THE WAR WITHIN

GOING UNDERGROUND: former Australian Army officer Alexander MacGregor crawls through a Viet Cong tunnel at Cu Chi, near Ho Chi Minh City.

WHAT IS IT THAT DRIVES AN OLD SOLDIER TO RETURN TO THE BATTLEFIELDS OF HIS PAST? MARK DAPIN TOURS VIETNAM WITH VETERAN ALEXANDER MACGREGOR TO FIND OUT.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **PETER STUCKINGS**

THERE ARE FEW REMNANTS OF THE AUSTRALIAN military presence in Vietnam: a handful of roads and wells, foundations and stones, a cross at Long Tan, and the flickers of ghosts in the milky eyes of old men.

Alexander "Sandy" MacGregor, 72, was once a captain with the Australian Army in South Vietnam. Today, he stoops with cautious confidence into tunnels where Viet Cong (VC) guerillas lived and fought, but there are spirits underground, too, and MacGregor hears them crying out still.

In 1965, MacGregor was an engineer with 3 Field Troop, who earned the nickname "tunnel rats". Their job was to deal with booby traps and unexploded bombs, and penetrate the catacombs the VC used to defend and extend their "liberated zones".

MacGregor has returned to the reunified country three times, most recently last month to lead a party of Australian tourists around the sites of the tunnel rats' war. He first arrived with 3 Field Troop in the port of Vung Tau, about 130 kilometres south-east of Saigon, in September 1965, on HMAS Sydney. Vung Tau – known to the Australians, inevitably, as "Vungers" – was a rest and convalescence (R & C) destination for Australian troops, who ran wild through its rustic brothels and tiny boom-boom bars.

But what was once a small town is now a resort city, and there's little here that MacGregor can recognise. The Army-run Peter Badcoe Club, where the troops on leave (officially) slept, has been replaced by the monstrous Imperial Hotel. The R & C centre is now a bank.

The prostitutes are back – small like schoolchildren, with high cheekbones and almond eyes. And there are Australians here, too, a community of perhaps 60 veterans, still trying to relive five days' leave when they were young.

"It's a great little place," says Glenn Nolan, who owns three local bars and runs tours of Australian battlefields, "but we get people here for the wrong reasons: cheap beer and young girls." He complains of "63-year-olds brawling in the streets".

"Why do they come back?" ponders Robert Taylor, the British owner of the new Worldwide Arms Museum. "You tell me why they come back. Do you think they'll go back to Afghanistan?"

THE TUNNEL RATS TOUR TRAVELS BY AIR-conditioned coach through the Australian area of operations in South Vietnam. Commentary is provided by MacGregor, a number of local guides, and Jimmy Thomson, a Sydney writer who co-authored the book *Tunnel Rats* with MacGregor.

At first, MacGregor is combative with the Vietnamese guides. He stiffens at suggestions the Viet Cong might have been patriots, or that their cause was just, and challenges any implication that the US and their allies might have been careless with Vietnamese lives.

He repeatedly asks a guide if his former Viet Cong relatives have changed their minds about communism. It seems important to MacGregor that others might believe his war was justified, but he says he doesn't care what they think. "I know that we did the right thing," he says. "I know. We did not do the wrong thing by being here."

The Australian engineers noticed their first enemy tunnel in October 1965, when they were patrolling outside the US air base at Bien Hoa, north-east of Saigon. MacGregor had his staff sergeant lower him down head first, so he could see where it led.

"Your heart's thumping," he says, taking a soldier's second-person distance. "You don't know what's going on, you can't see. But I had to do it."

He suddenly shifts both tense and perspective, as he does often when he speaks about the war.

"How can I expect any of my guys to go down tunnels if I don't?" he asks.

Once MacGregor had established the tunnel wasn't booby-trapped and it was only an escape route, leading from a hut into the bush, he sent down his men, one by one. He says he didn't force anyone to enter a tunnel, but no engineer ever refused.

In a later operation, engineer Doug Sanderson, a claustrophobic, followed an armed and wounded enemy into a tunnel. "I asked him after the war how he did that," says MacGregor. "He pretended to himself that he was on the surface of the ground, that he was able to easily breathe, and everything was okay for him."

It was a primitive version of the mind-control techniques that MacGregor himself was forced to adopt much later in his life.

