

Finding Gunner Norris

The young soldier was long dead, his mates thought. Then came the truth.

Story: Catherine McGregor

In the small hours of August 17, 1966, Gunner Allan Stewart awoke with a start. It was probably the explosion of the first mortar round inside the Australian base in South Vietnam that woke him.

Even in the relative security of Nui Dat soldiers slept with their weapons and webbing close by and dozed fitfully, alert to the constant danger of random shelling by local Viet Cong Forces.

It was still early in the war and the Viet Cong were probing the Australians, trying to gauge their tactics, battle craft and standard operating procedures. In turn, the Australians were conducting constant patrols to familiarise themselves with the terrain and villages in their area of operations.

Many of those at the Nui Dat base that night — the night before all hell broke loose in the battle of Long Tan — were young national servicemen who had never seen war or even left Australia before. Others were career soldiers who had already fought in Malaya and Borneo. They excelled at small unit operations in close terrain and were employing these tactics in Phuoc Tuy Province.

Stewart was a regular soldier who had enlisted in Melbourne at 17. He had arrived at Nui Dat three months earlier with his mates from the 1st Field Regiment of the Royal Australian Artillery. The gunners had been added to the Australian taskforce to provide dedicated fire support to two infantry battalions.

As he tumbled out of his tent that night, Stewart had no idea that his unit was about to write its own chapter of Australian war history. His primary focus was on survival. “At that stage of the war we used to sleep starkers,” he tells Inquirer. “It was hot, so we slept in our jocks under the mozzie nets with our weapons beside us.

“I dived straight into my pit in my jocks with my weapon and webbing. Straight into the bloody red mud, as it had been raining. I called out to one of the blokes back in the tent, ‘Mate, grab those toffees, this might take a while.’ ” He was referring to a tin of toffees provided in a Salvation Army care package.

The memories of the men interviewed for this story by Inquirer vary, but they all agree the preliminary attack on the eve of Long Tan was a substantial barrage in which several Australians were wounded. As the shock of the shelling dissipated, the Australians quickly assessed the damage.

Several of the 1 Field Regiment gunners had shrapnel wounds and were taken to the underground regimental aid post where they were triaged by unit doctor John Taske.

In forward bases such as Nui Dat, strict blackouts were enforced to avoid offering the enemy targets, so Taske worked by torchlight. He suspected some men in forward positions might

not have been discovered, so he checked with the medics attached to the various batteries of 1st Field Regiment.

“I spoke to Lofty Mortimer who was the 103 Battery medic and asked him if he had accounted for all his blokes,” recalls Taske. “He told me they were all fine except for one fellow with a bit of a boil on his head. That didn’t sound right to me. Boils on the head are actually quite rare. So I asked him if he’d had it that morning. He told me, ‘No, he got it tonight.’ So I decided I’d better have a look at him and told him to bring him to me.”

Mortimer remembers taking that call from Taske on the field telephone in the machinegun pit, where he was on sentry duty during the attack. “I had a look at him and it looked like a boil and he could speak. But later, in proper light, I saw he was losing cerebral fluid.”

The young soldier, Phil Norris, was badly dazed but conscious. He was a young postman from Granville in western Sydney. Norris had been called up in the first draft of the National Service Scheme. After training at Puckapunyal, he had been “warned for service” in Vietnam.

The newly uniformed Norris left for Vietnam on May 20, 1966, two weeks after marrying his 17-year-old sweetheart, Maryanne Matthews. The pair had the sort of whirlwind courtship that so often precedes the departure of young men to war.

Stewart did not know Norris particularly well, though as members of the same battery they would exchange banter. “I knew him a bit, but you spent most of your time with the blokes from your own tent who served your gun,” Stewart tells Inquirer.

Now Norris’s life was in Stewart’s hands. He, Mortimer and Bill Cross, a seasoned non-commissioned officer with tours of Borneo and Malaya behind him, carried Norris to a Land Rover for the urgent dash to the aid post. Cross’s impression was that Norris was critically wounded. “He was in pain and mumbling and there was a bit of blood,” he recalls.

