

An Uneasy Legacy

Vietnam Veterans and Australian Society

Thesis submitted by

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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

Introduction

On 18 August 2004, throughout Australia dozens of groups of varying sizes gathered at cenotaphs, memorials and other less conventional reminders of the dead. Some laid wreaths, some listened to speeches or a chaplain's prayer, but at all, the haunting echoes of *The Last Post* were heard, even if only in their heads. They gathered at sites in cities, in suburbia, in small towns, in isolated parts of the country, and some in another country entirely, in front of a recently rededicated cross. It rained in North Queensland, and at that lonely cross, as it usually did, as it had on *that* day. The rain did not bother those who gathered, as it did the general public, most of whom were not aware of the occasion. They met because they needed to honour, needed to remember, nearly as much as they wanted to forget. Thirty-eight years before Australians had faced their first real test in a war they could not win; in a rubber plantation which eighteen of their comrades and hundreds of their enemy would never leave. It was Long Tan Day, or more recently named by the government as Vietnam Veterans Day, and they had come not just to remember the eighteen from that date, but nearly five hundred others from that decade, and numerous others who had since passed. But they also came for themselves, and each other, some to remember, others searching for answers, and a few trying to find the people they used to be long ago. When they had done what they needed to do, fulfilled their obligation as survivors, they went home, back to their lives, vowing to return again next year.

War is singular in its ability to be evocative and emotive. No one in any society is untouched by its effects; no matter how subtle, or obvious, these effects might be. Vietnam is singular among the non-global conflicts of the twentieth century in its ability to be evocative. To many, particularly those who were there, Vietnam is not a country, perhaps not merely a war, but rather a state of mind. Certainly Vietnam is not the first war to conjure up this image. Gallipoli, for example, evokes images and ideas that have little to do with the Turkish coast. But Vietnam does not evoke the images of courage, honour and a larrikin bravery that transformed a military disaster to a noble defeat that in numerous ways became a compass to guide a national identity and a proud military history. Those who served in Vietnam distinguished themselves as honourably and ably as those who came before. Yet it induced quite the opposite effect, producing a compass that as if exposed to a magnetic field, spun in a confusing and directionless manner, around which commentators would write for

decades without agreement and from which Australians would never again see war in the same light.

The Vietnam War was a conflict that divided the nation, and its controversial nature meant that its veterans were perceived as being somehow different from those of previous wars. Australia has a long history of sending its military overseas to fight wars, a tradition in which the Australian public has taken great pride, at least up until Vietnam. From the tragedies on the battlefields of World War I came the Anzac legend – an ideal of gallantry and mateship that would be seen as a defining moment for a nation, and the cast from which Australian soldiers would try to mould themselves thereafter. Vietnam did not end in victory and the television images cast into people's homes did not portray war in the sanitised manner of previous conflicts: it was inglorious in the enormity of its visual impact – a factor that could never be expunged. When the Vietnam War was finally over, the Australian public did its utmost to forget a conflict that somehow did not seem to fit into that Anzac mould, however unrealistic that construction may have been, and somewhere in the wave of amnesia and apathy, the veterans became lost.

Aims of the Research

Utilising oral and other historical methods, this study examines the experiences of Australian Vietnam veterans over the three decades since the end of the war, the contribution of their experiences to the current situation of veterans and their struggle for recognition and an acceptable position in Australian history.

The thesis proposes answers to the following questions:

- ♦ How and why stereotypes and myths were created to contextualise a war (and its participants) that did not appear to fit the tradition, and the consequences of these stereotypes.
- ♦ Why the two predominant stereotypes of Vietnam veterans were the sick/disturbed victim/villain and the whinging malcontent.
- ♦ What has been the influence of public memory on the categorising of the Vietnam War and its veterans, even when that memory is not first hand.

- ♦ How important was the effect of the increasing influence of popular culture on history and remembering in relation to the Vietnam veterans and their war.
- ♦ What role do Australian Vietnam veterans have in the broader traditions of military history in a community where war has so much influence on identity.
- ♦ What influence have changing societal attitudes to war had on the perceptions of Vietnam veterans.

It is thirty years since Australia's war in Vietnam came to an inconclusive close. An entire generation has been born and become adults since the last Qantas jet left Tan Son Nhut Airport. They have no memory of departing troops, the war on the evening news or the protest marches. But like many other events, the Vietnam War has developed a series of public memories consisting of part fact, part stereotype and part myth. For many, Vietnam is not a place, but a discourse comprised of images of a war that refuses to end; images that some remember and others would sooner forget. Many found difficulty placing Vietnam into the context of the long shadow of the Anzac legend and Vietnam Veterans, as a group, felt dispossessed by society, and therefore ultimately, from history. At a time when Australian identity is once again being invoked and debated in the face of contentious military endeavours, the memory of the Vietnam War has again been called into question, demonstrating that it is still far from finding a comfortable place in a society that continues to place so much significance in the 'proud military history' nurtured by the Anzac Legend.

Chapter One examines the range of literature produced about the Vietnam War and its aftermath, illustrating the dearth of works which reflect the experiences of Australian veterans. It also includes an examination and explanation of the methodology, including oral history, employed to provide the context and framework of this study. The theory of popular memory has been employed by a number of scholars and made significant contributions to the study of history and politics. The concepts proposed by the various proponents of this school of thought were utilised in order to examine the historical position of the Vietnam War, and therefore its veterans, in Australian society. Popular memory within the community is the basis

for the construction of stereotypes and is an important tool in discovering their origins and therefore, discovering a new, and hopefully more realistic, perspective.

Chapter Two gives an overview of the period of the war itself and Australia's participation, reflecting predominantly on the social and policy changes wrought by more than a decade of anxiety and division over Vietnam. Vietnam was a relatively small scale war in comparison to the two world wars that dominated the first half of the twentieth century, but it was the longest and most contentious. 59000 Australians passed through Vietnam over the ten years of Australian involvement, but the significance of the war on society exceeded the numbers involved. The effect has been felt in an inestimable number of areas ranging from foreign policy to health, and the war has lodged itself in popular culture in a manner that has had repercussions for all involved. It is remembered more for the controversy than the war itself. This has contributed to the negative stereotyping of the war and its veterans and the difficulties of finding an historical context.

Chapter Three examines the role of Australian Vietnam veterans in the broader traditions of military history in a community where war has had so much influence on identity. Most went to war expecting, if not glory, at least respect and the recognition of carrying on a "heroic tradition" as their fathers and grandfathers had done. While all had a basic understanding that war was a terrible thing, for many it was an accepted rite of passage. The constant repetition of the myths of World War I and II – particularly in regard to the ANZACs – reinforced that sense of accepted duty, mateship, heroics and even adventure. As countless generations had done before them, they went to war with a largely unrealistic idea of what they would face: a place where death would often be the least of their problems. However, despite the fact that all service persons have faced these issues, for those who served in Vietnam, it was not just the war (which also had *some* divergence from other conflicts) that they had to confront, but an aftermath that certainly had distinctive qualities.

Chapter Four investigates the concerns that brought the veterans back to the community's attention. The emergence of health problems that many believed were caused by their service, combined with a fundamental bitterness that emanated from

much of the group, created a prominence and image that seemed necessary in order to address these issues. Influences from the experiences of American Vietnam veterans held a level of importance predominantly because information in Australia was scarce and the sheer numbers of their American counterparts made them impossible to ignore. The difficulties within the community resulting from the conflict – both in Vietnam and on the homefront – created problems when trying to find a context for the war, and by extension, its participants. In its earliest form, the event and arising issues were easiest to ignore and deny, and this was reflected in the literature – or lack thereof – at the time. When veterans began to receive attention, it was steeped in controversy and health issues became the focal point at which recognition of the veterans and their experiences would find its way into the general community.

These issues therefore necessitated an examination of the myths and stereotypes within which veterans became enmeshed. Most wars witness the emergence of stories and images that become representative of the general experience, such as the Anzac Legend's rise from the tragedy of WWI. Stereotypes and myths are created to contextualise an event (and its participants), particularly when it does not appear to fit easily into the accepted framework and traditions. However, the creation of these stereotypes has consequences and whether positive or negative, forms a generalisation that is notoriously difficult to reverse. The two most predominant stereotypes in which the Vietnam veterans found themselves fashioned were the sick/disturbed victim/villain and the whinging malcontent; neither of which portrayed a heroic or comfortable historical residence.

The increasing influence of popular culture on history and remembering is considered in *Chapter Five*. It appeared that this factor had significant influence in perpetuating these attitudes to the Vietnam veterans and their war. This was particularly relevant in the manner in which movies about the war were usually quite different in theme than those made about previous wars. Without an easily defined place in society, movie makers found the topic challenging until the difficulties faced by some veterans gained publicity. Despite the awareness of the vast majority that movies do not usually reflect historical reality, in the absence of other easily obtained avenues of information about the war, the screen veterans began to embed

themselves in the popular conscious. Most of these movies were American because of the lack of the resources available in the Australian industry in contrast to Hollywood, and – with a couple of exceptions - an apparent unwillingness to address the war. Australians viewed them in large numbers, and with little available comparison, often adopted the image, overlaying it on its own veterans.

Chapter Six delves further into the consequences of the images portrayed and the influence of public memory on the categorising of the Vietnam War and its veterans, even when that memory is not first hand. These two predominant views of Vietnam veterans as maladjusted outcasts and perpetually hard done by, have been widely held beliefs among the general public, and even by a few veterans. Although elements of both views may be true, the real truth lies closer to the middle. Few veterans fit either stereotype. One of the important questions that is addressed here is why some Vietnam veterans felt it necessary to adopt a victim mentality, and why that tag has been hard to shake. Veterans often felt forced into choices they did not wish to make by a range of participants and circumstances. The resulting divisions have made unity and a common voice impossible. This is compounded by the fact that Australians do not want to see their “war heroes” as victims, and the confusion surrounding moral uncertainties and lack of clear victory made “heroes” difficult to define.

One of the areas regularly affected in some manner by military service is employment. *Chapter Seven* offers a case study of the employment issues of the group interviewed in North Queensland and offers perspectives from veterans with both short and long term military service. Comparisons are offered with other twentieth century wars in Australia, where possible, as well as with American Vietnam veterans (about whom there has been more study).

Chapter Eight follows the veterans’ battle to take back control of their history and move beyond the negative representations of the stereotypes. However, it was not an easy predicament to resolve. The Australian government, as well as the public, was slow to offer Vietnam veterans the level of recognition they deserved, but over the last decade there has been a vast improvement with veterans fighting to raise their profile and publicise their issues in the community. Yet, while recognition, health

and welfare issues took centre stage, the wider battle was to obtain a balance between the assistance they required and the creation of a more realistic perspective, both for themselves and their war. This has been difficult within the confines of the deeply embedded images of popular culture and the seemingly inexorable spectre of the Vietnam Syndrome. The syndrome, partly political and partly societal in nature, had become enmeshed as much with the veterans' issues as it had with the war itself. It became not only a warning to policy makers and their constituents, but also a descriptor for disaster and dilemma, even on occasion, with no association to war.

The 'place' sought by veterans is not simply historical. *Chapter Nine* examines the struggle by a group of Vietnam veterans to secure a piece of State owned land on Cape York for their exclusive use. The issues that arose out of this so far unsuccessful mission have in many ways mirrored the journey of veterans in the aftermath of the war. A struggle to gain publicity for 'Pandanus Park' ended abruptly when the media managed to find a 'hook' that played on the stereotypes and left the impression that a group of unstable and discontented veterans were on the verge of re-fighting the war in the North Queensland bush. Those involved in the push for Pandanus also manipulated the image of the victim veteran to gain public support, and later, when frustrated by government inaction, began to utilise language that appeared to offer validity to the initial media interpretations. However, despite the overwhelming spectre of the popular Vietnam imagery, there was an underlying attempt to place the objective in the context of previous wars and the various aspects that established the Anzac identity.

Chapter Ten brings the thesis into the context of the contemporary perspective. A number of events over the past few years, combined with the efforts of veterans, offered a reformation of sorts to those who had served in Vietnam. The successful deployment of Australian forces to East Timor, the repercussion of the September 11 attacks and the succeeding 'War on Terror' and the simple passing of time defined through well publicised anniversaries of earlier conflicts, produced a gradual change in attitudes in regard to Vietnam veterans. Veterans rose in prominence with people such as General Peter Cosgrove and Governor-General Michael Jeffrey providing their former comrades with a more respected status in the community. In the United States, an election campaign became mired in Vietnam thirty years after the event,

where the issue became not ‘why did we go to Vietnam’, but ‘why did you not serve your country in Vietnam’? Australian Vietnam veterans had begun to find themselves a place, or more correctly, a context, in history, but whether that place resided in the Anzac Legend remained a questionable matter.

Ultimately, this thesis examines the influence of the changing societal attitudes to war and the effect that has had on the perceptions of Vietnam veterans. The demise of the ‘good’ war (such as WWII) and the belief that Vietnam was a ‘bad’ war has made it almost impossible to fit into the traditions of Australian history. While it is not the only war that proved contentious, both during and after, and difficult to comfortably place in the nation’s history – the Boer War also shares similar themes – but the advances of technology and the visual accessibility of the war in Vietnam to the wider community made it appear more lamentable. It is not without a certain irony that the idea of the ‘bad’ war owes much of its influence to the consequences of the Vietnam War.

This struggle for recognition, along with the legacies of their service, has taken a great toll on many veterans. Health studies reveal elevated levels of illness and death, and anger and despair are still common emotions throughout the veteran community. The consequent politicisation of the veterans and their issues has had a significant effect on the military, the government and the broader community. However, rather than discovering the popularly perceived group of disturbed malcontents, the research for this thesis 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. Significantly, this attempt to find a ‘place’ for themselves has also provided a considerable contribution to a wider Australian public memory in a country whose war stories have had so much impact on identity.

Voices from the Battlefield:
Methodology and Literature
Review



Vietnam Forces National Memorial

Chapter One

An event lived is finished, bound within experience. But an event remembered is boundless, because it is the key to all that happened before and after it.

W. Benjamin¹

It is unlikely that any conflict has produced the quantity of literature and representations that the Vietnam War has done, particularly in the United States. Australia has produced significantly less, particularly in comparison to World Wars I and II, which may well reflect the difference in relative size and influence, but there are perhaps other reasons for the more limited response. The divisiveness, the complex political decisions and repercussions, and the disastrous outcomes of that decade have been addressed at length. Yet, as time passes and provides some distance from the events and the possible wisdom of retrospect, there is a need to re-examine the war and its aftermath on a number of levels. The perception and the place in history of Australian Vietnam veterans is one of those topics that has been largely unexplored.

This chapter provides an analysis of the sources that have proved relevant to this research. All available Australian ones were consulted, and a number of American sources were also considered, as their literature base is significantly broader. Although many more sources were used than the ones mentioned here, those examined represent the major themes considered. However, what was most significant about these sources in relation to this research was not the large number available, but rather the lack of scholarship on this topic. In particular, an analysis of the history of Australia's Vietnam veterans and an examination of their place in a country whose identity is seemingly so connected to war and its participants, has not previously been undertaken.

Veterans have been given limited opportunities to have their voices heard, particularly in the sphere of their post-war histories. With the exception of health and the rapidly expanding psychological studies into war related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), academia has largely ignored Vietnam veterans. Such is the dearth of study that veterans have taken to writing their own stories, creating a whole new subsection of literature. Yet millions of words have been spent by historians

¹ Cited in: Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge, 1992), p.67.

analysing the Vietnam War, both in Australia and the United States of America. The whys and hows of involvement have been examined and re-examined. Its political ramifications have been discussed and military historians have reviewed and revised its strategies. Scholarship on the Vietnam War has even been going through a stage of revisionism, but still the veterans, particularly their post-war lives, remain almost invisible in Australia. There are a few exceptions along with a handful of unpublished theses around the country, but most focus on the health and compensation issues. Even when visible, Vietnam veterans continue to struggle to locate their history amidst the mass of incorrect or exaggerated perceptions still held by many in the community and exacerbated by the profile so often portrayed in the media and popular culture.

A discussion about the literature on the Vietnam War could well run to two or three volumes, as demonstrated by the release in 1998 of an encyclopaedia on the subject.² Most of this literature of course is American, and an examination of Australian works would produce a more modest volume. No examination of Australia's role in the war is possible without reference to the United States, and so American literature was also consulted for this thesis. The focus here was on the best known of the American works, such as Stanley Karnow's Pulitzer prize-winning *Vietnam: A History*, as well as Gareth Porter's comprehensive volume of historical documents, Harrison Salisbury's collection of essays, and the two excellent commentaries, Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* and David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*.³ Later, but no less important contributions to the history of the war, such as work by Marilyn B Young, Gerard de Groot and Robert McNamara, to name a few, provided influence and assistance to this work.⁴ DeGroot's work is particularly interesting as it is the latest of this group, just as the revisionism was taking hold, and although he did not follow the revisionist line, his work benefited from its distance in time. He admitted,

² Kevin Hillstrom and Laurie Collier Hillstrom (Eds), *The Vietnam Experience: A Concise Encyclopedia of Literature, Songs and Films* (Westport CT, 1998). See also: Spencer C. Tucker (Ed), *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social and Military History. 3 Vol.* (Santa Barbara, 1998).

³ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (London, 1990); Gareth Porter (ed), *Vietnam: A History in Documents* (New York, 1981); Harrison E. Salisbury (Ed), *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War* (New York, 1984). A considerable number of other American texts were studied – see bibliography for more comprehensive list.

⁴ Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1995); Gerard DeGroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* (Essex, 2000); Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York, 1991).

however, to not having any more conclusive answers to a war that was “ugly, brutal, costly and riddled with perplexing moral contradictions”, and therefore the “literature of the war is confusing precisely because the war was (and is) confusing.”⁵ McNamara’s contribution, *In Retrospect*, was no less important in the study of hindsight, and although a useful work, is undermined by its self serving disposition in trying to redeem a reputation critically damaged by his role as one of the war’s most prominent architects.

The first decade after the end of the war saw little mainstream scholarship on the subject in Australia, and when it did start to appear in print, it was almost exclusively focused critically on why the country had become involved and the disastrous outcomes. Michael Sexton’s *War for the Asking*, and Glen Barclay’s *A Very Small Insurance Policy*⁶ are examples of this type, with both emphasising Australia’s willing (if not enthusiastic) participation in the war, at least at its initiation. Barclay and Sexton were anxious to dispel the myth that the United States had bullied and forced Australia into participation in Vietnam, instead claiming that Australia’s willingness had been at least equal to, if not greater than, that of the Americans. Also among these earlier contributions were Martin Cameron’s *Australia’s Longest War* and *Australia’s Vietnam*, a collection of academic essays edited by Peter King.⁷ These were almost all critical of the involvement and its conduct, and because of the period of comparative literary silence before their appearance, they tended to set the tone for study of the war. Certainly King made his attitude clear in the first sentence of his introduction, claiming that “the Vietnam War...brought Australian foreign policy since the Second World War to its nadir of ineptitude.”⁸ His fellow commentators generally agreed.

The official histories did not appear until the nineties with the first of the Australian War Memorial’s eight volume history of Australia’s participation in post-WWII

⁵ De Groot, *A Noble Cause*, p.15.

⁶ Michael Sexton, *War for the Asking: Australia’s Vietnam Secrets* (Ringwood, 1981); Glen St John Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy: the politics of Australian involvement in Vietnam 1954-1967* (St Lucia, 1988).

⁷ Martin Cameron, *Australia’s Longest War* (1987); Peter King (Ed), *Australia’s Vietnam: Australia in the Second Indo-China War* (North Sydney, 1983). More examples of the style include: Frank Frost, *Australia’s War in Vietnam* (Sydney, 1987); John Murphy, *Harvest of Fear: A History of Australia’s Vietnam War* (St Leonards, 1993).

⁸ King, *Australia’s Vietnam*, p.10.

Southeast Asian conflicts, Peter Edwards' and Gregory Pemberton's *Crises and Commitments: The Politics and Diplomacy of Australia's Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1965* in 1992. *Crises and Commitments* made a significant contribution to the understanding of the forces that influenced foreign policy in the prelude to Vietnam, providing some of the context sometimes missing in Barclay's and Sexton's texts.

However, the first of the official texts to focus primarily on Vietnam was Ian McNeill's military history - *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War* in 1993 - which was followed by volumes on air force, naval, medical, political and a continuation of the military history.⁹ It is suggestive of the attitude of scholarship, or perhaps government, on Vietnam that its official history did not appear for almost a quarter of a century after the event.¹⁰ McNeill attempted to place Vietnam in Australia's military traditions, which until the Vietnam involvement had pride of place in Australia's national identity.¹¹ This was something Vietnam veteran writers such as Lex McAulay had been trying to do since the late eighties. However, of the official histories, it is Peter Edwards' *A Nation at War* that has the most relevance to this study. Edwards adopts a much more "middle of the road" view of the war history than had been taken by writers such as Barclay and Sexton, but perhaps more importantly, examines community attitudes and the war on all its fronts, including at home in Australia. *A Nation at War* appears to be the first broad-based study of the war and its effects (at the time of the war) on Australia, although detail is limited by its length. It is difficult not to be critical of the political handling of the war, and Edwards does not avoid exposing the failings of the policies, but neither does he carry

⁹ Peter Edwards & Gregory Pemberton, *Crises and Commitments: The Politics and Diplomacy of Australia's Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1965* (North Sydney, 1992); Ian McNeill, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War* (St Leonards, 1993); Peter Edwards, *A Nation at War: Australian Politics, society and diplomacy during the Vietnam War 1965-1975* (St Leonards, 1997); Brendan O'Keefe & F.B. Smith, *Medicine at war : medical aspects of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asia 1950-1972* (St Leonards, 1994); Peter Dennis, *Emergency and confrontation : Australian military operations in Malaya & Borneo 1950-66* (St Leonards, 1996); Jeffrey Grey, *Up top : the Royal Australian Navy and Southeast Asian conflicts, 1955-1972* (St Leonards, 1998); Christopher Coulthard-Clark, *The RAAF in Vietnam : Australian air involvement in the Vietnam war 1962-1975* (St Leonards 1995); Ian McNeill & Ashley Ekins, *On the offensive : the Australian Army in the Vietnam War, January 1967-June 1968* (St Leonards, 2003). At the time of writing, the final volume is pending.

¹⁰ Official histories for previous wars appeared more quickly. See for example: C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918 vol.1* (Sydney, 1921); Paul Hasluck et al, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945 vol.1* (Canberra, 1952).

¹¹ See also: Ian McNeill, *The Team: Australian Army Advisers in Vietnam 1962-1972* (St Lucia, 1983); McNeill & Ekins, *On the Offensive*.

the “monstrous mistake” banner as obviously as some of the earlier writers.¹² However, he does conclude with a note of warning for those contemplating future overseas commitments:

Australians may hope that, if and when such a commitment were made, both the government of the day and any who opposed it might display greater political maturity, social responsibility and diplomatic adeptness than did some of their predecessors between 1965 and 1975.¹³

More recently, scholarship into the Vietnam War has been undergoing a period of revisionism in the United States, a small amount of which is starting to find its way on to Australian shores. Michael Lind, in his 1999 book *Vietnam: The Necessary War*, claims that when considered as part of the Cold War, Vietnam was not so disastrous.¹⁴ He further argues that although unfortunate, the war in Vietnam was a necessary component in winning the Cold War. Military historians, Lewis Sorley and Mark Woodruff,¹⁵ have both produced studies claiming that the war was not lost by the military. Sorley, an American commander in the latter part of the war provides what he believes is compelling evidence that the war was not lost under the US forces. Woodruff, an American who has lived in Australia for more than twenty-five years, asserts that the American and Australian forces never lost a major battle and therefore Vietnam was actually a military victory for them. Woodruff's assertions are reflected to some degree in most of the Australian military and veteran literature, including historians such as McNeill.

Jeffrey Grey, Jeff Doyle, Peter Pierce, Jane Ross and Ann Curthoys¹⁶ have written on the comparative perspectives and the myth making surrounding the Vietnam War, and examined the influence of American popular culture on the perceptions held by

¹² Edwards is also the author of a number of essays for journals and books on the subject including: “Vietnam: What the Documents Reveal”, *Quadrant* (September 1992), pp.45-50; “The Vietnam Debate: Beyond Polarisation”, *Quadrant* (September 1997), pp.61-64; and essays in: Peter Pierce, Jeffrey Grey and Jeff Doyle (Eds), *Vietnam Days: Australia and the impact of Vietnam* (Ringwood, 1991); Jeffrey Grey and Jeff Doyle (Eds), *Vietnam: War Myth and Memory: Comparative perspectives on Australia's war in Vietnam* (St Leonards, 1992); Jeff Doyle and Jeffrey Grey (Eds), *Australia R&R: Representations and Reinterpretations of Australia's War in Vietnam* (Silver Springs MD, 1991).

¹³ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.354.

¹⁴ Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (New York, 1999).

¹⁵ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York, 1999); Mark Woodruff, *Unheralded Victory: Who Won the Vietnam War?* (New York, 1999).

¹⁶ This is not a comprehensive list, rather representative of those who have most relevance to this work.

the community and veterans. Grey, Doyle and Pierce have focused particularly on the idea that Australia has imported the American experience of Vietnam and transposed it over the Australian one, which they claim has created many incorrect perceptions. This is particularly the case in their 1992 text, *Vietnam: War, Myth and Memory*, which follows the theme of their previous work in 1991, *Vietnam Days: Australia and the Impact of Vietnam*.¹⁷ However, the most valuable contribution of *Vietnam Days* is discussion of the influence of the war on literature, movies, art and racism. Although both books have become somewhat dated in a few areas, they are still interesting for an alternative perspective on Vietnam's place in Australian history. *Vietnam Days* also criticised the idea of military incompetence and lack of strategies of the Australian command in Vietnam, as proposed by writers such as Frank Frost.¹⁸ An updated version, *Australia's Vietnam War*,¹⁹ was produced in 2002 and aimed at a wider audience, in particular an American one, of whom few have any understanding of Australia's role in the war. Pierce took this a step further in his edited volume with Robin Gerster, *On the War-path*, examining the meaning of war to Australians through both journeys to war and afterward, and the literature that has stemmed from those journeys. This is perhaps best expressed in the introduction to the Asian war section with the statement "that many older Australians think of the conflict before they think of the country suggests its reverberating significance."²⁰

Curthoys has also contributed to the works of Grey, Doyle and Pierce, as well as writing on the movements of the 1960s and their effect on popular memory.²¹ Curthoys claims that the reports of abuse and the poor reception of veterans on their return from Vietnam have been exaggerated in public memory, a belief supported by others including Jane Ross. Curthoys, using her experiences in the anti-war movement, has disputed some veterans' remembrances and denied that the group as a

¹⁷ Pierce, Grey and Doyle (Eds), *Vietnam Days: Australia and the impact of Vietnam*; Grey and Doyle (Eds), *Vietnam: War Myth and Memory: Comparative perspectives on Australia's war in Vietnam*. Peter Pierce also contributed to this work. See also: Doyle and Grey (Eds), *Australia R&R: Representations and Reinterpretations of Australia's War in Vietnam*.

¹⁸ The best example is in the chapter: Ian McNeill, "The Australian Army and the Vietnam War" in Pierce, Grey and Doyle, *Vietnam Days*, pp.11-61.

¹⁹ Jeff Doyle, Jeffrey Grey & Peter Pierce (Ed), *Australia's Vietnam War* (Texas, 2002).

²⁰ Robin Gertser and Peter Pierce (Eds), *On the War-path: An Anthology of Australian Military Travel* (Melbourne, 2004), p.227.

²¹ Examples of Curthoys' writing in the area: "Vietnam: Public Memory of an Anti-War Movement" in Kate Darian-Smith & Paula Hamilton (Eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia* (Melbourne, 1994); "Mobilising Dissent: The Later Stages of Protest" in Greg Pemberton (Ed), *Vietnam Remembered* (Sydney 1990).

whole was any less than supportive of the soldiers. A number of studies, however, reflect a different impression. One of the better known of these is Greg Langley's *A Decade of Dissent*, in which Curthoys is a participant of the interviews and remembrances on which the book is based.²²

Ross has written on a number of post-war issues, and has proved enlightening on the issues faced by service persons on their return home, but she has been particularly influential in addressing what she claims is misleading information regarding welcome home parades for those returning from Vietnam during the war. While her conclusions have influenced other academics, most recently Mark McKenna,²³ her own writings expose some contradictions on the topic. In King's critical 1983 collection, Ross states that "these parades may have lacked the unequivocal, fervid support of previous victory parades, but they served as some ritual acknowledgment of veteran status".²⁴ Yet in the volume edited by Greg Pemberton in 1990, *Vietnam Remembered*, she claims that "from the first march in June 1966...to the last on in December 1971...the troops were cheered and clapped by thousands of onlookers." Ross says that any "incidents" were of a "very minor nature" and goes on to describe the band, the streamers, confetti and the live television coverage.²⁵ The discrepancy might seem a minor one, and may be the product of further research or a changing attitude, but it also demonstrates the level of disagreement on the issue of the veterans' homecoming experiences.

Myth and Stereotypes

It is this disagreement and the confusion of the meanings and outcomes of the war, as described by De Groot, which forms the background (and perhaps even some of the basis) for the various myths and the resulting stereotypes examined in this thesis. The two main stereotypes that emerged were that of the Vietnam veteran as the victim or villain,²⁶ stemming from a mixture of attitudes about the war itself, the coming home

²² Greg Langley, *A Decade of Dissent: Vietnam and the Conflict on the Australian Homefront* (North Sydney, 1992).

²³ Mark McKenna, "Howard's Warriors" in Raymond Gaita (Ed), *Why the War was Wrong* (Melbourne, 2003).

²⁴ Jane Ross, "Australian Soldiers in Vietnam" in King (Ed), *Australia's Vietnam*, p.96.

²⁵ Jane Ross, "Australia's Legacy" in Greg Pemberton (Ed), *Vietnam Remembered* (Sydney, 1990), pp.190-191.

²⁶ These descriptions are simplistic and are discussed in more detail in the text.

experiences, the controversy over the health issues and the overwhelming wave of popular culture that followed. The development of the stereotypes was examined predominantly through an analysis of popular memory, as will be demonstrated in the following section on methodology. A wide range of literature was consulted on the issue. Everette Dennis, in Paul Lester's comprehensive study of stereotypes, *Images that Injure*, claims that "for visual communicators, whether photographers, videographers, filmmakers, cartoonists, or graphic artists, stereotypes are useful devices because they are easily understood and make a clear, if unfair and at times hurtful, point."²⁷ Yet Travis Linn points out that "stereotypical views of others are part of our shared culture. We participate in them even when we consciously reject them."²⁸ However, stereotypes are complicated and are not only created to provide a simplistic cultural shorthand. Barry McMahon and Robin Quin address this issue and conclude that:

The fact that stereotypes might be inaccurate does not tell us anything about why stereotypes emerge and how they are used in our society. This social aspect of stereotypes is far more interesting and important than simply learning to identify and to criticise them.²⁹

Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that stereotypes are sometimes used, and more occasionally, created by the people they depict. Luisa Passerini discovered that subjects in her study of the Italian working class were unwilling to disassociate themselves from their stereotype that had been generations in the making and closely tied them to their community and class identity.³⁰ Alistair Thomson found similar issues when interviewing elderly World War I veterans. While most admitted to not fitting into the stereotypes surrounding the Anzacs, they had accepted, and found acceptance in them, particularly as they grew older, and therefore tried to mould their stories to fit the framework.³¹ Vietnam veterans, while mostly unhappy with their stereotypes, did on occasion make use of them in order to gain government assistance and public recognition, though rarely deceptively or even consciously.

²⁷ Everette E. Dennis, "Preface" in Paul Martin Lester (Ed), *Images that Injure: pictorial stereotypes in the media* (Westport, 1996), p.ix.

²⁸ Travis Linn, "Media Methods that Lead to Stereotypes" in Lester (Ed), *Images that Injure*, p.15.

²⁹ Barry McMahon & Robin Quin, *Stories and Stereotypes* (Melbourne, 1987), p.117.

³⁰ Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge, 1987), p.5.

³¹ Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Melbourne, 1994).

Myths and stereotypes are common to all wars, but the ones that emerged from Vietnam are particularly salient because of their considerable divergence from the attitudes towards previous Australian service personnel. The inconsistencies of the war itself followed the veterans back into their lives, but it was the differences of opinion among the veterans themselves that has had a significant effect on how the war has been presented. The American scholar, Marita Sturken, struggling with this issue in her research for *Tangled Memories*, decided that the “history of the Vietnam War...consists of conflicting narratives, but there are particular elements within those stories that remain uncontested”,³² and it was from that baseline that she built her conclusions. Samuel Hynes, when addressing soldiers’ narratives, spoke of myths within those narratives, but cautioned that:

Myth here...is not a synonym for falsehood; rather it is a term to identify the simplified, dramatized story that has evolved in our society to contain the meanings of war that we can tolerate, and so make sense of its incoherencies and contradictions.³³

Sturken maintains that the living participants of an event complicate and reduce the efficiency of history, preventing a successful closure, but without them, history is in danger of losing its “cultural authority and value”.³⁴ Bill Gammage expressed similar sentiments when using extracts of letters and diaries of Australian soldiers from WWI in *The Broken Years*, pointing out that while there would certainly be inaccuracies, in attempting to “show what some Australian soldiers thought and felt during the war, it must include instances in which they erred.”³⁵

While the issue of myth and memory in relation to Vietnam has been addressed to some degree, particularly by Doyle, Grey and Pierce, little study has been attempted in Australia into the development and consequences of the Vietnam veteran stereotypes. While they may rate a passing comment in veteran literature or academic writings, examination has been limited. This was also the case in the United States until the last few years, which is surprising considering the fact that the stereotypes are so deeply etched in the country’s consciousness. The two most prominent

³² Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: the Vietnam War, the Aids Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, 1997) p.5.

³³ Samuel Hynes, “Personal Narratives and Commemoration” in Jay Winter & Emmanuel Silvan (Eds), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1999), p.207. See also: Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London, 1998).

³⁴ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p.5.

³⁵ Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* (Canberra, 1974) ,p.xiii.

explorations of the issues to date were both published in 1998, and come from two quite different perspectives. In *Stolen Valor*, B.G. Burkett (with Glenna Whitely) focused on the poor image and lack of respect in the community towards Vietnam veterans.³⁶ He claimed that most veterans were either average, or more likely, highly achieving individuals, who rarely mentioned their service because of stereotypes, which he believes revolves almost entirely around those who fraudulently claim service, or exaggerate their experiences for attention and money. He does however, insist that veterans were treated badly on their return from service. Contradictorily, Jerry Lembcke takes the opposite argument in *The Spitting Image*, but manages to come to similar conclusions about the stereotypes.³⁷ He does not believe that veterans were treated poorly by protestors or the community, and sets out to prove that the stereotypes are mythical. However, both agree that Hollywood, and popular culture generally, is at least partly to blame for the misunderstandings.

Many works were consulted on the topic of popular culture responses to Vietnam, particularly in relation to movies, which evidence seemed to indicate had the most lasting influence on the image of the war and its veterans. Little of any direct consequence has been published in Australia on the topic, with the exception of Jeff Doyle's excellent, though limited, examination.³⁸ Unsurprisingly, the US has churned out dozens of texts on the topic, just as Hollywood churned out the films. Clayton Koppes, Gregory Black, Colin Schindler, Marita Sturken and Peter Rollin³⁹ have discussed and analysed the increasing role of film in the telling of history, its exploitation by the government, and the increasing demand for reality, underscored by William Hagen in Rollin's text explaining that "we already have a generation of young adults whose primary memory of Vietnam is films."⁴⁰ Eben Muse's *The Land of Nam*, Andrew Martin's *The Reception of War* and Michael Anderegg's collection,

³⁶ B.G. Burkett & Glenna Whitely, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Were Robbed of its Heroes and its History* (Dallas, 1998).

³⁷ Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York, 1998).

³⁸ Doyle, "Bringing whose war home? Vietnam and American Myths in Australian popular culture" in Pierce, Grey and Doyle (Eds), *Vietnam Days*, pp.99-100.

³⁹ Peter C. Rollins (Ed), *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in Cultural Context* (Lexington, 1998); Clayton R. Koppes & Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (London, 1987), Colin Schindler, *Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society* (London 1979); Sturken, *Tangled Memories*.

⁴⁰ William Hagen, "Apocalypse Now (1979): Joseph Conrad and the Television War" in Rollins (Ed), *Hollywood as Historian*, p.232.

Inventing Vietnam were just three of many used, but their broad approach to the range of movies and evolution of the genre made them the most useful.⁴¹

No study of Vietnam veterans can possibly be contemplated without reference to veteran literature, which although not often academic in nature, is important in understanding attitudes and filling in the blanks left by scholarship. Frustrated by the silence and the lack of recognition, veterans began writing about themselves and their interpretations of the war in the later 1980s. The veteran literature was overwhelmingly bitter, and often critical of how the war was conducted – politically and militarily. Few regret doing their duty, rather that the continually compounded mistakes of the policy were allowed to happen, before, during and after the war. Many express a guilt that they feel was foisted on them by society, or anger towards the government and the public that did not appear to support them. The literature portrays the sense of isolation that Vietnam veterans feel from other war veterans and society; isolation that all returned service persons certainly must suffer, but has been defined in recent history through those from the Vietnam conflict. Australian Veteran, Terry Burstall, author of three books on Vietnam, illustrates this best in *A Soldier Returns*, which becomes almost a search for redemption for Australia's part in the war. He is somewhat critical of the military in *The Soldiers' Story*, his account of the battle of Long Tan, in which he fought.⁴² However, just because Burstall is a veteran, it does not necessarily follow that all veterans agree with his opinions. Indeed, he has come under heavy criticism from some sectors of the veteran community for his attitudes.⁴³ Other veteran writers, such as Cairns resident Mike Towers' *A Jungle Circus*, although critical of the war in a general sense, do not enter the debate of right and wrong so much as simply tell their stories.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Eben J. Muse, *The Land of Nam: The Vietnam War in American Film* (Lanham, 1995); Michael Anderegg (Ed), *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia, 1991).

⁴² Terry Burstall, *The Soldiers' Story: The Battle at Xa Long Tan* (St Lucia, 1986); *A Soldier Returns*. See also: Terry Burstall, *Vietnam: The Australian Dilemma* (St Lucia, 1993).

⁴³ The best example is the websites of Vietnam veterans groups such as the Victorian "Sunraysia Vietnam Veterans" (20 September 1999), whose site is well patronised at <http://users.mildura.net.au/users/marshall/>. See also: Bob Buick with Gary McKay, *All Guts and No Glory* (St Leonards, 2000).

⁴⁴ Mike Towers, *A Jungle Circus: Memories of Vietnam* (St Leonards, 1998). See also Sandy MacGregor, *No Need for Heroes* (Lindfield, 1993), D.J.Dennis, *One Day at a Time: A Vietnam Diary* (St Lucia, 1992); Stan Krasnoff, *Where to? For Valour: A True Story of Keith Payne V.C.* (Noosa, 1995).

Other veterans such as Gary McKay, and the previously mentioned Lex McAulay, have made an attempt to place Vietnam in the context of more traditional military history, and the idea of good soldiers doing their job under difficult circumstances. McKay's *In Good Company* takes a more personal approach than his later books in which he examines specific companies.⁴⁵ Lex McAulay studies particular battles such as *The Battle of Long Tan* and *The Battle of Coral*, or the service of particular battalions, such as his own, 1RAR, in *The Fighting First*,⁴⁶ and has more recently begun writing about battles from other wars. McAulay has attracted little dissent from within the veteran community because his writings are uncontroversial. He avoids making many judgements about the military involvement, instead focusing on soldiers and military tactics. Each chapter in *The Battle of Coral* begins with quotations relating to wars throughout history in an endeavour to make Vietnam conform to the traditional military mould, a continuing theme throughout his books, and a style that is now becoming more popular, particularly in American literature.

Later in the 1990s a new collection of veteran writings began appearing that seemed to bridge the two previous themes, taking something from each and trying to create a unique place for themselves that would nevertheless fit the criteria to attain continuity with previous wars and the Australian heroic traditions. These included authors such as Peter Haran, Robert Kearney, Peter Winter, Robert Hall and Bob Buick.⁴⁷ Buick's *All Guts and No Glory* retained the sense of overwhelming anger much more than any of the others, and is quite vehement in his criticism of the government and even some other veterans. Haran has been the most prolific of this group of authors with his writings covering a range of topics from the military elements to the later problems of some veterans. However, what is most significant about Haran's work, even on this latter topic, is his sense of positivity, refusing to allow the war or its veterans to remain in the negative atmosphere of blame and disillusionment. This is well illustrated in the epilogue of his most recent book focussing on the experiences of a

⁴⁵ For example: Gary McKay, *In Good Company: One Man's War in Vietnam* (St Leonards, 1987); *Delta Four: Australian Riflemen in Vietnam* (St Leonards, 1996); *Sleeping With Your Ears Open: On Patrol with the Australian SAS* (St Leonards, 1999).

⁴⁶ Lex McAulay, *The Battle of Long Tan* (Sydney, 1987); *The Battle of Coral* (Hawthorne, 1988); *Contact: Australians in Vietnam* (Sydney, 1988).

⁴⁷ For example: Peter Haran & Robert Kearney, *Crossfire: An Australian Reconnaissance Unit in Vietnam* (Sydney 2001); Peter Winter, *The year I said goodbye* (Kent Town, 2003); Robert Hall, *Combat Battalion: The Eighth Battalion in Vietnam* (St Leonards, 2000); Buick and McKay, *All Guts and No Glory*.

helicopter crew in Vietnam, *Shockwave*. After giving an overview of the problems suffered by these men since their service, Haran ends by commenting on the privilege these men felt serving together and the irreversible friendship and intimacy that forever remains.⁴⁸

There has been an increase in the significance of oral sources in the study of the Vietnam War in recent years, which has been of particular interest in the research for this thesis. Peter Liddle, Matthew Richardson and Australian, Alistair Thomson,⁴⁹ have contributed to the study of oral history in regard to war, and the usefulness of interviews with war's participants. Thomson's research is of particular interest as his interviews with Australian veterans of World War I cover not only the experience of the war, but also its effects on their lives afterwards and how they felt about their place in history. American historians such as Bret Eynon have encouraged further oral scholarship of the 1960s era, including Vietnam, about which he runs a section on the American PBS internet site.⁵⁰ The interviews conducted by this researcher were important in providing context and a central voice to the study.⁵¹ Various seminars and meetings of veterans were also attended, and some of the most fascinating information was often obtained during these, or in personal communications, which were followed up where ever practicable. The use of oral sources as a component of the research has provided an original perspective in this study. However, the use of oral sources was also indicated for the more practical reason that there was little work attempted in this area and therefore little existing literature. While the interviews are important, they could not stand alone and a substantial amount of other sources were utilised to provide context and background.

⁴⁸ Peter Haran, *Shockwave: An Australian Helicopter Crew in Vietnam* (Sydney, 2004), pp.205-206.

⁴⁹ Examples include: Peter H. Liddle & Matthew J. Richardson, "Voices from the Past: An Evaluation of Oral History as a Source for Research into the Western Front Experience of the British Soldier 1914-1918", *Journal of Contemporary History* (October 1996), Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Melbourne, 1994); and "Memory as a Battlefield: Personal and Political Investments in the National Military Past", *The Oral History Review* (1995).

⁵⁰ Bret Eynon, "How to do an oral history about the impact of the Vietnam era" at www.pbs.org/pov/stories/vietnam/curriculum.html. Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton have also made contributions to the study of memory in the Australian landscape in their edited book, *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia* (Melbourne 1994). Others whose studies on memory have influenced this work include Jane Sherron De Hart, Sandy Polishuk, Naomi Norquay and Valerie Yow.

⁵¹ See methodology section in this chapter.

Oral histories of Vietnam veterans began appearing in the early 1980s with groundbreaking works such as Mark Baker's *Nam*, and Wallace Terry's *Bloods*,⁵² the latter of which told the stories of African American veterans, a group that felt doubly disenfranchised.⁵³ Australian veteran oral histories began emerging a few years later, with Stuart Rintoul's *Ashes of Vietnam* in 1987,⁵⁴ followed by numerous other titles in the early 1990s, including one by the previously mentioned Gary McKay aptly named *Vietnam Fragments*.⁵⁵ Maree Rowe also made a significant contribution to the field with *Sons of the Hunter* in 2002.⁵⁶ Recent years have also witnessed the recognition of women's roles in the Vietnam War, in particular Siobhan McHugh's *Minefields and Miniskirts* about Australian women, which was highly acclaimed in the United States as well as in Australia.⁵⁷ Oral sources are not just used for purely oral histories, but also as a complement to other sources. Terry Burstall and Lex McAulay have applied this method effectively in their previously mentioned books. Both used documents such as military dispatches, and then utilised interviews with participants not only to fill in the gaps of information, but also to give the reader an idea of how it felt to be there and other details that make the story a living one. Oral sources have also been used for more political studies such as Neil Sheehan's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Bright Shining Lie*, Peter Edwards' Australian official history *A Nation at War*, and Ambrose Crowe's *The Battle After the War*.⁵⁸

Yet there have been only a small number of works about the post-war experience of Australian Vietnam veterans, and the bulk of these are in the field of health and

⁵² Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (New York, 1981); Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York, 1984).

⁵³ For an extended discussion of American veterans' oral history see: Renate W. Prescott, 'The Vietnam War and the Teaching and Writing of Oral History: The Reliability of the Narrator', *The Oral History Review* (Summer-Fall 1999).

⁵⁴ It is probably no coincidence that more books began appearing from 1987, as that was the year of the Welcome Home Parade, which is popularly believed to be the turning point for attitudes towards the Vietnam War and veterans.

⁵⁵ Stuart Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam: Australian Voices* (Richmond, 1987); Gary McKay, *Vietnam Fragments: An Oral History of Australians at War* (St Leonards, 1992). More examples include: Kenneth Maddock, *Memories of Vietnam* (Sydney, 1991), Harry Maurer, *Strange Ground: An Oral History of Americans in Vietnam* (New York, 1998); Al Santoli, *To Bear Any Burden: The Vietnam War and its Aftermath in the Words of Americans and Southeast Asians* (London, 1986).

⁵⁶ Maree Rowe (Ed), *Vietnam Veterans: Sons of the Hunter* (Loftus, 2002).

⁵⁷ Siobhan McHugh, *Minefields and Miniskirts: Australian Women and the Vietnam War* (Sydney, 1993). See: Donald A. Ritchie, 'Minefields and Miniskirts: Australian Women and the Vietnam War (Review)', *The Oral History Review* (Summer-Fall 1999), p.171.

⁵⁸ Another notable example is Paul Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead: Robert McNamara and Five Lives of a Lost War* (New York, 1996).

welfare. A number of government, and government sponsored, studies have examined these issues and journals abound with works on PTSD, cancer, and other health concerns, but scholarship on the broad perspective is limited. Nevertheless, many of these were consulted as they often provided context for the wider issues. The government reports, and their outcomes, were of particular importance because they formed the framework from which various governments would address veteran issues. The two major inquiries into the chemicals issue, the Senate Inquiry in 1982 and the Evatt Royal Commission in 1985 were compulsory reading, along with many of the submissions to these,⁵⁹ and were second in importance only to the morbidity and mortality studies in the late 1990s.⁶⁰ Many other reports were considered relating to a range of issues, including health, welfare, employment, changes in military practice and investigations and audits of the DVA and the VVCS. All provided something towards the contextual framework of veterans' experiences, with perhaps the most useful being *After the March*, a Standing Committee report, published in 1988.⁶¹ While dated, it was one of the first investigations (if not the first) of the issues from a broad perspective covering such aspects as employment, societal and governmental attitudes, readjustment, intra-veteran politics as well as the health and welfare issues. Such a base provided a place from which to follow government policy as it evolved (or failed to evolve) over time. A number of American government, or sponsored agencies, reports were also consulted for comparison, and though more numerous, they were also marked by the contradictions endemic in such large numbers of service persons and agencies.⁶²

Archival material from the Australian War Memorial and National Library was helpful for developing much of the background. Personal papers were of particular assistance, especially from those who participated in the development of the different

⁵⁹ Senate Standing Committee on Science and the Environment, *Pesticides and Health of Australian Vietnam Veterans – First Report* (Canberra, November 1982); Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam, *Final Report, July 1985 / Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam* (Canberra, 1985).

⁶⁰ For example: Commonwealth Department of Veterans' Affairs, *Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans: A study of the health of Australia's Vietnam veteran community – Volume 1 Male Vietnam Veterans Survey and Community Comparison Outcomes* (Canberra, 1998).

⁶¹ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *After the March: Strengthening Support for the Veterans* (Canberra, 1988).

⁶² For example: National Academy of Sciences, "Report on the Health Effects of Agent Orange: Hearing before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives [USA], One hundred and third Congress, First session" (4 August 1994).

veteran groups and the documents and submissions of various committees.⁶³ However, the limited range of oral histories in relation to Vietnam was disappointing.⁶⁴

Australian studies of Vietnam veterans in the political/historical genre are quite sparse. Noel Giblett, in association with the VVCS, produced *Homecomings* in 1990: this contained excerpts of interviews with veterans, but focused solely on the issue of psychological difficulties and was aimed mainly at increasing the understanding of these issues within the veteran community and their families.⁶⁵ A former high level public servant and the angry mother of a Vietnam veteran, Jean Williams, has written at least three books on veterans focusing on the chemicals used and the long battles between some veterans and the government.⁶⁶ Ambrose Crowe's *The Battle After the War* was one of the first published works dedicated to veterans in a post-war situation, though once again the emphasis is health issues. Crowe, a Vietnam veteran and honorary research associate at Monash University, chronicles the establishment of the VVAA and its battle with the government over the Agent Orange issue.⁶⁷ F.B. Smith's contribution to *Medicine at War*, part of the official history, addresses the same topics and produces some useful insights, though its usefulness is sometimes mitigated by its dismissive attitude to the merits of the concerns many veterans have on the effect of service on their health.⁶⁸ There are also several unpublished theses around the country examining veterans' issues, the majority of them written more

⁶³ For example: "Papers of Carla McCallum – Welfare Officer VVAA" (AWM – PR88/181); "Records of Major General Ronald L. Hughes CBE DSO" (AWM – PR88/86); "Vietnam Veterans Family Support Link Line – Correspondence" (AWM – PR01003).

⁶⁴ However, there have been plans to improve this issue. Advertisements and publicity sponsored by the DVA have appeared in newspapers nationally throughout 2004 calling for service persons to come forward and have their stories recorded.

⁶⁵ Noel Giblett (Ed), *Homecomings: Stories from Australian Vietnam Veterans and their Wives* (Canberra, 1990). See also from VVCS: Wayne Scott, *PTSD: A Vietnam Veterans Experience* (Townsville, 1999); Adele Leslie-Adams, *"I Thought It Was Just Me" – Information for the Children of Vietnam Veterans* (Melbourne, 1999).

⁶⁶ Jean R Williams, *Children of the Mist: Agent Orange Future Generations* (Nambour 2002); *The Devil's Rainbow: Conscripts, Chemicals, Catastrophe* (Maroochydore, 1999); *Cry in the Wilderness: Guinea Pigs of Vietnam* (Nambour, 1995).

⁶⁷ Jack McCulloch also wrote about the Agent Orange issue in *The Politics of Agent Orange: The Australian Experience* (Richmond, 1984).

⁶⁸ O'Keefe & Smith, *Medicine at War*. Crowe's text also shows some bias in the opposite direction, but Professor Smith's hostile attitude in an official history seems curious. Notably, O'Keefe, the primary author of the text makes the point in the Preface that "the section on the Agent Orange controversy in Australia was completely the work of Dr F.B. Smith and should not be taken to represent my views", p.xii.

than a decade ago and focussing mainly on welfare concerns.⁶⁹ Two of these, however, kept in the Australian War Memorial archives, were useful for comparison because of the transcripts of interviews with veterans.⁷⁰ This proved to be significant, because although their interviews and those done for this study were separated by fifteen years and 3000 kilometres the similarities in attitudes and responses were notable.

