

• CHAPTER 10 •

BERT OUR SSM

Bert McSweeny, the lanky guy in a white shirt sitting at the right of this photo, was our Squadron Sergeant Major (SSM), the bloke responsible for keeping everyone and everything in line.

He was quite well respected but I did have a couple of interesting moments with him. He knew how to handle young diggers and I think you will see that he definitely had my measure.

Everyone was required to do a weekly run as a group, although those of us working shiftwork got to do it individually. We would report to the duty sergeant in the

cooler pre dawn then head off on a prescribed route. However, some of us would jump into a roadside ditch at the bottom of our hill, wait the appropriate length of time then dash the short distance back up the hill to report in again all sweaty and puffing. After one of these "abbreviated" runs I was laying back on my bed, still in darkness, when I heard a Warrant Officer (WO) bellowing out "Sig Fisher, Sig Fisher". I got up and fronted him to be asked where I had gone as he had followed me and didn't see me come back past him as I should have. I told him that I had gone a different way for a bit of a change and after an admonishment for not obeying the rules thought I had got away with it. However later that morning I walked around the corner of a building and there was the WO talking to Bert. I immediately tipped what/who the conversation was about.

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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Remember what I previously said about VB being the popular beer, I should have had shares in it

Sure enough I got the ‘Fisher, get over here’ summons. I fessed up and got told to get my gear and report to Bert at the orderly room, the building with the low white fence in the photo above. He ordered me to run from there to the watchtower at the end of the road, rifle at the high port (ie diagonally across the chest). Now in the full on heat of the day I asked for how long and was told “until I tell you to stop”.

So off I went, earning derisory, giggling comments from the Vietnamese kitchen hands in the mess calling out “ah you go monkey house (ie jail)” as I passed them. Anyway after quite some time and a hell of a lot of sweat, the orderly room sergeant stopped me and asked what I was doing. I explained and he asked “for how long” to which I replied “until he tells me to stop”. “I think you had better stop, he’s gone into town” he answered.

Score: Bert 1 - Rex 0



Now Bert was slightly stooped and apparently a little arthritic. Thus when he saluted on parades he had a characteristic forward lean with his fingers slightly spread. His command of “Attention” also ended with characteristic cough like sound. I was actually quite good at taking him off which, paradoxically, was an indicator that I/we respected him.

A group of us were gathered in a hut one day and for some reason I did my Bert imitation only to hear the door open. “I hope that isn’t him” I thought, but on looking up there was the man himself “Oh shit, I’m gone”. He casually walked up and engaged in general chat with us, with me again sweating but for a different reason. “Oh well I better be off” he remarked and on turning to leave he remarked “by the way Fisher your drill isn’t too bad but you had better brush up on your word of command”.

Score: Bert 2 Rex 0. As I said he understood blokes like me.