When Taske examined Norris, he noticed a lesion near his right temple. “Phil was conscious when I saw him but I could tell immediately that the bump on his head was not a blister or a boil. He was not lucid, though he could converse. It was a bit like someone who had been concussed playing sport ... There was a trace of blood where a tiny sliver of metal was protruding from his head.

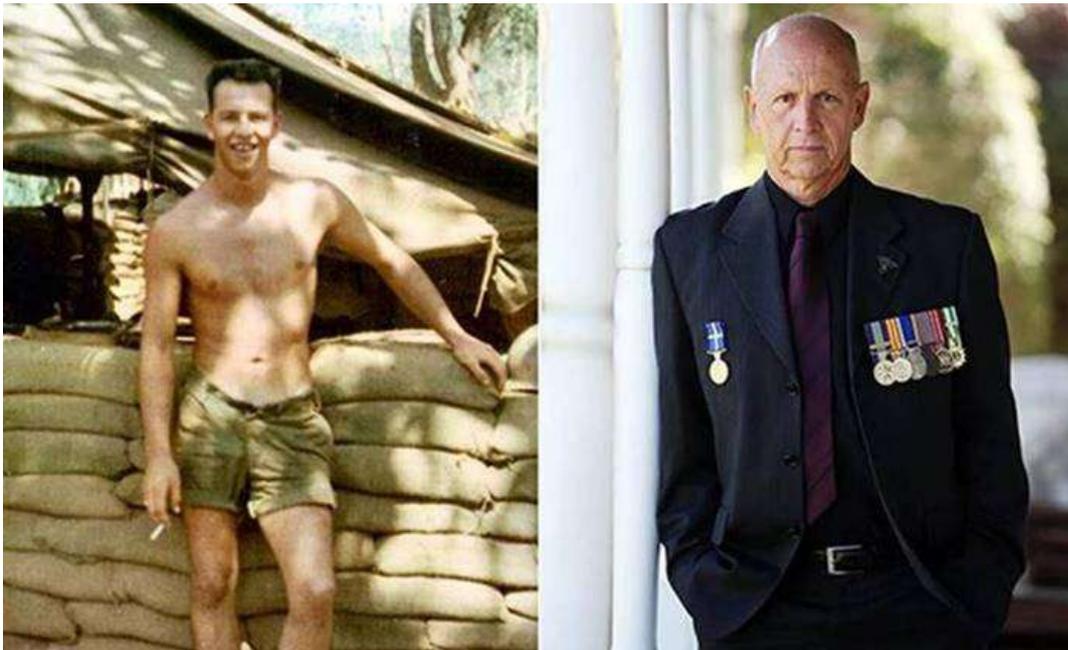
“He needed to have his skull opened urgently and to have the shrapnel removed. “I directed he be placed on the next chopper back to Vung Tau (in southern South Vietnam).”

Stewart and Cross carried their now unconscious mate to the landing zone, where he was taken by an Iroquois dust-off chopper. They never saw him again.

The next day the battle of Long Tan erupted and the men of 1 Field Regiment were caught up in a frenzied barrage in which they fired more than 3000 rounds. They not only saved a company of the 6th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment from annihilation, but in all likelihood foiled a deliberate assault by 2000 Vietnamese intent on storming the Australian base.

Long Tan, 50 years ago next Thursday, became the most acclaimed Australian victory of the Vietnam War (see historian Ashley Ekins's story of the battle, left). Amid the chaos and terror, the gunners of Norris's battery had little time to ponder his fate. However, when the smoke and monsoonal rain cleared over Nui Dat the men of the regiment were informed that Norris had died of his wounds at Vung Tau and his remains would be repatriated to Australia.

The mortar attack overnight on August 16-17 was widely viewed as a preliminary operation to induce a response from the Australians. By that measure, Norris was arguably the first man killed in the Battle of Long Tan and the first Australian artillery soldier killed in Vietnam.



Allan Stewart in 1966 and this year.

