



A SAPPERS' WAR

HOW THE LEGENDARY
AUSSIE TUNNEL RATS
FOUGHT THE VIETCONG

JIMMY THOMSON WITH SANDY MACGREGOR

FOREWORD

You wouldn't think Sappers and Navy Divers had much in common at first glance. But you'd be surprised. The Australian Army engineers 'make and break', as their unofficial motto says. And while these guys were up to their necks in bombs, landmines and booby traps in Vietnam, their modern day counterparts, like me, are dealing with IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) and other deadly traps.

Although we obviously spend a lot of time underwater, one of my first assignments in the Navy was sailing up through the South China Sea, often close to Vietnam. I've also been on task doing what Sappers do every day. Clearance Divers have been blowing things up, rendering explosives safe, clearing bays of mines and rescuing loads of people since their inception, so I can relate somewhat to the Tunnels Rats and the Sappers who

came after them. That said, there's a big difference between tunnelling and swimming underwater. In the sea you can go in pretty much any direction when things go pear-shaped. In a tunnel, you've got forwards and backwards, and that's it. On the other hand, you don't get many sharks in tunnels, except the VC kind.

I had the pleasure of launching *Tunnel Rats*, the first book by Jimmy and Sandy, and was curious to know where the story went from there. I have to say reading *A Sappers' War* took me on a journey right back to my first few hours in the forces. There's a chapter in the middle of this book about how the song 'I Was Only Nineteen' came to be written. On my very first morning in the Army, we new recruits were woken by the loud crack of machine-gun fire and then, as we lay frozen in our beds, on it came over the loudspeakers the Redgum song about a soldier in Vietnam setting off a landmine the same day man landed on the moon. It was a chilling experience; a powerful way of letting us know that our lives were changing forever and, for some of us, it might not be for the better.

So it was a pleasant surprise to discover that the Sappers' story didn't end with the *Tunnel Rats*—in fact, it had barely begun. I can relate to the guys who prodded and probed their way through minefields, making them safe for their mates, having spent countless hours learning the techniques. And I totally get what it must feel like to spend all day on a highly technical task only to have to saddle up as a fighting soldier when darkness falls and there are enemy to hunt down.

But there's stuff here that's totally alien to me: riding on

tanks while looking out for massive landmines; building bridges at night in lashing rain, knowing the enemy is out in the bush waiting for a chance to strike; clearing jungle in a bulldozer that's a slow motion target for rocket-propelled grenades; laying 23,000 mines and then, if that wasn't stressful enough, clearing them when the high command realised they'd made a mistake.

And of course, the larrikin spirit of the original Tunnel Rats lived on, from their high jinks in the bars and brothels of Vung Tau to running a gambling den to relieve rookie infantrymen of their wages. One big difference between the blokes in the original Tunnel Rats and the men who came after them was that most of the newcomers were Nashos—National Servicemen. But for conscription, it's fair to say, many of them probably wouldn't have been in Vietnam. However, when their country's call came, they stood tall and made the most of it.

This book doesn't dwell on the politics of that situation and it's not a shot-by-shot history of the Vietnam War. But if you want to know what it felt like to be 'everywhere' dealing with a different set of problems every day, this is the closest you'll ever get to walking in a Sappers' boots.

There's one statistic that speaks volumes about the role of the Sappers in Vietnam. The engineers of 1 Field Squadron based at Nui Dat suffered heavier casualties than any other Australian unit in the Vietnam War. That says everything you need to know about this special breed of soldier.

This is their story and I salute them all.

Paul de Gelder