisions of this order is a disciplinary offence," it said. Here were the rules and regulations for "bathing facilities in the South China Sea" and the "sailing and power boats, surf skis, life jackets and surf-boards etcetera available for recreational use by Australian and New Zealand service personnel serving in RVN".

Instead of a beach master, there was a boat master ("Ideally an Army seaman posted to the Amenities Unit") who had the job of declaring the beach open or closed for the various activities, making sure the beach was properly marked to show the zones for swimming, board riding, boat launching, sailing and power boating.

He must have been kept busy, being responsible for the seaworthiness of equipment, and "recording all issues of aquatic equipment to personnel, and for ensuring such equipment is returned by the due time. If any surfboards or other similar item of equipment have not been returned by the due time and there is any doubt whatsoever about the safety of any person, OC AFV Amenities Unit is to be informed immediately, and appropriate action taken to locate the person to whom the equipment was issued, and to recover the equipment."

Another task was to inspect "all craft and equipment when it is returned to determine whether any damage has been occasioned and, if so, whether the damage has been caused by misuse".

Surfboard safety was soon back on the agenda, in the first amendment to 1ALSOG standing orders in 1970. The new rules, sent out on January 9, said: "Surfboards are not to be issued to personnel who are not competent swimmers. The only practical way in which a person can be assessed as a competent swimmer under these circumstances is for the person who is issuing the surfboard to ask the recipient of the surfboard whether or not he is a competent swimmer ... and note beside the signature on the surfboard issue sheet the answer if in the affirmative. Surfboards are only to be used within the flagged area set aside for this purpose. The boat master and the senior member of the SLSC on duty at the time have the authority to order any surfboard rider from the water for irresponsible behavior. Any person ordered from the water will be prohibited from using a surfboard again on that day."

Base commander Colonel Simkin followed up with a list of commonsense "recreational safety" reminders for unit notice boards in March, 1970. Among them: "DO: Use boards in area set aside for that purpose; DON'T: Surf board if you are not a competent swimmer." Bodysurfers were told to keep a lookout for boats and surfboards, and were advised not to enter the water immediately after a heavy meal. Users of the sailing boats and power boats were ordered not to skylark, nor to drink and drive.

Not that all the regulations in the Army's rule book could prevent mishaps. Surfboard victim Bob Meyer, the injured RAAF instrument technician in hospital mentioned at the start of this book, says he was simply unlucky. "I was surfing, and caught this wave. I went over the front and the board went spinning up in the air and the fin got me on the head when it came down. It hit me three times and I ended up with 20 or 30 stitches inside my mouth. I thought I'd been bitten by a shark. I couldn't see because of the blood over my eyes."

But what hurt most was that he was scheduled to leave on a junket the next day ("And it was going to be a good trip, all expenses paid for, picking up the first aircraft serviced in Bangkok.")



*NO-GUN ZONE: The sign above the steps leading to the Badcoe club verandah says: "All weapons are to be placed in the armoury before entering this club."  
(Photo: Robert Smyth)*

but instead spent four or five days in hospital. "I even got my bags packed by a mate, thinking I'd still make it. I kept saying: 'No, I'll be right, I'll be out of here.' But they operated on me, general anaesthetic and all."

His mates, he said, "thought it was a great hoot". And it was no fun being the only RAAF serviceman in a hospital surrounded by injured soldiers. "There was a fair bit of rivalry between the services at the time, so they thought I was just one of those RAAF blokes, pissing around. They thought we were all softies."

Going to the beach was the regular routine for the off-duty crew from Meyer's unit. "You'd work 13 days straight, then have a couple of days off, so we used to go there and do stuff on the beach, have a barbecue. They probably had about 20 surfboards all up, so you could always get one, and I had done a bit of surfing. There was never a big crowd on the beach because there weren't a lot of people with spare time. On Sundays, there probably would be 100 people. The American beach was a lot busier; they had shops, bars, and they had some surfboards too."

The Badcoe club had barely opened when surfboards started being a cause for concern. Back on November 26, 1967, the HQ 1ALSOG duty officer's log shows that the club's Warrant Officer Lowe at 7.15pm "reported a surfboard missing and suspects a member of 1ALSOG missing also, possibly drowned". The provosts were informed, and all units were told to carry out a personnel check. However the surfboard was found on Back Beach at 9pm, and by 8am the next day it was established that all personnel were accounted for. Drama over.

There was similar fuss when a Corsair sailing boat was "lost at sea" in December, 1970, only this incident ended on a lighter note: The boat was recovered by an enterprising Vietnamese fisherman the following March, and he promptly offered to sell it back to the Amenities section



for \$500. The offer was declined, and it was decided not to buy a replacement boat. The club had four other Corsairs at the time, most suffering from rot in the hulls but so popular that some had to be reserved to be used by troops visiting from the Task Force.

Similar to the sailing boat buy-back offer, the sports council noticed in 1971 that its basketball trophy was missing, only to be eventually found on a shelf in a Vung Tau shop. HQ Company, winners of the basketball competition, were told to go and "recover" it, and pay the price of 300 piastres, about what it would cost to buy a Saigon Tea for a bar girl.

But back to the beach, which the Army system dangled like a carrot to hopefully keep the visiting Diggers away from the mischief awaiting in the streets and bars of Vung Tau. The story told by Keith Wilson seems typical. He was a private in 4RAR, 1968-69, sent down to Vungers to stay at the Peter Badcoe Club annex for rest-in-country "no more than three times, probably twice".

"You could spend anything from an overnight patrol to a six-week operation out in the scrub. An average might be three weeks, and you'd be living like grots. No showers, except in the wet season. It was an interesting life," he says. "You'd come back from an operation into Nui Dat, be choppered back, then you'd fix all the administration up, burn your clothes, get put into a truck and go down to Vung Tau."

It was "sort of a motel set-up, double-storey blocks, single rooms". He says: "You'd spend the day at Badcoe, and go out on the piss that night. If there was a board around, you'd go out in the surf. I'd think: There might be a wave there, I might go down and have a paddle. There was not really any surf, just horrible flattish brown water, and horrible surf. But I remember one wave, and standing up. That was rare. I might have got a couple of waves."

He says it took one night to get used to the leave system, one night when you knew how things worked, then it was time to leave. "Our attitude was: Shit, we've got two days to ran-tan, so let's go and ran-tan. We had such short stays, everything had to be packed into it."

"You'd be told what you could and couldn't do. You could stay there, drink and swim and go to the beach. Or you could go into town on the trucks, and get back to the base before curfew if you were lucky. Otherwise you were charged, which unfortunately I managed to do. That town, it was like something out of a John Wayne movie, it really was. Interesting times, wild days."

According to Major Lyndsay Daniels, responsible for the Badcoe club in 1970-71: "The troops enjoyed themselves on the beach, and quite a bit of boating and surfing went on, though some of them were off the place in minutes."

"They could go into Vung Tau for the day, but there was a curfew from 10 o'clock at night. I had the curfew extended for an hour because a lot had girlfriends, drinking Saigon Tea in the bars, and the bars closed at 10. That way they could get back to base."

The Badcoe complex didn't seem too remote from the war – "We could see the bombing taking place across the bay in the Long Hais" – but generally was peaceful. "A deranged soldier shot up the place one night. I kept my troops under cover until he ran out of ammunition, then he was arrested by the provosts."

Daniels recalls the swimming pool and mini golf being the most popular activities. "I'd go for a kilometre walk every morning along the beach, and kill the sea snakes that had been beached when the tide went out. There was a lookout tower: We called it the Eye-full Tower, a watchtower with lifesavers." Was it to watch for sharks, or drowning, or an approaching enemy? "The lot," he says.

