



Hudson Denning | Year 11

In Commemoration of Remembrance Day 2020

In 2020, we were unable to hold our traditional ANZAC Day Commemorative Ceremony due to restrictions enforced, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, our 2020 ANZAC Scholar did not have an opportunity to present his speech at an official ANZAC Day Ceremony. Instead, Hudson has chosen to write a newsletter article about Brigadier Kevin O'Brien, CSC, and his connection with our school.

Vietnam: the Gallipoli of the '70s

As Brisbane State High School students in 2020, the idea of a war forcing its way into our lives seems foreign. Nevertheless, this notion was true more recently than many of us might first assume. From only the class of '64, that graduated just over a decade before my father went to the school, at least seven alumni served in Vietnam — some by choice but some by the draft. In August, I was privileged to interview one – Brigadier Kevin O'Brien, CSC.



Brigadier Kevin O'Brien (pictured centre, facing the camera) and his fellow members of the 107 Field Battery driving to a helipad for insertion with a NZ company on one of Kevin's final operations in 1971.

In 1965, O'Brien and two other Year 12 State High students (Frank Ellis and Ross Sydney) applied and were selected for a four-year course at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in Canberra. This was the beginning of an education to become an army officer. It was on ANZAC Day of that year that Prime Minister Menzies declared Australia would be committing ground troops to Vietnam. In 1969, O'Brien was trained for a final year of education in the skills of becoming an artillery officer.

It was February of 1970 when he finally deployed to Vietnam, having been “very well trained”. He was to spend 13 months there.

O’Brien’s specific job was a forward observer, where he had the crucial responsibility of calling in artillery fire support whenever his infantry company contacted the Viet Cong during patrols through the Vietnamese jungles, valleys, and hills.

The fighting was brutal, six of his 100-man infantry company were killed and about 30 were wounded.

Of course, O’Brien did acknowledge one of the key discerning differences between the World Wars and Vietnam – Vietnam ended up being “impossible to win by military means alone”.

But I must add that Vietnam was surprising similar in many ways to Gallipoli – a strategic and political failure yes, but in my eyes also an awesome exemplification of the ANZAC spirit:

Soldiers were clearly courageous, enduring and strong – the Viet Cong avoided ANZAC forces because they knew they were “pretty good”.

They showed integrity – O’Brien never witnessed ANZAC soldiers taking drugs or committing atrocities.

They demonstrated mateship and ingenuity – after meeting and befriending a brigade of Americans, O’Brien realised that their abundant artillery was in range and obtained their radio frequency and call signs. Therefore, the next day when an NZ platoon was caught in a fierce firefight, he was able to tune into his American mates’ frequency and ask them to provide the platoon with fire support.

Finally, they had a good sense of humour – when a fellow past member of the BSHS cross country team – now a conscripted National Serviceman, Gunner Helmut Waldau — came up to O’Brien in Vietnam with a big smile across his face, O’Brien exclaimed, “Bloody hell, I remember you from State High!”

Brisbane State High alumni would serve in roles all over the battlefield. Keith Ayres as an RAAF bomber, Stan Krasnoff as an officer with the US Army Special Forces (‘Green Berets’), and most remarkably, Douglas Vincent, CB, AM, OCE, as Commander, Australian Force Vietnam (COMAFV), in 1967.