



FOR PRESS:

P.M. No. 71/1969

AWARD OF VICTORIA CROSS FOR GALLANTRY IN VIETNAM

Statement by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Her Majesty The Queen has awarded the Victoria Cross to a member of the Australian Army Training Team in Vietnam, Warrant Officer Class 2 Keith Payne of Stafford Heights, Brisbane.

Warrant Officer Payne showed outstanding devotion to duty and leadership under the most hazardous conditions during an operation with a battalion of a Special Forces Unit near the Cambodian/Laotian/Vietnamese border in Kontum Province in May this year.

He has previously served in Korea and the Malayan emergency and is still a member of the Australian Army Training Team, Vietnam.

Warrant Officer Payne's acts of personal bravery add further to the stature of the Australian Army as a professional fighting force.

I have sent Warrant Officer Payne the following message:-

"My ministerial colleagues and I congratulate you on the award of the Victoria Cross conferred by Her Majesty The Queen. Your exceptional devotion to duty, personal courage and cool leadership under fire were in the best tradition of Australia's fighting men."

CANBERRA
8 September 1969

Note:-

Attached: Details of Warrant Officer Payne's actions and personal background.

BACKGROUND TO VICTORIA CROSS AWARD

Details of Action:

On 24 May 1969 Warrant Officer Payne was serving as a Company Commander in a Mobile Strike Force Battalion on a search and clear operation in Kontum Province. Shortly after capturing an undefended hill, two companies of the battalion were attacked by elements of a well-disciplined and well-equipped North Vietnamese force using machine guns and small arms. As the companies broke under heavy mortar and rocket attack Warrant Officer Payne attempted to encourage his troops to hold their position. He continually exposed himself to enemy fire while firing back and throwing grenades at the North Vietnamese. He received shrapnel wounds to his hands and arms.

Despite his efforts the battalion continued to withdraw in disorder and the battalion commander decided to fight back to the battalion base. Warrant Officer Payne and the remnants of his company covered their withdrawal. He managed to hold together a small number of indigenous soldiers of the two companies to form a temporary defensive perimeter in a valley some 350 metres to the north east of the hill which the North Vietnamese had retaken.

Warrant Officer Payne then requested permission to attempt to gather together the wounded and disoriented members of the battalion left on or near the enemy position. He left the reorganised group and moved out alone. In a traverse of approximately 800 metres he managed to gather together forty indigenous soldiers in about three hours. On return to the temporary defensive perimeter he found that his force had returned to the battalion base. Leading these forty soldiers he found a group of advisers who had been left behind with some seriously wounded soldiers during the battalion withdrawal. Warrant Officer Payne arranged for the evacuation of the wounded and personally lead the group back over difficult enemy held terrain to the battalion base arriving in the early hours of the morning.

Mr. Gorton said his leadership and personal bravery throughout this action were outstanding.

Personal Background:

Warrant Officer Payne was born in Ingham, Queensland, on 30 August 1933 and enlisted on 13 August 1951 after a short period in the C.M.F. He served with 1 R.A.R. in Japan and Korea in 1951 and with 3 R.A.R. in Malaya in 1964. He joined the Army Training Team in Vietnam in January 1969 where he is still serving. He was wounded during the action for which he received the Victoria Cross but remained on duty.

His decorations and medals are:-

Victoria Cross, Korea Medal, United Nations Service Medal (Korea), General Service Medal with Malay Peninsula Clasp, Vietnam Medal and Vietnamese Campaign Medal.

Warrant Officer Payne is married with four sons and one daughter and his family lives at 28 Falkirk Street, Stafford Heights, Queensland.

96th Victoria Cross:

Warrant Officer Payne's award is the 96th Victoria Cross awarded to an Australian and is the fourth since World War II. The last three awards were made to the late Warrant Officer Kevin Arthur Wheatley for action in Quang Nhai Province, South Vietnam on 13 November 1965; the late Major Peter John Badcoe for his actions between February and April 1967 in South Vietnam; and to Warrant Officer Rayene Stewart Simpson, D. C. M. , for action in Kontum Province, South Vietnam in May 1969.