The Army filed away the paperwork from one incident which Daniels says he had forgotten. It was on a Sunday afternoon, October 2, 1970, when he was at the Badcoe club and saw a truck pulling on to Back Beach Road from the Bondi barbecue area. The driver was hatless and smoking, and a "large blonde-headed soldier was perched precariously on the tailboard," says the complaint he fired off at the time. Though the major was in uniform and called on the driver to stop, the driver merely glanced at him and increased speed. So he ordered the other soldier: "Get off the tailboard." The soldier replied: "Get fucked." According to the report: "The foregoing exchange was heard quite plainly by two lady visitors who were seated behind Maj Daniels. They made some comment on the matter." He requested that the offenders be banned from the Peter Badcoe Club "from this day forward".

And it wasn't the only clash. Daniels says: "Badcoe was used by all Australian forces in country, and we included New Zealanders as well. I had a confrontation with the Maoris on one occasion, after they ruined one of our buses going into Vung Tau. They were singing and swaying, and twisted the frame of the bus. They were big boys, 18 stone!"

"I also staved off a confrontation one day when a squad of Australians came marching up to take on the Maoris. I stood in front of the Australians, and when they halted I identified the pack leader, and addressed them. I said: 'Get a good look over my shoulder. Look at the size of those blokes you want to fight. You're drunk and you'd be done like a dinner. When you sober up, you can take them on.' They thought about this, then marched off, much to my relief."

The New Zealand allies, remembered by Lyndsay Daniels many for playing hard and drinking hard, also caught the attention of SAS historian Mick Malone when he was a trooper with the 3rd Special Air Service Squadron in 1969-70. "It was like the wild west, the way the Kiwis used to smash up the place," he says. "There was one chap in particular, 6ft 8in, a big Maori boy. He'd get drunk and start smashing things, then all the boys from his unit would have to empty their pockets to pay for the damage. They weren't allowed to leave till everything was paid for. The MPs used to watch from a safe distance, from the patio, and be going: 'That's seven tables, eight chairs...'

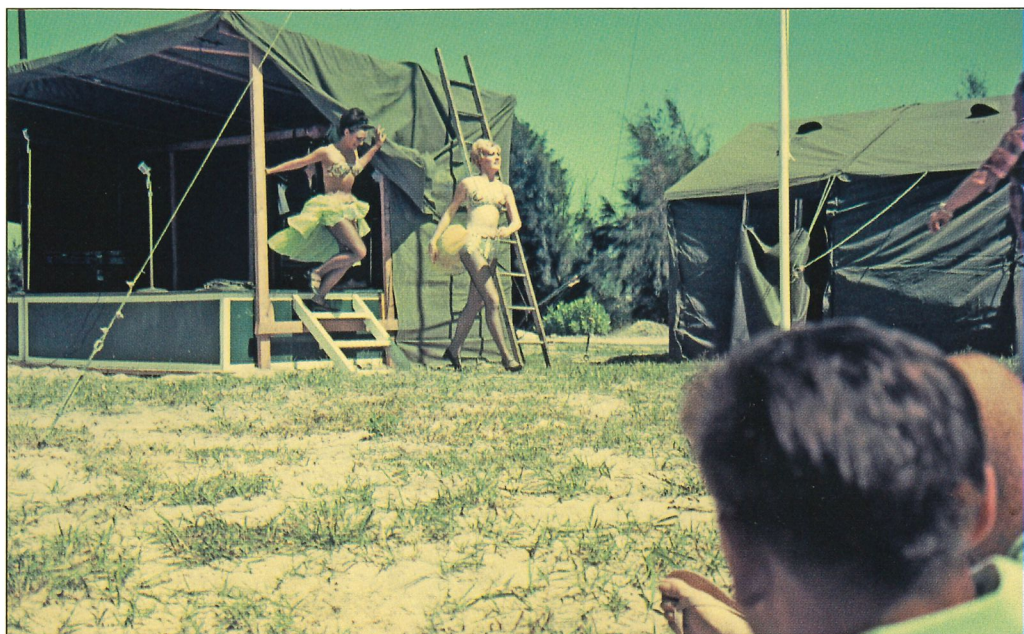
"We used to send four-man patrols down on R&C for a week, and they'd work as lifeguards for a break. It was called a layabout's week. You'd walk around the swimming pool with whistles, and hand out surfboards. There were a heap of boards, but probably never more than half a dozen would be given out at a time. There was zero surf. None. It was like a secluded bay."

Malone says the club's cut-down Land Rover, used to tow boats across the sand, was the roughest-riding vehicle he's ever encountered ("That thing had absolutely no suspension"). But, even when riding in a pink-painted Landie, you had to remember there were unfriendly people around: At one point it was banned from the beach because of fears that Viet Cong had snuck in at night and laid mines.

*'A deranged soldier  
shot up the place one  
night. I kept my troops  
under cover until he ran  
out of ammunition,  
then he was arrested by  
the provosts.'*

Lyndsay Daniels





*EARLY DAYS: Showgirls prance off the makeshift canvas-covered stage erected for concerts in 1967 before the Badcoe club was even completed.*

*(Photo: Phil Noble)*

He describes the Badcoe club as like an oasis, but hard on the nerves as you lay in bed feeling the ground shaking from the B52s bombing the Long Hai Hills.

Then there were those who misbehaved. "We were bits of larrikins then, and still are, but we had a good time," says Rob ("Cossie") Costello, a gunner in the 12th Field Regiment. His battery's first stay at the Badcoe club, around June-July, 1968, was also its last. "The boys made a little bit of a mess of it," he says. "There was beer flying here, there and everywhere. We played up a bit and weren't allowed a second visit."

No matter that Major General Vincent had ruled back in January, 1968, while the accommodation blocks were still being built: "All persons in 1ATF should be given the opportunity to use the facility three times during their tour of duty in the theatre." Visits would be "minimum continuous periods of two nights and one day", maybe three nights and two days, he said. By the following year, "where possible" had been added to the guidelines.

However the short break at the beach for Costello's unit was a welcome change from their usual conditions in Vietnam: "We came down from Nui Dat, where we had a tent with four beds in it, and that was a home away from home compared with the bush. I think our battery spent 300 days out of 365 in the bush. But the Badcoe club was brilliant. We could let our hair down, do what we wanted. It was a beautiful experience for blokes who hadn't been out of the wire for ages."

Thousands of others came to feel the same way, judging by the "Record of Visitors to Beach Annex" books which have been preserved, complete with remarks which read like a motel's guest book. Comments range from the very brief ("Good!") to the formal, such as a major in 7RAR, staying there with 141 men, applauding "the usual great hospitality and efficient organisation



*HAPPY AUDIENCE: The Sunday afternoon entertainment proved a sure way to keep men around the Badcoe club ... and therefore out of trouble in town.*

*(Photo: 1st Aust Fd Hospital Assoc - Vampire)*

beyond, in most cases, the technical requirement". A lieutenant writes: "An extremely enjoyable and relaxing two days. Wish it were longer." Then a captain: "Coy well looked after. One complaint only, the two days are too short." And a sergeant says: "Great fun had by all."

When B Coy 3RAR stayed from July 22-24, 1971, the unit mentioned: "The patience of the staff is to be commended." Likewise for D Coy 4RAR/NZ, with 127 men there for 42 hours: "All enjoyed themselves immensely. My thanks to the staff for their patience." And apparently the same went for the 151 men from C Coy 2RAR/NZ, with their major reporting: "A very enjoyable leave, assisted very much by a very tolerant and helpful Annexe staff." Similarly, a 3RAR sergeant hints that all did not go smoothly in June, 1971: "Many thanks to the staff of PBC for their patience and a job well done in adverse conditions."