American scholars have travelled a little further into the lives of Vietnam veterans. Some, such as Baker, Santoli and Maurer, have already been mentioned, as have Burkett and Lembcke. More recently, there have been some worthwhile contributions to the homecoming lives of veterans in two studies of the Vietnam veterans movement. Gerald Nicosia's comprehensively researched *Home to War* is a valuable addition to any study of the issues faced after Vietnam, and is one of the few to examine the divisiveness of not just the relationship between veterans and the government, but also among the veterans themselves.⁷¹ While Andrew Hunt's *The Turning* is not as comprehensive as Nicosia, it is nevertheless a useful work, particularly in relation to veterans who became anti-war as a result of their service.⁷²

Occasional newspaper articles chronicling veterans' problems, or commemorating an event appear to be the main source for Australian veterans to have a voice, but have a limited value despite the size of their audience.⁷³ This has been similar in television exposure, tending more often than not, to be unconstructive in nature. There have been some notable additions to literature on Vietnam in recent years, such as *Vietnam Shots*, *Australia's Battlefields in Viet Nam*, *Leather Bred Heroes* and the previously mentioned revision, *Australia's Vietnam*, but with the exception of the last, their areas of scholarship have been relatively narrow. And despite additions to veteran

⁶⁹ Examples include: Grant Walton, *Western Australian Vietnam Veterans: the experience of the return and the struggle for compensation*, Honours thesis, Murdoch University (Perth, 1989); Andrew Rice, *A Forgotten Sacrifice: SA National Servicemen Returning from the Vietnam War*, Honours thesis, University of Adelaide (Adelaide, 1985).

⁷⁰ C. Rhodes, "Vietnam Veterans' Welcome Home Parade and Reunion: a study of a ceremony and its origin" MA Thesis, Monash University (November 1990); Maureen Horrigan, "National Servicemen in Vietnam" (Undergraduate Research Essay, Australian National University, 1986).

⁷¹ Gerard Nicosia, *Home to War: A history of the Vietnam veterans' movement* (New York, 2001).

⁷² Andre E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York, 1999).

⁷³ Two recent examples: Alan Ramsay, "Vietnam – A legacy of denial" in *Sydney Morning Herald* (27 May 2000), www.smh.com.au/news/0027/05/text/features02.html; Adrian McGregor, "The Vietnam Legacy: The war that shaped a generation" in *The Australian* (24 April 2000), pp.15-16.

narratives, such as Rowe, little has been attempted to analyse these voices and find the meanings that provide a context for a more comprehensive commentary.

Missing from the body of work on Vietnam is any serious attempt to investigate the experience of Australian Vietnam veterans during *and after* the war, and analyse their responses to give them a historical context, as Alistair Thomson did with World War I veterans. Thomson's work has had a significant influence on this thesis, particularly in style and approach. This influence has also inspired the use of quotations to allow the veterans to speak for themselves, an approach used effectively (though from letters and diaries) in Bill Gammage's *The Broken Years*⁷⁴ as well. But despite the parallels with Thomson's methodology, the issues are different. Thomson examines how World War I veterans have coped with a myth they feel they have to live up to, while this study examines a myth Vietnam veterans feel they have had to live down.

All of the works mentioned have contributed in some way to the research, particularly in relation to the background and the understanding of the issues involved. The existing body of work has considered in detail the political and historical reasons for the Vietnam War and its repercussions. However, the extensive Vietnam War literature has included very little on the post-war experiences of Australian veterans. Some American studies do this, albeit in a limited manner, and those studies have been useful in providing points of comparison with the Australian experience for this study. Australian veterans have been examined, but the studies have been limited mainly to health and welfare issues, or personal and military focused accounts. In particular, this review of the literature demonstrates that this type of thesis has not been previously undertaken. It is for this reason that an analysis using popular memory theory as a framework is an effective manner through which to provide context and cohesion to the narratives, primary sources and the limits of the literature.

Methodology – Analysing with Popular Memory

Oral history is a popular method of studying the Vietnam War, both in Australia and the United States. Vietnam was the most controversial, and longest, war in

⁷⁴ Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years* (Ringwood, 1974).

contemporary history. It was a war that was fought on the home front as well as on the battlefield, and for many, the wounds inflicted are still painful more than three decades later. There was no great victory to celebrate and many found difficulty placing Vietnam into the context of a proud military history. When the histories started appearing they focused mainly on how Australia and the United States had become entangled in Vietnam, and how it had all gone wrong. Vietnam veterans, as a group, felt dispossessed by society, and therefore ultimately, from history. Oral history offered them the opportunity to be heard, and the emerging theory of popular memory offered the tools with which to analyse their words.

The theory of popular memory has been adopted (and adapted) by a number of scholars in history and politics. The concepts of popular memory have made significant contributions to the study of culture as it has grown in acceptance over the past three decades.⁷⁵ Alistair Thomson argues that this approach with oral sources “can help us to understand how and why national mythologies work (and don’t work) for individuals, and our society generally. It can also reveal the possibilities, and difficulties, of developing and sustaining oppositional memories”.⁷⁶ The construction of popular memory plays an important role in the study of society and culture. Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli, in their studies of the working class in Fascist Italy, discovered the importance of popular (and collective) memory in placing events in the context of both the past and the present.⁷⁷ Portelli does not believe however, that collective memory necessarily affects the reliability of the narrators, instead claiming that is a strength that tells the researcher more about the meaning of an event than any other source could ever provide.

The concepts proposed by the various proponents of this school of thought were utilised in order to examine the historical position of the Vietnam War, and therefore its veterans, in Australian society. Popular memory within the community is the basis for the construction of stereotypes and is an important tool in discovering their origins

⁷⁵ For a comprehensive examination see: Graham Dawson and Richard Dawson, “Popular Memory: Theory, politics and methodology” in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998).

⁷⁶ Alistair Thomson, “Anzac Memories” in Perks and Thomson (Eds), *The Oral History Reader*, p.310.

⁷⁷ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, 1991); Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*.

and therefore, discovering a new, and hopefully a more realistic, perspective. This should not suggest the individual should be lost in a sea of collective data, rather that each unique story and divergent opinion form a powerful collective voice. Marita Sturken points to the importance of “conflicting narratives” of events,⁷⁸ as does Samuel Hynes, who claims that it is the making “sense of the incoherencies and contradictions” of these narratives that provides “the meanings of the war”.⁷⁹ Popular memory and its ability to provide an interdisciplinary approach is useful in the interpretation and examination of existing literature and other data, as well as oral sources.

Oral Sources

This researcher started interviewing Vietnam veterans in September 1999 and formally interviewed forty of them.⁸⁰ Some were sourced by making contact with local veteran associations, such as the Returned and Services League (RSL) and the Vietnam Veterans’ Association of Australia (VVAA). Thirteen others made contact after reading an article in the newspaper about the research.⁸¹ The remainder came from referrals from those interviewed, as almost everyone offered at least one referral, with a couple even inviting me to various functions and meetings to introduce other veterans. Many of those who made contact from the newspaper article were interested because it had stated that I also wanted to talk to veterans not associated with any veteran groups. It was also made clear to all participants that it was not a psychological study, which made many more willing to talk. Therefore, I was able to interview a wider cross section of veterans with varying views and backgrounds. They were all male and represented all three services.⁸² Participants were checked against the nominal roll of Vietnam veterans to avoid interlopers,⁸³ and although this is not a failsafe system, in a place like Cairns where most of the

⁷⁸ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories* (Los Angeles, 1997), p.5.

⁷⁹ Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale*, p.xiii.

⁸⁰ I also had discussions with at least a dozen more which were not recorded because they took place unexpectedly at functions and the like.

⁸¹ Hamish Patterson, “Vets’ Views Sought”, *The Cairns Post* (14 October 1999), p.19.

⁸² 35 were Army, with 3 and 2 respectfully from the Royal Australian Navy and the Royal Australian Air Force. 13 were National Service. These figures are statistically reflective of service in Vietnam.

⁸³ A nominal roll of Vietnam veterans was compiled by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs before beginning the various veteran health studies as no comprehensive list had existed before.

veterans know each other, it can be presumed that most, if not all, were who they claimed to be. Unfortunately, no female participants were located.⁸⁴

Only five of those interviewed were willing to allow their names to be placed with their words.⁸⁵ Many of the others would only agree to be recorded on the understanding that I would be the only one to hear the actual tape. Most were happy to have their words quoted, but not identified, and releases were signed to that end. While some may be willing to lift the restrictions over time, or after their death, others have concerns about their families and may never want their names put against their words for one reason or another. Several indicated that they would be willing to be identified - but they would then be less forthcoming. This is hardly surprising considering the nature of the information which covered a spectrum ranging from war experiences to family problems and sexuality. The promise of confidentiality alleviated any concerns that veterans might feel restrained by the tape recorder.

Because no definitive study of post-war veterans' lives, as well as their service has been previously attempted, it is difficult to decide conclusively how accurately the veterans interviewed for this study reflect the broader group. However, extensive research on various aspects of the veterans' experiences, and interviews conducted by others on intersecting topics, does suggest that they may be considered representative of the majority. While larger numbers of veterans have been interviewed by authors such as McKay, Rintoul and Rowe – each of whom interviewed about one hundred – they simply provided selected sections of the transcripts with negligible analysis.⁸⁶ These texts are similar to the earlier American ones such as the groundbreaking works by Baker, Terry and Santoli.⁸⁷ While this is an excellent method that allows the participants to tell their stories in their own words, and its usefulness should not be underestimated, the aim of this thesis is to analyse the responses of the participants in order to obtain a broader understanding of the war and its aftermath, for the

⁸⁴ Despite this, literature on Australian women's experiences has been considered through texts such as McHugh's, *Minefields and Miniskirts* and Narelle Biedermann, *Tears on my pillow: Australian Nurses in Vietnam* (Milsons Point, 2004).

⁸⁵ A few of the interviewees are identified throughout the text at their own insistence. These included: Lt Gen John Grey AO (Ret'd); Keith Payne VC; and Les Hiddins, all of whom maintained that as public figures, their opinions were largely known and should have their names beside their words.

⁸⁶ Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*; McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*; Rowe, *Sons of the Hunter*.

⁸⁷ Baker, *Nam*; Terry, *Bloods*; Santoli, *To Bear Any Burden*.

veterans and Australian society. The sample is therefore numerically sound when considered alongside other studies with extensive use of interviews.⁸⁸ Thomson's work on WWI was based on interviews with twenty-one participants, focusing mainly on three of these.⁸⁹ Rhodes and Horrigan relied on similar numbers for their studies, with Rhodes obtaining sixteen interviews and a further sixteen answering questionnaires (all from a limited geographic area), and Horrigan relied mainly on eighteen questionnaires of only National Servicemen, with a few follow up interviews for clarification.⁹⁰ Giblett interviewed thirty-five, which included several veterans' wives, and all were chosen because they were known to the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service in Perth. While it could be suggested that Giblett's participants do not reflect the broader veteran community, as he himself admits, he does however claim that neither are they "grossly unrepresentative".⁹¹ It can therefore be claimed that the forty consulted for this study, who hail from all corners of Australia (though now residing in the North Queensland area), have a variety of military experiences, and most significantly, did not reflect any single affiliation with an organisation. Therefore they could be considered reasonably representative of the broader group at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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One of the greatest hurdles oral history has had to face has been its reliability in comparison to that of documentary sources. While oral sources can certainly have their weaknesses, it would be wrong to assume that documentary sources are beyond reproach. Douglas, Roberts and Thompson have pointed out that many documentary sources are recorded from oral information, including births, deaths and marriages, census information and legal proceedings, not to mention newspapers.⁹² The information in these documents could be incorrect for a variety of reasons, whether accidentally or deliberately. Paul Thompson says that historians have long been aware of the problems of bias in newspaper reports.⁹³ Diaries, letters and other personal papers also raise similar questions. All historical sources require careful

⁸⁸ The most obvious exception is Gammage's *The Broken Years*, which had the participation of about 270 veterans, though most of these were not formally interviewed.

⁸⁹ Thomson, *Anzac Memories*.

⁹⁰ Rhodes, "Vietnam Veterans' Welcome Home Parade and Reunion"; Horrigan, "National Servicemen in Vietnam".

⁹¹ Giblett, *Homecomings*, p.xi.

⁹² Louise Douglas, Alan Roberts and Ruth Thompson, *Oral History: A Handbook* (Sydney, 1988), p.21.

⁹³ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 1978), p.92.

consideration of their contents and historians have always had to use judgement when researching.

The main difference with oral history is that the source can be questioned. This is an advantage that cannot be underestimated. The oral source can fill in the gaps left by a documentary source. A living source can be questioned not only about facts, but also about motives and feelings. The great historical question of ‘why?’ can be answered by an oral source. Whether oral sources are used for purely oral histories or to complement other sources in research, it can be a powerful, and interesting, tool. British historians Peter Liddle and Matthew Richardson believe that “the historian who dismisses oral history altogether is attempting carpentry without a full bag of tools”.⁹⁴ A living source can also correct errors or misperceptions from other sources. Researchers in American foreign policy, for example, have found that the documents tell only part of the story, and at times can even be misleading. Andrew McFadzean discovered in his research of Cold War figures, that interviews revealed personal networks, unrecorded discussions, and other crucial information that the documents simply did not divulge.⁹⁵ Former United States Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, has claimed that “what is written in diplomatic documents never bears much relation to reality”.⁹⁶ This does not mean that oral sources are infallible, as no historical sources ever are, but neither should they be dismissed or undervalued in historical scholarship.

The reliability of the narrator is the most debated element of oral history scholarship. Discussion on the subject of memory is prolific. It has been one of the most contentious issues that the discipline has had to face. There have been many criticisms particularly in regard to interviewing older people about events that happened long ago, for example, fifty or sixty years previous. One American research project, which interviewed three hundred former slaves about their

⁹⁴ Peter H. Liddle & Matthew J. Richardson, “Voices from the Past: An Evaluation of Oral History as a Source for Research into the Western Front Experience 1914-18”, *Journal of Contemporary History* (October 1996), p.652.

⁹⁵ Andrew McFadzean, “Interviews with Robert Bowie: The Use of Oral Testimony in Writing the Biography of Professor Robert Richardson Bowie”, *The Oral History Review* (Summer-Fall 1999), Web version available at Infotrac.

⁹⁶ Cited in Jonathan Soffer, “Oral History and the History of American Foreign Relations”, *Journal of American History* (September 1995), p.609.

childhood (comprising interviewees ranging from 72 to 108 years of age), attracted considerable debate about the reliability of memories.⁹⁷ Thomson encountered similar questions when interviewing Australian World War I veterans in the 1980s.⁹⁸ However, although much depends on the health, and associated factors, of the interviewee, there is substantial evidence to suggest that long-term memories can be quite reliable. Studies have revealed that more information about an event is forgotten in the first day than in the ensuing weeks, or even years.⁹⁹ Some psychologists suggest that people over 50 may have a better memory of their childhood and early adult life than of the intervening years.¹⁰⁰ It is also widely believed that significant events which take place “at critical junctures” in a person’s life will remain clear throughout their lives.¹⁰¹ This would appear to be common sense. People would surely be more likely to remember important events such as the birth of a child, or traumatic ones, such as a death, or going to war, than they are to recall what they had for breakfast last Tuesday. Some details may be forgotten, such as an exact date or location, but other details will be retained. Strong feelings, for example, often remain clearly in the memory.¹⁰²

The Vietnam veterans interviewed were asked to remember back on average about thirty years, and discuss events that occurred both then and in ensuing years. Few had any difficulty remembering even the smallest details, and several were able to recall the exact date they left for Vietnam, or came home, or finished their military service. Almost without exception, those who had been wounded, or lost a friend, could remember the date and circumstances. Their service in Vietnam occurred when most of them were young adults and it was generally the defining moment of their young lives. Whether it was a great adventure, or a terrible trauma, it was the most significant episode in their lives up until then, and for some, in all of the years afterwards. Most of their service and the couple of years after are remembered with

⁹⁷ Donna J. Spindel, “Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Fall 1996), Web version available at Infotrac.

⁹⁸ Alistair Thomson, “Memory as a Battlefield: Personal and Political Investments in the National Military Past”, *The Oral History Review* (Winter 1995), pp.65-66.

⁹⁹ Valerie R. Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (Thousand Oaks, 1994), p.19.

¹⁰⁰ David C. Rubin, “Autobiographical Memory Across the Lifespan” in David C. Rubin (ed), *Autobiographical Memory* (New York, 1986), p.212.

¹⁰¹ Spindel, “Assessing Memory”.

¹⁰² Yow, *Recording Oral History*, p.21.

startling clarity, but what is remembered even more clearly is feelings. An event is often remembered in the context of the emotion that accompanied it and is therefore given more significance. One veteran recalled a Christmas spent with a “good mate” at a remote location, where they had no hot food and worst of all, no beer. He remembers with anger that this was because of a strike on the waterfront in Australia preventing supplies going to Vietnam. They ate a tin of cold beans, watched the tracer fire in the distance, and wished each other a merry Christmas. “Two days later he was dead. That’s what it’s [war] all about.”¹⁰³ A military dispatch might have given details about where and how a soldier was killed in action, but it does not say that he was a “good mate”, or about his last couple of days, or that for one man, his death symbolised the horror of war.

However, memory is not just about remembering an event that occurred, it is also about putting those memories into a current context. Oral historians have to be aware of the role played by retrospect in remembering. The passing of time, changes in societal attitudes, and everything that has happened to that person since the event will have an effect on how that incident is remembered. Elizabeth Tonkin believes also that “tellers are constructing retrospective accounts for audiences with different time scales, and they may adjust their own narrations to the memories and understanding of their listeners”.¹⁰⁴ There was much evidence of placing events in retrospective contexts in the Vietnam veteran interviews, and the foundation of popular memory was useful in analysing this issue. A common example was to talk of the war as having been a mistake. Most did not think of it that way then, but changing beliefs have had a significant effect on the way some of the veterans remember their experiences in hindsight. A few went to great pains to explain their reasons for going to Vietnam, and how they really believed in what they were doing, as if desperate to excuse what were later considered unpopular views. A significant number said, “we shouldn’t have been there”, and gave examples of things that they considered mistakes. One man talked about search and destroy missions which would clear an area of enemy, and then leave the area unattended, so that they would be back the

¹⁰³ Vietnam Veteran Interview #36, 10 March 2000.

¹⁰⁴ Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The social construction of oral history* (Cambridge, 1992), p.66.

next week fighting over the same piece of land.¹⁰⁵ It is interesting to consider how differently these things might have been remembered if the war had been successful and popular (if that can be said about any war), like, for example, World War II.

Luisa Passerini, one of the most influential scholars of the popular memory school, has made a considerable study of these issues in difficult periods of Italian history. She believes that adapting memories in retrospect is “a way of redeeming something from the defeat. For the subjects who survived, what happened afterwards is inextricably bound up with what happened then.”¹⁰⁶ She does not believe that this diminishes them in any way, claiming that they remain “highly relevant” to historical knowledge, providing a framework for a better understanding of events. While other historical sources are equally as important, and can actually add value to the oral ones, Passerini concluded that the stories of people’s lives are significant because “these testimonies are, first and foremost, statements of cultural identity in which memory continuously adapts received traditions to present circumstances.”¹⁰⁷

Misremembering is also a contentious aspect of using oral sources. An interviewee may remember details of an event incorrectly, but that does not necessarily make his or her testimony worthless. Italian historian, Alessandro Portelli claims that “rather than being a weakness, this is however, their strength: errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings”.¹⁰⁸ Portelli believes that meanings can be just as important, if not more so, than the facts themselves. This has been a matter of debate amongst oral historians for some decades, but many have begun to follow Portelli’s school of thought over recent years, although it is by no means new. Barbara Allen and William Montell wrote in 1981:

The truth in orally communicated history does not always lie in its factual accuracy. What people believe happened is as important as what actually happened, for people think, act, and react in accordance with what they believe to be true.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Vietnam Veteran Interview #12, 19 October 1999.

¹⁰⁶ Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, p.68.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁰⁸ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, p.2.

¹⁰⁹ Barbara Allen & William L. Montell, *From Memory to History: Using oral sources in local historical research* (Nashville, 1981), p.89.

Vietnam veterans provide a particularly good illustration of this theory of misremembering. Many veterans relate disturbing stories of their treatment on their return to Australia, but there is much disagreement, amongst scholars and veterans themselves, about how much of it is true. Some claim that the reports of mistreatment are exaggerated, and point out that many were welcomed home with marches through cities attracting large crowds.¹¹⁰ However, how the public perceived veterans was not as important as how they felt they were perceived. One of the veterans interviewed showed me a letter from his girlfriend, a university student, who called him a “baby killer” and broke off the relationship when he returned from Vietnam. Later in the interview, when discussing problems with how he was treated, he said, “the worst ones were young women, particularly in academia”.¹¹¹ He did not give any other specific incidents of abuse, so it is possible that his girlfriend and all young women in academia had merged in his mind, making the one incident a series of incidents. There are many examples of similar situations, but ultimately, it does not really matter whether they were spat on or called names once, or a dozen times. The event has taken on greater significance in their minds, making them feel as if they were reviled by a larger group, or even by the whole country. The idea that their country ignored or despised them has become a truth for many veterans. Whether or not it is an actual fact is not as important as what they believe, because what they believe to be true is what has made them the people they have become. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that most truths have a basis in fact, just as it is a fact that a large number of veterans did suffer some amount of mistreatment on their return from Vietnam.

The best option for verifying a narrator’s information is to check it against other sources, such as documentation, although verification is not always available, which is of course one of the reasons for interviewing them in the first place. Therefore, the next best option is cross analysis with other interviewees.¹¹² Although it is not a foolproof methodology, logic states that the more people who offer the same answer to a question, the more likely it is to be accurate. A homecoming march in Adelaide in 1971 provided an interesting illustration of this method. Four separate veterans,

¹¹⁰ Ann Curthoys, “Vietnam: Public Memory of an Anti-War Movement” in Darian-Smith and Hamilton (Eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia*, pp.123-130.

¹¹¹ Vietnam Veteran Interview #8, 16 October 1999.

¹¹² Allen and Montell, *From Memory to History*, pp.76-77.

three from the battalion in question, and the other assisting in providing security, were all present at the march, and all recalled being targeted (physically and verbally) by a group of protestors.¹¹³ None of these men had seen each other since the march, neither were they particular friends at the time (two knew each other in Vietnam), and none of them knew I was interviewing any of the others. The other aspect that made the stories more believable was that there were subtle differences in each relating of the story. The facts remained fairly constant, but interpretations of the event were different with each individual, reducing the possibility of a created group memory. Although testimony from four people does not mean that the facts are unquestionably correct, logic suggests that the story is more likely true than not.

The oral historian must always be aware that some narrators may be prone to exaggerate, or on occasion, lie. Interviewers can ask questions more than once looking for inconsistencies, and a little digging can usually expose untruths. However, few narrators actually lie, particularly when long time periods have passed since the events. Mark Baker believes that most feel “obligated to relate their stories clearly and accurately” and when false information is given, it often has “more to do with metaphor than with deceit”.¹¹⁴ Information from an unreliable narrator can be ignored, and should be if their testimony reduces the authenticity of the research, but there are occasions when the answer is not so simple. A researcher must sometimes juggle between their responsibility to the community who is entrusting them with history, and their responsibility to the narrator who is entrusting them with their story.¹¹⁵

The interviewer creates the themes of the research topic and decides which questions to ask. Throughout the period of the interviews, the questions were refined. Some topics were dropped, while it became obvious that some important areas were being ignored. Donald Ritchie, a very experienced oral historian, tells the story of having done dozens of interviews on a topic when someone casually mentioned an important factor that he had overlooked. Horrified, he asked why no one had mentioned this to

¹¹³ Vietnam Veteran Interview #11, 18 October 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #12, 19 October 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #25, 1 November 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #26, 2 November 1999.

¹¹⁴ Baker, *Nam*, pp.13-14.

¹¹⁵ Sandy Polishuk, “Secrets, Lies and Misremembering: the perils of oral history interviewing”, *Frontiers* (September-December 1998), Web version available at Infotrac.

him before, and was told, “well, you didn’t ask”.¹¹⁶ Sometimes a question can elicit unexpected results. A question asked of the veterans, “how would you like history to remember the Vietnam War?”, which was originally added as an afterthought, provoked thoughtful and fascinating responses. The answers reflected long held feelings of hurt and anger, as well as an appreciation for an opportunity to express their opinions. Some claimed that it was the first time that they had shared their memories and said how much they appreciated my listening to them.¹¹⁷ Alistair Thomson had a similar experience with the World War I veterans he interviewed, finding it was often emotional.¹¹⁸

Personal involvement and feelings raise the question of objectivity and subjectivity, a much discussed topic amongst historians. Ideally, it is purported, a historian should be objective – a neutral observer. This is not a simple endeavour when living, breathing, talking, feeling sources are being used in the research. Some historians believe that a certain amount of subjectivity is necessary when producing oral history. Historian Saul Benison claims that in fact, objectivity does not exist in history at all, and if it did it would be as interesting as reading a telephone book.¹¹⁹ Yow has suggested that by pretending “there is nothing going on inside of us that is influencing the research and interpretation, we prevent ourselves from using an essential research tool”, and therefore by “understanding the subjective aspects of the research and interpretation so that we can carry out the project with as much objectivity as possible and use subjectivity to advantage”.¹²⁰ Portelli asserts that oral history not only provides information about history and its meanings, but also its psychological costs.¹²¹ The ultimate aim of the researcher therefore, should be to strike the most realistic balance obtainable between objectivity and subjectivity.

Oral history provides the community with the right to have their say as to how events are remembered. It has the ability to give worth to the lives of those who may have

¹¹⁶ Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York, 1995), p.21.

¹¹⁷ For a discussion on interviewer/interviewee relationships see: Valerie Yow, ““Do I like them too much?”: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-versa”, *The Oral History Review* (Summer 1997), Web version available at Infotrac.

¹¹⁸ Thomson, “Memory as a Battlefield”, p.67.

¹¹⁹ Saul Benison et al, “It’s Not the Song, It’s the Singing” in Ronald J. Grele (Ed), *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (New York 1991), p.85.

¹²⁰ Yow, “Do I like them too much?”

¹²¹ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p.50.

felt disenfranchised by traditional history. The Vietnam War provides an excellent example of events in the past that can benefit from oral history scholarship, particularly when analysed through the framework provided by the scholars of popular memory. The veterans interviewed all provided some unique facts or perspectives. Despite all the questions surrounding the reliability of the narrator, the power of the spoken word should never be underestimated. Memory may be fallible, facts may be questionable, but feelings are never “wrong”. Ultimately, that is what oral sources provide. They fill in the gaps left by documents, tell untold stories, and the emotions expressed give history a heart and soul that no piece of paper can ever supply. However, a study of the literature and veteran’s narratives about the Vietnam War has limited value without first providing a context for the research through an examination of the war itself, and its effects on Australian society and foreign policy.

A Large Price to Pay: Australia's Intervention in Vietnam



Gate posts at entrance to former Australian Task Force Base, Nui Dat, Vietnam - 1999

Chapter Two

The story of the Vietnam War is a cautionary tale for our time, the war story that can teach us most.

Samuel Hynes, *A Soldiers' Tale* (London, 1998), p.177

Australia was a different country in 1962. The long reign of conservatism was still at its height. It was a predominantly white and strongly Anglo country, both in population and attitudes, and communism was still considered the biggest threat to the accepted way of life. Few Australians had heard of Vietnam, let alone knew where it was in relation to their part of the world. A decade later, when Australia's military involvement officially ended in that country, after 60 000 Australians had been and gone from its shores, Australia had changed. The schisms caused by the war were so deep, and the reverberations so widely spread, that they are still apparent today. The Vietnam War proved to be a major catalyst for change in Australia. It altered the way Australia viewed the world, and the manner in which Australians viewed its governments and indeed their own place in the political process. It transfigured the way Australians had traditionally viewed war and military service, and how Australia regarded its allies. Most of all, it reshaped Australia's perception of its place in the world, and where that place would be in the future. There was much change in the world during the decade of the war, but for Australia, as for America, the compass directing it seemed suspended over a small Southeast Asian country. Australia's reasons for becoming involved in Vietnam were deceptively simple: self preservation. In reality, of course, there was no imminent threat of invasion, but involvement reflected the countries underlying sense of geographical and cultural isolation. Ultimately, it was the politics of security, rather than security itself that concerned Australia the most. Vietnam's effect on Australian politics and society has varied in importance through every stage of involvement, disengagement and recognition over the past three decades; from fear and support, to protest and denial, but its legacy should never be underestimated. Even though a generation has passed, Vietnam is still able to create controversy.

The Politics of Security

A conservative government had been in power for almost a generation by the mid - sixties, reflecting for the most part, a conservative society.¹ There was a sense of stability throughout the polity with generally consistent high economic growth, low

¹ This section draws significantly from Chapter One of Edwards, *A Nation at War*.

unemployment, and – on the surface at least – a continued sense of homogeneity. The turmoil of the rest of the world often seemed far away. However, this sense of general confidence should not be mistaken for an ignorance of world events. Australians were only too aware that the world was not always a friendly place. Communism was considered the predominant threat to all this prosperity and stability. Various developments during the fifties and sixties had weakened the modest communist groups in Australia, but it was still the 'resident evil' in Australian society. The average Australian did not spend a lot of time worrying about the immediate threat of communist infestation, but most believed, as the Government regularly reminded them, that it was a dark shadow lurking not far from Australia's shores, and that they had to be ever vigilant.² Instability in Malaysia and Indonesia assisted in keeping the concerns fresh in the minds of the public. Troops had been sent to Malaysia in 1965, but it was Indonesia with its immense population in such close proximity to Australia that was foremost in the minds of the policy makers. It was a period of "alarm and distrust" of the direction being taken by Indonesia, and of the "potential of the apparently evolving 'Peking-Jakarta axis'."³ Belief in the basic concept of the Domino Principle was widespread, with Edwards claiming that in the mid-sixties, this belief was "deeply embedded in the national psyche",⁴ providing justification for the ideals of forward defence in order to prevent the dominos landing on Australia's doorstep.

Australia's fear of communism extended to alarm when it came to China. Australia had historically feared China, but the feeling increased when the 'yellow hordes' took on a red hue. By the early sixties, the Australian government considered China to be a direct threat.⁵ It was seen as expansionist and imminently hostile, and became the

² For discussion on the impact of communism on Australian society, see for example: A.C. Palfreeman, "The Political Objectives" in F.A. Mediansky and A.C. Palfreeman (Eds), *In Pursuit of National Interests: Australian Foreign Policy in the 1990s* (Sydney, 1988), pp.87-90.

³ Coral Bell, *Dependent Ally: A Study in Australian Foreign Policy* (Melbourne, 1988), p.73.

⁴ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.49. The Domino Principle had various forms after originally being introduced by America's President Eisenhower in 1954, and was applied to Southeast Asia in the fifties and sixties. Basically, it was the belief that if one country was allowed to fall to communism, that the others would also succumb. For a more recent discussion of the reasons for Australia's decisions and policies, see: Garry Woodard, *Asian Alternatives: Australia's Vietnam Decision and Lessons on Going to War* (Melbourne, 2004).

⁵ Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, pp.35-36.

basis of the overall threat to Australia from Asia.⁶ The wisdom of the period perceived the Vietnam War as being conducted from Peking (Beijing) rather than Hanoi. The belief of Chinese expansionism had led to the establishment in 1955 of a Far East Strategic Reserve in Malaya, with Indochina being one of its areas of concern; a belief that strengthened throughout the next decade.⁷ North Vietnam was portrayed as the “puppet” of communist China,⁸ a conviction that was vastly oversimplified in the face of the complicated relationship between the two countries. Vietnam and China were traditionally enemies, and the countries’ mutual hostility was not overcome by mutual ideology. North Vietnam was in fact, anxious to improve its relations with the Soviet Union in preference to China, and had put considerable effort into the task,⁹ as it would again after the war. Certainly, China did make a significant contribution to the North Vietnamese war effort at various times, particularly in arms, but tensions between the two remained. Despite the facts of the situation, the Australian Government insisted throughout the war that its main reason for intervention in Vietnam was the threat from China,¹⁰ and it was used consistently as the major argument against opposition whenever the matter was debated, even long after it was demonstrably incorrect.

The United States had been involved in Vietnam in some form since the French were ousted in 1954. By 1961, with the country still split at the 17th parallel and the South crumbling under the pressure of the communist North and internal strife, America decided that more pronounced intervention was necessary in order to check the spread of communism. It did not however, want to carry the burden alone, at the very least politically, and called for other willing participants. America was particularly looking for Western democracies for an exercise similar to the United Nations’ joint commitment in the Korean War. Although some made sympathetic overtures,

⁶ Perhaps one of the most interesting illustrations of this paranoia towards China occurred in a little known visit to the Soviet Union in 1964 by then External Affairs Minister, Paul Hasluck. Hasluck met with Foreign Minister Gromyko and Premier Kosygin to warn them of his government's belief that China was threatening to expand into Soviet territory, as it was into Asia. Hasluck left the Soviets bemused, but unconcerned, in his less than subtle attempt to secure Soviet assistance in containing China. The ultimate irony was that the Soviet Union would give North Vietnam considerable support; more than any other country that contributed to the North Vietnamese. Gregory Clark, "Vietnam, China, and the Foreign affairs Debate in Australia" in King, *Australia's Vietnam*, pp.18-19.

⁷ Edwards & Pemberton, *Crises and Commitments*, p163.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.300.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.194

¹⁰ See for example speeches from the time of the commitment: *Ibid.*, pp.372-373.

Australia's was the only hand up,¹¹ and it was not just raised, it was waving fervently. Over the next few years, Australia's rarely wavering enthusiasm for intervention in Vietnam - particularly American intervention - would sometimes even surpass that of the United States.¹²

Australia had two major motivations for supporting America in Vietnam, although both had the same desired outcome. The notion that Australia needed its great and powerful friends for protection was well entrenched in the thinking and the policy of successive governments. During the sixties it was becoming increasingly obvious that Britain could no longer be relied upon in the region, despite several joint operations such as the Malaysian Emergency. Australia had begun to focus on cementing its relationship with America since the Second World War, pushing for agreements such as the ANZUS treaty. Developments, such as concern over the seemingly deteriorating situation in Indonesia, only served to strengthen this policy. Vietnam offered a perfect opportunity for Australia to prove its loyalty and commitment to America. The Government reasoned that if Australia supported American policy, then the protection of Australia might become American policy.¹³ Intervention in Vietnam became what was termed, "a very small insurance policy" against any future threats, or as Coral Bell would later claim, it could be "interpreted as the largest single 'debit entry' in a cost benefit analysis of the US alliance relationship".¹⁴ Vietnam could strengthen the rather non-committal wording of the ANZUS treaty.

Australia also realised that, without an ally, the United States may well have pulled out of Southeast Asia, as it had threatened to do.¹⁵ This caused great anxiety in Australia as it considered America's continued engagement in the region essential for

¹¹ Australia – with an attached contingent from New Zealand - was the only Western democracy to offer unequivocal support, although South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan and later Thailand, all sent troops. They did not, however, fit the profile of allies that the USA were seeking, and neither were they self-funding. Ironically, many Americans, including statesmen from that era, appear to have forgotten this, as illustrated by Robert McNamara's statement in the documentary *The Fog of War* (2003) that the US had been abandoned by all of its traditional allies in Vietnam.

¹² There are now various good studies on Australia's role in the escalation of the involvement in Vietnam, particularly: Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, and Sexton, *War for the Asking*; Edwards & Pemberton, *Crises and Commitments*; and Bell, *Dependent Ally*.

¹³ Sexton, *War for the Asking*, p.2.

¹⁴ Bell, *Dependent Ally*, p.69.

¹⁵ Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, pp.43-44.

Australian security, particularly against communism. This concern had been recognised as early as 1948, when Minister for External Affairs, John Burton expressed concern that the United States “appeared to be interested almost exclusively in Europe, and he urged that attempts be made to enliven American interest in the region”.¹⁶ Therefore the Australian Government believed that the only way to keep the United States in Vietnam was to join it there, and encouraged other countries to do the same. Thirty army advisers were sent in May 1962. Over the next three years that number would gradually increase, and would also include aircraft and various other forms of aid. Prime Minister Menzies made the announcement on 29 April 1965 that combat troops were to be dispatched on the request of the government of South Vietnam.¹⁷ Australia's war in Vietnam had begun in earnest.

There was little opposition to the initial decisions for intervention, and in fact, little public debate. The government did not encourage debate on the issue, as with most aspects of foreign policy. Some commentators have suggested that the long period of conservative rule, and its continuing popularity, had caused a complacent arrogance.¹⁸ This seems to be reflected in society and also to some extent in the media. Despite the legendary cynicism of Australians about their politicians, the majority appeared to trust the government on foreign and defence policy issues,¹⁹ or at least enough not to question it to any significant degree. Besides which, military commitment in an Asian country was not a new or radically different approach, but largely a continuation of a policy that had been followed since the 1940s.

Perhaps the primary reason for the lack of any significant debate was the weakness of the Opposition. The Australian Labor Party had suffered nearly two decades of crippling splits and divisions, and in 1965 was still in a state of disagreement and disorganisation. The party could not agree on an opinion towards intervention in Vietnam - although there had been general support up until the commitment of

¹⁶ Edwards & Pemberton, *Crises and Commitments*, pp.54-55.

¹⁷ The “request” by South Vietnam caused much controversy. Australia offered to contribute a battalion, and asked the United States to make the arrangements with the South Vietnamese. The United States instructed South Vietnam to make the request, but there was much dithering and confusion. Menzies had to delay the announcement as the request had not arrived, and when it finally did, its wording was vague to say the least. Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, pp.101-105.

¹⁸ Edwards, “Vietnam - What the Documents Reveal”, p.49.

¹⁹ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, pp.2-3.

combat troops²⁰ - and would not have a collective and firm policy about Vietnam until 1969. Labor included some vocal protesters, such as Jim Cairns and Tom Uren, who would become important in the peace movement, but in the early days, their audience was contained in the small, but well established peace movement in Australia. Initial opposition to Vietnam was particularly based around the sending of conscripts and the idea of the National Service lottery. National Service had been introduced in 1964²¹ with a high level of support, but the attitude of acceptance changed somewhat when it was announced that National Servicemen would be eligible for overseas service. Although protest took on a wider context as the war progressed, conscription was always the issue that galvanised the most opposition.

Harold Holt took the reins from a retiring Robert Menzies in 1966, bringing with him a fresh approach to the role of prime minister. He was more charismatic, projecting the image of having stepped directly from "Hollywood casting" and enthusiastically encouraged increased media attention.²² Holt displayed a different attitude to foreign relations, seeming anxious to reduce some of Menzies' "Britishness" from the policies. He was also committed to Vietnam, announcing in March an increase in the commitment to the level of a task force. The announcement brought a surprisingly large backlash with an intensity that shocked many.²³ The Government realised that although the majority still supported the policy, action was required to cement this level of support, particularly with an election looming that December. So began a "hard sell" campaign which finally brought debate into the public arena.

Holt's promotion of the campaign included trips to Washington and to Vietnam, where he visited Australian troops in the field. He took along large media contingents on his overseas trips, which was a radical departure from his predecessors.²⁴ Holt wanted to be seen and heard. There was increased debate about Vietnam both inside and outside parliament. Labor leader Arthur Calwell strongly opposed the increased commitment, but handled the task poorly, and was unable to

²⁰ Kim C. Beazley, "Federal Labor and the Vietnam Commitment" in King (Ed), *Australia's Vietnam*, pp.37-41.

²¹ National Service was introduced as part of an overall plan to build up the military, with problems in Indonesia foremost in the minds of the government.

²² Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, p.125.

²³ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.96.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.107-108.

harness much support even from within his own party.²⁵ The high point of Holt's campaign came in October with a visit by the President of the United States. Lyndon Johnson's visit was seen by the Government to serve two important purposes - to demonstrate to America the strong commitment of Australia, and to show the Australian people how much America appreciated and valued their support. Politicians called on the public to show the President a warm welcome, and it did not disappoint, with spectators turning out in their thousands: ironically, the enthusiastic crowds raised more security concerns than any of the protests. There were some protests, and two youths splattered the President's car with paint in the colours of the Viet Cong National Liberation Front (NLF), but even that was portrayed as "the effervescence of youthful gaiety and jocularly excited to fever pitch" at the visit.²⁶ Holt reiterated his promise to go "all the way" with America in Vietnam, and he certainly seemed to have the support of the Australian people. He and his coalition government were re-elected with an increased majority in November 1966 - the biggest election victory until that time in Australian history.²⁷

Escalation and Division

During 1967, Holt felt empowered by his massive election victory, considering it a rubber stamp on his policies, including (and perhaps, particularly) Vietnam. He agreed to American requests and made the decision to send a third battalion against the counsel of official advisers and an unenthusiastic cabinet, and without consultation with the South Vietnamese government, who were informed after the fact.²⁸ The third battalion would join the Australian task force at Phuoc Tuy, a province to the south-east of Saigon. The military had preferred to keep most of the Australian forces together to give it some autonomy from the Americans, although it was still under US command. But ultimately, the decision was more about politics than military strategy. The Government needed the Australian task force to stand out and not be swallowed up by the Americans,²⁹ who in 1967, numbered nearly half a million. Holt was particularly concerned with keeping America's attention as Britain began to accelerate its policy to move the borders of its foreign involvements and

²⁵ Beazley, "Federal Labor and the Vietnam Conflict", pp.46-50.

²⁶ Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, p.143.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.148.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.159-161. See also: Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.155.

²⁹ Frank Frost, "Australia's War in Vietnam 1962-1972" in King, *Australia's Vietnam*, p.60.

sphere of influence back to the Suez Canal; a plan intended to remove most of the British presence from the South East Asia region.³⁰ Australia had known of the British policy for some time, but as it began to come to fruition, a sense of desperation gripped the Government; a desperation that spilled into foreign policy, where it would float like an oil slick, affecting decisions for years.

The election proved to be politically fatal for Arthur Calwell, and he was replaced by Gough Whitlam in 1967. Whitlam immediately began to pull the party back together. He carefully took a middle road on the Vietnam issue; refusing to back the growing protest movement, but also using Vietnam as a club with which to bash the Government when he felt it appropriate.³¹ Whitlam was a pragmatist. He was aware how much damage Vietnam had done to Labor at the election, and was determined it would not happen again. He focused the party's policies on domestic issues, while throughout the next two years he created a great deal of mileage out of the Coalition's growing foreign policy problems - particularly Vietnam - while never really outlining Labor's policy. Despite continuing deep divisions within the party, Whitlam managed to give the impression of a united front, and Labor's popular support started to slowly rise.

Changing attitudes towards Australia's involvement in Vietnam began to emerge more strongly in 1967-68, whereas previously public opposition had been contained to a passionate few.³² One of the reasons for change was that the "baby boomers" were coming of age in the mid-sixties, with 38.5% of the population under 20 years old. They had not known war, depression or any other serious instability, and many began to question conservative ideals, thereby questioning the Government. The general apathy towards becoming involved in political activity began to show cracks. This was reflected in a continuing rise in both moderate and radical dissent. Organisations such as Save Our Sons (SOS) and Youth Against Conscription had growing support, but more radical groups, such as those from the "New Left"³³ also

³⁰ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, pp. 148-149.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 162-163.

³² Ann Curthoys, "The Anti-War Movements", in Grey & Doyle, *Vietnam: War, Myth and Memory*, p.95.

³³ The "New Left" began as a revisionist Marxist movement which had a small following worldwide. It filtered through the universities, becoming the basis for some of the Labor Clubs and other more radical student groups.

began to emerge strongly. The actions of the police during the visits of Johnson and Vietnam's Prime Minister Ky only managed to increase antagonism, and elicited sympathy for the protesters from some quarters. Most were shocked by the rise of civil disobedience, but at the same time many who had never protested against anything in their lives, were becoming willing to break the law.³⁴ Intervention in Vietnam became symbolic of everything the demonstrators believed was wrong with the world and their own societies. During 1968-69 protest increased, as did the level of violence, most memorably with the 4 July demonstrations in both years. Monash University was at the time one of the most notable arenas of radical dissent through its Labor Club. The organisation became notorious for its open support of the NLF, even sending money and supplies.³⁵ In previous Australian wars, actions such as these would have been considered treasonous, but the traditional lines between the right and wrong side had become blurred.

The media had played no small part in the continuing majority public support in the earlier years of the war. Most of Australia's major newspapers showed overwhelming support for the involvement, and high profile protesters, such as Bruce Anderson, have claimed that it was extremely difficult even to get letters of opposition printed.³⁶ Those who opposed the war were generally not portrayed sympathetically in most of the mainstream media. The situation was not improved by the fact that Australia had no permanent journalists dedicated to the Indo-China region.³⁷ Most reporting came via the Americans, especially the images seen on the nation's television sets every evening. Some journalists found themselves intimidated for not toeing the official line. Protest groups had trouble buying advertising, and Bruce Anderson's organisation "Committee for the Statement on Vietnam", which represented a large moderate opposition, including high profile members of the community, was refused advertising space more than once in newspapers such as *The Age*.³⁸ However, as the war progressed - or more correctly, did not progress - some of the media began to reflect the growing doubts of the community at large. During 1969, full page advertisements, paid for by public donations, appeared in major newspapers printed

³⁴ See for example: Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.167-168; Langley, *A Decade of Dissent*.

³⁵ Langley, *A Decade of Dissent*, p.89.

³⁶ Bruce Anderson, "Vietnam and the Media" in *Overland* (Spring, 1996), p.66.

³⁷ Rodney Tiffen, "News Coverage of Vietnam" in King (Ed), *Australia's Vietnam*, p.166.

³⁸ Anderson, "Vietnam and the Media", pp.65-66.

with hundreds of names of prominent Australian's encouraging young men to refuse to register for National Service.

Fate intervened for Harold Holt at the end of 1967, his mysterious death coming among increasing domestic and external problems. John Gorton had been prime minister for three weeks when the complexion of the war was changed by the Tet Offensive.³⁹ Tet proved to be a military victory for the South aligned forces, but it was psychologically damaging, and became a political nightmare for the American and Australian Governments. Doubts had been raised about the course and the outcome of the war prior to the offensive, but the Government had insisted (and in fact appeared to believe) that everything was going well and victory against the communists was assured.⁴⁰ Tet made the public aware that the war was not going to have a quick, or happy, ending. Certainty was waning and more questions were being raised about its overall morality. If Tet made the Vietnam question difficult in Australia, it was a disaster in America. Lyndon Johnson was unable to salvage the situation as the death toll rose and deepening divisions began to dislocate his country. Stanley Karnow claimed that "his credibility – the key to a president's capacity to govern – was gone."⁴¹ He withdrew his nomination for a second term and by year's end, Republican Richard Nixon was in the White House, ushering in a period in which "more Americans would be killed in Vietnam than had died there previously. And the United States itself would be torn apart by the worst internal upheavals in a century."⁴² Australia's policies were so closely aligned with America's that any problems and changes that occurred there, would have repercussions in Australia. Singapore's prime minister, Lee Kwan Yew, a supporter of intervention in Vietnam, commented prophetically in an interview in 1965; "Well, you have to pay your premium for American protection; but, my word, the price is really rising."⁴³

Nixon came to office with the realisation that disentangling his country from Vietnam

³⁹ The Tet Offensive was launched on January 30 1968, the Vietnamese New Year Holiday, during a cease fire, while many of the South Vietnamese allied forces were on leave. The offensive was well coordinated and attacked on dozens of fronts. NVA soldiers even made it into the US Embassy grounds in Saigon and occupied the city of Hue for nearly a week. Casualties were very high, and this proved to be a turning point in the war.

⁴⁰ For an extended discussion see: Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*.

⁴¹ Karnow, *Vietnam*, p.559.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.581.

⁴³ Cited in Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.31.

was going to be extremely difficult. The President was keen to ensure that America not find itself in the same predicament again. He outlined his Administration's policy in what became known as the Guam (or Nixon) Doctrine in 1969. This encouraged countries to take more responsibility for the defence of their own neighbourhood, and gave a strong indication that after Vietnam, the USA would withdraw from the region. The announcement, the contents of which Australia apparently had no hint, terrified the Australian Government, which in the wake of continuing British withdrawals, had all its hopes pinned on the United States for future security.⁴⁴ Suddenly the "insurance policy" did not seem so secure, with the viability of future claims seemingly damaged by the new terms and conditions.

There was also a growing realisation that the theory of the Domino Principle was unfounded, or at least over-estimated.⁴⁵ Politics in Southeast Asia was stabilising, with the obvious exception of Indo-China, with communist groups losing popular support. The reduced level of threat compounded the doubt that the United States would continue to police the area after Vietnam. Recognition of the changing situation not only provided fuel for the anti-war protesters, but also exposed massive problems in foreign policy. The two components, of communism and insurance, had been Australia's major motivations for going to war in Vietnam, and now they were disappearing. Shortly after the revelation of the Guam Doctrine, Nixon announced the first withdrawal of American combat forces from Vietnam. Although he encouraged its allies not to reduce their commitment yet, he did suggest some options to the Australian Government.⁴⁶

Despite the changing character of the situation, the Government made no attempt to alter any of the elements of its foreign policy. There was an unwillingness to part with any of the conservative ideals that had provided the basis for the Coalition's

⁴⁴ Murphy, *Harvest of Fear*, pp.201-206.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, pp.343-345. While most commentators agree, there are some who argue that the theory was basically correct, and would have been proved had no one intervened in Vietnam, giving other countries the opportunity to stabilise. For example see: Jeffrey Grey, "Lest We Forget the Facts", *The Bulletin* (28 December 1993 / 4 January 1994), pp.47-49; Michael Lind, *A Necessary War*.

⁴⁶ Nixon strongly hinted that if Australia would provide more economic aid to South Vietnam, then there would be no political repercussions to the withdrawal of some of the force. However, Australia hesitated to withdraw any troops as the three battalions made up a complete task force. See: Edwards, *A Nation at War*, pp.239-240.

twenty year reign throughout the height of the Cold War.⁴⁷ Gorton reiterated this on a visit to Washington later in 1969, when he promised Nixon that Australia would continue to "go waltzing Matilda" with America. But the electoral majority that had seemed unbeatable in 1968, looked shaky in 1969. Labor finally had a firm policy on Vietnam. It promised withdrawal as soon as practicable and no more sending conscripts to serve overseas, except in the face of a direct threat. Labor also planned to urge America to stop the bombing and provide recognition to the NLF in negotiations. The Coalition still won the election, but it was very close, with its parliamentary majority falling from 39 to 7. The Vietnam issue was down-played in the aftermath, but no other convincing reason could be floated. In retrospect, it was a bigger factor than it seemed at the time.

By 1970, more emphatic changes were appearing in the public's perception of Vietnam. The war was dragging on with no apparent solution in sight. The spectre of controversies such as the massacre at My Lai, and the activities of the American anti-war movement provided impetus for increasing protest. It is no small irony that while the government was aligning its policies with American ones, the Australian protest movement was taking its cue from its American counterparts, all the while shouting anti-American slogans.⁴⁸ Anti-war organisations often invited high profile American protesters to Australia to speak, just as the government had with Johnson and others. The American anti-war movement also provided the inspiration for the most important and successful protest against the war - the Moratorium.⁴⁹ The government viewed the Moratorium movement as a dangerous threat to the social fabric. The government portrayed the participants in the media as part of a communist front and expected violence. Labor refused to sanction the protest - although it attracted support from some of the party - as it did not want to be identified with an event with such a potential for volatility.⁵⁰ People were advised to stay away, advice that seemed unheeded on 8 May when up to 100 000 turned out in

⁴⁷ Murphy, *Harvest of Fear*, pp.202-205.

⁴⁸ This is not to suggest that the protest movement was primarily American inspired, as Australian anti-war protest groups had a small, but committed following throughout the 1950s-60s and beyond.

⁴⁹ State Moratorium Committees (VMCs) were established in January 1970, and were well organised. The VMCs consisted mainly of moderates and already established groups, but soon realised it would have to make certain compromises to retain the support of the radicals. Edwards, *A Nation at War*, pp.248-249.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.255-256.

Melbourne alone, with an estimated 250 000 throughout the country joining the mostly peaceful protest.

Nixon announced more troop withdrawals, and continued pressure caused Gorton to decide in April 1970 that the currently deployed 8RAR battalion would not be replaced when its tour finished in Vietnam in November. He promised more withdrawals if the new phase of "Vietnamisation" was successful.⁵¹ Through these assertions, Gorton insinuated the withdrawals meant that things were going well on the ground in Vietnam. The government continued to refuse to admit (perhaps even to itself) the possibility that the war might not be winnable. The fact was that the scaling down of Australia's commitment had more to do with following America's lead, than with what was actually happening in Vietnam. Then again, the whole involvement had always been more about America than about Vietnam.

After the success of the first Moratorium, some of the protests and groups became more radical, with greater divisions arising, and more vocal support for the NLF. Despite this, the second Moratorium later in the year was still quite large and mostly peaceful.⁵² Figures released about the levels of non-compliance to the draft proved embarrassing to the Government.⁵³ Over the course of the war, several resisters were jailed, ironically providing much more support and ammunition to the anti-conscription groups. The Government announced more troop withdrawals in March 1971, causing interest in the anti-war movement to begin to wane. However, the third Moratorium was given an unexpected boost by the release of the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971. The documents exposed some of the lies told by the governments in relation to the Vietnam involvement. The focus of the *Pentagon Papers* was predominantly the conduct of the American Government, but as Edwards pointed out in his official history, "because the Australian Government had identified itself so closely with the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.244. "Vietnamisation" was a policy whereby control of the war would be given back to the South Vietnamese. It was not very successful, but provided an excuse for the USA and Australia to get out of Vietnam.

