

## Jacob's story

*A Line of Sight* includes short excerpts from the memoir that Jacob, Nick's uncle, is writing. Jacob was a chaplain in Vietnam during the war. Here is the full version of his story as I originally wrote it (with much help from Vietnam veteran Roger Mortlock).

Okay. Here goes. Why am I doing this? Not just to keep myself busy, and not just because this whole shooting business has got me thinking about Vietnam. There are other reasons too. Vanity, that someone might be interested. Also because I see family history repeating itself. Also because if I write about it I might lay it all to rest. Although I don't know about that. Laying it to rest is a cliché.

I'm going to start from the day I told my parents I was going to South Vietnam. It was 1969. I'd gone home for the weekend and I was in the back seat of their car, and I said, casually I thought, 'I'm going to South Vietnam in two weeks.' My father pulled over onto the side of the road, turned off the ignition and glared at me in the rear vision mirror. Then he said, 'You're an absolute bloody fool' which was very strong language for him, and started the car again. Then he said, 'And a disgrace' and put his foot down on the accelerator. He was so angry he was hunched over the steering wheel, driving like a kid. I saw my mother reach across and put a hand on his knee. Why he jumped to the conclusion that I volunteered to go is still a mystery to me.

My parents were an incongruous couple. Well we were an incongruous family. For as long as I can remember we called everyone by their Christian names. I called my parents Edwin and Lina at a time when no one else did. Edwin must have encouraged it - he had all kinds of radical notions back then - but all our neighbours thought Rex and I were rude little upstarts.

For most of his working life my father had a small shoe repair business. The turnover was enough to live on, but in a small town it was never going to be spectacular. My mother, Lina, was Swedish. She met Edwin before the shoe repair days when she was on a working holiday and he was training to be a teacher. They married in 1936 when he was twenty-two and she was twenty-five, and she must have thought she was marrying some clever passionate young man with a bright future, but then the war came and changed everything. Edwin had always been a pacifist and when he became a conscientious objector his teaching career was over. So was his freedom for a few years. I didn't know that at the time - I was a little kid whose dad was away, but most kids' dads were away. When he came home he mended shoes, and he never seemed to be happy but he never seemed to have the ambition to do anything else. So Lina spent the rest of her life as the wife of a small town salesman. In her wildest - or tamest - dreams I'm sure she never imagined that her adventure of a lifetime would end up in such a small cardboard box of a life.

It must have been very difficult for Lina during the war. She had almost no money - though I don't remember her ever complaining - and to have a conscientious objector in the family could get you a fair amount of abuse. Some of the kids at school used to call me names, and I'd shout back to them 'Better a live dog than a dead lion.' It was something I'd heard (I didn't know till years later where it came from) and I didn't know at the time how inappropriate it was, but it shut the other kids up. It wasn't until much later that I realised what Edwin had done, and that in some way it had entered my own consciousness and my whole life would be marked by it.

When I was about twelve - Rex was still a baby, because he was ten years younger than me - Lina leased another shop in town and ran a delicatessen, with Rex in a playpen behind the counter. I still remember the smell of marinated herrings and meat balls - she made them herself, even the

herrings that she bought and prepared in the back of the shop - and the warm baking smell of knäckebröd that I was so proud of being able to say. The shop barely covered its costs because people weren't buying 'foreign' foods much then, and I think they were also in awe of her, but it probably kept her sane. Sometimes I'd go into the shop after school and she'd make hot chocolate, and occasionally she'd talk about Sweden. But not often - at that time I wasn't interested and didn't ask her.

When I look back now, I don't think she felt at home here all that time, but she made the best of it. It wasn't until she was in her fifties and they finally had enough money for her to go back to Sweden for a visit that something settled in her.

My real memories of Edwin start when he came home after the war. He would get up in the morning and go to the shop and come home at the end of the day and spend the evening reading. It was Lina who did our homework with us and taught us to cook, and play cards, and when I complained about Edwin, she always said, sharply for her, 'Jacob, don't be critical of your father. Not till you understand.' But I didn't know what there was to understand. And I didn't know till much later that my whole life would be marked by it.

