

Starlight: An Australian Army Doctor in Vietnam

Tony White

1st edn, xii + 183 pp, with illustrations, hardback, RRP \$33.00, ISBN 987-1-876344-689, Brisbane, Australia, CopyRight Publishing Company, 2011.

Australia is fortunate to have a significant repository of historical documentation of its involvement in wars and other overseas operations, particularly over the past century.¹ However, few books have documented the role of the Australian medical officers during such campaigns. Perhaps many readers will remember the war zone experiences of John Pearn, documented in a book soon after his return from Rwanda.² *Starlight: An Australian Army Doctor in Vietnam* is a superb account by Tony White of an Australian Regimental Medical Officer's (RMO's) experience in Vietnam, particularly given that it has been written more than 40 years after the events took place. The book contains a table of Contents; a Foreword by Major General (Retired) W.B. Digger James, AC, AO(Mil), MBE, MC; an Introduction (Preface); a list of Abbreviations and Terms; 17 Chapters; a Citation; an About the Author; End Notes; and a comprehensive Index. The book also includes a glossy insert of well-selected mostly black and white but some colour photographic plates in the centre section of the book, as well as some useful maps.

The interest generated by *Starlight* is reflected in some of the reviews that appeared soon after its release.^{3,4} Those that have served in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) will readily identify with the military terminology and the unique challenges confronting a new Royal Australian Army Medical Corps (RAAMC) RMO recruit. *Starlight*, for example, was the "radio call sign for army doctors and medics" (back cover). However, apart from Vietnam veterans and some who have deployed to post-conflict zones, few RMOs would have had experience of war until the more recent deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. *Starlight* provides some unique insights into one former Army RMO's life journey, particularly through the Vietnam War.

Starlight is substantially based on the author's correspondence with his family; however he embellishes and explains these accounts with his unique insight as an RMO into the military and its operations. Chapters include "From Boy to Man"; "How to become an army doctor"; "Rushing

off to war"; "Sufferer's Paradise"; "Hardihood"; "A bushwalker's guide to Phuoc Tuy"; "WIA and KIA"; "Hearts and minds"; "Night moves"; "Up the warbies"; "Back at the 'Dat'"; "Getting away from it all"; "A short walk in a minefield"; "Going troppo"; "Coming home"; and "Ghost busting". The early chapters of *Starlight* recount the author's early life, but most of the chapters are devoted to the author's deployment to "Sufferer's Paradise" (Ch. 4), the Vietnam War, and his experience with the 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (5RAR), a newly formed infantry battalion at the time. The remaining chapters relate to the author's subsequent civilian career, but he reflects again on the Vietnam conflict in the final chapter, particularly on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the high psychological toll amongst Vietnam veterans.

Like many battle groups during the Vietnam War, there were many casualties and the author recounts in *Starlight* his experiences and personal tragedies. As mentioned in some of the chapter titles, Nui Dat was the location of the Australian base in the coastal province of Phuoc Tuy. There were a couple of incidents in particular that were devastating, not least of which was a patrol's deadly encounter with a Viet Cong (VC) minefield (Ch. 14. "A short walk in a minefield"), where there were seven deaths, including the Officer Commanding (OC), the Second-in-Command (2-i-C) and two medics killed, as well as 28 wounded. The author poignantly described the incident as "Death without glory" and clearly such events have a lasting impact. It would be an understatement to say that February 1967 was a particularly dark period for the battalion. These chapters also provide an excellent description of the many tasks expected of an RMO on operational service, whether it is dealing with acute trauma or whether it is undertaking sick parades and hygiene inspections.

The author is Tony White, AM, RFD, a retired Colonel in the RAAMC. He served as an RMO in South Vietnam in 1967 with 5RAR, where he was "Mentioned in Dispatches". He also spent some time attached to 2 Field Ambulance. His medical studies

were completed at the Cambridge University and then the University of Sydney, partly with the support of the ADF Medical Undergraduate Scheme. Following his residency and subsequent overseas military service, he specialised in dermatology and has been in practice for over 30 years in Sydney. In 2009, he was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM).

Starlight is an exceptional account of a young RMO's confrontation with the harsh realities of the Vietnam War. Most of the events contained within the book have probably either been largely forgotten or overlooked in the media politics of the time. *Starlight* joins that exclusive portfolio of books written by ADF medical officers and former medical officers, where

they relate their personal journeys and experiences through war and conflict. It is highly recommended reading for all current and former serving medical staff in the ADF and *Starlight: An Australian Army Doctor in Vietnam* will appeal to all those interested in the humanitarian perspective of the impact of war and operational deployments.

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3. Short B. Book Review: *Starlight: An Australian Army Doctor in Vietnam*. United Service. 2011; 62(4): 35.
4. Short B. Regimental doctor in "Sufferer's Paradise". Book Review: *Starlight: An Australian Army Doctor in Vietnam*. Med J Aust 2012; 196(4): 206.



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