⁵² There were some ugly incidents in Sydney and Adelaide, provoked mainly by the tension caused by the new "Law and Order" campaigns of those states, aimed at the protesters.

⁵³ Langley, *Decade of Dissent*, p.150. The Draft Resisters Union (DRU) promoted the figures in an attempt to goad the government into taking more action against the resisters in an effort to highlight the cause. The DRU - with the assistance of other groups such as SOS - operated an "underground" for resisters, but the main purpose of the organisation was to obstruct the National Service scheme in any way possible until it became unworkable.

United States administration, it too began to be associated with the credibility gap".⁵⁴ There was also a growing realisation that Australia's importance as an ally had somewhat diminished,⁵⁵ and William McMahon⁵⁶ took the opportunity to speed up troop withdrawals. Despite remain publicly positive about Vietnam, privately the establishment was attempting to make sure that it would not be repeated. The Defence Committee determined in March 1971 that "not again would Australia be likely to commit ground forces to counterinsurgency operations unless her own security was directly affected."⁵⁷ Problems continued for the Coalition throughout 1972, and the slogan for the Labor election campaign, "It's Time", seemed appropriate. Labor won the December election, though the margin was narrow.

Gough Whitlam became Prime Minister on 2 December 1972. He immediately established a temporary cabinet with deputy Lance Barnard, in order to begin his extensive program of reforms without delay. Among the first of these was to order the remaining advisers home from Vietnam.⁵⁸ Conscription was halted, jailed dissenters were released, and pending action against the rest was dropped.⁵⁹ Whitlam also began dismantling the National Service scheme. Plans for major reforms in foreign policy were begun which the Government hoped would herald a new era of increased independence of policy from the influence of the major powers. The first Labor Government in twenty-three years had big plans, and the expectations of its supporters were even higher.⁶⁰

The infant Whitlam Government was plunged into the first of its many foreign policy controversies within a fortnight, with the 'Christmas Bombing' incident. After a long period of failed negotiations, President Nixon attempted to push North Vietnam back

⁵⁴ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.66.

⁵⁵ The Government severely criticised Whitlam for visiting China in mid-1971, only to discover that United States Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, was there at the same time making overtures to re-open relations between the countries. The Australian Government was embarrassed and angry that the American administration had not informed it of its proposed change in policy. *Ibid.*, p.303.

⁵⁶ McMahon replaced Gorton, on his resignation, in March 1971 after a long period of growing division in the Liberal Party.

⁵⁷ Ian McNeill, "The Australian Army and the Vietnam War" in Pierce, Grey & Doyle (Eds), *Vietnam Days*, p.11.

⁵⁸ While it is popularly believed that Whitlam brought home the troops from Vietnam, the last of the battalions were already home. Only a handful of advisers and support staff remained.

⁵⁹ American President, Jimmy Carter, would take similar action in 1976, as one of his first acts in office.

⁶⁰ Pierce, Grey & Doyle, "Introduction", *Vietnam Days*, p.2.

to the conference table with an extensive bombing campaign of the Hanoi - Haiphong area. More bombs were dropped in the eleven days between 18 and 29 December, than in the previous three years in all Indo-China.⁶¹ Condemnation was world-wide, and created a backlash of violent protests. Whitlam was publicly restrained, but privately sent a strongly worded letter to Nixon. The President was so furious he refused to answer the letter, placing Australia amongst the least favoured Western nations for a time.⁶² It was a long drop from most trusted ally.

A hard won peace agreement brought an official cease fire to Vietnam on 27 January 1973. The bulk of the remaining American troops were withdrawn, with a promise to return to assist South Vietnam if the agreement was broken. Australia established diplomatic relations with Hanoi with almost indecent haste, while also retaining its relations with the beleaguered Saigon Government.⁶³ Australia's war in Vietnam was officially over, but the divisions it caused within society were a long way from being healed. The election of Whitlam was seen as a great victory for the protest movement, but with all the troops home and conscription dissolved, the movement lost its momentum. There were still Vietnam related protests, such as over the 'Christmas Bombing', but it was mainly left to the more radical groups. Instead, demonstrations began branching out into other areas of concern. The anti-Vietnam War movement became the launching pad for wider community involvement in various other campaigns and causes - whose origins pre-dated Vietnam - such as the women's movement, Aboriginal rights, environmental issues and nuclear disarmament. The community as a whole began to recognise that elections were not the only way to protest against the government's policies.

The Military Experience

59 520 Australian men and women served in the Vietnam War.⁶⁴ The first Australian military personnel sent to Vietnam in 1962 were advisers with the Australian Army

⁶¹ It would be revealed some years later, that bombing in Cambodia and Laos was considerably more extensive than admitted at the time. It is believed that more bombs were dropped on Cambodia than on all of Europe in World War II.

⁶² Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.323.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.325.

⁶⁴ Army: 41 435; RAAF: 4 544; RAN: 12 376. The balance served in support of the military. Source: Veterans Support and Advocacy Service of Australia, "Statistical Data on the Vietnam War" (22 August 2000), www.ausvets.powerup.com.au/vietnam/vietnam.htm.

Training Team Vietnam (AATTV), which remained in Vietnam throughout the intervention. The first of the sixteen battalions of combat soldiers was sent in 1965 and was attached to the American 173rd Airborne Division at Bien Hoa, about 100 kilometres north of Saigon. When Australia increased its commitment to the level of a Task Force in 1966, it was decided to move to Phuoc Tuy province. The Australian Task Force (ATF) base was established at Nui Dat, in a central area of the province, while the headquarters was strategically placed on the coast at the seaside resort town of Vung Tau. Phuoc Tuy province linked Saigon - and therefore the South Vietnamese Government and the American Military Command - to the South China Sea, providing what was considered to be an important supply and reinforcement artery to the capital. Phuoc Tuy had been a Viet Cong (VC) stronghold, with the main highway between Saigon and the coast occasionally impassable and dangerous, but after the arrival of the Australian Task Force, the road remained open and safe.⁶⁵

While the bulk of the Australian forces were based in Phuoc Tuy, a number of others served in different areas of South Vietnam. Some air force squadrons were based at American airfields such as Phan Rang on the central coast, or in Saigon. Members of the AATTV served all over the country, and other small groups or individuals were sometimes assigned to American or South Vietnamese units. However, all battalions except for the first in 1965, worked out of Nui Dat.

Approximately 18000 National Servicemen served in Vietnam: almost half of all army personnel. They were integrated into the ranks of the regular soldiers and received an equal level of training, and many went into the infantry. The average age of an infantry soldier in Vietnam was 20 years of age, down from 26 in WWII, a situation likely influenced by the large numbers of National Servicemen who were conscripted at 20 years of age. One of the differences between Vietnam and previous wars was the lack of a clear frontline - as the war was everywhere - which resulted in Australian infantry soldiers having an average of 314 days in combat in a 1 year period. This was vastly different from WWII, in which an infantry soldier in the South Pacific arena of the war for example, saw an average of 40 days of combat.

⁶⁵ For a more detailed discussion of Phuoc Tuy province and the ATF see: McNeill, *To Long Tan*; Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*, pp.29-52; Burstall, *Vietnam*, pp.54-68. Burstall claims that in retrospect, Phuoc Tuy was not as strategically important as it was made out to be at the time, although it became important in 1975 when the North made its push into the South.

Australians suffered 3642 non-fatal casualties, with 2400 of those occurring in action. 508 Australians died in Vietnam.⁶⁶

* * *

Australia might have withdrawn its forces, but the war in Vietnam was by no means over. In 1975, North Vietnam made a major push into the South with some of the fiercest battles Vietnam had ever seen. The promised help never eventuated, and the rest of the world watched the final act safely from the wings. In early April, Whitlam wrote to both the North and South governments, urging them to work it out peacefully. A couple of months later, it was revealed that the contents of the letters were much more sympathetic to the aspirations of Hanoi, than to the predicament of Saigon.⁶⁷ Although controversial, it is hardly surprising considering the barely suppressed satisfaction of many in the Government that Vietnam would soon be reunified.⁶⁸ However, it did seem tactless, and perhaps hypocritical, coming from a country that had spent ten years fighting on the opposite side. It was also seen to denigrate the sacrifices of those Australians that had fought and died at the previous Government's behest. Ultimately though, it seemed obvious that Hanoi would be the victor, and the Whitlam Government was unwilling to do anything to damage the "hard won" relationship with its government.⁶⁹

The image on televisions everywhere, of the continuous convoy of helicopters evacuating the final few from the roof of the American Embassy became one of the most evocative in the social memory of the Vietnam War. It became symbolic of a notorious and failed venture that would haunt its participants long after the whirr of the rotors could no longer be heard. Saigon was surrendered to the communists on 30

⁶⁶ The statistics for this section were sourced from: VSASA, *Statistical Data on the Vietnam War*. There are varying figures on the number of deaths ranging from 490 to 520. VSASA's figures are sourced from the Australian Defence Force. The comparatives with WWII obviously differ between theatres and length and division of service, but are the statistics most widely accepted.

⁶⁷ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, pp.336-337.

⁶⁸ Tom Uren, *Straight Left* (Sydney, 1994), pp.201-202.

⁶⁹ Charles A. Price, "Immigration and Ethnic Affairs" in Allan Patience and Brian Head (Eds), *From Whitlam to Fraser: Reform and Reaction in Australian Politics* (Melbourne, 1979), p.208.

April.⁷⁰ The Australian Government recognised the interim Vietnamese government on 6 May. The war continued for the Vietnamese in some form or another, but neither had it reached a satisfactory conclusion in Australia. As the seventies came to a close, more was being revealed of the lies told by the Australian and American governments during the Vietnam conflict, but an atmosphere of apathy and denial had settled over the country. A new battle began as Vietnam Veterans struggled to find their place, both in history, and in a society that was not interested in them.

Australia's involvement in Vietnam proved to be a turning point in both the political climate and social attitudes. Military service, and therefore war itself, is no longer considered a rite of passage in Australian life. Although it is now recognised that Australian troops conducted themselves with honour in Vietnam, as their forebears had in previous conflicts, it still fails to ignite the collective pride and admiration afforded the two world wars. The Vietnam War also provided a catalyst for social change through protest movements on other issues, and made civic disobedience and protest on matters of conscience more acceptable. The conservative parties lost much of their political domination, and had to wait more than two decades to retain a firm hold on power. Despite the victory of Vietnam, communism lost its power throughout the world, as an ideology as well as a threat, and therefore, so did anti-communist groups such as the Democratic Labor Party, and even organisations like ASIO. There has also been a tendency for people to regard their governments more cynically. The actions of the governments in regard to Vietnam cannot be held solely responsible for the increased cynicism, but it certainly widened the credibility gap.

Bruce Grant prophetically stated in 1971 that “historians of the Vietnam War will have the same problem Thucydides had with the Peloponnesian Wars. You begin with a military history and find yourself writing about civilisation.”⁷¹ The study of the war does find its way to the study of civilisation, and there are few adequate

⁷⁰ Whitlam dallied for weeks over the decision about who and how many Australia should assist out of South Vietnam, afraid of offending Hanoi. The official decision was made only a couple of days before the evacuation of the Australian Embassy in Saigon on 25 April. In two days, 3660 applied, 366 were officially approved, but owing to the constraints of time and available transport, only 76 made it out. Vietnamese who had worked for the Embassy for years were among those left behind on ANZAC Day 1975. The United States managed to get 130 000 out to the waiting Seventh Fleet. Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.336.

⁷¹ Bruce Grant, *The Age*, 21 August 1971. (Cited in Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.340).

conclusions, but it is also the study of victims. All wars have victims, but with Vietnam, everyone who was involved seems to have become one. There are those who fought, and those who did not, the society that was divided, the politicians and their governments, not to mention the often forgotten people whose country became the "line in the sand" for East-West tensions. Vietnam became a quagmire that could not be resolved simply by the removal of troops from its shores, and neither could it be resolved by the culture of denial that appeared in the aftermath. The situation was rarely better described than by Barclay:

Australia's Vietnam adventure was over. The insurance premiums had been higher than anybody could have expected; and the policy seemed to have more fine print about it than ever.⁷²

Every year, more Vietnam veterans march on Anzac Day, and Long Tan Day attracts more publicity, but as the veterans get older, their struggles do not necessarily decrease. When the Australian Government committed itself to Vietnam in 1962, it did not simply commit thirty advisers, or later three battalions, but rather, it committed the whole society to a decade of upheavals from which there would be no turning back. It does not necessarily follow that the repercussions of all upheavals would be bad, but history has shown that there is a price to be paid for social change. Vietnam veterans are still calculating the cost.

⁷² Barclay, *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, p.164.

"My Grandpa was a great old soldier":
The Veterans



Cross erected at Long Tan by Australians - 1999

Chapter Three

"Sounds crazy now, but it seemed like a good idea at the time".
Veteran Interview #13

No one service person's war is the same as any other. While there might be a few threads of congruence, such as the rigours of training and the first moments of exposure to an 'alien' culture, the war can be as individual as the participants themselves. This could be said of any war, but Vietnam embodied some idiosyncrasies that previous wars in which Australia had fought did not. Whether it was the length of the conflict, the controversial National Service scheme, the one year tours, or the lack of an official war footing at home, there was something unique about Vietnam. Others cite the speed with which an airplane could deliver a serviceperson to the war and home again, the ability to watch the war on the evening news, or the divisions caused by the war on the home front. However, it is unlikely that any single factor was responsible for the construction of the Vietnam veterans and their individual experiences. Rather, it was an aggregation of these factors and many others. But while every story is different, recurring themes can be woven together to create a recognisable pattern.

There were 59520 Australians who served in Vietnam during the decade of intervention. The figure sometimes seems small when compared to the numbers committed to the world wars, or to the United States' undertaking in Vietnam of 2.5 million, but for Australia it was the largest commitment possible without full mobilisation, and as it stood, necessitated conscription to expand the armed services to requirements. There were a number of difficulties with conducting a war over such a long period and under the controlling shadow of a substantially larger ally, not to mention the basic difficulties of the war itself. As the war dragged on, and the divisions on the home front became more evident, those returning from the war often found themselves in a place that seemed as alien as the one they had found on their arrival in Vietnam. Coming home was sometimes nearly as challenging as going to war, but a challenge for which they were untrained.

The average age of Australians deployed to Vietnam was twenty;¹ younger than previous wars, but older than the American average of nineteen years. The

¹ VSASA, "Statistical Data on the Vietnam War".

differences between the two countries had much to do with the conscription age, which at 20 years in Australia was two years older than in the United States. The training regime was considerable whether National Service or Regular, and all underwent the six week to three month jungle training course at Canungra in Queensland before going overseas. The Canungra training, along with the experience of those who had previously served in Malaysia and Indonesia, gave Australians a formidable reputation as excellent jungle fighters. Many believe that this ability reduced casualties and gave them the edge over their American counterparts in this particular area,² particularly on patrols and during long periods in the field. Much has been written about both the high quality of Australia's military and the difficulties of the war on the ground in Vietnam and does not need repeating here, except to say that all the training available cannot overcome the problems wrought by politics. Neither Australia, the United States nor South Vietnam itself, could produce a unified political front, leaving little chance of success for those on the ground. Vietnam shared all of the horrors of any other war, but for Australia, it was a war that was conducted very differently from previous conflicts; politically, militarily and on the home front.

In the Forces Now

Conscription, officially known as the National Service Scheme, was introduced by the Menzies Coalition government in November 1964. As discussed in chapter two, it was the unstable political situation in Indonesia that precipitated a desire for the government to expand the military. Conscription was not unknown in Australia, but it was a consistently controversial topic and the only time it had been used for overseas service had been during the most desperate days of the Second World War when it seemed Australia might be in danger of invasion,³ and even then, the scheme was restricted to the southern Pacific among the Australian administered territories. A National Service scheme had been in place between 1951 and 1959, but was abandoned when it was decided that the threat of another large scale war seemed

² Clive Williams, "Doctrine, Training and Combat with 1st Battalion" in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (Eds), *The Australian Army and the Vietnam War: 1962-1972*, the Chief of the Army's Military History Conference 2002 (Canberra, 2002), pp.120-121.

³ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.21.

minimal.⁴ The instabilities in South East Asia caused a reversal in government attitudes by the mid-sixties, but more than a decade of peace and nearly full employment did not create much of an inducement to join the defence forces.

The 1964 National Service Scheme was not general as were the American and previous Australian ones, but selective. All males who were to turn twenty during the specified six month period were required to register for National Service. Conscripts were then picked lottery style, with balls being drawn from a barrel during live television coverage of the event; the numbers on the balls corresponded with birth dates. However, despite the draws being televised, the dates drawn were not generally publicised, and those whose birth dates had been drawn often did not know until a letter arrived in the mail asking them to report for a period of two years. The system was widely criticised and accusations of tampering and cover-ups were common,⁵ one interviewed conscript asserting that "many of us do believe that it was a rigged process".⁶ Deferrals were available for those in apprenticeships and some university courses (and some other limited circumstances), and exemptions were provided if medical reasons provided, or if those chosen agreed to serve four years part time in the Citizens Military Force (CMF), the predecessor of the Army Reserve. The scheme had its critics, but the announcement by the government in 1966 that National Servicemen would be eligible to serve in conflict overseas, provoked outrage from numerous quarters.

Almost 18000 National Service conscripts served in Vietnam over a period of seven years, about a third of those called up, making up almost half of the army's 41000 person contribution to the war. They frequently saw combat, as the set service period limited the duties they could be trained for, making the infantry and other combat roles, preferable. Despite initial concerns, there were few problems between the national service and the regular army, particularly overseas. None of those interviewed felt they were treated any differently while in Vietnam, and there is little evidence of serious difficulties amongst other sources. In fact, those who commanded or served with National Servicemen regularly praise their

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Langley, *A Decade of Dissent*, pp.34-35; Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.77.

⁶ Veteran Interview #8.

professionalism. Major General Michael O'Brien (Retd), a platoon commander in Vietnam and advisor on army training, believes that the National Service soldiers were "indistinguishable" from the regular service personnel. He further claims that they improved the service with their presence, bringing skills and a level of education that were limited throughout the regular ranks.⁷ Military historian John Coates, agrees with O'Brien's assessment, finding that "their quality was high" and the regular and the conscripted personnel "did not differ greatly from each other in performance".⁸ Former Chief of the Army, and a captain in Vietnam, Lieutenant General John Grey [ret'd] also spoke highly of the contribution made by those called up under National Service, adding, "for people who were unlucky enough to have their marbles come out in a lottery, they served their country very proudly."⁹

The vast majority went to Vietnam quite willingly, if not enthusiastically. Once they entered National Service, many were quite eager, or at least amenable, to the idea of Vietnam. A number felt that if they had to be stuck in the army for two years, they might as well make it worthwhile and volunteered for overseas service. "Sounds crazy now, but it seemed like a good idea at the time", said one, shaking his head at the memory, "I'd seen all the John Wayne movies, and I thought it was the thing to do."¹⁰ Quite a few went for the adventure aspect or from a sense of boredom with their average lives. They were young men in the prime of their lives whose opportunities for travel and excitement were limited, and Vietnam seemed like a viable solution. Few thought of the risks involved, and even fewer considered the politics of the conflict beyond what they had been told by their government. Narratives from other veterans continue this theme, stating that they "had nothing better to do", were "dissatisfied with life", or "thought it would be an adventure".¹¹ Some had something specific to escape, such as looking for a way to "leave home", or more obtusely, to "avoid accountancy".¹²

⁷ Michael O'Brien, "The Training of the Australian Army Units for Active Service in Vietnam: 7th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment" in Dennis and Grey (Eds), *the Australian Army*, p.59.

⁸ John Coates, "Preparing Armoured Units for Overseas Service" in Dennis and Grey (Eds), *The Australian Army*, p.80.

⁹ Veteran Interview #35.

¹⁰ Vietnam Veteran Interview #13, 20 October 1999.

¹¹ Maree Rowe, (Ed), *Vietnam Veterans: Sons of the Hunter* (Loftus, 2002). & Maureen Horrigan, "National Servicemen in Vietnam" (Undergraduate Research Essay, Australian National University, 1986).

¹² Horrigan, "National Servicemen - Questionnaires".

Others had more practical reasons in volunteering for overseas service. A number indicated that they thought that the benefits it would bring, either from possible advancement if they stayed in the service, or more commonly, the government assistance they would receive in resuming their civilian lives.¹³ One spent three years in the CMF, and with only one year of that part time service to go, volunteered to go into the army on the proviso that he be sent to Vietnam so that he could take advantage of the later benefits.¹⁴ War service home loans featured on some wish lists, as demonstrated in Gary McKay's text.¹⁵ A few considered it in terms of an opportunity to continue their education, or to receive assistance in starting a business or buying a house; a shortcut to increased stability. One described his reasons for volunteering as providing "better bargaining power to direct myself... to go for what I wanted."¹⁶

While adventure and a stable future proved compelling reasons to go to war, more than anything else, whether National Service or regular defence personnel, they went to Vietnam out of a sense of duty. Several in particular discussed going to war in relation to their family history of participation in previous conflicts. "My Grandpa was a great old soldier – Boer War and World War One",¹⁷ a veteran of the Battle of Coral proclaimed, while another explained that by going to Vietnam, he was continuing a family tradition of war service. He believed it was expected of him, not least of all because he had been named after a "famous soldier" in the family.¹⁸ Another described it simply as being "part of my heritage".¹⁹ There was a sense of debt to the past, which was nowhere more obvious than in the veteran whose father had died as a result of World War II, was made a Legacy ward, and was then raised by a step-father who had served in the same conflict.²⁰ Going to war, one believed at the time, "was a good thing to do, because Dad had done it, and Grandpa had done it."²¹ McKay found that the family tradition was a popular motivation,²² as did Stuart

¹³ Few missed the irony in telling me this 30 years and many battles later.

¹⁴ Vietnam Veteran Interview #14, 20 October 1999.

¹⁵ McKay, *Bullets, Beans and Bandages*, p.6.

¹⁶ Vietnam Veteran Interview #9, 18 October 1999.

¹⁷ Vietnam Veteran Interview #13.

¹⁸ Vietnam Veteran Interview #31, 11 December 1999.

¹⁹ Veteran interview #14.

²⁰ Vietnam Veteran Interview #8, 16 October 1999.

²¹ Veteran interview #9.

²² McKay, *Bullets, Beans and Bandages*, pp.4-6

Rintoul. One of the veterans in Rintoul's text speaks of idolising his Grandfather who died in World War I and of "making the grade" in a small town where he watched the "heroes" march every Anzac Day: "they were the most respected people in town. They were like the Phantom, they would never die."²³

Duty was not reserved just for the immortality of family traditions. Many went because it was the right thing to do; their government had told them that communism had to be stopped in Vietnam and few had any reason to doubt them, particularly in the early years of the war. They were protecting Australia as thousands had done before them; it was their "patriotic duty".²⁴ Several discussed the feelings within the community at the time and how the "Domino Theory felt like a real threat"²⁵ to Australian security. Some had been happy to go out of a sense of duty to their country, but when asked why, they found "it a difficult question to answer in retrospect" or just a continuation of Cold War actions such as "what had been going on in Malaya".²⁶ There is ample evidence throughout the sources to support these attitudes in departing service persons, with at least two of Horrigan's participants believing that it was their duty to protect Australia from communism.²⁷ While most were anxious to look at the war in retrospect and say that it was a mistake and that Australia should not have been there, reflecting the contemporary outlook, they had not forgotten that they had gone to war believing in something, even if it was now harder to define. One former officer pointed out that "whether it was right or wrong doesn't matter", because "when you look at the Vietnam period, you've got to see it in a context...of what was going on in the world at the time".²⁸

For the regular army soldiers, and other career defence personnel, it was the goal for which they had spent years training. One veteran from the first battalion sent to Vietnam in 1965, described it as being like "a football team that trains, but doesn't go anywhere", and were pleased to be finally getting a chance.²⁹ Another remarked that "it was an honour to fight for Australia, and we were professional soldiers, so that's

²³ Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*, p.3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Vietnam Veteran Interview #2, 5 October 1999.

²⁶ Vietnam Veteran Interview #38, 26 June 2000.

²⁷ Horrigan, "National Servicemen - Questionnaires".

²⁸ Vietnam Veteran Interview #5, 14 October 1999.

²⁹ Vietnam Veteran Interview #38, 26 June 2000.

what we were expected to do".³⁰ One officer delayed a planned resignation because he "wanted the war experience", explaining he "wanted to find out what it was like for somebody to be shooting at me...the curiosity value".³¹ A seventeen year old volunteer was annoyed at having to wait for his eighteenth birthday to go overseas,³² while another resigned from the navy and joined the army in order to get to the war.³³ Others went to great lengths to go to Vietnam more than once, with a few doing two or more tours: one veteran describing his work with the engineers as a "satisfying job".³⁴ Clive Williams, in his study of army doctrine and training, claims that "many" from the first battalion which deployed "opted to return to Vietnam for second tours".³⁵ Not all were as eager, but just accepted it as being part of their job. One mentioned being disappointed that the RAAF was sending him to Vietnam after just returning from more than two years in Malaysia when he had a young family, but it was his job and he went unhesitatingly.³⁶ The attitudes of the career military personnel were summed up succinctly by an officer in McKay's oral history, when asked about being posted to Vietnam - "I was a professional and available."³⁷

These stories dispute the popular perception after the war that those who served in Vietnam went unwillingly, particularly the National Servicemen. While a significant number now regret their participation in a war that became so problematic, it does not negate their relative willingness at the time. Only one of those interviewed had felt that he was going to Vietnam under some form of duress,³⁸ but much of that pressure was family and community based, rather than the army itself. These attitudes are reflected throughout veteran narratives. In Maree Rowe's collection of 104 stories from veterans, only two indicate a serious unwillingness to go to Vietnam.³⁹ One respondent to a questionnaire of National Servicemen felt that he was forced, claiming that he "resisted" his deployment to Vietnam.⁴⁰ The rarity of this sort of claim is not surprising when the evidence is examined. Noel Charlesworth,

³⁰ Vietnam Veteran Interview #34, 9 January 2000.

³¹ Vietnam Veteran Interview #11, 18 October 1999.

³² Vietnam Veteran Interview #4, 11 October 1999.

³³ Vietnam Veteran Interview #3, 6 October 1999.

³⁴ Vietnam Veteran Interview #28, 4 November 1999.

³⁵ Williams, "Doctrine, Training and Combat with 1st Battalion", p.125.

³⁶ Vietnam Veteran Interview #1, 29 September 1999.

³⁷ McKay, *Bullets, Beans and Bandages*, p.8.

³⁸ Veteran Interview #8.

³⁹ Rowe, *Sons of the Hunter*.

⁴⁰ Horrigan, "National Servicemen - Questionnaires".

commander of the 2nd Battalion in Vietnam, stated that the battalion was informed "that no one was obliged to sail with the Battalion if they did not wish to" and the small number who did not were simply sent to "the Personnel Depot for reposting".⁴¹ It was pointed out a number of times in interviews and in the literature that the army would have been foolish to take unwilling recruits into a combat zone; it was simply not in their interest to force people to participate in a war.

Coming Home

Surprisingly little has been written on the effect of one year tours of duty on service personnel, the conduct of the war, and the military itself. While the advantages of one year tours are obvious, particularly in regard to a conscription system, there is some evidence to suggest that short tours could sometimes lead to unforeseen and sometimes long term, difficulties. Everyone was happy to be back at home, but sometimes after the euphoria had worn off, the continuing war they had left behind began to worry them. These attitudes are best described by one of the veterans in Noel Giblett's study, *Homecomings*: "Pretty soon...being reunited with family was overshadowed by the feeling that I should not have been back. The job was unfinished. I belonged back there."⁴² The length and complexities of the war exacerbated these feelings, underscored by the comments of one veteran who complained that the war was being won when he had served,⁴³ as if those that came after him were responsible for the problems - although it seems likely that he blamed politicians rather than fellow soldiers for the situation. Ultimately, no Australian service personnel were present when the war actually did end, which only complicated the issue further.

The limited tours proved more problematic for those who served as reinforcements. Reinforcements might arrive and leave with different units, serving with at least two different groups during their twelve months. Arriving in Vietnam to join an established group was always difficult, whatever the rank. The current Chief of the Defence Force, General Peter Cosgrove, arriving in Vietnam as a replacement platoon

⁴¹ Noel Charlesworth, "Training for Service in South Vietnam 1966-1967: 2nd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment" in Dennis and Grey (Eds), *The Australian Army*, p.73.

⁴² Giblett, *Homecomings*, p.45.

⁴³ Veteran Interview #2.

leader, was greeted with what was later described as "indifference and hostility", and Cosgrove himself described it as "pretty intimidating".⁴⁴ For others, it was the leaving that proved difficult. A number of veterans were saddened or disturbed by leaving others behind. Some felt "guilty", defined by one veteran as being "like I was letting them down by going home".⁴⁵ Major General O'Brien has pointed to a number of problems with the reinforcing systems, particularly for those in National Service, and claims there was a general "lack of consideration" for the difficulties from the community and within the army itself.⁴⁶

Vietnam was the first war in which large numbers went to war, or came back, by plane. More than a third of the veterans interviewed travelled at least one way by air, with the bulk of the remainder being transported by HMAS Sydney. Travelling to and from war on a Qantas jet was often an odd experience. One army captain described the surrealism of eating breakfast with his wife in Sydney in the morning, boarding a plane, and by midnight his platoon had already suffered losses in Vietnam. Twelve months later, he came into Nui Dat⁴⁷ one morning from patrol, got on a plane, and by the same time the next morning was sitting in a Sydney hotel eating breakfast again. He described the strangeness of sitting at a table with clean linen and cutlery, with everyone sitting there going on with their everyday lives.⁴⁸ Returning by air could also be a lonely experience, as it often meant separation from the mates upon whom they had depended throughout their service. Those going to and from the war by plane included advance parties, reinforcements, special groups such as the advisers of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV), and the wounded and sick. Later in the war, as the protest movement began to attract more attention, returning servicemen were sometimes flown in late at night and told to change out of uniform before being dispersed.⁴⁹ These men resented being "sneaked back in" as if

⁴⁴ Garry Linnell, "Made in Vietnam" in *Good Weekend* (20 April 2002), p.18.

⁴⁵ Giblett, *Homecomings*, p.2.

⁴⁶ O'Brien, "Training of Army Units", p.65.

⁴⁷ Nui Dat was where the First Australian Task Force (1ATF) was based from 1966-1972.

⁴⁸ Vietnam Veteran Interview #5, 14 October 1999.

⁴⁹ Veteran Interview #5; Vietnam Veteran Interview #8, 16 October 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #15, 20 October 1999. Similar experiences were also conveyed to Stuart Rintoul in his interviews with veterans. Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*, pp.181-183. Vietnam was not the first war in which this occurred, as it had happened in all deployments since WWII, but its use was more widespread during Vietnam.

they had done something wrong, compounding the confusion of the sudden separation from the war zone.

Those returning by ship found it somewhat easier, as they had some time to adjust and were also often with the people with whom they had spent the previous twelve months. A number of those who had sailed home considered themselves to be fortunate in retrospect, providing time "which helped us wind down".⁵⁰ Major General O'Brien recently claimed that "Those soldiers fortunate enough to return to Australia on HMAS *Sydney* could be seen to have undertaken a fortuitous ten-day readjustment period after the stress of operational service."⁵¹ Jane Ross described the veterans who returned by ship as being "the lucky ones";⁵² nevertheless, it was still a relatively sudden change with the trip usually taking only about eight days. One veteran described how strange it was to have been in Vietnam one weekend, and then in the next to be with his family. "One day I was out on night patrol with shells running around me, and a week later, I was home at a barbecue. Very difficult to adjust".⁵³ However, most were just happy to be home and anxious to be with their family and friends.

Adjustment problems were common, as would be expected, ranging from the relatively minor to some extreme difficulties, with the majority fitting somewhere in between. Veterans, particularly those who were in combat, had to try to extricate themselves from the hypervigilance that had kept them alive for twelve months. One veteran described how nerve racking Sydney seemed on his return with the noises and all the people creating an environment that was difficult to control. He said he was suspicious of everyone, cautious about where he walked and crowds, and "if there was anything that sounded like a rifle shot of some sort, you'd be on the ground, or at least duck down, and you get everyone to be quiet, and you're in the middle of the city".⁵⁴ Many had difficulty sleeping or relaxing, were unable to talk about their experiences and found the relative peace and quiet of Australia somewhat disconcerting. These were by no means unusual responses, as Giblett discovered

⁵⁰ Giblett, *Homecomings*, p.13.

⁵¹ O'Brien, "Training of Army Units", p.65.

⁵² Jane Ross, "Australia's Legacy" in Gregory Pemberton (Ed), *Vietnam Remembered* (Sydney, 1993), p.188.

⁵³ Veteran Interview #36.

⁵⁴ Veteran Interview #38.

when interviewing veterans for his book: best described by one veteran who said, "I sure didn't want to go back, but there was something not quite right in being safe and sound at home".⁵⁵ Veterans claim that the feeling never completely goes away and can be reactivated by something as simple as a walk in the Botanical Gardens.⁵⁶ This was confirmed by Wayne Scott, Director of Counselling for the VVCS in Townsville, who has studied the effects of military training methods and the absence of debriefing programmes for veterans, and believes that this made re-adapting to normality difficult.⁵⁷

Adjustment was perhaps a more complex issue for National Servicemen than those in regular service. While the Regulars had the military system and a level of continuity to cushion them to some extent, National Servicemen were released from service within weeks (sometimes days) of their return from Vietnam without any type of debriefing. These problems were often exacerbated by the fact that National Servicemen were much more likely to have returned from the war zone by plane rather than by ship.⁵⁸ They were then sent home and expected to fit back into civilian life. Several veterans tried to explain the difficulties of the sudden change. "We'd just walked out of the jungle, and now we were civilians again, and we were expected to behave like human beings. It was one day you're a soldier, the next day you're a civilian."⁵⁹ Others spoke of feeling lost, and "there was just a feeling of now what? Where am I supposed to go now? One minute I'm riding on the back of tanks, riding in helicopters, being in fire-fights ... then you're back and it is 'well you've done what we want you to do, now go and play'".⁶⁰

The abrupt separation from their mates – and from other servicemen in general – was also difficult. Not only were they removed from the people in whose hands they had put their lives for twelve intense months, but also from any support system. Giblett, Horrigan and Rowe all encountered these issues in their responses from veterans.

⁵⁵ Giblett, *Homecomings*, p.45.

⁵⁶ Vietnam Veteran Interview #17, 21 October 1999. The bush was a recurrent topic in the veteran interviews, particularly around Cairns as it has similarities to Vietnam. Several talk of it triggering memories and of feeling more comfortable in the bush as that is how they were trained.

⁵⁷ Scott, *PTSD*, pp.39-41.

⁵⁸ O'Brien, "Training of Army Units", p.65.

⁵⁹ Vietnam Veteran Interview #13, 20 October 1999.

⁶⁰ Vietnam Veteran Interview #10, 18 October 1999.

These feelings were most articulately expressed by one infantry soldier: "A very intense chapter was closing and I felt I had to turn the page to a new one, but that chapter could not yet be written. All I had before me was an empty space. All I knew was that I had a family waiting for me... Nothing else was certain."⁶¹ One veteran spoke of the despair of not seeing anyone he had served with since returning from Vietnam and the isolation that came with the dislocation from the military so soon after returning from Vietnam. "You can't walk down the street. You feel alienated ... you feel like a prisoner that's been in jail for a long time, and suddenly he's outside and he doesn't know what to do. You're on your own bat, and you don't know who your enemy is..."⁶²

Settling back into civilian life, particular after an adrenalin charged twelve months in a war zone, proved difficult for many, and for a few, almost impossible. There was a feeling of alienation, and the lives they had imagined before they went away, sometimes no longer made much sense, or seemed very appealing. Jobs were boring or pointless, non-service relationships were baffling and the complete lack of civilian understanding was somewhat frightening. For most, these feelings dispersed to a large degree over time (anything from weeks to years), but traces lingered. This sort of reaction was far from abnormal: returning service personnel from previous conflicts described similar experiences. Thomson's study of returned soldiers from World War I found difficulties adjusting to a normal life and communicating "the nature and effects of their experience".⁶³ These difficulties affected all aspects of their lives, including friends, jobs and marriages, with the latter apparently being the subject of "particular stress".⁶⁴ However, it could be suggested that a number of factors complicated the experience for those returning from Vietnam, one being the previously mentioned speed of their return from the war zone; quite a different situation from the experience of from most of those from WWI and II, which could take months. Another possible factor is the society to which they returned.

⁶¹ Giblett, *Homecomings*, p.2.

⁶² Vietnam Veteran Interview #19, 14 July 2000.

⁶³ Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp.109-113.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.111.

The Vietnam Veteran and the Australian Community

Australian troops came home from Vietnam to a public in which a majority generally respected them, if not their cause. Many veterans were angered and confused by the anti-war protests that had taken place while they were fighting in Vietnam, particularly in relation to the protesters who supported the NLF, the "enemy". They encountered some hostility, and if the incidents in most cases were isolated and short lived, their demoralising effect cannot be underestimated. Commentators such as Curthoys, Doyle and Ross have suggested that the reports of returned servicemen being abused are heavily exaggerated. However, while it is true that not every veteran was spat on, physically or verbally abused or personally singled out, thirty-seven of the forty interviewed veterans observed, or were the victim of some type of negative treatment - ranging from the annoying to the horrifying - in relation to their service. As time passed, apathy began to appear, and worse than any amount of hostility, was the indifference. The fact that South Vietnam had been lost to the communists in 1975 only exacerbated the situation, as it made the Australian effort appear to have been a waste and a failure. The whole incident was swept under the collective carpet; Australians not wanting to associate themselves with a lost war. A sense of shame seemed to attach itself to the involvement, and therefore by association, to the veterans themselves.

Readjustment to life back in Australia was challenging in itself, but when placed against the background of the anti-war movement, and later the public apathy, the situation became even more complex. Veterans returned home to find that the country was at war, but not the same war that they had been fighting. Most had realised that there was some level of dissent, particularly later in the war when union action began holding up supplies and mail at different times, but they all seemed surprised by the situation that greeted them at home. One veteran from the first battalion to return from Vietnam recalls being surprised and confused when told by superiors as they prepared to march through Sydney that there were protesters and they must ignore them. "Don't they understand that Australians have been killed to protect someone's livelihood and their home and all that?" he remembers asking.⁶⁵ It was the infamous march where the young woman covered herself with red paint, an

⁶⁵ Veteran Interview #18.

image that would remain etched in public memory, particularly for veterans.⁶⁶ Two veterans interviewed by Tom Molomby in 1971, were also warned by their superiors about the likelihood of protesters during their parade, and allege that their arrival back in Australia was delayed by one day so that it did not coincide with a planned moratorium march.⁶⁷ Whether there were protestors at the parades or not, the warnings by superiors, or fellow service persons, were sometimes enough to anger those returning, or at least to put them on their guard.

Most veterans marched through cities shortly after their return with decent sized crowds and a good deal of support, but for many, the overwhelming memories of those marches were the anti-war protesters and other hecklers. One recalled a march through Sydney in 1968 in which "we were booed. We were spat on. We had condoms full of water thrown at us. Lunches thrown at us as we marched through the city. And then back at the Domain with blokes with tears in their eyes, ripping parts of their uniform off."⁶⁸ Four veterans spoke of a march in Adelaide in 1971 where they were similarly targeted by groups.⁶⁹ One veteran marching in Townsville claims that they were welcomed, but then hustled away "quick time before the university students came out".⁷⁰ But not all veterans remember the experience of their parades negatively, even amongst those that reported disruptions. Two mentioned the day fondly, feeling as if they had a large amount of support, although one encountered problems with protesters at a later time.⁷¹

More than 80% of those interviewed were involved in some sort of incident or altercation in relation to their service. Home on leave from Vietnam in 1969, Lieutenant General Grey was horrified to discover that his daughters' school teachers "had described us in Vietnam as murderers".⁷² He spoke to the headmaster and the matter was resolved, but "it left a bitter taste". One veteran, who did two tours in Vietnam, said that his wife refrained from saying that he was in Vietnam for fear she

⁶⁶ Ross, "Australia's Legacy", p.191.

⁶⁷ Tom Molomby, "Recorded Interview with Tom Molomby, Peter Hamilton and Others" (1 January 1971).

⁶⁸ Vietnam Veteran Interview #27, 4 November 1999.

⁶⁹ Veteran Interview #11; Veteran Interview #12; Veteran Interview #25; Veteran Interview #26.

⁷⁰ Vietnam Veteran Interview #34, 9 January 2000.

⁷¹ Veteran Interview #31; Vietnam Veteran Interview #32, 13 December 1999.

⁷² Veteran Interview #35.

would be harassed, as others had been, and also to avoid constant comments.⁷³ Victoria Cross recipient Keith Payne reports that his children were harassed at school, and he was often targeted because of his high profile.⁷⁴ Former government minister, Jocelyn Newman, was married to a regular army soldier who served in Vietnam, and maintains that she was eventually forced to "conceal her husband's job and his whereabouts" to prevent criticism and hostility, which came from old friends, acquaintances, tradesmen and shopkeepers.⁷⁵ Veterans returned to a sense of hostility that some families had been suffering in their absence.⁷⁶

The altercations mentioned in the interviews are too numerous to list, but many apparently became physical. Keith Payne claims that the media often portrayed the soldiers as violent troublemakers, a situation that served to isolate them further.⁷⁷ One veteran made the interesting observation that nobody seemed to understand that returned soldiers were often still tense and had recently been shooting at people, so "were probably not the best people to annoy".⁷⁸ The uniform made them an easy target and most soldiers interviewed were advised not to wear them in public, a situation that was made actual policy in the nation's capital for a period to prevent incidents.⁷⁹ Lieutenant General Grey, based in Canberra after returning from service, declared:

We were told that appearing in uniform in public was likely to upset the community, and we were better off not to wear uniforms. It made me resolute, and I have marched every ANZAC Day since.⁸⁰

Many resented having to hide their identity and felt that hiding was somehow an admission of guilt. The uniform, which had been a symbol of pride for previous generations, had become a symbol of something quite different. A Navy veteran, who was expected to wear his uniform to and from work when in port, said that no one would sit beside him on the train in the later years of the war.⁸¹ Sometimes though, removing the uniform was not enough. Several claimed that they stood out

⁷³ Vietnam Veteran Interview #33, 20 December 1999.

⁷⁴ Vietnam Veteran Interview #30, 27 November 1999.

⁷⁵ Ross Fitzgerald and Anne Henderson, *Partners* (Sydney, 1999), p.72.

⁷⁶ Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, p.10. See also: Edwards, *A Nation at War*, pp.50-51.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Veteran Interview #18.

⁷⁹ McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, p.238.

⁸⁰ Vietnam Veteran Interview #35, 18 February 2000.

⁸¹ Veteran Interview #27.

because of their short hair and beardless faces, which was the opposite of the fashion of the time. One veteran said that "the only way to meet girls was to buy a wig".⁸²

There has been considerable disagreement amongst historians as to the level of hostility towards Vietnam veterans. Australian historian, Ann Curthoys, believes that it is overstated because of an incorrect public memory that has developed.⁸³ Curthoys, a former anti-war protester herself, says that she cannot remember any occurrences where any returned soldiers were jeered, booed or demonstrated against, except the woman with the red paint in 1966, and knows of no group that advocated such behaviour.⁸⁴ She further claims after a study of two oral history based books about Vietnam that:

None of the veterans seem to be at all aware of the variation of political position within the anti-war movement, or of the social diversity of its membership. The protesters appear as a single, generally despised, hated social force.⁸⁵

Whether the actions of individuals were officially advocated by the more organised areas of the anti-war movement was of no consequence to servicemen who had just returned from war. There was no way to tell someone with genuine beliefs from anyone else, and the fact that the incidents might be isolated ones did not lessen their effect. Most of the incidents reported in the interviews *were* isolated ones, which is why they would not have appeared in the press. Curthoys' description of the manner in which veterans perceived the anti-war movement is probably not far from the truth, but veterans also complain about being branded with generalisations in a similar fashion. Curthoys also attempts to distance the actions of the unions from the anti-war movement, and to diminish the impact of the activities of radical groups such as the Monash Labor Club who raised money for the NLF.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the fact that the Monash group's assistance to the NLF was small was no consolation to a soldier in a war zone, who when seizing enemy supplies, found boxes marked Monash Medical School,⁸⁷ or to a wider group of soldiers who knew that in previous wars

⁸² Vietnam Veteran Interview #7, 16 October 1999.

⁸³ For an examination of public memory and Vietnam see: Curthoys, "Vietnam – Public Memory of an Anti-War Movement" in Darian-Smith and Hamilton (Eds), *Memory and History*, pp.113-134.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.124.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.126.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.129.

⁸⁷ For details of assistance given to the NLF by some of the radical anti-war organisations see: Langley, *A Decade of Dissent*.

these activities would have been considered treasonous, and now appeared to be tolerated by the government because they did nothing to stop it.

However, despite Curthoys' protestation that she cannot remember any occurrences where any returned soldiers were targeted, there is ample evidence to suggest otherwise. High profile journalist and anti-war protestor, Allan Ashbolt, proudly recalls telling parents of those serving that they should be "ashamed" and accused them and their sons of "collusion with the army".⁸⁸ Ashbolt's feelings were not isolated ones. One former member of the organised protest movement, said that she had only recently begun "coming to terms with veterans" and the part they had played in the war.⁸⁹ A soldier who helped to coordinate security at Holsworthy Army Base in Sydney in the later years of the war claimed that groups of protestors regularly harassed service personnel, and made things so uncomfortable for families, that a school was built for children within the confines of the base.⁹⁰

Historian Jeffrey Grey disagrees with Curthoys about the level and effect of hostility suffered by Vietnam veterans, describing the tensions caused as "clear cut and obvious". His research also confirms the veterans' stories of demonstrators at several of the marches on their return home.⁹¹ Ultimately, it made no difference to the veterans whether protesters were moderate or radical, genuine protesters or hecklers, or any other differentiation. They were other Australians, and therefore seen as betraying the sacrifices made by themselves and their fellow servicemen. A significant number had already begun to question the worth of Australia's intervention in Vietnam by the time they returned home, but they considered that to be an issue that should be taken up with the government rather than the nation's soldiers, doing as their government had decreed. While it is true that the main target of the organised anti-war movement was the government and its Vietnam policies, the military was the physical incarnation of those policies and therefore sometimes

⁸⁸ Allan Ashbolt, *An Australian Experience: Words from the Vietnam Years* (Sydney, 1974), p.205.

⁸⁹ Email to author (18 December 2001).

⁹⁰ Veteran Interview #2.

⁹¹ Jeffrey Grey, "Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran" in Pierce, Grey and Doyle (Eds), *Vietnam Days*, pp.77-78.

became the recipient of the dissension and discontent.⁹²

However, it could be argued that veterans did not have to be singled out or personally abused to feel as if their sacrifices were not appreciated by the Australian community. The effect of the activities of the anti-war movement and even the increasing disillusionment amongst average Australians towards the government's Vietnam policy on the returning service persons should not be underestimated. Veterans spoke of being angry or confused at seeing protests on the evening news, or coming across them in some public place. Even these impersonal encounters could make them feel personally mistreated, as it intimated that their service was not only unappreciated, but wrong. Many remain extremely angry at the protest movement to this day, even though quite a number of these now believe that it was probably a mistake to go to Vietnam.⁹³

Sometimes these feelings did not even require a public place or a placard. A few veterans claimed that they stopped mentioning that they had been to Vietnam to prevent people commenting on the situation. One regular army soldier who served two tours avoided mentioning Vietnam and sometimes claimed he had been posted elsewhere because he said he was tired of arguing with people at social occasions. If he mentioned Vietnam, they would invariably begin discussing the problems with the intervention, and even though he had doubts himself, he would find himself feeling that he had to defend the policy, because he had lost friends and had put his own life on the line for it.⁹⁴ Although no one ever personally disparaged him, it nevertheless made him feel that way. Brian Hennessey, a teacher who became a veteran counsellor, recalls a similar encounter with an acquaintance in a bar on his return, which disturbed him for a long time. Other patrons in the establishment supported Hennessey, but the damage was done. He also did not know how to deal with the situation, asking "do I attack or withdraw? I remind myself that I'm back in Oz and that I'm untrained and unprepared for this type of ambush". To him, that one person

⁹² This should not suggest that the anti-war movement was 'bad', or purposely damaging to veterans, as many protestors believed they were saving soldiers' lives and were deeply committed to peace, and in fact, some veterans joined the movement. However, the purpose of this examination is to establish how the majority of veterans perceived the anti-war movement.

⁹³ Veteran Interview #8; Veteran Interview #5; Veteran Interview #3; Veteran Interview #7; Veteran Interview #26.

⁹⁴ Veteran Interview # 33.

was representative of all Australians and "the seeds of a terrible anger are sown that day."⁹⁵ While this might seem an over reaction to a single incident, it must be remembered that those who found themselves in this situation had very recently returned from a war zone, hypervigilant and as pointed out by Hennessy, unprepared. A war zone where they had fought under the direction of the Australian government; a government elected by the Australian people, the Australian people who were seen to be denigrating their service.

There is significant evidence of veterans feeling that the entire Australian public despised them on their return, even if they knew logically that this was incorrect. One veteran, an extremely successful businessman, asked if he could begin the interview by stating that he would "never forgive the Australian people for the way they treated the Vietnam veterans" during and after the war.⁹⁶ Another complained that Australians "are not a very compassionate people" and that "nobody had the courage to stand up to [*sic*] the convictions of the silent majority".⁹⁷ This anger is a common theme in other veteran narratives. Some complained they were treated as criminals and murderers, others felt ignored, while a few were somewhat more vehement in expressing their feelings, such as one national serviceman who claimed "I was a hero in '68 and an arsehole in '70".⁹⁸

This situation raises questions for the future. A number of veterans said that they will not tolerate what they consider to be the denigration of any future service persons, including inflammatory statements about "manning the barricades" and a willingness to go to jail if necessary.⁹⁹ Scenes such as the deployment of troops to a possible war with Iraq in January 2003 resurrected old wounds and created new ones. During the send off ceremony, the Opposition leader, Simon Crean, in a speech to the departing troops and their families, announced "that I don't support the deployment of our troops in these circumstances", then went on to say that despite this he did however

⁹⁵ Brian Hennessy, *The Sharp End: The Trauma of a War in Vietnam* (St Leonards, 1997), p.105.

⁹⁶ Veteran Interview #5.

⁹⁷ Veteran Interview #8.

⁹⁸ Horrigan, "National Servicemen". A number in Horrigan's, Rintoul's, Rowe's and McKay's texts expressed similar attitudes.

⁹⁹ Veteran Interview #8; Veteran Interview #26. While these views might seem contrary to the democratic principles for which veterans fought, to many it was less about politics than emotion, and the feeling that their rights had also been breached.

"support our troops and always will".¹⁰⁰ Meanwhile, a group of anti-war protestors demonstrated a few metres away, creating a sense of *déjà vu* that proved a little too much for some Vietnam veterans.¹⁰¹ A number of people recognised similarities with the events of three decades previous, but what effect this will have on those troops when they return is at this stage unknown.

Vietnam veterans soon discovered that rejection did not necessarily come only from strangers. Most returned to supportive networks of families and friends who were at least eager to have them home, if not to discuss their experiences, but as the war continued and its popularity continued to decline,¹⁰² a number began to experience dissension closer to home. One veteran, a regular churchgoer, was shocked one Sunday to hear a sermon against the war and those fighting it coming from the pulpit. He walked out and never went back, and still finds himself struggling with his faith.¹⁰³ Nine of the veterans reported incidents within their places of work. Returning to his civilian job with the Department of the Navy, one veteran found that "the people in that department were openly derogatory about the people in Vietnam".¹⁰⁴ Another veteran returned to his civilian job as an employee in a small business in his home town. The business lost some long-time clients, some of them friends, when they discovered he had been in Vietnam, and he had to suffer comments from several others.¹⁰⁵ Others also experienced derogatory remarks or exclusion, with one veteran claiming that "it was always mentioned – got mentioned probably more than it was warranted."¹⁰⁶

Relatively few veterans suffered discord within their own families or with close personal friends, but when this occurred it was extremely traumatic. Two reported acrimonious clashes with their wives' families. This resulted in feelings of betrayal towards their wives also, because they were not seen to have done enough to support

¹⁰⁰ Simon Crean, "Troop Deployment" (23 Jan 2003).

