

‘Hide and seek in the Bush’ Article in the *Border Morning Mail* 18

September 1979

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The charge of the heavy brigade is like some HG Wells fantasy.

Grotesque overgrown beetles scurrying and darting for the nearest dark spot bellowing as they move and, when they have reached sanctuary panting, waiting to spot a new temporary cover.

The constant dash, wait, dash, wait becomes unnerving.

It’s no fantasy.

The “beetles” are armoured personnel carriers on manoeuvres in the bush near Albury.

Ominous-looking vehicles on tracks, camouflaged with limbs and leaves from gum trees they are constantly seeking for cover.

“Taxis,” the men who operate these machines call them.

That is exactly what they are, Taxis for war zones.

The heaviest most uncomfortable taxis imaginable,

We have come through the early morning darkness to find a troop of the 8th/13th Victorian Mounted rifles, encamped, we are reliably informed, somewhere near Howlong.

It takes time, but finally in the dawn light, we see the squat shapes of three armoured personnel carriers camouflaged beneath large gums on the bank of the Murray River.

The Army Reserve men of the 8/13th are shaving, cooking jaffles and boiling water.

It’s the third day of a fortnight in the bush. The men are a little seedy after sleeping a cold night on the metal floors and seats of their cramped machines. There’s a long day ahead – a bone jarring, roaring romp along back roads and stock tracks of the Riverina.

Reconnaissance, it’s called. Checking out the scene.

Thursday they will be “attacked” by an assault troop and a small mock war will develop.

But for now, the troops are training, working on manoeuvres, learning the tricks of the trade.

Men from the 8/13th troops in the Albury, Wangaratta and Cobram are taking part in the camp.

Reserve Army members must take part in one of these fortnight-long camps a year.

Most of the year they are civilians – public servants, tilers, mechanics, labourers, accountants. . .

But out in the bush they are soldiers – members of Australia’s secondary line of defence forces.

Another armoured personnel carrier lumbers through the trees and the day is just about to begin.

I am assigned to travel with Trooper Jeff Ziebell and Sgt Bill Russell, both of Albury.

Their machine bears the title “Swamp Fox” for some unknown reason.

Sgt Russell hoists himself into the gunner’s turret, and adjusts his headphones and mouthpiece.

Trooper Ziebell – Ziggy to all his mates – slides into the small driver’s compartment. He’ll be in charge of 2200 hp, provided by a monstrous motor. I clamber in the back where hundreds of Australian troops have discovered the real discomfort of war.

These American made machines were introduced to Australia in the 1960s and were used in Vietnam.

Practical and serviceable, no doubt. Also claustrophobic, noisy beyond belief and liable to jar every bone in your body.

Metal everywhere. Metal bench seats, metal walls, metal roof, metal radios, metal whatchamacallits poking out everywhere.

Heavy thick metal. Not the expected steel but pressed aluminium. The armour plate is about 7 cm thick.

Unfortunately, even this will not protect the occupants from anti-tank weapons, land mines and heavy calibre gunfire.

There are unpleasant tales of 50mm shells slicing through the armour like a hot knife through butter.

And the APC driver in Vietnam who was lifted metres out of his seat when a land mine burst a bolt in the floor, passing right through his body and out the top of his head.

It becomes obvious why some soldier has scratched into the metal seat a cryptic piece of graffiti which reads “Drive to Live – Live to Drive.”

Scuttling from tree to tree, from cover to cover, is simply a method of survival. Insects and beetles have known this since creation.

Trooper Ziebell opens up the throttle and the Swamp Fox lurches into life.

It has a remarkable turn of speed. The semi-automatic gearbox rips the 10.5 tonne vehicle to its top governed speed of 80kph in seconds.

The Swamp Fox can also swim. Sealed tight it becomes a paddle boat, the tracks its paddles.

Its only defence is a pair of 30mm machineguns poking from Sgt Russell’s turret, a reminder this is a taxi, not a real fighting machine.

The idea, Troop Commander, Capt Lyle Jackel explains, is to zip into a war zone with a load of soldiers, drop them off and disappear – fast.

But today there’s no war.

This is an exercise with the machinery of war.

All very macho, even fun, for a visiting journalist.

I'd rather see it as a fantasy.

Because if there is a war, you won't find me alive – or dead – in one of these things.

Just give me a typewriter and a spare corner in the Armageddon Bar.

It's too hard to roll out of bed before dawn.