
D 8726(L) Letter by Donald Arthur Hemsley, written on 30 September 2011 to his friend Jeff Glibert, regarding his recollections of the 1AFH Pathology Lab during the Vietnam War, August 1969 to August 1969.

3sTo: Jeff Gilbert 1AFH

Regarding: Some of my memories of 1AFH Pathology August '68-August '69

SEPTEMBER 30TH, 2011

Dear Jeff

Elliot Bishop has written his experiences extremely well, and I don't think my memory and writing skills are up to his standards, but I'll try to fill in some details that I can remember. I'm sorry for any delay, but I have continuing computer on-line problems, perhaps because of our location.

A bit about me: I was originally called up in the 2nd intake, but was deferred because of studies, and eventually was part of the 11th intake (February '68), so was actually over 22 when I went in, probably not dissimilar to a lot of Nashos. By then I had been married to Josie for 6 months.

After Puckapunyal & Healesville Corps training, I was posted to the Malarial Research Unit at Sydney University under Professor Black. I thought this would be great, wearing civvies, Sergeants pay, field trips to New Guinea etc, but it only lasted 3 weeks. I was told that I had to go to Vietnam asap, As it was such a small unit, I virtually had to go through the process of sending myself to war (what a fool), kit clearance, medical, dental, injections, jungle training at Canungra. I had my dental whilst on pre-em leave, and had all 4 wisdom teeth extracted ("You wouldn't want to have a toothache in the jungle, would you, digger?"). I flew to Vietnam in August 1968 via Qantas with the rank of Private. After a short time on digger's ridge, the Sergeant's posting came through.

The "old" lab, as described by Elliot, was still in use, and pretty cramped. The guys in the lab at the time made me immediately welcome- they were a very tight unit, obviously good mates, and worked together well. I can't remember if Major Cameron Baird was there then, or whether he came slightly later, but Elliot will probably know. He was held in very high esteem by us all, really "one of the boys", and a brilliant Biochemist from the Royal Melbourne Hospital. He persuaded me to attempt a thesis for my Fellowship of the AIMS with the title "Kit tests in the field". I wasn't incredibly keen, as my main areas of expertise were in Haematology and Blood Bank, but he was such a lovely and persuasive man that I started collecting data etc. I continued with it, and after discharge, I sent him a draft copy, but it still needed a lot of work. Then, unfortunately, he suddenly died. I hope it wasn't from the poor quality of my research!! Seriously, his death by suicide was a terrible shock, and everyone who knew him grieved. He obviously had problems, to which Elliot alluded.

He was replaced by Major Brian Purser, a Histopathologist from Concord Hospital in Sydney, who came for a 6 month stint. A quiet and rather quirky man, but well liked, he subsequently joined the permanent Army. I think he came at around the time we shifted into the new lab, in November '68??

The new lab, very grand and spacious, was a great change for us. I think around that time, Grantley Payze, Geoff Barnes, and Peter Shepherd went home, and replaced by Barry Ormiston, Graham Casemore, and Bruce Maslin, with Ian Hobson to go to 8 Field Ambulance at Nui Dat (more of them later).

The two storage areas at either end (non air-conditioned) were hardly used in my time, apart from some heavy stores, coffee cups, our pop-guns etc. The equipment in the lab was adequate, but there were some problems. A number of the Biochemistry methods were quite bizarre (we got them from the Yanks, of course), including testing total proteins using specific gravity, bilirubins using a colour chart, and not very good quality standards and controls. We found it very difficult to give decent electrolyte results, as the flame photometer was pretty wobbly, and the chloride method was archaic. Blood gas measurements were non-existent.

In retrospect, the transfusion cross matching techniques were probably overcomplicated and hence slower than necessary. The vast majority of the diggers would never have had a transfusion previously, and hence no antibodies. We could have simply, in emergencies, given them their own group, without the elaborate full crossmatch. We received a "proper" blood storage fridge soon after going to the new lab, which helped enormously. When needing extra blood, we found the American system worked very well, even though, generally, we were pretty well at the end of the queue. When fresh blood was needed, we had no problems with donors from the nearby Ordnance and Service units.