¹⁰¹ There were many "Letters to Editor" of various Australian newspapers from veterans. See also: Peter Wilson, "Aussie soldiers fear Iraq backlash", *news.com.au* (16 March 2003), <http://www.news.com.au/common/0,6093,6133776,00.html>; "Fears 'ratbag' protestors will vilify troops", *The Age* (19 February 2003), www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/02/19/1045330652704.html.

¹⁰² Morgan Gallup Poll found in 1969 that 55% were against the war, up from 28% in 1965. Langley, *A Decade of Dissent*, pp.33 and 111.

¹⁰³ Vietnam Veteran Interview #16, 21 October 1999.

¹⁰⁴ Vietnam Veteran Interview #6, 15 October 1999.

¹⁰⁵ Vietnam Veteran Interview #19, 26 October 1999.

¹⁰⁶ Veteran Interview #7.

their husbands.¹⁰⁷ Another told of the failure of his father to stand up for him when his father's friends (World War II veterans) denigrated his service.¹⁰⁸ Others were rejected by members of their extended family, or long time friends. More often than not, however, difficulties with families and friends occurred in more subtle fashions. Almost half reported some sort of communication breakdown which prevented them speaking of their experiences either because they were unable or because their family or friends made it clear that they did not want to know. This situation was particularly disturbing for the National Servicemen who no longer had the support of fellow service personnel. One veteran described it as "the loneliest time of my life".¹⁰⁹ Giblett also found evidence of communication problems amongst veterans owing to the belief that nobody was interested in them.¹¹⁰

Sometimes it was not a lack of interest on the part of families and friends that caused the inability to communicate. As mentioned above, some veterans had already discovered that mentioning Vietnam raised issues or caused arguments, so they considered the subject best left alone. Others simply had no words in which to express a war experience to civilians, believing that only others who had been there could possibly understand. If they did discuss their service with family, it was usually restricted to a set of anecdotes about the lighter side of their experiences, and even amongst the mates with whom they had served it was often just about "the bars they fell out of"¹¹¹ rather than the war itself. This pattern of behaviour was not unusual for returned service persons from any conflict. Thomson discovered similar attitudes amongst World War I servicemen, finding that they "became selective about what they would say about the war and who they would talk to", even sometimes restricting conversations between themselves to "good times" they had on leave.¹¹² A number of Vietnam veterans themselves stated that relatives who had served in World War II rarely discussed their service with them, even after Vietnam. Sometimes, those left at home also did not want to discuss the period of their loved ones absence, as evidenced by wives in Giblett's study who felt that all involved had suffered enough and just wanted to forget what was also a harrowing time for them, and get on

¹⁰⁷ Vietnam Veteran Interview #25; Veteran Interview #16.

¹⁰⁸ Vietnam Veteran Interview #4, 11 October 1999.

¹⁰⁹ Vietnam Veteran Interview #9, 18 October 1999.

¹¹⁰ Giblett, *Homecomings*, pp.35-47.

¹¹¹ Veteran Interview #2.

¹¹² Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp.110-111.

with their lives.¹¹³ Once the pattern of silence and isolation was set, it was difficult to break.

Many veterans were dismayed by the lack of interest or knowledge in the community about the war, which according to Jane Ross, was even more common than hostility.¹¹⁴ It could be suggested that much of the responsibility for the situation lay in the failure of successive Coalition governments to clarify Australian objectives in Vietnam, and to promote support in the Australian community,¹¹⁵ and ultimately the lack of an actual declaration of war. According to Mark Woodruff, similar problems occurred in America "because of the American government's decision to fight the war in Vietnam without going on a 'war footing'", as in previous conflicts and therefore failing to create a war psychology in the community.¹¹⁶ Terry Burstall echoed these sentiments about the Australian government, claiming that the military involvement "was never presented in clear-cut unambiguous terms."¹¹⁷ Apart from the friends or families of those deployed, few people were inconvenienced by the war. There were no shortages, no blackouts or attacks, and because of the limited service situation, there was not a large presence of people in uniform. The images most people saw on the news were predominantly of Americans¹¹⁸ and had little context for most Australians. Ironically, the most obvious sign of war for the Australian public was in the form of the anti-war movement.

Several veterans told of situations where they would meet someone they knew and would be asked where they had been because they had not seen them around for a while, and when told they often showed indifference. One veteran, feeling like a stranger amongst his friends, tried wearing his uniform with his medals to solve the problem, but it did little to alleviate his feelings of alienation. "No one understood where I'd been. I was greeted as if I'd been on an overseas holiday. To many Aussies, the war didn't exist. It was the farthest thing from their minds."¹¹⁹

¹¹³ Giblett, *Homecomings*, pp.36-39.

¹¹⁴ Ross, "Australia's Legacy", p.190.

¹¹⁵ Grey, "Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran", p.79.

¹¹⁶ Woodruff, *Unheralded Victory*, p.198.

¹¹⁷ Burstall, *Vietnam*, p.1.

¹¹⁸ Despite the fact some of the most iconic vision taken of the war came from Australian journalists.

¹¹⁹ Giblett, *Homecomings*, p.39.

However, sometimes indifference was better than asking: "did you kill anyone?"¹²⁰ As mentioned above, other veterans complained that when someone did show an interest, it was usually to have their say about what was wrong with Australia's intervention in Vietnam, and one claimed he often had to justify himself when he did not want to, because "if you didn't want to argue, you must agree with them, so it was a no win situation."¹²¹

Perhaps the biggest shock for Vietnam veterans was rejection from the one quarter they might reasonably have expected support: other war veterans. Although many examples occurred in individual situations, the focus for the phenomenon became the RSL. Seventeen of the veterans interviewed were rejected or made to feel unwelcome by different branches of the organisation.¹²² The overwhelming complaint was that they were treated as if they had not served in a "real war"; a problem not helped by the fact that the war remained undeclared. One veteran, who had been seriously injured by an anti-tank mine, claimed that he regularly faced that sort of attitude in the Cairns RSL. One day he lost his temper and asked his harassers if "in your war did you have bullets about that long, about that round, when they hit you made you bleed and possibly die?" When answered in the affirmative, he told them "well that's funny, you know the bastards used them against us too."¹²³ Most of the seventeen left the organisation, or had little to do with it, for many years. These feelings of dissatisfaction provided the ground work for breakaway organisations specifically for Vietnam veterans, which began appearing in the early 1980s. Some have returned to the RSL in recent years as those who persevered are now finding a voice in executive positions in branches.

Some believed that the problem in the RSL was caused by the politics radiating from its national headquarters, while others feel it was a case of personality or generational clashes within individual branches. One claimed that it was based in the political inclinations of particular branches, with the level of rejection more common in Labor

¹²⁰ Veteran Interview #6; Veteran Interview #12.

¹²¹ Veteran Interview #33.

¹²² Ten joined the RSL and had no problems, and the other eight were not interested, meaning that 63% of those wanting to be involved had some sort of difficulty. Service persons from other post-WWII conflicts were also having problems obtaining acceptance and recognition from the RSL.

¹²³ Veteran Interview #4.

Party areas.¹²⁴ Ambrose Crowe found evidence of a small, but significant, amount of anti-Vietnam feeling within the organisation, best illustrated by the expulsion and suspension of members in New South Wales for espousing such beliefs.¹²⁵ Another veteran, who believes it was the different factions and personalities that caused most problems, was pulled up in the street in Sydney by a WWII returned serviceman who told him that he should not be wearing his RSL badge because he had done nothing to deserve it.¹²⁶ Several reported similar attitudes, a situation also encountered by Stuart Rintoul when interviewing veterans for his book *Ashes of Vietnam*.¹²⁷ One veteran, who had a bad experience with members of an RSL branch, felt it was "because they didn't identify with the Vietnam veteran; they'd fought a different kind of war and just didn't comprehend".¹²⁸ Major General O'Brien believes that the lack of welcome extended by the RSL to Vietnam veterans reinforced the "environment of less than enthusiastic community support",¹²⁹ a situation that had repercussions, particularly in regards to National Servicemen.

Ross, in her contribution to *Vietnam Remembered*, states that veterans of WWI treated those returning from WWII in a similar manner.¹³⁰ More than half of the veterans interviewed report being told stories by WWII veterans of their rejection a generation earlier, but as their war was "popular", and their numbers much greater than those of the Vietnam veterans, they were not so easily dismissed. These attitudes between WWI and WWII veterans caused the division of some branches as happened in Cairns with a group breaking away to form the West Cairns branch.¹³¹ Several veterans, including three in executive positions in RSLs in North Queensland, made the particular point of stating that the mistakes of the past would not be repeated for current and future service people.¹³² This was demonstrated by a number of newspaper articles promoting RSL campaigns such as "Adopt a soldier" after the

¹²⁴ Veteran Interview #30.

¹²⁵ Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, p.8.

¹²⁶ Veteran Interview #14.

¹²⁷ Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*, p.216.

¹²⁸ Veteran Interview #2.

¹²⁹ O'Brien, "Training of Army Units", p.65.

¹³⁰ Ross, "Australia's Legacy", p.197.

¹³¹ Vietnam Veteran Interview #2, 5 October 1999.

¹³² Veteran Interview #4; Veteran Interview #31; Veteran Interview #32.

deployment of troops to East Timor in 1999.¹³³ However, despite such positive policies for the future, many still harbour feelings of anger and bitterness that cannot be easily dispelled. Alistair Thomson highlighted the importance of organisations such as the RSL with WWI veterans finding that "the League club provided a refuge from civilian incomprehension" and "a forum for the articulation of digger identities and memories".¹³⁴ Exclusion from this forum, or at least the perception of it, compounded the feeling of isolation suffered by many Vietnam veterans.

A Conspiracy of Silence

Vietnam veterans watched the Vietnam War end on the evening news in 1975. Their war had been over for three years, and the fall of Saigon served simply as an exclamation point to a confusing and divisive war. Australians went about their daily lives, just as they had throughout the war, but without the occasional visual reminders, denial, dissent and disinterest gave way to apathy, and what Grey termed "a lengthy public silence".¹³⁵ Such was the relief that it was all over, it seemed best if the "dirty little war" was just forgotten. Several veterans suggested that the Labor Government, which came to power in 1972, was at least partially to blame for the situation. Labor's policy towards Vietnam was seen to be the complete opposite to that of the Coalition Government which had conducted the war,¹³⁶ and a number of veterans felt betrayed and their sacrifices undermined.

During the first few days after the December 1972 election, Gough Whitlam ordered the withdrawal of the last Australian military personnel, an act that was a formality at best, as the battalions had already been withdrawn and all that remained were a handful of advisers, but it nonetheless appeared as if he had ended Australia's commitment to the war. The misconception that Whitlam had brought the troops home and ended the war was mentioned in annoyance by a number of those interviewed, and is an error still occasionally repeated in the media or other

¹³³ Examples include: "Adopt-a-Soldier Plan" *The Cairns Post* (11 October 1999), p.7; "Troops Deserve Support" *The Northern News* (23 September 1999), p.1.

¹³⁴ Thomson, *ANZAC Memories*, p.127.

¹³⁵ Grey, "Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran", p.78.

¹³⁶ See chapter two.

forums.¹³⁷ The National Service scheme was also immediately abandoned by Whitlam, leaving a number of veterans in limbo in regard to benefits, a situation that was never satisfactorily repaired. While the population was generally relieved to have conscription abandoned, the sudden cessation of funding and lowering of the military budget affected a number of returned servicemen. One National Serviceman who attempted to access promised funds to start a business was refused "because there was no money",¹³⁸ and his situation was not unique. Reductions in funding and the subsequent downgrading of the military also affected career soldiers who sometimes found themselves unable to access promotions as the army found itself with an oversupply of officers with limited troops to command. Morale was low, and according to the current Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, the army had "returned to a country which appeared not to value its professionalism or appreciate its achievements".¹³⁹ Two of those interviewed eventually left the army, in major part because of that situation.¹⁴⁰ Significant changes in defence and foreign policy by the Whitlam government, such as the previously mentioned recognition of communist Vietnam, also inadvertently placed veterans in an unusual position in comparison to returned service persons from previous conflicts. The Labor agenda on the whole, "sought, successfully, to put the Vietnam War behind it",¹⁴¹ leaving the veterans with no context into which to place their experiences. Little was written on the subject in Australia, even as the printing presses in America began to produce a torrent of work, which has yet to stop flowing.¹⁴²

Veterans found themselves unwittingly compounding the culture of silence. Those who had unpleasant experiences on their return home refrained from mentioning that they had been to Vietnam, and as time passed, many other veterans joined them. Almost a third of those interviewed hid the fact that they were Vietnam veterans,

¹³⁷ This researcher has personally seen this in at least three undergraduate essays, two news reports and at an academic conference in a presentation during 2001-2002.

¹³⁸ Veteran Interview #6.

¹³⁹ Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, "Introduction: Chief of the Army's Conference" in Dennis and Grey (Eds), *The Australian Army*, p.xvii.

¹⁴⁰ Veteran Interview #4; Vietnam Veteran Interview #32, 13 December 1999.

¹⁴¹ Grey, "Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran", p.79.

¹⁴² The shorter period of silence in the United States is quite likely due to the Prisoner-of-War/Missing in Action (POW/MIA) issue which saw more than 2000 Americans remain unaccounted for despite numerous investigations and "fact finding" missions.

while many others at least avoided advertising their status as veterans.¹⁴³ Two veterans spoke of working closely with colleagues for several years without ever knowing that they were also Vietnam veterans and vice versa.¹⁴⁴ One admitted that at that stage he had no desire to talk about it even if the others had been willing. "There was just [pause] nothing. And I suppose if you look back on that, it would be magnified across Australia many times."¹⁴⁵ One veteran claimed that "you didn't go around telling too many people" you had been in Vietnam, and it was easier to just become a loner.¹⁴⁶ Wayne Scott has found that for many veterans "the best way to avoid the past is not to talk about it and this in itself contributes further to their psychological isolation."¹⁴⁷ Vietnam veterans were not the first returned servicemen to have felt neglected, and they will probably not be the last, but the ideal of the returned serviceman had gone from being a badge of honour to being a burden in one generation.

To suggest that Vietnam veterans were treated poorly by the Australian community is a generalisation, but it is also a truth. While the silent majority in Australia were supportive of the servicemen, they were generally as their description suggests – silent. The loudest voices were of the ones raised in dissent, and even if they intended no disrespect to those fighting and dying, those doing the fighting and witnessing the dying, took it very personally. Perhaps worse, though, was the atmosphere of denial that settled over the country like a fog, rendering the veterans invisible. Historian John Murphy declared:

It was the final and saddest irony of the Vietnam intervention that its veterans were denied even the simplest dignity and solace of the returning soldier. That they should feel their experience shunned was one wound too many.¹⁴⁸

Most Australian service personnel went to the war in Vietnam without reluctance, though some more eagerly than others. For many young men it was the first big

¹⁴³ Gary McKay also discovered in his research that it was not uncommon for Vietnam veterans to hide their service. See: McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, pp.238-239 and 258-259.

¹⁴⁴ Veteran Interview #19; Vietnam Veteran Interview #24, 26 October 1999.

¹⁴⁵ Veteran Interview #19.

¹⁴⁶ Veteran Interview #10.

¹⁴⁷ Scott, *PTSD*, pp.38-39. This could be said to be true of the aftermath of any war - the public wanting to forget the horrors and deprivations and the veterans trying to forget. However, just as there are certain symmetries in any aftermath, there are also certain aspects of the unique.

¹⁴⁸ Murphy, *Harvest of Fear*, p.278.

adventure of their lives, and some believed that they were continuing a great military tradition or going to war to carry on a family custom of serving their country. Some wanted to go for more practical reasons such as increasing chances of advancement in the military, or for the benefits they would receive later from the government for overseas service. However, first and foremost, they went out of a sense of duty to their country, and a belief in the justness of their cause. To return home and discover that not everyone shared that belief, including sometimes themselves, was often too much to bear. Despite the difficulties, the majority of veterans came home and went on with their lives. They found employment, raised families and settled behind the white picket fence of suburbia. However, the past is a curious domain that has a tendency to turn up when everyone thinks it has been left behind. For some veterans, the issues raised as a result of their service were far from resolved. A new war was beginning, with battles on a number of fronts: the battle for assistance; the battle for recognition; and most of all, the battle to reclaim their history.

“Long forgotten dockside guarantees”:
Origins of the Myths and
Stereotypes



Vietnam Veterans Memorial – Stratford (Nth Qld)

Chapter Four

For me, the greatest legacy of the war in Vietnam is that I will never trust my government again.

Bill Ehrhart – Vietnam Veteran, 1987.¹

By the beginning of the 1980s, the Vietnam War had been relegated to the 'old news' basket. It was perhaps too soon to claim that Vietnam had been forgotten by history – that would come later – but it had certainly been pushed beyond the consciousness of most Australians. Even the arrival of increasing numbers of Vietnamese refugees seemed to fail to remind the public of the role they had played in the drama that ended at sea in tiny boats for so many Indo-Chinese. But somewhere beneath the heavy silence, a small number of veterans, first between friends, then in groups, began to whisper to each other. Some were unwell, others were struggling, a few had friends who had died, and voices from across the Pacific Ocean were beginning to filter into the veteran community. Vietnam veterans began to think that something was not quite right and started asking questions. The answers only raised more questions, many of which would remain unanswered. While the questions did lead to some assistance, what veterans did not realise was that they were opening the proverbial Pandora's Box from which each offering had a price, or at least strings attached. Even those who did not want anything from the box, found themselves bestowed with the repercussions caused by the search for answers.

What began as a search for answers to increasing concerns about health issues developed into a battle when it became obvious that the answers would not be easily obtained, or on occasion, willingly provided. As the frustration among veterans increased, and news of the unfolding problems in America reached them, a more combative attitude began to emerge from areas of the veteran community. Inflamed by the feelings of disillusionment, disappointment, and sometimes even betrayal, that many had retained since their service, veterans sought attention in larger numbers than before. The search for recognition became an integral component of the concerns and the veterans were thrust into the limelight in a manner not previously experienced by other returned service persons. This eventuated not simply because of the controversial nature of the war, but also through the easier and more visual availability of publicity. However, they also discovered that this medium was

¹ Bill Ehrhart cited in "Vietnam: A Television History – Legacies" (Boston 1987).

notoriously difficult to control and would have a more powerfully sustained outcome than might have been expected. The stereotypes that would become an integral part of the Vietnam story began finding their roots within the community: images that would reflect the divisions and ambiguities obvious during the war itself. Perhaps more significantly, these images also provided a contextual point to a wider community confused and uncomfortable about the place and historical meanings of the war.

The apathy that blanketed Australian society stifled the development of the intensity of the rage evident in America, and while anger would become a prominent feature of the veteran domain in Australia too, it would be expressed differently. It would be difficult to identify one particular moment or event that caused Vietnam veterans to break the silence surrounding them. For the veterans interviewed, it has been an experience spread over nearly two decades depending on their circumstances, and every veteran's situation was different. Events in the 1980s, including the establishment of organisations such as the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (VVAA), controversies such as the Agent Orange Inquiries, or events like the Welcome Home Parade, certainly had an enormous influence on Vietnam veterans standing up to be counted. Health issues also had a significant impact as a growing number of veterans began exhibiting symptoms of a range of illnesses, the causes of which are still being debated. The profile of veterans in the community was also increased, not just by such events, but also by an influx of movies from the United States about the Vietnam War and its veterans, war movies that were somewhat different from those about previous wars. While veterans struggled against the silence to gain recognition for both their service and their health concerns, they also found themselves struggling against the skewed perceptions and burgeoning stereotypes foisted upon them by popular culture and, sometimes unwittingly, by themselves.

A Question of Health

The battle for recognition for Vietnam veterans has in many ways been the struggle for assistance in regard to health issues. The silence enveloping the Vietnam War in Australia was lifted by veterans themselves, a situation that has been repeated many

times as the years passed. What began as a few concerned conversations between friends became a movement that would both unite and divide veterans as well as the community. The majority had put Vietnam behind them (voluntarily or otherwise) and had generally speaking moved on with their lives with varying degrees of success as would be expected from any group in the population. What was becoming apparent though at around the turn of the decade, was that some were not doing as well as others and a number were displaying signs of illness. Although these illnesses varied, there was a certain symmetry about their afflictions that caused veterans to question aspects of their service. The quagmire they had left a decade before did nothing to prepare them for the one they entered looking for answers.

The illnesses from which some veterans were suffering could be divided into two major areas, physical and psychological. The two crossed over at various points, but it was the physical that first gained prominence in Australia.² During the seventies the public and the health community were becoming more aware of the health issues associated with the use of some chemicals often used in agriculture; particularly dioxins in herbicides such as 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T. Studies began to reveal that the chemicals were not as safe to humans as first thought, although it would later be proved that the companies making the chemicals had known for many years.³ It was revealed that some of these chemicals had been used in Vietnam and American veterans began lobbying for answers from the government and the military as an increasing number began showing symptoms of illnesses that often appeared inexplicable. While their struggle was beginning, Australian veterans, less in number and typically more scattered, began to see the reports and to talk amongst themselves. In December 1979 a meeting held at a local RSL in Victoria attracted enough interest to prompt the group to organise other meetings.⁴

Public meetings in capital cities in early 1980 exposed a significant number of veterans with health problems. The symptoms were very similar to those reported by American veterans. Many complaints consisted of severe skin rashes, intestinal

² This is different from the US where the psychological problems gained prominence first. Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners* (London, 1974).

³ See for example: Nicosia, *Home to War*, p.440; Jean R Williams, *Children of the Mist: Agent Orange Future Generations* (Nambour 2002), pp.88&153.

⁴ Carla MacCallum, "Papers of Carla MacCallum – Vietnam Veterans' Family Support Link Line" (1979-1989), Australian War Memorial holdings.

disorders of varying types and a range of nervous system problems. However, these were minor in comparison to those suffering a range of cancers, and the reports of children with abnormalities. While cancer is not an unusual disease in itself, it is in the context of a group of men many of whom were barely in their mid-thirties with no family histories of the illnesses. It became obvious that some answers were required, and with the government being somewhat less than forthcoming, a representative body was required to assist in lobbying. The VVAA was established nationally in January 1980 and was followed quickly by state branches which immediately held more public meetings and began collecting data with the aim to provide recognition and advocacy.⁵

The major suspect in the health problems of veterans and their families were the chemical cocktails used in Vietnam, in particular a herbicide known as Agent Orange.⁶ The main aim of the chemicals was to deprive the NVA and the Viet Cong of foliage cover and crops, therefore reducing the major home ground advantage of hiding and self sufficiency. The success of the operation has long been debated, but certainly it caused long term damage to the Vietnamese environment, not to mention the effect on those in the environment. During the period 1962-1971, the United States military sprayed 19 million gallons of herbicides over 3.6 million acres in Vietnam, with Agent Orange making up 11.2 million gallons of the whole.⁷ Half a million gallons of that amount was dropped on Phuoc Tuy province, the main operating area of 1ATF, in a three year period.⁸ Added to this, millions of gallons of insecticide, particularly DDT, were also sprayed by truck and by hand around the perimeters of all the bases, including Nui Dat and Vung Tau.⁹

⁵ Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, p.22-23.

⁶ The chemicals were named for the colour coding on the drums in which they were delivered – others that were named as possibly dangerous were white, purple and yellow. Agent Orange was the code name for mixture of 2,4, 5-T (2,4,5-trichlorophenoxyacetic acid) and 2,4-D (2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid), while the others were variations of these. For further discussion see: University of Bristol – School of Chemistry, "The method of action of 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D" (December 2000), <http://www.chm.bris.ac.uk/motm/245t/245th/glossary.htm>.

⁷ National Academy of Sciences, "Report on the Health Effects of Agent Orange: Hearing before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives [USA], One hundred and third Congress, First session" (4 August 1994), p.113.

⁸ Senate Standing Committee on Science and the Environment, "Pesticides and the Health of Australian Vietnam Veterans" (November 1982), p.41.

⁹ See: "Submission to 'Agent Orange' Royal Commission of Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia" (November 1983); Williams, *Children of the Mist* and *The Devil's Rainbow*; Crowe, *The Battle After the War*. A number of those interviewed also gave first hand accounts of these practices.

Veterans were told that the chemicals were in no way dangerous, and therefore few efforts were made to reduce exposure¹⁰ (although how they realistically could have significantly reduced exposure under the circumstances is hard to imagine). Chemicals were sprayed around food preparation areas and sleeping quarters and on to service personnel themselves. The trucks used for spraying often drove through the water supply and sometimes also carried water after chemicals.¹¹ Most veterans interviewed recall seeing chemicals being sprayed. One told of an incident while on patrol when his platoon passed through an area recently sprayed by an American plane, finding the foliage dying and everything covered in a white powdery substance.¹² He said that because they had been told it was harmless, they kicked it around so that it rose up and covered them. He says that every time he hears something about the problems of the chemicals, he thinks of that moment with the white powder floating down on them like snow. He has had constant medical problems of varying severity since his service.

The VVAA began lobbying for an investigation into Agent Orange in 1980;¹³ however it was not until the latter half of the 1990s that veterans' health concerns received some validation. The 1997 release of the Mortality of Vietnam Veterans study revealed that veterans were dying in larger numbers than the general community. The study found that veterans were 21% more likely to die of suicide and cancers in general, 29% more likely to die of lung cancer and 53% more likely to die of prostate cancer.¹⁴ Most disturbing however, is the report's admission that it was difficult to get an accurate picture of the significance of the death rate owing to the presence of the "healthy worker effect".¹⁵ This effect refers to the fact that when entering the service veterans would have been carefully screened for health problems, pre-dispositions and mental illnesses, so that only the healthiest males went to Vietnam. This causes a bias when comparing their health to the community in general. Elevated death and illness rates are therefore even more significant, as statistically they should be lower than the community standard for these men. A 1998

¹⁰ "Submission to 'Agent Orange' Royal Commission of VVAA", p.12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Veteran Interview #13.

¹³ For an expanded discussion see: Crowe, *The Battle After the War*.

¹⁴ Department of Veterans' Affairs, *Mortality of Vietnam Veterans: The Veteran Cohort Study* (Canberra, 1997), www.dva.gov.au/media/pulicat/mortal1.htm.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

report on the morbidity of Vietnam veterans found elevated levels of cancer, multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease, mental health conditions and general poor health.¹⁶ The report also indicated serious health concerns for wives and children, the latter of which was explored in a validation study released in 1999 showing significantly higher levels of congenital abnormalities and a suicide rate three times higher than the Australian community standard.¹⁷

The other concern raised by the study is in regard to those who did not take part. While nearly 52000 surveys were dispatched to known veterans, 41000 were completed.¹⁸ Only 1000 of these contacted the survey personnel, a number citing refusal to participate and others reporting the death of a veteran to whom the package had been sent.¹⁹ That left 10000 (one fifth), of the survey group unaccounted for in the study. While some of these surveys might not have reached veterans for reasons such as change of address from the electoral roll, it is not unreasonable to suggest that some of them may not have responded because they were not well enough to do so, or wanted nothing to do with the DVA. There is also some suggestion that a number of veterans received their packages too late to respond. Researcher and advocate, Jean Williams claims that several veterans reported that they received their surveys towards the end of May when the return date was 31 May.²⁰ Williams also says that some veterans complained about the layout of the survey which they believed would not give an accurate picture and underestimate the illnesses.²¹ Whatever the case, it can only be conjectured what the missing veterans might have said, but logic suggests had that fifth replied, it may have shown figures of even greater concern. These and other concerns resulted in the government's announcement in August 2002 to commission another study into the rates and causes of death among Vietnam

¹⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans: A Study of the Health of Australia's Vietnam Veteran Community: Volume 1* (Canberra, 1998), www.dva.gov.au/health/research/morbidity/morbidity.htm.

¹⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans: A Study of the Health of Australia's Vietnam Veteran Community: Volume 3 Validation Study* (Canberra, 1999), www.dva.gov.au/health/HlthStdy/validation/index.htm.

¹⁸ AIHW, *Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans*. While this may have statistically provided a more than adequate response for any standard survey, those who did not respond raised some questions in relation to the study as a whole, particularly when considering the nature of the topic.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Jean R Williams, *The Devil's Rainbow*, p.36-37.

²¹ *Ibid.*

veterans.²²

Among the veterans interviewed, 74% claimed to have some sort of physical health problem related to their service, ranging from the expected hearing and back problems to skin and intestinal disorders. Four reported that their children had congenital defects or illnesses they considered attributable to their service.²³ Most of the veterans interviewed believed that the chemicals used in Vietnam contributed to health problems. Lieutenant General Grey said he was "convinced that chemicals in Vietnam did affect a number of soldiers", and was himself affected by serious skin problems that lasted for years.²⁴ One veteran, who has two children with serious health problems, received \$157 as his share of the compensation payout resulting from American legal action.²⁵ Although the Australian government has never officially acknowledged that the chemicals used in Vietnam caused health problems, the DVA extended its range of allowable illnesses covered under compensation in recent years to cover most of these problems in veterans (though their children continue to struggle for recognition of their problems).²⁶ This issue had been under review in the light of the new evidence arising from the morbidity studies, and the department had begun initiatives to address some of the concerns, including increased availability of counselling²⁷ and medical assistance for five of the most notable conditions uncovered in the Validation Study.²⁸

Smoking and alcohol related illnesses were also reported by several of the veterans who blame their excessive usage on their service, claiming that they were encouraged to smoke and drink. Smoking particularly was "actively encouraged" with cigarettes being supplied in all ration packs; one veteran maintained that "we were advised to

²² ABC News Online, "Survey to examine health in Vietnam vets" (28 August 2002), <http://abc.net.au/worldtoday/s660981.htm>.

²³ Veteran Interview #5; Veteran Interview #9; Veteran Interview #12; Veteran Interview #31.

²⁴ Veteran Interview #35.

²⁵ Veteran Interview #12. The Monsanto and Dow chemical companies settled out of court in 1985 for A\$180 million, which made many veterans unhappy as the settlement meant that the companies did not have to admit liability. Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, pp.159-160.

²⁶ "Defect link to Agent Orange" in *The Cairns Post* (4 November 1999), p.11.

²⁷ The VVCS organised the "Sons and Daughters of Vietnam Veterans Program" in 2000 and travelled to most major population centres for initial Focus Group meetings. There was so much interest in the Cairns area that two meetings were held on 25 & 26 July 2000.

²⁸ Department of Veterans' Affairs, "Vietnam Veterans' Children Support Program", <http://www.dva.gov.au/health/vvcsp/index.htm>.

smoke because it will relieve the stress”.²⁹ Another, who completed two tours, and developed a drinking problem while in Vietnam, said that “smoking and drinking were obligatory in Vietnam – it was very cheap and was just a way of life there.”³⁰ This assertion was supported by a number of other veterans, and the fact that this was encouraged is well documented in the report by Justice Evatt from the Agent Orange Royal Commission.³¹ This has been accepted by the DVA,³² particularly in regard to smoking. A small number also have continuing health problems caused by wounds they received, some of which are exacerbated by age.

The scars of the Vietnam War are not always physical. A significant number of veterans suffered from psychological problems attributable to their service, most common of which is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). War-related PTSD is by no means new or unique to the Vietnam experience and was known in previous wars under various terms, such as “shell shock”. New studies in the last twenty years, inspired in many cases by the problems of Vietnam veterans, redefined the disorder as PTSD. According to the VVCS, the common presentations of war-related PTSD include:

- Feelings of alienation – “don’t fit in”.
- Avoidance of situations where people [may have] criticised the war or their involvement.
- Sleep disturbances and nightmares.
- Low tolerance.
- Sudden Mood swings eg. hyped up or depressed.
- Periods of intense energy and periods of lethargy.
- Unsettled in family and work life.
- Lots of moves and job changes.
- Irritability or outbursts of anger, and hypervigilance.
- Periods of drinking too much. Many begin a pattern of substance abuse as a coping mechanism.³³

Some began showing symptoms very early, and for others it did not become apparent for years, and could be triggered by seemingly small or unrelated events. Whatever the case, for a great number of sufferers, it became worse with the passing of time,

²⁹ Veteran Interview #3.

³⁰ Veteran Interview #28.

³¹ Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam, *Final Report, July 1985 / Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam* (Canberra, 1985).

³² Veteran Interview #17.

³³ Vietnam Veteran’s Counselling Service, “PTSD: Common Presentation” (1995).

with problems sometimes taking on a “new level of intensity”.³⁴ Counselling and medications can be useful in treatment, but it is rarely cured, with the emphasis placed on learning to cope with the illness. Some do not “cope”, and most veterans know of at least one person who has committed suicide.

The morbidity studies assert that almost a third of Vietnam veterans have at one time or another suffered from some psychological problems, the most prevalent of which is PTSD.³⁵ This figure is similar to the one discovered by the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study Conducted on the American veteran population a few years earlier.³⁶ While the figure is disquieting, there is some evidence to suggest that it may be an understatement. The VVCS in Townsville has 3000 people on file for the North Queensland area,³⁷ a number that seems large in view of the population of the area and the fact that only 12600 Vietnam veterans live in the entire state. Australia-wide, the VVCS conducted 58730 consultations in the 2000-01 fiscal year.³⁸ Among the veterans interviewed, 69% have suffered from PTSD related problems at some time since their service in Vietnam, and 51% are reliant on benefits for incapacitation caused mainly by PTSD related problems. Most suffered for many years without being aware of what the problem was, prompting a common refrain – “I thought it was just me”. The majority managed to continue in their careers and raise their families, while several had problems with employment, changing jobs and moving around, and difficulty in relationships. At some point for all of the eighteen suffering illness, they finally could not cope and sought assistance. The other six with symptoms had managed to continue employment in some capacity, but at least two were doing so with great difficulty.

Most tried initially to ignore or deny their problems:

I just felt frustrated. I could never settle down in a job. I blew two marriages. But at that stage, I wouldn’t admit there was a problem.³⁹

Thought it was the good thing people did –get married, get a nice job,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ DVA, *Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans: Vol 1*.

³⁶ Andrew Weist, “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and History”, Society for Military History Conference (Washington, April 2002).

³⁷ Scott, Interview.

³⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australia Now – A Statistical Profile: Income and Welfare, Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service* (2002), www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats.

³⁹ Veteran Interview #3.

settle down, but there was no settling down. The job crashed, the marriage crashed, and so did I.⁴⁰

I couldn't sleep at night. I was drinking heavily. And to cover up these two, I was international cabin crew... because I was coming home for three days then packing a bag, for fourteen years that restlessness was being covered up by being away from home, going somewhere, packing a bag.⁴¹

Looking back....why we got divorced and that sort of stuff, too late I realise, I was like that, and why was I like that? I mean for years and years I used to go to bed... and just before sleep I'd be lying there in that semi-comatose state, and have a rifle to my shoulder pulling the trigger. Not at anyone – it was just the action.⁴²

Others did not realise that they had a problem until other ailments alerted them. One veteran nearly died of two heart attacks five years ago before realising anything was wrong.

If I hadn't had those, I'd still be wandering around wondering what the hell is wrong with me. I don't know when it started, it was progressive... Things happen that you can't understand or explain. One of the things is I have no memory of my kids, up until they were about thirteen and ten respectively.⁴³

While visiting a friend one night, one man suddenly had a fit and was taken to hospital where he was diagnosed with epilepsy. He had no previous symptoms and no family history of the illness. Doctors eventually concluded it was brought on by stress and he was diagnosed with PTSD. After counselling, the symptoms eased.⁴⁴ Another suddenly found one day that he could barely walk, could not drive a car and remained bed-ridden for months. He refused to believe that his problem could be PTSD, saying that:

I wouldn't recognise my own situation. I wouldn't believe it. I just flatly refused to. That left a lot to be desired, particularly in my family life. I was always one of those people that had always gone to work for the whole time.⁴⁵

Those whose symptoms did manifest themselves earlier were not necessarily any better off:

I tried to get some help in the 1970s as I knew there was something wrong with me, the way I was acting, the anger I had inside... I saw a young

⁴⁰ Veteran Interview #9.

⁴¹ Veteran Interview #15.

⁴² Veteran Interview #17.

⁴³ Veteran Interview #21.

⁴⁴ Veteran Interview #15.

⁴⁵ Veteran Interview #19.

bloke who suggested I go fishing to relieve stress.⁴⁶

He sought out help again about twenty years later after he found himself unable to manage any longer.

Anger was a common theme for a number of veterans. One veteran, who had not felt as if he had any difficulties, was surprised to be told by his grown daughter that he always seemed so angry, which caused him to reconsider aspects of his life:

I do wonder a little about my decisions to do various things. My withdrawal from my marriage. Why I didn't speak. Why I find it hard to have relationships...⁴⁷

Another veteran spoke of his frustration with his feelings, claiming that "all the time, I'm angry, and I don't know what I'm angry at".⁴⁸

There is some suggestion that the problems of some Vietnam veterans were not caused exclusively by their war experiences. One, who has worked helping other veterans for more than ten years, stated unequivocally that many cases of PTSD were caused, or at least exacerbated, by what happened after they came home.⁴⁹ This assertion was repeated by two other veterans who have worked in similar capacities,⁵⁰ and is further supported by VVCS Director of Counselling, Wayne Scott, who believes that a significant amount of Vietnam veterans' problems were caused by how they were treated when they came home.⁵¹ As early as 1982, the Senate Standing Committee report on the health of veterans stated that they believed that homecoming experiences had contributed to the health problems.⁵² While the theory requires further research, the idea is not without some validity when considering the controversial nature of the war, the attitudes in the aftermath that regarded the war as a mistake and the veterans' feelings of rejection. All wars may be equally horrifying of the participants in their experiences, but the outcome and aftermath of the Vietnam War were different from previous conflicts in which Australia has participated.

There has also been growing evidence to suggest that many of the symptoms may be

⁴⁶ Veteran Interview #10.

⁴⁷ Veteran Interview #8.

⁴⁸ Veteran Interview #25.

⁴⁹ Veteran Interview #4.

⁵⁰ Veteran Interview #26; Veteran Interview #19.

⁵¹ Scott, Interview.

⁵² Senate Standing Committee, *Pesticides and Health*, p.123-25.

exacerbated by, or not necessarily manifest themselves, until middle age. This was certainly the case for the majority of veterans interviewed. They reported that problems became apparent or deteriorated in the past few years. One advocate claims that it is more common for these problems to develop when the veterans are in their forties and fifties, and that this is an accepted fact in the mental health community.⁵³ Wayne Scott has found that an "awakening occurs" and a "pattern appears to emerge at around forty-five years onwards as they approach middle age and the main consequence of this is that their ability to cope is reduced considerably."⁵⁴ Janne Barlow, convenor of the VSASA Joblink program in Brisbane, agreed, claiming that the situation was worsened by other changes that may be taking place in the veteran's life at that time, such as relationship, family and employment issues.⁵⁵ One former army medic described how the coping mechanisms he had established within himself in Vietnam were no longer working:

After the first or second dust off,⁵⁶ I learned to turn the switch off in my brain. But now I'm finding over the last two or three years, that the switch is starting to fail and I'm having problems.⁵⁷

Growing evidence supports this phenomenon, and suggests that it is not unique to those who served in Vietnam. Barlow claimed that she had assisted World War II veterans in similar situations.⁵⁸ Other research suggests that "significant numbers of World War II veterans with no previous history of mental health problems" began suffering PTSD symptoms decades after the event.⁵⁹ Echoing Barlow's observances, psychiatrist Dr Michael Robertson found the problems appear to be triggered when a veteran retires, becomes ill or suffers family problems.⁶⁰ Studies of PTSD have found that it can be triggered by a seemingly minor, and often unrelated, event many years later even among those who have never suffered previous problems.⁶¹ The late onset of PTSD can be just as disabling and sometimes more difficult to treat than

⁵³ Veteran Interview #19.

⁵⁴ Scott, *PTSD*, p.79.

⁵⁵ Janne Barlow, Interview with researcher, 28 October 1999.

⁵⁶ "Dust off" was the term used in Vietnam for a helicopter evacuation.

⁵⁷ Veteran Interview #14.

⁵⁸ Barlow, Interview.

⁵⁹ Michael D Robertson and Alison O'Neill, "First onset of late life post traumatic stress disorder in Australian veterans of the Second World and Korean wars – A descriptive study", Produced by Wesley Mental Health Services – Wesley Private Hospital (Sydney, 2001), p.5. See also: "Veterans hit by flashbacks", *The Cairns Post* (26 May 2001), p.29.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "About US: The Unforgettable Experience – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder", SBS Television Network (1 November 2002).

those who suffer earlier.

Unfortunately, the inability to cope sometimes had a terrible cost. As mentioned, the 1997 Mortality Study found that Vietnam veterans have a suicide rate 21% higher than the community standard, but there is a feeling throughout much of the veteran community that the figure is underestimated. Anecdotal information from counsellors and support groups suggests that the suicide rate amongst Vietnam veterans is up to ten times the average for their age groups. While this assertion cannot be verified, there is some evidence to suggest that the figure is higher than indicated by the mortality study. Scott agrees that the suicide rate is significantly higher than is stated, and says that some suicides are hidden in "accidental deaths".⁶² There is also the issue of substance abuse that leads to death, and whether it should be considered as a self inflicted death. Scott also points to the fact that there are an enormous amount of suicide attempts, for which there are no statistics.⁶³ One of the veterans interviewed admitted to a suicide attempt - "unfortunately, I didn't do that very well either"⁶⁴ - while two others allowed inferences to be drawn. Two Vietnam veterans committed suicide in the Cairns area within a six month period while these interviews were being conducted.

This should not suggest that all veterans are chronically unstable. For those with PTSD, the severity of their symptoms range from mild (causing some minor disruption to their lives), to extremely severe (where a "normal" life was almost impossible), with the majority falling somewhere in between. A few have been hospitalised due to the illness, and most have attended counselling at some time. A couple, who were at the severe end of the spectrum and with assistance are now coping, spend a great deal of time working with other veterans. Most live extremely average lives. This was something most veterans were very anxious to convey in their interviews. They wanted it to be known that they had suffered, and some continue to, but also that they were ordinary men with ordinary problems too. While there is no doubt that health issues are a continuing concern for the veteran community, assistance and acceptance is gradually becoming more readily available

⁶² Scott, Interview.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Veteran Interview #25.

than it has been in the past, but the acceptance has been a hard won battle. Problematically, although the numbers for those suffering from PTSD among the Vietnam veterans may appear to be statistically greater than from other wars, it is likely that this is largely a result of more understanding and medical acceptance of the illness – including in non-war situations of trauma. However, the greater publicity and more publicly acknowledged sufferers aggravated and inflated the stereotype of the damaged Vietnam veteran.⁶⁵

Expectations of Betrayal

Explaining the circumstances surrounding the creation of the image of the Vietnam veterans, that would eventually morph into the problematic stereotypes, requires an understanding not just of the health issues, but also of the battle by veterans for recognition of the origins of those issues. Certainly, at the time the veterans began lobbying for recognition, those suffering problems were in the minority, though many were worried what it all would mean for their future wellbeing. It was not just about receiving assistance, but also finding answers. Feelings of betrayal and abandonment that many had experienced since their service found an outlet in the health issues, particularly when the government appeared coy about answering their questions. Veterans believed that the only way they were going to get anything was to fight for it, establishing a combative mentality that would attach itself to all of their endeavours.

Veterans have been criticised for adopting this combative mentality from their American counterparts and following their methods too closely.⁶⁶ However, this is an oversimplification of the issue. While Australian veterans did take some cues from the Americans, this was mainly because of the enormous number of Vietnam veterans (nearly 3 million in comparison with Australia's 58000) and the larger resources that put their research considerably ahead of Australia's. Also, as mentioned in chapter two, the Australian government, by aligning itself to American policy in Vietnam, also found itself dealing with resulting credibility gap. The situation worsened when

⁶⁵ This state of affairs made it more difficult for both those who did suffer from PTSD and those who did not, making it even more confusing for those trying to get answers or just get on with their lives.

⁶⁶ See for example: Grey, "Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran", pp.92-93; Doyle, "Short-timers' endless monuments", p.109; Ross, "Australia's Legacy", pp.195-98, 204.

it was discovered that Australia had been less than forthcoming about various issues relating to its intervention in Vietnam.⁶⁷ As far as the veterans were concerned, the credibility gap extended to the actions of the government after the war; if they were unable to trust the governments that sent them to war, why would it be any different after.

Although the experience of the Vietnam War was different for Americans and Australians on a number of levels, it was equally a common experience on other levels. They had, in alliance, fought the same enemy, in the same small country, at the same time and had both ultimately been on the same losing side returning home to countries with dwindling popular support. There were enough similarities between the two groups of service personnel to entertain and reinforce the idea that there could also be some comparable post-war problems. Certainly the DVA thought so: its minister, Tony Messner went to the United States in 1981 to investigate counselling facilities. As a result, the department was greatly influenced by the US Veterans Administration's approach to the problems of Vietnam veterans.⁶⁸

Therefore, following this pattern, veterans in Australia could be excused for believing that they would encounter the same resistance to their requests as their American counterparts. The silence surrounding Vietnam in Australia, both in literature and in general, was such that the only information about other veterans was from American sources, and the picture painted of the relationship between veterans and the government there was grim to say the least. The Veterans Administration (VA) was unequipped to deal with those wounded during the war itself, let alone those who suffered health problems afterward, and continued funding cuts owing to the economic downturn exacerbated the problem.⁶⁹ Psychological problems were the first dominant health issue for American veterans, and the resources were simply not available for consistent assistance. There is also some evidence to suggest that the government purposely withheld the resources necessary and played a significant role in undermining the veracity of the veterans' claims. Gerald Nicosia discovered that

⁶⁷ For example, the fact that South Vietnam did not request Australian assistance – this request actually coming from the USA as discussed in chapter two.

⁶⁸ Clem Lloyd and Jacqui Rees, *The Last Shilling: A History of Repatriation in Australia* (Melbourne, 1994), p.366.

⁶⁹ Nicosia, *Home to War*, p.302.

the American government knew in the sixties that they could be facing problems (both physical and psychological) with returned service personnel and claimed that during the Nixon term: "with pressure mounting from the White House, both the VA and Congress would resolutely deny medical and psychological help, even the most basic sort of readjustment counselling to many Vietnam Veterans... Their decisions would not be reversed for almost a decade."⁷⁰

There is no shortage of accounts of American veterans having difficulties gaining assistance.⁷¹ They had returned to a country in severe recession with high unemployment that was desperate to put Vietnam behind it as quickly as possible. Their homecoming experiences made the ones of Australians seem almost rosy in comparison. They suffered all of the difficulties of their Australian counterparts, but the wounds were sometimes deeper. The United States had been rent by nearly a decade of upheaval that had a wider context than just Vietnam. Civil rights, anti-war and other movements had split the country and spiralling civil unrest and violence that saw the assassination of popular community leaders, riots and the death of protesters, caused social damage that many were unable to comprehend. Vietnam veterans already suffering the effects of war trauma, sometimes found it almost impossible to find a place for themselves in society, causing a sense of isolation that had been rare in the wake of previous conflicts. They felt rejected by every quarter, including their own government. As in Australia, there was some reason to suspect that the problems of some veterans were worsened by their homecoming experiences,⁷² causing Nicosia to suggest that a number of veterans were pushed into their difficulties "by an unbelievably insensitive government".⁷³

By the time the spectre of Agent Orange was raised in the latter half of the seventies, it seemed obvious to American veterans that if they wanted some answers and assistance, they would have to fight for it. The Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) was established in 1979 ostensibly as a united voice from where they could lobby for

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.155.

⁷¹ See for example: Arnold R Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore 1997); Nicosia, *Home to War*; Wilbur J Scott, *The Politics of Readjustment: Vietnam Veterans Since the War* (New York 1993).

⁷² See for example: Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran* (New York 1971).

⁷³ Nicosia, *Home to War*, p.114.

assistance and answers. It was the VVA that led the charge in the civil lawsuit against the manufacturers of the chemicals used in Vietnam, notably Monsanto and Dow Corning. The lawsuit was long and complex, and was eventually settled out of court in 1985 for \$180 million - nuisance value at worst for these companies. The lack of a finding did nothing to really help the VVA in recognition and assistance from the VA, but gradually over time it began accepting more Agent Orange "related" illnesses as service related. The effects of the chemicals on veterans' health are now more widely accepted by the government and the community as an abundance of research over the past two decades has proved that it is likely that the chemicals used in Vietnam were responsible for numerous conditions.⁷⁴

However, the battle for recognition on the issue is far from over as demonstrated in April 2002 when a Federal appeals court ruled that the VA must make retroactive repayments to veterans suffering from diabetes and prostate cancer believed to be caused by exposure to Agent Orange.⁷⁵ Despite the fact that the government has linked nearly forty diseases to exposure to the chemicals since the *Agent Orange Act of 1991* was passed by Congress, the veterans have continued to battle the VA to be covered under the legislation, with many believing that the "VA has dragged its feet on the Agent Orange issue" to avoid paying benefits.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, veterans have made some headway in regard to recognition. Psychological assistance was also eventually forthcoming in the form of shop front "drop in" counselling centres and the proliferation of so called "rap" groups, a form of group therapy established by early veteran counsellors such as Robert Lifton.⁷⁷

Australian veterans might have expected a similar battle with the DVA. There was a history in Australia of previous service persons having difficulty proving causation,

⁷⁴ A conference co-sponsored by the American and Vietnamese governments was held in Hanoi in March 2002 to discuss the effects of Agent Orange on Vietnam. Scientists and the Vietnamese government produced shocking results of what they believe has been caused by chemical exposure, but representatives of the American government claim that it will "take many more years of research" to confirm and are refusing compensation, although it is providing some research and cleanup funds. "US Scientists Question Vietnam Dioxin Studies", *The New York Times* (4 March 2002); "A Killer Still", *The Economist* (7 March 2002).

⁷⁵ "Court Orders Retroactive Payments for Ill Veterans", *Los Angeles Times* (2 April 2002), www.latimes.com/la-000023597apr02.story.

⁷⁶ Kathleen Sullivan, "VA owes millions for Agent Orange ills", *San Francisco Chronicle* (2 April 2002), www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2002/04/02/MN191434.DTL.

⁷⁷ Lifton, *Home from the War*, p.18.

but thanks to the lobbying of many veterans before them, the situation was better. World War I veterans struggled until 1943 to have full coverage for tuberculosis. The disease was believed to have been significantly more prevalent in those exposed to gases during the war, and those who could prove exposure were assisted.⁷⁸ Sometimes, however that was difficult to prove, and more problematically, as time passed, it became obvious that the privations of service had exacerbated the possibility of contracting the disease. Until the 1943 legislation though, a direct link between service and the disease had to be made. Similar disputes arose in relation to cancer, particularly after World War II. Direct links had to be made between the service and the form of cancer, although this was finally resolved in the favour of veterans in 1974.⁷⁹ Veterans after both world wars also struggled for recognition and assistance of war related psychiatric illnesses as "the Commonwealth largely abdicated responsibility for mentally ill veterans" by resorting to the "predisposition theory" that they were a result of a weak mind.⁸⁰ Estimates of those refused pensions by 1946 on these grounds range between 12000 and 100000.⁸¹

By the time those returning from Vietnam reached the DVA, access and assistance had been considerably improved and a generally good relationship existed with returned service groups. Legislation had also been changed in the area of burden of proof, where a veteran was given the benefit of the doubt when applying for assistance, meaning that it was up to the department to prove that it was *not* a war related illness.⁸² Nevertheless, an act introduced in 1962, the year the first Australians were sent to Vietnam, did reduce access to benefits for those returning from war after that date. The *Repatriation (Special Overseas Service) Act* made it more difficult to claim benefits for problems caused by a non-specific occurrence, which among other limitations, "made it impossible for them to make a successful claim of war-caused disability from chemical spraying",⁸³ as short of falling in a barrel of chemical, few veterans would ever be able to prove the moment of exposure that caused the illness. While this act was amended in 1982 (after considerable

⁷⁸ Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.230.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.361.

⁸⁰ Kirsty Muir, "'Idiots, Imbeciles and Moral Defectives': Military and Government Treatment of Mentally Ill Service Personnel and Veterans", *Journal of Australian Studies* (St Lucia 2002), p.41.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.46. This range of figures is used by Muir as records were contradictory.

⁸² Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.358.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

lobbying) in favour of the veteran, it certainly did nothing to change the opinion of many veterans who believed they were being treated with less respect than previous service persons. Just as Vietnam had been the line in the sand for Cold War tensions, Agent Orange became the line in the sand for veterans, and as in the former, the war was complex, deeply political and difficult to define.

