

An Uneasy Legacy

Vietnam Veterans and Australian Society

Thesis submitted by

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in October 2004

**for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the School of Humanities**

James Cook University

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Acknowledgments

This thesis would have remained no more than a private obsession had it not been for the support of the School of Humanities at James Cook University. I would like to thank the school and the Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences for providing financial support through an APA Scholarship and research and conference trips. The assistance of the staff and other postgraduates was invaluable and constant, and special mentions would involve including you all. I would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by the Australian War Memorial Research Centre (particularly Elizabeth Stewart), James Cook University Library, the National Library of Australia and the Australian Defence Force Academy.

This research would not have been viable without the assistance of a group of Vietnam veterans who not only offered support, unlimited access and invaluable information, but also willingly shared both happy and the worst possible memories with me. Several went further in continuing assistance that sometimes caused difficulties – and certainly inconvenience - for themselves, but provided wider sources of information in areas that I hadn't even known existed. They are some of the most decent, resilient and courageous people I have ever had the privilege to meet. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the VVCS in Townsville, particularly Wayne Scott, representatives of the DVA, VSASA, VVAA, VVF, VVMC and RSL, the Federal Member for Leichhardt, Warren Entsch, and the inspiration and support of Jill Williamson from the Department of Health.

I would like to thank Dr Dawn May - brilliant scholar and talented educator – for taking a chance on me and showing so much of faith. I would also like to note my appreciation for her comments and editorial suggestions on this work.

Many thanks go to my family and friends for not disowning me during the years of work. Words are inadequate to express the appreciation of the support given by my husband, James, parents, Jean and Wally, as well as Audrey and my extended family in the Kewarra Writers' Group.

I cannot conclude these acknowledgements without expressing my thanks to Dr Doug Hunt, who went over and above the call of duty as a supervisor. He was my coach, mentor, editor, critic, fellow coffee connoisseur, counsellor and indefatigable supporter. He gave willingly of his time, and showed great diplomacy by not expressing surprise when I completed the thesis. It was a privilege to receive guidance from such a talented academic, inspirational lecturer and pretty good bloke.

Abstract

The Vietnam War is remembered more for the controversy than the war itself. This has contributed to the stereotyping of the war and those who fought in it. War is always political in nature, but the politics of the Vietnam War provided a series of distinctive complications that heralded a divergence from Australia's traditional approaches to war and remembrance.

This thesis examines the origins, veracity and consequences of the veteran stereotypes. It uses a range of sources, including documents, film, and interviews to explore the experience of veterans since the war ended – and ultimately their struggle to find a suitable place in Australian history. There is a methodological focus on oral history, based on a group of veterans in the North Queensland region. The study finds that there is neither a simple nor a single explanation, but rather a series of events, decisions and outcomes accumulating over a period of time. Veteran-related issues emerged initially in the United States of America, but this does not indicate that they were purely American problems and responses. Rather, the issues were addressed there first. The relative size of the different veteran populations played an important role, with the Australian contingent smaller and more widely spread, geographically. However, some of the more extreme images emanating from the US were applied to the emerging representations in Australia. The impact of those stereotypes is complex: while they were most often a burden to veterans, they could also offer some advantages, being concurrently helpful and hurtful. This made finding a suitable identity problematic, as few veterans wanted to identify with the stereotypes, but nonetheless sometimes found themselves trapped by them.

Rather than discovering the popularly perceived group of disturbed malcontents, however, the broad scope of the sources (particularly the interviews) revealed a group of men searching for an historical context into which to place their experiences both during the war and in the following years. The evidence revealed a group of average Australians who, for a period thirty years ago, were asked to make the ultimate sacrifice. The interviews offered the opportunity to provide context to a difficult history, contributing not only to the study of the conflict, but to a wider Australian public memory in a country whose war stories have had so much impact.

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Abbreviations

AATTV	Australian Army Training Team Vietnam
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ADF	Australian Defence Force
ANZUS	Australia, New Zealand and the United States Treaty
AO	Officer of the Order of Australia
ATF	Australian Task Force
AWM	Australian War Memorial
DVA	Department of Veterans' Affairs
NAA	National Archives of Australia
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment
RSL	Returned and Services League of Australia
TPI	Totally and permanently incapacitated
TTI	Temporarily totally incapacitated
VA	Veterans' Administration (USA)
VFW	Veterans of Foreign Wars (USA)
VSASA	Veterans' Support and Advocacy Service
VVA	Vietnam Veterans of America
VVAA	Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia
VVCS	Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service
VVF	Vietnam Veterans' Federation
VVMC	Vietnam Veterans' Motorcycle Club
VVRS	Veterans' Vocational Rehabilitation Scheme