When he was seventy-five and Lina was seventy-eight a furniture truck pulled out of a driveway in front of their car and slammed into the passenger's side. Edwin had concussion and a broken arm but Lina never had a chance. They had two of Rex's kids in the back seat, and Kieran had only a few cuts but Nick's leg was shattered. Lina would have been devastated because she doted on those kids.

As a kid I was lucky. Rex always tells me that I got what I wanted, and that was mostly true. It could just as easily not have been the case, because I was born between the Depression and the War, at the end of one long period of deprivation and at the beginning of another. But people liked me, and they often gave me things - a favourite marble, or a piece of cake - although a few took every opportunity to tell me what they thought of my father.

I left high school two weeks before the final exams - I told everyone that exams were a waste of time because they only tested book knowledge and not natural intelligence - and the next three or four years I just mucked around. I had plenty of friends with flats where I could find a bed, and I headed out into the hills and went hunting whenever there wasn't any casual work around. I read a lot, started going to Mass at various Catholic churches and decided to become a Catholic priest. As far as my father was concerned, I might as well have said I was converting to Hinduism. I'm not sure where his opposition came from. It could be that all his fiery radicalism had been hammered out of him and he had shrunk into a small-town conservative Protestant, as suspicious as the next man of the Catholics with all their eating fish on Fridays and Hail Marys. But it could have come from a profound cynicism. Whatever the reason, he was very relieved when I became disillusioned with the Catholic Church, but I'd got curious about theology and I'd learnt to love ritual, and neither of those things disappeared.

When I was twenty-three that curiosity got the better of me and I decided to study theology at university. I had to talk my way into it - quitting school turned out to be a bad idea - and going to university turned out to be a bad idea too. Sitting in lectures was definitely not my style, so I spent my time avoiding them and doing the business of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament instead. But after several years of failures and just-passes, I managed to graduate. I was thirty.

Here's the Mills and Boon part. In my last year at university I fell in love - passionately - with the secretary of the university branch of the CND and she fell in love - passionately - with me.

It almost cost both of us that year's exams and continued over the summer when neither of us could decide what to do next, but knew that 'our future would be lit by the bright flame of our shared idealism'. I actually wrote that in my diary at the time!

Then in February, in the space of two weeks, she left me, married and went to live in Brisbane with a zoologist way ahead of his time and into fanatical environmentalism.

I went home and moped like a kid in either Lina's or Edwin's shop. Lina was sympathetic but said love wasn't the only thing in the world, it wasn't even the most important, and if we weren't going to be happy together it was better to find out sooner rather than later. Edwin didn't say anything, and I don't think he even noticed that I wasn't my usual self, though he did give me the rifle. But I had to do something, so I went off to theological college and trained to be a priest. I didn't want to go back to the Catholic Church, so I figured the Anglicans were the next best thing.

By then all my old mates from CND were protesting against the Vietnam War. Sometimes I was out there with them, but I was more focused in those days, I wanted to be finished with studying, and it was a struggle enough without constantly distracting myself. When I'd finished, the Bishop, in his wisdom or with his tongue in his cheek, sent me to be chaplain to the army at Burnham Military Camp.

In less than a year I was in Vietnam. It was an odd chance - they'd never normally send someone as inexperienced as I was. But one of the chaplains there, Peter Barrett, became ill and had to come home, so I became his temporary replacement.

I'd been marching against these guys in Vietnam, and now I was going to support them. A lot of people gave me a hard time about that. But by then I was back to my old hugely confident self. Who cares about not much experience? - I was the man for the job, a hunting and fishing type who could handle all conditions. I couldn't wait to go.

(I'm finding it really hard writing this. I'll try to write in a different way.)

Arriving in Vietnam.

There were seven of them in the Bristol Freighter from Singapore - six soldiers returning from R & R, and Jacob. He'd had more comfortable flights in his life, but it could have been worse. Still, he was pleased when they touched down at Vung Tau.

It was his first view of South Vietnam. In some ways Vung Tau was what he expected - a huge military airfield, the deafening roar of planes taking off and landing, the smell of avgas, huge stacks of crates and bales and 44 gallon drums everywhere waiting to be moved. But it could have been a busy airport anywhere. None of the urgency of a war zone that he'd expected.

