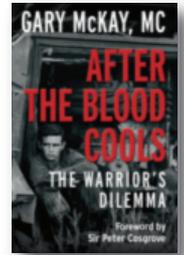


BOOK REVIEW:

After the blood cools: the warrior's dilemma

by Gary McKay, MC

Living History: Manly, New South Wales; 2022; 208 pp.; ISBN 9780648922612 (paperback); RRP \$34.95; Ursula Davidson Library call number 547 MCKA 2022



After the Blood Cools is a military memoir of Lieutenant Colonel Gary McKay, MC (Ret'd), an Australian infantryman. The book's focus is his war service as a rifle platoon commander in South Vietnam in 1971 and the lessons he has derived from this combat experience and its long aftermath.

McKay is the author of 13 books mainly on the Vietnam War. They include *In good company: one man's war in Vietnam* (Allen & Unwin: North Sydney, 1987); *Delta Four: Australian riflemen in Vietnam* (Allen & Unwin: St Leonards, NSW, 1996); and *Tracy: the storm that wiped out Darwin on Christmas Day, 1974* (Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, NSW, 1999).

After the Blood Cools is in two parts. Book One describes McKay's war service in South Vietnam, which culminated in him being seriously wounded; and Book Two is about his subsequent recovery back in Australia, a long journey including battles years later with post-traumatic stress disorder.

McKay begins by describing how he came to be in the Australian Army. In his late teens, McKay was a very fit surfer and Rugby player. As national service had been reintroduced for 20-year-old males, McKay enlisted as a gunner in 7th Field Regiment, a unit of the part-time Citizen Military Forces (CMF). When called up for national service, however, he decided to serve for two years full-time in the Regular Army rather than for six years part-time in the CMF.

Following call-up, McKay was selected for officer training and was commissioned through the Officer Training Unit, Scheyville, as a second-lieutenant into the Royal Australian Infantry Corps. He subsequently served out the remainder of his national service obligation in Australia, mostly at 3rd Training Battalion. Rather than leaving the Army at this point and wishing to test himself in combat, he elected to continue his service in the Regular Army. He was posted as a rifle platoon commander to 4th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, which was preparing to deploy to Vietnam.

Once deployed to in Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam, in mid 1971, the battalion began patrolling, usually at platoon or company level. The enemy was still very active in the province and McKay describes how his 11 Platoon, D Company, experienced combat – from their first contact with the enemy, through their first kill of a Viet Cong (which drove home the harsh reality of war), and, after several months of patrolling at company level, to a battle on the Song Ca. Here, D Company, supported by Centurion tanks, successfully

attacked a Viet Cong bunker system. Chaotic, close-quarter combat in the jungle ensued. McKay's description of this battle should be read by all aspiring infantry officers.

Subsequent patrols had both good and bad moments. On one occasion, his platoon had a 'blue-on-blue' incident when his platoon ran into the back of another D Company platoon. Two days later on 21 September and still quite shaken by the blue-on-blue incident, with the company advancing on three separate platoon axes toward the Nui Le hills, D Company stumbled into a major enemy bunker complex. Tank support had been withdrawn by this stage of the war, but artillery and close air support were still available and they saved the day. Nevertheless, fierce close-quarter combat ensued, with significant casualties on both sides, including two 11 Platoon machine-gun crews. Eventually, near last light, 11 Platoon was able to break contact and withdraw only to discover that it had now entered another, though much smaller, bunker complex. During the night, while directing the platoon battle, McKay was shot through the shoulder by an enemy sniper. Seriously wounded, his war was now over.

Book Two describes McKay's return to Australia and long road back from being wounded-in-action, including his hospitalisation, convalescence, return to Townsville and unit life, being awarded the Military Cross for his gallant leadership during the Battle of Nui Le, and further hospitalisation in Brisbane. Training, staff and command appointments followed. He began writing books about the Vietnam War and leading battlefield tours of Vietnam. This triggered post-traumatic stress disorder which, in turn, placed stress on his marriage. Lengthy psychological counselling followed. He retired from the Army after a 30-year career, and pursued a new career as an author and battlefield guide.

In the book's final chapter, McKay reflects philosophically on his experiences, particularly the mental and physical challenges of combat. He discusses the role of warriors, the face of battle, fear, fatigue, grief, horror, courage, shock, memories and training for war.

McKay writes very well in simple, almost colloquial, Australian-English. The book is easy to read; gripping in places. I recommend it to anyone interested in Australia's contribution to the Vietnam War, but especially to aspiring infantry junior leaders.

David Leece