A 2RAR major wrote in April, 1971: "An enjoyable stay but it was far too short." To which a sergeant (signature illegible) from the group added: "Very satisfactory from the troops point of view. I would however like to extend my apologies for the behaviour of certain troops and senior NCOs and wish Amenities staff to realize that this is not the standard normal for 'old faithful'." Indeed, the remarks reveal there must have been wild times. Such as a 3RAR captain's comment on behalf of the 149 men he was with: "Excellent co-operation by Amenities staff and military police during stay." And all one major wrote was: "Greater control should be exercised over OCs."

D Coy 8RAR's Major Malcolm Peck, visiting in September, 1970, thanked staff for their patience and said the company had relaxed and enjoyed itself "despite the normal behaviour of soldiers 'throwing over the traces' when they are let loose to their own devices and the resultant frayed tempers caused thereby."



Occasionally, compliments flowed the other way. Such as when Major Daniels reported in March, 1970, that C Coy 8RAR, which had just stayed at the Beach Annex, was "the best behaved of any group since the Tet period". He noted their "quiet and controlled behaviour" though their visit coincided with two presumably unconnected events: A visit by the chaplain general and a Sunday concert which included a stripper. And, bad news for ex-soldiers and ex-airmen reading this, but the Peter Badcoe Club adjutant noted that a 45-man RAN group, which stayed on June 14-16, 1971, was: "Best group ever to visit annex."

Few of the visiting units left complaints, and the most frequent suggestion from their officers was for the bars, beach and pool to be open longer. Typical was the idea put forward by a major in November, 1970, calling for the bar to open at 10am, not 1pm, on some days "to induce the troops to remain at the centre instead of departing for a beer in town". The club's official reply was that it was Task Force and 1ALSG policy not to allow the men to go into town before 1pm on those days. "The idea being to encourage troops to have a good meal prior to their having a good time."

The men even received a cheery letter on arrival: "Welcome to the Beach Annex and the Peter Badcoe Club for your rest period. The staff appreciate that you have earned your rest period and hope that you will relax and have a good time in whatever entertainment you yourself have planned. You are expected to behave as disciplined (AUSTRALIAN) soldiers ... Remember that the Vietnamese women of the staff are here to serve meals, clean your quarters and serve beer: and nothing else."

"All meals served here are of excellent quality and are supplemented with fresh steak, sausages etc flown in from Penang."

It seems such an orderly system. No wonder the Amenities Unit wasn't happy when, in 1969, there was a proposal to change the leave schedule so men arrived in the morning, not late afternoon. Records show a senior officer argued this had already been tried "with disastrous results".

"The identification of accommodation and gear at times between 2100 hrs and 0200 hrs by drunken, ill, incoherent, and abusive soldiers who have not previously been physically oriented and have not occupied their accommodation has been proved to be quite impracticable. It is strongly recommended that there be no change to the existing march-in arrangements."

At that time, units would arrive to begin their break on Mondays, Wednesdays or Fridays, and Amenities wanted things kept that way. "Sunday is the busiest day of the week at the Peter Badcoe Club. It is a rest day for many members in ALSG and many day trippers arrive from 1ATF. Consequently the bars, swimming pool, boats, surfboards etc are all much used and the addition of a coy group to the numbers would further congest the facilities and inhibit the enjoyment of the coy."

How unusual, an Army rest area full of "drunken, ill, incoherent, and abusive soldiers". Seems someone wasn't obeying the original 1968 orders which demanded "high standards of behaviour" at the Badcoe club and the R&C Centre. "These facilities were established to provide rest and convalescence which can only be ensured in a pleasant and orderly, yet relaxed, atmosphere. A member ... is to be ... moderate in his behaviour, use of language and consumption of alcohol."

Fat chance. A year later, Captain K. A. Taylor, of the Amenities and Welfare Unit at Vung Tau, was sending an angry letter to the unit's HQ in Saigon. "Behaviour of troops using this



*PLAYGROUND: The imposing L-shaped pool, with its twin diving boards and ironic name, became a Badcoe club landmark.*

*(Photo: Paul Haw)*

facility (PBC) is of a low standard in conduct, language and dress," he wrote. "The ability of the officers and NCOs to deal with troops who are excessively intoxicated is nil."

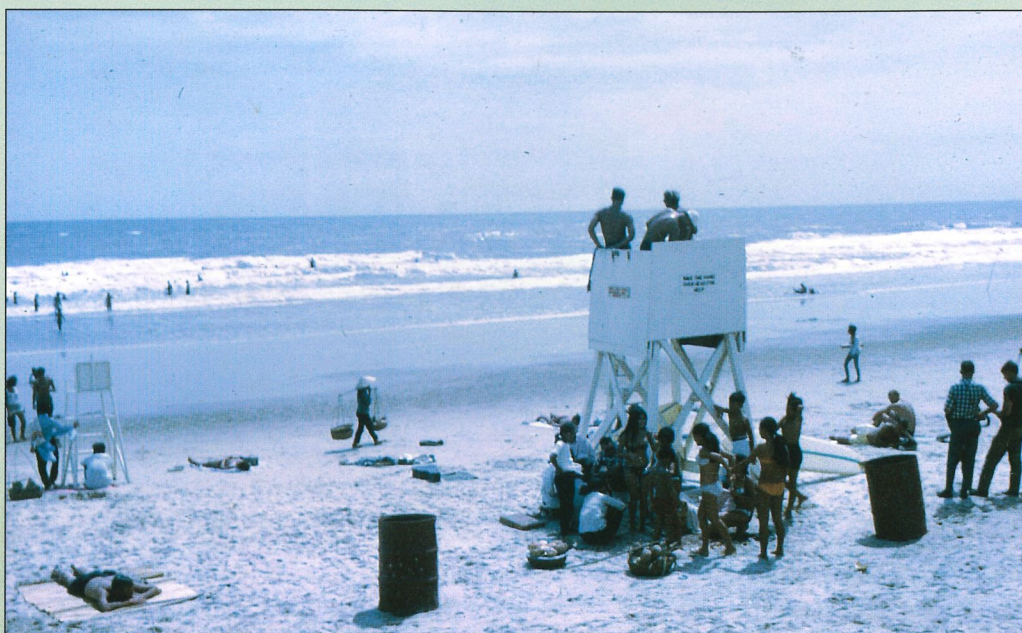
"Even though a directive on behaviour has been issued and the improvement was felt for the first 10 days the situation has deteriorated back to an unacceptable level. Today the club was visited by a unit who climaxed the conduct level with the worst exhibition yet. The officers had no control and could not arrive at acceptable decisions between themselves ... Soldiers left this area who could not control themselves nor the weapons they carried."

No wonder Lieutenant Colonel GO Thompson, of Amenities, soon was objecting to a plan to have convalescents stay at the Beach Annex. He wrote: "I stressed that the alcoholic environment of the Peter Badcoe Club was in my opinion an undesirable background for convalescents unless they could be continuously supervised and segregated."

"These rooms can not be isolated from the noise, boisterous behaviour and violence often associated with the return of drunken troops in the leave bus at 2200 hrs and of later curfew breakers."

"I reiterate that, whilst I believe that the recreational facilities available at the Peter Badcoe Club area are ideal for use by convalescents, the environment and accommodation are not considered suitable for the reasons outlined above and offer undesirable temptations and distractions to members in a convalescent condition, if they are expected to live there." In a nutshell, it would be a fine place for convalescent Diggers to go surfing, he thought, but they wouldn't get any sleep if they stayed the night.