Despite the bravery and sacrifice on display in this fierce, against the odds battle, it would take another 2½ decades for the soldiers of Long Tan to receive recognition. Seventeen Australians died in the conflict and one later from his wounds, making it Australia's bloodiest single day of the war.

The opening of the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial in Canberra on the morning of October 3, 1992, was possibly the first moment those who fought at Long Tan had come together. This was a chance to mourn their fallen comrades and to savour the acknowledgment that had been so long coming to those who fought in this unpopular war.

The men of 1 Field Regiment Royal Australian Artillery gathered behind their scarlet and blue banner. There were mixed emotions. Five years earlier, the welcome home parade in Sydney, at which 25,000 Vietnam veterans marched, had finally integrated these veterans of a divisive war into the pantheon of national heroes stretching back to Gallipoli.

On this crisp spring morning, all were struck by the beauty of the newly erected Vietnam Memorial. After the ceremony, most of the men walked the few hundred metres down Anzac Parade to the Australian War Memorial to look at the names of their fallen mates.

It was retired Warrant Officer Paddy Durnford who noticed the aberration. Gunner Norris, who died in the early hours of August 17, 1966, was not listed anywhere on the wall. Durnford was puzzled. He had been in Vung Tau the night Norris was brought in by chopper. He'd never had reason to doubt the report that Norris had died as a result of his injuries. Durnford is still the archetypical career sergeant major, and his attention to detail and military protocol is impeccable. He was aghast that the sacrifice of one of the men of his regiment had been overlooked.

He began to make inquiries. Why wasn't Norris's name listed as killed in action? After all, he was included on the regiment's own memorial at its barracks in Wacol, Brisbane. He wanted the error at the more prestigious national memorial rectified immediately. But when Durnford contacted the Department of Veterans Affairs, his query was greeted with an answer the sergeant major could never have expected: Norris was not listed on the wall because Norris was not dead; he did not die of his wounds in Vietnam. Despite insistence the gunner was still alive, the staff at DVA refused to release details about his whereabouts or condition. Privacy regulations prevented it.

For Durnford, the news was startling. Fluctuating between hope and despair, he began a quest that would last 14 years; the quest to bring one of his men back into the fold. He could not have known then how many lives his actions would touch. Showing the same discipline and commitment to the task that characterised all his service, Durnford set about contacting veterans' care authorities. At times Durnford nearly gave up, the bureaucratic trail was so opaque. Although he could establish that Norris had spent several years in Sydney's Concord Repatriation Hospital following his return from Vietnam, his next location remained a mystery.

With hindsight, medic Mortimer believes he may have been the source of the inaccurate news that Norris had been killed in action. "He was taken back to 36 Evacuation Hospital (in Vung Tau)," he tells Inquirer. "It was run by the Yanks."

The day after Long Tan, Mortimer flew down to check on his men. He asked a surgeon in an Australian uniform how Norris was going and was told, "He is not going to make it." Mortimer then informed the unit. When the unit dispatched Norris's personal effects to his next of kin and removed his name from the unit roll, this would have seemed to confirm the news. But this is procedure for soldiers killed or sent home wounded.

Durnford finally tracked down Norris at a psychiatric hospital in Sydney's Rozelle. He had discovered the gunner had been moved there in 1970 when it became obvious his mental state was unlikely to improve markedly. The tenacious sergeant major, ever mindful of protocol, initiated contact by writing a letter to the hospital's associate professor in charge of psycho geriatric health, who in turn passed it to the nurse in charge of the ward on which Norris was a patient.

Sister Elizabeth Miles had been nursing Norris for more than a decade and had grown close to the injured soldier. She was impressed by the determination Durnford had shown in tracking his missing comrade and promptly telephoned him. She told him that Norris was, indeed, a patient at Rozelle Hospital and had been in various brain injury wards there continuously since 1970. She assured him Norris was well cared for and explained that,

although he had shown some improvement through the years, he was incapable of independent living.

