

The Vatican Guineas.

The following is an article written by Paul Stock and was published in the 7 Sig Regt Assn Newsletter of October 1997

No matter where Australians find themselves on the first Tuesday in November, they will find a way to listen to the Melbourne Cup. The war in South Vietnam proved to be absolutely no barrier to our continuing the tradition. As the month of November 1970 approached the usual sweeps were planned and the more fertile minds among us sought ways and means to make the day a bit more memorable than simply listening to the Cup and hopefully picking up a winner or two from Sig Leon 'Sleepy' Douglas who always got 'the mail' from home about some promising nag or another. Unfortunately, Sleepy's mail was usually late, lamentable and laughable; one of his perennial tips, Red Richard, won its first race the week after Sleepy came home to Australia, and when, of course, no one knew that it was set to win!

Anyway, drawing upon an idea discussed by Pope Gehle and Sig Ray 'The Seal' Seiler, it was decided by the Baggyarses Social Club that we should perhaps run a horserace of our own on Melbourne Cup Day. Small potatoes only just a bit of a giggle along with bringing our normal Saturday evening BBQ meal forward to the Tuesday and hoping the Boss, Capt. Jack Fenton, would allow us a couple more than the usual 'two cans per man per day (perhaps). In fact, part of the reason for the whole event ultimately being sanctioned by Capt Fenton was that, through various means (mostly illegal), we had managed to build up a store of booze that had not only become alarming in its scope and size, but had also so overcrowded the unit's one meagre storeroom that it had to go to make way for the many more important items of kit and equipment that required dry storage. WO 1 GBL (Bryan) Russell, our Troop Sergeant Major, reckoned that a social function where some invited guests could help demolish the illegal cache would be just the ticket.

Little did we know at that early stage that the show would grow like Topsy and that, from such humble beginnings, in the way that The Cup is 'the race that stops a nation', this would become 'the race that stopped a war'. Ultimately, very little attention was paid to the Melbourne Cup itself. A couple of sweeps were run, the village bookie (safely ensconced at the next unit, 104 Signals Squadron, and safely insulated from unwanted attention by being contactable only by phone) was the gleeful recipient of some of our hard-earned on mostly losing bets, while we all listened in to Radio Australia's broadcast of Joe Brown calling his umpteenth Cup. I can't remember now, but Cpl Ron Biddle probably backed anything at over 100-1 and probably picked up a tidy sum on the day! Those not actually on duty were charged with the many preparations needed to get the 'Vatican Guineas' up and running, for that was the name that evolved out of many Pit Six gatherings, OR's club committee meetings and musings over a cold tin or three in the great Vietnamese outdoors. Race time was set down for the relative cool of 1700 hours by which time the skeletal evening watch was in place, day shift bods were free, ARDF, Cell and Processing staff were released from or finished their daily

duties and visitors, entertainers, dignitaries, hangers on and spectators were able to get to the race venue. The Nui Dat helipad access road was chosen as the track because it was flat, straight and smooth and most importantly, it was right at our back door, 547 being located adjacent to the pad. Entertainment had been booked in the form of a band of motley musicians and minstrels from 110 Sig. Sqn in Vung Tau. All this, of course, was to take place on that first Tuesday in November, 1970. For weeks prior to that, however, truly amazing scenes had pervaded the confines of 547 Sig Troop. Race format had been decided upon by a committee comprising anyone whose ideas were not considered too radical, or likely to cause the participants anything more serious than an extended stay in hospital. A death would have been met with some consternation as 547 was not exactly flush with extra troops to replace any such casualty.

Essentially, the race was to be contested by those foolish or willing enough to act as horses while being ridden piggy-back style by other, lighter members of the unit, over approximately three hundred metres of the helipad access road. The more serious actually got in some training in order to perfect riding technique, jockey's position and so forth. Others, American exchange operator, Specialist 4 Slim Blaylock included, sought solace, comfort and extra intestinal fortitude for the rigors ahead by consuming as much pre-race elephant juice as was available. Pre-post swabs would have eliminated more than half the field for being incompetent, incoherent and incapable. Breathalysers would have proven manifestly unequal to the task in being totally incapable of registering readings of such magnitude.

Sleepy Douglas, former apprentice jockey and lover of the good life, was always a bit different and added not only great colour to the Unit, but also outstanding professionalism to radio operating and was, ultimately, the sensation of the Guineas. From his apprentice days Sleepy brought to the Unit the choicest put-downs, insults and rejoinders we had ever heard. Certainly, most of them had not previously been aired in military circles generally, but particularly so in the cloistered confines of our Regiment and its far-flung outposts.