*'On any given day the lifeguard tower was surrounded by beautiful local girls, surfers, surfboards, tourists (ally and VC), business people, prostitutes, Buddhist monks, criminals, mothers and children, and of course lovers, against the backdrop of sunshine, white sands, the blue sea and warm waves.'*

US lifeguard Tom Woods, Vung Tau, 1967-68 (Photo: Tom Woods)

## Chapter 11

### *All The Way With LBJ*

Prime Minister Harold Holt stood on the lawn of the White House in Washington in 1966 and announced to US President Lyndon Baines Johnson, and the world, the words which would go down in history: "I hope there will be a corner of your mind and heart which takes cheer from the fact that you have an admiring friend, a staunch friend that will be all the way with LBJ." The speech may have gone on to make generations of Australians cringe, but the sentiment – Aussies and Yanks together as mates – at least held true in the surf in Vietnam.

"Most Aussies were good surfers, with a handful excellent. More fun to surf and drink beer with," recalls former parajumper David ("Captain Dave") Lambdin of the USAF 360th Special Forces Air Commando Squadron. He tells of "many, many memories of the surf and the Australian warriors" but there was just one cultural problem: "The Americans felt weird about surfing with them because the Aussies wore 'speedo bikinis'." (He means Speedos.) Captain Dave even took some of his "Aussie pals" to the American Beachcomber Club for a show by a surf band. He says: "We took the band out surfing and they were all kooks. Bummer!"

He was in Vietnam in 1968-69 ("Travelled all over to wherever the shit was happening") and tells of wild times surfing. "Saw several gun battles offshore with Vietnamese junks and patrol boats. Watched napalm strikes against Marble Mountain while surfing. Got blown off my board by a hotdog fighter pilot jealous of me surfing. Got knocked off my board when I hit a partly-submerged body. Chased around by giant tiger snakes and occasional shark. Yep, never a dull moment."

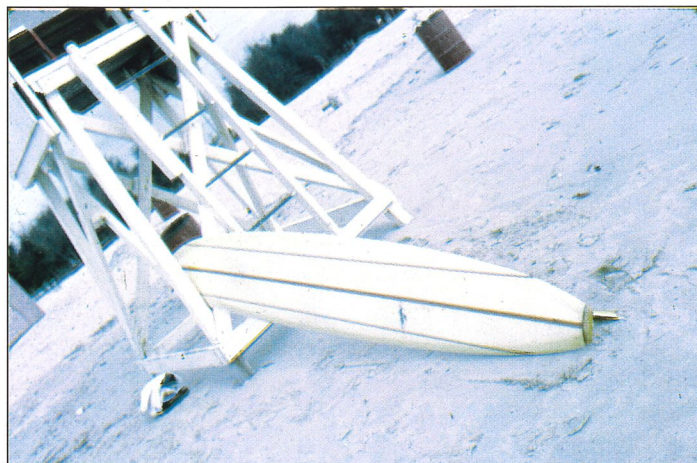
He says most of the Australians he surfed with at Vung Tau ("Six or eight guys at max") were SAS men he worked with on insertions into the Mekong Delta and surrounding areas. He remembers the surf as a beach break, changing with the tide and as sandbars moved; the waves mere wind swell "with occasional glassy ground swells from typhoons or tropical storms". Lambdin goes on: "I actually volunteered several times for Vung Tau duty 'cause of good surf. Whenever I could jump a ride I would fly down for a surf session. I tried to extend in Vietnam and get full-time duty station at Vung Tau ... Air Force sent me back into the jungle and mountain highlands instead."



He even tells of one day "smoking a spliff in the lifeguard shack then going surfing with the two lifeguards 'cause the beach was empty. First wave we caught, a mortar round blew up the lifeguard shack. Thank God we went to catch some tubes." Charlie don't surf, perhaps, but he scored a psychological victory that day. "Only boards saved were the ones we were riding," said Captain Dave.

The huge American force in Vietnam may have had all the money and the manpower and the military hardware, but the Australians had the good beer, the better boots, sought-after hats ... and the most up-to-date surfboards. Lambdin recalls the American base having a few surfboards ("Mainly tankers, 9ft-plus") available for GIs to borrow, while the Australian zone nearby had lots more – "Short, mainly 8ft-plus. Much better board selection and design ... They had a great rec area cabin filled with many different-size boards and wave skis."

Unlike the Badcoe club, the American beach had a squad of six full-time lifeguards, some of them keen surfers. Tom Woods from California was one of them in 1967-68, a lifeguard in the US Army's Special Services section after entering the war as a Navy "Sea Wolf" helicopter door gunner. When not hauling out waterlogged GIs, he was watching the crowd: "On any given day the lifeguard tower was surrounded by beautiful local girls, surfers, surfboards, tourists (ally



*CLASSIC: A top-quality Phil Edwards signature-model board, pride of the fleet on the American beach*  
(Photo: Tom Woods)

and VC), business people, prostitutes, Buddhist monks, criminals, mothers and children, and of course lovers against the backdrop of sunshine, white sands, the blue sea and warm waves." Woods believes that Back Beach, because of its location and security, was the only beach in Vietnam open to both GIs and civilians.

They had about 10 boards – mostly 9ft-9ft 6in "pop outs" (basic mass-manufactured surfboards) that could survive a beating.

But among the basic boards there were thoroughbreds like a classic 10ft Phil Edwards model and, Woods thinks, a Greg Noll design – boards which collectors would kill for today. The Americans even shipped in "Slip Check", a spray-on board wax replacement that was the rage in the late '60s. "But we mostly used paraffin wax and candles when we ran out. We went through a lot of wax and it was always sent in by family members.

"As Special Services lifeguards we loaned surfboards to a lot of surfers from all over the US and quite a few Australians. I may have even loaned one to a VC." Hard to believe, he says, that in the midst of a war there was a "safe zone" where Americans, Australians, Koreans, Viet Cong and, most importantly, the civilian population were able to temporarily escape the reality of their surroundings. And the surfers were able to "bliss out" in the sport of kings.



*HARD AT WORK: A stylish drop-knee turn by US lifeguard Tom Woods near the Cap St Jacques end of Back Beach.*  
(Photo: Tom Woods)

But though it looked like paradise, Woods points out that the beach was far from it. "Besides the common sound of exploding bombs from over the horizon, everyone on the beach was in some way suffering from the pain of war, post traumatic stress disorder, some much more than others. Honestly, some looked like zombies. In reality, some had just come in from fighting and killing in the jungles, some civilians had lost family members in another city or village, and some GIs had just got a 'Dear John' letter from home."

Against this backdrop, he encountered Australians. "It was my first time in the club, didn't know a soul, and was looking for a seat. There were Yanks and Aussies talking loud, laughing hard, coughing up beer, while Vietnamese entertainers sang Beatles hits. This Aussie says to me: 'Hey mate, sit on down with us,' and orders me a huge can of Foster's, a beer that I had never heard of.

"All the Aussies were a riot and within minutes my vocabulary was growing quickly. Banana Bender, Nipper, Tinny, London to a brick, Cat's Piss, Whacker, Sheilas, Old Fella, Not the full Quid, Piss, Bloke. The amount of beer those boys could polish off was astonishing to say the least and the camaraderie they exhibited was memorable. What an introduction to Australian 'culture' and some great guys.

"I would see Australians every day on or off the base in Vung Tau. The road to Back Beach had you driving by the long open beach area and then you came upon the area where the American-managed club was, across the road from our Rest and Recuperation beach area. As you drove on down the road you came to the Australian zone and beyond that was the Republic of Korea zone. After that was what we considered Charlie's zone."



