

# When I Was Only 19



REX FISHER

# COPYRIGHT & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This memoir is not for commercial publication as it contains internet sourced photographs and other references which are not mine, but were part of the inspiration for telling this story and are quite useful in illustrating it.

It is compiled as a keepsake record for those who know me and as a therapeutical process. It is something I would not have been able to do just a few years ago and in that respect I would like to acknowledge the help of the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) and their agents for their counselling. Also the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) for their support and the Veterans Support and Advocacy Service (VSASA) in Brisbane for their assistance.

None of this material is to be reproduced without the author's permission but may certainly be referenced.

However the story is freely available to anyone who would like an insight into one young man's experiences in the Vietnam War and some of its long term impacts. In that respect I do ask that you reflect for one moment to recognise that our "Modern Anzacs", often veterans of many conflicts, have their own stories and are suffering similar impacts.

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# PREFACE

*So many memories (and laughs) were triggered whilst viewing photos on Denis Hare's Pronto\* website that I decided to record some of them. Yes 13 months in Vietnam was often fun (for me at least), typified by Aussie, larrikin mateship and, I suspect, a subconscious realisation that humour helps to cope with fear (it certainly did at the time).*

*Even though as a Signals Technician I was a POGO (Personnel On Garrison Operations) there were constant, underlying anxieties (mostly "false alarms") and some very serious "moments" which, whilst relatively fleeting, have certainly had lasting impacts. Mountains of fun, moments of fear probably sums it up.*

*That 13 month "Tour of Duty" definitely shaped my future. I gave up my goal of becoming an Army Officer and have followed varied paths since - generally aligned with something I wrote home at the time saying "after being in a place like this you just want to do something that helps others".*

*A popular cry at the time was that "the pen is mightier than the sword" and on leaving 'Nam I added "but don't let it run out of ink". Unfortunately I don't think we have learned from the 520 lives lost, the thousands wounded or those suffering post traumatic stress as we seem very willing (for political expediency?) to rush into what General Cosgrove often labelled "Wars of Choice".*

*War results from and leads to the total degradation of humanity [the killing; the willingness to kill (yes including mine); the poverty; orphans; women turning to prostitution to survive etc] and it had a huge impact on me. You will read later where I actually questioned "what have I become" after an incident. I particularly abhor the term "collateral damage" that generals and politicians use to somehow justify unintended, but entirely predictable, consequences. On Anzac Days we often hear Veterans referring to war as "bloody stupid" and questioning how we can get to the point where we can so readily kill one and other. Thus this story is no attempt to glorify war which, in my view, is actually impossible.*

*The photos I have used are mine; from the Australian War Memorial as marked ( <https://www.awm.gov.au> ); or other web sources especially Denis Hare's Pronto website. Click the 110 Signals Squadron banner on the home page of that site ( <http://pronto.au104.org> ) for heaps of information and photos. It also directs you to Denis' web book "[Pronto in South Vietnam 1962-1972](#)" to which I refer a couple of times. Denis has also set up an excellent 104 Signals Squadron website at <http://www.au104.com> and there are a few photos from its albums as well. Thanks all round to Denis. More detailed acknowledgements of photos are made in the credits.*

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\* "Pronto", based on the motto Certa Cito (Swift and Sure), identified a Signals Corps member using a radio. Each Corps had its own identifier eg Armoured Corps troops used "Ironsides". The Pronto website provides a lot of history about the Royal Australian Signals Corps in Vietnam.

# PREFACE *CONT'D*

*As a Signals Technician my job was to set up, manage and maintain communication systems, mostly sitting on my bum not patrolling etc where "each step could mean your last one on two legs" as in Redgum's song "I was only 19".*

*However so much of that song does relate to my experiences and it certainly "chills me to my feet" at times. You may wish to set the mood for this book by now by watching the YouTube link below or listening to it through your own music source.*

*You may also like to read Dave Morgan's book "My Vietnam War" to which I made a small contribution*

*Hope you enjoy the narrative and some of the music from that time. I also hope that you will indulge me my various opinions whilst not necessarily agreeing with them.*

*"I Was Only 19"*

<https://youtu.be/Urtiyp-G6jY>

