

Gloria's Vietnam War

By Anzac Day, Gloria Carter will receive, (some 30 years after the Vietnam War), the Vietnam Logistic and Support Medal in belated recognition for her services to Australia during her three tours of Vietnam as a singer with four band groups.

Tony Cable talks to the chanteuse who has already received a certificate signed by the Prime Minister inscribed, "a grateful nation expresses its thanks to Gloria Carter (nee Purcell) for contributing to Australia's effort in the Vietnam War."

It's Hobart Race 1994. Prize giving dinner is down at Wrestpoint Casino. Gloria Carter takes the stage to sing a bracket.

She is the effervescent wife of Lew Carter, Radio Relay Ship Operator; 25 Hobart Race veteran; twice winner of the "Best Race Crewman" award for his work in heavy weather races.

"Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," Gloria sang from Me and Bobby McGee. Next morning,



Da Nang, 6th August 1968.

at the airport, I berated her for "being an Australian wanting to sing like an American!". This she defended; gently putting me in my place, with the explanation that the "measure of the song needed that accent. You can't sing 'Busted flat in Baton Rouge' in Australian, any more than you can sing I Still Call Australia Home in a Tennessee accent." I would not have been so cheeky also if I had then known of the extensive musical background of my friend, who today identifies me by our code words, "Bobby McGee".

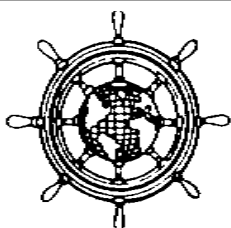
Her application for the medal lists her dates of service as, "The Mystics" (Jul'68-Nov'68); "The Beaumarks" (Jul'69-Dec'69), "Xanadu" and "Daughters of Zeus" (May'71-Nov'71).

During these periods she worked

for an Australian agent in Sydney, who contracted entertainers to the American forces. Whenever possible, the groups were anxious to find time to give free concerts for any Aussie troops they came upon.

The start to her singing career could be taken from '65 when she won a talent quest at Sydney's Bronte Charles. The Kiwi band there were so taken by her that they gained the permission of this 16-year-old's dad, to be a replacement vocalist for them.

"I had the wonderful experience of starting out singing with the Maoris. They were naturals who taught me so very much. This experience included the requirement by our management to sing (for bugger all) at Kings Cross' Tiki Village."



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"I then joined The Mystics who were fantastic. They had been together for four years and had wonderful harmonies. We worked together initially at the Rex Hotel at the Cross. Off then on an Asian tour, completing engagements at the Kuala Lumpur and Singapore Intercontinental Hotels. Next, was to be the Intercontinental Bangkok. However, our agent rang to say that 'the deal had fallen through, but not to worry, as he had been lucky enough to get us into Vietnam'. He said he had already squared it off with our parents who were given the impression that we were only to play Officers Clubs in Saigon. They were never to know the whole time we were there we had been going out into the field!

Next day, we were on the plane to Vietnam. Five of us; two were 19 and the eldest 22, four boys and myself. That was July '68, the Tet Offensive had been in February. It was really a war zone and we had been thrown into it at the deep end.

Our management had basically sold us to an American agent to perform for a fee for their troops. We did an initial audition and that put a rating on our show. The lowest concert was \$275 and we made the highest at \$425. The agent made most of this money; we were just on a basic wage.

Our repertoire covered the clean cut hits from such as The Seekers, John Denver, The Beatles. But we had also to appeal to all kinds of audiences from those sad guys wanting Country 'crying in your beer' tunes. Then, the Negroes wanted their Soul. I didn't know any of their favourite music then, but learnt Respect, the Aretha Franklin one. It took me so long just to get the feel for it, I listened to it over and over. The same applied with Janis Joplin.