The VVAA versus Everyone

The VVAA was established as an issues only organisation to provide recognition and advocacy.⁸⁴ There was no social aspect as in other organisations such as the RSL: it was solely a lobby and information body for veterans on health and welfare concerns. At its peak the VVAA claimed to have 10000 veterans registered,⁸⁵ and even though those numbers have since waned, it proved groundbreaking in raising the profile of Vietnam veterans, becoming a voice after a long period of silence. As mentioned, the VVAA believed that the health problems of veterans were caused by the use of chemicals in Vietnam, particularly Agent Orange.⁸⁶ Both the Australian and American governments denied that Agent Orange was responsible for any of the health problems. This, of course meant that a number of illnesses were not covered under the assistance allowable by Veterans' Affairs guidelines, and even those that were did not acknowledge chemical exposure as their cause. But what the VVAA wanted more than anything else was answers, and by extension, acknowledgement.

It is interesting to speculate about how different things might have been if the government had acknowledged the emerging plight of Vietnam veterans, admitted that the chemicals may have been dangerous and apologised for the difficulties imposed on them since their service. This might seem fanciful, particularly in the light of the continuing problems in regard to the reconciliation issues of indigenous Australians and the "sorry" conundrum. However, considering that acknowledgement and even apologies of a sort have been made by governments in some form over the past few years, it is not so whimsical. As it was, the Fraser Coalition Government began by handling the issue so poorly that all the veterans'

⁸⁴ Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, p.22-23.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.103.

⁸⁶ For an extended discussion see: McCulloch, *The Politics of Agent Orange*; Crowe, *The Battle After the War*; for an alternative view see: F.B. Smith, *Medicine at War*.

worse fears appeared confirmed. During answers to questions in parliament in 1979-80, both the prime minister and the defence minister, James Killen, denied any knowledge of Agent Orange or its use in Vietnam.⁸⁷ This is particularly astonishing as Malcolm Fraser had been defence minister for part of the Vietnam War. Killen, in particular, was flippant and sarcastic in his reply to parliament, which only increased the dismay and surprise of several high level bureaucrats within the DVA, who were themselves Vietnam veterans and knew there was ample proof of the use of Agent Orange.⁸⁸ After instances such as these, combined with the other issues mentioned, it was going to be difficult to dissuade veterans from believing that they had a fight on their hands.

Critics of the methods of the VVAA point out that only a small minority of veterans were unwell as a possible result of chemical exposure and the VVAA were simply the voices of a malcontent minority. One critic who supported this view, F.B. Smith, asserted that a "small minority of disgruntled Vietnam veterans seized on the issue both as an explanation of their discontents and a likely source of additional repatriation benefits."⁸⁹ While the VVAA did not represent the majority of veterans on paper, such a suggestion underestimates the concern throughout the community. 10000, or nearly one fifth of all veterans as financial members, is certainly not an indication of a lack of interest among the community. In comparison, the American VVA has attained a membership of 50000 – only about one nineteenth of eligible members – and considers itself to be a powerful lobby group and the voice of the veteran.⁹⁰ Even if they did not join, most veterans were probably watching the unfolding story with intense interest, as indicated by the interviews. The numbers of those with reported illnesses was also no indicator of the level of interest, as many were concerned about their future health and the welfare of their families. Diseases such as cancer do not appear predictably and veterans were worried for their future health. There is also some indication that health problems were under reported because those suffering were either unaware, or had been told that their problems were unrelated to their service. This was particularly the case with symptoms of a

⁸⁷ Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.363.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Smith, *Medicine at War*, p.293.

⁹⁰ Vietnam Veterans of America, "A Short History of the VVA" (2003), www.vva.org/Membership/history.htm.

less severe nature, such as skin problems and gastrointestinal disorders. Some veterans had for years been suffering from a range of relatively minor complaints that they rarely complained about because they did not want to sound like “whingers”, but which nonetheless made them feel constantly unwell. While a number of these could be explained as the physical manifestations of stress from PTSD, not all could be dismissed, and those that were PTSD based received assistance partly through the lobbying of the VVAA.

Fifteen of the veterans interviewed joined the VVAA with various levels of involvement ranging from state vice-president to casual observer. Most who joined did so in the hope of finding answers and a platform many felt was denied them by the public and traditional organisations such as the RSL. Keith Payne claims that many turned to the VVAA because they felt “let down” by the RSL;⁹¹ a view supported by others and described by one veteran as needing to create a “separate entity” from which to make a place for themselves in the wider veteran community.⁹² The VVAA was also often the first point of call for those suffering difficulties, from where they could be referred to appropriate assistance. Five became involved in volunteer counselling or referral work, a situation that was particularly critical in remote areas such as Cairns while the VVCS was still in its infancy. Two veterans who helped run the twenty-four hour hotline in Cairns in the early 1980s, eventually found the situation too stressful and themselves in need of counselling.⁹³ Another in a similar situation in Victoria claimed that “it virtually put the last nail in my coffin”, but was proud to have been involved.⁹⁴

The VVAA did much to raise the profile of veterans outside the arena of battle with the government. At the first official VVAA meeting in Sydney, a welfare officer was appointed and began examining the needs of veterans. Carla McCallum, the widow of a veteran who died of cancer, quickly established a welfare arm which was eventually known as the Vietnam Veterans’ Family Support Link Line.⁹⁵ The support network was mainly a referral and advocacy service, but they also found themselves

⁹¹ Veteran Interview #30.

⁹² Veteran Interview #32.

⁹³ Veteran Interview #4; Veteran Interview #16.

⁹⁴ Veteran Interview #26.

⁹⁵ Papers of Carla McCallum – AWM.

doing counselling like the Cairns veterans, as no organised system yet existed. The volunteers ran a 24 hour crisis line, but as stressed in a grant application to the government "the services provided would not attempt to replace the need for 'treatment' or for professional care management, but it could assist in supporting a family during treatment or being an ongoing support treatment and in case of death."⁹⁶ Apart from the counselling, volunteers also established other programs, such as Joblink in Western Australia,⁹⁷ which provided veterans with networking opportunities. The VVAA also tried to promote education about the Vietnam War. One veteran interviewed visited high schools in the Sydney area for many years: one of these, St Joseph's, regularly made donations to the VVAA and eventually offered scholarships to the children of Vietnam veterans.⁹⁸

From its inception, the VVAA began lobbying for a government inquiry into the Agent Orange issue. The first Senate Inquiry was held in 1981-82,⁹⁹ and concluded that it was "highly improbable" that the herbicides were responsible for the health problems. Much of the evidence consisted of what became known as the 'Herbs tapes', a record of Operation Ranch Hand, which was responsible for most of the aerial spraying.¹⁰⁰ There were claims and counter-claims over the evidence taken from the 'Herbs tapes' and the report shows inconsistencies, most glaring of which is the claim "it seems evident that a vast majority of Australian military personnel in Vietnam could not have been exposed to aerial spraying of herbicides", two pages before stating that 487000 gallons had been sprayed in Phuoc Tuy province between 1965-68.¹⁰¹ Little, if anything, was investigated in regard to helicopter, truck or backpack spraying, which is not included on the 'Herbs tapes'. Most disturbing however, was the conclusion that the herbicides were not to blame, but that the insecticides sprayed or the anti-malarial drugs used might be the culprits.¹⁰² If this was supposed to ease the minds of veterans it certainly failed as it only raised more

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *After the March: Strengthening Support for the Veterans* (Canberra, 1988), p.34.

⁹⁸ Veteran Interview #13.

⁹⁹ For a comprehensive discussion see: McCulloch, *The Politics of Agent Orange*.

¹⁰⁰ Senate Standing Committee, *Pesticides and Health*, pp.18-42. The 'Herbs tapes' were a computerised record (on tape) of the chemicals used, but can only be used as a guide for overall usage, as they pertain solely to the chemicals dispersed under 'Operation Ranch Hand'.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp.18 and 41.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.202.

questions.¹⁰³ Significantly, the Committee also concluded that it believed negative homecoming experiences contributed to health issues in a “situation completely reversed from that of World War II when the returning veteran was a hero.”¹⁰⁴

Unhappy with the findings of the Senate inquiry, the VVAA began lobbying for a Royal Commission. The Fraser government, believing that it had already fulfilled its obligations to veterans with the Senate Inquiry, refused. Veterans, wondering why the same party which had sent them enthusiastically to war seemed to want to avoid a thorough investigation of the chemical issue, became increasingly suspicious of the government. A few began to wonder what the government was trying to hide as a continued distrust began to fester. Others simply took the government refusal as further proof of how little they were regarded by those in authority, and by extension, by the community at large. This only made the veterans more determined, and they did their best to keep the issue in the media. This was assisted in 1982 by *Simpson’s Case*. Colin Simpson had applied to the DVA for assistance when it was discovered that he had non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, which he claimed was due to chemical exposure. His application was refused. The case was appealed (by which time Simpson had died), and the Review Tribunal found that there was a “real possibility” that the lymphoma had been caused by chemical exposure, and they certainly could not disprove it. Simpson’s widow was granted a pension, but the DVA “instructed determining officers that *Simpson’s Case* was not to be taken as a precedent”,¹⁰⁵ contrary to the established practice of the department. This twist in what should have been a victory was further evidence to veterans that they needed a Commission to verify their claims and confirmation to some that the DVA was against them.

However, the most significant rejection for veterans came once again from the RSL. The relationship between the Vietnam veterans and the organisation had often been tense, which was why the VVAA had been established. Some Vietnam veterans had felt that the RSL might not have their best interests at heart, a concern that was not

¹⁰³ The anti-malarial drug, Dapsone, which was given to service persons in Vietnam as part of a medical trial would come under further scrutiny some time later. Evidence emerged that it was possibly dangerous, and while enquiries continue, much of the information about the Dapsone Trials remains classified under an act revised in 1982. For an in depth discussion see: Jean Williams, *The Devil’s Rainbow* and *Guineapigs of Vietnam*.

¹⁰⁴ Senate Standing Committee, *Pesticides and Health*, p.125.

¹⁰⁵ Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.365.

without some basis in fact. The relationship between the VVAA and the RSL did not start auspiciously, when the first meeting of concerned veterans in 1979 was forced to pay for the use of a RSL meeting room at Castle Hill.¹⁰⁶ It was this sort of petty slight that put the VVAA on the defensive even before the real altercations began. The RSL, in some quarters, had supported the veterans in their call for answers over Agent Orange,¹⁰⁷ after the formation of the VVAA, but by the release of the Senate Inquiry report, its support was starting to wane.

The relationship between the two really deteriorated when the RSL refused to support the VVAA call for a Royal Commission. The RSL did have its reasons for this refusal, not least of which was that initially it thought the reports of problems were exaggerated.¹⁰⁸ It failed to grasp many issues about Vietnam, and chemical exposure was one of these. Former National Secretary of the RSL, Ian Gollings, claimed that eventually after some research of its own, the RSL began to change its mind and see that the Vietnam veterans did have cause for concern,¹⁰⁹ but ironically, this is where the real problems began. The main concern of the RSL was that the majority of its members, who were predominantly World War II service personnel, have generous access to the repatriation system, and so concerned were they by the evidence unfolding on the chemical issue that they were afraid the whole structure could be under threat. This fear had some grounds in fact, as some members of the medical profession and the government had been trying to expose what they considered "generosity that bordered on corruption" since the early 1960s, but had apparently been thwarted by the ex-service lobby.¹¹⁰ According to Gollings, the National Executive thought "that the problem was so complex and likely to be so widespread that to allow Vietnam veterans to claim exposure to Agent Orange as the reason for unexplained illnesses would so strain the standard of proof for granting benefits to veterans that it would threaten the whole viability of the repatriation system."¹¹¹ The RSL felt that its responsibilities lay with protecting the benefits of its members, and even though they had for several years been trying to increase membership amongst the Vietnam veterans, they were still in the minority and in few positions of power.

¹⁰⁶ Papers of Carla McCallum – AWM.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, *Medicine at War*, p.295.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Gollings, p.73.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.103.

¹¹⁰ Smith, *Medicine at War*, p.338.

¹¹¹ Interview with Gollings, p.73.

Keith Payne echoed the sentiments of many Vietnam veterans in claiming that the RSL had "let them down", particularly on the Agent Orange issue.¹¹²

Having been spurned by the government and the peak service persons organisation, the VVAA turned its attention to the approaching federal election. If the Coalition would not support them, perhaps the ALP would. This was perhaps a surreal turn for some veterans who had been so angered by the Whitlam Labor government, but bigger issues were at stake. The VVAA lobbied a number of hopeful candidates in marginal seats, and after promises to take their concerns on board and launch a Royal Commission, the VVAA threw its support behind the ALP in the election.¹¹³ It would be hard to gauge how much influence the issue had over the result as it was not a factor affecting the majority of Australians, but it certainly appeared to assist a couple of successful candidates.¹¹⁴ The RSL was horrified by the VVAA tactics as it had a policy of staying out of partisan politics and its criticism did nothing to ease the tensions. At about this time, according to Gollings, there had been a "complete breakdown at the national level of relations between the VVAA and the RSL"¹¹⁵ and the VVAA was left to face the Royal Commission alone when it was eventually convened.

The Hawke government kept its election promise and the Evatt Royal Commission on the "Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam" was finally established in 1983 and sat for two years.¹¹⁶ Initially, the VVAA was mildly confident of fair access and an effective outcome from the Commission. After their difficulties getting to this point, the optimism of Vietnam veterans that the end was in sight seems almost naïve in retrospect. However, they had developed a good relationship with a number of ALP contacts, in particular Clyde Holding (personal friend of Hawke and minister in the cabinet), and they appeared to have the ear of the government. They had been able to secure some financial assistance for counsel as

¹¹² Veteran Interview #30.

¹¹³ Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, pp.89-105.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Interview with Gollings, p.104.

¹¹⁶ Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam, *Final Report, July 1985 / Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam* (Canberra, 1985).

well as acceptable terms of reference to suit their needs.¹¹⁷ The VVAA hired respected QC Aaron McInnes and began writing submissions and searching for witnesses to give evidence. But, even before the first hearings it became obvious that the veterans were in over their heads. Despite this, they still believed that the weight of their evidence would be convincing.

It would be impossible in a few paragraphs to begin to demonstrate the enormity of what the VVAA faced in the Commission. The Commission was not about the VVAA versus the DVA – it was the VVAA versus everyone, or at least that is how it seemed. The Commission had attracted international interest and everyone who felt they had a stake had sent their legal counsel, including representatives from the United States government and from the chemical company, Monsanto. While the government representatives kept a low profile, Monsanto spared no expense defending its products with submissions and expert witnesses.¹¹⁸ Despite its calm exterior, the United States was very worried about the implications of the Commission. Not only was it concerned about the possible cost of compensating veterans, but also the political outcome that could result in it being accused of chemical warfare if it could be proved that the dangers were known, or even suspected.¹¹⁹ Apart from the obvious political repercussions of such a finding and its consequences for future warfare, there was also the likely pressure to help the “other victims” of the chemicals: the Vietnamese. Compounding these obstacles was the spectre of the RSL, which although claiming that it “deplored” such an “inordinate waste of money”, used its influence to keep its hand in, not least of all by submitting a document to the Commission from its National Executive supporting the Monsanto case.¹²⁰

The hearings began inauspiciously when Justice Evatt questioned whether the VVAA had the legal validity to stand before the Commission. The association’s books were subpoenaed, and after the aggrieved veterans had handed over the required papers, appearance was granted. However, it was another obstacle which reinforced the veterans’ belief that they were held in contempt. Nevertheless, veterans and

¹¹⁷ Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, pp.103-106.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.106-110.

¹¹⁹ For an extended discussion of the issue see: McCulloch, *The Politics of Agent Orange*.

¹²⁰ Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, p.110.

organisations (including some RSL sub-branches which obviously felt differently to their National Executive) from all over the country sent contributions to the fund and the VVAA struggled forward.

Belying the hysterical rhetoric in media sources surrounding the veterans' claims,¹²¹ the VVAA submission compiled by McInnes was balanced and moderate, based mainly in hard scientific proof mixed with documents and testimony of witnesses to army organisation, chemical use and health problems.¹²² The veterans wanted answers, not scalps. This was stated quite clearly: "The VVAA does not contemplate legislation which would give sums of money by way of compensation. Essentially they wish to have their war caused illnesses recognised and treated as such and in the same manner as any veteran from another war would be treated for war caused injuries and illnesses."¹²³ The only real vitriol was reserved for the DVA, claiming it had "failed to carry out its responsibilities to Vietnam Veterans" and "invented evidence and absurd reasoning has been put forward by the departments to cover for their deficiencies".¹²⁴ Two of the veterans interviewed provided evidence for the Commission¹²⁵ - both of whom speak of the experience with great bitterness - and a few others had been involved in some way owing to their positions in the VVAA. All watched the proceedings with concern. Interestingly, few wanted to discuss it in any detail, even those directly involved. It was most often mentioned in passing, usually as an example of proof of government attitudes towards Vietnam veterans.

The Commission delivered its findings in July 1985, nearly a year after its report was due. Vietnam veterans were confident that they had made their case, despite having difficulty holding on to their counsel as the funding ran dry. Just days before the findings were revealed, the government introduced the *Repatriation Amendment Act 1985*, effectively altering the burden of proof mechanism, switching the onus of proof from the DVA back to the veterans.¹²⁶ The change was unexpected and worrying for

¹²¹ For example headlines such as: Headlines such as 'Veterans Tell of Illness and Deformity', 'Spraying to Kill', 'The Agent Called Hades' and 'Agents of Deformity and Death' – cited in Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.360; and Smith, *Medicine at War*, pp.345-346.

¹²² VVAA, "Submission to 'Agent Orange' Royal Commission of the Vietnam Veterans of Australia Association" (November 1983).

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p.14.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.66-67.

¹²⁵ Veteran Interview #2; Veteran Interview #12.

¹²⁶ Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, pp.186-187.

veterans, but some probably thought that it was because the department and the government were concerned about the imminent findings of the Commission. However, the VVAA was instead devastated to discover that Justice Philip Evatt had concluded that he was not convinced of the link between chemical exposure and illness. Evatt's florid language did nothing to placate veterans: Agent Orange was "not guilty" and this information "should be shouted from the rooftops".¹²⁷ A finding that was supposed to reassure veterans that their health was not in danger succeeded once again in having the opposite effect.

The VVAA launched calls for an inquiry into the conduct of the Commission, citing harsh treatment of their witnesses, a lack of evidence for the finding, and more seriously, a charge of plagiarism against Justice Evatt as large sections in the findings appeared to be lifted directly from Monsanto documents.¹²⁸ An internal review conducted by Bob Hogg for the government, tabled more than two years later, described the report as "clumsy, flawed and lack[ing] credibility",¹²⁹ and further research into the chemical issue was recommended, but the findings were considered sustainable, although the term "not proven" was suggested in preference to "not guilty".¹³⁰ There would be no new inquiry. Later studies, as previously mentioned, would show that veterans' fears were far from groundless, but at the time the situation seemed hopeless. The sense of anger felt by veterans over the Commission was deepened by the suicide of the desperately ill VVAA National President, Phil Thompson, at the height of the struggle for a review of the findings.¹³¹ Two of the veterans interviewed who knew him personally remain saddened by the loss of such a leader; one believed the VVAA was never the same afterwards.¹³²

It could be argued that the VVAA made a tactical error in focusing exclusively, even obsessively, on the chemical issue, which may well have been in some part a product of the governments' poor handling of the chemicals issue: if it was evasive, it must have something terrible to hide. This unfortunately removed attention from other more easily proved health and welfare problems, particularly as the organisation later

¹²⁷ *Royal Commission: Executive Summary*, p.37.

¹²⁸ Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.375; Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, pp.117-127.

¹²⁹ Bob Hogg cited in Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, p.130.

¹³⁰ Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.374.

¹³¹ Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, p.128.

¹³² Veteran Interview # 13; Veteran Interview #18.

widened its goals after its approach had been undermined. However, obscured under the poorly handled Agent Orange issue, Evatt had in fact concluded that Vietnam veterans were indeed in need of improved assistance. He recommended to the DVA that "diseases of the circulatory system, alcohol-induced diseases and mental health disorders should be automatically accepted for entitlement,"¹³³ concluding that stress was most likely responsible for many of the veterans problems. Evatt believed that PTSD was a considerable crisis for veterans. The DVA rejected the recommendation claiming that such a fundamental change would undermine the entire repatriation system and the effect on the budget would have been "incalculable".¹³⁴ Therefore, despite the fact that Evatt had brought attention and given credibility to what would eventually become the most significant health problem for veterans, they were at that time, no further ahead and very tired of the battle. The whole affair had defeated some and radicalised others, while the majority in between went on with their lives.

Not everyone was critical of the findings of the Royal Commission. Scientific studies into the issue were still in their infancy in Australia, and many government documents were yet to become available for study. The VVAA was let down by some of its witnesses, particularly the experts, and Smith provides a thorough, though perhaps overly harsh, examination of their performance.¹³⁵ While he makes some worthy points about the irresponsibility of the media in regard to the issue, and the lost opportunities brought about by a largely single minded approach by the VVAA in claiming chemicals as the root of all their ills,¹³⁶ his biased approach to such a controversial topic in a volume of the official history only served to confirm to veterans the attitudes of the establishment. An official history was perceived to have the approval of the government, and such strongly held opinions, some of which were later disproved, angered some veterans.¹³⁷ Despite some of the excellent information provided by Smith's study, it is difficult not to suggest that he undermines his argument by suggesting that many of the veterans involved were motivated by the desire for money and other benefits, and to "manipulate" the generosity of the

¹³³ Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.375.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.375-376.

¹³⁵ Smith, *Medicine at War*, pp.285-363.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ The piece is criticised by a number of advocates such as Ambrose Crowe and Jean Williams, and was mentioned by several in the veterans' interviews and at meetings.

repatriation system.¹³⁸ He further asserted:

[The] tenets of classical liberalism and truth values in scholarship and public affairs contrast sharply with the pretensions of the Agent Orange lobby. The clash epitomises many of the worst aspects of Australian behaviour in the 1980s when, following the rest of the world, private greed became, for some, public good.¹³⁹

However, even Smith could not deny the politically poor handling of the issues surrounding Vietnam veterans, claiming that the government "had seemed evasive and dilatory in handling an issue fraught with public disquiet and suspicion".¹⁴⁰ Few veterans would disagree.

Various issues, ranging from the time of their service, up to and including more current events, have caused a deep distrust or contempt for the government and its associated authorities amongst even the most moderate veterans. These feelings of antipathy ooze from the veteran literature and were obvious in the interviews. Keith Payne talked of how the government had lied to veterans about the chemical issue,¹⁴¹ while another career soldier and representative of a veteran organisation criticised the government for the "divide and conquer climate" it created and promoted.¹⁴² It was normal to hear a comment such as, "the Australian government let the guys down"¹⁴³ or criticism of a "non-compassionate bureaucracy".¹⁴⁴ A successful businessman believed "veterans had been abandoned by the government" and claimed that the government will never "admit" to any misdeeds to avoid liability.¹⁴⁵ Another maintained that it was the government's bad attitude towards veterans that caused the public's poor perceptions and considered more recent improvements to be nothing but "political stunts" to keep them quiet.¹⁴⁶ Even Lieutenant General Grey expressed frustration with the government, claiming that until the last few years, "when you tried to push a case for Vietnam veterans you found there was every bureaucratic obstacle" to overcome.¹⁴⁷ Another high ranking retired officer was more unequivocal: "I'm angry about what's happened after. The neglect. And it is the

¹³⁸ Smith, *Medicine at War*, pp.293&362.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.362.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.299.

¹⁴¹ Veteran Interview #30.

¹⁴² Veteran Interview #32.

¹⁴³ Veteran Interview #19.

¹⁴⁴ Veteran Interview #8.

¹⁴⁵ Veteran Interview #5.

¹⁴⁶ Veteran Interview #7.

¹⁴⁷ Veteran Interview #35.

fault of the government as they set the tone.”¹⁴⁸

What is most notable about the above comments is that they were all made by the least troubled and radicalised of the veterans interviewed. They could not be described as a group of malcontents by any measure. They were all respected members of the community with long, successful careers and none were reliant on DVA assistance. In fact, throughout the interviews, only one veteran did not have something negative to say about the government's handling of the Vietnam issue, and many were nowhere nearly as moderate as the ones mentioned above. No direct question was asked about governmental attitudes unless it was already raised by an interviewee, signifying that the attitudes were usually expressed unprompted. A general feeling of betrayal on some level was palpable. The ultimate irony was that the anti-authoritarian attitudes of the protest movement eventually found its way to a very different group of people who found themselves distrusting, or simply disliking, the very institutions they had been told they were fighting to protect. Over time a small amount of veterans would find solace, or a place to hide, within the emerging stereotypes, just as many from previous wars had done before them. It may not have been a comfortable place, but it was an identity of their own.

Vietnam veterans had returned from their service to a climate that most felt was hostile, or at least uninterested. A number of events compounded these feelings and certain attitudes began to emerge from the veteran community. They believed that every step for assistance and recognition was going to involve a battle; they believed that the public was generally unsympathetic; and they believed that the government had betrayed them. Therefore veterans felt that they would have to make a lot of noise to attract attention to their plight and show themselves as victims rather than villains. Even though only a small minority of veterans were then unwell, there was a general concern that the problem would grow, so there was a need to promote the issue. Groups such as the VVAA needed publicity for their cause, and the media, recovering from its Vietnam “fatigue”, began to become interested in some aspects of the issues - particularly if it involved dying men, deformed children and a possible government conspiracy. However, veterans could not have known that the

¹⁴⁸ Veteran Interview #36.

willingness of some areas of the media to give them publicity would have other repercussions.

The problems of Vietnam veterans were often sensationalised. Headlines such as 'Veterans Tell of Illness and Deformity', 'Spraying to Kill', 'The Agent Called Hades' and 'Agents of Deformity and Death',¹⁴⁹ certainly raised awareness, but also had the potential to cause fear and tempted the media to make it seem that all Vietnam veterans were ill. However, it was not just the issue of Agent Orange related illnesses that found its way to the media. In the United States, psychological aspects were under the microscope of media attention. A couple of high profile murder cases where decorated veterans allegedly killed their wives received a lot of attention, as did a number of reports claiming high rates of mental illness and unemployment amongst those who served in Vietnam.¹⁵⁰ Current affairs programs ran stories on the so called 'tripwire vets',¹⁵¹ which spawned other accounts and so on. Those who were in need of assistance were at first pleased to be getting publicity and little was done to contradict these stories or show another perspective. Like most stories that become sensationalised, the seed of the stories did lie in truth, and public sympathy and concern certainly increased. Thus the stereotypes were conceived. The reports filtered into the Australian media, but although some parallels could be drawn with Australian veterans, the stories rarely reached the dramatic overtones of the American ones. Yet increasingly, the lines between them would become blurred.

The factor that veterans could probably not have foreseen was that the problems of Vietnam veterans were attracting interest from elsewhere. Hollywood had been having difficulty finding a perspective on the Vietnam War and few movies had been made on the topic, certainly in the mainstream. Suddenly a subject which had been an uncomfortable one for many studio executives, had a handle, and it was not the "black and white" heroics of previous conflicts. The veterans had returned from one war to a new set of battles, and as those skirmishes widened and accelerated, the celluloid war opened a new front. Hollywood took a lost cause, a damaged nation, a

¹⁴⁹ Cited in Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.360.

¹⁵⁰ Nicosia, *Home to War*, pp.336-337.

¹⁵¹ "Tripwire vets" was the term given to veterans who behaved in an extremely hypervigilant manner including setting up perimeters around their homes and guarding them as if in imminent danger. These veterans often withdrew from society and lived in remote locations. For a discussion on the coverage of "tripwire vets" see: Burkett & Whitely, *Stolen Valor*.

damaged population, a group of damaged veterans and created a genre of damaged history. Australian veterans, struggling for recognition, assistance, a place in the Anzac Legend, and often, just a normal life, found themselves again faced with an overwhelming American presence. Vietnam veterans who had lost a war and felt as if they had lost the peace, were about to become the collateral damage of popular culture.

“Do we get to win this time?”:
Popular Culture and Stereotypes



Browning gun on tank in garden of government building – Ho Chi Minh City 1999

Chapter Five

Movies are to America what epic poems were to Greece and Rome or Shakespearean drama was to Elizabethan England: namely, the primary means by which national history is turned into a serviceable political mythology.

James Bowman, 2001.¹

The Vietnam War had a deep and irrevocable effect on popular culture both in the United States and Australia, as would be expected from any war, let alone one that had caused such destruction and division over such a long period. The fact that there was an interval between the event and the main response of popular culture only made the eventual impact more significant in its nature and application. Vietnam veterans, who had felt largely ignored and marginalized, suddenly found themselves represented, and misrepresented, with astonishing frequency in various media. The problems of veterans, in particular health and readjustment concerns, provided inspiration to those who had found difficulty finding a suitable manner in which to tell the troubled Vietnam story to the populace.

Nowhere was this more obvious than in the Hollywood film and television studios, which have been at the forefront of the creation of popular culture for at least half a dozen decades. The stories of the Vietnam War and its participants, as told at the multiplex, and later on television, had little basis in reality, but neither was it completely devoid of it. The fantasy and the reality created a confusing miasma alongside an already complicated and often debated set of 'truths', creating an identity for veterans that some would exploit and others revile. It was even more confusing for Australian Vietnam veterans who found themselves caught between the relative silence of Australian culture and the overwhelming power of the Hollywood Machine. The story of Australian veterans became largely lost in the morass, and as the images cemented their place in popular culture, they found it increasingly difficult to find a context for their stories. It was Rambo versus the Anzac legend.

Other aspects of popular culture such as literature, music and art have been important in the creation of stereotypes and the Vietnam story, but none have had an impact anywhere approaching that of film and by extension, television. While film has long been acknowledged for its influence on popular culture, its place in the retelling of history has had less recognition from historians. Colin Schindler was an early

¹ James Bowman, "Apocalypse Not" in *American Spectator*, Vol.34 No.7, (Sept-Oct 2001), p.36.

proponent of the importance of films in the context of telling social history, proclaiming in the preface of his 1979 study, *Hollywood Goes to War*, "historians are still dubious of the values of works of the imagination. I hope this book will dispel some of those doubts".² Schindler had been writing about WWII films, but his words contain no small irony, being written as the Hollywood machine was cranking up for production of the Vietnam War films. Almost two decades and millions of words later, Marita Sturken, in her study of remembering and history, spoke of the "significant influence" of films on the remembering of history. She believes that for much of the public they "are a primary source of historical information", particularly in the case of a topic as complex as the Vietnam War by "afford[ing] a means through which uncomfortable histories of traumatic events can be smoothed over, retold, and ascribed new meanings".³ Sturken acknowledges that films may not be as accurate or valuable as historical texts, but are powerful and important as "they have greater cultural significance because they reach mass audiences and younger people who may have little prior knowledge of the war".⁴

Popular culture scholar, Ray Browne, argued that it is impossible to underestimate the power of movies, describing them as the "great seducer" and that "pictures are exceptionally effective because, "although words lie flat and dormant to some readers, it is difficult to miss messages carried in a motion picture as it explains a historical period or event."⁵ Writing about the re-release of iconic Vietnam War film, *Apocalypse Now* in 2001, James Bowman was even more unequivocal on the subject, claiming:

Movies are to America what epic poems were to Greece and Rome or Shakespearean drama was to Elizabethan England: namely, the primary means by which national history is turned into a serviceable political mythology.⁶

While his words spoke of the influence of films on the populace, they also reminded that films were not the first aspect of popular culture to deliver history to the masses.

² Schindler, *Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society* (London 1979), p.xiii.

³ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p.85.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ray B. Browne, "Foreword", Peter C. Rollins (Ed), *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in Cultural Context* (Lexington, 1998), p.1.

⁶ Bowman, "Apocalypse Not", p.36.

There are a number of reasons for the increased influence of Vietnam films on the public imagination. The Vietnam War had always been a very visual one – its progress paralleling the rise in popularity of the television. People no longer had to leave the house to see newsreels to follow the war's progress; the images were beamed into the lounge room with limited editing. Vietnam was a war of images, most of them moving, most of them showing the horror in full colour. Vietnam veteran author, Nelson de Mille, in his semi-fictional best seller *Word of Honor*, shows his character perturbed to see a book covering aspects of his time in Vietnam, full of black and white photographs: "he thought [it] was wrong. World War II was in black and white. This war was in colour."⁷ William Hagen agrees, claiming that filmmakers did not have "the beautifully framed and composed black-and white imagery" that created the "thematically simple films about World War II".⁸ Right from the beginning, it could lend itself to the film screen with ready made images of helicopters, gun fire, exploding napalm, dying soldiers and screaming civilians. Ironically, it was partly the ease of access to these images that contributed to the delay of the films. Initially they simply were not needed, as the dramatic and constant media footage stymied any necessity to further elaborate.⁹

Another factor was the absence of easily accessible histories and the lack of information in educational curriculums, particularly in the first decade after the war. In the same way veterans disappeared from view, so had the history. When films began appearing as the silence began to break, they proved a more accessible and simpler way to examine the war as historians and educators struggled to find an acceptable way to deliver a story in which the participation and outcomes remained in dispute. While studies of the Vietnam War have been gradually making their way into curriculums during the past five to ten years (particularly in the US and to a lesser degree in Australia), somewhere between two and three decades of students have been largely denied this history, providing a ready made movie audience with

⁷ Nelson de Mille, *Word of Honor* (London, 1987), p.21.

⁸ William M. Hagen, "Apocalypse Now (1979): Joseph Conrad and the Television War" in Rollins (Ed), *Hollywood as Historian*, p.230.

⁹ It could be argued that massive media coverage of more recent conflicts have continued to reduce the need for Hollywood contributions during the event. Little appeared for nearly a decade after the first Gulf War and it seems this may be repeated with the 2003 Iraq War. William Hagen agreed, claiming that "any battlefield film about Vietnam would have found less acceptance for its visual interpretation since the American experience of the war was so visual." *Ibid.*

little context into which to place the information. Newspaper headlines about chemicals, psychologically damaged veterans and war atrocities created a chicken and egg problem that provided the only other knowledge of the war. A survey of first and second year university social science students in Cairns showed that more than half of them had gained whatever knowledge they had of the war entirely from movies and television. Only 22% could say what the war was about in even the most basic terms, or who participated.¹⁰ This is supported by Hagen, who found that most of his students believed that films depicted what "really happened", because "we already have a generation of young adults whose primary memory of Vietnam *is* films".¹¹

Culture has also become more visual in recent decades. Motion pictures, and therefore box office takings, have risen and most homes have at least one television; many have more. Both adults and children watch significantly more television than read, and even those who read regularly are more likely to read magazines and newspapers than books.¹² While this is not the forum in which to examine why this has occurred or to explain the repercussions of it, as indicated by Sturken, Schindler, Bowman and Hagen, it has evidently had an impact on the delivery of historical knowledge. Even those who have knowledge of the events look to movies and television for education, which has led to calls from some commentators for those producing this work to research better and to take seriously the "responsibility" to the public and to those involved in the actual event, to get it "right".

Recent years have seen increased calls for realism and factuality from what is for all intents and purpose, a fantasy industry. This pressure on war movies, in particular, to get the facts right has increased in the past couple of years, and that pressure became stronger after September 11. A number of films advertised their factuality as an important part of their promotion, a strategy that became popular after the success of *Saving Private Ryan* in 1998. The two biggest box office war movies of 2002

¹⁰ Student Survey of 110 social science students conducted by the author at James Cook University, Cairns Campus, March 2000.

¹¹ Hagen, "Joseph Conrad and the Television War", p.232.

¹² Dana Gioia, "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture" *The Hudson Review*, Vol. LVI, No. 1 (Spring 2003), pp.1-2; Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Australian Social Trends 1999 Culture & Leisure - Recreation: How Australians use their free time" (February 2002), <http://abs.gov.au/ausstats>.

emphasised their accuracy and attention to detail. The Mel Gibson vehicle, *We Were Soldiers*, set early in the Vietnam War, was consistently promoted as "setting the record straight".¹³ Similarly, *Black Hawk Down* (2001), about the ill-fated peacekeeping mission in Somalia, followed this path.¹⁴ Director Ridley Scott announced that *Black Hawk Down* was not "a movie movie. It's as near to the edge of a documentary as I could make it".¹⁵ During the same year, the made-for-television *Band of Brothers* (2001), advertised its realism and consistently reinforced it with testimonials of actual survivors of the unit throughout the drama.¹⁶ This movement has become even wider with some commentators even looking to movies to show the "truth". Film critic David Edelstein suggested during the Iraq War that people should look to the 1999 film *Three Kings*, about the first Gulf War, for a "reality check" about mistakes being made.¹⁷

Realism has become so important that deviation from the historical facts can engender harsh criticism, even when the producers do not make claims of precise realism. Jerry Bruckheimer's 2001 patriotic epic, *Pearl Harbor*, was criticised in a number of quarters for deviating from some of the facts, embellishing the role of some participants and somewhat skewing the timeline.¹⁸ Protestations that it was "just a movie" did nothing but bring scorn from the critics. If Bruckheimer was somewhat confused by this response, the answer could perhaps have been found later that year in Australia. The made-for-television, *Changi* (2001), was also severely criticised for historical inaccuracies. The writer and producers had never intended it

¹³ Fred Schruers, "Test of Loyalty", *Los Angeles Times* (17 February 2002), www.latimes.com/la-000012115feb15.story; "Veteran's Affairs, *Sydney Morning Herald* (6 April 2002), www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/04/05.html. Gibson kept the former commanding officer of the unit portrayed, General Harold Moore, close during the filming and had to constantly convince the General that he would not sully the memory of his men. Testimonials of Vietnam veterans that the movie was an accurate portrayal were also used in the lead up to the film's release. "Sunrise" Seven Network (21 April 2002).

¹⁴ Again the author, journalist Tim Bowden, was kept on set, as were survivors of the mission, and the film was described as "astonishingly realistic". David Stratton, "Chaos and Horror from the Inside", *The Weekend Australian* (23-24 February 2002), p.R13.

¹⁵ Malanowski, "'Black Hawk Down': War, With Any Answers" *The New York Times* (16 December 2001), www.nytimes.com/2001/12/16/movies/16MALA.html.

¹⁶ *Band of Brothers*, HBO Network (Producer: Steven Spielberg), 2001.

¹⁷ David Edelstein, "One Film, Two Wars, 'Three Kings'", *The New York Times* (6 April 2003), www.nytimes.com/2003/04/06/movies/06EDEL.html.

¹⁸ A.O.Scott, "War Is Hell, but Very Pretty" *The New York Times* (25 May 2001), <http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html>. There was even criticism about the more minor details such as weapon, aircraft and uniform minutiae. For example: Humanities and Social Sciences Online, "H-War" (May-June 2001), <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/>.

as an accurate historical account, though some of the advertising insinuated it, but rather as an amalgam of experiences united by the ideals of Australian mateship and to "celebrate the spirit that saw Australians endure" the horror of their captivity.¹⁹ Nevertheless, letters of complaint flooded newspapers and the Australian Broadcasting Commission and historians criticised the production. Dr Peter Stanley, principal historian at the Australian War Memorial, claimed that it was "wrong both in detail and tone"²⁰ and in fact "shallow and misleading".²¹ When interviewed about the controversy, Professor Hank Nelson of the Australian National University, asserted that Changi "is evocative shorthand for 8000 Australian dead and the general experience of POWs", as important as Gallipoli, and "with that in mind, it's fair to say Doyle brought a particular obligation upon himself" by taking on the story.²² While demands for a certain amount of accuracy in historical films have existed since film began, the pressure has become more intense in recent years. Apparently even artistic representations require historical accuracy, demonstrating, perhaps, that academics recognise that history is increasingly being told and interpreted through the screen.

The Government

Governments have long known the power of movies to deliver messages to the masses. In the US, the government established a close relationship with a number of the powerful studios in Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s.²³ Sections of the government were initially less than satisfied with the Hollywood portrayals of the war until the attack on Pearl Harbor. In fact, a congressional committee convened in 1941, accused Hollywood of inciting sympathy for the war, but that all changed on 7 December. Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black claim that: "During the war the US Government, convinced that movies had extraordinary power to mobilize public opinion for war, carried out an intensive, unprecedented effort to mold the content of

¹⁹ Matthew Spencer, "Historians shoot down Changi", *The Australian –Media* (15 November 2001), p.12.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Peter Stanley, "Secret Seven Go to Changi", *Wartime*, No. 16 (Summer 2001), p.65.

²² Spencer, "Historians shoot down Changi".

²³ This period reflected the zenith of the power of the studios when most film stars were "owned" under contract and could literally be told in which films they would participate.

Hollywood feature films.”²⁴ With few exceptions, Hollywood was happy to cooperate; some individuals were so enthusiastic that they tried to get out of their studio contracts to join the military while others acted as spokespersons for the effort.²⁵ Taking the influence even further, Koppes and Black found that:

Officials of the Office of War Information, the government propaganda agency, issued a constantly updated manual instructing the studios in how to assist the war effort, sat in on story conferences with Hollywood’s top brass, reviewed the screenplays of every major studio, pressured the movie makers to change scripts and even scrap pictures when they found objectionable material, and sometimes wrote dialogue for key speeches.²⁶

This approach was very successful. With more people going to the movies than ever before (a common effect in difficult times), the ability to transmit a message to a mass audience was enormous. Recruitment and patriotism were the two most important factors. If the air force was down on numbers, a call would be placed and a movie would be made about heroic airmen and recruitment would rise almost immediately.²⁷ After the shock of Pearl Harbor, the “emotional heavy artillery” and directors such as John Ford were recruited to recount victories such as *The Battle of Midway* (1942) to lift morale.²⁸ According to Eben Muse, the movies were constructed to stress “the importance of duty and unity against the implacable, invasive foes”.²⁹ However, films could also be used to promote more everyday domestic issues such as rationing and generally doing without for the greater good.³⁰ The influence and flow of war movies continued through to the end of the Korean War and before long there would be a new foe to fight.

Two decades later, it would be a different story in Hollywood. Cooperation with the government was decidedly limited and in fact the relationship was sometimes one of

²⁴ Clayton R. Koppes & Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (London, 1987), p.vii.

²⁵ When Clark Gable attempted to join the air force, he was told that the best thing he could do for the war effort was to stay in Hollywood and make movies. Schindler, *Hollywood Goes to War*, p.27.

²⁶ Koppes & Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, p.vii.

²⁷ Schindler, *Hollywood Goes to War*, p.27

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.37-39.

²⁹ Eben J. Muse, *The Land of Nam: The Vietnam War in American Film* (Lanham, 1995), p.15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.52.

barely concealed animosity.³¹ The predicament became more problematic as the war continued and the anti-war movement began to find a voice. There was a strong anti-war sentiment in Hollywood, but early in the war, few films reflected these views. What was probably most significant was the lack of war films: Hollywood did not know how to react to this war. Only one serious attempt was made by the US government to use the Hollywood machine for Vietnam, and that was with the John Wayne vehicle *The Green Berets* (1968). John Wayne was as American (and anticommunist) as the Stars and Stripes; no one seemed more fitting to represent the heroic soldiers. After many changes to the script, a long production period and millions of dollars of assistance from the Department of Defence, *The Green Berets* was finally released in 1968.³² It was poorly received, critically panned, and although had respectable box office takings, did not accomplish its aims. A lot of the blame fell unfairly on Wayne and no further collaboration was attempted.³³ *The Green Berets* remained the only notable mainstream Vietnam War movie for almost two decades. The traditional approach did not work for Vietnam, and Washington's influence in Hollywood waned for some time.

However, the intermission in collaboration was only a short one, and although perhaps it never fully reached the dizzy heights of WWII, the aftermath of September 11 certainly proved that the relationship was far from superficial.³⁴ Strategies were formed and scripts were written and re-written. Some movies were pulled from production, even among those ready for release. As the 'War on Terror' began, there were some changes in strategy and a few of the delayed films were fast tracked or put back into circulation in order to put the nation (and the world) in the right frame of

³¹ There reasons could probably be traced to three main issues. Hollywood had been routed by the black listings in the anticommunist backlash of the 1950s with many appearing before the McCarthy hearings. Another issue was that by the 1960s, the monopoly power of the big studios was waning and a new atmosphere of independent film was appearing. Although the studios would continue to play a dominant role, they were no longer the only game in town, so to speak. Thirdly, the two previous issues only seemed to highlight the different type of war that was developing in Vietnam. It did not fit easily into the heroic stereotypes of WWII, and as the country was not on a war footing, and never would be, it was hard to find a context into which to place films. It was not a black and white war.

³² Andrew Martin, *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman, 1993), pp.107-109.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ In the weeks and months following the terrorist attacks, meetings were held and committees were formed between the studio heads and representatives of the White House. Studio executives visited the White House and were instructed on how they could help the coming war effort. For example: Rick Lyman, "White House Sets Meeting with Film Executives to Discuss War on Terrorism", *The New York Times* (8 November 2001), www.nytimes.com/2001/11/08/national/08HOLL.html. "Hollywood's War Effort", *The Australian – Media* (22 November 2001), p.13.

mind.³⁵ These included *We Were Soldiers*, *Black Hawk Down* and *Band of Brothers*.³⁶ *We Were Soldiers* presented bravery and honour, and *Black Hawk Down* emphasised helping others and leaving no man behind, while all portrayed survival against terrible odds. Perhaps they were not the victorious epics of the 1940s, but they served the more contemporary and complex issues being faced, and most importantly, they were patriotic. Suggestions were made for other patriotic storylines, including the return of familiar faces.³⁷ However, not all war movies fit the appropriate “needs” of the situation, with more than one movie being withheld for political reasons. The most publicised of these was *The Quiet American* (2002), the Philip Noyce adaptation of the Graham Greene novel about the early days of American intervention in Vietnam. Miramax, the producing studio, considered the theme of anti-American foreign policy and intervention to be inappropriate under the circumstances.³⁸ Countless other movies and television shows were stopped or altered, some for reasons of sensitivity, and others for more patriotic purposes.³⁹

Washington has looked to Hollywood for inspiration in an effort to bolster public attention and patriotic spirit. During the 2003 Iraq War, the executive earned the title of the “Bruckheimer Whitehouse”, particularly after a widely publicised fighter jet delivery of President Bush to the aircraft carrier, *Abraham Lincoln* in May 2003 to announce the end of “official” hostilities.⁴⁰ However, political influence in Hollywood was not always so overt. Over the past couple of decades, Washington

³⁵ “Hollywood’s War Effort”, *The Australian – Media* (22 November 2001), p.13.

³⁶ Significantly, the first two of these portrayed American disasters, but it was the conduct and spirit that fitted the prevailing needs.

³⁷ A *Rambo IV* was floated, sending Rambo back to Afghanistan to help his friends from *Rambo III* and kill Osama bin Laden. Fortunately perhaps, a number of disagreements meant the project never got off the ground. “Hollywood’s War Effort”, *The Australian – Media*.

³⁸ British actor Michael Caine brought the situation to a head, through public statements and a personal appeal to the head of Miramax. This evoked public support and the film was eventually released in 2002 to rave reviews and good box office takings. John Harlow, “Star not quiet about American sensitivities” *The Australian* (23 September 2002), p.16.

³⁹ Anne Thompson, “Films with War Themes are Victims of Bad Timing”, *The New York Times* (17 October 2002), www.nytimes.com/2002/10/17/movies/17QUIE.html. The meetings between Hollywood and government officials continued, but became less frequent and more discreet after the first tumultuous months post September 11. Some backlash began appearing in Hollywood, and while war movies were popular for a period after, by the first anniversary of the event and the looming Iraq War, the genre fell dramatically in popularity as people turned to more escapist themes: Laura Holson, “War Films Falter Next to the Real Thing” *The New York Times* (14 April 2003), www.nytimes.com/2003/04/14/business/media/14MOI.html.

⁴⁰ Frank Rich, “The Jerry Bruckheimer White House”, *The New York Times* (11 May 2003), www.nytimes.com/2003/05/11/arts/11RICH.html. Bruckheimer has close working relationship with Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, and the Pentagon through the collaboration on *Pearl Harbor* and *Black Hawk Down*.

has discovered a new manner of influence through the Department of Defence. The rising cost of production, reflecting audience demands for realism, led to movie makers seeking defence cooperation to use equipment, personnel and advice. The department vets scripts and often has a final say over film content, and can therefore have significant influence over the finished product.⁴¹ The ability to attain assistance can sometimes make or break a film as demonstrated by the movie *Top Gun* (1986), which was a winner for its producers and the defence force, and continues to be used as a recruitment tool.⁴² The department refuses to assist if the movie portrays the military negatively, imposing a form of censorship.⁴³ In fact, few Vietnam films have been able to obtain official assistance:⁴⁴ even the assistance given to *We Were Soldiers* was limited in comparison to *Black Hawk Down* and *Pearl Harbor*. It could be suggested that this is indicative of the sensitivity of the subject of Vietnam within the military and the government, but in retrospect, perhaps the presentation of the war might have turned out differently if they had been more cooperative and involved.

“We Fought Ourselves”

The film industries in Australia and the US struggled to find a way to portray Vietnam. There seemed to be no suitable genre, and the political differences within the industry, and society itself, complicated the issue. The Australian industry was suffering one of its intermittent lulls during the war years (in relation to successes at least) and Hollywood’s only mainstream⁴⁵ reactions to the war were cynical interpretations of other conflicts such as *M.A.S.H.* (1970), *Catch 22* (1970) and *Soldier Blue* (1970), and even these were late in the war. It was only well after the war was over and the stories of veterans’ problems began to appear that Hollywood

⁴¹ Duncan Campbell, “Top Gun versus Sergeant Bilko? No contest says the Pentagon”, *The Guardian* (29 August 2001), www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4246810,00.html.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ While the reason for refusal for assistance was obvious for *Courage Under Fire* (1996), *Crimson Tide* (1995) and *Sergeant Bilko* (1996), some decisions are less clear. *Forrest Gump* (1994) was apparently refused because of the notion that someone with such a low IQ would be allowed into the army. Campbell, “Top Gun versus Sgt Bilko?”.

⁴⁴ Refusals to assist Oliver Stone (a veteran and former infantryman himself) with *Platoon*, forced him to film in the Philippines and borrow equipment from the Philippine government, as *Apocalypse Now* had done some years before. Muse, *The Land of Nam*, pp.163-164.

⁴⁵ This study will focus on mainstream and box office hits because they are the ones that have the most influence on public perceptions. Little attention has been displayed towards the Vietnamese perspective, with the exception of Oliver Stone’s *Heaven and Earth*, as America does not seem to have come to terms yet with that part of the story. It could be argued that this is a reflection of the war itself.

began to formulate a response. The veteran as victim or villain provided a handle for producers: a theme that would stay with Vietnam movies throughout many incarnations, and which assisted greatly in reinforcing, and in a sense creating, the stereotypes that continue to follow the war and its participants.

Commentators have identified three or four categories into which the film can be divided, with each reflecting changing attitudes through time.⁴⁶ The earliest portrayed the Vietnam veterans usually as social outcasts with psychotic tendencies. Of these, *Taxi Driver* (1977), *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), all released in the period 1977-79, are notable because they remain iconic in motion picture history. They were the public's first introduction to the horror and insanity that was Vietnam, accurate or not. All are war centred, with the exception of *Taxi Driver*, which told the story of a disturbed veteran, giving Robert de Niro the questionable distinction of being the first famous psychotically violent Vietnam Veteran; a profile that would be copied in countless forms over coming years.⁴⁷ *Coming Home* is a gentler film, but nevertheless tells the story of flawed and damaged - physically and mentally - returning veterans. It also introduces the theme of the loss of honour of the soldiers: none of them have any pride in their service. Despite its many shortcomings, it probably contains the most elements of realism of these four movies, however small,⁴⁸ but is also the least generally popular of the four.

Released in the same year, Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* was everything *Coming Home* was not – a complex, violent and disturbing view of the effect of the war on the inhabitants of an ordinary working class community. Robert de Niro again starred, playing the respectable character, Michael, against Christopher Walken's, Nick, who is sent crazy by the Vietnam experience. Nick stays in Vietnam, eventually dying at his own hand, while another character is left wheelchair

⁴⁶ Doyle, "Bringing whose war home? Vietnam and American Myths in Australian popular culture" in Pierce, Grey and Doyle (Eds), *Vietnam Days*, pp.99-100.

⁴⁷ The role was perhaps given further credence by the Oscar nomination received by de Niro.

