

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the story of Frank Hunt – ‘Frankie’ – who ‘kicked a mine’ just as Neil Armstrong was ‘kicking the moon’ that fateful day in 1969.

It is also a glimpse into the Vietnam War, how young men became involved, how it affected them, and how their lives changed forever. And it is a story of how a song came to symbolise that war and become an anthem for all Vietnam veterans. ‘I Was Only 19’, written by John Schumann based on the stories told to him by his brother-in-law Mick Storen, has resonated with Australians since 1983, meaning so much to so many.

Frank Hunt grew up in the dry, farming Mallee country of Victoria. As he and his family battled through the tough times of drought and failed crops, he could never have imagined how his life would merge with other young men in the way it did in such dramatic fashion after he volunteered for the army out of desperation. How, after a year of training, he was sent to the Asian conflict

from where he would return mentally damaged and physically wounded.

And what wounds they were. Frank spent almost two years in hospital recuperating from his injuries, having the Last Rites said over him five times, undergoing 25 operations and having 30-odd pieces of shrapnel and bone fragments left to float around in his body forever. While his physical being was slowly mended to a limited extent, his other wounds weren't so obvious; those of the mind never are.

'Frankie' was to become synonymous with the battles that the vast majority of those who served in a conflict against a totally misunderstood and underestimated enemy would fight long after the sounds of war fell silent.

This book is about the journey of Frank Hunt and the other soldiers of 3 Platoon, A Company, 6 Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment. It is their memories, their reflections, their pain and their years since. It is not, nor does it pretend to be, a historical record. Historians can quibble over facts, not over memories. Memories are mischievous. They can vary from person to person and from time to time – especially if you have suffered as these men suffered. Incidents are remembered in diverse ways, seen by different people from different angles and given different interpretations.

It's a tale of how history can be both universal and specific; how lives are changed in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of an individual, both at the same time.

These men went where not many have gone – and only those who have will completely understand. The story tells of the brutality of the Vietnam War that caused young men to grow up quickly, earlier than their time – innocent, carefree young men, sent to a place from which they would not return. At least not in the same way they left.

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During its 12 months tour of duty, 3 Platoon saw six men killed and more than 40 wounded, yet theirs is not the worst nor is it the easiest of stories from the Vietnam War. It is just one that many will relate to, one that is in some way typical and one that left an indelible mark on history.

Prologue:

KICKING MINES AND THE MOON

Somewhere in the scrubby landscape about five kilometres east of Vietnam's imposing Long Hai Mountains, the buzz of the radio handpiece on Private Frank Hunt's left shoulder alerted him to an incoming message.

'Alpha 6 to 3 Alpha,' the voice on the radio crackled. 'The moon landing has taken place. Man has walked on the moon.'

It was about 9.30 on the morning of 21 July 1969. 3 Platoon, A Company, 6 Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (6 RAR), was taking a 'walk in the Light Green'. This was the way soldiers described patrols through the areas shaded differently on the army maps. The Light Green designated a section that was lighter on jungle than normal while the Long Green was much heavier on jungle. It was far easier to lay mines in the sandy soil of the Light Green and that was where the biggest danger from mines lay.

Platoon Commander Lieutenant Peter Hines, five foot eight, fit and muscular, had worked his way through the lower ranks to officer status. That morning he had been leading his men on

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patrol for about an hour and a half, walking steadily and alertly through dense, short, almost mallee-like scrub that bashed their legs and made the going tough as they forced their way along. The platoon's three sections were moving silently through what was considered enemy territory. Their language consisted mostly of hand signals with a click of the fingers to attract attention.

Even though it was still early, the men were hot, sweaty and tired. Insects were biting, the humidity was sapping their energy and what was happening in outer space, even though historic, was not that important.

Frank, a short, skinny 19 year old, standing a couple of metres from Hines, said softly, 'Skip, the Yanks have landed on the moon.'

'Stuff the Yanks,' came the swift reply, the lieutenant, called Skip or Skipper by his men, concerned with more pressing matters.

The patrol was part of Operation Mundingburra and the men had been 'out' from their Nui Dat base for a week. Earlier they'd come across enemy signs stuck in the ground to indicate a minefield: a freehand drawn skull and crossbones with '*nguy niem*' painted on it – 'dangerous'. When Frank had radioed the news, Company Headquarters (CHQ) had ordered Hines to take his men in a reverse direction and go to another area.

After a few days during which there was a 'contact' with two enemy killed and a Viet Cong (VC) bunker destroyed, the platoon spent the best part of a day lying in ambush. Then, with no enemy arriving, Hines received more orders to patrol back towards a deserted village which had no real structures but was in the same direction they had been patrolling on the first day. However, they were not on the same track as the first few days. In fact they had gone in a loop and were approaching the same mined area from a different direction.