The heat hit them like a solid wall. It was stifling, drenching heat. They were met by two soldiers who led them through the stacks of stores to the Huey helicopter waiting to take them to Nui Dat. When they boarded the helicopter the others insisted that Jacob have the outside seat, next to the door. 'Great view!' one of them said. They were all amused by something but he had no idea what it was - until they took off. Then he knew. The helicopter had no doors. There was only his seat belt between him and the ground gaping and tilting beneath him. He was as green as they come, and those six men knew it. He would have to be sharper than that.

Diary entries.

14 October

We flew from Vung Tau to Nui Dat by helicopter. Vung Tau is at the end of a small peninsula, with a river delta on one side and the ocean on the other, and with water everywhere I couldn't get my bearings for a while. It took about a half hour to get here to Nui Dat and I spent most of it hanging on so I didn't go plummeting out that gaping hole of a door.

When you're up there you know you're in a country at war. We mostly followed the course of a road that was chock full of military traffic, convoys going both ways. We flew over a town with a huge church in the middle and an enormous hole punched into the front wall of it. Swarms of tiny people, nearly all in their conical hats. Fields, villages, jungle. Then a lot of cleared land round this base.

Now I'm here. Is it what I expected? Not many surprises so far. Nui Dat's a tin and canvas town, very orderly. I've taken over Peter Barrett's tent. It's got a low wall of sandbags around it (no doubt for a good reason), a floor made from wooden pallets, a filing cabinet, a trestle table desk and two chairs. And an iron-frame bed. Why cart an iron-frame bed here? It's the first tent I've ever been in with electric light - and a pull cord to turn it on - but I'm not complaining. Peter left a couple of bottles of whisky in his 'bar' which is an ammunition box beside the filing cabinet. I hear the Americans specialise in alcohol at rock bottom prices.

It's 11 pm. There's an army of mosquitoes lining up outside the mosquito net, all whining away greedily. I don't know how I'll sleep.

Peter left me a letter. Plenty of practical advice. *The loneliness of the commanding officer is the stark reality here. You might be the only person a commanding officer can talk to...* Haven't thought about that before. But I'll read the letter again when my head's in better shape. 'Dog-tired' might be the best word right now.

There's the boom of artillery not far away. One of the boys in the Bristol Freighter said to me, 'Don't worry about it, it's routine. They reckon if there's a gun in this place you've got to keep firing it.' It'll take some getting used to.

18 October

Wasn't a great evening tonight. Had dinner with some Australian officers and a couple of New Zealanders. One of the Australians was called Andy Chalmers. He's an Intelligence Officer here - has to get inside the enemy's head and plan operations based on what he finds there. He told me in the first five minutes that he was a Duntroon man, started here as lieutenant but got promoted to corporal because he did so brilliantly! He told me about this operation he's masterminding at the moment, clearing an area of Vietcong, and he's so proud of it. Twenty three years old and thinks he's God's gift to the army! And patronizing! He goes on padre this and padre that but he obviously thinks I'm a naïve idiot. People think a chaplain loves everyone. Well, you have to take them as they come, but you don't have to like them. This man's going to be a challenge. But he's off home soon so I won't have much to do with him.

They're going to send me out on an operation. Might be next week. I definitely want to see what it's like out there.

20 October

Today I took my first service. Only a dozen people there. No atheists in fox-holes, they say. Well in that case there are a lot of God-fearing men who'd rather spend Sunday morning sleeping. I don't blame them.

Reading the liturgy here - you see the words in an entirely different way.

*Pray for the peace of the whole world.*

*Pray for those who exercise authority among us.*

*Pray for those whose conscience leads them into conflict with authority.*

A lot of guys here are gutted about the anti-war protests. They're out here, doing their best, putting their lives on the line - literally - and they feel as though people at home hate them for it. You get a different view of the issues here. At home it's just one issue - the Vietnam War. No one bothers to divide who's to blame from who's just doing their jobs. I certainly didn't. But when you're here, you know that the protests have to be against the government's decision to enter this war. They're nothing to do with these young guys being sent out here. But they feel as though people back home are throwing rocks at them. They feel totally betrayed.

I've been thinking about Edwin a lot.