⁴⁸ *Coming Home* is often criticised as an apologist film by Jane Fonda, who was extremely unpopular with veterans for her anti-war activities and was known as "Hanoi Jane". The film is sympathetic to the suffering of veterans, but the sympathy is mainly restricted to those who did not "choose" to go. Michael Anderegg, "Hollywood and Vietnam: John Wayne and Jane Fonda as Discourse" in Michael Anderegg (Ed), *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia, 1991), pp.21-24.

bound and unwilling to leave the VA hospital. Michael tries to fit back into his life, but finds himself psychologically isolated and struggling with guilt. It is traumatic and disturbing, yet despite its abstract nature and faults, it is likely to remain an enduring piece of art that will provide generations with a distorted image of veterans.⁴⁹

Of the four films in this group, *Apocalypse Now* is undoubtedly the best known. Millions of words have been spent examining and interpreting the disturbing and ultra-violent epic. Although producer and director, Francis Ford Coppola, almost certainly did not intend an accurate portrayal of Vietnam, but rather a demonstration of the pointlessness of war and mankind’s propensity for evil and self destruction, the movie has very much become shorthand for the war.⁵⁰ The movie demonstrates the gradual decay of morale and humanity of the group as they travel further up the river and away from “civilisation”. The analogy is clear, following the progress of the war until even the lead character and moral compass of the story gradually reverts to primitive and animalistic behaviour. Although his killing of Kurtz, the rogue, crazy soldier is meant to be redeeming, it is obvious that the character is now damaged beyond salvation and one doubts he will ever make it back to “civilisation”.

The production of the film is almost as famous as the film itself, spawning books and a movie length documentary.⁵¹ Much could be said, and has been elsewhere, about the vision intended by *Apocalypse Now*, but because it became the first post-Vietnam War epic, it painted an appalling picture for veterans. The film scored eight Oscar

⁴⁹ The critics found it the most convincing of the two movies, beating *Coming Home* to take the best picture Oscar that year, and has achieved cult status with dozens of websites dedicated to it, countless books and articles written and almost always makes it on to lists of “great movies” by film aficionados.

⁵⁰ It famously depicted a squadron of cavalry in helicopters attacking a village to the strains of *Ride of the Valkries* so that they can clear the beach for surfing – which they do while still under fire. While meant to be a darkly humorous look at why the US was at war there (to bring American values and culture) and the lack of respect for Vietnamese life, few veterans care about the artistic undercurrents. There are a large number of articles addressing the influence of *Apocalypse Now* on perceptions. For a contemporary view see: Bowman, “Apocalypse Not”.

⁵¹ Actors suffered serious health problems, the script was rewritten constantly; the production cost blew out enormously; the military assistance provided by the Philippines government was generous, but intermittent owing to a civil war; and Coppola eventually suffered a breakdown. Claire Sutherland, “Now and Then”, *The Cairns Post* (1 February 2002), p.27. Pre-production began in 1973 and a considerably edited version was finally released in 1979 (still over two and a half hours long). Coppola had to wait until 2001 to release his version (*Redux*), adding almost another hour of footage. A.O.Scott, “Aching Heart of Darkness”, *The New York Times* (3 August 2001), www.nytimes.com/2001/08/03/movies/03APOC.html.

nominations and the film developed a following surpassing even that of *The Deer Hunter*. Despite its obvious lack of realism, it is one of the two or three films most associated with Vietnam and also makes a regular appearance on "best movie" lists. If the movie itself holds little reality to the Vietnam War, perhaps the production does, at least metaphorically, as Coppola himself quipped: "[*Apocalypse Now*] is Vietnam. And the way we made it was very much like the way Americans were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle, we had access to too much money, too much equipment, and little by little we went insane."⁵²

Although Ted Kotcheff's *First Blood* (1982) is included as part of the first wave of films, it fits somewhere between that and the second group both in theme and timing. Based on a novel - and loosely a real character - *First Blood* is the tragic story of a veteran, John Rambo, who is finding it extremely difficult to fit back in to civilian life. The movie itself was not without some critical praise and the basis of the story itself has some redeeming features.⁵³ *First Blood* does not portray the gratuitous psychosis of *Apocalypse Now* or *The Deer Hunter*, and neither does the film appear as overtly violent. Little sympathy can be mustered for the local authorities who arrest, abuse and provoke Rambo simply because he is a drifter and "they don't want his sort" (Vietnam veteran?) even passing through town. Their timing is also bad as he has just discovered that he is the last surviving member of his unit, his best friend apparently dying of Agent Orange induced cancer. His meeting with the widow introduces the audience to a polite, kind and well-spoken man who has all but disappeared by the time he is arrested. While his treatment at the hands of the police, which causes traumatic flashbacks, make him feel he has no option but to fight his pursuers, he makes a concerted effort not to kill any of them.⁵⁴ Rambo's surprisingly moving speech at the end tries a little too hard to sum up the mayhem and destruction as he explains to Trautman - his former commanding officer - that in Vietnam he was the best and brightest and was in charge of millions of dollars worth of equipment and

⁵² Cited in: David Thomson, "'Apocalypse' Then and Now", *The New York Times* (13 May 2001), www.nytimes.com/2001/05/13/arts/13THOM.html.

⁵³ Its biggest failing is its schizophrenic production, which cannot decide whether it is a serious drama or an action film. The problem is prominent not just in the storyline, but also in its dialogue which switches from contemplative to "cheesy".

⁵⁴ When one is killed, the cruellest one and more accidentally than intentionally, Rambo doubles his efforts to prevent fatal injury, and in fact no one else is killed in the film, although the police chief is spared only by the intervention of Trautman.

back home he was nothing and unable to find employment. Rambo could be speaking for many veterans, but the message is somewhat muddled by the rampage he has been on, however provoked. Although the movie perpetuated the deranged veteran stereotype, it did make an attempt to give it some context.

The early to mid 1980s brought more attention to Vietnam Veterans. The American Welcome Home parades and the opening of the Memorial, the various court cases in the US and Australia and the appearance of some of the first histories, made the issue a topical, if painful one. The success of the earlier group of Vietnam films, along with these events, brought a new wave of films. In these, the Vietnam Veteran was very much the victim; usually a victim of an uncaring government and public. These were action pictures and often vehicles for Hollywood stars – very much the beginning of the action genre that would become extraordinarily popular later in the decade. The movies spawned countless imitations which are still appearing on video shelves today. One of the originals, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), is still the most watched Vietnam film and in fact created its own popular culture.

Taking on the “veteran as victim” image, most of these films centred on the ultimate veteran “victims”: the MIAs and POWs.⁵⁵ This had become a huge issue in the US and the POW/MIA committees had enormous political power. *Uncommon Valor* (1983), which was only a minor success, saw the remnants of a unit return to Vietnam on a privately funded mission to find unreturned POWs.⁵⁶ The film is unusual in the sense that it is a group effort rather than one man, but also displays the theme that would become common: the return to Vietnam gave them the opportunity to regain their honour; something those who served in Vietnam are universally believed to have lost. Even if they are not successful in their mission, they would achieve redemption. The need to regain redemption therefore presumed that they have done something wrong, placing them back in the role of a villain, who has then become a victim, and the redemption will make them the heroes they never were, or were not allowed to be. Although it is always the government that is in the wrong in these films, the veteran is tainted with guilt by association.

⁵⁵ For a further discussion on the “victim” mentality in film see: Muse, *The Land of Nam*, pp.143-156.

⁵⁶ During the 1980s the POW/MIA issue was a popular topic and there were many stories of sightings. Actors Clint Eastwood and William Shatner are said to have funded a group investigating the issue. *Ibid.*, p.197.

Missing in Action (1984), the Chuck and Aaron Norris vehicle, arrived a year later and immediately developed a following.⁵⁷ Norris is Braddock, a retired Colonel racked by nightmares and guilt, who travels to Vietnam with a government group investigating the POW/MIA issue. Braddock knows that the men are still being held because he used to be one of them, and somehow manages to separate himself from the group, obtain equipment and set forth upon his own fact finding mission. The movie does not pretend to be anything but an action film, and although Norris obviously has a personal message to send, he realises that the best method of delivery is entertainment. *Missing in Action* was followed a year later by a sequel/prequel about Braddock's original escape.⁵⁸ *MIA* was popular, though it may have been more memorable if not for the arrival of a new action hero the following year.

No fictional war hero is as famous as John Rambo, thanks mainly to *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. It was a very different film from its more serious predecessor and is purely an action vengeance film with typical Cold War political overtones.⁵⁹ Rambo is released from prison by Colonel Trautman to participate in a mission to look for POWs: the American government will pardon him if he behaves. Rambo is abandoned in Vietnam with some very angry Vietnamese, a group of unpleasant Russians and a number of dying POWs who are relying on him. Therefore, he must re-fight the war on his own, help his comrades escape and get back to take vengeance on the real villains – the government officials that recruited and abandoned him (again). The movie grossed over \$US 25 million in its opening weekend, more than *Missing in Action* made in total, and stormed to a worldwide gross of \$US300 million.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Chuck Norris' brother was killed while serving in Vietnam, and Chuck has played a Vietnam Veteran in most of his films, including his television series, *Walker: Texas Ranger*. Tony Williams, "Missing in Action: The Vietnam Construction of the Movie Star" in Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (Eds), *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick, 1990), p.131.

⁵⁸ A superfluous third instalment attempted to be somewhat more pretentious, with Norris trying to rescue Eurasian children and offering another opportunity to re-fight the Vietnamese.

⁵⁹ The story was written by actor, Sylvester Stallone and future famous director, James Cameron, and filmed mainly in Thailand on a moderate budget thanks to Stallone's success with the *Rocky* series. For a discussion of the political overtones see: Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser, "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: *Rambo's* Rewriting of the Vietnam War" and Gregory Waller, "*Rambo: Getting to Win this Time*" in *From Hanoi to Hollywood*.

⁶⁰ Bruce Nash, "The Numbers: Box Office Data" (3 June 2003). It should be remembered that these are 1985 figures and to put into context *Top Gun*, released the following year, grossed \$US345 million with a lower censorship rating. *Lethal Weapon* reached \$227 million in 1987 and *MIA's* \$39 million.

It is hard to quantify exactly what made Rambo so popular. Its story was simple and predictable with spectacular action sequences, but nothing groundbreaking. Stallone was a popular actor, but even that was sparse explanation for the film's appeal. Critics were scornful and no Academy Awards were forthcoming, but the people voted with their feet and wallets. It was probably a combination of reasons along with the "right time, right place" theory. The US was on the road to recovery from the political, social and economic consequences of the Vietnam War by 1985, and the patriotic militarism of the Reagan era with continued Cold War tensions was the perfect setting for Rambo.⁶¹ But Rambo was also a statement about Vietnam: he was its ultimate victim; every Vietnam veteran. He gave it something that had until that time been missing: a hero.

Rambo burned himself into popular culture in a manner that has few parallels – it became more than a film: it was an attitude. It became embedded in culture and even in language. Rambo became a descriptor, ranging from derogatory: "who do you think you are, Rambo?" to praise: "he raced in there like Rambo". It has been suggested that Rambo replaced John Wayne as the modern version of the iconic hero,⁶² and it is most likely an accurate statement as John Wayne's heroics fade into the past and weapons change from six shooters to rocket launchers. Rambo is universally intoned, whether negatively implying American aggression, or describing positive actions. An Australian soldier decorated in 2003 for actions in the Gulf War had his deeds described as being like Rambo.⁶³ The term even found its way into politics with Ronald Reagan announcing at a press conference that he knew how to rescue hostages from hijackers because he had seen Rambo the night before.⁶⁴ Rambo has constantly been alluded to for its patriotism, despite its anti-government theme.

Buried among the adrenaline and automatic weapon fire of *Rambo II* are a number of issues close to the heart of many – if not most – veterans; recognition, understanding and respect. When Trautman goes to the prison to offer the mission, Rambo

⁶¹ Waller, "Rambo: Getting to Win this Time", pp.122-125.

⁶² Muse, *The Land of Nam*, p.203. See also: Martin, *Receptions of War*, pp.101-103.

⁶³ Jason Frenkel, "SAS hero's bravery honoured", *news.com.au* (19 May 2003), www.news.com.au/common/0,6093,6457751,00.html.

⁶⁴ Waller, "Rambo: Getting to Win this Time", p.125. (One can only hope he was joking).

hesitates, because "in here, I know where I stand". As pointed out at the end of the previous film, he felt unwanted and no longer fitted into American society, but the military style structure of the prison proves an escape in itself. More significantly, when Trautman does convince him, Rambo asks "do we get to win this time?" to which Trautman replies "this time it's up to you." As indicated, this is an important issue to veterans. This was the first lost war for Americans and Australians, and veterans have continually insisted that they did not lose the war, but rather they were not allowed to win. Trautman tells Rambo that this time he has the power to decide whether it will be a success: it is his opportunity to right the wrongs, and regain his, and all veterans', honour. The significance of this issue cannot be overstated as veterans consider it the basis for society's attitudes towards them, and is encapsulated very well in these two lines. The question and response could also be interpreted as referring to the post-war battle for recognition and assistance which many felt they were fighting alone.

The need to find some worth is repeated more significantly at the end of the movie, in what is often mistaken as a patriotic diatribe, but is actually a common plea for recognition, understanding and respect. Trautman urges Rambo not to hate his country, to which Rambo stares at him incredulously as if he has missed the whole point, asserting that he loves his country. "Then what do you want?" Trautman asks him, to which Rambo replies "I want what they want, and every other guy that came over here and spilt his guts and gave everything he had wants; for our country to love us as much as we love it. That's what I want." While undeniably corny, Rambo's statement is a reflection of the words and actions of many Vietnam veterans. Rambo's words, in slightly less melodramatic language have been intoned many times, and had the power to deliver a clear message to the public about the plight of veterans, if only its vehicle had been somewhat different. However, in fairness to Stallone and the other producers, this particular vehicle certainly reached a greater audience than a more serious one might have done. Nevertheless, it was hard to undo the power of the cultural image of Rambo on veterans, and in general: it will almost certainly continue to be an enduring image of Vietnam.⁶⁵ This is supported by the

⁶⁵ Studlar and Desser claim that *Rambo* has become "culturally ubiquitous". Studlar & Desser, "Never having to say you're sorry", p.105.

previously mentioned student surveys which showed that all but a few had seen the film despite many of them being very young when it was first released.⁶⁶

Victims versus Villains

The next wave of Vietnam films attempted to take the story in a different direction, seeking a greater sense of reality and an effort to place Vietnam within a wider context of war movies, while remaining intrinsically different. The majority of this group were released between 1986 and 1990, and could be examined as a backlash to the two previous groups. Certainly, that was true for *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Hamburger Hill* (1987). *Hamburger Hill* recounts the long and bloody battle for a seemingly worthless piece of ground that was abandoned shortly afterwards. The story is based on true events of one of the less common traditional battles of the war. At times, it could be any twentieth century war, but the discussions about protestors, race and the pointlessness and waste bring it back to the uniquely Vietnam atmosphere. At the other end of the scale, Stanley Kubrick's shocking *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) continues his history of anti-war films by telling the story through mind boggling brutality. The film is split into two distinct sections. The first follows their training which consists mainly of dehumanising them. The second sees the platoon attempting to put that training into practice in the confusing miasma of Vietnam, then leaving the survivors to return home facing the contradiction of having to presumably reclaim their humanity somewhere along the way.

Platoon and *Born on the Fourth of July* proved significant turning points for Vietnam War cinema. Both were the products of Oliver Stone, himself a Vietnam veteran, who had been trying to get both projects off the ground since the seventies.⁶⁷ *Platoon* was billed as "the way it really was" and publicity surrounding the film included interviews with veterans who assured everyone that it really was "the way it really was".⁶⁸ Having a veteran as the director reinforced the 'reality' of the movie, particularly after Stone proclaimed that the main character was based on himself and

⁶⁶ Social Science Student Survey.

⁶⁷ Muse, *The Land of Nam*, pp.163-164. He was fortunate to acquire the talents of a number of the finest actors Hollywood had to offer.

⁶⁸ For an extended discussion see: Muse, *The Land of Nam*, pp.159-171.

his experiences. *Platoon* won the best movie Oscar in 1987, with Stone winning best director two years later for *Born on the Fourth of July*. Both were well received by critics and, interestingly, the student surveys nominated the two as probably the most realistic.⁶⁹

Platoon explores a number of issues considered unique to Vietnam (although not all were). It is set in 1968 when it is becoming obvious on the ground that the war is not going to plan. New men arrive, including Charlie Sheen's Chris, to find themselves in a troubled platoon split by rivalries and led by an inexperienced young officer who is unable to unite the group. The platoon struggles with racial, drug and morale problems and certainly explodes the idea of camaraderie, even under fire. *Platoon* takes another step in the veteran as victim scenario – its tag line was "the first casualty of war is innocence" – and further develops the theme into a victim/villain one. This theme was appearing in society as it tried to come to grips with the veteran problems (in Australia as well as the US). Were they victims or villains? And if they were villains, were they that way in spite of the war, or because of it; making them victims all over again? This story, and in fact the two sides of the war itself, is told through its two sergeants, Barnes and Elias. Both are career soldiers with multiple tours. Elias still believes in what he is doing, although he struggles with various aspects, and off duty he turns to drugs to escape. Barnes seems to no longer grasp the cause and for him it has become just about killing, the adrenaline of destruction and staying alive. He is badly scarred and disfigured (a metaphor for his character?) and has apparently been seriously wounded a number of times, leading to the theory that he cannot be killed. After a confrontation between them, the platoon splits into two distinct groups with Chris joining Elias. However, after Elias's eventual murder at the hands of his nemesis, Chris surrenders the humanity taught to him by Elias and takes revenge by killing Barnes in the final battle.

Although the victim versus villain veteran is very explicit in *Platoon*, it is common in most Vietnam films. When Hollywood could not decide which they were, it decided to hedge its bets (except in the POW/MIA films). The scenario is obvious, for example, in *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*,

⁶⁹ Social Science Student Survey

*Born on the Fourth of July*⁷⁰ and most notably in *Casualties of War* (1989).⁷¹ Stone makes an attempt to draw some conclusions from the victim/villain issue in *Platoon*, with Chris claiming in his retrospective voice over at the end that he is the “child of both fathers”, Barnes and Elias; that he was a mixture of victim and villain: really just an average man who went to war and came home changed. Most significantly, he says “we fought ourselves”, and this is certainly true in the movie. The enemy is faceless and invisible, and the most damage is caused by the internal conflict. Stone means it not only in the specific sense, however, but on a number of levels, both within the war and at home. In the end, the Vietnamese enemy ceased to exist, but the conflict continues, and still does in some respects.

Running parallel to this group of movies was the evolution of films with Vietnam veterans as their main characters. These were not Vietnam films per se, but their service was emphasised and in fact often used as part of the storyline. These were particularly common with the rise of the action genre in the 1980s and included box office successes such as *Top Gun*, *Blue Thunder* (1983), *Firefox* (1982), *Iron Eagle* (1984) and *Heartbreak Ridge* (1986). However, the most successful, and the most explicit in its intonations of Vietnam were the *Lethal Weapon* (1987; 1989; 1992; 1998) series, particularly the first in 1987. The Richard Donner vehicle for Mel Gibson (Riggs) and Danny Glover (Murtough) was a surprise success which spawned three sequels, accumulating a world wide gross of \$US898 million. While the Vietnam veteran status of characters in the above mentioned movies is highlighted (sometimes in flashback), and infers it has made them the men that they are, it is always a side issue: *Lethal Weapon* takes it a step further.

Murtough is a successful, seasoned homicide detective, happily married with a growing family who has put his Vietnam service behind him. On his fiftieth birthday he is teamed with the moderately young, unstable, but talented Riggs, who has been

⁷⁰ Ironically, Willem Defoe, the victim in *Platoon* is the “villain” in *Born on the Fourth of July*.

⁷¹ The popular film follows a soldier seeking justice for the rape and murder of a Vietnamese woman by his unit, led by his rival, in a similar theme to *Platoon* and apparently based on truth, although it is just one man against the group.

transferred from narcotics after some “incidents”.⁷² Shortly after their first disastrous meeting, Murtough asks Riggs: “you know it’s over don’t you?” (the war), to which he replies, “yeah” and seems somewhat offended. But later, when Riggs knows Murtough a little better, he confides that by the age of nineteen he had been a special operations assassin and only “eight or ten other guys in the world” were as capable as him. “It was the only thing I was ever good at, you know?” It is not a boast, or something about which he is proud, just something he cannot change.⁷³ The “bad guys” in the film were also Vietnam veterans – special ops people like Riggs, but who had found it easier to continue to use their “skills” to further their illegal civilian activities.⁷⁴ It also once again raises the victim versus villain veteran, but outside the war setting. *Lethal Weapon* demonstrated that the distinctions continued to exist over a decade after the war, and once again, the victims are searching for redemption.⁷⁵ Once again, also, the enemy is not the Vietnamese, but each other, continuing Stone’s “we fought ourselves” theory.

During the 1990s there was a dearth of Vietnam movies, and in fact war movies were very much out of fashion. The Cold War was over, and Vietnam and its veterans had become the mythological mistake with veterans the victims of a time best forgotten. Veterans made some regular appearances at the movies, either as deranged killers, or the more common but harmless social misfit, or in extremely rare cases, as the successful citizen, though even those were often a bit different.⁷⁶ Perhaps the only significant movie about Vietnam during the 1990s was Robert Zemeckis’ multi-award winning, *Forrest Gump*. Forrest is a simple man who finds himself involved in a

⁷² Although his current psychological status is partly the result of the recent death of his wife, it is made obvious that it has exacerbated rather than caused his problems. He lives in a trailer by the beach, drinks constantly, is filled with rage and keeps a special bullet in his pocket for the moment when it finally becomes too much. While Murtough was a regular army soldier early in the war, Riggs had served in Special Forces later in the conflict, including the CIA’s ‘Operation Phoenix’ assassination program.

⁷³ These refrains are commonly echoed in various forms by veterans who were trained at a young age for the violence of war, and then could find no context for those skills in civilian life and had few other skills so had to retrain again.

⁷⁴ The spectre of the war reappears constantly with the pair having to revert to their military training to fight the group when it becomes personal and the police simply do not have the ability to solve the problem. This theme of “going off the reservation” is a continuous theme in all four movies. Ironically Gibson plays the type of character he would later malign when promoting *We Were Soldiers*.

⁷⁵ Gibson plays the type of character he would later malign when promoting *We Were Soldiers*.

⁷⁶ This is best epitomised by a character in Roland Emmerich’s 1996 *Independence Day*. A pilot in Vietnam, he cannot hold down a job, drinks constantly and is taken care of by his children. However, he manages to sober up enough to save humankind and redeem himself by giving up his life.

number of adventures and famous events. The centre of the film focuses on the Vietnam War and its aftermath, tackling a number of issues. Forrest's simple narrative underscores some interesting observations about the war, most explicitly when he is unable to save his best friend despite saving four others, he announces: "and that's all I have to say about that", making Vietnam the silent topic it was for many veterans. Acceptance and redemption are also important themes throughout the story.⁷⁷

A New War

A renaissance in war films began at the end of the millennium. The re-emergence burst on to the screen with the WWII epic *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), a painful, but spectacular examination of D-Day and the period immediately following. It was so successful that director/producer Steven Spielberg and actor Tom Hanks produced a sibling story, *Band of Brothers*, for television in 2001. Its success opened the way for a new wave of war films such as *Pearl Harbor*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Three Kings* and *We Were Soldiers*.

We Were Soldiers was the first successful attempt at making a traditional war movie devoid of the moralising, the rights and wrongs of the conflict and without the victim/villain mentality of the previous Vietnam movies. The film focuses on the three day battle between the Seventh Cavalry and the NVA in the Ia Drang Valley early in the war; the first and one of the few set extended battles of the conflict. The toll on both sides is shocking, and for a change, the Vietnamese are shown, minimalistically, but respectfully. The Vietnamese are not portrayed as invisible and inscrutable, but as competent and committed soldiers and provide a frightening premonition for the Americans. The fallen are heroes, decent men with families at home, and the survivors on both sides pick up and go on with the war.

⁷⁷ In a pivotal scene, Forrest is in hospital beside the platoon leader he has saved, but has lost both legs. He is a career army man and a member of his family "has fought and died in every single American war" and he is angry to have lived. He berates Forrest for saving him, saying it was not meant to go that way: "I was Dan Taylor" he cries, to which a bewildered Forrest replies: "but you're still Lieutenant Dan". Years later, Lt Dan attends Forrest's wedding (walking on titanium prosthetics) with his fiancée, a Vietnamese woman, representing his return to wholeness and redemption.

As mentioned, Mel Gibson spent a lot of his publicity time emphasising the authenticity of the film and the determination of General Moore to make sure the story was told correctly.⁷⁸ Contradictorily, in interviews for the film, Gibson claimed to have been a big fan of the earlier Vietnam films, but also criticised them for not being realistic views of the war or its veterans. He went further to proclaim that veterans were not "a bunch of baby killing, lieutenant-fraggin', dope smoking, wackos ... they were just ordinary people".⁷⁹ Veterans in the US and Australia were given preview screenings, and most seemed positive about the film. Cleverly, the movie was released in Australia on ANZAC Day 2002, but did not fire up the box office in Australia as hoped, although it had some critical success. It seems that the viewing public is not yet ready to accept Vietnam in a mainstream context.

Although the war film renaissance does have aspects of the patriotic heroics of the pre-Vietnam war movies, the culture of the Vietnam War (and its movies) have left indelible marks that are apparent in all war films. There is something intrinsically different about war movies in the post-Vietnam era that is unlikely to ever completely reverse. The failings of the military and/or government are often portrayed, and those fighting are even sometimes betrayed. There is invariably an air of waste or cynicism. They question why they are "there": what are they doing; what had they accomplished? Death is not portrayed neatly, or something of which to be particularly proud, but heroics and honour are in good supply. The one main thing that is different in these recent movies is that none of them are searching for redemption, because it has not been lost.⁸⁰

Australia

It is no mistake that all the movies mentioned in this chapter are American. Mainstream Australian film makers seemed to have all but ignored Vietnam; *The Odd Angry Shot* in 1979 being the only exception. Hollywood made itself the cultural focus of the Vietnam War, particularly with its formidable distribution and peculiarly

⁷⁸ The General took Gibson to the cemetery where the veterans were buried and turned down a number of other offers from producers he had considered unworthy to trust with their story. "Brave Hearts", *The Age* (21 February 2002), www.theage.com.au/entertainment/2002/02/21/FFX3DOYTWXC.html.

⁷⁹ Devine, "Place in the sun for forgotten veterans".

⁸⁰ *Three Kings* could arguably be the exception to this rule.

infectious brand of cultural imperialism.⁸¹ Australian (and worldwide) audiences can be excused for adopting American views and stereotypes of the war, as they had few alternative interpretations to which they could refer. While texts began gradually increasing in the late 1980s, they were rarely seen by the general public. The war was rarely taught except at tertiary level, and then with limited emphasis on veterans. *Platoon*, *Rambo* and *Lethal Weapon* (with its adopted Australian star) were the 'veterans' best known to the average Australian.

Even the one mainstream Australian attempt at Vietnam was not widely seen by audiences. Tom Jeffrey's portrayal of an Australian Special Forces unit tour of duty, *The Odd Angry Shot*, starred iconic Australian celebrity Graham Kennedy and a group of up and coming actors. Although, almost entirely set in Vietnam, very little of the movie centred on war type activities, with most time focused on the off duty antics and larrikinism of the group, including a number of well planned pranks. They also spent a fair amount of time sitting around drinking beer and discussing society – particularly women and war protestors; both of whom were apparently troublesome. It only becomes serious towards the end when a couple are killed on patrol with the combat scenes being handled relatively poorly, which is unfortunate as the living conditions are represented quite accurately.

The final scene is perhaps the most significant of the film. On their return home there is a distinct lack of excitement (although they are excited leaving Vietnam) and they act as if they know something is different. The two main characters enter a bar in uniform and Kennedy orders the drinks. The bartender asks if they have just returned from Vietnam, not in any hostile fashion, and without a moment's hesitation Kennedy replies "no mate" and the bartender loses interest. Kennedy takes the drinks to his friend and they sit staring through the glass wall at the view and the world outside, which they seem happy to see but seem somehow separated from now. It has not changed, but they have.

It could be assumed that Australia left Vietnam movie making to America's much larger resources, and felt they had nothing of significance to offer to the story, but it

⁸¹ For further discussion see for example: Doyle, "Bringing whose war home?", pp.197-141.

could also be suggested that Australian filmmakers approached the subject somewhat differently. While the first and second wave of America's Vietnam movies were appearing, Australia began producing movies such as *Gallipoli* (1981), *Breaker Morant* (1980), *The Light Horsemen* (1987), *1915* (1983) and *The Anzacs* (1985), (the last two mini-series made for television), making a significant contribution to a renaissance in Australian film. None of them glamorised war - showing it as useless, cruel and wasteful of its youth - and in all Australia was the subservient ally of a larger power. So many parallels could be drawn between these stories and the Vietnam experience, including the denial of the aftermath, that there can be little doubt of the source of the inspiration.⁸²

Gallipoli, in particular, was an enormous success. Up until the horror of the arrival into combat, the movie was not unlike (a superior version of) *The Odd Angry Shot* in its portrayal of the Australian larrikin image. None of the characters really knew what they were going to fight for, with the exception of the ideological Archie, who believes that his country needs him for a worthy cause. When trying to explain to a drifter they meet, Archie tells him that "if we don't stop them [the Germans] there, they might come here" and try and take Australia for themselves. The improbable idea sounds suspiciously similar to the Domino Principle uttered half a century later.⁸³ The film also holds the British entirely responsible for the terrible death and waste of Gallipoli, and Archie becomes the symbolic victim: the only one who truly believes dying in a pointless charge at the Nek.

The themes are continued in other films of the time. *Breaker Morant*, the story of the trial of two Australians for alleged atrocities in the Boer War, was released at a time when stories of atrocities in Vietnam were coming out in books and American movies. In the film, as in the popular version of the story, Morant was a "patsy" for the British military hierarchy and his execution caused outrage in Australia. The strongly anti-British theme continues through all of the films to various degrees, reflecting an anti-American atmosphere in the early post-war years, emphasising the ideas of the need for increased independence from powerful allies so that it need not

⁸² Doyle, "Bringing whose war home?" pp.127-130.

⁸³ The drifter seems quite disbelieving, but as his gaze surveys the desert around him, he decides "well, they're welcome to it".

find itself the victim of circumstances as it had in Gallipoli, and by extension, Vietnam. Of course, to consider Australia as an unwitting victim in either of these circumstances is extraordinarily naïve and untrue, however, it makes for dramatic storylines. Other post-Vietnam themes were also observable in the productions. For example, post-traumatic reactions were explored more regularly than had been done previously. This is most clearly dramatised in *1915* where the war has left one of the main characters injured and extremely disturbed. He is angry, depressed, intermittently violent, confused and almost completely unable to function normally.

The other possible component in the motivation behind these films is in trying to find a context for Vietnam in the Anzac tradition,⁸⁴ considered by many to be an essential element of national identity. There was a sense that redemption for Vietnam – an essential factor in the American films – could be found in recalling the Anzac legend and show that Australia was just, once again, the victim of other countries mistakes. However, hiding the spectre of Vietnam behind previous conflicts did nothing to diminish the frustration of Vietnam Veterans at not being able to make a place for themselves among the heroes of Australian military history. While movies did not address the issue, the bitterness was illustrated in other cultural outputs, such as the controversial song by Cold Chisel in 1978, *Khe Sanh*, about a disillusioned veteran and encapsulated in one line: "there were no V-Day heroes in 1973".⁸⁵

Late in the eighties, with the gradual increased recognition of Vietnam Veterans, particularly with the Welcome Home Parade in 1987, two acclaimed mini-series, *Sword of Honour* (1987) and *Vietnam* (1987) appeared to tackle the silence. *Sword of Honour*, in particular, examined the problems of veterans fitting back into society, as well as trying to find their place in the traditions of the past. *Sword of Honour* is the story of Frank and Tony, two country boys (traditionally Australian heroes come from the bush), best friends, who go to Duntroon together and begin military careers. Tony and Frank are eager to go to Vietnam and Tony in particular, is proud of the family tradition he plans to continue. Driving home on holidays, he stops at the local ANZAC memorial, the statue on which is apparently modelled on his grandfather, whom Tony greets as if he can hear him.

⁸⁴ Doyle, "Bringing whose war home?" pp.127-130.

⁸⁵ Cold Chisel, "Khe Sanh" (Words and Music by Don Walker), 1978.

The tour of Vietnam proves not to be anything like they expected and Frank has his legs blown off by a mine near the end of their tour. He returns to his wife a broken man in more ways than one, and when Tony returns in one piece, he seems hardly less damaged. Tony's relationship with his fiancé, an anti-war protestor, fails: he cannot relate to her, but then he cannot relate to anyone. He applies to be reassigned back to Vietnam, as he feels if he can finish the conflict, it will provide closure. He is refused and after a number of incidents, including being denigrated at his father's RSL club, Tony realises that his service does not appear to make him worthy of the respect afforded previous soldiers, and he blows up the local Anzac memorial, and by extension his grandfather and the past he is unable to live up to. Frank is also unable to leave Vietnam behind, and secretly builds a copy of a Vietnamese bar filled with memorabilia, becoming lost in the past, following the war obsessively. After seeing the fall of Saigon on television and realising that it was all for nothing, he shoots himself. Tony searches for redemption in Asia and marries a Vietnamese woman (who dies), but it is not complete until he finally returns home with his half Vietnamese son to his welcoming family and the waiting arms of his lost love. Peace has been made with his country.

Perhaps Duigan's *Vietnam* is a little less accessible to the average audience, with much of its undercurrent implied rather than expressed as clearly as in *Sword of Honour*.⁸⁶ They remain the only mainstream attempts to explore the Vietnam issue, with previous conflicts remaining the preferred medium. Both are a bleak look at Australian intervention in Vietnam and portray veterans quite sympathetically, and certainly as victims. The veteran villain aspect clear in many American productions was less obvious in Australia, although it did make numerous appearances later in television. Certainly, these two productions, and *The Odd Angry Shot*, were more faithful to the Australian experience with the Vietnam War and its immediate aftermath, than any American production could be, no matter how good. However, they were almost certainly the Vietnam productions least seen by the general public, even with good ratings. This fact was underscored by the student survey which showed that only 8% had seen any of these, and only one person considered them to

⁸⁶ This is unsurprising as Duigan is most recognised for the predominantly art house style of his later films.

be more accurate portrayals than the American ones.⁸⁷ This suggests that Australia is still somewhat unsure about where to place Vietnam in its traditions of popular culture. It seems that Vietnam remains part of a victim culture which has never sat easily in Australia.

Television

Only one medium can come close to having the type of impact of motion pictures, and that of course, is television. Television has taken the characteristics of the Hollywood Vietnam films, and continued them as recurring stereotypes both in the US and in Australia. During the eighties and nineties (and still fairly regularly) Vietnam Veteran characters were often "crazy", difficult and not uncommonly, the "bad guys". Many represented veterans as a criminal element, while countless others made them a victim pushed over the edge to become a villain. In recent years, high rating dramas such as *Law and Order* (and its spin-offs such as *SVU*), *Without a Trace*, *NYPD Blue*, *Nash Bridges* and *The District*, have featured Vietnam Veterans as their unstable villains, with popular Australian dramas such as *Stingers*, *Blue Heelers* and *All Saints* doing the same.⁸⁸ Even if they are not villains per se, they are at least in some way unstable or "damaged".

Few television series have been dedicated to portraying the Vietnam War itself; the critically acclaimed *China Beach* (1988-1991) and *Tour of Duty* (1987-1990) being the only exceptions. *MASH* (1972-1983), although set in Korea, was always meant to represent Vietnam and addressed a number of issues of the time: disparaging the government or the upper echelons of the military, but never the average soldiers who were considered as much victims as the Koreans. The two characters who attempted referring to soldiers as heroes were constantly disparaged and mocked. Television series with a veteran as a main character became popular, and were somehow a little different. The *A-Team* (1983-1987) portrayed a group of men unable to adjust to civilian life and feeling betrayed by their government, become vigilantes for hire. *Magnum PI* (1980-1988), and later the popular *Miami Vice* (1984-1989), had successful and dedicated characters, but there was still something amiss. They had

⁸⁷ Social Science Student Survey.

⁸⁸ All television series mentioned here began production after 1990 and all but two continue in 2004.

trouble settling down, they were overly moody and had tendencies to "go off the reservation" and were hard to control. They became somehow angrier over time as well, as shown progressively in the character of Sonny in *Miami Vice*, Andy Sipowicz in *NYPD Blue* (1994-) and to a lesser degree Lennie Briscoe and John Craig in *Law and Order* (1990-). All were cynical, angry men with substance abuse problems and failed marriages. Although the last three of these have mellowed in recent years, television has been inundated with these characters. The highest profile veteran on Australian television is the crusty but loveable Tom Doyle on *Blue Heelers* (1994-), whose veteran status is generally only raised when problematic veterans appear.

Other Sources of Popular Culture - Literature

While there is no doubt that movies and television have had the most significant effect on the popular culture surrounding the Vietnam War and the establishment of the veteran stereotypes (and therefore the focus of this chapter), other sources such as literature and music should not be ignored. Literature in particular, is always an influential medium, even when it does not always reach a mainstream audience to the degree of *Rambo*. Much has been written on the effect of literature on popular culture in Australia, particularly by Peter Pierce, Jeff Doyle and Jeffrey Grey.⁸⁹ Pierce discusses the elements of Vietnam literature at length, examining its similarities and differences with previous wars. He concludes that "there is a nostalgia for the heroic and legendary moments of old wars, for what can be construed as less complex, morally ambiguous times," but finds that the authors also mock this era for which they yearn.⁹⁰

As with movies, Australia was not entirely sure what to do with Vietnam, and therefore few significant pieces of war dedicated fiction have been produced. Once again, audiences were often left to American sources. Notable exceptions include Rhys Pollard's *The Cream Machine* (1972), William Nagle's *The Odd Angry Shot* (1975), Michael Fraser's *Nasho* (1984) and John Carroll's *Token Soldiers* (1983),

⁸⁹ See: Pierce, Grey & Doyle (Eds), *Vietnam Days*; Grey & Jeff Doyle (Eds), *Vietnam: War Myth and Memory*; Doyle & Grey (Eds), *Australia R&R*; Doyle, Jeffrey Grey & Peter Pierce (Ed), *Australia's Vietnam War*.

⁹⁰ Pierce, "Australian and American literature of the Vietnam War" in Pierce, Grey & Doyle (Eds), *Vietnam Days*, p.237.

most of which did not reach as large an audience as the American ones by authors such as Michael Herr, Tim O'Brien and Philip Caputo. Pierce claims that "many Australian authors either ignored the war or treating it indirectly, thus abetting public amnesia regarding its causes and consequences", once again portraying Australia as having been betrayed by America.⁹¹ This is startling similar approach to the Australian motion picture industry, illustrating that there appeared no comfortable place for the war or its veterans in traditional culture.

Few pieces of Australian literature have promoted the stereotypes of Vietnam veterans to any significant degree. One of the exceptions appeared in crime writer Gabrielle Lord's *The Sharp End* (1998)⁹² in which the major character, a policeman, regularly relives the horrors of his Vietnam service three decades after the event. He has been successful in his professional life (though unhappy), but his private one has been disastrous and he struggles with alcohol abuse. This is exacerbated further by the appearance of another veteran he knows who has become a psychotic killer. In few Australian novels has this victim/villain theme been applied so starkly, though it is not uncommon in American literature. More prevalent however, has been the widely used trend of having the Vietnam veteran as a more minor character, often as the deranged criminal or a mistreated victim. While most commonly associated with television, this theme has been just as predominant in literature and the two mediums have fed each others characterisations in American sources.

A recent shift from this theme to a more concentrated Vietnam veteran perspective appears in Bryce Courtenay's Australian novel, *Smoky Joe's Café* (2001).⁹³ Courtenay is one of Australia's most popular authors and most of his books have been bestsellers and often made into movies. *Smoky Joe's Café* is set around the lives of the survivors of the battle of Long Tan and their struggles to get their lives back on track; a task that most appear to have failed. They are reunited to try to help raise money for the cancer stricken daughter of one of their comrades, and feeling betrayed by the establishment, take to growing and selling high grade marijuana to pay the medical bills. The story is so filled with damaged, and occasionally deranged,

⁹¹ Ibid., p.274.

⁹² Gabrielle Lord, *The Sharp End* (Sydney, 1998).

⁹³ Bryce Courtenay, *Smoky Joe's Café* (Ringwood, 2001).

characters, that even after the normalisation and acceptance of their group by society, the stereotypes have been highlighted so convincingly, that it is the realistic conclusion that seems unbelievable. What was most significant about the novel was that it was apparently written with the assistance and blessing of a group of Vietnam veterans, which although highlighting some of the continuing concerns of veterans, also reinforced and gave credence to the victim/villain mentality. It seemed like another lost opportunity to move away from this mindset. It became a bestseller, moving more than 100000 copies.⁹⁴

* * * *

Producers of film and television, particularly the Hollywood group, have had an enormous impact on the creation of the Vietnam War myth and stereotypes. However, while it could be suggested that the producers should be more responsible when people's lives and sensitive issues are in play, it would be unfair to hold them solely responsible for the situation. Their ideas come from other sources, some of them correct, and they build on each other. This was demonstrated recently in the story of Private Jessica Lynch in the US. Lynch was one of a number of soldiers captured during the 2003 Iraq War, and quite badly injured, she lay in an Iraqi hospital until her dramatic rescue some weeks later. Nothing quite captured the imagination or patriotic fervour better than the heroic story of Jessica Lynch – a story that was later found to be largely fabricated by the government or military.⁹⁵ However, the truth should never get in the way of a good story, although the young soldier certainly had a terrible experience, which will only be the basis for what has already become a moving and patriotic myth. The war needed a hero to avoid becoming another Vietnam, and a teenage, blonde, blue eyed uniformed girl was the perfect choice.

Ultimately, the role of a producer is to entertain: it is an enormous business and there are financial gains to be made supplying the public with what it wants to see. The

⁹⁴ Australian Publishers Association, “Adult Hardbacks, sales over 7,500 copies” (2002), <http://www.publishers.asn.au/emplibrary/ACF4E53.pdf>.

⁹⁵ Lynch was captured, but her injuries were sustained in a car accident. She did not fight back because her gun jammed, and she was treated quite well at the Iraqi hospital and there is doubt about whether she was brutalised. James Dao, “Private Lynch Comes Back Home to a Celebration Fit for a Hero”, *The New York Times* (23 July 2003).

fact that movies and television provide much of the knowledge disseminated through society is of little consequence in what is ultimately about ratings and box office profits. This is obvious in all sections of the commercially lucrative creative industries; even in news it is recognised that the viewer must be entertained, thus the infamous "if it bleeds it leads" mantra. To the dismay of the majority of veterans, the entertainment industry has provided them with a legacy that cannot be escaped easily. Despite a gradual revisionism in recent years, the veteran as the victim/villain seems set to remain embedded in popular culture for many years to come. While Rambo created a veteran hero and certainly managed to "win this time", his redemption was of little comfort to ordinary people trying to live ordinary lives and find a suitable history and context for their war experience. The stereotypes portrayed in popular culture (particularly movies) were not created by that medium, but it refined, compounded and delivered these perceptions to a public that had also struggled to find a context for Vietnam. That is not to suggest that the population just took for granted that any of these portrayals were necessarily factual, but the lack of available information combined with such a divisive history offered the opportunity to fill the void with anything that might explain such confusion and suffering. Hollywood had captured the public's attention and imagination, but Australian veterans found themselves missing in action. As John F Kennedy so eloquently stated:

Mythology distracts us everywhere. For the great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie: deliberate, contrived and dishonest. But the myth: persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.⁹⁶

The war remained unfinished and unresolved.

⁹⁶ John F Kennedy cited in: Andrew Ferguson, "The Myth Machine", *Time* (13 Aug 2001), p.44.

“A Bunch of Loose Cannons”?: Consequences of the Stereotypes



Ride-by – VVMC at Vietnam Memorial Rededication, Canberra – October 2002

Chapter Six

The thought that everyone who'd been to Vietnam was a gun crazed psychopath with a green rag around their head really pissed me off.

Vietnam Veteran Interview #2.

With the media, Hollywood and the publicity created by veterans themselves, the victim/villain mentality was well ingrained in the public imagination by the end of the 1980s. It was a situation that would continue for all intents and purposes until the end of the century, regularly being reinforced by one occurrence or another, despite the efforts of many veterans to establish their reputation as soldiers in the Anzac tradition. Academic discussion focused on the rights and wrongs of the war itself or the erroneous beliefs of what were considered the 'myths' of the war and its participants. These discussions often served to divide veterans further and even radicalise the more moderate groups. Their identity, already moulded by the media and Hollywood, was further confused by the battle for the 'truth' – a tenuous concept that pitted academics against veterans and even veterans among themselves.

Against the backdrop of these issues, average veterans tried to get on with their lives. Those in need of help continued to struggle for assistance, while others did what they had always done. The publicity however, fuelled a growing feeling of resentment of destinies unfulfilled, and veterans began lobbying for greater recognition. The combative mentality established during the early inquiries and commissions continued, serving to cement the emerging stereotypes as many found themselves in a 'no win' situation. The only option to suffering in silence was to become a victim (or occasionally, a villain) – popular culture had left little room for compromise. While the publicity brought some veterans out, it confirmed for others the need to keep their service under wraps. It was a difficult and confusing time for some veterans watching their history being rewritten with every new movie or book release as the stony silence turned into a staggering roar of opinions. Many veterans turned inwards as a number of groups were established to try to control the situation and give a voice of their own to the fray. Their level of success varied, while the public lined up to see *Rambo*, *Platoon* and *Lethal Weapon* in numbers they could hardly hope to reach.

The Victim/Villain Dilemma

Perhaps the rise of the victim or villain mentality is not so surprising when the conduct, images and attitudes surrounding the war are examined. As mentioned, by the closing stages of the war, public opinion in Australia and the US had swung against the involvement, and the events of 1975 seemed to confirm those beliefs. No amount of revisionist history can change popular opinion as long as so many who personally remember events continue to do so, and therefore apply their own interpretations to those memories. Samuel Hynes claims that as early as the end of the war, the defining imagery, the grinding duration and the homefront discord had already created the two images of the conflict that would endure:

The Myth of the Bad War, which said it was an immoral adventure that should never have been begun, in which American boys were killed and a nation was devastated; and the Myth of the War That Was Lost, which said the army could and would have won, if it had been allowed to fight as it wished... [I]t had been a wasteful and destructive folly and disgraced the men who fought in it.¹

The two versions – the “bad” war and the “mistake” war – were inherent in post-war literature and commentary (historical, political or otherwise), and eventually also in the film interpretations. Everette Dennis claims that for “visual commentators ...stereotypes are useful devices because they are easily understood and make a clear, if unfair and at times hurtful, point”. They were the prisms through which the public understood (or misunderstood) the war, and ultimately also, its participants.

It took no great leap to translate the notions of “mistake” and “bad” into categories for the returned service persons. Those involved in the “bad” war became its villains and those dragged into the “mistake” of the “lost war” became its victims, although, these definitions were blurred. Veterans often seemed to drift between the two polar points, depending on the situation. They could be both a victim and a villain, occasionally concurrently. Marilyn Young concluded that:

He became a living hologram, an image projected by conflicting interpretations of the war: a victim or an executioner, a soldier who had lost a war, a killer who should never have fought it at all.²

¹ Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, p.214.

² Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*, p.321.

Gerard DeGroot believes that “one side sees a war of perpetrators and victims, the other of heroes and villains”³, which, while true, is also a simplification as the interpretations tend to be much more fluid than fixed. Andrew Martin has remarked that “Vietnam veterans have been variously positioned as crybabies, dutiful sons, dangerous misfits, or patriotic warriors”⁴, and not necessarily exclusively. This is further expounded by Muse who points out that in the earlier Vietnam movies, the veteran would often start out as a vigilante, or displaying other anti-social behaviour, and then become the “mirror image”: “the wounded veteran, the crippled or emotionally unstable soldier who would come to be seen as the war’s chief victim and most distressing symbol.”⁵

Despite DeGroot’s “heroes” and Martin’s “patriotic warriors”, there was little room for heroes in the Vietnam story. It simply did not fit within the parameters specified by the two ends of the spectrum. How could someone be a hero and a victim or villain at the same time?⁶ There were undoubtedly no fewer heroic acts (or cowardly ones, for that matter) than in any previous war, but it was somehow harder to define in the turmoil. Apparently that confusion was not just away from the battlefield, as those fighting the war apparently sometimes also struggled with the concept. Hynes found that veteran narratives still contained words such as “courage” and “duty” and “heroism”, but they were somehow almost inexplicably different in their use and not uncommonly used in irony. Hynes decided:

Courage and heroism were possible in Vietnam narratives; the *ideal* of courage, the Heroic Man of the war tradition, wasn’t.⁷

Heroism appears reserved for “other” wars; wars that were not lost or clouded with uncertainty. It is not unusual to hear of participants in World War I or II being referred to as a “type” of heroes which will not be seen again. They are somehow more worthy, according to popular myth – a myth which is regularly perpetuated in innumerable forums. Current Prime Minister, John Howard, has on a number of

³ DeGroot, *A Noble Cause?*, p.15.

⁴ Martin, *Receptions of War*, p.9.

⁵ Muse, *The Land of Nam*, p.64.

⁶ The hero/victim problem is arguably the exact dilemma the Pentagon tried to address in the Pte Jessica Lynch case.

⁷ Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale*, pp.214-215.

occasions lauded the unique “heroic Australian generation” that fought WWI and II,⁸ as did his Labor predecessor, Paul Keating.⁹ This view has been reinforced by statements such as those of historian, Don Watson, who believes “they were the heroic generation of Australia’s history in the last 200 years”.¹⁰ Journalist Alan Ramsay, who sailed with 1RAR to Vietnam in 1965, believes that the problem is that because of government attitudes, there are “no glorious victories to immortalise, no heroic defeats to mythologise”¹¹ and Vietnam therefore does not capture the imagination of the community in the same manner. American veterans have faced a similar situation as illustrated in a 2002 American Federal Appeals Court decision on extension of lifetime health care for WWII and Korean veterans: one of the judge’s commented that “We cannot readily imagine more sympathetic plaintiffs than the retired officers of the World War II and Korean War era”.¹² This attitude was reinforced in an article about the gradual demise of these veterans, claiming that “they were from the greatest generation. They were ready and knew what needed to be done, and they made a great sacrifice for our way of life.”¹³

Among Vietnam veterans themselves, there are a few that feel they are less worthy of the respect given to those who served in previous conflicts.¹⁴ One constantly spoke of his service as being “lesser” in value than of previous wars, and was therefore less “entitled” to assistance and recognition,¹⁵ despite the fact that he saw almost constant “contact”. Vietnam veterans understand that the scale of their war is not the same as WWI or WWII, and that they did not necessarily suffer some of the deprivations of their predecessors. Nevertheless, on an individual level they went to war for what they considered at the time, the same reasons, and facing the same concerns –

⁸ For example: “War Dead Honoured at UK memorial”, *The Age* (11 November 2003); John Howard, “Address at Northern Victoria Country Conference – Benella, Victoria” (10 February 2001), <http://www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/2001/speech737.htm>; “Boost for Howard: Digger’s tribute lifts leadership”, *The Cairns Post* (10 March 2003), p.11.

⁹ Paul Keating, “Paul Keating’s Speech at the 1996 ALP Campaign Launch” (14 February 1996), <http://australianpolitics.com.au/elections/1996/keating-launch.shtml>.

¹⁰ “Exhibition tells of wartime courage at sea”, 7.30 Report (ABC Television, 14 January 2000), <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/stories/s93770.htm>.

¹¹ Alan Ramsay, “Vietnam – a legacy of denial” in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (27 May 2000), www.smh.com.au/news/0005/27/text/features02.html.

¹² “Veterans Lose Healthcare Suit Against Pentagon”, *The Washington Post* (19 November 2002), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A12711-2002Nov19.html>.

¹³ “Losing the ‘Greatest Generation’”, *The Washington Post* (10 November 2002), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A36580-2002Nov10.htm>.

¹⁴ Veteran Interview #17; Veteran Interview #8; Veteran Interview #6.

¹⁵ Veteran Interview #8.

possible injury and death. Certainly, none of those interviewed felt that they deserved more respect or honour than those of other wars, just a comparable amount.

