

Gordon Cameron Sharp, born March 17, 1945, educated at Dominican Convent and Christian Brothers College, Tamworth, in the New England Tablelands of New South Wales, displayed sporting talents as a schoolboy and won a prize for rifle shooting. By all accounts he was a bright, happy youngster with a good future when at the age of 17 he travelled to Sydney to start work as a trainee cameraman for ATN Channel 7.

Gordon could hardly have imagined that some four years later he would be at the extreme cutting edge of Australia's battle against communism in South Vietnam. Commander of the platoon in D Company, 6RAR which found it necessary to practise contact drills against an entire regiment of North Vietnamese and Vietcong, who at that stage had preferred not to be located.

A member of the first class to go through Scheyville, Gordon celebrated his 21st birthday in Brisbane 10 weeks before he



*Graduation Ball. Gordon Sharp with girlfriend Sheree Gilbert.*

departed for Vietnam. His brother Tony keeps a file of photographs and cuttings showing Gordon full of zest and life. One photograph shows him standing, smiling joyfully, at his graduation ball, with his fiancée Sheree Gilbert at his arm. Another shows him at a muck-up parade, where members of 1/65 stood stiffly to attention in drill hats and underwear. Yet another is of his platoon, destined eventually for Vietnam and immortality.

The letters are more tattered now and the ink is fading. But Tony will never let them go. One letter, dated November 10, 1966, is to the then Minister for the Army, Malcolm Fraser, asking for information on how Gordon met his death.

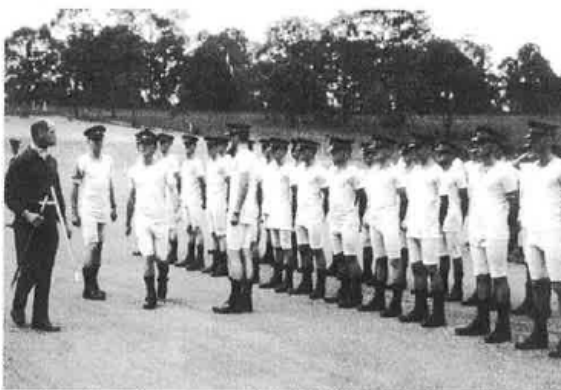
Those facts are now part of history. Gordon was in Vietnam for only six weeks when, on August 18, 1966, he was leading his platoon, in the middle of a downpour of rain, through a rubber plantation. About 1,000 enemy, from 275 Regiment and local guerillas from D445 Battalion were moving into position where they were to wait till darkness, preparatory to an all-out attack on Nui Dat.

Peter Firkins says in his book, *The Australians in Nine Wars* (Rigby): "Suddenly, the plantation erupted all around them.

Mortar shells crashed among the trees and a hail of bullets from rifles and automatic weapons snarled and ricocheted between their trunks as the Australians threw themselves on the sodden ground, drawing together as they attempted to see the enemy and then beginning to return their fire."

Though outnumbered by 10 to one, the 108 soldiers of D company held its position for 3 hours until a relief force from other companies arrived in personnel carriers. It was an action which the Australian forces met, and which resulted ultimately in a stunning Australian victory, the most famous engagement in Australia's commitment and a battle from which the Vietcong retreated to lick their wounds. This writer remembers the RSM at 1RTB, Wagga, in 1969 telling recruits of the battle and adding that "the Rat" never tried anything like that again.

But it was not without cost. At the end of the engagement, Gordon lay dead, shot through the neck, and his platoon was



*Muck-up parade (1/65).*

badly mauled. Eighteen Australians died in the Battle of Long Tan. Gordon was the first Scheyville graduate to fall in Vietnam. The Vietcong left 245 dead behind them, and suffered an estimated 350 wounded.

For its action D Company was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation "for extraordinary heroism" by President Lydon Johnson. Devastating as Gordon's loss was, it was part of a proud family tradition. Many of the Sharp family had gone to war. Five of Gordon's relatives died in World War I. His uncle, Frank Sharp, at 15 had lied about his age to get into the armed forces for the same war, then enlisted again in World War II. Frank and his eldest son Doug, went into the Army together. Both, serving as artillerymen, were captured in North Africa. They spent three years as a prisoner-of-war in Italy, were then transferred to Germany but en route escaped and made their way across the Alps to Switzerland. Gordon was named after another uncle who was a World War II fighter pilot, killed when shot down over Italy in 1943.

The two Gordon Cameron Sharps are in fact featured on the same wall in the War Memorial in Canberra, only two columns apart. Across from it are the names of Gordon's five other relatives who gave their lives in the Great War. ✻