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IN STRICT CONFIDENCE

It is most crucial that the confidential nature of this letter is understood. I have no wish to either distress or embarrass any person. It, I think, corroborates certain claims on the establishment of a "Sabre" Platoon during the tenure of Maj Gen Sandy Pearson whilst he was Commander, 1st Australian Task Force at Nui Dat, South Vietnam.

In the late Nineties, I had lunch with Maj Gen Pearson, at the Union Club, Sydney, of which we are both members. The purpose was to discuss matters relating to the Association of First Infantry Battalions.

After this, discussion broadened and I suggested that, given some extra training, the average Rifleman or Infantry Company could perform as well as the Special Air Service Troopers and Squadrons, or at least to an acceptable level of capability that any shortcomings would be indiscernible. Gen Pearson agreed and then, quite unprompted, said, "Do you know, I suspended the SAS Squadron from operations when I was Task Force Commander".

Gen Pearson went on to reveal:

- He was dissatisfied with the increasing tendency of SAS patrols to call for extraction at the slightest hint they had been observed or would contact the enemy. This was diminishing the flow of good Intelligence and restricting his options as Commander.
- A fairly 'forthright' discussion was held with the Officer Commanding the SAS Sqn, indicating that, if his SAS soldiers were not willing to do their job, he would find alternatives.
- The SAS Sqn was immediately to be withdrawn from operations – the distinct implication was that they were not fit for such and were hindering, if not endangering, TF ops.

- This suspension was indefinite until “retraining” was completed and the SAS Sqn commander could assure him that his soldiers were fit for ops and would not repeat previous behavior.
- The period of this suspension was, at least, a month.

Maj Gen Pearson did not further elaborate on this, not did I press him. However, it was a stunning revelation, given the commonly held view of SAS and, I am sure, Maj Gen Pearson told me to underline his faith in the Australian Infantryman. It is hard to imagine, then, that a Commander of Maj Gen Pearson’s skill would leave the gap in his force’s capability created by suspension of the SAS Sqn.

Beyond this, I would not further conjecture. I trust that this is useful.

Owen Eather