Since he enjoyed Australian company – “Man, the Aussies were so different. My first impressions were that they were totally carefree” – he and fellow lifeguard Steve Broderson went to Sydney for a week’s R&R. Looking for boards to rent, they went into a surf shop at Bondi, and were stunned to find that surfboard design had changed radically while they had been at war. Gone were the long California-style nose-riding boards they were accustomed to. Instead, the racks were full of shorter boards with very wide tails and V bottoms. “The shop manager Robert Conneeley came up to help us out and when he found we were Yanks on R&R from Vietnam the aloha and hospitality poured out and we learned of the shortboard revolution that was taking off in Australia. Robert set us up with some traditional longboards and we all went out for a surf at Bondi via a stumbling walk across a beach filled with beautiful, round-eye, bikini-clad beauties and it seemed like they all knew Robert. The surf was about head-high and the guys in the lineup were ripping in a way I had never seen before, combining rapid turns and traditional nose riding. Steve and I felt like beginners compared to the Aussies and we weren’t bad surfers ourselves.

“Robert was a fabulous host and tour guide of the beach area. We would meet him every morning and he would educate us as to what was happening in the Aussie surf scene as well as tell us where there were good fish ‘n’ chips restaurants.

“What a difference it was to be in Australia where people judged how good a day it was by valuable experiences – meeting friends, catching waves – in comparison to Vietnam where the amount of human carnage was how a day was to be judged, good or bad, by either side.”

Woods enjoyed himself so much he returned to Sydney a month or so later, found his mate Conneeley again, was taken to a surf contest at Long Reef, and ended up meeting the who’s who of Australian surfing at the time: former world champions Midget Farrelly and Nat Young, plus Wayne Lynch, Ted Spencer and Russell Hughes.

“Nat was very considerate and concerned with the number of young men who were dying,” says Woods. “He said he had a place up in a rainforest area that I could stay at if I didn’t want to return to the war. I am not sure if he was joking. I was very thankful for his concern but I would humbly decline his offer. Throughout our talk the other fellows at the table were glued to the conversation of what was going on the battlefield as well as what was the surf like in Vietnam. I had a few good stories to share and told them of the Aussies in the Vung Tau area who surfed with us.”

Before leaving, around March, 1968, Woods ordered one of Conneeley’s signature-model boards, an 8ft Hayden-brand “Space Ship”. “Robert boxed the board up and had it sent to my address in Vietnam. I remember the day it arrived in Vung Tau. No one could believe what they were seeing. The George Greenough-inspired fin was huge, the tail was wide and it had a lot of V in it, and boy could that board turn. To my understanding it was the first shortboard in Vietnam, at least in the southern area. Of course all the other guards wanted to ride it. The ‘Space Ship’ worked great.” Eventually it went home to San Diego with him.

Woods’ buddy, Ron Sizemore, a US Army stevedore in Vung Tau (“I worked at night as a cargo checker on ships and would visit the beach for a surf or two”) describes the waves as being good at times, blown out at times, and pristine “every now and then”. The conditions suited the old-fashioned longboards available on the American beach. Then he saw a board which was brought in from “the Australian camp”, a more modern, V-bottomed shape, around 8ft long. The Fantastic Plastic Machine style of surfboard, shaper Bob McTavish’s psychedelic brainchild at the peak of the peace-love-flowerpower era, had found its way into the combat zone.



*U.S. POWER: American lifeguard Gregg Samp puts all his weight behind a bottom turn, up north at Howell Beach.*

*(Photo: Gregg Samp)*

Sizemore, who won the US west coast surfing championship – effectively the American national titles – when just a teenager in 1961, says: “I know the Australians had surfboards there but as Vietnam was closer to Australia I think they took their duty more seriously than we did, as I do not remember a lot of them surfing or surfing with them. I do remember the beach club at Vung Tau but never got to it for a drink. Although I did drink a Foster’s or two while in country.”

Like his pal Woods, Sizemore went to Sydney on R&R and found himself in Robert Conneeley’s surf shop. And Conneeley, regarded as one of the nice guys of the 1960s surf scene in Australia, says he vividly remembers the meeting. “He was very fragile. To go from the carnage he’d come from to Sydney’s northern beaches was a huge shock to his system.” And the Americans also were stunned to find that surfing, especially in Australia, had entered a new era while they were away at war. “When they left home, surfboards were full-length malibus,” says Conneeley. “By the time they got here, McTavish was in the middle of the shortboard revolution. It was like landing on another planet for them.” Making the contrast even greater, Conneeley was vocally anti-war, and his surf shop had even been threatened because of the anti-conscription material displayed in its window.

Around the time Woods was turning his first R&R into a surfing safari to Bondi, another American lifeguard – Gregg Samp, stationed up north at Howell Beach, Cam Ranh Bay – was making a similar pilgrimage to Manly. By chance he and a mate encountered Bob Brewster, the surf shop owner who had been at the fore in the initial donation of Sydney boards for the troops



18 months before, and soon there were more Australian surfboards bound for Vietnam. But of course some military red tape had to be untangled first. Samp tells the story: "After talking to Bob for 10 minutes and telling him that we were lifeguards in Vietnam and that we were down here on R&R, he actually said: 'Well, I've got these two boards that these guys never came back for, I'll give them to you.'"

"We did not go down there to look for boards – this was something that just popped up. Of course we called our Special Services officer at the R&R centre in Sydney and told him that we'd received these boards. He said: 'Well, you guys can't take them back on the plane. You can only take back one bag.' So we went back to Bob and told him that they weren't going to allow us to take these things back on the plane. Bob said: 'Gimme the number of your CO.' So we did and he called him up and said that if he didn't let us take these surfboards back to Vietnam he was going to write an article in the newspaper about how the Americans refused a gift from the Australians. And he was going to make a big deal about it. So our Special Services officer said: 'Well, I guess we can make an exception in this case.' And we were allowed to bring back these two surfboards to Vietnam."

After 40 years, he thinks one was 9ft 4in, the other 9ft 6in. And though secondhand, they were in good shape. The Australian boards were a welcome addition to the Howell Beach fleet which at the time consisted of a top-quality Hansen, a worn-out California and six newly-arrived pop-outs. All the boards served a dual role, he says – lifeguards and their friends would surf on them, and they also were used for rescues. "I surfed on the boards that I got from Australia maybe a few times," says Samp.

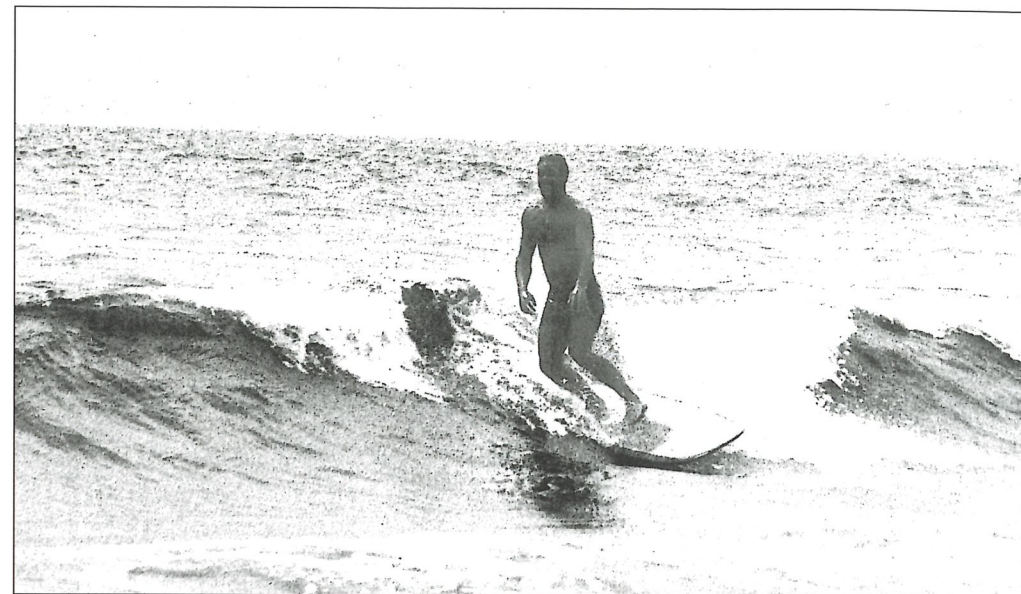
Unlike at the Peter Badcoe Club, and the American beach at Vung Tau, surfboards weren't for just everyone at Howell Beach. Samp said: "We did not allow the GIs to surf. We didn't have enough surfboards to give out to the GIs. Most of the GIs didn't even know how to swim, and if we gave a board to one GI, we'd have to let everybody use them, so we decided that we would not give out boards to the general public."