There's another chaplain here - big mealy-mouthed Australian with white teeth. He's likeable enough, very warm, but he's got all the clichés - they just roll off his tongue. He knows exactly what he's here for - to save all those poor boys for Jesus before they all get shot up and go to hell. And to remind them that God's on our side. 'Doing a great job, boys, God's on our side and he loves us and that's why we're going to win this war.' I despise that kind of talk. There are also times when I envy him his certainty.

25 October

Had an HQ company barbecue today. They set up some 44 gallon drums cut in half long ways, put a steel plate on top and cooked steaks and onions and sausages - just like home. There's no shortage of good food here. And beer. They pulled in a whole trailer load packed in ice.

The whole base must have been there - cooks, clerks, storemen, the lot - a good chance to talk to a few people. I had a chat with a group of vehicle mechanics, though not so much a chat as them giving me an earful. That's what a trailer load of beer will do - they start very politely with yes sir no sir, then pretty quickly they get past that to everyone's chip on their shoulder about religion. One of these boys was called Pete and he was spoiling for a fight. He pointed out one of his mates and said, 'Now Richard there, he's one of yours.'

I could see what was coming, but I decided to play dumb. 'What do you mean, one of mine?'

'He's a born-again Christian, aren't you Richard? Know what his favourite saying is? God looks after his own. Whoever that is.'

Richard wasn't bothered. He looked about fourteen, and exactly like a kid who used to live next door to us, ginger hair and freckles. He said, 'He does, you know.'

Pete was back at him like a shot. 'Well I've got news for you. Everyone's getting killed here, Christians, Buddhists, Jewists, the whole lot. You know Rickie boy Charlie isn't going to stop in his tracks and say "Are you saved son? That's all right then" and put away their guns and wave you on through. No, they'll shoot you because you're white, and because you're a Yank even though you're not.' He looked at me. 'That's right isn't it Padre?'

'Give over Pete,' one of the others said, then he said to me, 'You know how often they've had this argument? Probably every day since we got here, eh Keith.'

Keith was one of the boys cooking the steaks. He said, 'It's how they keep their tiny minds occupied.'

It's the same everywhere. People see 'chaplain' or 'priest' and they drape all their hang-ups about God all over you. But I know how these guys tick. I can handle it.

I'm doing okay here.

26 October

Had a few sessions with some of the men coming back from operations of various kinds. Most of them are ten or twelve years younger than me and they've been looking death in the face since they got here. 'God stalks the battle field.' No he doesn't. Death does. Mostly they don't want to talk about it, they want to talk about everyday things. But not always. I saw a boy today - I think of him as a boy, he was about 19 - had just seen his best mate get one leg blown off by a land mine. That's what he wanted to talk about.

I've heard a lot of glib statements from the pulpit over the last few years. Easy answers. But there aren't any easy answers here.

27 October

Thursday I'm going out on my first operation. Turns out I'm going with Andy Chalmers. Enough said. Some pious idiot would say, God sends these things to try us. That's rubbish. You fall over people like him all the time. No doubt Andy thinks the same about me.

28 October

I had a briefing with Andy this afternoon. His office is in the administrative block, tin walls and roof - I don't know which is hotter, tin or canvas. It's all sweltering. It's interesting seeing how these guys operate. He plots these operations on a trestle table with a field telephone and a bunch of maps.

What we're doing tomorrow is part of the op he told me about the other night. A platoon have cleared the Vietcong out of an area twenty clicks north-west of here (I'm starting to learn the lingo - clicks for kilometres - it helps not to ask so many dumb questions!) They've got the headman of the key village and Andy wants to interrogate him for information about what the VC might do next up there. He thinks now the area is secured the headman might name names - VC who turn into farmers by day then go back to their old tricks at night - and he wants me to come along. It's a Catholic village, well they all are, and he thinks the appearance of a priest might oil the wheels a bit.

I must admit, he's a smart fellow. Plotted it all out on the map for me - where the helicopter will take us, the route to the village, the name of the platoon commander, Vic Henare - I'm writing it down because I'm not great on names. I've been reading contour maps since I was a kid and I was keen to show him what I knew, so we spent a lot of time poring over all his maps, discussing terrain, looking at what the VC were doing and what we were doing. I'd have to say I learnt a lot. I did - grudgingly - tell him he'd been thorough and then of course he laid it on how 'we have to get these things right, lives depend on it' etc. He didn't see that I was simply trying to get over my dislike of him and be a bit generous. But he did relax after that, told me that he has a fiancée in Melbourne and when he goes home he's looking for a promotion and wants to get into a brigade HQ. He'll probably get it - he's smart and pushy enough - but I hope he learns some humility along the way.

