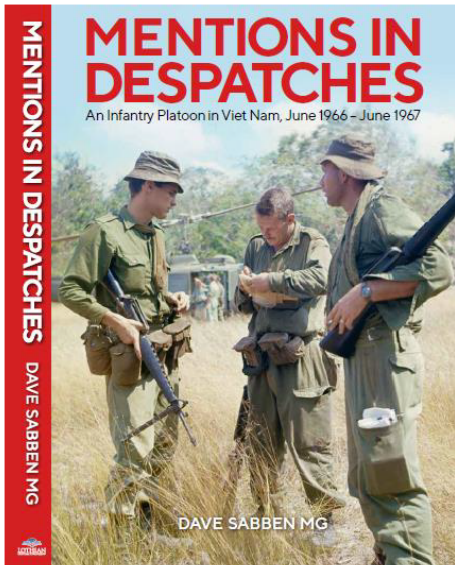


**Book review – OTU “Scheyvillian” magazine**  
*(Scheyville was the National Service Officers Training Unit 1965-1973)*  
**Issue April 2023, pages 49-50**

**NEW BOOKS:**

**Mentions in Despatches** David Sabben (1/65) reviewed by Robin Hunt (3/69)



At left: Denis Gibbons Cover photo:

2Lt Dave Sabben (OC 12 Pl), Sgt Lance Larcombe (Sgt 12 Pl) and Sgt Bob Buick (Sgt 11 Pl) on Operation Portsea.

“Dear Sue...” and that’s how the author, then an Army National Service volunteer, David Sabben starts over three hundred letters to his wife whilst he undertakes a year-long tour of duty in South Vietnam in 1966-1967. These letters form the core of a confronting tour through the Vietnam War through the eyes and pen of 21-year-old Sabben who, following punishing training at the Officer Training Unit (OTU) and further infantry training, is warned in mid-1966 for service in South Vietnam as a 2Lt Rifle Platoon Commander in D Company, 6 RAR.

Whilst there isn’t a lot of intimacy shown as being shared between husband and wife in these letters (refer to Preface), there is some humour (look for the scorpion story), but there is a huge amount of

insight into military life in a war zone. Sabben wrote to his wife virtually every day whilst he was on war service, and she must have kept all of his letters – bar a few that went AWOL thanks to the postal system. Remarkable really for, when I was in SVN, I was either unobservant, too busy or used letter tapes, and I suspect that, like me, most Viet Vets have nothing like the trove of information that Sabben uses. Mind you, he adds to this gold mine, data gleaned from commanders’ War Diaries, interviews and outright research. His observations and insights make even an uneventful week long patrol seemingly interesting even if there is no contact with the enemy. Sabben gives great credit to his officer training at OTU (and mentions fellow graduates from his class 1/65, and later 1/66 & 2/66) who served beside him in SVN. He even runs across former DS from OTU and identifies other officers who will later instruct at OTU.

There is a lot that fellow OTU graduates (and also those from RMC & OCS) will recognize as being the nuts and bolt activities of an infantry platoon commander: Warning Orders, “O” groups, dust and mud, monsoon, bamboo, patrolling, cordon & search, ambushes (with an hour by hour diary of one ambush), night routine, fire discipline, weapons handing, evening harbours, clearing patrols, chopper discipline, dealing with enemy KIA, defoliants, digging in, OHP, rations (Australian and US), war souvenirs, barbed & razor wire, mines, medical & dental, leaches, artillery fire control, DF’s, “friendly fire”, the role of armour, duty officer, pay matters (he was paid about \$63 per week including \$5 per week “Vietnam Allowance”), resupply (especially the role of a CSM with socks and ammo), communications, radios breaking down at awkward moments. All of this is typical of what all young infantry officers were trained to handle in that era (and most of it still applies now) and shows “Infantry doing what has to be done” - but not by “pogos” but by those at the “sharp end”. Sabben also addresses weapons adequacy, map availability and the lack of “intelligence” at company level (especially at Long Tan). Sabben even has time to get to the larger cities, met the Yanks (and swap some military trinkets but he never ended up winning a Jeep). Because he was in country for 365 days (“and a fart” – see the book), he had some Rest and Convalescence in country and Rest and Recreation in Hong Kong (and all I will say here is “boys will be boys”) and even ANZAC Day 1967 gets a mention - as does Christmas Day 1966.

Author Sabben had a leading role in the Battle of Long Tan (as one of the three platoon commanders involved in the fire fight) and this is covered in his letters written a couple of days after the fight and these give us a good insight into Sabben’s role and that of other key players. Sabben has also written on this aspect in another of his books, “*Through Enemy Eyes*”, ANU. 2005. and there are plenty of other texts on this battle. The book does not dwell on Long Tan, but it is clear lessons were learnt.