Sleepy it was who attempted to steal a march upon everyone else by being the first and only jockey kitted out in 'silks' for the big race. Others latched onto the idea and soon no purveyor of haberdashery, millinery or any other female frippery for that matter, was safe from the entreaties of members of 547 wanting to relieve them of material suitable for jockeys' silks. Indeed, the ingenuity of those jockeys in fashioning and cobbling together their silks was something to behold. Most were held together by so many staples that they would have caused apoplexy in any airport's metal detection system. No matter how the effect was achieved, however, the result was nothing short of spectacular and one of the most colourful highlights of the afternoon. Nothing, though, could be done for the poor 'horses'. They simply had to show up, resigned to their fate, and be prepared for a merciless flogging by their jockeys for the dubious honour of winning the first Vatican Guineas, the trophy for which nobody seems able to remember, but would probably have been alcohol of some description.

While preparations for the race itself gathered momentum, others were at work on aspects of the days activities which saw the evening develop into one of the most memorable ever experienced. Brigadier C M I (Sandy) Pearson [*Ed note: Brig Pearson had long gone by this date – Brig Weir took over command on 1 September 1969*], Task Force Commander, kindly

agreed to be the official starter of the race, while Colonel Joe Ulatoski, Commander of the 2nd Brigade of the US 25th Infantry Division (foolishly) accepted an invitation to be our special guest for the function and from that point things developed into an epic of de Mille proportions: An army trailer-load of US and Australian beer and goffas (soft drinks) miraculously appeared; Several boxes of frozen sirloin steaks fell off a helicopter.

The guest list swelled to ridiculous numbers. Among all of this, there appeared a very professional Country and Western band comprising US Army members who were to entertain us right royally for the evening, all flown in on their own Chinook helicopter. The American band was a late arrangement when it was discovered that the 110 Signals Squadron band was unable to attend: some of its members had been somewhat less than model soldiers and had been confined to barracks or jail in Vung Tau! (We suspected that this excellent Yank band was arranged by Jack Fenton in his 'liaison discussions' with Colonel Ulatoski. It seems that Ulatoski thought pretty highly of the support our unit provided to his brigade).

Race time arrived and all concerned assembled for the start at the far end of the paved helipad access road. All, that is, except the Brig whom a welcoming committee waited, and waited and then waited some more. Captain Hugh Nichols was delegated stand-in starter and found himself surrounded by a gang of eager jockeys, sweating 'horses` and various pecuniarily interested punters, all thoroughly lubricated and vocal and demanding action NOW!

Unflappable as ever, but nevertheless mindful of the increasingly voluble and vehement mutterings of violence directed against his (AND the Brigadier's) person, Hugh sought to calm the assembled starting line-up with soothing words. Sig Tony Arday, displaying both his Spanish heritage and his Sydney Lifesaver pedigree, not to mention his VERY short fuse, was heard to exhort Hugh to 'Come on Sir. Let's get this bloody thing started!' 'Yes Sir Antony', intoned Hugh, 'As soon as the Brigadier arrives.'

*#Si@ THE BRIGADIER', roared Arday, 'Let's go NOW!'

That was the signal for a false start which should have seen the demise of the Vatican Guineas from the outset. A Shotgun was aimed skyward but misfired; Sgt Keith 'Zug" Zeller detonated the purple smoke grenade, causing a pall of impenetrable suffocating purple smoke to envelope the starting area; three horses and jockeys careered into the roadside storm drain; one horse panicked and immobilised itself in the trackside barbed-wire entanglement after dislodging and trampling its hapless rider.

The punters were riotous; 8 Field Ambulance personnel were delirious at the thought of so many casualties at their very doorstep; and everybody else, including most of those at 547 some hundreds of metres down the road, were saying, 'What the bloody hell's going on?'

(*The offending shotgun, which, mercifully, considering its firer was one of 547's finest, actually caused not a single casualty, was used to attempt to start the second Vatican Guineas in Singapore in 1973. Recalcitrant as ever, the shotgun, this time in the unsteady hands of Sgt Brian 'Fat Black Abe' Abrahamson refused to fire. Abe, distraught at the thought of yet

ANOTHER Vats cock-up, improvised: Casting his eyes heavenward for both strength and forgiveness, he shouted 'Bang! Oh, *#@&iNG BANG!' and they were off)

The starters and riders eventually were re-assembled under the orders of the Clerk of the Course for a second (and successful) start to a race the like of which probably would close down any self-respecting turf club anywhere in the world.

Sig Charlie Bennett had recently been on R & R in Hong Kong where he'd had tailor-made a very snappy pearl grey suit, which, coupled with an orange shirt, a lurid tie and grey fedora, "Honest" Charlie wore as course bookmaker. He had no shortage of takers as he laid a small fortune in bets on the runners assembled some three hundred metres down the road. Ridiculous odds were bet about some runners, but by and large, the odds offered proved pretty accurate in respect of the eventual winner, Backwards (Sig Mal Simpson), who started at fairly short odds.

