

Many of you will already know that Garry Prendergast passed away suddenly, early on 4th July 2016. He was 70 years old.

Garry was 2nd Lieutenant 6 Platoon B Company 1st Battalion Royal Australian Regiment at the time of the Battle of Fire Support Base Coral. Later, he was wounded in Vietnam. He went on to enjoy a long military career before retiring to the building industry.

He is the father of two sons Beau and Paul and at the time of his death, partner to Lorna.

Garry was the founder of the 1RAR Coral Reunion Group. "Pepe" began this group after meeting up with veterans at 1987's Welcome Home Parade. Annual 1RAR reunions ensued and I was most fortunate and honoured to be enveloped into this community and attended many.

Pepe continued to gather many veterans together through this group, and not just from 1RAR. Through his large email database, he sent newsletters, information from Department Vet Affairs, news and happenings in the veteran community. I don't think anyone receiving those emails can forget the sometimes very blue jokes! Garry felt strongly about righting the wrongs that had befallen his soldier community, and set about making a difference. Pepe's contributions to gathering, reuniting, making representations for and informing a generation of men, generally shunned by the Australian community upon return from an unpopular war, enabled many to reunite and find friends and comradeship again. Pepe's efforts are just part of his legacy.

I met Garry through my cousin Barry, also a Vietnam Veteran when I began researching the Battle of Fire Support Base Coral. As it turns out the world is a small place, as Barry is best mates with Pepe's brother and we were all from the same small NSW town of Deniliquin. Pepe knew my parents. Together we worked on the Coral documentary and oral history project, gathering information and interviewing veterans. Together we managed 150 interviews from soldiers across all units at Coral. Together with a sizable body of Coral artifacts, they form a sizable body of memory; important military, social, political and personal history that will live on in Australia's public memory.

Part of that research included a trip to Vietnam with a group of Coral veterans. It was here I met Cossie, Blackie, John Davenport and Ian Ryan from 102 Battery, and life has never been the same since! The trip to Vietnam was arranged by Pepe and included a day at the Coral battlefield. I was also able to find and interview three NVA Coral veterans who shed new light on some aspects of the battle and they walked the site with us and then joined us for a simple and moving ceremony at the memorial there. It was, I believe, an historical first. We also visited the remains of Nui Dat Base, climbed SAS Hill, drank in bars in Vung Tau, told stories, and toured Saigon, Baria and many other places. We were planning a return trip in 2018 to mark the 50th anniversary.

Pepe was also instrumental in developing a submission for a unit citation for all Coral veterans, along with Alan "Jack" Parr from Mortar Platoon, Neil Weekes 1RAR and George Hulse RAE. An impressive, thorough submission was delivered early in 2016 and is still awaiting outcome.

I last saw Pepe when he and John Salter (1RAR) joined my husband and I for breakfast on our deck on a sunny Sunday 24th April this year. He and John were on their way to Mitchell for ANZAC Day. We discussed what to do next, now the documentary is planned for broadcast on the History Channel on Remembrance Day this year. So we began making plans for a new attack on getting the Battle of FSB Coral out in the public in a new way, and the trip to Vietnam. But he was going on a cruise with Lorna first. He was really happy. We hugged as he left and my last words to him were "love ya Pepe, see you soon". Like so many others I couldn't believe he passed away so suddenly and unexpectedly while in hospital with another issue. I miss him and his emails every day.

Garry's funeral was held on 11th July at Reedy Creek on the Gold Coast. Over 350 people attended, coming from all over. The service included memories and tributes shared by his partner Lorna, Beau his eldest son, his brother Terry, Bryan "Jazza" Smith and John Salter 1RAR. Father "Tink" gave a most joyful and beautiful tribute. 12 Field Regiment was ably represented by Robert Costello, Geoff Grimish and John Davenport who helped form a guard of honour. We then attended the wake at the local Bowls Club – Garry was a keen bowler.

I think Tim Fischer said it best: "In salute of a brave warrior and generous helper in so many ways. Thankyou."

Leonie