Their caution was understandable, because Howell Beach took its name from a GI who drowned there while trying to save others. "That was one of the problems that the Army was having: the GIs would go down to the beach, they'd be drinking, one guy would go out in the water and he'd get in trouble, and of course his friends would try to help him and we actually lost six black guys, all in one shot, trying to save everybody. This happened before I got there."

Samp returned to Australia in July, 1968, then in December, and finally late February, 1969, visiting Brewster again, meeting surfing legend Snow McAllister and, on his last trip, getting a board custom made from the then-cutting-edge Shane factory. He says: "It was about an eight-footer, which at that time was a shortboard. I shipped that back to Vietnam but then shipped it home to California for my own use when I got out of the Army."

One of the many unanswered questions about the war is what happened to all the other surfboards sent to Vietnam. Samp says: "When I got there, there were two boards on the beach. We got six from the Army, then in early '68 I returned with the two other surfboards from Australia, which gave us 10 surfboards. I left Vietnam in March of '69 and when I left, those boards stayed at the beach, and the war ended four years later, so I have no idea what happened to those surfboards. Far as I know they're still there ... but I doubt it."

Another American surfer, Chuck ("Walrus") Allison, tells how he had an Australian-made board – an 8ft 6in Keyo V-bottom design "with lots of colour" – flown to Vietnam (courtesy



*GREY MARKET: Chuck ("Walrus") Allison on his Australian board, flown to Vietnam by the RAAF. The photo was taken at China Beach and on the back it is stamped "US Army Photo Service", dated "1968, January".*

of the RAAF) around January 1968 so he could surf at China Beach, the American recreation centre near Da Nang, made famous by the late 1980s TV series of the same name. "I was a WO2-courier flying all over the place for 18 months; I was in the zone 1968-69, running 'errands' for Air America then," Allison says. "Got a few waves in the Cam Ranh Bay area – wasn't a high point of my life."

"I gave two bottles of booze and \$200 to a couple of Air Force guys who were flying back and forth to Oz. They went to a surf shop and got me a board and brought it back in the belly of a recon aircraft along with a bunch of steaks frozen solid. I left it at the China Beach setup when I was elsewhere. My daughter found a really cheezy photo of me riding the sloppy knee-to-waist waves – I was so thin and young! The board was left there when I left. Yep, the Keyo was a nice board, better actually than what I found when I got home. We were still a bit behind on the US east coast. The board was pretty new, semi-used, no dings."

"I seem to remember Aussies coming over to the R&R centre to drink and play – we had occasional nurses. Mostly drinking, I think. And of course the surf sucked. Most of the boards at the beach were brought in by the Army Recreation Group, I guess from California. Some guys did try and get boards sent from home in the States. What often happened was several guys would share a board and those guys who were stationed in the nearby area were the 'owners' and would fix them and reshape them and so on. I was in and out of Da Nang and so it was 'my' board when I was there. Kind of wish I still had the board."

"I looked in my journal, and the flight crew was half Aussie and American, flying one of your Canberras into Da Nang. I seem to recall that lots of 'stuff' rode in the belly of aircraft – meat, booze, anything that could be moved and make life a bit better. Not sure all was legal either. Hey, we were young and semi-screwed up." Allison says Vietnam "probably made me what I am today – mildly nutty and glad to be alive".





*AS GOOD as it gets: A clean peak on the American section of Back Beach, and no sign of any surfers.*

*(Photo: Tom Woods)*

*"There was quite a nice swell coming in day after day. I don't know where it came from but consistently for a number of months it seemed to me we had surf almost every day. It was a bit idyllic in that sense. But then I think it stopped for a number of months and we did other things for our recreation."*

*– John Bradford, in country 1969-70*

*"The surf was only beach breaks, up to 3ft, nothing spectacular. I had one day when it was reasonable, at 2ft or 3ft."*

*– Geoff Collins, in country 1967-68*

*"I only went swimming in the sea once, and saw a banded sea snake; that was enough."*

*– Gerry Lloyd, 1968-69*

*"There was never much surf to speak of, but the 1ft waves suited me just fine."*

*– Leigh Floyd, in country 1969-70*

*"The surf wasn't bloody Bondi. I never saw it very big."*

*– Ralph Darlington, in country 1968-69*



*FIVE OF THE BEST: Former US west coast champion Ron Sizemore hangs five in the American zone.*

*(Photo: Tom Woods)*

*"Some of the soldiers would come down from Nui Dat, and take boards out, and you could see they were class surfers, wonderful surfers – a pleasure to watch."*

*– John Meehan, in country 1968-69*

*"There was a bit of surf, though it wasn't enough to inspire me. There were sea snakes, and that thought tended to keep you upright when you were water ski-ing. Also, the odd body would float past. That was a bit of a disconcerting moment."*

*– Bruce Young, in country 1969-70*

*"It was very flat surf, not the likes of Malibu or Coolangatta. On some days it might get to half a metre – certainly enough to ride. You'd surf in the mornings because towards the afternoons, the surf would flatten out anyway."*

*– Lyn Guy, in country 1969-70*

*"The beach reminds me a lot of Adelaide. You'd go out for a long way before it drops off into real depth."*

*– Russ Morison, in country 1969-70*



*'I remember paddling out and not being able to pick up anything... but it felt good to be in the water.'*



IT'S around June, 1968, and Trevor Bryant, a gunner with 102 Battery, 12th Field Regiment, stands in the warm water of the South China Sea, military-issue Australian-made surfboard under his arm, as a dozen other members of his unit paddle around on boards in the background hoping to catch some of the feeble little waves.

His story: "I only got down to Badcoe once, and only for a couple of days. R&R was laid down in some sort of regulation, but rest-in-country seemed to be arbitrary. It was a unit thing – probably the whole battery went down apart from a skeleton crew. There were probably a couple

of truckloads of men, about 30 or 40 of us. We stayed at the club, probably two nights, maybe three.

"That would have been after one of our operations. It may even have been after Coral. There was an element of reward in going there, to recover a bit after being knocked around in the battle. We'd lost a lot of blokes.

"I took a board out for a while, and water ski-ed. I wasn't a real surfer, but I'd used one before. I remember paddling out and not being able to pick up anything because there weren't enough waves, but it felt good to be in the water."

*(Photo: Trevor Bryant)*

## Chapter 12

# The Last Wave

So Australia took over a beach and handed out boards to the boys, but being sent off to war couldn't help but be a life-changing experience for many young men. Keith Wilson, a nasho private in 4RAR who went to Vietnam on May 22, 1968 – his 21st birthday – tells how conscription came as a shock: "There you were, hanging around the beach, going surfing with all your mates. You're getting into surfing, you're making boards, your mum is making board shorts, then all of a sudden you're down at Singleton."

David Cripps, one of the first Vung Tau lifesavers, echoes the same sentiments about his surfing life being interrupted. "Just prior to going away to Vietnam, my 21st birthday present was a longboard which I never learned to master properly. I learnt to ride a wave in Vietnam but still not real well. I just loved body surfing and being called up thwarted the natural progression of taking it that one step further into board riding."

