



February 2008

# John Gillespie Home



## Dignified Welcome For Long Lost Comrade

On the 19th December 2007, more than 36 years after his death in a helicopter crash in the Long Hai Hills south of the old Australia base at Nui Dat, southern Vietnam, LCpl John Gillespie came back to his hometown of Melbourne Victoria.

Soldiers of the 1st Combat Support Battalion, Operation Aussies Home head, Jim Bourke and the man who found the helicopter crash site, former AATTV member, Peter Aylett, escorted John from Hanoi where he had been formally identified and handed over to Australian authorities.

John's family, including his wife at the time of his death, Carmel, and his daughter, Fiona had also flown to Hanoi to witness the start of the repatriation.

They were also at RAAF Base Point Cook, in Melbourne's western suburb as his casket touched down two days later.

The past 36 years has been a long journey for all the family in different ways, according to Carmel.



Above: Peter Aylett, (right) who found the helicopter crash site. Behind him, Jim Bourke MG.

Knowing that John is home and that they can visit him at anytime is a real relief for the Gillespies.

John Gillespie, a medical assistant, formerly of 8th Field Ambulance, died on 17 April 1971 while trying to rescue a wounded South Vietnamese soldier. (See full story on page 3)

The helicopter caught fire and impact trapping LCpl Gillespie and he could not be rescued because of the ferocity of the fire.

Peter Aylett discovered the crash site in February 2004 and reported his find, through OAH, to the Defence Department.

## The Long Reach Of the MIA Issue

The Dept of Defence has always made the families of MIAs the first priority - as it should be.

But the impact goes much further than that, as OAH has found out with its work on the MIA cases out of the Vietnam conflict.

Comrades-in arms who were forced to leave Tiny Parker and Peter Gilson behind were haunted for years by what they had to do.

John Gillespie's loss haunted the crew of the aircraft in which he was lost - and they were not members of John's unit.

The SAS patrol that watched David Fisher fall into the jungles of Long Khanh District are all tormented by his loss and the SAS regiment continued to search for information about him until they left the theatre.

They all felt frustrated because there was no mechanism to do something about their lost comrades.

Now because OAH has shed light on this issue, we are being approached by a broader range of people.

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Above: Fiona Pike, wearing her father's medals, standing with her mother Carmel Hendry, John's widow, at RAAF Base Point Cook

## The Search For John Gillespie

Peter Aylett saw the Gillespie crash site every time he went to the top of the Long Hais.

“We regularly went to Hill 327, the high point of the mountains, to set up standing patrols and ambushes,” Peter says recalling his time as an AATTV advisor to 302 RF Battalion in 1971.

“I could see the burn mark on the hill and often used it as a reference point,” Peter says.

“I realised, after a tourist trip to Vietnam in 2003, that, given my knowledge of the site, there was a reasonable chance I could find it again.”

In 1971, in one of those twists of fate war tosses up, Peter was sent on R & R while his mate Tom Blackhurst was sent on a patrol with 302 Bn into the mountains where he died in the Gillespie crash incident. (See full story p3).

“I always felt a special connection to the incident because of that,” Peter says.

Peter bought a GPS device and trained himself up by doing long marches through the hills outside Brisbane.

Meanwhile he contacted Jim Bourke at OAH and they exchanged information, trying to deduce the possible crash site.

In February 2004, Peter went back to Vietnam with his son Trent and supported by Vung Tau bar owner, Anh Davies, he began a series of treks through the hills the Vietnamese now called the Minh Dam Ranges, after a couple of local resistance heroes.

These exhausting searches through the rough steep terrain proved fruitless until Anh Davies intervened with her relative, Brother Ngan who had served with D445 Battalion and had lived in the hills since the war.

Peter knew Ngan and Ngan had been advising Peter.

But Peter had not realised Ngan knew the exact crash site location - it turned out he'd been involved in stripping metal from the aircraft carcass after the war.

Chastised into sobriety for a day by Anh, Ngan led Peter to the site, exactly where Peter knew it to be but had had trouble finding.

A fuel cap housing recovered from the site gave definitive proof that Peter had found the correct location.

Peter and OAH gave a full report to the Department of Defence but heard nothing.