Understandably, there are quite a number of references to “recognition” ie awards (in the form of medals for gallantry – not the “I was there campaign medals”) and award recommendations that were well

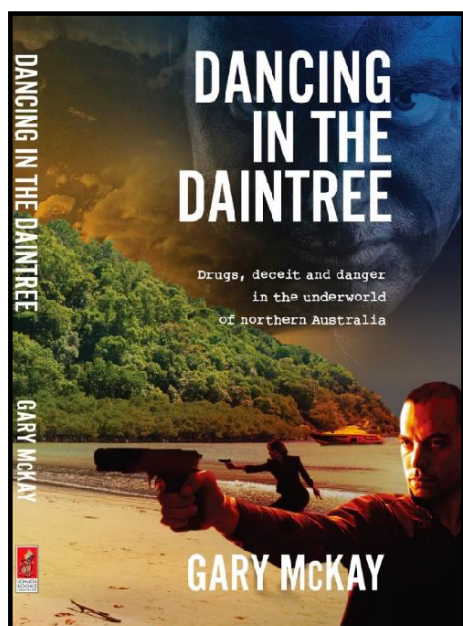
merited were either downgraded or not awarded at all. It seems this stemmed partly because Australia didn't have its own awards system and thus we were obliged to use the British system. Because Long Tan happened in mid-August, we had used up most of our annual quota of awards and some of the higher awards had to be held for senior officers - whether they were merited or not. It took many decades of lobbying by Maj Harry Smith, the D Company Commander (see "*Long Tan – The Start of a Lifelong Battle*". BigSky. 2015) and others to obtain due justice for all participants (including Sabben - who eventually was awarded an Australian Medal for Gallantry to add to his UK MID).

This may be a coffee-table sized book with 400+ pages but it is NOT a coffee-table book. It is an accurate historical record, illustrated with hundreds of B&W and coloured photos (thanks to the support of the AWM) – many of which have not been published before, and there are relevant maps and charts, pictures of the materiel of war (guns, grenades etc), and there are observations about living in the Task Force base and it's daily routine – even the locals outside rate a mention. There is even a useful "Postscript" of "*Why Phuoc Tuy*" (see further discussion in "*Australian Military Operations in Vietnam*" by Albert Palazzo. Army History Unit. 2009 and "*The Australian Army and the Vietnam War*". Chief of Army's Military Conference. 2002). Sabben's book in many ways parallels "*Vietnam Vanguard*" (Boxhall and O'Neill eds. ANU. 2019). The latter is virtually a text book covering 5RAR's time in SVN in 1966. Nothing wrong with that and it's a book of record in its own right but it lacks the intimacy of Sabben's book. In the latter, we see a junior officer doing what he was trained to do and doing it well and his leadership skills - and those of others - shine through.

In terms of publishing excellence, I rate Sabben's book up there at the top - along with the WW1 modern classic "*The Western Front - an Australian Perspective*" by Dwyer, Duffy and Postle (Affirm Press, 2015). Sabben's book has everything – a complete story, well written, well researched, well-illustrated, well edited & well published with an excellent index (buy the book and look up "OTU" to see what I mean). All aspiring company-level infantry officers should buy and read this book. It could be you! This book may help to convince you that one can take an intelligent and committed civilian, train him or her and produce a combat-ready junior officer in six months. Sabben proves it is possible. As would have been said to Sabben at OTU prior to his going to the Vietnam War, "*Well done that Man!*"

Robin Hunt (3/69) served in South Vietnam in Artillery in 1970-1971 and thus well after the dust from 1966 had settled (but the mud remained!)

And while you're considering a book purchase, perhaps you might like to consider this one too:



**Dancing in the Daintree Gary McKay (2/68)**

After 22 non-fiction books, Gary McKay has penned his first 'novel'. The back story is that is based (only loosely) on a job he did with the AFP when he was the Brigade Major of 6 Brigade (as it was then) and they, and Customs and Quarantine, were trying to catch crooks up in Far North Queensland.

**Reviews:**

"Like an Australian James Bond, Dancing in the Daintree is a fast-paced, action-packed adventure set in tropical North Queensland. With an easy-going style, unforgettable characters and peppered with Australian humour, it is a great read. Highly enjoyable!"  
Alaine Neilson, Author of *Are You Sure You Want to Know?*

"Veteran SAS hero on dangerous, covert surveillance of ruthless drug-traffickers. A suspense-filled adventure to the very end."  
Vivian Waring, author of *When Tears Ran Dry*

**This book is not available in bookstores, back can be ordered directly with Gary at [garymckay@bigpond.com](mailto:garymckay@bigpond.com)**