"I had to use it," he says, "to overcome the death of my kids."

THE ENGINEERS UNCOVERED OTHER TUNNELS nearby, including several that were linked. The passages were too low to stand up in, so they had to crawl through on their hands and knees.

MacGregor knew the Americans had already found tunnels, and that they used a Mighty Mite air-blower to pump in smoke, watching for leakages to pinpoint any other entrances, then cleared them with clean air. "I *assumed* they went down the tunnels after they'd blown air in," says MacGregor.

"THAT WAS WHEN I FIGURED OUT THESE AMERICANS NEVER WENT DOWN THE TUNNELS. IF THEY DID, THEY WOULD HAVE HAD THE SAME PROBLEM."

Hidden dangers: (above) MacGregor looks on as a Vietnamese guide emerges from a camouflaged tunnel entrance at Cu Chi.

The Australians decided to act more aggressively and throw down a tear-gas grenade with the smoke. "That basically immobilises you," says MacGregor. "You start crying and you can't do a damned thing."

They built a short tunnel at their base and trained at flooding it with gas then blowing the gas clear. Their skills were tested at the Battle of Ho Bo Woods in January 1966, when US and Australian forces attacked an area north of Cu Chi, near the so-called Iron Triangle, which was "95 per cent Viet Cong".

They were fired on from the moment they jumped from their helicopters, by weapons aimed from invisible positions in the scrub. Two stretcher bearers were shot dead as they ran to rescue wounded men. An Australian platoon commander, Lieutenant Jim Bourke, took a bullet through his face but continued shouting orders until he passed out.

Once an enemy bunker was located, MacGregor's engineers blew it in and scrambled into the tunnel beneath. They pumped in their gas and air, then two engineers went down, followed by a second pair to relay the wire of their field telephone. Within hours, both the front men had fainted. The tunnels were too narrow to turn around in, so the second team had to drag out the first men backwards, on their bellies.

The Australians had been knocked out by their own gas.

"Then I realised there was no way in the world that those Mighty Mites blew enough air around to clear the smoke," says MacGregor. "And that was when I figured out these bloody Americans never went down the tunnels. Because, if they did, they would have had the same problem."

Early in the battle, MacGregor's close friend, artillery officer Captain Ken Bade, had his chest blown in by a VC bomb.

"He and I went right through Duntroon together for four years, living in each other's pockets," says MacGregor. "I heard of his death and that really hit me hard, but I was busy as all hell with the tunnel clearance."

Over the next days, MacGregor's engineers mapped the tunnels they found, and pulled out enemy weapons and supplies. Meanwhile, Corporal Bob Bowtell, an Australian engineer working with another infantry company, had squeezed his tall, thin body into what ultimately proved to be a dead end.

"We'd already blown down smoke, tear gas and air," says MacGregor, "but when there's a dead end you can't clear the smoke properly, and the smoke burns up the oxygen, so no matter how much bloody air you try to pump in, there's no oxygen to breathe. He'd fainted and we'd put little guys in to try to push him back up through the hole. We couldn't physically get him out. We had to dig him out and he was dead by the time we got him out. He was asphyxiated."

The troops drove women and children out of the tunnels, but the fighters stayed hidden. The Australians heard the Viet Cong talking in a passageway underground. They brought in a Vietnamese interpreter to call for their surrender, but they wouldn't come out.

"So we blew it up," says MacGregor, slowly. "Anyway." He takes a breath. "I don't know what [the noise] was."

But it stopped. When the troops moved out, B-52 bombers flew over the woods and carpet bombed them to ashes and dust.

SINCE THE WAR ENDED, THE VIETNAMESE have reopened a number of their tunnels as unlikely, but hugely popular, tourist attractions. The first system visited by the Tunnel Rats tour is the Long Phuoc tunnels near Cu Chi, which, a guide tells us, were built to fight the French in 1948. The high, wide tunnels meander through a hospital and kitchen. They are clean, well preserved and lightly populated by faintly unnerving mannequins wearing black pyjamas.

"It's all bullshit," says MacGregor. "Every bit of it. This was our area of operation. Mate, if that was here, we would've found it. When we found them, we destroyed them."

MacGregor says the tunnels were built for tourists, and becomes agitated trying to nudge the Vietnamese guides into confessing what he believes to be true.

