



The Gentle Giant

David Paterson (1/67)

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John Neervoort (1/67-2/67) was a friend of David at OTU in 1967, has met both of the authors and arranged for this extract.

Lieutenant David Paterson hoisted his backpack up onto his enormous frame and prepared to lead his men out on patrol. The National Serviceman was commander of 8 Platoon, C Company, 3RAR. Your first impression of him was his size – he topped six feet, six inches, and his boots were specially handmade to fit his size-15 feet. He was a gentle giant, a family man who spoke lovingly of a wife and baby daughter and regularly attended church services. His platoon sergeant was Claude Hoppe. The platoon had been on operations since February 27, 1971; it was now March 18. The previous weeks had been spent patrolling and ambushing – heavy and frustrating work, but with no contact. Paterson and Hoppe wondered when they would see real action.

Patrolling north-west of Xuyen Moc on March 18, Paterson and his platoon stumbled upon a large enemy bunker complex. Paterson had found an empty one, but the recently abandoned cooking fires indicated it hadn't been long vacated.

'About time we found something – and time we had some action,' one of 8 Platoon's soldiers said to Hoppe. The sergeant knew in his guts his platoon was going to get action soon enough – the ingredients had been shaping up for days: tracks with fresh bootmarks, sporadic contact that other platoons had experienced in the Xuyen Moc area, and the number of bunker systems that had been

found. 'It'll happen soon enough, mate,' he replied.

Paterson called an O Group, and the decision was made to split the platoon into two groups to cover more ground. Hoppe would lead one group, Paterson the other. This doubled the number of grid squares that could be searched in one day. It was an acceptable practice at the time but also a potentially dangerous one. With the chance of hitting an enemy party no more than squad size – five or six – the Aussie half-platoon method had merit. But Paterson remembered that at Canungra Jungle Training Centre he had been warned about decreasing the size of a fighting patrol to anything less than 15 men. The posted strength of a rifle platoon was one officer and 33 other ranks, including the platoon sergeant. Through attrition, transfers, sickness and lack of reinforcements, 8 Platoon was already down to 25 men. Splitting also meant that one of the groups had only one M60 machine-gun. There were three M60s to a platoon, and getting a fourth issued was almost impossible, as additional weapons were another casualty of the war since the wind-down had commenced. (IATF now consisted of only 3RAR and 4RAR.)

On the morning of March 20, Paterson and Hoppe took their half-platoon groups out looking for the enemy, D445, and more bunkers. It was a sweltering day and Paterson bush-bashed, pushing his men until lunchtime. Resuming after the break,

they had moved less than 200 metres when they found a track showing signs of ox-cart use. Then, through the silence, came the unmistakable sound of men chopping wood.

'Jeez, they're bloody confident, Skip,' Martin Cross whispered. 'Buggers are rowdier than a wood-chopping competition.'

Paterson ordered the mini-platoon to drop their packs and move into an extended line. Once they had shaken out, he waved them further into the gloom of the thick bush. *Was it local woodcutters or the enemy?*

Paterson's scout, Alan 'Gouldy' Gould, moved to his commander's right while the machine-gun group moved to the left, the high ground. The VC were waiting less than 50



Left to right: Dave Paterson, Claude Hoppe, Martin Macanas, Graham Johnson, Grant McCracken

metres away in a U-shaped bunker system, and began to sight up automatic rifles, RPGs and a 12.7mm heavy machine-gun on the approaching diggers. They released the full arsenal in one deadly fusillade.

Paterson realised moments before he was hit, that his half-platoon had stumbled into a bunker complex of Company size. Worse, the enemy was equipped with heavy weapons and they weren't bugging out as per normal practice, they were staying to fight. It was D445 Vietcong unit, reinforced with regular force members of the 3/33 NVA Regiment.

Scout Alan Gould saw an M79 grenade launcher go off, heard the distinctive *dupe* it makes, then felt the blast of an incoming RPG explode nearby. He was thrown to the ground and blood began to spurt from his chest. He could taste and feel warm fluid running down his throat; he heard a curious whistling sound coming from his chest. *I've been hit in the lung.*

Peterson started crawling over to him, and shouted above the roar of fire, 'You're gonna be okay!'

Gould's last impression was watching tracers overhead while he lay in the leaves. His section was pouring fire onto the enemy, who were still trying to close in and kill the wounded Australians. The enemy's 12.7 heavy machine-gun was cutting above Gould's head, felling small trees, and he could just see his section commander, Russ Petty, desperately trying to get him.

Paterson and 8 Platoon were pinned down by a blizzard of enemy fire. Dave Paterson was mortally wounded; two other men, the machine-gunner and Gould, had been hit. Things were getting worse – all the soldiers were almost out of ammunition and smoke grenades, which were desperately needed to mark their position. The spare ammo and smoke grenades were in the packs back where they had been dropped. As their leader, Paterson knew he had to do something.

Martin Cross was convinced the enemy would now advance from the bunker complex and overrun the Aussies' thin line of defence.

Paterson turned, waved his arm and called, 'Back, get back to the packs ... go now, I'm covering.' He propped himself up and fired another burst from his Armalite. Cross got to his knees and worked his way backwards, crab-style, with the two men closest to him, John Melma and Ross Budden. As they reached a nearby clump of bamboo there was another sustained burst of enemy fire ...

The members of 8 Platoon were fighting for their lives. The wall of fire had become sporadic and the platoon popped its last smoke grenade to assist an ammunition drop. The moment the coloured smoke began to filter upwards, another smoke grenade popped and sent the same colour upwards - inside the enemy perimeter. Martin Cross's heart sank. *They've used the same coloured smoke. Cunning bastards, they were waiting for that.*

Lt David Paterson, KIA, March 20, 1971. As you walk past the APC you have to look; you don't want to, but you have to. Patto, the gentle giant with boots so big they're handmade; Patto the Nasho, liked by all. Patto now lying on the seat of the carrier. He still has a few blades of grass in his hand, grass he must have clutched as he died. *Maybe in a minute he'll get up and walk out and ask for a brew. Hell, why would they make such a huge man an Infantry commander? Men that big don't belong in the jungle, the jungle's for shorter people – people you don't see so easy.*

The dustoff arrived to take the dead and wounded. The medic was adamant. 'The rule is, the wounded never travel with the dead. I don't give a toss how you do it, Sarge, but the wounded aren't travelling with their dead skipper.'

Later that day a second dustoff came in. Paterson was loaded on to the Iroquois with as much gentleness as

they could muster. You couldn't help but notice the one huge boot that stuck out from the poncho liner wrapped around the body. There was a rubber band around it to stop the detached sole flapping. He would have walked many clicks with that rubber band, snagging on every vine he stepped over. The Army just didn't have spare boots that size to fly in on a resupply.