29 October

I'm writing this while I'm waiting for Andy to pick me up. It's an odd kind of morning. There's mist drifting among the trees, a dog barking somewhere. Reminds me of a poem I learnt at school once:

*A dog shakes itself loose  
from the mist curling off  
the back of the country.  
A car revs in the cold frost.*

Except that the mist here's curling off the rubber trees and you know that the coolness is going to be eaten up by the heat in no time.

Sometimes it feels surreal being here. As though I'm playing some bit part in a war movie. The set looks very realistic - the tent, the rough-sawn floor, trestle table, the sound of the generator whirring away outside - and you're waiting for the planes to scream overhead or some other junk war movie stuff, except that it never happens like that. It's not that kind of war. A young man came to see me yesterday. He said 'When you're out there the worst thing is never knowing the whole time what's going to happen.' Then he said, 'I don't mind the action but that's screwing up my head.'

I'm glad I'm getting out of the base today - if I'm going to be any use to these men I need to know what they're going through.

I've been issued with an M16 and I cleaned it this morning. Didn't need to because I haven't used it but I guess it's habit. We used these on the range shoots before I came here and it's a nice light weapon to hold. Plastic stock and butt and the rest of it's aluminium except for the barrel. It makes my old bolt-action .22 look like a shanghai. In the time it would take me to fire and reload the .22, this machine can fire twenty times. Re-loads automatically.

For the first time I felt homesick. Suddenly I was back at home sitting at the kitchen table polishing the stock of the rifle - probably with Edwin standing behind me telling me to stop wasting my time - but for a moment I could almost feel the weight of that old rifle in my hands and it was overpowering. Bit of a revelation.

Andy's picking me up in the land rover to go to Eagle Farm - it's the domestic helicopter base. Great name. We're going by chopper about an hour and a half north then we've got a half hour walk to this village. I'm loading myself up with as much water as I can hang on my belt. Can't say I've got used to the heat yet and that's a surprise to me. I've been out in every kind of weather most of my life but this has floored me.

---

I've been rereading my diary for the rest of that day. I don't want to type out what I wrote because with hindsight some of it doesn't make any sense. I think instead I'll try and describe the rest of the day as best I can.

Andy and I drove to Eagle Farm. He had an interpreter with him in the back. The interpreter was wearing a South Vietnamese army uniform but Andy told me he was a chu hoi, a Vietcong who'd surrendered. I couldn't understand how you could trust someone like that to be a reliable interpreter and I would have asked Andy except that the guy was sitting right behind me. I remember thinking, maybe you couldn't trust anyone so you had to use whoever you could get. The longer I was in South Vietnam the more complex I realised the whole situation was.

I decided to try out my newly acquired Vietnamese words I was so proud of on him - '*Chào bà. Ong manh khong.*' He wasn't interested - he probably didn't understand a single thing I said. Andy was smirking away and I decided not to provide him with any more home-grown entertainment. On the way he updated me on the whole op and he was very confident about it. It had gone well and we'd be back for 'afternoon tea padre', which no doubt was a joke at my expense - the padre being the 'afternoon tea with the parishioners' type. But I let it go.

Eagle Farm was a whole new experience. You had to run through an incredible storm of red dust to get on board the helicopter. And you ran. There was no wasting time - it was all about saving fuel or making sure you weren't a sitting duck. We flew high, and mainly over jungle. In places there

were areas of cleared land, roads, villages, but we were too high to see any detail. It was hard to keep a sense of direction, because we weren't flying straight. We seemed to be all over the place.

There were six of us in the chopper, plus the pilots - Andy and the interpreter and I were on the bench seat with a crewman facing us and there was a machine gunner at each doorway. We also had an escort chopper. I'd told myself this was a routine operation but now we were on the way I realised nothing was routine here. It was serious stuff.

