

Forensic recovery and identification of Vietnam war dead

It was called Operation Hump, and for many of those involved it didn't end until June this year.

After 42 years, the men of A Company could rest easy, knowing that the bodies of their mates were finally coming home.



Sieving the excavated soil to search for bone and tooth fragments.

From 5–9 November 1965, 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) was involved in a brigade-sized search and destroy operation in a region north-east of Bien Hoa in southern Vietnam. On 8 November, A Company encountered a Viet Cong force dug in. During the heavy engagement, the Australians sustained a number of casualties. Two men were killed.

Both Lance Corporal Parker and Private Gillson were hit by enemy fire and were not able to be recovered from the contact area. It was confirmed that Gillson did not have a pulse, and those present were of the opinion that Parker also died during the contact. A Court of Inquiry convened 3 days later found Parker to be recorded as missing and for official purposes presumed dead. Gillson was recorded as “killed in action, body not recovered”.

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The forensic team (L to R): Squadron Leader Denise Donlon, RAAF SR, Mr Tony Lowe, Mr Brian Manns, Lieutenant Russell Lain, RANR, Major Jack Thurgar, Commander Matt Blenkin, RAN.

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For the past few years, a Vietnam Veterans group called Operation Aussies Home has been attempting to locate the remains of the six Australian soldiers left behind from the war. In April 2007 — success! After extensive background and field research, ground-penetrating radar surveys, and nearly 30 test trenches, they located the remains of what they thought were Parker and Gillson.

Within a couple of days, the Army History Unit (AHU) had assembled a forensic team to excavate the site, recover and identify the remains. The team consisted of an archaeologist, Tony Lowe, a forensic anthropologist, Dr Denise Donlon (SQNLDR, RAAFSR), and two forensic odontologists, Dr Russell Lain (LEUT, RANR) and Commander Matt Blenkin (PNF).

The original medical and dental records for the two missing men were obtained from Defence archives and used to reconstruct ante-mortem profiles of the men. These profiles consisted of general physical traits, including any history of boney pathology, and detailed dental charts. Two dental radiographs were also available, and ultimately proved crucial to the positive identification of the men.

The excavation of the site began, somewhat fittingly, on Anzac Day, after a brief but emotional service on the hillside where the two men had fallen. In the ensuing days, the team uncovered two sets of remains, commingled from being buried in the same trench back in 1965. The recovery process was extremely delicate work, as the remains were very fragile and significantly degraded. All dirt removed from the site had to be sieved, looking for small, hard tissue fragments.

During the excavation, the team found a number of well preserved items, including an Australian map with our operational sectors marked on it and two sets of dog tags. However, one set of tags was so badly corroded that they began to crumble with attempts to clean them up. To preserve the tags, it was decided to use the portable digital x-ray equipment to image the tags. This was done in the hope that the stamping or engraving process used to produce the detail on the tags had thinned the metal where the letters were. The technique was successful, producing detailed images of Gillson's name, service number, blood type and religion. Unfortunately, this did not confirm an identification — it actually complicated matters. The AHU had a statement from the Viet Cong commander of the opposing force in which he described not only the action that took place on the day, but also the detail that the next day they buried the Australians in one of their (Viet Cong) trenches after removing their dog tags and personal effects. In the days ahead, the team had to prove beyond doubt that the remains uncovered were not those of a couple of Viet Cong carrying the dead Australians' dog tags with them, but those of our soldiers.

Once the excavation was complete and the bones and teeth removed, the team set about distinguishing between the



The excavation with the forensic team in situ.

remains. It took a number of days to separate out the two sets of remains from each other, and another 2 days to confirm the identifications. The anthropological analysis confirmed the remains were those of two Caucasoid males.

Post-mortem radiographs were taken with a handheld deployable digital x-ray system which is soon to be in service for use in all Australian Defence Force forensic identification operations.

The first identification was based on comparison of radiographs taken of the remains in the field with the ante-mortem records obtained from the archive.

The second identification was based in part on comparison with the written dental records, which were reasonably accurate but did not provide the level of detail required to positively identify the soldier. In this case, the team relied heavily on the anthropological analysis, along with the written statements of the action from the Court of Inquiry, the dog tags and map to provide enough evidence to satisfy the Australian and Vietnamese governments as to the identity of the second soldier.

It was a privilege to work with a team of such dedicated professionals on an operation of this nature. Parker and Gillson laid down their lives for our country, and we owe them and their families a debt of gratitude that we can never repay. What we did was honour their commitment and provide some comfort to their families and mates by locating them, identifying them and bringing them home, so that they could be buried with the dignity and respect they so rightly deserve.

The search for the other missing soldiers continues.

Commander Matt Blenkin, RAN

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(Received 21 Aug 2007, accepted 13 Sep 2007)

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