

15,105 days later, there's hope

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By Marika Dobbin 21/04/07

Lance Corporal Richard Parker disappeared amid heavy machine-gun fire on a Vietnamese hillside in November 1965.

The 24-year-old yelled one last instruction to his platoon, before falling behind a ridge, never to be seen again.

The mystery of what happened to the Sydney man they called "Tiny", because of his height, has haunted his mates and family ever since.

However, the discovery of buried human remains in a timber plantation 60km north-east of Ho Chi Minh City this week may finally bring some answers.

A forensic team sent by the Australian Government is expected to arrive on Monday to identify the bones and those of a second soldier, Private Peter Gillson, killed that day more than 40 years ago.

Among those hanging on the result is Lance Corporal Parker's platoon corporal Trevor Hagan.

Mr Hagan, of Queensland, says he, not Parker, should have died that day.

"The platoon commander did not come on the operation,



REMEMBER: Ray Latimer, David Thomas and Jim Bourke pause and reflect after the discovery of the remains north of Ho Chi Minh City.

so we all stepped up a rank," he said. "If everyone had been in order, I would have been doing the job and I would have been the one lying there in the ground.

"It's been 15,105 days since I lost Tiny on that hillside and he just disappeared off the face of the earth. I've counted every one of them - it's been automatic for me," he said.

Mr Hagan has visited the site where Parker was presumed to have been killed, to lie down in the dirt and remember the battle.

"It's gut-wrenching because we never leave anyone and here we had to leave two men on the battlefield. I sat down on

the gun pit that would have killed Tiny, and he and Peter Gillson talked to me through the ground. I said to them, 'It's been 14,626 days and that's long enough. I'm coming back to get ya'". Mr Hagan is just one of the former Vietnam veterans who formed a not-for-profit group, Operation Aussies Home, which has been searching for the remains of six Australian servicemen missing since the war.

On Monday a single boot was discovered in an excavation pit where volunteers and Vietnamese workers had been scouring for signs of the men.

Bones, more boots, a belt buckle, a plastic-covered



FALLEN: Private Peter Gillson and Lance Corporal Richard Parker

soldier's map and buttons have since also been found.

It is an emotional discovery for the family members of both men, who are cautious about claiming the remains before they are formally identified.

Private Gillson's widow Lorraine Chevalier says she never gave up hope her young husband would come home for a "hero's burial".

"I'm just so overwhelmed to think that they could have found my husband's remains that I've been crying at work and can't sleep. He's never been forgotten all of these years. He was loved by a lot of people." Mrs Chevalier, who remarried, says she would like to travel to Vietnam with their son, who was four months old when Gillson died, to bring him home.