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MENTIONS IN DESPACHES

REVIEW for DUTY FIRST and SABRETACHE

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Sabben was a typical young Australian when deployed as a platoon commander to Vietnam with D Company 6 RAR on its first tour. Credibility is a keystone of this remarkable publication. Rarely does one find a story of what it is like to be an Infantryman at platoon level. This is such a story and it is a cracker. It is about the author's tour of duty as a young national service officer, plucked by an unfair process to bolster the numbers needed for the Vietnam War, put through a crash course in junior officer-ship and sent to war with awesome responsibilities.

The Battle of Long Tan is the subject of other books, a movie and still features in a wide range of military training and studies, up there among Australia's more famous battles. Sabben covers the battle, and in a remarkably clear manner aided by good maps showing its progress. But that is not the central intent of the book nor, in my view, its core attraction. Through the method of daily letter writing, he spells out for his wife Sue what it is the platoon does each day and night. Each day, each night. And under the privations of being among the first to arrive at the newly selected Task Force base at Nui Dat where they had to develop their position from scratch. Those to follow had different experiences.

He might have intended at that time of life to simply keep his wife well informed of what it was like during their separation. Whether he intended that or not, he actually captures his experiences in a war zone at a far greater detail than other writers have. He might not have realised the long-range value of taking a day-by-day approach to recording this war but in so doing, he has left a remarkable legacy for future generations of young Infantrymen. And now those experiences are ours to share, through the eyes of a platoon commander who left little unrecorded while it was fresh in his mind.

Liberally illustrated with a large number of original photographs, the book leads readers to 'feel' like they are there, part of Dave Sabben's platoon. At least, that is how it struck me, having been in the same job, at a different time. He records the deprivations, humour, boredom, fear - the sharp escalation to action interspersed with long periods of tedious patrolling and ambushing. Some might say unproductive time securing vital points and covering largely-impassable terrain. But there are among us many who hold that little such effort is wasted. Domination of the ground is everything, and no contact with the enemy is not necessarily a bad thing at the end of the day. But when that contact is made, the

fight is on, and the various contacts Sabben and his 12 Platoon have are exceptionally well described.

And we learn from this singularly effective story telling how things really happen in the field. When things go well; when they don't. Accidents, misfortune, the realities of war at the coalface. Weapons and equipment, living conditions, the inequities between other arms and services and sometimes, the sheer 'luck' of it all, are well demonstrated. The book is exceptionally well illustrated, depicting the lot of the Infantryman and the importance of good leadership and teamwork to good soldiering.

It is also critical and blunt in exposing the manifestly unfair honours and awards quota system which, along with conscription and the failed barrier minefield from which so many allied mines were to be lifted and used against us, rate among the more insidious and regrettable features of this war. As we learn from Sabben's descriptions of the administrative actions following Long Tan, one can only hang their head in shame over how poorly many deserving acts of bravery and service in Vietnam went unrewarded. It was a cruel enough war as it is. Many will say that the authorities at the time did not manage that part of the war at all well. Events in that space over 50 years later are worth reflecting upon, with Sabben now awarded the Medal for Gallantry, and others with him on the day more appropriately recognised.

The reader is invited to keep in mind that this book contains the words of a man in his early twenties, the age of the officer closest to his men then, and still the case today. Most of us at that time of life are still mastering our trade as Infantrymen, striving to be effective subalterns, sergeants, corporals, point scouts, machine gunners, riflemen. Others guide and support us with characters in our regimental lives like Harry Smith and Jack Kirby in this book, and we learn from them. And we learn much from our soldiers and our peers. Any aspiring young leader will relate to Sabben's story of the intimate interweaving of this regimental phenomena; the brotherhood of arms, and go on learning.

The Poor Bloody Infantry. This is what his letters to Sue depict. And now, with the help of images from his tour of duty, and the licence of later photographs and superb maps and diagrams, we have an excellent record of an Australian rifle platoon going to war. Sobering is Sabben's information on how few who started with 12 Platoon got on the Vung Tau ferry to ride home together twelve months later.

This is a story told simply but brilliantly. Honestly. Veterans know. Future veterans will be wise to listen and learn. Sabben's latest book is a classic, up there with *All Quiet on the Western Front*. If there is one book on Infantry that one might have on the bookshelf, it is this one. Next door to another of his works *Through Enemy Eyes*.