Durnford arranged for members of the Granville Vietnam Veterans Association to visit, to let Norris know his mates had not forgotten him. One of those men was Barry Bannerman, who also served in 1 Field Regiment at Nui Dat and had been a class ahead of Norris at Granville High. He had heard the story of Gunner Norris and his death on the eve of the battle of Long Tan.

Mary and Phil in his Eels gear.

"I knew it was him because we had a passing acquaintance as far back as school, though you wouldn't say we'd been close mates," recalls Bannerman after meeting Norris again nearly 40 years later. "It was definitely Phil Norris. Sadly, his case was pretty hopeless because his



memory was shot and he was pretty vague. But he loved the Parramatta Eels. That was one thing he was dead sure about, so Bob Gagan and I hit the club up for an official jumper and a scarf. He was really grateful for that. We used to drop in occasionally to see how he was going."

Across time the veterans came to know Miles and decided to invite her to represent Norris at the 40th commemoration of the battle, on August 18, 2006. She accepted the duty with pride. The nursing sister revealed more of Norris's story to Durnford. She told him that in his early medical notes there were references made by a social worker to a wife and infant daughter. They had visited Norris for a few years,

then the visits had suddenly stopped. Their whereabouts were unknown. His only visitors since then seemed to be his mother, Olive, and his brother, but both were now dead. What Miles had always wondered was, who was that little girl?

When the NSW government decided to close the Rozelle facility in 2007, it meant the relocation of the five repatriation patients to other nursing homes. This provided the catalyst for Miles to search for any remaining family for her wounded veteran. After discussing it with Norris and with the help of Durnford, Miles approached the Salvation Army tracing service. The organisation was able to track down a birth certificate in the name Mary Elizabeth Norris and, in turn, discover her marital name.

Miles was awarded the Order of Australia Medal in 2011 for her service to nursing. The veterans who know her believe she earned it for her fine care of Norris alone.



Elizabeth Miles at the former Rozelle psychiatric Hospital.

There was nothing remarkable about the letter that arrived for Mary Howell in September 2007. Howell lived with her husband of 18 years, Brad, and their three sons in Maitland, just north of Newcastle. She opened the letter absent-mindedly, curious about why she didn't recognise the handwriting on the envelope.

The contents soon had her attention. Was she Mary Elizabeth Norris? Was her mother Maryanne Matthews? She was perplexed. Her mother Maryanne had died of cancer in 1997 and her father, Keith Brown, had died in 2001. What on earth was this about? Curiosity got the better of her and she called the number at the bottom of the note.

"A really sweet man answered the phone," Mary tells Inquirer. "He seemed very nice. As it turned out he was from the Salvation Army tracing service and he had been given my details by a group of men from the Vietnam Veterans Association."

When Howell asked why he had contacted her he was pleasant but direct: "Are your given names Mary Elizabeth? Was your mother Maryanne Brown nee Matthews?"

Howell confirmed both details.

The voice on the other end of the phone then told her he was in possession of her birth certificate.

Still puzzled, Howell answered, "Sure. But how can I help you?"

"Your dad wants to meet you," he said.

Howell recalls feeling weak, dizzy. "I'm sorry, but you must be mistaken," she remembers saying. "My dad died a few years ago."

“Did your mum ever mention that she was married to a man named Philip Norris?” the man asked. Howell could recall a fleeting reference once made by her mother to a young man to whom she had been married in the 60s. “Oh, that’s right. It was brief, wasn’t it? He went off to war and never came back. His name was Phil. But he’s long gone. Didn’t he get killed in Vietnam?”

A pause, then: “Let me tell you, he is very much alive and he would like to meet you. Some of his army mates have spent years trying to find him and he is in a hospital for people with brain injuries. But he really wants to meet you.” Howell felt nauseous. “I had a wonderful husband and three lovely boys. None of this was on my radar. This rocked my world. And I had already buried Keith Brown, the only dad I ever knew.

“The man left me a number for the hospital where my alleged dad was living, and after I hung up I just broke down and sobbed my heart out. Then I tried to call them. I had been given the name of a nursing sister, Elizabeth Miles, who ran the nursing unit where Philip was residing. They told me she had finished her shift for that day so I could not confirm anything until at least the next morning. I spent all that night with my husband, Brad, and we just sat staring at one another wondering what on earth would happen next. It was pretty earth-shattering, frankly.”