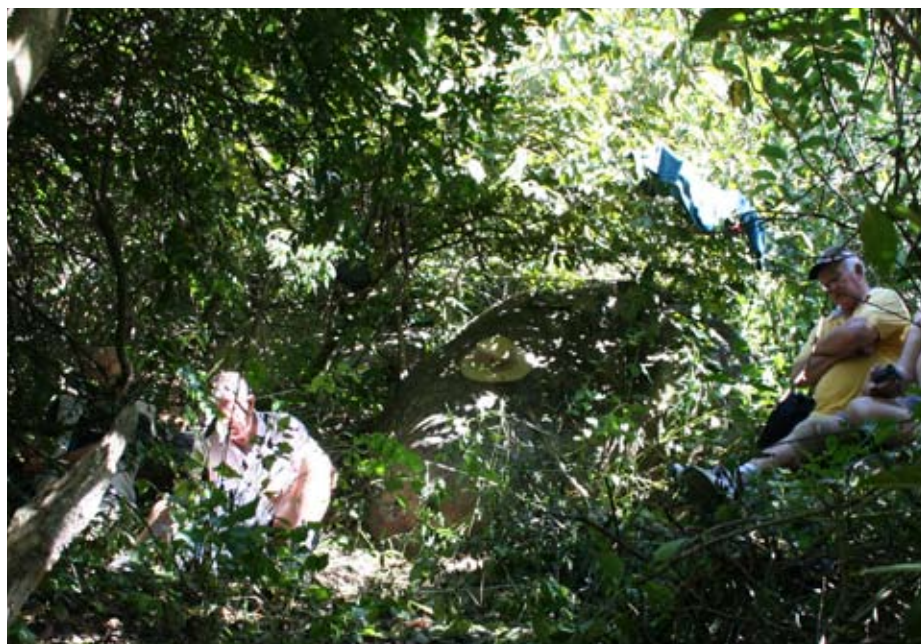
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OAH pursued the Department but the Department refused to move unless John's family was in favour.

The Gillespie family were, like many, happy to let their relative lie at peace undisturbed in the jungle.

Defence officials, at that stage, saw OAH as a bunch of interfering but well-meaning old veterans and were undermining the organisation and its activities with the Defence Ministers and the families of the MIAs.

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Above: The helicopter crash site as it was in November 2006. Peter Aylett can be seen in a patch of sunlight to the left. On the right Les Maher rests. In the centre, is the rock the helicopter eventually came to rest on.

## Teamwork Persistence And Professionalism The Key To Discovery and Return

The return of John Gillespie's remains was the end result of the work of a number of teams who applied high levels of professionalism to the task and who persisted for more than three of years in the face of resistance from a number of quarters.



TEAM February 2004: The team that found the crash site after 33 years. From left, Trent Aylett, Peter Aylett, Brother Ngan and Anh Davies.



TEAM November 2006: Jim Bourke, Les Maher, Walter Pearson, Roy Zeger and Peter Aylett.



TEAM March 07: Rear From Left - Walter Pearson, Brian Manns, Denise Donlon, Jim Bourke. Front From Left - Peter Aylett Jack Thurgar, Tony Lowe



Team November 2007: Rear: From Left Tony Lowe, Brian Manns, Mr Binh, Denise Donlon, Jack Thurgar. Front From left: David Thomas, Peter Aylett.

## Hillside Horror - How John Gillespie Became Australia's Last Vietnam War MIA

**John Gillespie's** death is remembered because he went missing in action.

But on the afternoon he died, April 17, 1971, he was just one of a number casualties including the last man killed in the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam's (AATTV).

Cpl Tom "Blackie" Blackhurst was working with Warrant Officer Les Maher that day in the Long Hai Hills.

They were part of a seven man MATT (Mobile Assistance Training Teams) attached to 302 Regional Force Battalion.

They were with 2 Coy and were searching for a recoilless rifle, believed to be hidden in a cave on a knoll in the eastern end of the hills.

Earlier on, in March 1971, 302 Bn set up an observation post on the top of the highest feature in the Long Has - Hill 327.

It was manned continuously in 4 to 7 day troop rotations. All 302 Bn patrols and operations in the hills started and ended at Hill 327.

Mid-afternoon, at about 3.30, a soldier in the lead platoon stepped on an M16 anti-personnel land mine.

The soldier lost both legs; four others were wounded.

Cpl Blackie Blackhurst and an American FO, Captain Albertson were with the lead platoon some distance from the company HQ.



Above: John Gillespie on board his chopper

Blackie realised the wounded had to be winched out because the legless man could not be moved and huge boulders made landing impossible.

The Dustoff chopper assigned the job was a Huey, A2-767 from 8 Fd Ambulance.

The pilot was Pilot Officer Mike Castles, co-pilot Pilot Officer Simon Ford, Door Gunners, Cpl Bob Stevens and LAC Roy Zeger and medic LCpl John Gillespie.

John's shift was just finishing when the call came but his replacement was not suited up and John chose to go instead.

Two Bushranger helicopter gunships provided extra protection for the Dustoff chopper.

Hovering at a height between 20 and 50 feet, Cpl Bob Stevens was operating the winch and John Gillespie was temporarily sitting behind Bob's starboard gun.

On the other side, LAC Roy Zeger was shooting at a machine gun firing at the chopper from the ground.

There was a loud bang in the chopper followed by silence and then an intercom voice; 'Hang on we are going down'.

Blackie was standing on a large flat rock; as the helicopter hit, the aircraft's rotors chopped into him and Capt Albertson.

Both died instantly.

The Huey started to breakup as it slid

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However, August 2006 the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan caused a sudden change in circumstances.

There was to be a street-naming ceremony in Perth to honour the six Vietnam MIAs.

There Jim Bourke and Peter Aylett met the Gillespies opening OAH connection with the Gillespies.

At the same time, Ngan led a Western Australian newspaper journalist to the crash site.

