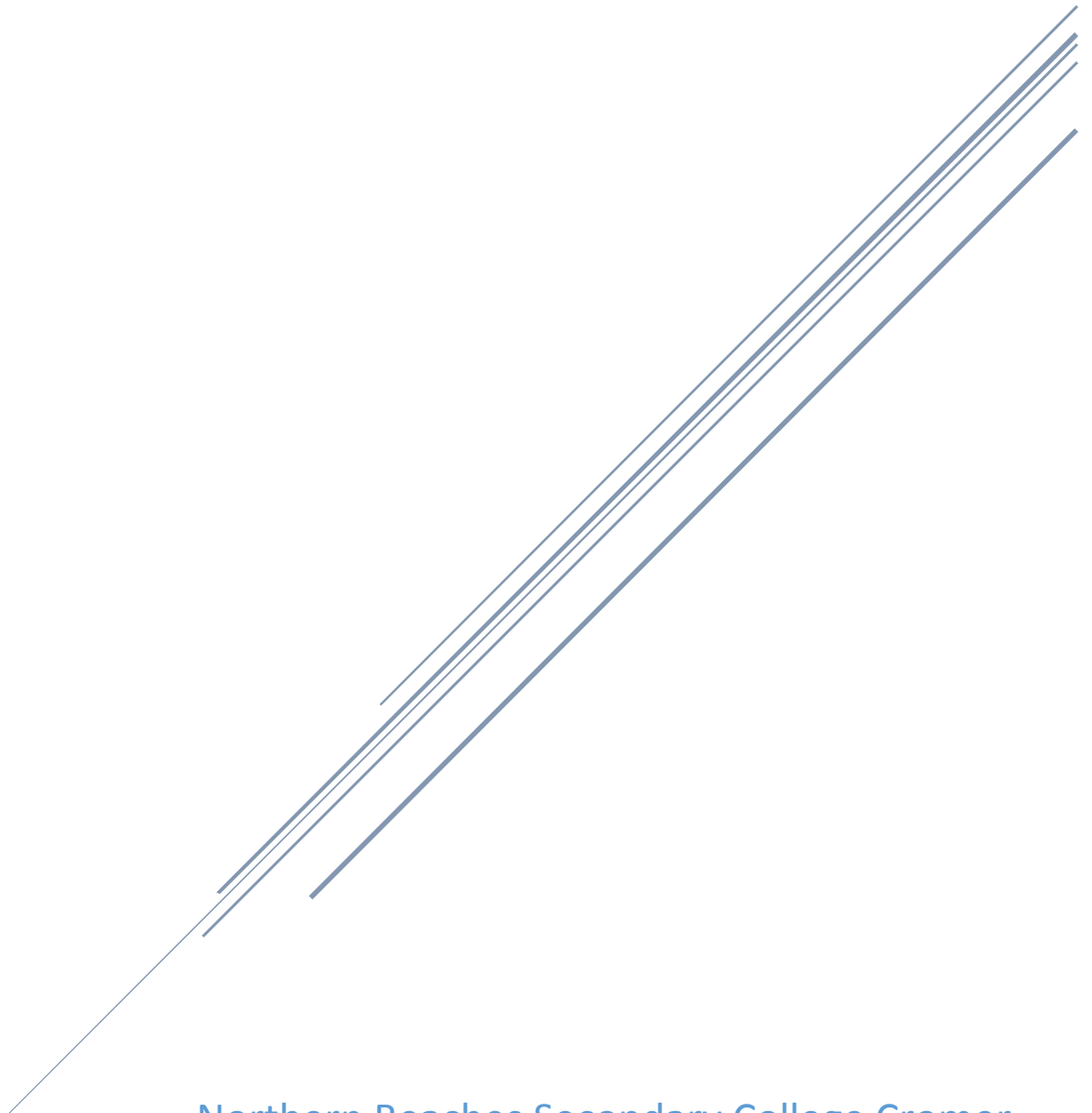


JACK

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- Jack

Life was going great. I had just turned 20, had my mob all around me, the saltwater on my skin and endless summer days without a care in the world. The sense of eternal freedom and youth lingered gently around me like a cool sea breeze on a hot summer's night, its presence welcome but only missed when gone. I would never have guessed that those feelings would have been stolen from me with the utterance of 'one sentence'. At first, I didn't know I had been robbed. It was gradual until the realisation was so sudden and confronting that it felt like a punch in the guts with a cement fist.

Kenny and I had been best mates since Bobby Munda knocked my front teeth out in second grade and Kenny had slogged him one under the chin and warned him sternly, "If you ever touch me best mate Jack again, I'll flog ya even 'more ard". In return, I had dragged a drowning Kenny out of the creek unscathed during the big flood the year after. These defining moments and everything in between, created an unbroken bond of mate-ship over the years, despite our upbringing. Wherever Kenny went, I went. So, when Kenny came to me with that 'one sentence', the cool sea breeze suddenly departed and the air became hot and still. "Jack" he paused and drew in a big breath, "buddy, I've received my conscription letter to join the troops in Vietnam".