Then the chopper came around in a wide circle and Andy pointed out a column of purple smoke marking the landing zone. We came down fast in an area of cleared ground and the minute the helicopter touched down Andy was out of it and racing across the ground. I took off after him and when he hit the dirt I did too, with the interpreter right behind me. By the time I looked up the chopper had already taken off. The speed at which all these things happened was seriously impressive. As the dust cleared I could see silhouettes of men around the perimeter of the clearing. For a moment I didn't know whether they were ours or theirs. It was a ridiculous thought because there was no way we'd be down there if they were Vietcong, but when everything happens so fast I'd already discovered that you can get pretty random thoughts.

Then someone appeared beside us though I had no idea where he came from. These men could materialise out of nowhere - I suppose that's the essence of a guerrilla war. He introduced himself as Corporal Williams and said he'd been sent to pick us up. From the moment he started talking I knew something was wrong. It's easy to say that with hindsight but even then I knew it. He was barely polite, and at the time I would have said he was surly or that there was some bad history between him and Andy, but they obviously hadn't met before. If Andy noticed it he didn't react, and there wasn't any discussion because Corporal Williams wanted to get us out of there as fast as he could.

The men around the perimeter had reassembled in single file. There were about a dozen of us altogether with five or six paces between each of us. I was in the middle of the line behind Andy and in front of the interpreter. I could see the machine gunner and his number 2 up ahead, and Corporal Williams and a couple of scouts were ahead of them. I knew there were several riflemen behind me but we moved off so quickly I wasn't sure how many.

What we were moving through wasn't thick jungle, more like regrowth. We followed a path of sorts, more like a strip that a small bulldozer had pushed through. The men fanned out into a staggered double column - when you learn these drills at home they're just practice, but out there it's about survival. I started to get an idea of what it was like being in that war. I couldn't believe how quietly these men moved. I was used to moving quietly, but when you're in the Tararuas you're dead quiet so you don't alert whatever it is you've got your sights on. Here it was a matter of not alerting someone who might have their sights on you, but you had no idea where they might be. For the first time since I'd arrived in South Vietnam I was afraid.

The machine gunner and his number two looked like bandits with their ammunition belts slung over their shoulders, and all the men were unbelievably filthy. Their shirts were literally black with sweat and they stank. I don't know why I expected anything different because they'd already been out there for three weeks. Andy looked as though he was on a Sunday school picnic in contrast and I guess I did too, though I didn't feel like it. Every inch of cloth was literally glued to my body.

The corporal was up in front of Andy, and if there was bad blood between them, they didn't show it. But then, he was out there carrying out this op that Andy had designed sitting back in the base, and he probably didn't have any time for officers of any sort. If I had known what was coming up I might have understood him better.



We went through this scrubby jungle for about twenty minutes then we came to some cleared land and a few dried-out paddy fields. We had to walk along the dike between the paddy fields and that was when I felt really exposed. We were like a bunch of ants walking across concrete, no protection at all. Then we came to a couple of tree trunks felled across a small stream to form a bridge. I could smell wood smoke and I guessed we were coming into the village. But there were trees on the other side of the stream and that's why we didn't see what was coming up, in fact we were at the entrance to the village before I realised we were there.

The path went between two stakes. Each stake was driven upright into the ground and each was topped by something. For a moment I didn't register what it was, or maybe I couldn't take in what I saw. Then I did see. Each stake was topped by a head. And not the head of an adult. The head of a small child.

One was a girl, maybe about eight, with long black hair. The other was a boy, a bit younger. They didn't even have their eyes closed.

The corporal stopped the patrol and pointed to the heads with his rifle barrel, and he was so angry he could hardly speak. He said something to Andy like 'See that sir! VC last night. You'd think we'd have figured out how they work by now!' Andy didn't say anything but he was utterly shocked - you could see it. Maybe I could have learnt in that moment not to be so hard on him but I was too shocked myself.

The corporal led us into the village. It was the first time I had been in a Vietnamese village, and another time I would have been curious, but right then I couldn't take it in. I remember a jumble of shacks and a lot of chickens and goats, and a few mangy-looking dogs. I could see some of the platoon on the outskirts - they'd formed a defensive ring to seal off the village. There was an open area in the centre and people squatting at the edge of it watching us. They were all silent.

The platoon commander was waiting for us. He told Andy that the night before, after the platoon withdrew from the village to a defensive position about a kilometre away, the Vietcong came back in. The children on the stakes were the headman's grandchildren. Now he was fearful for the rest of his family. It was a waste of time talking to him.