Says Brad Howell: “A few things fell into place for me. We met really young, like about 15½, so I remember when Mary went for her learner’s permit. She showed me her birth certificate and her name was down as Mary Elizabeth Norris. Yet I knew her only as Brown. I said, ‘What do you reckon this means?’ She didn’t seem too fussed. She said, ‘I don’t really know but my dad’s name is Brown.’ We didn’t sweat it. She just wanted to get the permit. And you know, when you’re young it just doesn’t register with you.”

Early the next morning, Miles called the house in Maitland.

“We just bonded straight away,” says Mary Howell. “I could tell how fond of Philip she was and she was really protective of him. She had more or less become his family and next of kin because his dear old mum, Olive, had died in 1999. Olive used to visit him every few days until her own health failed.

“In fact, Olive had lost her only other son at a young age in a road accident, so I think she devoted herself to Philip as her only remaining son with extra huge passion. But she also got heavily involved in Legacy to help other wounded men. That was a stroke of luck, actually, because I think it was through Olive’s links to Legacy that the Vietnam Veterans Association was finally able to piece together the jigsaw puzzle and work out where Dad was.

“During our chat Elizabeth said, ‘I’d like to meet you and pay you a home visit.’ So she came up to Maitland to see us. She brought with her a DVD that she had made of Dad for us so that we could see him and so that our first meeting would not be too much of a shock. She also brought his war medals, which were his prized possession, to show us those. She is a really formidable lady and I now realise that she was actually checking me out to make sure that her beloved Philip was not going to be exploited by some blow-in who had turned up out of nowhere. It was actually a bit of an audition.

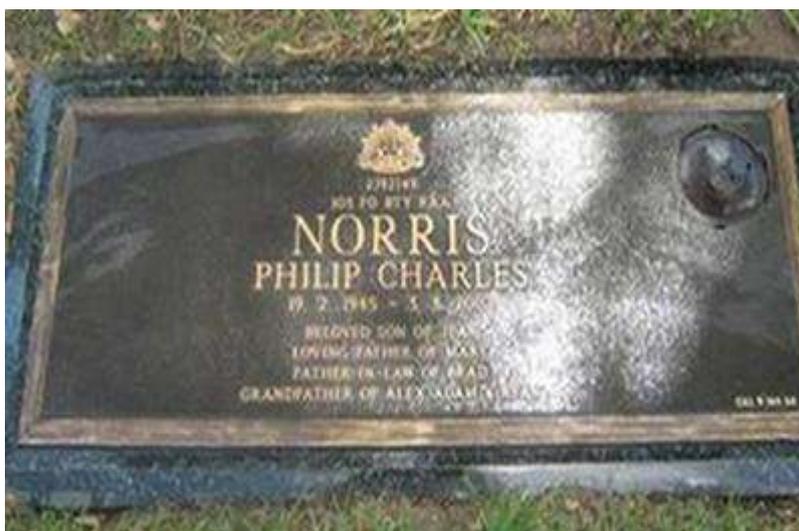
“But we got on like a house on fire when she arrived at my home. We chatted for hours and after she went back to Sydney I called her every day for the next week trying to learn more about this man who was the father I had never met. I could not get there soon enough.”



Norris and his three grandsons.

The following week Howell set out for Sydney with her husband and three boys to meet her father — four decades after his ostensible death at Long Tan. Despite his mental impairment, Norris knew he was meeting his daughter and grandsons. It was a joyous occasion. After 40 years living in psychiatric hospitals, he had found himself in the bosom of his family.

Across time Mary, Brad and their boys developed a strong familial bond with Norris, which deepened and endured. All the boys have replicas of his Vietnam decorations and wear them with pride on Anzac Day. Mary Howell shared his passion for the Parramatta Eels. They would don their team scarfs when together.