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After 'stand-to' that morning, in an unusual move, 3 Platoon, 8 Section's two forward scouts, Privates Mick Storen and Tony Muir, had been called in for the morning orders briefing. They were to lead off. Normally the section commanders would attend the briefing and relay any relevant information to their sections. The men wondered what their attendance meant but they didn't ask and they weren't told. When they heard the orders, Mick and his mate Muir were concerned. They were told they were to go cross-country, not on a track, towards this village. Mick knew they were going back into the mined area but not on the enemy signposted track. He was apprehensive. They were heading in almost at right angles to the track and there would be no warning, no signs at all. Mick spoke up about his concerns but was told not to worry about it and to be particularly watchful.

The patrol moved off, each section strung out behind Mick and Muir, struggling with the heat, the weight of their packs and the lightly treed but tight saltbushy type scrub. An hour or so later, with the rumble of American B-52 planes bombing the Long Hais as background noise, they came across a thin track just wide enough for feet and worn down in the centre from the passage of, they assumed, Viet Cong.

Mick stepped carefully across the track and, using hand signals, beckoned Hines to come forward from his position about six metres behind. Everything appeared to be safe, so Hines ordered the platoon of about 25 men to stop, develop a 'harbour' and have a break.

A harbour consisted of soldiers strung out in an elongated oval shape on either side of the track. A machine gun post was set up at each end and as they arrived men either stood, squatted or lay down in a fighting position hidden in the scrub, ready for an attack from any direction or an enemy approach. Claymore

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mines were laid out at various intervals ready to be let off by the 'clackers' close to the soldiers on piquet – or sentry – position. 8 Section took one side of the track and 9 Section the other as they waited for 7 Section to bring up the rear so as to properly form the harbour. In the middle was Platoon Headquarters (PHQ): the sergeant, the lieutenant, the medic and the signaller.

A couple of the soldiers were ready to prepare a brew of tea and coffee when it was safe. With relief, as they arrived at the designated harbour, the men dropped their 45 kilogram packs on the ground. Nearly all the men smoked and they grabbed waterproof packaging from their pockets and began to roll their own. They were relaxed but still alert as Hines, who had packed the pipe he always smoked and put a match to it, walked a few metres up and down the track quietly telling his men about the moon landing and signalling to others further away. Unless you were very close, silence was imperative until the all-clear was given.

Mick was at the side of the harbour, some 20 metres away from Hines who, back with PHQ, was considering his next move. Private Alfie Lamb was standing about six metres away as his section had taken up a separate position in the harbour. Hines asked Lamb to spread the word among the men. Lamb did as he was asked. Hines then made his way a few metres further towards the other end of the harbour, conveying the news Frank had given him to those close enough. A few metres back to PHQ and Hines spoke to Platoon Medic Graeme 'Doc' Davis, asking him to check the back of his neck as he could feel something uncomfortable. Davis pulled whatever it was from his skin, Hines thanked him, looked around, took a step over a couple of packs and, out of nowhere, the world exploded. The noise was deafening and the scrubby floor surged into the air in a cloud of black

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smoke and dirt. Hearts leapt and pulses raced while shrapnel tore into nearly all the men.

Skip had stepped on an M16 Jumping Jack mine and their lives were changed forever.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

HISTORY AND DOMINOES

Landing on the moon was a monumental achievement. With an estimated television audience of more than 600 million watching pictures sent from the radio telescope at Parkes in New South Wales, the event had the world transfixed. America had succeeded in its ambitious space project. The years America had spent trying to stop what they considered was the Communist threat to the world were not as successful. Nor, by July 1969, was the war it had created in Vietnam as popular with the public as it had been in earlier years, either in America or in Australia.

In the late sixties there was some confusion in sections of the Australian community. Many didn't understand how their country had come to be involved in Vietnam. They didn't know much if anything about Vietnam's history or, in some cases, that the country even existed. Many didn't care much about politics, simply trusting their leaders to do what was right. They came to understand the way politics worked but, as for the history, they needed to go back quite a few years.

At the outbreak of World War II, Indochina was a French colony. During the war Japan took over Indochina and then after the war, when Japan was defeated by the Allies, France tried to reassert its territorial claims on its former territory. To do that they had to fight the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi, the League for the Independence of Vietnam, more commonly known as the Viet Minh. The Communist nationalists were led by Ho Chi Minh, who proclaimed an independent Vietnam in 1945. France refused to accept the declaration and eight years of war ensued. It ended with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The peace settlement, known as the Geneva Accords, split the country in two at the seventeenth parallel; the North under Ho Chi Minh, and the South under the American-backed President Ngo Dinh Diem, who had deposed the former Emperor, the French appointee Bao Dai. Diem proclaimed the Republic of Vietnam in October 1955.