The headman squatted on the ground. He was bald with a goatee beard and I couldn't tell how old he was, maybe fifty, maybe seventy. I thought that under the circumstances Andy would leave him alone, but I guess he had a job to do - after all, we'd come all this way for him to interrogate this man, so he and the interpreter squatted beside the headman. I didn't know what my role was, because everything had changed and now my presence wouldn't make a bit of difference, but I sat down with them anyway. I needed to - if I hadn't sat down I might have fallen over.

It was a one-sided interrogation clearly going nowhere from the start. The interpreter was an arrogant aggressive bastard, and I was appalled at him. I couldn't understand a word of what he was saying, but you could hear that he was threatening, cajoling, abusing - the whole works. But he might as well have been throwing rocks at a brick wall. Nothing he said was going to move that old man. I thought that grief and horror would keep that old man's mouth shut even if fear didn't.

I saw Andy shake his head then stand up. He said, 'Why the hell hasn't he taken them down?' He didn't look at the stakes.

Vic said, 'We asked him to but he won't. Not allowed to. He's got to leave them there as a warning to anyone else who feels like cooperating with us.'

'Then take them down yourself!' Andy shouted at Vic then he got himself together and repeated it more levelly. 'I said, take them down.'

Vic said, 'If I do, he'll get it.' He took a packet of cigarettes out of his pouch. I thought he was buying time. He offered them to us and Andy took one, then Vic said, 'We secure this village for the day so you can come in and interrogate this man then we all walk out and they cop the consequences.' He gave the headman the rest of the cigarettes.

Andy said, 'How long will they stay up there?'

'Days. Weeks. Until the Vietcong say they can come down.'

I drank about half a bottle of water. I needed something a lot stronger. I saw Andy stub out his cigarette with his foot. He didn't look good.

Vic gave an order to the corporal to take us back to the landing zone. He'd radioed for the chopper and it would be there by the time we were. The only way out was between the two stakes, and we were just past them when Andy stopped and fished in his pouch for his own cigarettes, but his hand was shaking so much he couldn't hold the packet. Suddenly he crouched down on the side of the track and was sick.

I said 'Are you okay?' It was the most pathetic thing I could have said, but I said it. He stood up and said 'Sure', and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Then he said something I didn't think I heard. Later I knew what it was.

We went back over the bridge, and I was chanting two lines from the prayer book in my head, over and over, like a mantra. The way the mind dredges up words as a kind of protection. *Bring hope that you will make him the equal of whatever lies ahead. Bring him courage to endure what cannot be avoided. Bring hope that you will make him the equal of whatever lies ahead. Bring him courage to endure what cannot be avoided.*

I had no idea whether I was thinking about the headman. Or myself. I wasn't thinking about Andy.

I've many times gone over in my mind the rest of that day. I was shattered and I seriously doubted whether I could handle all this. By the time we got back to Nui Dat all I wanted to do was to be by myself. But I asked Andy to come back to my tent and have a drink. At least I did that.

I should have paid more attention. I was responsible for these guys. I was the one who knew what had happened that day, and I was the person he could have talked to. I wanted to say to him how terrible it was and that I didn't know how they could keep dealing with such unbelievable cruelty. I should have taken enough time to listen to him. However long it took, I should have sat there in silence and waited.

I actually thought he might say something to me, like 'Pretty tough for your first op padre.'

But I said 'You all right? Want to talk about it?' He finished his whisky, stood up and said, 'It's all part of the job.' He walked out of the tent and I let him go.

About 10 o'clock that night an Australian captain who was a colleague of Andy's came to my tent to tell me that Andy had shot himself in the head.

I was held responsible. The officer who told me Andy was dead let me know that straight up. He wanted to know what the hell had happened out there and why the hell I let Andy walk off, why the hell I didn't tell anyone else. Then I heard it all again from the CO the next day, except that he was even more blunt - I hadn't done my job. It was Andy's operation and it went horribly wrong, and Andy being the sort of man who would take it personally why didn't I go to the commanding officer

and let him know Andy had taken it so badly? Or asked one of the other young officers to talk to him? I might as well have shot him myself for all the good I'd been.'