The few years she spent with her father before his death in 2010 reframed Howell’s life but also raised many questions. Why had her mother misled her about such a fundamental matter? She will never know, but she says she can understand that for a young woman of 21 the challenge of spending the next 50 years caring for a husband who barely recognised her and whom

she'd known for only a matter of weeks before their wedding must have been just too daunting. She understands why her mother might have sought a new relationship and tried to close the door on her traumatic past.

The simple pleasure of spending family time with her father remain vivid. "Dad loved fish and chips. He would light up when we suggested that we all go and get fish and chips, and some of my sweetest memories are of all of us just sitting around talking and eating his favourite treat. And somehow he worked it out that it was my 40th birthday at one stage and arranged a gift for me. You can imagine what that meant. My first birthday present from my dad was when I had three kids of my own."

The impending closure of Rozelle Hospital might have brought him Howell, but the move to a new nursing home, at nearby Croydon, was far less fortuitous. Norris disliked it intensely and missed Miles. He suffered a spate of injuries culminating in a serious fall.

In February 2009, on a visit, the Howells found him wearing a bandage on a cut on his head. Brad Howell asked him directly, "Phil, are you happy here, mate?" An emphatic "No" was the answer. The couple moved Norris to a nursing home in Mosman, in Sydney's north, where he spent his final years happy and at peace, needing to return to hospital only in the last weeks of his life.

Mary Howell cherishes the memory of the trip from Croydon to Mosman. As she was driving over the Anzac Bridge, Norris saw the bronze statues of two soldiers astride its arches, maintaining their silent vigil. "What are those blokes there for," he asked his daughter.

"Dad, one is an Australian Digger and the other is a New Zealand soldier. You know? It's about Anzac."

Norris mused quietly, before responding: "Then why are they so far apart? They should be closer together."

Howell was stunned. "He never talked about the war but that triggered some deep memory for him because the guys had told me that the Kiwis from 161 Battery were right alongside Philip and his mates at Nui Dat. Where on earth did that come from? I nearly ran off the road."

As Norris's body failed, his memory seemed to rally. Some of Howell's most treasured moments with her dad came from long chats in his final days. "He talked a lot about his brother, Alan, who was killed in a road accident on his 39th birthday. And he even asked me about Mum. He wanted to know where she was now. I paused and thought, 'How am I going to deal with this?' I told him, 'She got sick and died, Dad.' He went quiet and just nodded. Then he asked me what day of the week it was and I told him it was Friday. Then he asked which year. I told him it was 2010. Again, he nodded quietly and asked, 'What happened to the rest of the years?'

"I just sobbed because it came home to me just how much that young man who went away to war had missed out on, all that time as a dad and a grandad and the simple pleasures we all take for granted."

The end came not long after for Norris. He died in the early hours of August 3, 2010. When the phone rang at 6.35am Howell knew it could mean only one thing. She felt deep loss and Brad and her boys were distraught. Their time with "Pop" had been too brief.

In accordance with Olive Norris's wishes, Philip Norris was interred near his mum in Pinegrove Cemetery, Minchinbury, in western Sydney. Mary Howell prepared a slide show of his final years. As she and a handful of Vietnam veterans gathered around the grave she gave a short eulogy. "Real super-heroes don't wear capes," she said. "They wear slouch hats."

Next Thursday, August 18, the remnants of the 1st Field Regiment will form up around their unit banner on Anzac Parade near the Vietnam monument in Canberra to mark the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan.

Catherine McGregor was an Australian infantry officer who served for nearly four decades in the Australian Army. She dedicates this article to the memory of Jeffrey Grey, her intellectual mentor and Australia's foremost military historian, who died on July 26.

From McGregor: On a personal note, I would like to add that the men of 1 Field Regiment are very typical of the Vietnam veterans with whom I have served. They are patriots to whom terms such as mate, loyalty and honour are more than just words; they represent a code for living. That society turned its back on them for so long forged even stronger bonds among them. These are some of the best soldiers our nation has ever deployed and among the finest men I have ever had the privilege to meet. I am humbled that they chose to share their memories with me.

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