Even those that did qualify as heroes beyond any apparent shadow of doubt were somehow tarnished by having committed their deeds in Vietnam. The family of Kevin “Dasher” Wheatley, honoured with the Victoria Cross for actions in Vietnam in 1966, was shattered in 2002 when his status as a hero was questioned. Papers released by the British Public Records Office showed that there was much disagreement as to whether to allow the posthumous award.¹⁶ Allegations included the inference that some officials in Australia had been reluctant to award high honours for Vietnam. The argument apparently centred on whether Wheatley had been killed protecting men under his command by the enemy, or by his own grenade thrown at the enemy.¹⁷ The semantics of the interpretations could be endlessly debated, but the politics of the situation certainly played a part. The 2002 debacle also demonstrated the sensitivity still operating within the veteran community, and the outcry over the threatening of one of their few “war heroes”. Another Victoria Cross recipient from Vietnam, Keith Payne, was initially deeply honoured by his award, but found it made him a “target” at home.¹⁸ Rather than being a hero, he often felt as if he was a public villain; targeted by protestors, constantly a source of media scrutiny and with his family – in particular, his children – harassed. The army had its own agenda, desperately needing a hero to display to the public as well as its ranks. Payne went along with it for a time, but eventually his health suffered and he became angry from his experiences. He retreated from the public arena for many years and struggled to make sense of his place in history. Stories abound of Vietnam veterans not receiving awards for which they were nominated, including those who survived Long Tan, and even in recent years, delayed commendations are being received after years of lobbying.¹⁹ One interviewee, a long time office holder in the RSL, made the

¹⁶ Peter Day, “British queried Vietnam VC award”, *The Australian* (1 January 2002), p.2.

¹⁷ Robert Garran, “VC queries started on home soil”, *The Australian* (8 January 2002), p.6; Ashley Ekins, “Our dashing hero”, *The Age* (6 January 2002), <http://www.theage.com.au/news/state/2002/01/06/FFX78VV92WC.html>.

¹⁸ Veteran Interview #30.

¹⁹ Michael Lund, “Blood, bravery and a lingering bitterness”, *The Sunday Mail* (15 August 1999), pp.82-83; “Six receive war medals” *The Cairns Post* (2 September 1999), p.15; Harry Smith, “Letters – The long battle after Long Tan”, *The Australian* (10 October 2003), p.16.

thought-provoking observation that in Australia “we usually wait for our heroes to be dead before we acknowledge them”.²⁰

Even when “heroism” has been discussed by Vietnam veterans (or referred to in relation), it is usually not in the traditional or expected sense, echoing Hynes’ conclusion. For American veterans, their point of reference for heroism was the John Wayne figure, while Australia encompassed John Wayne along with the Anzac Legend. For both groups, their contexts proved to be grave disappointments. Michael Anderegg discovered many allusions to John Wayne in veteran literature and films, particularly as the “icon of the uncomplicated warrior hero” that they all wanted to emulate.²¹ Hynes also found considerable evidence of the Wayne influence and how it had all gone wrong, finding that those going to war believed “John Wayne’s wars were adventurous and romantic; but there was no adventure in Vietnam, and no romance”.²² The exact words could have been used in relation to the Anzac Legend for Australians. The song *I Was Only Nineteen*, which became an anthem for the veterans’ movement, complained that “The Anzac Legend didn’t mention blood and mud and tears”.²³ Actually, it did, but they are not the parts remembered and recounted by fathers and grandfathers and on Anzac Day. Vietnam veterans felt betrayed by the stories of a romanticised past of glory in war, just as did every other person before them who had ever been to war. But in Vietnam, there was simply not enough glory to disguise the disillusionment.

A number of those veterans interviewed also mentioned John Wayne and the Anzac Legend as points of reference for the heroics they expected to find in war, usually in disappointment at their absence. One spoke of doing the “John Wayne thing”, but it was very different after the first time someone was killed.²⁴ Another professed that he “had seen all the John Wayne movies, and I thought it was the thing to do”.²⁵ It was not only the war that these icons did not fit, but also the times and the changes throughout society on a number of different levels. Agreement on the reasons for the

²⁰ Veteran Interview #32.

²¹ Michael Anderegg, “Hollywood and Vietnam: John Wayne and Jane Fonda as Discourse” in Anderegg (Ed), *Inventing Vietnam*, p.19.

²² Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Story*, p.215.

²³ Redgum, *I Was Only Nineteen*, Music and Lyrics by John Schumann (Gilbey Music, 1983).

²⁴ Veteran Interview #18.

²⁵ Veteran Interview #13.

absence of heroism is hard to find as it is undoubtedly caused by a combination of those issues discussed as well as the post-war circumstances. B.G. Burkett in his angry diatribe, *Stolen Valor*, asserts that veterans' honour was "robbed" by frauds, fakers, the anti-war movement and the media at home, rather than in the war itself.²⁶ While this opinion is not without some validity, and other veterans might agree with much of his argument, it does not provide a definitive explanation. There is also the element of the unpopular, unfinished and "lost" war. This is particularly addressed by the *Rambo* phenomenon. Rambo must go back and fight the war again, on his own terms, and win, before he can become a hero. He replaces the quiet, good, family oriented, courageous image of John Wayne, with an anti-hero much more suitable for an anti-war, and desperate for a hero on which to make a point of reference for Vietnam. While Rambo became the ultimate American hero for Vietnam (and was comparably popular in Australia), Australia attempted to turn back to the Anzac Legend for answers to the hero problem: a "bandaid" that may have been useful for the general public, but was worse than useless for Vietnam veterans as it seemed to confirm that they had no place in that heroic legend.

Veteran Reactions to Popular Culture

Veterans on the whole were horrified and dismayed by the popular culture response to their war. Eben Muse notes that "Hollywood's difficulty in producing a successful combat film was unprecedented" and instead looked for the "truth" in "representations" making veterans "puzzled and appalled at the need for inventing a metaphor for the Vietnam War".²⁷ Australian veteran and counsellor, Brian Hennessy, claimed that he and his colleagues watched these representations and "were alarmed and angered by what they saw" feeling he and his friends had been personally "misrepresented".²⁸ But according to Andrew Martin, the movies were just the tip of the iceberg as "to the dismay of many Vietnam veterans, the trend was transported wholesale to television"²⁹ and a much wider audience, with Muse indicating that, in a very short time, the "violently psychopathic veteran became a cliché".³⁰ It seemed, away from the representations of war, which disturbed veterans enough, the representation of the damaged returned soldier became increasingly

²⁶ Burkett, *Stolen Valor*, pp.xxvi-xxvii.

²⁷ Muse, *The Land of Nam*, p.101.

²⁸ Hennessy, *The Sharp End*, p.132.

²⁹ Martin, *Receptions of War*, p.104.

³⁰ Muse, *The Land of Nam*, p.89.

popular and “a valuable commodity for any storyteller in need of a civilian defined by traits other than race”,³¹ and was thus embedded in the public imagination.

One of the few subjects upon which all of the veterans interviewed agreed was popular perceptions. They believe that the bulk of the Australian community sees the war through mainly American eyes and therefore also has a skewed perception of veterans. They are overwhelmingly critical of the American movies, claiming that they are generally inaccurate even from an American point of view, or most eloquently labelled as “drivel”.³²

Unfortunately, all the movies you see are American, absolute garbage. I’ve never seen a movie portraying the Australians the way they fought.³³

It was all rubbish. Hollywood hype.³⁴

I can’t stand them. What I see on television, and the Hollywood version, it’s not the war I fought in. It’s terribly disrespectful.³⁵

When television portrays people like that, it doesn’t do us any good.³⁶

A few admit that there are isolated scenes in movies such as *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Hamburger Hill* that are realistic. *Hamburger Hill* in particular rated an honourable mention from several veterans for its straightforward, non-political approach and its presentation of “the horror of war”.³⁷ One dissented with these opinions, claiming that Australians would never have put up with the unrelenting pointless “slaughter of troops”,³⁸ although it could be argued that the evidence is to the contrary when Australia’s previous military history is considered. Certainly however, it could be argued that the public, and therefore the government, would not have tolerated high body counts in Vietnam as it had in previous wars. *Platoon* is an interesting point of contention between veterans. A number regarded the ambush and patrol scenes as a useful illustration of quite realistic basic operating procedures as well as the difficulties of the environment.³⁹ A couple mentioned that the details of equipment, language and the like were accurate and interesting.⁴⁰ However, agreement ended there, as the majority, including some of those who made positive comments, were disturbed or annoyed by the inter-platoon politics, the drug

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.54.

³² Veteran Interview #6.

³³ Veteran Interview #31.

³⁴ Veteran Interview #3.

³⁵ Veteran Interview #5.

³⁶ Veteran Interview #15.

³⁷ Veteran Interview #3; Veteran Interview #13.

³⁸ Veteran Interview #8.

³⁹ Veteran Interview #6; Veteran Interview #34.

⁴⁰ Veteran Interview #14; veteran Interview #13.

taking, the atrocities and the general lack of discipline. Two reported walking out of the film in disgust,⁴¹ but most were just disappointed. Presumably, they had hoped that a movie made by a Vietnam combat veteran would be closer to the “truth” as they remembered it. However, a couple admitted that they were looking at it from an Australian perspective, and perhaps it was more accurate from an American one. Those who had dealings with American units did find them very different from the Australians. One serviceman who had some dealing with Americans quite late in the war (1971), talked firstly of “no sense of reality” in the films, but on reflection when discussing the Oliver Stone versions, decided that “there was maybe a bit”,⁴² particularly in relation to marijuana and morale among Americans.

The two movies that attracted the most scorn from veterans were *Apocalypse Now* and *Rambo II*, which conversely are also the best known. *Apocalypse Now* was regularly dismissed with a shake of their heads and a look of disdain, unwilling to dignify it with words. Descriptions included: “terrible”,⁴³ “disrespectful”,⁴⁴ “garbage”,⁴⁵ most persuasively as “a load of shit”.⁴⁶ Two reported walking out of the cinema, deeply offended by Coppola’s vision of the war in which they had watched mates die.⁴⁷ Only one interviewee had anything positive to say about the film. He was shocked to think that anyone would take it seriously, considering it to be only representational and thought it “showed the madness of the era and fitted the time quite well”.⁴⁸

Rambo was by far the most discussed movie, with veterans believing that this character in particular, has done them a great disservice, best described by one who said that “the thought that everyone who’d been to Vietnam was a gun crazed psychopath with a green rag around their head really pissed me off.”⁴⁹ Another claimed that his grandchildren perceived him as being like Rambo,⁵⁰ as it was the only concept of Vietnam that they had. An office holder from the RSL, who is often contacted by schools to have someone come and talk to the students (some of whom particularly ask for Vietnam Veterans), has been disappointed to find that the school

⁴¹ Veteran Interview #5; Veteran Interview #8.

⁴² Veteran Interview #11. Notably, the heroic movies of previous wars were almost certainly no more realistic than the Vietnam ones (perhaps even less so), but it was the representations and lack of heroics that offended Vietnam veterans.

⁴³ Veteran Interview #30.

⁴⁴ Veteran Interview #5.

⁴⁵ Veteran Interview #31.

⁴⁶ Veteran Interview #19.

⁴⁷ Veteran Interview #5; Veteran Interview #15.

⁴⁸ Veteran Interview #27.

⁴⁹ Veteran Interview #2.

⁵⁰ Veteran Interview #12.

children regularly ask about Rambo rather than reality.⁵¹ One declared that “Rambo created the first real images that stuck and has been perpetuated ever since”.⁵² He pointed out that it is a source of much annoyance to many veterans that the actor who played the ultimate Vietnam warrior spent the war years avoiding the draft teaching in a girls school in Switzerland. Most displayed their derision less articulately, but just as clearly, with comments such as: “Rambo just really pisses me off.”⁵³

One veteran when discussing the inaccuracy of the portrayals managed to see the lighter side of the situation, proclaiming that “if we’d had a half a dozen guys like Rambo, we would have kicked their butts in six months”.⁵⁴ Another, whose unit served in conjunction with the Americans early in the conflict, announced (only half jokingly) that “Rambo had nothing on us”,⁵⁵ while telling of their exploits, and indicated that there was some behaviour that could later be selectively translated into a character such as Rambo, proving once again that all stereotypes have some basis in truth, however slim. Despite this, Rambo was no more popular among American veterans, even producing pickets outside screenings of the film to protest the image being portrayed.⁵⁶

As Australia’s only mainstream film, *The Odd Angry Shot* was enjoyed by a couple, but disappointed more. Some veterans were critical of the liberties taken in the film with one labelling it a “shambles”.⁵⁷ At least one found it insulting, while another complained that the only film made about Australians in Vietnam was a comedy, which he felt was somehow par for the course in public attitudes.⁵⁸ Others found it somewhat “accurate” at least in relation to “the lighter side of life”⁵⁹ at war. This was perhaps an important point as Australia’s major attempt to portray Vietnam reflected an issue brought out in some of the interviews about how Australian soldiers describe their wars. Many claimed that they rarely get together and tell war stories and are often suspicious of those who do: one veteran claimed that when he does meet with others, they usually talk mainly about events that happened during R&C or “the bars we fell out of”⁶⁰ during their service. This possibly reflects the reason for the

⁵¹ Veteran Interview #31.

⁵² Veteran Interview #9.

⁵³ Veteran Interview #26.

⁵⁴ Veteran Interview #13.

⁵⁵ Veteran Interview #18.

⁵⁶ Kevin Bowen, “‘Strange Hells’: Hollywood in Search of America’s Lost War”, Dittmar & Michaud (Eds), *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, pp.229-230.

⁵⁷ Veteran Interview #13.

⁵⁸ Veteran Interview #12.

⁵⁹ Veteran Interview #7 and Veteran Interview #4.

⁶⁰ Veteran Interview #3.

production of *The Odd Angry Shot* instead of something more serious, and perhaps is also an attempt to connect it to the larrikinism inherent in the Anzac Legend. This has been commonly used in portrayals of previous conflicts and also reflects the attitudes of many of the participants in those conflicts.⁶¹

As indicated, a significant number of veterans have taken their “treatment” by popular culture very personally. Despite some of them having difficulties, they do not see themselves in the disaffected and damaged veterans portrayed. Hennessy stridently insists that “I fought my war in Vietnam, not Hollywood”,⁶² but as with previous conflicts, it is hard to escape the myth. Australia’s most respected service persons from WWI found living within their myth difficult,⁶³ even though it would be the image most sought after by later veterans. A couple were able to view the issue of films more ambivalently, and with the benefit of hindsight. One, although pointing to the numerous inaccuracies, allowed that “a movie had to have a storyline to make people watch it. The truth is 99% of the war was sheer boredom: the rest of it is sheer terror.”⁶⁴ Another agreed, asking “what else do you show? Should we do a movie of the nice times we had sitting around in a hole in the ground?”⁶⁵ However, it should not be assumed that the influence of popular culture was completely without benefits. One veteran heavily involved in advocacy, admitted that movies such as *Rambo* had at least raised the issue of veterans and gave them an audience for whom they could build a more accurate picture of Vietnam veterans.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, although it did give the issue prominence, it has been very difficult to produce the more accurate picture. *Rambo*’s image has proved surprisingly resilient.

The stereotypes had been set and there was scant opportunity to escape. Barry McMahon and Robin Quin believe that “the fact that stereotypes might be inaccurate does not tell us anything about why stereotypes emerge and how they are used in our society.”⁶⁷ “Vietnam vet” had become a type of shorthand for damaged, unstable, sick and dangerous, in the same way *Rambo* had become synonymous with over the

⁶¹ See for example: Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp.110-111.

⁶² Hennessy, *The Sharp End*, p.114.

⁶³ Thomson, “Putting popular memory theory in Australia”, Perks & Thomson (Eds), *Oral History Reader*, p.306; Thomson, “Embattled Manhood: Gender, Memory and the Anzac Legend”, Hamilton & Darian-Smith (Eds), *Memory and History*, pp.158-173.

⁶⁴ Veteran Interview #32.

⁶⁵ Veteran Interview #11.

⁶⁶ Veteran Interview #19.

⁶⁷ McMahon & Quin, *Stories and Stereotypes*, p.117.

top heroics. When the question is raised as to whether the general public really believes the stereotypes, certainly the veterans believe it to be so. All but one believed that it is the manner in which they are perceived, and many have been made to feel like it as well. A number spoke of how they have avoided mentioning that they served in Vietnam, with a couple saying that when they occasionally do, they get “strange looks” and are then treated differently.⁶⁸ A few went as far as denying their service because of the public perceptions and it even interfered with their employment prospects.⁶⁹ One spoke of having managed a small workplace for over five years before discovering that three of his colleagues were also veterans, commenting: “I suppose that if you look back on that... it would be magnified across Australia many times”.⁷⁰ Others highlight the fact that there is a tiny minority that do fit aspects of the stereotype, therefore it is difficult to ignore completely. The other issue is that for a few who have struggled to find an identity for themselves, it has sometimes been easier to go along with the accepted stereotype, a situation that is not without precedent from previous wars.⁷¹ Lieutenant General Grey has observed in relation to the Rambo image that he believes “the public actually expect some people to behave like that, and I think some veterans behave like that because they’re expected to”.⁷² Luisa Passerini also came across this dilemma when interviewing members of the Italian working class about the difficulties of life under fascism, discovering they were sometimes unwilling to completely disassociate themselves from their stereotypes because it provided them with an identity.⁷³ More significantly however, is the point that some veterans have had difficulties to some degree over the years making it hard to entirely dismiss. One quite well adjusted and personally successful interviewee talked of how the “psycho” label had made things problematic for veterans, but also said that on the other hand “sometimes...you say, yep, they’re talking about me”.⁷⁴

The evidence does suggest that veterans are correct in their belief about public perceptions. The student survey revealed that only 25% had been exposed to any

⁶⁸ For example: Veteran Interview #5; Veteran Interview #7; Veteran Interview #12.

⁶⁹ For a more detailed discussion on employment issues see chapter 7.

⁷⁰ Veteran Interview #19.

⁷¹ Thomson, “Embattled Manhood”, pp.171-172.

⁷² Veteran Interview #35.

⁷³ Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, p.5.

⁷⁴ Veteran Interview #18.

information about Vietnam in a formal education environment, with several admitting even that had been limited in scope. Only 22% could say why Australia had been involved in the Vietnam War, which is surprising considering that 20% of respondents were old enough to remember the war. Despite their lack of knowledge, and the fact that only 55% of respondents knew a Vietnam veteran, 77% believed that most veterans have psychological problems.⁷⁵ All but one respondent had seen at least one of the popular Vietnam films, with most having seen several. However, considering how Vietnam veterans are presented to the public, it is only surprising that the figure was not higher than 77%. This image concerns many in the returned service community, disappointed that being a Vietnam veteran has developed certain negative connotations, that it is mentioned much more than necessary: one claimed that the “unstable guy” in a television show is always a Vietnam veteran.⁷⁶ This has a certain amount of truth, as in a two week period just prior to that interview, two weekly television shows, one Australian and one American, had “unstable” Vietnam veterans as their protagonists.⁷⁷ The trend has continued with numerous references since and two completely new drama series in 2002/2003 using it in their first season.⁷⁸

Several veterans also indicated that they believed the fact that somebody was a Vietnam veteran was also referred to more than necessary in news items, even when it apparently had no relevance to the situation:⁷⁹ “it was always mentioned – got mentioned probably more than it was warranted.”⁸⁰ It is particularly highlighted when the incident includes some sort of criminal or questionable activity, such as in

⁷⁵ “Student Survey”: Older respondents showed significantly less accurate knowledge than younger ones.

⁷⁶ Veteran Interview #32.

⁷⁷ *Stingers*, Nine Network Australia (19 October 1999); *Nash Bridges*, Seven Network Australia (28 October 1999).

⁷⁸ One episode in particular covered a range of stereotypes: *Without a Trace*, Nine Network Australia (5 November 2003); *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, Ten Network (1 September 2002).

⁷⁹ Examples around the time of the interviews include: The fact that a man giving evidence at the Mackay sisters murder trial in Townsville was a Vietnam veteran was constantly mentioned in media coverage: “Court told girls seen in vehicle”, *The Cairns Post* (22 October 1999), p.11. News report of helicopter crash near Marlborough reported that the pilot was a Vietnam veteran before any other details were available: National Nine News (24 July 2000), Nine Network Australia. A report into the re-opening of an inquiry to ascertain whether a man was wrongfully shot by police constantly referred to his status as a Vietnam veteran without any apparent context. “Inquiry launched into veteran’s death”, *The 7.30 Report*, ABC Television (29 February 2000).

⁸⁰ Veteran Interview #7.

the case of a Brisbane man on data theft charges in 2001.⁸¹ The defence later went on to use his Vietnam service and subsequent related difficulties as the reason for his conduct.⁸² Another news report in 2002 described a man as a “Vietnam veteran” during his trial on drug production and possession, which he claimed was for his own use.⁸³ The man seemed a bit old to have served in Vietnam and the barest investigation revealed that he was a French national who had at one time served with the French Foreign Legion, including a short period during the French war in Vietnam in the early 1950s.⁸⁴ This tenuous connection to Vietnam was enough for the media, particularly when it involved substance abuse and a man who lived alone in the bush and behaved somewhat erratically at his trial. Other news items that do relate particularly to veterans issues are regularly over-dramatic and associate in some way with the stereotypes.⁸⁵ One veteran commented that:

What is forgotten is that the Vietnam War was fought by a lot of average Dads. There is a portrayal that all the other wars were fought by average people, and that Vietnam was fought by a bunch of loose cannons.⁸⁶

During one interview it was claimed that whenever Vietnam is mentioned the images usually show “a little girl with no skin running down the street, or a guy getting his head blown off ... so what hope have you got”.⁸⁷ The images he referred to are of a young girl fleeing a napalm attack and the shooting of a VC soldier by an ARVN general in the days after Tet in 1968. Both are closely associated with what many believe to be the uniquely barbaric conduct of the war, particularly by the US and its allies, and according to Burkett, these pictures sum up the Vietnam War for most people.⁸⁸ Marita Sturken maintains that they are two of the three best known images of the war. She agrees that they are invariably used whenever the war is mentioned and has become emblematic of “what we did” and “a serious indictment of the...methods of conducting war”.⁸⁹ There is also the idea that these images prevent

⁸¹ “Vietnam veteran found guilty”, *Ten News Queensland* (Ten Network, 26 March 2001).

⁸² “Data theft draws \$20,000 fine”, *The Courier Mail* (27 March 2001), p.7.

⁸³ “85 year old on drug charges”, *Ten News Queensland* (Ten Network, 14 November 2002).

⁸⁴ Kevin Meade, “Marijuana tea saved his life”, *The Australian* (15 November 2002), p.3.

⁸⁵ For example: David Nason, “Only 19 when a life’s pain began”, *The Australian* (25 April 2002), p.6; “Scarred veterans still waiting for help”, *Sydney Morning Herald* (29 April 2000); Megan Everitt, “Vets fight for dignity” *The Cairns Post* (24 July 2002), p.7.

⁸⁶ Veteran Interview #34.

⁸⁷ Veteran Interview #6.

⁸⁸ Burkett, *Stolen Valor*, pp.118-119.

⁸⁹ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, pp.90-93. The third was the evocative image of the helicopters leaving at the evacuation of Saigon in 1975.

any opportunity to change the popular impression of the war as “they offer not closure but a sense of the war’s horror”.⁹⁰ Significantly, neither of these images actually reflect what is popularly believed,⁹¹ but they are iconic of a war which suffered an image problem from its earliest days.

However, just as Hollywood is not solely responsible for the re-writing of history, neither can the media be held accountable for all of the victim/villain press received by veterans. Veterans themselves have sometimes used the media to promote a personal or group issue in a manner that propagates (however unintentionally) the victim mentality, or extremely rarely, the villain one. There were examples of this occurring in North Queensland during the period when the bulk of the interviews were conducted. *The Cairns Post* printed the story of local man, Gary Edwards, and the problems he has had since his Vietnam service.⁹² The story outlined many of the difficulties suffered by a number of veterans, and certainly did produce an image of the classically damaged veteran: “We’ve all got big problems. They haven’t gone away. They’ll never go away”.⁹³ The Edwards story, along with others that have appeared, was quite likely helpful to some who may have had similar problems or be in need of assistance, as the most common refrain from veterans was that they “thought it was just me”, and probably also assisted in keeping the issue prominent to keep pressure on the government not to reduce services. However, the story did upset a number of veterans who made comments, or wrote to the paper accusing Edwards of whinging and alluding that he was continuing to bring their reputation into disrepute, urging Edwards to “get on with life”.⁹⁴ Others, while agreeing with the theme of the story in principle, felt that it was overdramatised. There are many examples of the same situation in newspapers or on television. Other local examples included stories of the controversy of veterans using Kalpower Station as a retreat,⁹⁵

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.94.

⁹¹ The plane that dropped the napalm on the village was not American, but South Vietnamese, during a battle between the ARVN and the NVA in 1972: “‘The girl in the picture’ speaks out about Vietnam War”, *7.30 Report* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 7 May 2001). The man executed by General Loan had apparently been responsible for the death of a number of his and his colleagues’ civilian relatives, which while not in any way diminishing the horror or illegality of the event, does give some context to the brutality: Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, p.261.

⁹² Roz Pulley, “The veterans the world forgot”, *The Cairns Post* (11 December 1999), p.4.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ C.Cummings, “Letters to the Editor: Get on with Life”, *The Cairns Post* (18 December 1999); Paul White, “Letter to the Editor: Different memories of conflict”, *The Cairns Post* (16 February 1999), p.9.

⁹⁵ See chapter nine for a full discussion.

as well as other occasional “magazine” type pieces like the Edwards one. This conflict has also been an issue in the US where stories of troubled veterans often receive similarly mixed responses.⁹⁶

The VVAA

This situation has been the basis of disagreement between commentators, commentators and veterans, and between veterans themselves about the “truth”, and the “that was/was not my experience” arguments.⁹⁷ It is this conflict that has dogged the VVAA since its inception. As indicated, the VVAA has not been without its share of critics. It has come under attack from academics such as Jeffrey Grey and Jane Ross, who criticise the organisation for promoting false stereotypes, among other things. Grey, while admitting that Vietnam veterans did not receive an adequate amount of care from the government after the war, believes that the VVAA has not done veterans any favours by presenting them as “unique, or uniquely sinned against”.⁹⁸ Criticism of the VVAA has not been the sole province of academics. Some veterans are also disappointed with the methods of the VVAA, particularly the image of the “whingeing vet”, or the deeply disturbed one which they feel has been portrayed. One veteran claimed that he left the VVAA because “they just seemed to me that they’d lost all touch with reality”.⁹⁹

However, this was not always the case. Half of the interviewed group had been involved with the VVAA in its earlier form, and they all had their reasons for being there. On some level, they felt that they needed a voice to speak for them, and as previously mentioned, they felt very strongly that traditional areas of advocacy were not adequately assisting them. Not all joined because they were unwell; and while most were concerned about their future health, in many ways they were looking for recognition and understanding. While it is true that veterans of previous wars did have some problems of a similar nature to Vietnam veterans, not least of which was PTSD, it was the nature of the conflict and its aftermath which has had the greatest influence on the behaviour of the VVAA. It could also be suggested that the

⁹⁶ Nicosia, *Home to War*, p.355. See also: Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*; Burkett, *Stolen Valor*.

⁹⁷ See chapter eight for an extended discussion.

⁹⁸ Grey, “Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran”, pp.92-93.

⁹⁹ Veteran Interview #6.

circumstances under which the VVAA was established also significantly influenced the manner in which it has conducted its activities.¹⁰⁰ The organisation certainly had a reputation for its adversarial nature, both in its battles with the government and the RSL. However, as outlined in the circumstances of the stoushes in the early 1980s, the VVAA felt that this was the only way to get any attention. The more bureaucracy the group faced, the more combative it became, convinced that fighting for assistance was the only option available. The feelings of anger that were endemic in the veteran community (but unseen by the public) were reflected in the VVAA. Even its motto - “Honour the dead, but fight like hell for the living” – voiced their belief that every step was a battle that had to be fought. Despite all the publicity and criticism, the VVAA was certainly not the first returned veteran’s organisation to display a combative spirit. Thomson describes conflicts between veteran groups and the government after WWI, including break away groups with quite large memberships which later merged to become the RSL.¹⁰¹ These groups were ostensibly created for advocacy for the various issues facing those returning from the war, many of which included concerns similar to Vietnam veterans over half a century later.¹⁰² It is largely forgotten that even after WWII, different groups emerged when conflict arose with the RSL.

The main difference between the VVAA and these groups was in the social aspect. While most other groups, particularly of course the RSL, put a significant amount of emphasis on the social interaction element of the organisations, the VVAA was quite specific in its decision to not follow that route.¹⁰³ Its focus was entirely on advocacy and has remained steadfast in this attitude. Possibly it believed that the social role was already being fulfilled by the RSL or unit associations, but other issues were also involved. The VVAA had an agenda and it wished to be taken seriously, so structured the organisation to reflect these aims. Funds were raised through a modest membership fee and donations, and staffed entirely by volunteers – usually veterans or their wives. Also, being fewer in number than from previous conflicts, the

¹⁰⁰ This is perhaps confirmed by its less adversarial nature in more recent years when it has encouraged greater cooperation with the government and other organisations as more issues of veteran concern are addressed.

¹⁰¹ Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp.120-128.

¹⁰² For example: pensions, illness and injury assistance, employment, housing benefits.

¹⁰³ Vietnam Veterans’ Association of Australia, “Aims and Memorandum of the Vietnam Veterans of Australia” (27 March 1981), AWM – 419/108/22.

members were more dispersed, making regular social events difficult and hardly cost effective. Some of the individual groups within the state structure did sometimes have a social aspect, as in Cairns,¹⁰⁴ though this was rarely formal and generally entailed getting together for coffee or a barbecue. There was also a sense of urgency about the early days of the VVAA, with some of its founding members being ill (or knowing someone who was) and therefore wanting to get answers and assistance quickly. Keith Payne highlighted the fact that the organisation “bloomed overnight” because of the belief that the RSL was refusing to address Vietnam veterans’ issues.¹⁰⁵ This sense of urgency also played a role in the development of an adversarial nature as frustration took over when events did not unfold as veterans had hoped, because as Payne stated, they had formed looking for assistance and treatment, “not looking for a fight”.¹⁰⁶

It was this frustration, combined with the lack of recognition of Vietnam veterans, that caused the VVAA to feel as if they had no choice but to adopt a victim mentality. They had been made to feel like villains rather than war heroes, so the only way they could see to overcome that was to turn it around and become victims. It was not difficult to portray themselves as having been betrayed as the evidence mounted up, and early government attempts to deny assistance, or ignore them, was seemingly clumsy and short sighted. The VVAA attempted to develop a relationship with the media,¹⁰⁷ and increasing publicity from American sources augmented the local stories. It was also involved in an advisory capacity in the production of *Sword of Honour*, with one of the veterans interviewed spending a lot of time with the main actor to assist him in achieving authenticity in the role.¹⁰⁸ This all helped to raise the profile of veterans and put their concerns on the agendas of local members. The VVAA became political and backed politicians and hopefuls that supported their cause. However, the media stories were unfortunately not always helpful to the cause. Stories about “tripwire vets” and violent behaviour, including a spate of spousal killings by men described as veterans¹⁰⁹ in the US might have created

¹⁰⁴ For example: Meeting for coffee – “What’s on in FNQ”, *the Cairns Post* (27 November 2001), p.39; Social evening – “What’s on in FNQ”, *The Cairns Post* (29 November 2001), p.47.

¹⁰⁵ Veteran Interview #30.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, pp.149&163.

¹⁰⁸ Veteran Interview #26.

¹⁰⁹ For an extended discussion see: Burkett & Whitely, *Stolen Valor*.

publicity, but also fear. The “bad war” had come back, and it was inevitable that people would think back to the stories of atrocities committed by soldiers and those images described above. These mixed messages from the media, propagated by Hollywood, caused confusion, and ultimately, largely erroneous perceptions in the public imagination.

Despite the fact that a significant number of veterans would later leave or become disillusioned by the organisation, most believed that the VVAA had done a good job, or at least the best it could under the circumstances, of raising the profile of the various issues. One former career soldier, who had never been involved directly with the association, praised its hard work and believed that without the VVAA, he would not have been able to enjoy the recognition and assistance he now did.¹¹⁰ Another man, an office holder in the RSL, maintained that the RSL had put the VVAA in a position where it had no other option; a situation which he feels will never be repeated because of the work of the organisation.¹¹¹ A serviceman who has spent much of his time since Vietnam in New Zealand credits the VVAA with improving services for its smaller group of comrades across the Tasman, and made a point of representing and protecting their interests as well.¹¹²

These attitudes, echoed by most veterans make their decrease in popularity all the more lamentable, but perhaps unsurprising. The failure to secure the preferred outcome at the Agent Orange Royal Commission in 1985 caused some to give up, but also radicalised others, and it was in this period of anger and disappointment that the group began to splinter. Even the VVAA itself admits that it was a group of angry people:

The bitterness engendered by the political response to veterans’ concerns about their health and the health of their children coloured the attitude of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia for many years. It is only lately that positive action by both the Department of Veterans Affairs and the VVAA has resulted in a relationship where the concerns of veterans are being addressed.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Veteran Interview #33.

¹¹¹ Veteran Interview, #32.

¹¹² Veteran Interview #15.

¹¹³ Vietnam Veterans’ Association of Australia, “A Short History of the VVAA”, <http://www.vvaa.org.au/history.htm>, (4 December 2003).

The association continued its work, and would have a number of successful ventures (such as the Welcome Home Parade) before the major schisms occurred, but these only provided further ammunition for its critics.

For a small number of Vietnam veterans, neither the VVAA, nor any of the other mainstream organisations provided the type of outlet they required, leading to the establishment of the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club. It would not be untrue to say that this was a group of particularly angry and disillusioned veterans who believed that they no longer fitted comfortably into society and therefore rebelled. Historian, John Pigot, claims that “the club hijacked one of society’s anti-heroic stereotypes and applied it to a group of returned servicemen whose own position in Australia’s cultural life was still not well defined.”¹¹⁴ They also craved, almost contrarily perhaps, the comradeship of the group of fellow travellers that they missed from their close service ties. From the very beginning of its establishment, the VVMC was at odds with other organisations, in particular the RSL. The RSL, which held the “keys” so to speak, among the veteran organisations, prevented the VVMC from participating in many major events, especially Anzac Day commemorations. The battles between the two groups ranged from petty to serious, and differed in intensity depending on the state and region. Even in recent years when tensions between the groups have cooled, they are still a long way from reconciliation. In Cairns, where the local chapter of the Motorcycle Club has a relatively friendly relationship with the local RSL, the League is still considered to be “the enemy”.¹¹⁵

Ironically, those who joined the VVMC found that they were beset not only with the Vietnam Veteran associated stereotypes (particularly the one of the villain), but also of those connected with motorcycle gangs. Outlaw motorcycle gangs such as the Hell’s Angels in the US, and the Bandidos and the Rebels in Australia, were regularly associated (sometimes with good reason) with violence, criminal activity and racism. The outlaw motorcycle gangs make up only a tiny percentage of motorcycle clubs,¹¹⁶ but as they are the most publicised, their image overshadows anyone riding a Harley Davidson in black leather with a coloured patch, particularly if there is more than one

¹¹⁴ John Pigot, *Leather Bred Heroes: The Vietnam Veterans’ Motorcycle Club*, p.3.

¹¹⁵ Veteran Interview #25.

¹¹⁶ These outlaw groups are known within the general motorcycle club fraternity as the “one percent” group – the small amount that do not follow the codes of conduct. Pigot, *Leather Bred Heroes*, p.1.

of them. The VVMC certainly did not fall under the “outlaw” umbrella. With the exception of the occasional minor incident, the club did not attract the attention of the law to any significant extent.¹¹⁷ They were generally men with jobs and families, and many of the club activities were family orientated.¹¹⁸ A number of them did suffer from problems associated with their service, but that was part of the reason for joining the group and they turned to each other for support. The feeling of comradeship was extremely important to them, and going on rides together were often cathartic experiences.¹¹⁹ Member for Leichhardt, Warren Entsch, who was made an honorary member of the North Queensland club for his assistance to veterans, claimed that the relationship between the members was vitally important and often prevented crises.¹²⁰ However, even if the club does not fit the motorcycle gang stereotype, it is fair to say that the idea of seeming rebellious and dangerous did appeal to those joining the organisation. Pigot agrees, pointing out that the “style of the one percent biker is an ideal metaphor for the still marginalised identity of the Vietnam veteran”.¹²¹ Their secretiveness and nonconformist image also linked them to the notion of the “tripwire vet”, of which few of them were, but with whom many felt an affinity. However, despite the air of menace surrounding them, there is little evidence of threat or danger. Perusal of the Queensland state club’s newsletters reveals advice on advocacy resources, jokes and reports and plans for rides and social functions (almost all including families);¹²² hardly proof of dangerous and unstable outlaws.

Some veterans avoided groups altogether, either because they felt they did not need the support, or alternatively, were not yet ready. While a couple were dismissive of the groups, others held them in contempt. At least one claimed that those who joined groups “went over to the other side” and was “disgusted” with the idea,¹²³ while another who did join the VVAA was made to feel by other veterans that those who did join groups “had just caved in and had excuses” for not getting on with their

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.77-78.

¹¹⁸ Vietnam Veterans M.C. (Queensland Chapter), “Full Bottle” (No. 36, May 1999).

¹¹⁹ Veteran Interview #25.

¹²⁰ Interview with Warren Entsch (29 January 2003).

¹²¹ Pigot, *Leather Bred Heroes*, p.3.

¹²² VVMC, “Full Bottle”, No.36.

¹²³ Veteran Interview #9.

lives.¹²⁴ This attitude certainly reflects the idea of the victim mentality that the VVAA is accused of propagating, however, the evidence does not support the idea that those who participated were “bludgers” or “whingeing malcontents”. All of those in the interview group who had joined the VVAA had been professionally successful and those that received financial assistance had only done so in the past few years, not when they were initially more involved. In fact, a few of those most active in the association believed that the illness they suffered was exacerbated by the stress of their participation, though none of them regretted their sacrifices.¹²⁵ Significantly, it was those avoiding the organisations who appeared to suffer more serious difficulties.

Bludgers and Whingeing Malcontents

With the “victim” mentality emerged the idea of the veterans as “bludgers” or “whingeing malcontents”. While coming out of the general community, or occasionally the academic one, it was also apparent among Vietnam veterans themselves.¹²⁶ Australians expected their service persons to be stoic and proud, not publicly melancholic and asking for assistance. While most people were sympathetic to the situation of the veterans, the “victim” mentality was not easy to place in a useful context, making them feel even more ostracised. Veterans were outraged when a peaceful rally at the Sydney Town Hall in 1989, attended by a cross section of veterans, family and distinguished invited guests, was labelled a “rent-a-crowd” by the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, Ben Humphreys. Respected National Party MP and Vietnam veteran, Tim Fischer, (who would become party leader some months later) attended the rally and later wrote an angry letter to a Sydney newspaper condemning the minister’s comment and attitude.¹²⁷ However, a letter from one high profile “successful” veteran did not hold much weight against the apparently overwhelming proof of the situation of Vietnam veterans. It seemed that it was Fischer that was the aberration, rather than the other way around.

¹²⁴ Veteran Interview #8.

¹²⁵ Veteran Interview #26; Veteran Interview #19; Veteran Interview #16; Veteran Interview #4.

¹²⁶ For example: Veteran Interview #28; Veteran Interview #34. See also: Burkett & Whitely, *Stolen Valor*; Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*.

¹²⁷ Tim Fischer, “Rent-a-crowd is not correct”, *The Torch* (13 May 1989), p.13.

It seemed to some critics that many of the veterans complaining of health problems appeared to develop them a little too conveniently after the publicity began appearing, or that the problem was dramatically overstated.¹²⁸ While it is true that the numbers coming forward for assistance did increase dramatically after the media reports and the inquiries began, there is little reason to assume that most of these were not valid. There are a number of reasons for the influx, not least of which included the fact that some had been ill for many years without realising that the cause might be related to their service. Some of the symptoms of PTSD or possible chemical exposure could initially be explained away in the minds of otherwise healthy young men. The most common ones such as skin rashes and gastrointestinal disorders could individually be linked to hundreds of things, as could relationship problems and mood swings. Most had limited contact with previous service colleagues, especially among the National Service group, so it was not until the public meetings began that the symmetry began to appear more clearly.

Critics also point to the fact that all service personnel had medicals before being released from the military and any problems should have been obvious at that time.¹²⁹ There are a number of problems with this theory. The most obvious one relates to the fact it is well documented that many health concerns do not appear immediately. For example, hearing and orthopaedic problems caused by the rigours of life in the field often do not appear until later in life, just as respiratory problems from the privations of service were found to be common many years later in WWI veterans.¹³⁰ Also, because so little was known about chemical exposure at the time, those issues were rarely documented in a medical record, and because PTSD was not sufficiently understood and could appear belatedly without any previously obvious symptoms, it was also missing from files. Another issue was the conduct of the actual medicals themselves. The circumstances under which they took place must be understood in order to see the wider perspective. Many took place in the days shortly after returning from service, particularly in the case of National Servicemen, when they were anxious to get away to their friends and family and get on with their lives. They were also often young and inexperienced with medical and service procedures,

¹²⁸ For example: Burkett & Whitely, *Stolen Valor*; Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*; Grey, "Memory and Public Myth", pp.143-145; Crowe, *The Battle after the War*; Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, pp.366.

¹²⁹ Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.357

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.230 & 361.

sometimes answering questions without much attention or not giving any other information other than what they were specifically asked. Some said they were fine just to get through everything quickly, not considering the long term effects of the record.¹³¹ Those conducting the medicals were also often under pressure, particularly when processing large numbers coming in and out of units; and personnel sometimes felt rushed through. This is not symptomatic only of those returning from Vietnam, with some of those in Thomson's study returning from WWI reporting similar incidents, or a lack of understanding of the long term consequences of trying to get assistance for service related illness after being rated A-1 on their return.¹³²

While it should not be suggested that no one took advantage of the increased publicity, it does not necessarily follow that those who seek assistance are "bludgers" or "malingerers", although some claim to have been treated that way by the department or the community.¹³³ One reports being told "to stop feeling sorry for himself",¹³⁴ and another claimed to have been "interrogated" as if he had done something wrong.¹³⁵ Unsurprisingly, these two gave up trying to attain assistance again for many years.

The system that veterans have to go through to achieve assistance is so rigorous, and allegedly tortuous, that it is difficult to imagine too many putting themselves through the procedure without cause, or without being exposed. In some ways, it could be claimed that the feeling of some that they are "malingerers" has sometimes prevented, or at least hampered, some who really need help from getting it.¹³⁶ Ironically, the stereotypes made getting assistance more difficult. A number of veterans had difficulty getting any useful assistance from their private doctors, who either

¹³¹ Veteran Interview #32; Veteran Interview #10; Veteran Interview #13; Williams, *The Devil's Rainbow*, p.40. Two interviewed were warned to get "everything on the record" and believe that without that warning they would have had difficulty later getting assistance: Veteran Interview #4; Veteran Interview #8.

¹³² Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp.107-108.

¹³³ For example: Veteran Interview #6; Veteran Interview #10; Veteran Interview #25; Veteran Interview #12; Veteran Interview #13.

¹³⁴ Veteran Interview #10.

¹³⁵ Veteran Interview #25.

¹³⁶ Lloyd & Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.366. This was also stated by a local veteran and advocate: Veteran Interview #31.

appeared to have little understanding of veterans' problems, or little interest.¹³⁷ This is supported by the Standing Committee on Community Affairs report which found that many practitioners lacked appropriate training leading to "under diagnosis and unsatisfactory treatment" of illnesses.¹³⁸ There were numerous complaints about the doctors, including those working for the DVA, with several claiming that they were made to feel like fakers or malingerers.¹³⁹ Veteran Brian Black was shocked when asked by his doctor "if work was slow and was I pursuing a claim to get some money from the government?"¹⁴⁰ The problem was even more pronounced in regional areas where less medical assistance was available, and therefore fewer doctors trained in the necessary areas.¹⁴¹ One psychiatrist admitted that there would always be those who were "rorting" the system, but "that it was far better for a few to slip through the net than one genuine veteran suffering post traumatic stress disorder be denied his rightful compensation."¹⁴² Australian veterans are not alone in their claims of being treated as "faking" or being malingerers, with many in the US finding themselves in a similar position.¹⁴³ These views have leached into some sections of the community, particularly with continuing disagreement about the causes and effects of the various health concerns. However, it is not difficult to link the image back to the victim/villain status; a status that both helped and hindered.

The Welcome Home Parade

There is perhaps no more defining moment for Vietnam veterans as a group than that of the Welcome Home Parade on 3 October 1987, when 22000 (38% of all veterans) marched through Sydney. A crowd of about 50000 cheered them through the streets, with an unknown number watching the televised version from home. Questions about the event elicited emotional responses from all the veterans interviewed. More

¹³⁷ For example: Meeting of the National Mental Health Team, RSL Cairns, 12 April 2000; Williams, *The Devil's Rainbow*, p.169-172

¹³⁸ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *After the March: Strengthening Support for the Veterans*, p.7.

¹³⁹ Veteran Interview #13; Veteran Interview #6; Meeting of the National Mental Health Team, RSL Cairns, 12 April 2000.

¹⁴⁰ Cited in Williams, *The Devil's Rainbow*, p.199.

¹⁴¹ Changes to the system in recent years has given veterans greater choice of medical practitioner: Dr Graeme Killer, "From the health desk: Veterans' health care - a decade of progress", *Veterans' Health* (No. 68 December 2002), p.2.

¹⁴² Williams, *The Devils Rainbow*, p.113.

¹⁴³ For example: Nicosia, *Home to War*.

than half attended the parade, and not a single regret was expressed. All found the experience cathartic and emotional. Many spoke of the day with a distant look in their eyes and a catch in their voices, best summed up by one veteran as “one of the most incredible days of my life”.¹⁴⁴ All have particular memories of the day: the first sight of the crowd gathering in the Domain, the 504 flags (for those who died), and the mates they had not seen for twenty years. Almost all used the word “emotional” in their description of the day, and for some it was a bit too emotional. One veteran, who was hospitalised with nervous exhaustion that night, aptly described it as “mind blowing”, but still thinks only positively of the day. For most, it symbolised reconciliation with a community from which they had felt isolated for so long. While most returned service persons feel isolated from the wider community at some time, Vietnam veterans felt they had been forced into that isolation by the sense of shame and confusion surrounding Vietnam. The parade offered some new opportunities, or as one described it, “a turning point for veterans and Australia”.¹⁴⁵ Another veteran saw the event as being summed up by a stranger in the crowd that day. “One lady held up a placard that I’ll never forget. It said three words – ‘about bloody time’.”¹⁴⁶ One veteran who went because he was encouraged by his wife to do so “came back immeasurably pleased” that he had gone.¹⁴⁷ Another, who had to get a doctor’s certificate for three days because his employer would not give him time off for the event, claimed that it “went a long way to healing a lot of the wounds”.¹⁴⁸

For the seventeen who did not attend, there was a mixture of regret, despair and ambivalence. Eight regretted missing the event. Distance, cost and work commitments kept some from going, while at least two felt that they were at that stage still unable to face the past.¹⁴⁹ A couple expressed concern that they would again be targeted by protesters, with one agonising over it until he decided, “look, I just don’t want to go and get spat on again”.¹⁵⁰ Two claimed that they had not seen the need for the parade and had no compunction to attend, and were almost

¹⁴⁴ Veteran Interview #13.

¹⁴⁵ Veteran Interview #31.

¹⁴⁶ Veteran Interview #13.

¹⁴⁷ Veteran Interview #8.

¹⁴⁸ Vietnam Veteran Interview #3, 6 October 1999.

¹⁴⁹ Veteran Interview #19; Veteran Interview #25.

¹⁵⁰ Veteran Interview #27.

bewildered by the fuss surrounding the event.¹⁵¹ Sometimes, not going was even more complicated. Two veterans shunned the parade because they felt that attendance was some sort of betrayal. One veteran felt that those who went were “traitors” who “went over to the other side” to glorify the idea of war,¹⁵² while the other felt it was just “too late” to make up for the betrayals of the past.¹⁵³

A number of academics, including Jeff Doyle, Jeffrey Grey, Ann Curthoys, Jane Ross and Mark Woodruff, have questioned the motivations and necessity of the Welcome Home Parade. All insist that the idea of a Welcome Home March was a purely American invention created to deal with circumstances that did not exist in Australia, and point out that the majority of veterans marched with their battalions to be “welcomed home” on their return from Vietnam. Doyle maintains that it signifies “the substantial replacement of certain elements of the wider Australian experience of Vietnam with the remembrances of only a few.”¹⁵⁴ Ross claims that “these earlier ‘welcome home’ marches seem to have been comprehensively forgotten” and points to numerous incorrect statements made in the publicity leading up to the 1987 march.¹⁵⁵ All describe as part of the myth of public memory about Vietnam that veterans received no “welcome home” and were “sneaked” into the country, and part of the “inverted ... appropriation of American myths of the revenant warrior despised”.¹⁵⁶

These comments are an oversimplification of the situation. While it is true that the American “Welcome Home” marches did have a significant influence on the decision to hold an Australian one, this should not suggest that Australian veterans were blindly following their American compatriots without any objectives of their own. The veterans interviewed were well aware of the facts of their initial return from Vietnam. Nobody denied that marches had taken place on their return, even amongst those who were unable to participate in one. If anything, they made an enormous effort not to perpetuate any of the so-called myths. A few did feel as if they were “sneaked” into the country - and some were, particularly in the latter part of the war.

¹⁵¹ Veteran Interview #28; Veteran Interview #34.

¹⁵² Veteran Interview #9.

¹⁵³ Veteran Interview #26.

¹⁵⁴ Doyle, “Short-timers’ endless monuments”, p.109.

¹⁵⁵ Ross, “Australia’s Legacy”, pp.191 and 212.

¹⁵⁶ Doyle, “Short-timers’ endless monuments”, p.109.

This finding is supported by interviews conducted by Rhodes in 1990, claiming that veterans had not forgotten those marches attended on their return, contrary to Ross' comments.¹⁵⁷ Rhodes also reported that a number reported "mixed receptions" at these marches, and concluded that a maximum number of only 16000 can have attended these events.¹⁵⁸ Those who missed out on marches were also presumably often National Servicemen, as they were most likely to be reinforcements: moving between units thus reducing the opportunity to march. Rhodes also points to the dislocation felt by many veterans after not seeing many (if any) of the people they had fought beside since their return, and the march presented an opportunity to find those people and attain some closure.¹⁵⁹ This is certainly supported in the North Queensland interviews, with most echoing similar sentiments.

However, the veterans talked of needing the Welcome Home Parade not because they received no welcome home in the first place, but rather because they felt that welcome to be unsatisfactory or that there was a sense of "unfinished business" surrounding themselves, the war and the Australian community. Many of the veterans who did march on their return from Vietnam found the experience marred by unwelcoming elements, even if these were in the minority.¹⁶⁰ Most felt their service denigrated at some point after their return home, and the silence and apathy that followed in the years afterwards often exacerbated a growing sense of isolation for veterans in regard to their service. If nothing else it provided a sense of belonging to those who felt isolated. The point missed by some commentators is that the "welcome home" veterans wanted was not the physical one that most had already received, but instead a symbolic one; a "welcome home" from the no-man's land in which they felt their war had been placed. However, they were also anxious to avoid making political statements, making it quite different from the American marches, with the organising committee telling the veterans to "leave their messages at home or not march".¹⁶¹

As already indicated, another aspect that should not be underestimated is the

¹⁵⁷ C.Rhodes, "Vietnam Veterans' Welcome Home Parade and Reunion: a study of a ceremony and its origin" MA Thesis, Monash University (November 1990), (AWM – MSS1578), pp.17-19.

¹⁵⁸ There were 16 marches of Battalions of about 1000 men. Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p.34.

¹⁶⁰ See chapter three.

¹⁶¹ Rhodes, "Welcome Home Parade and Reunion", p.43.

unfinished nature of the war for most veterans. One year tours meant that only a small number went to war or returned, at the same time, and the war they left remained unfinished. Without a clear start or finish date, the war seemed to go on without an end. Australians who served in Vietnam throughout the years of Australia's commitment left a war which was not only unfinished, but also not won, and would later be lost when they were gone. Mark Woodruff suggests that the real reason Australian and American veterans wanted a welcome home march was that they had "never received the 'victory parade' they felt they had ultimately earned."¹⁶² While this might be an overstatement, it is true that at the time of the parade, most veterans did feel that their contribution had been underestimated. Most importantly however, many veterans felt a need to be reconciled with the Australian community and their place in Australian military tradition. Keith Payne believes that "the Welcome Home parade could not have taken place five years, ten years, or fifteen years sooner. It happened at the right time. The nation was ready to be unified."¹⁶³ Facts that cannot be disputed are that most veterans clearly felt that the parade was necessary - as reflected in the attendance figure - and the continuing positive memories of the event. The parade did not by any means solve all the problems of veterans, and neither did it magically transform their place in history, but it was "a turning point".¹⁶⁴

Unfortunately, this important turning point for Australian Vietnam veterans was also perhaps the one that most firmly cemented the victim mentality in the public imagination, although, once again, that was never the intention of the organisers. The parade and accompanying reunion was intended to provide closure and reconciliation, and both of these aims were accomplished to a certain degree. However, if veterans hoped that it would be the path to heroism and acceptance into "the Anzac Legend" version of Australian history, they would have been disappointed. The alignment of Vietnam veterans into "normalcy" was certainly intended in the planning of the event.¹⁶⁵ This is further supported in the preface of *Homecomings* released for the event, which stated:

¹⁶² Woodruff, *Unheralded Victory*, p.231.