"Well, I'm coming too, I just gotta wait for my letter." It was a reflex, the words jumped out of my mouth without thought. Kenny swallowed, a lump visible in his throat, his eyes darted down to the dirt. It was then that I looked down too. The encrusted white salt in contrast against my dark brown skin had dried and my bare dirty feet standing opposite Kenny's leather shoes, and clean white socks made me turn and run.

I ran to the cliff where my ancestors lay dreaming. I sat with eyes fixed on the horizon. How did I forget who I was?

I was never going to receive that letter. My conflicting feelings fought their own war in my mind as I pondered how the government did not recognise my family or myself as Australian Citizens when here I am so connected to this land, this country where the people, my ancestors have lived for over 50,000 years. Kenny had no choice in fighting this war, but I did.

Training was tough, but I refused to let it break me. The name-calling, the psychological games and the physical challenges were all part of preparing me for the jungle. I wore my new nickname 'Black Jack' with as much pride as my 6RAR lapel badge. Unit D, 6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment had become like family to me. As I stood rigid in the body but loose in mind, my thoughts drifted back to the Island, and I could still hear the echo of Mum and Auntie Doris wailing and clearly envision Carol standing barefooted in the sand. A steely look fixed on me before she pulled me in for a hug and whispered painfully, "You bring him home to me, Jack, you bring my Kenny home, this baby needs its daddy". The image of her slender hand rubbing her swollen belly fell from my mind like a pane of glass shattering in slow motion.

Just east of the rubber plantation we had set up camp. The mosquitoes were relentless here, like bloodthirsty little helicopters hovering above our faces. They came with the rain and, just like the rain, they refused to leave. We joined forces with the American troops and the colour of my skin blended in with some of the other soldiers. I began to feel a strange sense of belonging, a brotherhood promised with a nod and a hard but friendly pat on the back. Except for Joe Fox, a loner whose permanent scowl crumpled his brow so heavily that his eyes struggled to look upwards. One evening, as I took a makeshift shower with the bucket raised up over my head, I felt something sharp and cold touch my back. In the reflection of the trucks side mirror, I saw Joe's dark stone cold face and the shimmer of the steel knife that was pressed against my back. "There's no place here for the likes of you," he grunted with stale breathe against my cheek. Before I could answer, Joe was knocked to the ground and Kenny's gravelly voice warned him to get back to his tent before he reported him to the Lieutenant.

A few days later, Kenny and the boys were yelling and hooting for we were heading into the jungle amped up for battle. Some of us dying to kill but most of us prayed for peace. Underneath the fog of excitement lay deep fear and as we trampled out into murky water, the fog lifted. I turned back to look at Kenny, eight soldiers down the line, he dipped his helmet and grinned that cheeky grin, and for a split second, I could have sworn he was 8 again. Then, I heard the loudest noise and Kenny disappeared into a cloud of orange smoke and debris. My ears were ringing. I was completely deaf. The howl of Joe's unmistakable Texan accent alerted my senses "Get Kenny!" he screamed to me as he gestured towards some large fallen branches. When I found Kenny lying under a pile of banana leaves, I knew straight away that he was hiding his wounds. The strength it took not to react when I realised he had lost part of his left leg and part of his left arm still amazes me to this very day. We smiled at each other as if we were meeting at the bar for a drink after a hard day's work. "You ok? I uttered casually. "Yeah mate, got a ciggie?" he asked. "Nah, cigarettes will kill ya, you know" and we both chuckled before Kenny, winced in agony. I leaned in closer to him. I could see the fear and sadness in his eyes as he surveyed the broken bodies all around us. "Look after Carol and the baby, mate." His fear seemed to disappear with the last word. If I didn't know better, I would have thought he was about to get up and walk away.

Instead, he clasped my hand with more strength than I imagined a dying man would have. His white hand stained red with blood, and my dark brown hand stained red with blood not knowing whose blood is whose, it looked like a heraldic design on a Coat of arms. A whispered creak of a voice broke through my screaming brain as Kenny spoke. "You know who you are? He paused to cough up blood, "You are.... Jack." His eyes closed and his hand went limp. I cried out in a rage that I didn't know I had in me. Like a wild beast, I roared and groaned with such intensity, but my voice was drowned out by the dying and the scared. A large hand landed on my shoulder firmly but gently. I looked up to see Joe's angry scowl soften and dark eyes of sympathy rest upon me. With a nod and a hand held out, he pulled me back up into the jungle.

"C'mon Jack, snap out of it, we've got to get him 'outta' of here".

I was glad there was no celebration when I arrived home. I didn't feel like a hero. The dirty looks from every passerby as I walked through the city streets of Brisbane in my uniform were seen but not felt. I was numb. I just wanted to go home to my island. The saltwater, the sun, the fresh sea breeze. I could almost smell it, but it was though I had lost all my senses. I don't remember the ferry ride home or talking to Ray, the old fisherman. I do remember looking at my home and seeing the Island as if it were the first time. I saw Aunty Doris and Mum on the shore, their shoulders shaking as they wept conflicting tears of joy and sorrow. Carol was standing on the hill cradling an infant in one arm, the other waving a white handkerchief.

It gave me hope, and it was then that I knew why I went to war. It wasn't just to protect Kenny. It was to protect this, my home.