Paul Martino, a sapper in 198 Works Section, says: "I was a surfing fanatic before being conscripted into the Army '69-71 and spent the occasional hour surfing in the South China Sea during my weekend stints in Vung Tau. The surf was pretty unspectacular with no screaming lefts or rights, just a closeout ride to the beach and paddle back out again for the same again but it was wet and it was surfing and it was better than nothing."

"Before that I was destined for the life of your original beach bum, and thought of nothing but surfing – I would glass and pigment boards, make surfing T-shirts which I sold thru the local surf shop, I was in the process of producing a magazine and life as a surfer looked pretty good for me. Won a few trophies and have the odd photo still floating around somewhere.

"After the war, I returned to a ready-made family, a son born while I was in Vietnam and nothing was the same. I went surfing twice with my old crowd and I've never touched a surfboard since, nor do I hang with the boys. Surfboards changed drastically and I couldn't adapt, and somehow I outgrew the guys and we were on a different plane. It was one of the many negatives of Vietnam."

Time moved on for the Badcoe complex, too, but building the centre turned out to have been relatively straightforward compared with the international tug-of-war which developed when it was time to walk away. In late 1971, as the troops were packing up, Australian ambassador



Arthur Morris wrote to the secretary of the Foreign Affairs Department, saying two "significant contenders" – the United States Army and the Vietnamese Ministry of Defence – were interested in the "well-equipped leave centre at Vung Tau". He said: "As soon as it became known that Australian combat troops were to be withdrawn from Viet-Nam by the end of this year there developed a scramble to succeed to our assets, particularly the leave centre."

And he warned of a complication: "Many of the facilities at the centre were paid for out of the funds of various welfare bodies who have expressed interest in the eventual use to which the centre may be put."

But the commander of the Australian forces, Major General Donald Dunstan, wrote a minute to the Army chief of staff, urging caution. "I am not sure what proportion of the Badcoe club was paid for by public subscription in Australia, but I suspect it was a great deal less than they think."

"I believe we should make some assessment of the total expenditure ... with a view of getting into perspective the degree of influence AFOF (Australian Forces Overseas Fund) can reasonably expect to have on the ultimate disposal of the centre. I realise Army engineer labour probably cannot be costed, more is the pity because they built the swimming pool."

Following his suggestion, the bill was added up – a couple of times, in fact – and it became apparent what a rich asset was at stake. The entire complex was estimated to have cost \$233,000 or \$266,000, depending on who did the sums and how they were calculated. That is around \$2 million to \$2.5 million in today's dollars.

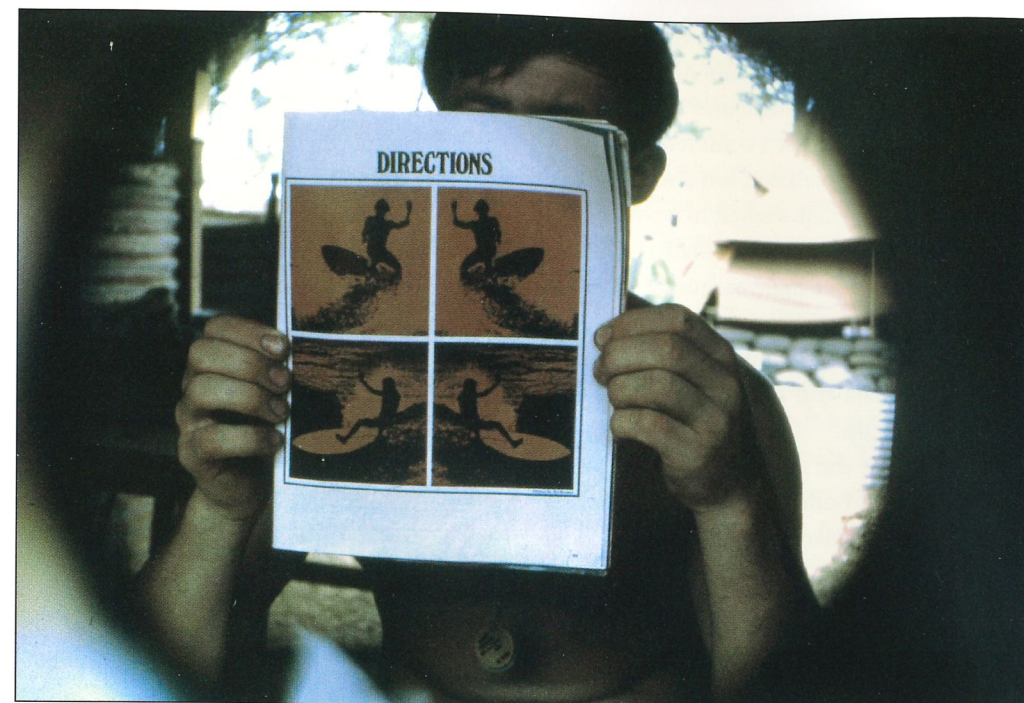
No wonder Canberra was alerting the embassy in Saigon that the RSL had asked the Defence Minister if the Amenities Fund could get a "financial credit" for the Badcoe complex.

"In the absence of any commercial sales prospect, the only conceivable way to produce such a credit would be through transfer of the complex to the Government of South Vietnam on a financial basis as a charge against aid funds," said the message from Canberra. "The Returned Soldiers League was advised of the difficulties of this approach in view of the purposes for which aid is granted, and the likely unwillingness of the Vietnamese Government to forego other items in the limited aid grant. However, the Returned Soldiers League countered with information that the South Vietnamese Army apparently wanted the Badcoe complex and may therefore be willing to accept it as an aid project."

"There are obvious problems remaining ..."

America brought in its big guns, with General Creighton Abrams himself, US commander in Vietnam, putting the hard word on Dunstan for the Badcoe centre. This would be in line with the military working arrangements which dated back to 1967, said Abrams, and he proposed the complex be transferred to the Vietnamese armed forces "at such time in the future that our needs are reduced". Dunstan's suggestion was that it be used and staffed by the Americans, with an Australian in charge or, Plan B, with an Australian NCO for liaison purposes. Clearly the intention was to keep some sort of Australian foothold, though eventually it was decided both ideas were unworkable.

So on February 29, 1972, the day *HMAS Sydney* sailed from Vietnam with its last load of Australian troops, the facilities were handed to the Americans. The Badcoe name was removed, with the complex re-named the R&R Centre, Vung Tau, and, according to Army HQ in Canberra, "for all practical purposes has been written off Army charge".



*MEMORIES: Not only surfers, but surf magazines, made it to Vietnam. Popular reading material at Nui Dat, 1970.*

*(Photo: Lance Grimstone)*

This was bad news for the Vietnamese Ministry of Defence, which had asked to take over the buildings as a recuperation centre for combat units. Canberra's official reply was: "There remains a continuing Australian and Allied visiting forces requirement for the facilities and it is the Australian wish to retain ownership of the facilities and access to the property, although accepting the help of the US forces in running the centre. When the present requirement no longer exists, the Australian Government will give full consideration to the request."

That stalling tactic worked fine for more than eight months, but then Brigadier General Harold H Dunwoody, US Army chief of staff, sent a letter which took Australia by surprise. "You are hereby advised that effective 10 Nov 1972, the Vung Tau R&R Centre will be transferred back to the Australian Army Assistance Group, Vietnam, unless instructions are received from your headquarters," he wrote. And if he heard nothing, the property would be handed to the Republic of Vietnam, his letter said.