The guide leads the tour up into the Minh Dam caves, which once housed the headquarters of the local VC. He climbs into cracks in the cliff face that no outsider could recognise, and emerges in chambers identified as the secretary's office, or the general's quarters.

Not far from Minh Dam is the Long Tan Memorial Cross. By the time the VC attacked an Australian patrol in a rubber plantation at Long Tan, the engineers had helped build the 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) base camp around a hill known as Nui Dat.

On the night of August 16, 1966, the VC mortared the engineers' positions at Nui Dat. MacGregor was out on an operation, but "a good mate", Doug Payne, lost his legs. "I think one was

below the knee and one was above the knee," says MacGregor. "I never saw him again. He stayed in the army for quite some time. They gave him some sort of desk job somewhere, minus two legs."

On August 18, an estimated 2500 local VC and North Vietnamese Army regulars ambushed the lead platoon of D Company 6 RAR near the hamlet of Long Tan. In the battle that followed, 18 Australians were killed, but the Australians counted 245 enemy corpses, and an unknown number of bodies were dragged away from the battlefield. Most of the enemy casualties were caused by artillery fire.

The Australians raised a wooden cross to their dead, a replica of which stands in a Long Tan plantation, flanked by avenues of rubber trees. There used to be a copper plate screwed on to the cross, but both the original plate and cross now rest in a museum in Bien Hoa. A copy of the plate can be hired from a local police station and affixed to the copy of the cross for formal services. The system stops local people from recycling the plaque into scrap metal, and also provides an income for the police.

The tour group lays flowers around the cross, the Vietnamese guide lights sticks of incense, and the bus carries on to Nui Dat. There was once a sprawling Australian base here, flanked by mountains, divided by an airstrip and watered from wells. Almost every sign of it has disappeared, except for the track prints of armoured personnel carriers on the remains of the runway.

MacGregor has been back to Nui Dat before and found that his headquarters was now a base for the former VC battalion D445, which fought at Long Tan. He tried to approach it with a tour party, but the guards swung their rifles at him – "That's been done before," he says – and detained their bus for two hours.

> **"I WANTED TO KNOW HOW THEY FELT ABOUT AUSTRALIANS IN THE WAR – WHETHER THERE WAS ANY FORGIVENESS ON THEIR PART."**

D445 has now left the position and MacGregor hopes to visit the site of 1 ATF headquarters, where there was a plaque to the engineers. "That's where I want to go," he says, over and again.

The engineers chose to dig in near a well, and MacGregor is driven by the thought of seeing that well again. The guides do not understand. At first, they believe he is looking for a lake. They ask the people who live in the houses nearby, most of which fly a ragged red Vietnamese national flag.

The neighbours offer discouragement and fragments of history. MacGregor marches through their backyards and ducks under bamboo washing poles, until the guides finally find an old woman who still uses the well to draw water.

When MacGregor sees the well, a calm smile stretches across his face. His big, weary body relaxes a little. Even his voice softens and slows.

"Boy oh boy," he says. "This is the first water point. That's why we came here."

He looks happy. Is he?

"I am, I am," he says. "I've been … I am."

Around him, black-winged butterflies flutter and rest.

THE TUNNELS AT CU CHI ARE THE MOST developed of all the Vietnam War tourist sites. Their car park is crowded with coaches. As visitors wander through the woods, a guide points out airholes and entrances to the underground city of the guerillas. The Viet Cong bunkers on the surface led to three further levels of tunnels, the first for fighting, the second for women and children, the third for escaping. Thousands of guerillas lived in the womb of the land. There are displays of their spiked death-traps made from US ordnance: punji pits and bear traps and the not-very-fierce sounding "clinging armpit trap". The guide trips them all in turn. Metal teeth fashioned from the flesh of unexploded bombs clamp shut around his stick.

The sound of gunfire in the distance is the noise of tourists firing antique AK-47s, among other weapons, on the range the Viet Cong once used to train their fighters. The rounds are live but the bullets are old and difficult to target. The Cu Chi tunnels, MacGregor concedes, are the real thing, destroyed several times by the Americans but repeatedly rebuilt by the Viet Cong as the base from which they eventually over-ran Saigon.