The crowd by now had swollen to a level that would please the organisers of a mid-week Mooney Valley meeting. Word had gone out to the Field Hospital further along the track. Medical staff carried out bed-ridden patients while those able to walk made their way to trackside to watch proceedings. Ever opportunistic, the 8 Field Ambulance medics were hoping to pick up a bit of business in the form of dead, dying or at very least critically ill participants. Their blood-lust, however, was denied.

In a 547 'first', responding to the only official invitation we were ever silly enough to extend to them, 104 Signal Squadron personnel abandoned their dull surrounds, weapons pits and re-incarnated meals (we were all convinced that the term 'fitter and turner' originated with 104's cooks in that they would FIT perfectly good ingredients into pots and TURN them into something unpalatable, indigestible and the consumption of which was deserving of meritorious service awards!) to immerse themselves in betting and speculating upon the outcome of this highly unusual spectacle.

Meanwhile, and most amazingly, the RAAF crews of several helicopters abandoned their aircraft (they were supposed to have long since departed for their night harbour at Vung Taug Airbase) and joined in the festivities surrounding the running of the race. Being totally ignorant of any form, they foolishly wagered money on the say-so of members of 547. 'Honest' Charlie Bennett was in bookmaker heaven!

Harry 'The Hat' Lock was firmly ensconced up a ladder halfway along the track ready to call the action while I, having been given the job of filming the epic for posterity could only look on as I had forgotten to buy a bloody film. Alas, this wonderful spectacle was to be etched only in the minds of those privileged enough to be present. Ultimately, purple grenade having been detonated prematurely, (startus interruptus?) The Shotgun was fired and starting rope was released, with not one favourite being seriously maimed at the re-start. Given the total lack of expertise within the unit in the handling of anything that went boom!, bang!, or which could strangle, the starting crew was forgiven for previous misdemeanours and was roundly congratulated ! Not by Charlie Bennett, though, who had hoped that the favourites, at least would have been garrotted.

Backwards (Sig Mal Simpson), 'ridden a treat' by Sig Lloyd Giles absolutely steeled most of the opposition to land the race on protest. Around them, the race had degenerated to farce the likes of which would have caused any self-respecting Jockey Club steward to beg for the administration of euthanasia, or at the very least, exile on Tasmania.

Sleepy Douglas had literally ridden big Slim Blaylock into the ground, and having done so, was seen, still mounted on the prone, bleeding Yank, mercilessly flailing him with his whip and berating him for a weak, gutless excuse for a horse. Blaylock, to his eternal credit, not to mention his unmitigated stupidity, actually regained his feet and continued the race, eventually to run a place, muttering all the while exactly what he would do to Sleepy once over the finish line. In fact, Sleepy didn't hang around for congratulations at race end, but was seen swiftly vacating the area lest the Yank should remove parts of his anatomy that he might have use for on his next visit to the Back Beach bars at Vung Tau!

Sleepy was eventually outed for life for 'over vigorous riding' and cruelty to a dumb animal, which, while no way to speak about one of our American allies, nevertheless seemed entirely appropriate at the time. The Stewards lot is never easy at the best of times, but was made even more difficult on this occasion when they had to adjudicate on a matter unprecedented in the annals of racing history: Well short of the finish line, Unit Clerk Cpl Andy Coyle, not very capably ridden by Sig Billy Sampson, was seen to be visibly tiring. Greed, the lust for riches and fame and the quest for immortality drove the jockey to the extraordinary length of swapping places with the horse! While the switch proved to be an outstanding ploy (the combination actually 'won' the race), the sequel, in the Stewards' bunker, soon brought them back to the field.

The Stewards, after a deliberation lasting several seconds, eventually disqualified the jockey on the grounds of insanity and recommended the Knackery Stakes for the horse's next start, but awarded both life membership of Variety club for entertainment value, meanwhile elevating all 'legitimate' placegetters up the order.

The evening of entertainment, kicked off in such fine style, continued unabated until the wee small hours. Many speeches were made, Col. Ulatoski presented the unit with a plaque for meritorious service and was rewarded by members of the unit with a rousing rendition of a song reserved for such occasions: 'Hooray for Joe, Hooray at last. Hooray for Joe, he's a horse's arse!' Various stuffed shirts in attendance were mortified at this total lack of respect for a very senior field commander. The man himself loved it, quite seriously stating that 547 was the ONLY outfit, ANYWHERE, that would, could or should sing that to him.

Importantly, though, from such humble beginnings, the Vatican Guineas became truly international, being run in Singapore in 1973 when most of us were posted there for second and third tours of duty. In 1974 and on each Melbourne Cup day since, the Guineas has been run at 7 Signal Regiment Headquarters, Cabarlah, Queensland.

Thus is the stuff of which unit tradition and esprit de corps is made. Long may it continue. But long, also, may its originators and original participants, the imaginative, creative, hopelessly depraved, but utterly fantastic bods of 547 Sig Troop, South Vietnam, 1970, live, prosper and enjoy wonderful memories of "The Race That Stopped the War".