This immediately prompted a flurry of correspondence between Canberra and its diplomats in Vietnam, debating the legal niceties of ownership to make sure the former club did not become classed as a military installation and be dismantled. There even was discussion of a plan for the Australian Embassy to claim title to the buildings then ask the Vietnamese for an extension.

Ambassador Morris sent a confidential priority cable to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra saying: "I can see considerable merit in putting in a bid for the centre which in a ceasefire situation would again become as popular with embassy personnel as it was prior to the offensive. But I recognise the problems inherent in doing so."



It could be a useful beach resort for Australian embassy staff, he said, though would be costly to run. However the American embassy would also like to use it, so could take care of the bill, and maybe even British and New Zealand diplomats would join in, he suggested.

Canberra fired back a confidential cablegram of its own, telling the ambassador that it didn't wish to lose a valuable asset, but also didn't want to take on something which could be expensive or risky to keep. And it wanted to head off "possible criticism of us for maintaining a 'white man's club' at Vung Tau" so perhaps there could be some Vietnamese use of the facilities?

Clearly all sides had recognised what a prize the former Badcoe complex amounted to – beachfront land, a two-storey hotel-style building, accommodation for around 150 people, a swimming pool, two tennis courts, squash court, gymnasium, huge beach storeroom packed with sailing boats and surfboards. Even an Aussie lifesaving surfboat. Here was a ready-made resort up for grabs.

No wonder the issue became even more muddled when the Australian Army pointed out that since it had built the place, perhaps Foreign Affairs should buy it if embassy staff wanted to use it. One problem: the Department of Defence had already ruled that the centre should be given to the Vietnamese as a gift when no longer needed.

And late 1972, the Australian Army Assistance Group, Vietnam, was alerting Canberra HQ of further complications – the mayor of Vung Tau was claiming the land was owned by the government of Vietnam, and "civic plans for general area of club include residential and tourist development". What's more, the R&R Centre's US manager reckoned that up to US\$70,000 had been spent on maintenance and facilities in a matter of months. "This estimate could be excessive and should be confirmed," said the Army message. Staff wages were said to be US\$200 a week, and the Americans said they had put in a quantity of sporting and other items including outboard motorboats.

The cable said the Australian ambassador had been told the Army would like to sell the assets – for about \$100,000 – and put the money back in the Amenities Fund. "The size of this amount has caused some consternation in the embassy ... Would be grateful for any further views held on future of club incl confirmation that Army still wishes to sell if possible and precise amount in mind."

In reply, the Army's top brass in Canberra replied that it would "go along with" Foreign Affairs taking control of the club. "Naturally we would like to be recouped for the money it cost us to build this project but believe this is a problem to be sorted out this end." In Canberra, that is.

Bureaucrats, diplomats, generals and lesser mortals, all weighed in as the debate went to and fro. Finally it was decided that "no further register of assets action or financial adjustment is necessary" before what had been the Badcoe club was handed over to the Vietnamese, just like the rest of the Vung Tau base in accordance with the original Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, directive.

So the South Vietnamese inherited the complex, with instructions that it should continue to be used as an off-duty centre for the armed forces. A noble sentiment, but soon it was sold and turned into a hotel. After the Communists over-ran the south in 1975, it became the October Hotel, in honour of Russia's October Revolution. Locals tell how all the other buildings on the former Australian base were flattened by bulldozers more than 30 years ago, with the debris carted away and the concrete slabs used for drying fish, just some bitumen roads surviving. By

2000, the only remaining trace of the Peter Badcoe Club and its associated buildings was the swimming pool, long neglected, its stagnant water occasionally used as a duck pond. Even that was demolished around 2004-2005: a veteran who happened to be there at the time reports that the wreckers had great difficulty, and they said it appeared the pool "had been built to last 1000 years". Now that the pool has disappeared, returning Diggers scratch their heads and find more and more difficulty in recognising Vungers landmarks they once knew so well. In an ironic twist, many say the best view of where the Australian base used to be is from the top of the Viet Cong memorial erected after the war.

Offshore oilfields have been developed with foreign assistance – often Russian – bringing to Vung Tau a flood of new arrivals (and occasional oil slicks on the beach, according to some visitors). Multi-lane roads have arrived, and a building boom has brought shopping centres, hotels, new-look bars and restaurants. Prosperity has swept aside the rundown 1960s bars with names like the Ponderosa, Long Beach, New York, Detroit, San Francisco, Hawaii, Florida, Washington, Nevada etc, though homage to the American dollar continues with the arrival of Vung Tau's very own KFC fast-food outlet.

Among Australians who have gone back to Vungers, common agreement seems to be that a multi-storey, three-star, Russian-built hotel occupies what was the Badcoe site. Directly opposite is a surf-themed "beach club", a bar noted for wild parties and serious drinking. Seems like some things don't change.



*SO LONG: In 1972, it was time for the Australians to say goodbye to the beach which they had made their own territory for six years.*

*(Photo: Mike Page)*



## Epilogue

THE Americans, as always, started it. Not only did they start the Vietnam War, they started the trail which led to this book. First, a boardriding ex-GI named Pat Farley – who volunteered for Vietnam – wrote his memoirs, titled *Surfing To Saigon*. Then American film-makers started working on a documentary, *Between The Lines*, combining Farley's story with that of another 1960s surfer, Brant Page, who took the opposite route, fleeing to Hawaii to evade the US draft, eventually being arrested by the FBI. Then the American magazine *The Surfer's Journal* published an article about the film and other Vietnam-era surfers, with one ex-GI telling of surfing at Vung Tau, and mentioning, almost in passing: "The only shortboard I saw had come up from the Australian camp." What? Australians with surfboards in Vietnam? And, just as amazing, ones which were more up to date than those of the mighty American military machine? To someone who didn't go to the war – my birthday was just a day away from one of the numbered balls which was drawn out of the national service barrel – this sounded fascinating. It was a story which just had to be told.

This turns out to be a largely-overlooked side of the Australian involvement in the Vietnam War, and I soon found that ex-servicemen and the armed forces have a vast supply of stories, records and photographs from Australia's most unlikely surfing outpost.

Thank you, everyone, for the incredible co-operation I've received in this fact-gathering quest. So many people have been so generous with their time. War veterans kindly invited me into their homes and their photo albums; they dusted off old colour slides and memories. Any parts of this book which come out right are due to all the help I've been given; the mistakes are mine.

Other books about Vietnam tell of the awfulness of war and the experiences of men in action, the incredible heroism, the bloody battles which still fuel nightmares, the victories and the tragic losses. This book doesn't have any of that. Instead, it just tells about a place where mateship was allowed to flourish, surely as important as all the military strategy and firepower. The Peter Badcoe Club may not have added to the body count, but it seems to have been a place which helped preserve one's sanity and, by all accounts, the Vietnam experience would have been worse for the average Aussie if it hadn't existed. Amid the horrors of a drawn-out war which changed so many lives, a safe beach where you could have a swim and a beer with your mates, and even borrow an Army-owned surfboard, must have been a very precious place indeed.

## *'It was wet and it was surfing and it was better than nothing'*

Paul Martino, 198 Works Section, Royal Australian Engineers, in country 1970-71



*THE sun has only just risen over the South China Sea, and already it's stinking hot on the Australian stretch of Back Beach, Vung Tau. On this morning in late September, 1968, a handful of keen surfers are out in the water on boards from the Peter Badcoe Club. They're paddling around, occasionally getting a gentle slide shoreward, making the most of the clean little waves which will trickle in until the wind comes up. The lifeguard has taken a chair down to the water's edge, sitting back to watch. The boats of the Vietnamese fishing fleet are mere specks out on the horizon. Such a peaceful, perfect beach scene. Hard to believe there's a war happening on the other side of the barbed wire.*

(Photo: Paul Haw, 102 Field Battery)