Haematology (including malarial diagnosis) was generally OK, although on more than one occasion we had no supplies of haemoglobin standards, and had to rely on the haematocrit results- unbelievable in this modern age. All the crew became au fait with malaria diagnosis (thick and thin films).

Microbiology and Parasitology were handled pretty well under the circumstances. Considering we had to make our own agar plates, we had very little trouble. One specific incident comes to mind. We had a *Shigella sonnei* outbreak at one stage, which was written up in the AMJ. Many cases of *Salmonella*, and of course, wound infections kept us busy. Elliot mentioned the parasite survey among the Vietnamese civilian workers. It was a veritable smorgasbord! There was a reasonable amount of Hookworm and *Strongyloides* amongst the diggers, and some *E. histolytica*.

Personnel:

Elliot Bishop, Grantley Payze, and Peter Shepherd left, they were replaced, I think, by (Corps) Barry Ormiston and Graham Casemore from Queensland, and later, by Pte Bruce Maslin from W.A. At the same time (Corp) Ian Hobson was posted to 8 Field Ambulance in Nui Dat.

I had met Barry, Graham and Ian at Corps training in Healesville in June '68, re we became good mates. It also happened that we went through Canungra together, so this was like a bit of a reunion for me. These three did Captain Stan Fraser's course at 1 Mil, and like a lot of Nasho's, were tertiary qualified. Barry Ormiston was a Biochemistry graduate, and worked at P.A. Hospital in Brisbane prior to call up. Graham Casemore was an Industrial Chemist (paint manufacture) in Brisbane, and Ian Hobson was a qualified Veterinary Surgeon from Townsville.

Barry is a very intelligent bloke with a warm and caring attitude (reads like a job reference, doesn't it?). He also was married before army entry. He was a champion chess player, and didn't mind a XXXX and a smoke. Graham was a quieter, introspective bloke, also married, and generally kept to himself. Ian (8 Field Ambulance), with whom I have maintained contact, was a pretty disgruntled bloke at the time; he thought, being a Vet Surgeon, he should at least have had a Commission. He was generally a wilder type, very personable, and lost his Corporal stripes at least once for misdemeanours, but generally did a great job at the "sharp end". We remain good mates now. He has just retired from his successful Vet practice on the Gold Coast.

Bruce Maslin was a ginger haired, spectacled, Botanist from Perth. He was a bit of an eccentric, and smoked like a chimney (as most of us did). Being an academic, when he first came, he stated that he wanted to do a botanical survey of the Vung Tau peninsula!??? That intention lasted about a week. I believe he has had a distinguished career in W.A., being a eucalyptus expert. If you Google his name, you'll find a number of references, and perhaps an e-mail address (I have since noted that he had joined our Association). The other member of our lab was Jeff Crow. I can see his face, but can't remember much about him unfortunately.

My replacement was Neville Herrmann, another Queenslander, who also was a qualified Med Lab Scientist. He also worked for Gutteridge's (QML) and was a Haematology expert. Another very nice quiet and rather reserved chap; we saw each other frequently post army at the lab

The Pathologist in my time after Majors Baird and Purser was Colonel Bruce Gutteridge, a Histopathologist from Brisbane (since deceased) who came in ?June '69 for 3 months. He, with his father, had private pathology laboratories in Brisbane and other Queensland centres. He was an eccentric fellow, but like the other Pathologists in my time, very supportive, and mainly left us to run the laboratory. He knew I was leaving the army in February '70 and offered me a job on discharge. I accepted his offer, and subsequently worked for QML for 27 years, mainly on the Gold Coast.

There are probably other things that come to mind, but I'll leave this for you for now. I have a number of slides in which you may be interested, of both the lab and general snaps, even though I'm a lousy photographer.

Regards

Don Hemsley