Their passages are dark and constricted, although they, too, have been partially illuminated and widened for what an earlier guide called "the big people, the KFC people, the beer people". It's like crawling down a pipe with no end, away from the light towards nothing but a deeper darkness.

When MacGregor emerges from a tunnel, he says he has been thinking of Bob Bowtell, the man who died in the dead end. "He wriggled into this thing," he says. "And can you imagine how … he would've really just flaked out. He would've gone into a deep sleep, I suppose.

"I've woken up many, many times at night," MacGregor says later, "dreaming about Bowtell. I've got lost in tunnel systems, I've got so many negative thoughts about tunnels that it comes up in my subconscious mind, in my dream mind."

MacGregor first returned to Vietnam in "about 1995", on a private tour with his son, Ian.

"I was really interested in talking to the enemy at the Cu Chi tunnels," says MacGregor. "I was

really interested in their attitude, and I also wanted to know how they felt about Australians in the war – whether, in fact, there was any forgiveness on their part. Their attitude was all about 'We won', 'It's fine', 'We don't mind you being in our country', 'We invite you to be here', 'We're glad we're the victors', and there was no animosity between us."

But what would the VC pardon him for, when his position is he did the right thing, anyway?

"My position is [I did the right thing]," he says, "but their position isn't. They would consider us as invaders, trying to propagate a non-communist government onto them. They forgave me for being involved in that action against them."

Reconciliation had reached the heart of MacGregor's life when, in 1987 in Sydney, three of his daughters and one of their friends were shot dead by a mentally ill stalker named Richard Maddrell, who had chosen not to take his medication on the day of the killings. MacGregor turned to meditation and mind-control techniques to deal with his grief, and eventually visited Maddrell in Grafton jail, in northern NSW, and offered him a father's forgiveness.

"I didn't do it for Maddrell," he says, "I did it for me. Forgiveness is for the forgiver, not for the forgiven. I think there were parallels between talking with the Viet Cong and Maddrell. Forgiveness is a process of cleansing for yourself, so you can get on with your own life. I didn't want there to be bitterness and hatred with the Viet Cong that would consume me, and I didn't want to be affected by bitterness between me and Maddrell."

But he doesn't feel any bitterness towards the Viet Cong, does he?

"I don't know," he says. "I mean, one of my soldiers and my best mate were killed. I certainly didn't handle that as well at the time."

When the terrible events he has lived through come into his mind, MacGregor returns to the shelter of the second-person. "You just observe the thought as it goes through you. It's not part of you, it's not you. It's like a negative thought coming in one ear, and then you imagine it going out the other ear. With someone like Ken Bade or Bowtell, I would think about them, send them my light, my spiritual light, and tell them, 'I'm glad I knew you.'"

The formal tour ends with a day in Saigon, which includes a visit to the War Remnants Museum, which used to be known as the Museum of American War Crimes. MacGregor does not want to see the museum again. He dismisses as "propaganda" its wall decorated with hundreds of photographs of American soldiers laughing at the twisted corpses of mutilated Vietnamese, waving their body parts like trophies, terrorising prisoners for entertainment, burning civilians to save them.

Glimpse into the past: (above) a local guide demonstrates a series of Viet Cong booby traps to MacGregor's tourist group at Cu Chi.

The exhibits were real, but MacGregor quibbled at the contexts and bridled at the mechanically furious captions denouncing imperialist murderers and their mercenary accomplices.

MacGregor insists on a division between the American Army and the South Vietnamese forces that does not seem to exist in the minds of many Vietnamese today. The guillotine at the museum was not last used by the "Americans" in 1960, as the caption read, it was employed by the South Vietnamese government. The napalm dropped on the naked girl fleeing her village in the famous photograph was not dropped by an American pilot, as was suggested. It was a *South Vietnamese pilot using American napalm*. The distinction is important to him.

Eventually, Thomson persuades MacGregor to make one more visit, and the old soldier is stunned. The captions have been rewritten, their tone adulterated, the exhibits altered. Many of the most confronting photographs are gone.

For MacGregor, this was reason enough to return to Vietnam. "I'm really happy that I did do it," he says. "I found new things. I found better things going on in Vietnam than I thought."

He is smiling again. The Viet Cong no longer paint him as a monster. He has put one more ghost to rest.

And that, in the end, is why the soldiers come back. GW