Included in the Accords was that a Vietnam-wide election, aimed at reunifying the divided country, be held in 1956. However, Diem claimed that the people of the North could not vote freely and, with the backing of America, he refused to participate. An agreement was reached that any Viet Minh soldiers in the South would go to the North while anyone who had fought for the French would head South. After the break-up, civilians could go where they chose. It was estimated that about one million people moved around the country.

Animosity between the North and South increased to such levels that in 1960 the North, aiming to overthrow Diem and reunite the country under Communist rule, created the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam. These soldiers were known as the Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists). With the aim of creating an uprising against the Diem rule in the South

and inspired by Ho Chi Minh, they embarked on a guerilla campaign. The South Vietnamese Army could not do much to counter the insurgents' tactics and the United States, alarmed at the prospect of communism spreading throughout South-East Asia, began to significantly increase its help to the South.

The Korean War finished in 1953 and afterwards the Communist Soviet Union helped the forces of Ho Chi Minh. Meanwhile, America was able to help Diem, as it could see that Diem was not going to be able to stop the Communist advance by himself.

Diem had instigated the building of what were known as strategic hamlets, fortified villages in the south where it was thought locals would be safe from the insurgent Viet Cong. However, the VC successfully infiltrated these so-called safe havens. In fact, the VC were everywhere, virtually controlling the countryside.

Led since 1961 by influential and charismatic President John F Kennedy, America heard constantly about 'Reds Under the Bed' and 'Better Dead than Red'. They also believed in what was known as 'the Domino Theory', a term first used by President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s to encapsulate the notion that when one country fell to Communism, so other countries would fall like dominoes and much of the world would suffer. That was something Kennedy, encouraged by history and the military, needed to stop.

The Americans had sent thousands of what were euphemistically called 'military advisors' to South Vietnam during the late 1950s and over the years that number had increased substantially. The situation at that time had more complications, twists and turns than could possibly be seen clearly, especially by the Americans, who were completely sure in their belief they could stop the Communist threat if they poured enough men and money into South Vietnam.

By the early 1960s Australia was closely watching everything America did. If it was American, it must be good, especially when it came to defending the country. Australia by and large believed what America believed when it came to Communism. After all, the US had saved the country during World War II, or so people were led to understand. Politicians and the media were worried about a perceived Communist threat from the north and welcomed America attempting to stop it. Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies spoke passionately and eloquently about halting the threat before it reached Australia's shores. 'Forward defence' was the term used – fight everywhere but on our own land.

Australia had signed the ANZUS treaty after World War II thinking that America would protect it in war. However, the treaty was a commitment on the part of the US only to consult on defence concerns, not necessarily to defend Australia. Menzies wanted more than that. To that end, he made plans to garner American support by helping in its quest against Communism. The best way was to help out in Vietnam.

Military chiefs and international experts considered that Australia's first line of defence was in Malaya, where a confrontation was already being waged against Communist insurgents, and to which Australian troops and ships were committed. Menzies thought the defensive line should be South Vietnam, so that was that.

Menzies and his government were extremely popular at the time. Generally, people believed whatever politicians and the papers said was true. They trusted them. If there was a Communist threat to the country, then it needed to be stopped. The Australian way of life must be protected and if that meant supporting America in a war in a land that many hadn't even heard of, then so be it.

America asked for Australia's help and although Australia could not do much, in 1962 it entered the conflict by sending 30 men of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) to help train soldiers of the South Vietnamese Army. It was a token gesture but a contribution nonetheless. Politicians debated sending the navy and air force as well as the army but defence department heads decided against it. Later the Minister for Defence said that Australia was asked by the South Vietnamese government to become involved. That was not true; it was the Americans who had asked and anyway, apart from that invitation, Australia had offered its services.

It wasn't to be the last half-truth, obfuscation or outright lie to be told in the ensuing years by politicians of all persuasions and from all the countries involved. This was the beginning of what was to be more than a decade of turmoil, protest, wrongful accusations and a split in Australian society, and the cause of much angst and difficulty for many of the men caught up in a war in which they would eventually see they had no reason to be involved.

There were a few protests in the capital cities about Australia's involvement but nothing that caused much of a stir. It wasn't younger people who protested but a few older, politically active, peace-loving types. They were apparently out of touch with what the vast majority of Australians thought, yet saw it as their duty to do something, at least.

The task of the AATTV was onerous and nothing the Australians would encounter in Vietnam had any sort of precedent. The two world wars had shown how the Australian Army could be relied upon in all manner of battles. From Gallipoli to the Somme and from Tobruk to New Guinea, Australians had covered themselves in glory. But fighting in the South-East Asian jungles was

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totally different. Not only were the terrain and conditions difficult, the culture caused problems. The Viet Cong could not be distinguished from ordinary non-Communist villagers as they all dressed in the same 'black pyjamas'. For all those reasons and more, the job of fighting them was difficult in the extreme and never really became any easier for any of the Australian troops over the years.