The Gillespies were appalled when his stories hit the streets; it seemed the site was becoming a tourist destination.

"I don't like the thought of people tromping around all over my father," Fiona Pike told the then Minister, Bruce



Billson, at a meeting in November 2006.

The Gillespies demanded a proper search of the area for any remains.

Moved by the family's pleas and the obvious human impact of the cases, Billson ordered an expedited search for the remains.

OAH dispatched a team to Vietnam later in the month, this time taking Les Maher and meeting up with Roy Zeger who were both involved in the crash.

While they waited for the government team,

OAH took Zeger and Maher to the hills. The two confirmed the location and provided additional first-hand information.

After some bureaucratic delays, the government team arrive in late January 2007 and OAH assisted their work.

The Government team returned in November 2007 and with OAH help were successful in finding human remains despite 36 years of exposure to the tropical weather.



ABOVE: From left, Michael Herbert, Robert Carver, David Fisher

## Work Continues On Remaining Three MIAs

OAH continues to work on the three outstanding MIA cases from the Vietnam War.

The Army History Unit within the Department of Defence, says it has carried out a number of interviews with Vietnamese on the disappearance of David Fisher in 1969.

Fisher was part of an SAS patrol being extracted from on ropes by helicopter.

Fisher became unhooked from his rope and fell some 90 metres into thick jungle some 35 kilometers north-east of Nui Dat.

Nine Battalion and the SAS were involved in ground searches in the days after his disappearance but nothing was found.

Two years later Fisher's radio turned up in the hands of a Vietnamese soldier far to the east near the May Tao Hills.

Recent work by the Army History Unit has been driven by the Unit's Jack Thurgar, himself a former SAS Regiment member.

OAH has tried to obtain clear information

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backwards down the hill, rolling onto its right side.

John Gillespie had been thrown out and was trapped, his lower legs caught under the chopper's right side, his body in the door opening.

Bob Stevens struggled to free him; the chopper was on fire; acrid smoke filled the cabin; ammunition cooked off; the aircraft was about to blow up.

Bob Stevens was forced to get out of the chopper leaving John behind.

He was awarded the BEM for his bravery in trying to free John.

The rest of the crew had been able to escape; Pilot Officer Simon Ford was badly burned.

The Vietnamese who was being winched

about the progress of this information.

However, the information so far provided has been vague and scant.

OAH continues to research the disappearance of Michael Herbert and Robert Carver, a Canberra Bomber crew who disappeared after a successful night bombing run south-west of Da Nang in November 1970.

This is a difficult and technical case requiring access to Vietnamese records and investigations on the ground in the area.

As demands on OAH increase with requests relating to other conflicts and overseas agencies, the organisation's capacity is being stretched.

The structural problem OAH faces is that Defence policy places the case within the purview of the Chief of the Air Force.

This means OAH has to fight another battle for recognition within the Service and will have to convince the RAAF that the issue of MIAs is live and has real impact on families and comrades.

when the chopper went down, survived.

Les Maher took control of the wounded and the aircrew and sheltered them in a cave until they could be lifted out by one of the Bushranger gunships.

In fading light, the rescue chopper balanced with one skid on a large rock as the walking wounded and the crew scrambled aboard and the legless soldier was dumped onto the aircraft.

With the evacuation complete, 2 Coy returned to harbor at Hill 327 over night.

The helicopter burned ferociously; there were stories that it could be seen at Vung Tau nearly 20 kilometers away.

At 7:23 next morning Les Maher and the company returned to the helicopter but it was still too hot to go near.

The Company recovered the bodies of

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Families and comrades of Australians lost during the Second World War in Australia and Papua New Guinea, particularly aircrew, are wondering what can be done about their lost ones.

Even the leading DNA specialist at the US Government's Laboratory in Hawaii has raised Second World War cases with OAH because he says we are his "most coherent and informed Australian interlocutor".

People have no where else to go.

The problem is, the Department of Defence policies on MIAs are way behind community expectations.

And the Departments structures reflect this policy failure.

Moreover, the officials within the Department have failed to fully appreciate the impact these losses have on families and on comrades in arms.

In a conversation with an OAH member after the recovery of Parker and Gilson, a senior departmental official was still professing the view that "this hasn't had much impact on the families; they've moved on haven't they?"

In 2008 OAH will be attempting to engage the new Minister and the Department in a bid to see the current policy brought into the 21st century.

Jim Bourke

Blackie and Capt Albertson with their gear and were ordered all over the hillside for the next four hours until Maher made it clear he wasn't going to keep crossing the horrific terrain anymore.

Les Maher, PFC Ray and the bodies were extracted from a spot south-east of Hill 327 at 5.30pm on 18 April 1971.

No friendly forces ever visited the crash site again during the conflict.

The next morning Peter Aylett and Kiwi Warrant Officer Scoff Cootes went up to Hill 327 for a rotation which went until after Anzac Day, 25th April.

The A2-767 burn area was clearly visible and remained so for subsequent rotations until July 8, 1971.