The first show that they sent us to do was at Cu Chi; (where those tunnels are). We were brand new in-country and totally naïve about the situation. Travelling in this convoy, in flak jackets and helmets, we had no idea why they kept



The Mystics, Perry, Rodney, David, Gloria and Pete, 4th July 1968.

stopping. It wasn't till later we learnt they had been sweeping ahead for mines! Country Road (John Denver). That night we slept on stretchers on the stage and as happened all over in Vietnam, in those days, if I wanted to go to the bathroom, there would be guards sent out to clear the area.

Wherever we went we always sought the Aussies out. We even did a show for just one adviser and his Vietnamese ARVN unit. The best fun we had with them was at Long Binh, the big American base with nearby Bien Hoa. We found out that there was a small Australian artillery unit thereabouts. We contacted them and offered to come out the next afternoon and do a show for them before our scheduled gig for the Americans. 'We can't pay you,' we replied that we did not want payment.

We were late getting there, with the result that this big bloke they called Ned Kelly (from Adelaide) stood up and said 'it's about time you buggers arrived I've been pissed twice over waiting for you'. I loved to hear that accent.

They served us a lunch of steak with tomato and onion gravy and Fosters. I can't begin to tell you what that meal meant to us. We set the band up and did the show just for the five of them, along with a couple of Koreans and a few

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Chu Lai, 9th
November 1969

others. They really appreciated it and we indicated we would love to stay and just sing for them. Thereupon, they said, 'we can organize that'. Next thing, the siren goes off; they had staged a red alert. Our agent was very upset at us for us missing our concert, but had to accept that it was unavoidable as our camp had been under attack.

From then on whenever we were in that area, these characters would break all the rules by sneaking out to our performances for the Americans. They would stand up the back and do what was popular in those days, yelling 'anyone who can't tap dance is a poofter!' Whereupon, they and

the guys on the stage, mid-song would stop playing and vigorously tap dance. This leaving the bewildered yanks saying, 'what's that purfter mean?'

This 'call' was to be unexpectedly heard again when I returned for my second tour with The Beaumarks. My dad had organized a box of frozen pies from the celebrated Maroubra Pie Shop and Aussies knew I was coming. As I stepped from the plane at Ton San Nhut airport, Saigon (then the busiest in the world) some larrikin made an announcement over the loud speaker for all the base to hear, "anyone who can't tap dance is a poofter".

Incidentally, we later gave a concert at this airbase for the second contingent of 4RAR returning to Australia.

Whenever we worked for the Aussies we absolutely loved it. Our various groups entertained them on six or more occasions, at each of the main bases Vung Tau and Nui Dat.



Gloria and the Mystics tap dancing at the Marines E.M. Club, Pleiku, South Vietnam, 11th July 1968.

It was wonderful to be there among my people as there was great camaraderie among us. It was just magnificent to perform for them. We would arrive by helicopter in the morning and the guys would want you to have lunch with them. Actually, our officers were different from the Americans. They would aim to 'share' the visit with the diggers and not monopolise us. My feeling was that everyone was like your brother or your father, not threatening, you could sit and talk without being on your guard.

We would yarn for a couple of hours and then go and have a chat with the guys in the hospital. Actually, I had to be 'cleared' for this, as they had to know that I could take the dreadful sights there.

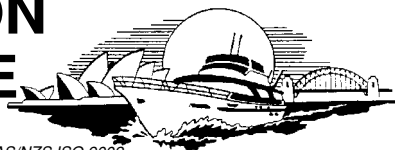
At the shows I always called out 'who was from Bondi, Rose Bay etc.'. At Nui Dat, Michael Ardrie the guy who grew up across the street from me at Maroubra put his hand up. He was the same age as my brother who had missed the lottery to be a conscript. Later, he was wounded in the head and was in hospital for quite some time. I was able to get information as to his progress to his parents, more so than what was officially disclosed to them.

Some of the Australian entertainers who worked there only did a short stint of a week or so, then home. With us, it was back to the hard yakka on the American circuit." ↓

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