

2nd Lieutenant Noel F. Osborne, 3789407

I am a Veteran of the Vietnam War **But Not** a Vietnam Veteran. Sounds confusing? Let me explain

As part of Australia's commitment to the Government of USA Our Government pledged "to go all the way with LBJ, the then president Lyndon Johnson. Accordingly in 1964 National Service was reintroduced requiring all Australian men who would turn 20 on or after 1 Jan 1965 to register for National Service (NS). Birthdate were then selected from a barrel and selected NS men were chosen. Those members selected and passed medic requirement and enlisted into the military primarily to the army subsequently became "Veterans of the Vietnam War' Those service personnel that were posted to Vietnam and served a minimum of 2 weeks became Vietnam Veteran as well as Veterans of the Vietnam War

Noel was born in Bendigo in April 1945 and was part of the first group of young men to register for the compulsory two year National Service as part of Australia's commitment to the Vietnam War. Being the first group to register, it was the largest group selected for any intake.

He was 19 when he registered in November 1964. At that time he was in his final year of Civil Engineering studies at the Bendigo School of Mines. He joined the CRB on 4 January 1965 at Benalla Division and lived in a shared room at a boarding house four blocks from the Divisional office. A few months later, he received his call up notice in the post.

His roommate decided that he needed to celebrate, or commiserate, and they adjourned to the nearest pub. John, his roommate pointed to the bottles on the wall behind the bar and asked Noel which one he fancied. Noel had completed his civil engineering studies without ever having had a drink of alcohol. He chose a nice looking bottle solely because it had a colourful blue label. John bought it and they returned to their room. It was Blue Sapphire Gin and they drank it neat from the bottle. It was his first drink of alcohol and he has never drunk gin again.

The Army deferred Noel's entry for a year to enable him to graduate with his Diploma of Civil Engineering in April 1966. He was selected for the third intake of 1965 (3/65 in army speak) and reported to the Mollison Street Barracks in Bendigo on the 12 July 1966. He had driven his car home to the family farm, put it up on blocks for two years and his father drove him to the barracks. He remembered turning to him and throwing his arms around him in a hug before he realised that his family did not usually show affection in public. His father was a bit surprised before returning the embrace. Noel was now in the army.

Noel was now in the army he and his fellow recruits were then bussed to 2 RTB Puckapunyal, i.e. the 2nd Recruit Training Battalion. It was one of three the nation established for the sole purpose of providing basic training to civilians for the Vietnam War.

The recruits split into sections with one section per hut. After two weeks in Puckapunyal, Noel was selected for transfer to OTU Scheyville in NSW. This unit is described in more detail in the entry for Peter Balfe above. The training was intense. Quite a few other CRB staff members undertook training at OTU Scheyville including; Peter Balfe, Geoff Hose, Ken Mathers, Owen Thomas, Lindsay Clay. And Bob Adams

Noel graduated as a Platoon Commander for Vietnam in March 1967 .In 1967 the Army instructed graduates to submit three choices for their posting “but they must include these two”. Which he duly included and was posted to the RAE and 19 CRE Works Popondetta on the 31 March 1967 as a 2nd lieutenant. It was one of the two army nominated postings.

Popondetta is on the north coast of Papua on the lower reaches of the Kokoda Trail. His posting was a Staff Officer Royal Engineers and Noel said it was the broadest exposure to engineering in his 50 years as a practicing civil engineer. The posting was a Captain’s posting. Noel took over the role of the previous Captain who had been posted to Vietnam. Not only did he move into his role, but he also moved into the house his family had vacated just a week beforehand. It also included the furniture and the Captains inbox at the Engineering office

Noel’s role was to undertake the design of civil works in the developing town and the survey task for the northern district of Papua. The unit had one National Service sapper, Bob Smith, who also worked for the CRB. Noel also had a National Service sapper, three Papuan chainmen, and Marcel who was a ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel’ from the Second World War. Marcel was the Papuan ‘Boss Boi’. Noel spent half his time in the jungle surveying the road and other projects. The main airstrip serving Popondetta was at Oro Bay some distance away and had been built on swampy ground by the Americans during the Second World War and was maintained as an emergency landing strip for large international aircraft. One of Noel’s duties was to construct a new grass airstrip closer to the town to service the daily flights in and out.



Lieutenant Noel Osborne – 1967.

There were many challenges. Noel's team spent days in swamp country infested with large 'pook pooks' (salt water crocodiles). They teamed up with leaches that entered boots through the eyeholes to attach themselves to feet and other body parts. It was not only a malaria zone but one of the planets most virulent malaria sites. Hence anti-malaria drill was essential and was monitored daily. Noel was also bitten by a spider that combined with the malaria in his system resulted in a two week extreme fever and coma. When he returned to work he had several weeks of twice daily treatment for the resulting gangrene in his leg.

Noel served in this posting for 15 months before returning to Australia to run the discharge company for his 3/66 intake of Victorian national servicemen at Watsonia in June 1968. He marched out as a 1st Lieutenant on 12 July 1968. His last function was to go out with a group of fellow officers from Watsonia to celebrate their last night as Vietnam 'Nashos'. They went to a dance at the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital and there he met a lovely young lady, and he and Christine still celebrate that night together - their most recent anniversary being their 54th.

In the first few intakes for National Service, it was a requirement to do two years full time and one year in the army reserve. Noel continued to serve in the Army Reserve in the 22nd Construction Regiment sponsored by the CRB.

In Noel's last two active years, he was the OC of a construction squadron in the now full-time and part-time army. On one occasion our Sqn took over the role of the full-time Construction sqn and flew to Qld while they flew back for two weeks leave. Our sqn continued its task of constructing a military road to a coastal landing point. On the second occasion he commanded the sqn as part

of a brigade exercise and was one of the 3 sqns reporting to the regimental commander. Noel was proud to add that on each of these occasions, the sqn at least matched the performance of the full-time service sqns.Noel retired from the army in 1993 with the rank of Major.