¹⁶³ Veteran Interview #30.

¹⁶⁴ Veteran Interview #31.

¹⁶⁵ "Australian Vietnam Forces National Reunion 1987", (AWM – 419/2/40).

As a first word it must be acknowledged that the majority of Australian Vietnam veterans returned, readjusted and are living exemplary lives. Many look back on Vietnam as a valuable but tough experience which has contributed to their character and wisdom.¹⁶⁶

However, the book goes on to describe, in most cases, the complete opposite of the statement above. The book was given to all attending veterans along with a pack of brochures, many of which advertised support services available to veterans, both governmental and private. The parade stimulated a large increase in those seeking assistance for health problems,¹⁶⁷ most likely for similar reasons as the increase after the emergence of the VVAA: publicity; talking to other veterans for the first time; and feeling that it was now “acceptable” to seek help. While this should be looked upon as a positive outcome, it also reinforced the veteran as victim. The finale of the event was a concert at which the final song played to a capacity crowd was Redgum’s *I Was Only Nineteen* with “Frankie”, the subject of the song, placed on the stage in his wheelchair.¹⁶⁸ All accounts claim that there was not a dry eye anywhere, which seems supported by the news footage played around the country. While the entire event was a tremendous step forward for those who had served in Vietnam, an enjoyable event for all involved and a bigger success than even the organisers had predicted, it also had its price. It could be argued that it was a price worth paying, as services and awareness increased dramatically afterward.¹⁶⁹ This factor alone may well have saved lives, and certainly immeasurably reduced the suffering of many. But at the end, while “home”, the veteran was still different, somehow placed apart from the returned of other wars: no longer a villain, but not quite a hero.

While it is unlikely any did it knowingly, veterans felt they were forced to build themselves an identity separate to those of previous wars in order to capture public and governmental attention to their plight. This identity, part myth and part fact, unwittingly created an image over which they no longer had any control. The media, Hollywood and the public imagination had hijacked the Vietnam Veteran identity. No amount of protestation made any difference because there *were* some issues of

¹⁶⁶ Ric Marshall, “Preface” in Giblett, *Homecomings*, p.2.

¹⁶⁷ J. Williamson., Interview with the author, 13 September 1998; Rhodes, “Welcome Home Parade and Reunion”, p.67; Scott, *PTSD*.

¹⁶⁸ Jeff Doyle, “Dismembering the Anzac Legend: Australian Popular Culture and the Vietnam War” in Jeff Doyle & Jeff Grey (Eds), *Australia R&R: Representations and Reinterpretations of Australia’s War in Vietnam* (Chevy Chase, 1991), p.122.

¹⁶⁹ For example: House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *After the March: Strengthening Support for the Veterans* (Canberra 1988).

concern within the veteran community. The only way to be rid of it would be to claim that *none* of it was true, and that could not be done without losing assistance. During the 1980s, the villain/victim mentality had become well ingrained into the social myth, making veterans unsure about whether they wanted to step forward or retreat. Respect and honour had been sacrificed for inquiries and pensions and they found themselves trapped in a no man's land between the status they desired, and the assistance they required.

Any jobs for an old digger?:
Employment Issues of Vietnam
veterans



Australian Army Memorial - Canberra

Chapter Seven

Service = Vietnam – 110 Sig Sqn 1971

surfing the web looking for a job

I am new to the web and not sure if this is the right thing to do but as I am in a spot of bother I thought there might be an old digger out there that may know of any work available in the Melbourne area. This is my daughters email address. A great site anyway and my regards to all Vietnam Vets.

Notice on Vietnam Veterans Bulletin Board, 16 September 1999.¹

Few would deny that military service has a significant and long lasting effect on its participants, and for those whose service takes them to war, the effects are significantly magnified. The fact that the majority were young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, just beginning their adulthood and independent lives, makes it all the more profound. Most Vietnam Veterans went back to their lives where they found jobs, married, had children and tried to fit back into society. Many succeeded. However, during the late seventies and early eighties, it became obvious that some in the veteran community had problems, and for a significant number, these issues are still current today. These issues are reflected in the employment trends of Vietnam Veterans. Employment is an integral part of life for the majority of Australians, and its trends are therefore often indicative of the welfare of a particular group. This study attempts to examine more closely the employment experiences of Vietnam Veterans and how, if at all, their service affected their civilian working lives. Examining these experiences is not simply an assessment of whether their service affected their lives, but also of whether community attitudes about the war, and veterans, had any measurable influence on employment prospects. Sometimes, it was not just going to war and returning that produced consequences: it was a result of the events in the years that followed.

The major problem for research in the area of the employment prospects of returned servicepersons is the deficit of specific studies and statistics, making much of the evidence anecdotal.² Surprisingly little research has been attempted on the effect of war on employment in Australia. Even the most basic facts are difficult to obtain. A

¹ “Vietnam Veterans Bulletin Board” (16 September 1999), www.vds.com.au/~spook/notice.htm.

² This has been confirmed by numerous representatives of veteran and support groups including: Dominic Melano, Director of the Veteran’s Vocational Rehabilitation Scheme, Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Interview with Researcher (2 November 1999).

nominal roll of Vietnam Veterans has only been compiled in the last five years, prior to the DVA beginning a morbidity study. Even the DVA cannot say with any certainty how many veterans are not employed at any point in time; a somewhat surprising situation for a department which grants service pensions and purports to assist veterans become more employable. The VVCS and veteran groups can only give anecdotal evidence and have to guess (although, in an educated sense) at figures. Certainly after the two world wars of the twentieth century, there were measurable effects on the workforce as a whole because of the numbers involved. So many were deployed during WWII that women had to fill many of the traditional male fields. After the war, the economic boom, the return of most women to traditional arenas and full employment absorbed most of those returning from the war and the unemployment rate stayed below 3% until the 1970s.³ The experience of WWI and the long period of economic growth assisted a more organised and equitable repatriation system,⁴ and few servicemen appear to have had any significant employment difficulties.

The situation had been more complex after WWI and there is some evidence to suggest that employment was not so easily found.⁵ The issue was part of the emerging government repatriation system; promoting preferential treatment and offering the opportunity of soldier resettlement in rural areas to promote agricultural and primary production (with varying results). The policy of offering employment preference to returned servicemen was adopted in legislation by all states except Queensland, but was not as successful as hoped - not least of all because of opposition from the union movement.⁶ It proved a difficult time for returning soldiers with unemployment levels after the war of 11%; a figure that rose rapidly over the ensuing decade to reach 19% in 1929, and 29% in 1932.⁷ The Depression caused a reduction in repatriation benefits when many former soldiers could least afford it, and Albert Jacka, Australia's first WWI Victoria Cross recipient, became

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Labour special Article: A century of change in the Australian labour market" (2002), <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/12D509E0F07F37BFCA2569DE0021ED48>.

⁴ Grey, "Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran", pp.73-74.

⁵ Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp.112-115. This situation was similar in the US: Judith Waldrop, "27 Million Heroes", *American Demographics* (November 1993), pp.4&56.

⁶ Grey, "Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran", pp.70-71.

⁷ Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp.112-115.

symbolic of the poor management of the system when he died at age thirty-nine in 1932, destitute.⁸ There were also the difficulties of readjustment, and of course particular problems for those suffering from wounds and poor health. However, these were largely hidden within the sheer numbers and in a different atmosphere of community attitudes.

Paid employment is an important social indicator, one of the “Key National Indicators” identified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.⁹ For Australians, the right and expectation of having a job has been an essential part of the culture. While the traditional nature of the workplace has undergone a transformation in recent years,¹⁰ it is still a vitally important part of culture and lifestyle. Australian researchers have concluded that “work is fundamental to human happiness, health and well-being. It is more important even than money to the quality of most people’s lives”. More significant is the suggestion that “its absence is a denial of human potential, of the capabilities which make people truly human”.¹¹ A 1994 conference on unemployment problems in Australia supported this view, finding that the inability to attain a job was damaging to the community, the economy, and most significantly, to the individual and their family - “a shattering and de-valuing experience” in which “...’loss of self esteem’ hardly begins to articulate the hurt” caused.¹² Jocelyn Pixie believes that citizenship has long been “defined by the market” and therefore the inability to work can have a profound effect on the idea of being a useful and active member of the community; so maintaining the rights of citizenship.¹³ Jan Carter goes further, claiming that not being able to work repudiates an important element of the Australian ethos and that the loss of full employment has “a negative impact on identity, at individual, community and national levels”.¹⁴ Historically, for

⁸ Grey, “Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran”, pp.71-72.

⁹ ABS, “Key National Indicators”, www.abs.gov.au.

¹⁰ See for example: Ian Watson, John Buchanan, Iain Campbell and Chris Briggs, *Fragmented Futures: New Challenges in Working Life* (Sydney, 2003).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.20-21.

¹² Stephen Frith, “Australia as the island of Robinson Crusoe”, Stephen H Frith (Ed), *The Value of Work* (Sydney 1994), p.1.

¹³ Jocelyn Pixie, “Work and the Character of Citizenship”, Frith (Ed), *Value of Work*, pp.70-75.

¹⁴ Jan Carter, “Employment, Unemployment and Identity: National Responses to the Green Paper”, Frith (Ed), *Value of Work*, p.47.

Australians, as in many other cultures, the ability to work has been the way to “find meaning, and maintain their dignity and self-respect”.¹⁵

Coming Home

I had a bad attitude, and I think most vets do. Because we'd just walked out of the jungle, and now we were civilians again, and we were expected to behave like human beings.¹⁶

Back home, I just went back to work, and I slotted into society, and I didn't mention that I'd been there and done that. It was a chapter that was over and gone, and that's it.¹⁷

Returning to Australia from Vietnam was disorientating for a large group of veterans; a factor that has certainly been a problem for the service people of most wars. The sudden change from situations of extreme danger and constant vigilance, from living most of the time in the bush, and from a vastly different culture, to coming home to a peaceful country untouched (physically at least) by the war, is always a difficult transition. As we have seen, there were a number of factors that made this transition more complicated, not least of which were the speed of their return from the combat zone, the unfinished element of the war and the homefront situation. Adjustment to everyday routines was often difficult and confusing.¹⁸ However, veterans returned to an economy that had been booming throughout the ten years of Australia's involvement in Vietnam. It had not been pushed into a recession by the cost of the war as had the United States, and unemployment had not gone above 2% for the duration of the war.¹⁹ The servicemen left and returned at staggered intervals over the years, so there was no notable effect on employment levels as there had been in previous wars. Some came back to the job they had before their service, some found new jobs, and others remained in the military for some time. There was also of course, a group that were seriously injured and would have great problems returning to any sort of normal work, as is the case after every conflict.

¹⁵ Watson *et al*, *Fragmented Futures*, p.22.

¹⁶ Vietnam Veteran Interview #13, 20 October 1999

¹⁷ Vietnam Veteran Interview #17, 21 October 1999

¹⁸ Giblett, *Homecomings*, pp.35-47.

¹⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics – New South Wales Office, *Official Year Book of New South Wales 1979* (Sydney, 1975), p.276.

Amongst the survey group, 19% had some sort of difficulty attaining employment after their discharge. A few found the adjustment too difficult to make, as illustrated by the first quote at the beginning of this section. They were sometimes confused or angry, and a couple took some time off to work out what to do with the rest of their lives. All eventually found employment, with various levels of success. The majority of the 19% however, were the career military people, with service ranging from 5 – 37 years. Most were officers with high levels of skills in trades and/or management, but they found it difficult to translate these into a civilian equivalent. One reported leaving the RAAF at age 41 with 24 years of trade experience which included extensive mechanical, electrical, panel beating and upholstery, and was unable to find any sort of job that used his skills, as he did not have the requisite civilian paper work.²⁰ With a family to support, he ended up taking a job as a storeman until a former air force colleague assisted him in obtaining another position (which also did not utilise his skills).²¹ Two other high ranking officers, with respectively 20 and 37 years in the military, spoke of the demoralising effects of going from stations in which they were respected and revered, to a civilian life where their skills were ignored or held in scant regard. One said that he "assumed private industry would be dying to hire me", but soon discovered that "private industry had no concept of the military...and had the idea that we just marched up and down all day".²² He was out of work for 8 months, and found it a terrible shock – a loss of ego, status and self-esteem. Another went from being an officer to being a security guard.²³ Two former officers at first turned down offers of employment in security and labouring because they felt them to be significant demotions, but had to eventually take them as they could find nothing else.²⁴

Almost all of the career military people felt they were not well prepared for the civilian workforce, even those who found jobs quickly. Trades were often not recognised, and other specialities (such as explosives training) did not always

²⁰ Lack of recognised qualifications was a common complaint from those who had learned a trade in the military. This situation has been rectified in recent years with qualifications being made more recognisable and transferable: Australian Defence Force, "Technical and Trade Scheme" (December, 2003), http://www.defencejobs.gov.au/careers_explorer/ArmyMain.html.

²¹ Vietnam Veteran Interview #1, 29 September 1999.

²² Veteran Interview #21.

²³ Veteran Interview #18.

²⁴ Veteran Interview #18; Veteran Interview #24.

translate well into civilian employment. One veteran drove trucks and operated all sorts of heavy machinery throughout his decade in the army, and had to apply from scratch for all the appropriate licences when he left the service.²⁵ This is echoed by a number of veterans, even those under National Service, and ironically one of the complaints made by the Rambo character in *First Blood*: they were trained and trusted with million dollar equipment, but it meant nothing on release.²⁶ Administrative and management skills were also rarely recognised without civilian qualifications. There was little assistance or advice supplied on leaving the service. Resettlement courses were usually provided, ranging in length from one to three weeks, but focussed mainly on financial affairs, and included little useful career advice. No career re-training was offered. One Navy veteran was sent on one month's work experience at a civilian company (at no expense to the participating companies), but no job was forthcoming, as he claims was often the case for participants of the program.²⁷

There is also evidence to suggest that these courses were not held in high regard by either the forces or those attending. Some felt that the courses themselves were “half hearted” and delivered by rote, and most also admitted to taking scant notice of the information provided. They were anxious to get out and could not imagine that they would have any difficulties getting a job. One went to the Kings Cross Aquatic Centre for the resettlement course and remembered “they spent most of the time playing around. We didn't really care about resettlement, just cared about getting out.”²⁸ He also remembers that his level of interest was about the same as the instructors, and there was no follow-up or further support. The Australian Defence Force has made an effort to address these problems in recent years with initiatives such as the “Defence Link Project” which entails a Transition Management scheme which aims to assist with civilian employment, financial counselling, health insurance

²⁵ Veteran Interview #12.

²⁶ Jeffrey Grey noted similar problems in returning servicemen from WWI, particularly among those who had risen to higher ranks during the war and felt undervalued by the civilian workforce. Grey, “Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran”, p.71.

²⁷ Veteran Interview #25.

²⁸ Veteran Interview #27.

and general adjustment issues, and includes ongoing support.²⁹ It will be some years before the success of the project is known.

Not everyone found their military service debilitating when looking for a job. A former major with 25 years of service in the Engineers Corps, was referred to an employment agency (non-military) by a speaker at his resettlement seminar, where he secured a job with a prestigious engineering and construction firm.³⁰ Perhaps the important point here is that the employment agency translated his skills for civilian use, and offered assistance with resumes and the like. Others found jobs in professions that used military skills and favoured the ex-military, such as the police force (particularly Federal), corrections and security agencies. This sort of work was sometimes a preference, as a few claimed they found it difficult to work with, or relate to civilians, or alternatively, found it difficult to function without the regulatory nature of the military. Certainly, this was the case among the interviewees with more than a third of the non-National Service group working in one of these three areas. Many others of the former regular military overcame the difficulty of working with other civilians by starting their own businesses, often in the building/development or security areas. More than half of those interviewed began their own businesses either immediately or soon after leaving the forces, with one making the observation that in his experience, ex-career service people seemed to fall into groups; taking either government/security type jobs, or starting their own business.³¹ Another was less circumspect admitting that he just “couldn’t work for anyone else – I didn’t trust anyone” and went into a business with another former army “mate”.³² Rowe’s interviews in the Hunter Valley area found similar statistics, with most either starting their own businesses, working in security areas (a number becoming prison officers), or going into more solitary and regulated trades such as building and mining.³³

A few found the discipline, organisational and tactical skills they had learned in the services useful in their civilian employment. One officer left the service after 10 years, joined the corporate world and eventually became the CEO of several leading

²⁹ Department of Veterans’ Affairs, “Defence Links Project: Transition Management”, <http://www.dva.gov.au/adf/dlp/transman.htm>.

³⁰ Veteran Interview #27.

³¹ Veteran Interview #33.

³² Veteran Interview #22.

³³ Rowe, *Sons of the Hunter*.

Australian companies.³⁴ He has now “slowed down” somewhat and runs a specialised recruitment agency for professionals. Others claimed their discipline and training were useful when running their own businesses,³⁵ or alternatively used it as a basis for consultative work.³⁶ The military could also be useful for job stability from a different perspective. One badly wounded soldier, who at nineteen years of age would have spent his entire adult life on a disability pension, was advised by a sympathetic officer to stay in the army where they would be forced to find him suitable employment, pay a decent wage and get good medical care.³⁷ He did so, and had another twenty years of satisfactory employment he would otherwise have lost.

Most returning service people had no problem finding a job, and were anxious to get on with a “normal” life. Those who had been on National Service usually went back to the job they had before their call-up. Legislation stated that their jobs had to be held for them by their employers for the two years, and that they should be treated and promoted as if they had never been away. A majority of employers appear to have done the right thing - although sometimes grudgingly - but the situation usually meant that the employee was two years behind everyone else in skills and training on top of the added pressure of readjustment. Some worked hard and caught up, others got left behind. A veteran who worked for the Department of the Navy before his service, was made to feel very unwelcome on his return. Notwithstanding that this was a government department, his supervisors would not honour the promotion agreement, and were openly derogatory about those serving in Vietnam. “I used to flip out regularly...then eventually I couldn’t stay there any more.”³⁸ He attempted to get redress for the situation, but none was forthcoming. One man was sacked by his employer as soon as he was called up so that he did not have to hold his job for him.³⁹ Another had his own successful small business before his conscription, which he had to sell in a hurry, so that when he returned he had nowhere to go.⁴⁰ Horrigan’s interviews painted a similar picture, with all but one having their job held. One returned to the job he had left for service and was still there at the time of the

³⁴ Veteran Interview #5.

³⁵ For example: Veteran Interview #18; Veteran Interview #24; Veteran Interview #28.

³⁶ Veteran Interview #33; Veteran Interview #34; Veteran Interview #35.

³⁷ Veteran Interview #4.

³⁸ Veteran Interview #6.

³⁹ Veteran Interview #10.

⁴⁰ Veteran Interview # 13.

interview, but he appeared the exception within the group. Nine (over half of the participants) returned to the civilian jobs that had been held for them, but felt too behind or uncomfortable and moved on shortly afterwards.⁴¹ However, it was not necessarily the fault of their workplaces, with several admitting that they just did not feel as if they “fitted in” and were not sure what caused the urge to change jobs.

The army did offer some assistance to National Service people on their discharge, although it was met by little enthusiasm on both sides. If a returned man did not wish to return to his previous job – or did not have one – he could apply for one of two offered schemes. One was for further education, where the army would pay the costs of going back to school, or for tertiary training, for the first year. This was less generous than for WWII service persons who often had all fees paid.⁴² A few (only one in the survey group, although two had colleagues who did) took advantage of the offer, but there were two major flaws in the plan. These men were aged between 21 and 23, and were hardly likely to want to go back to high school. Secondly, in the case of tertiary education, university was not a place many of them wanted to be at that time. The main thrust of the protest movement came from the universities, and announcing to your classmates that you had just returned from Vietnam was unlikely to elicit a welcoming party. This was supported by the one veteran who taking up the offer, claimed that he found the atmosphere “difficult” with so much anti-war activity on campus, and stayed less than a year.⁴³ He eventually finished the degree externally some years later. A former sailor who went to Monash University for a course while in the Navy (not under the scheme), claimed that one day he was greeted by a sign at the canteen that said people in uniform were not welcome.⁴⁴ Many veterans admit to “hating” universities, so it is unsurprising that few took up the offer. A representative of the DVA claimed that with thirty years of retrospect, it was not a very good idea, but “it was probably done with the best intentions”.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Horrigan, “National Servicemen - Questionnaires”; See also: Rowe, *Sons of the Hunter*.

⁴² Kerry McGlynn, “The Lost Diggers”, *The Sunday Telegraph* (18 April 1971), p.16. This depended on length and type of service. Understandably, someone who had been away for six years needed more assistance than for two, though even statistically, Vietnam veterans’ benefits were less generous.

⁴³ Veteran Interview #31.

⁴⁴ Veteran Interview #27.

⁴⁵ L.Stone, Younger Veteran’s Section – Department of Veteran’s Affairs, Interview with Researcher (29 October 1999).

The second scheme offered to the National Service people was a business loan program. The applicant had to draw up a reasonable business plan and apply in a similar way as for a bank loan. Despite the fact that many would later have their own businesses, it was not a result of the program as only two of the survey group applied for the loan. One had his application accepted, then was told that they had no money available at the time.⁴⁶ The other went back to his pre-National Service employment for a while, but became somewhat disillusioned and decided to start his own business. When he applied, he was told that the time limit for applications had expired.⁴⁷ Problematically, the schemes (training and business) were only available for six months after discharge, and few were ready to make those sorts of decisions about their future.⁴⁸ However, most of the National Service group took little notice of the offered schemes, as they were just eager to get out and get on with their lives. They were young, usually had jobs waiting and had just undertaken a life changing experience: they were rarely looking at the future beyond getting their lives back. Generally, they were anxious to cut any ties to the army. Many were already disillusioned (and some would become more so) and one veteran suggested that taking advantage of any of the offerings would mean they were still under the power and influence of the service.⁴⁹

The Aftermath

It [the service] was always mentioned. Got mentioned probably more than it was warranted.⁵⁰

All the time, I'm angry, but I don't know what I'm angry at.⁵¹

While the majority of Vietnam Veterans secured employment and held down those jobs successfully, a significant number did not find it so easy. 44% of the interview group had problems keeping jobs. They were sometimes fired from a job, but most moved on of their own accord. Many were reportedly unable to settle down, found themselves intolerant of others, or felt the need to keep "running away" – although

⁴⁶ Veteran Interview #6.

⁴⁷ Veteran Interview #17.

⁴⁸ McGlynn, "The Lost Diggers", p.16.

⁴⁹ Veteran Interview #8.

⁵⁰ Veteran Interview #7.

⁵¹ Veteran Interview #25.

they were never sure what from. There is little doubt that there is always an element in society and the work force that finds it difficult to settle down and “fit in”, but 44% is very likely a higher figure than the community average. Most of these men had families, and while they had some troubles, that rarely included trouble in any legal sense. They were not dangerous or even necessarily unstable, they were just unable to settle.

I'd spend two or three years in a job and that was it; I'd get the wanderlust again.⁵²

Thought it was the good thing people did – get married, get a job, settle down, but there was no settling down boy.⁵³

I was in and out of jobs. I got sick of things real quick.⁵⁴

I've had twenty-one jobs since 1978.⁵⁵

I've had twelve jobs in the last fourteen years. I was sacked from several from having a bad attitude.⁵⁶

They wound us up and they didn't wind us down. I couldn't settle into a job – fifteen to twenty years of my life is pretty much missing.⁵⁷

The situation was certainly not confined to this group, with many other studies finding similar, if not more startling results in regard to settling down.⁵⁸ Some gave up altogether, and dropped out of society. Two were interviewed for this study, but many others professed to know veterans “hiding in the bush”. An episode of *Inside Story* in 1999 about Vietnam Veterans showed one veteran who had removed himself from society and was living in the bush.⁵⁹ Neither was the problem confined to Australian Vietnam veterans, with a number of American veterans reporting similar problems.⁶⁰ Much of this was related to the difficulties of readjustment, whether directly back from the war, or after another twenty years of military service; although it was the war experiences that had the most significant impact. The normal problems of readjustment translated themselves into their work lives as well as their personal lives. Often, the jobs felt unimportant or unexciting, or more often, they felt isolated

⁵² Veteran Interview #3.

⁵³ Veteran Interview #9.

⁵⁴ Veteran Interview #10.

⁵⁵ Veteran Interview #12.

⁵⁶ Veteran Interview #25.

⁵⁷ Veteran Interview #26.

⁵⁸ For example: Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*; Horrigan, “National Servicemen - Questionnaires”; Crowe, *The Battle After the War*; Rowe, *Sons of the Hunter*; Towers, *A Jungle Circus*.

⁵⁹ “Inside Story: Shellshocked” (28 October 1999), ABC Television.

⁶⁰ For example: Baker, *Nam*; Nicosia, *Home to War*; Terry, *Bloods*.

from those with whom they worked. They had aged beyond their peers, but were rarely accepted by the older group either and feelings of loneliness and despair were common, and there is some evidence to suggest that these issues were obvious almost immediately.⁶¹ However, it should not be suggested that these problems were confined to those returning from Vietnam. WWII servicemen reported to have taken at least twelve months “to settle down” after coming home,⁶² and there are similar stories from those who served in WWI. Thomson’s interviews with WWI veterans showed surprising similarities to those of those from Vietnam. A few had trouble settling down (a couple never did), while several found the retraining and business loan system unsatisfactory or just plain useless, and it was often many years until they had stable employment.⁶³ A similar situation existed in the United States, when very high unemployment among servicemen after WWI resulted in the government’s decision to significantly change their approach to repatriation after WWII.⁶⁴

Health issues related to service became the dominant problem over the ensuing years. About 64% of the survey group had some sort of physical health issues ranging from minor to extremely serious; with about a quarter of these serious enough to significantly interfere with their ability to do their job. Some had problems stemming from wounds they received, worsening with age. Many Vietnam Veterans suffer from skin rashes and stomach complaints, which can be either debilitating or just plain irritating. These two are commonly linked with the Agent Orange debate.⁶⁵ A large number of veterans hold Agent Orange (and the spraying of other chemicals) responsible for many of their health problems. Hearing and back problems are also common complaints, neither of which are surprising from a service perspective.

The most prevalent health problem for Vietnam Veterans appears to be PTSD. Some begin showing the symptoms very early, and for others it does not become apparent for years.⁶⁶ PTSD can have a severe impact on the working lives of sufferers. According to the VVCS:

⁶¹ McGlynn, “A young Veteran’s private war”, *The Sunday Telegraph* (18 April 1971), p.17; Polner, *No Victory Parades*, pp.iv; Lifton, *Home from the War*, pp.18-22.

⁶² McGlynn, “The Lost Diggers”, p.16.

⁶³ Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp.112-115.

⁶⁴ Judith Waldrop, “27 Million Heroes”, *American Demographics* (November 1993), p.4.

⁶⁵ See Chapter Four for a detailed discussion of the Agent Orange issue.

⁶⁶ See Chapter Four for a more detailed discussion.

For those veterans suffering war-related stress, the quality of their work and their ability to apply themselves can be significantly affected by their condition. When war-related stress is severe, veterans often have poor relationships with their work colleagues and mood swings which can result in variable work quality. They often set themselves high expectations which become a source of anxiety when they fail to achieve these goals. Veterans may also commonly adopt either a workaholic or keep out of sight and hide away work pattern.⁶⁷

The major symptoms, such as alienation, avoidance of people, the inability to settle and hypervigilance,⁶⁸ are certainly not helpful in the majority of work environments, and go a long way to explaining many veteran employment difficulties. Eventually, PTSD may become too much of a strain and the sufferer may have to leave work permanently.

Among the group interviewed, 70% admitted to suffering from PTSD. This should not suggest that all of these were chronically unstable; the severity of their symptoms ranging from relatively mild (causing some disruption to their lives), to extremely severe (where a “normal” life was almost impossible). A few had been hospitalised for short periods due to the illness, and most had attended counselling at some time. Two, who had been to the severe end of the spectrum and with assistance were coping more successfully, spent a great deal of time working with other veterans. For all of the 70%, the PTSD had some effect on their working lives. Some had been able to continue working successfully with a minimum of assistance, and others had carried on because they felt they had no choice. At least two of the survey group continued working full time although they were in considerable distress. One applied to DVA for a pension, but found the process long and difficult.⁶⁹ The other expected the loss of his current job to be imminent, and had held 12 jobs in the past 14 years.⁷⁰ He had only recently started seeking counselling. About 50% of the survey group had been divorced at least once, while the relationships of several others were precarious or badly damaged. Most of them cited the PTSD as the main cause of the relationship breakdowns, though often only understanding this factor in retrospect.

⁶⁷ Vietnam Veteran’s Counselling Service, “Impact on Work of War-Related Stress” (1995).

⁶⁸ Vietnam Veteran’s Counselling Service, “PTSD: Common Presentation” (1995).

⁶⁹ He was granted a TPI pension shortly after the interview. Veteran Interview #12.

⁷⁰ He was also granted a TPI pension shortly after the interview. Veteran Interview #25.

Overall, 56% of those interviewed were no longer in paid employment.⁷¹ Two were retired in the traditional (and voluntary) sense of the word, while two others were forced into early retirement by problems; the remainder withdrew from the work force for health - usually PTSD related - reasons. Two more of the group joined them over the twelve months following the interview, having applied to the DVA for assistance. The average age of the group at the time of interview was 53 years. This statistic becomes of particular concern when compared to the national average of people not in the labour force among the age ranges of the majority of Vietnam veterans. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in September 2002, the national average of males not in the labour force in the 45–54 year age group was 16% with 25% for 55–59; and for the 60–64 age group, 51%.⁷² It is even lower on a state level, with Queensland male non-participation rates of less than 15% for the 45–54 group, and 25% for the 55–59 ages. The reason for the high figure of 56% amongst the group does not appear to have any geographical relevance, as all but one moved to Cairns while still in paid employment. If anything, the figure might even be a little low in comparison. The DVA claims that 28000 Vietnam Veterans receive some sort of assistance,⁷³ and although some of these have not completely withdrawn from the labour force,⁷⁴ there are approximately 45000 veterans, which suggests a very high percentage no longer in paid employment.

Notably, there appeared to be a high level of voluntary work amongst those no longer in paid employment. Four of the group worked almost full time in a completely voluntary capacity helping other veterans.⁷⁵ One of these received a national community service award in 1999 for his work in the veteran community,⁷⁶ and two others helped veterans get counselling and financial assistance. At least three others undertook some kind of voluntary work with veterans. Several had been involved with groups such as Legacy, or the VVAA elsewhere in previous years. Most of

⁷¹ It is 61% if the two mentioned above are taken into account.

⁷² Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Persons Not in the Labour Force" (September 2002), www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf.

⁷³ Tania Salvestro, Department of Veteran's Affairs – Younger Veterans Section, Interview with Researcher (29 October 1999).

⁷⁴ More than half of these are TPIs, meaning they are under retirement age and will not be working in paid employment: ABS, "Year Book Australia 2003: Income and Welfare – Services provided by the DVA" (2003), <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf>.

⁷⁵ Veteran Interview #3; Veteran Interview #4; Veteran Interview #29; Veteran Interview #19.

⁷⁶ Veteran Interview #19.

those not working dislike being on a pension at a still relatively young age, often finding the process demeaning and damaging to their self-worth, as highlighted below (p.211) by the comment by Linda Stone from the DVA. This explained the high level of voluntary activities amongst the group, with at least three claiming that they “wanted to give something back”.⁷⁷ One of the veterans receiving some DVA assistance found he could not just sit around at home, and feeling unable to do voluntary work and mix with other veterans, took up a paper route to give himself something to do and an excuse to get out of the house.⁷⁸ These veterans did not like the position they have found themselves in at the prime of their lives, but the majority refused to sit around feeling sorry for themselves. Volunteer work had always been a significant factor in the history of Vietnam veterans, with many being involved in helping each other and raising awareness both in Australia and the United States.⁷⁹

While there are no published statistics (or studies) on the employment situation of Australian Vietnam veterans, the United States Division of Labor has produced a number of reports, releasing statistics in 2002 about the fate of American Vietnam Veterans. According to the Division of Labor’s calculations in 2001, 27% of the Vietnam Veteran population (age 45-64) is no longer in the work force in any capacity, significantly higher than that of the non-veteran population at less than 18%.⁸⁰ Approximately 11% were reported as having a service-related disability, although the number was recorded at the higher rate of 18% in 1998.⁸¹ Although these figures are a source of concern, they do seem lower than the estimates for Australian Vietnam Veterans. However, there are at least two main points to consider in comparing these figures. The first is that America’s social welfare system is vastly different to Australia’s, with unemployment benefits harder to attain (and keep). The second is that service related incapacity is reputedly much harder to prove than it is in Australia.⁸² It is also useful to put the figures into the context of the bigger picture.

⁷⁷ Veteran Interview #3.

⁷⁸ Veteran Interview #13.

⁷⁹ For a discussion on voluntary work in the American veteran community see: Nicosia, *Home to War*.

⁸⁰ Division of Labor Force Statistics, “Employment Situation of Vietnam-Era Veterans” (June 2002), [http://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.nr\).htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.nr).htm).

⁸¹ Division of Labor Force Statistics, “Employment Situation of Vietnam-Era Veterans” (June 1998), <http://146.142.4.23/pub/news.release/vet.txt>.

⁸² This conclusion was drawn from information given by a veteran welfare advocate: Vietnam Veteran Interview #3, 6 October 1999, and by comparing the criteria and review methods of the United States and Australian veteran department’s.

As previously mentioned, the Australian national figure for non-participation in the male 45-60 year age group was 16-25%, while according to the Division of Labor, it was only 18% in the United States for the larger 45-64 age group.⁸³ Because of such immense bureaucratic (and cultural) differences, conclusions are almost impossible to make from the comparison, but the important point to note from these statistics is that American Vietnam Veterans have also had employment difficulties related to their service.

A range of studies indicate that these figures may yet underestimate the situation of American veterans. The *National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study*, released in 1990, found that although most veterans were living normal lives, there were higher levels of unemployment, and concluded that increasing morbidity over time would probably worsen the problem in the future.⁸⁴ As early as 1981, research showed that veterans had more employment concerns and appeared to hold jobs that “tended to be of a slightly lower prestige and lower income” than those in the same age group.⁸⁵ *Monthly Labor Review* in June 1992 reported that those who had not served in Vietnam “were earning significantly more than the war zone veterans...in almost every education and occupation category.”⁸⁶ This supported similar findings by the National Bureau of Economic Research on the long term effect of war on employment prospects in 1990,⁸⁷ and figures from the follow-up study from the Adolescent Society program, showing that Vietnam veterans “attained lower-status occupations than their non-veteran peers”.⁸⁸ The United States does offer a wider range of employment services covering areas ranging from basic training to small business development assistance, but according to the American Legion (a major national veteran organisation), funding has been more difficult in recent years.⁸⁹

⁸³ Division of Labor, “Employment situation of Vietnam-era Veterans”.

⁸⁴ Department of Veterans’ Affairs [USA], “Agent Orange Brief: Agent Orange and Vietnam Related Research” (Washington, 2003), <http://www1.va.gov/agentorange/docs/c2AOBRIEF72003A.doc>.

⁸⁵ Josefina J Card. *Lives after Vietnam: The Personal Impact of Military Service* (Lexington, 1983), pp.147-148.

⁸⁶ Sharon R Cohany, “The Vietnam-Era Cohort: Employment and Earnings”, *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol.115, No.6 (June 1992), Available on ProQuest.

⁸⁷ Peter Passell, “War is No Way to Start a Career”, *New York Times* (23 May 1990), p.D2.

⁸⁸ Jere Cohen, David R Segal and Lloyd V Temme, “The Impact of Education on Vietnam-era veterans’ occupational attainment”, *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol.73, No.2 (June 1992), p.397.

⁸⁹ A.G.Lance Snr, “Statement of Alan G. Lance, Snr., National Commander. The American Legion. Before a Joint Session of the Veteran’s Affairs Committees, United States Congress” (28 September 1999), www.veterans.house.gov/hearings/schedule106/sept99/9-28-99/tal.htm.

Most troubling perhaps, however, is that about 70% of the North Queensland survey group have had some problems in their employment as a result of their service. The problems range from difficulty keeping a job, and translating military life into a civilian one, to health problems related to service, to open harassment and discrimination for having served in Vietnam. A National Serviceman who returned to the small town he had lived in all of his life, and the job he had had since leaving school, found himself ostracised by part of the community. Clients – some of whom he had known all his life – took their business elsewhere, and others were openly hostile. He lasted a year, then finally “snapped”.⁹⁰ Sometimes the harassment was minor, or carried out behind the veteran’s back, but it was nevertheless there. One former medic, who has the same job today as he had when he was called up for National Service, says that he “had to develop selective hearing”.⁹¹ Some were faced with less subtle attention, as indicated by the previously mentioned veteran who returned to abuse at the Department of the Navy. Another was harassed so much that he left Australia, looking for work in New Guinea, where he started a new life and established a successful business with another veteran.⁹² He claimed to have met a number of others following a similar path, an assertion supported by other interview groups.⁹³ Even in contemporary society, when there is much more acceptance of and respect towards Vietnam Veterans, some were still treated as pariahs on occasion. A 47 year old veteran mentioned to a long time work colleague (and friend) about being in Vietnam, and the colleague has not spoken to him since, and would not acknowledge his existence.⁹⁴ A couple of others reported that their service had an unwelcome curiosity value in their current jobs, prompting such questions as “how many people did you kill?” This has proved to be a not uncommon trend.⁹⁵ As previously discussed, most admit that they have found it easier over the years not to mention that they were in Vietnam.

It became apparent that the stereotypes that were developing, not just through community attitudes towards the war, but through the attention of the media and

⁹⁰ Veteran Interview #19.

⁹¹ Veteran Interview #14.

⁹² Veteran Interview #24.

⁹³ For example: Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*, pp.211-213; Hennessy, *The Sharp End*, p.107.

⁹⁴ Veteran Interview #12.

⁹⁵ See for example: Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*; Towers, *A Jungle Circus*, p.217; Rowe, *Sons of the Hunter*; Horrigan, *National Servicemen - Questionnaires*.

popular culture had a measurable effect on the employment prospects of veterans, or at least on their level of job satisfaction. One extremely successful professional claimed that although he felt that his military training had been useful in the corporate world, he did “not tell people” what he had “done for a living”; certain that his Vietnam service would not be good for his career.⁹⁶ Another veteran, concerned by the attitudes towards veterans, decided that while not denying his army experience, he did not promote his Vietnam service as he moved through the corporate world and eventually into politics.⁹⁷ These concerns cannot be reduced to paranoia if the evidence is considered. In 1986, *Harvard Business Review* reported that many Vietnam veterans were hiding their service in regard to their employment, and that employers were overlooking the management potential of many because of the publicity of the “negative aspects of the Vietnam experience”.⁹⁸ Employers were avoiding hiring veterans, ignoring the positive aspects of “maturity, a sense of purpose, and self-confidence” that their service had given them.⁹⁹ These beliefs were often evident not only in the private sector as illustrated by some of the previously mentioned public service employed veterans and reiterated by Mike Towers:

One workmate told me that, if television was any guide, he expected me to kill any passing women and children with my bare hands, or at least rape any spare nuns. Three decades later this attitude remains.¹⁰⁰

The comment was apparently not meant in a light hearted fashion. One veteran claimed that although he did not feel as if he had been discriminated against, that there were the “comments”,¹⁰¹ and many gave the impression that those “comments” often became a problem and in most cases it caused them to avoid mentioning their service.

The Australian Standing Committee on Community Affairs report, *After the March*, found that some “veterans are unable to get and keep a job because of the perception by potential employers that all Vietnam veterans are unreliable and aggressive.”¹⁰² While recommending job assistance for veterans, it could offer no solution for this

⁹⁶ Veteran Interview #5.

⁹⁷ Veteran Interview #34.

⁹⁸ James W Hall-Sheedy, “The Unknown Vietnam Vet Manager” *Harvard Business Review*, Vol.64, No.3 (May/June 1986), p.117.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Towers, *A Jungle Circus*, p.217.

¹⁰¹ Veteran Interview #31.

¹⁰² Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *After the March*, p.34.

particular problem. Even those suffering from PTSD were often capable of continuing full employment (and many did), particularly with medical and personal support. However, workplace support and understanding was often absent, only multiplying the difficulties for those that were struggling. There is generally a substantial difference between the most common symptoms of PTSD and the popular perception of the “psychologically disturbed” veteran, and there is some reason to believe that health problems may have been accelerated, or at least exacerbated by workplace difficulties. Waldrop claims that “Vets with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are further wounded by the public’s perception that they are unstable and dangerous people”.¹⁰³ In many ways, it is a circular problem for veterans. Because some of them have become hyper-sensitive to references to their service from previous experiences, a remark by a colleague may cause an over reacted response, therefore perhaps reiterating the belief that veterans are “unreliable and aggressive” and so on.

The American studies also found evidence of discrimination against veterans by employers,¹⁰⁴ a situation which forced the federal government to create policies not only to prevent discrimination, but also to try to give preference to Vietnam veterans in federal government jobs.¹⁰⁵ Veterans found themselves in the unique position of finding themselves a target of affirmative action, as demonstrated in an advertisement for a job vacancy at California State University in 2002:

The university is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer and does not discriminate against persons on the basis of race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, marital status, age, disability, disabled veteran or Vietnam-era veteran status.¹⁰⁶

Universities had been one of the workplaces veterans accused of discrimination in their campaign to have legislation tightened and more preferences offered, with claims that veterans were not wanted in the tertiary sector because of continued differences in regard to the anti-war movement and the fact few working in

¹⁰³ Waldrop, “27 Million Heroes”, p.4.

¹⁰⁴ For example: Hall-Sheehy, “The Unknown Vietnam Vet Manager”, pp.117-121; Lucy Hodges, “Vietnam vets claim anti-war backlash” *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, No.1175 (12 May 1995), p.7.

¹⁰⁵ Department of Veterans Affairs, *Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents – 2003* (Washington, 2003), pp.56-61.

¹⁰⁶ “Faculty Position Opening – California State University”, *Child Literature Discussion Site* (16 October 2002), <http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~mjoseph/chlldlit/about.html>.

universities had served in the military.¹⁰⁷ Claims of bias against Vietnam veterans were also aired during hearings before a Joint Committee on Commerce and Labor in 2003 investigating whether veterans should be designated “as a protected group for employment purposes”.¹⁰⁸ While the designation is unlikely to assist many Vietnam veterans if approved by the committee, the initiative might serve to assist future service personnel. However, the tightening of anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action have done little to change community attitudes of the Vietnam veteran as a victim or villain.

The Struggle for Assistance

They’re reasonably young, and the department was getting feedback, six months down the track – what do they do with the rest of their lives?¹⁰⁹

Vietnam Veterans have had a thirty year struggle for recognition and assistance, and each break through has had a high price for those involved. The battle for assistance in employment issues has been an integral one, closely intertwined with the health and recognition problems. Apart from the limited programs made available at the end of service (National Service and regular), there was little assistance available to veterans. One National Service veteran reported going to a civilian counsellor for help in the mid-1970s, as PTSD (although it was not then diagnosed) was starting to overwhelm him and he was struggling to keep a job. The counsellor told him to “get over it”, and “go fishing or something”.¹¹⁰ He did not seek help again for another 20 years by which time his life had irretrievably broken down. Until the late seventies, most Vietnam Veterans had alienated themselves from their colleagues. Few had been welcomed into the RSL, and except for those still in the military, few had any networks within the veteran community. Many veterans began to realise that if they wanted something done to help them, they would have to do it themselves, leading to the establishment of groups such as the VVAA. This precipitated the creation of the VVCS in 1980 with some government funding, independent of the DVA¹¹¹ (although

¹⁰⁷ Hodges, “Vietnam vets claim anti-war backlash”, p.7.

¹⁰⁸ Sandy Coleman, “A Call to Ban Hiring Bias Against Veterans”, *The Boston Globe* (20 April 2003), available from ProQuest.

¹⁰⁹ L. Stone, DVA, 29 October 1999

¹¹⁰ Veteran Interview #10.

¹¹¹ Vietnam Veteran’s Counselling Service, “Statement by the Directors of Counselling, VVCS, to The House of Representative Standing Committee on Community Affairs” (20 April 1999).

this independence has since been revoked), and staffed mainly with volunteers, many of them veterans.¹¹²

One of the first groups to focus on employment issues was established in Perth in 1987. 'Job Link' was located in the VVCS offices and staffed entirely by volunteers from the VVAA and the VVCS.¹¹³ Its aim was to assist those veterans in need by supplying them with basic job advice, and most importantly, lobbying employers to hire a veteran to fill their job vacancy. They particularly targeted small businesses, and state and local government departments, with an emphasis on finding employment for "veterans whose job prospects are hindered by stigmatisation and for veterans who are disabled".¹¹⁴ During its first nine months of existence, it had found jobs for 148 unemployed veterans, and had another 158 on its books seeking employment. This is an astonishing level of success for a volunteer organisation. Several other Job Link programs were established throughout the country, often by VVAA and the VVCS, and all were voluntary. Another was run by VVAA volunteers through the Vietnam Veterans' Family Support Link Line in Sydney, which was set up for welfare and advocacy.¹¹⁵ It would be impossible to measure how many jobs they may have attained for their clients, how much they may have improved the profile of veterans, and ultimately, how many lives that may have been saved. The Perth Job Link program continued renamed as the Services Assistance Program, expanding to aid all those leaving military service. Rob Cox, VVAA Western Australia State President, who was with Job Link at its inception, claims that the biggest employment problem for Vietnam Veterans is now age; "it seems not a lot of businesses want to hire us old diggers, over the hill you know."¹¹⁶

In 1995, the Veterans' Support and Advocacy Service Australia (VSASA) created an employment assistance program in Brisbane. Joblink (no relation to the others) began as a response to veteran's needs, as well as ex-defence personnel and their families.

¹¹² In Cairns, veteran volunteers in conjunction with VVCS in Townsville ran a 24 hour helpline for those in need, and similar programs operated across the country. Vietnam Veteran Interview # 16, 21 October 1999.

¹¹³ Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *After the March*, p.34.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ "Papers of Carla McCallum: Vietnam Veterans' Family Support Link Line Correspondence", AWM – PR01003.

¹¹⁶ R.Cox, Personal Communication with Researcher, 5 October 1999.

According to Janne Barlow, who ran the program almost single-handedly, they “didn’t have the same needs as other people”.¹¹⁷ Ms Barlow claimed that once veterans were out of work, it was difficult to get them back into the market place, with age and health being the major factors. It was a vicious circle. Not only was it more difficult to find a job for men in their forties and fifties, but often worsening PTSD and other health related problems made finding and keeping a job more problematic. This often exacerbated the PTSD, creating another circular problem. Joblink did “whatever is necessary” to find and keep employment, usually taking a holistic approach. There was a skills audit, training courses, resume creation and help with the most basic and important things such as how to talk to employers and deal with interviews. There was also assistance on translating military skills into civilian ones. Barlow was critical of the systems offered within the defence forces, but acknowledged that some assistance is available “it the person is willing to suffer it out”.¹¹⁸

The Joblink program had to be shut down for a couple of years during the previous Coalition State Government’s tenure (1996-98), as the small amount of funding they received was stopped (VSASA is a volunteer organisation), but came back on line in 1999 with funding from the Labor Government, and managed to continue. The Joblink office has worked on creating a program to find a job for professionals in the fifty year age bracket. Barlow says she has a list of veteran professionals on her books who could “run this country blindfolded”.¹¹⁹ They formed a group called the Contract Professionals Cooperative who lobby to find jobs for professionals, even if there is little remuneration involved, and most just want to be occupied in a worthwhile sense. This is of course an increasing problem throughout society for professionals in this age group, as highlighted in a 1999 Drake Consulting Group survey, which found that few companies would consider hiring professionals in their fifties, no matter how impressive their qualifications.¹²⁰ Attempts to further examine and rectify the issue have so far had little measurable effect, except to reiterate that it

¹¹⁷ Janne Barlow, Interview with Researcher, 28 October 1999.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Drake Management Consulting, “Age Discrimination is Alive and Well – Media Release” (5 November 1999), <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/Owk/subs/sub165.pdf>; *The Cairns Post* (30 October 1999), p.19.

is a complex problem.¹²¹ However, this situation is exacerbated for those veterans with health problems, no matter how minor.

Vietnam veterans in the United States also found that help with employment issues generally had to come from within, as while there was governmental assistance, it was not always satisfactory. Legislative advocate for the VVA, Bill Crandel, claims that the VA initially struggled with the needs of Vietnam veterans as it was “acclimated to a much older population” and was “terrible at dealing with young men who wanted to get out and get jobs”.¹²² According to Gerard Nicosia, because the VA was still focussed on helping veterans from previous wars, by as early as 1974, “Vietnam veterans’ self-help centers had sprung up around the country” to assist with readjustment and employment issues.¹²³ Veteran groups have put on events such as “Stand Down musters”, where they bring together appropriate help agencies, including the Department of Employment and Training, in neighbourhoods with large numbers of unemployed, and sometimes homeless, veterans to help those in need.¹²⁴ Even with services better than they have been in the past, Veterans still have to turn to voluntary or veteran run organisations to obtain assistance. The Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program, a Pittsburgh based group, has found similar problems to those indicated by Janne Barlow in placing qualified professionals and has had increasing numbers of veterans looking for employment in recent times.¹²⁵

The Australian government has long been aware of employment difficulties within the Vietnam veteran community despite its lack of investigation and specific assistance. The 1988 Standing Committee inquiry, *After the March*, identified serious deficiencies and reported that “the VVCS have confirmed that they are confronted daily with evidence of the disadvantaged employment status of veterans”, and recommended more programs like the WA Job Link be established.¹²⁶ It would

¹²¹ For Example: The National Strategy for an Ageing Australia, “Employment for Mature Age Workers: Issues Paper” (Canberra, November 1999); Francis Lobo and Stanley Parker, *Late Career Unemployment: Impacts on Self, Family and Lifestyle* (Williamstown, 1999).

¹²² Bill Crandell cited in: Waldrop, “27 Million Heroes”, p.56.

¹²³ Nicosia, *Home to War*, pp.348-349.

¹²⁴ Gloria Negri, “Veterans come together on South End playground : Accent at ‘muster’ is helping homeless get back on their feet”, *The Boston Globe* (14 August 1993), p.17.

¹²⁵ Jim McKay, “Unemployed Pittsburgh-Area Professionals Turn to Self-Help Job Search Networks”, *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News* (13 April 2003), p.1.

¹²⁶ Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *After the March*, p.34-35.

be another eleven years (1999) before the DVA implemented an employment assistance scheme called the Veterans Vocational Rehabilitation Scheme (VVRS). The scheme's promotion "How to get that job and keep it", was an attempt to diminish veterans' reliance on pensions by attempting to get them back into the workforce.¹²⁷ According to Director, Dominic Melano, there was a feeling amongst some veterans that they had "been thrown on the scrap heap...so this was an attempt to address that, to give them pension protection, so that they would be encouraged to go into work."¹²⁸ The scheme attempts to re-train and rehabilitate, sometimes in conjunction with the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service if a physical incapacity is the problem, while promising that if the efforts at employment fail, the pension will be reinstated automatically. These protections are enshrined in legislation, and any changes must be in consultation with major veteran groups, but Melano admitted that although the scheme has been welcomed, some veterans were still suspicious of their motives.¹²⁹ Barlow from Joblink, spoke highly of the people running the VVRS, and said they are "well funded", but did not give the personal attention that groups like Joblink offer.¹³⁰ Even the literature on the VVRS supplied by DVA states that services are provided at "the minimum necessary to achieve a suitable paid employment outcome", and offering little to encourage self-employment.¹³¹

It is difficult to know how successful the scheme has been as no figures have yet been released by the DVA, though according to the DVA Annual Report (2001-02) it had seen 670 clients from its inception to July 2002, and had entirely bequeathed the administration of the scheme to the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service.¹³² However, there must have been some concerns as the following year's Annual Report stated that a working party had "reviewed the effectiveness of the VVRS and made 32 recommendations that are being considered by the Repatriation Commission".¹³³ Only one of the veterans interviewed had taken any interest in the VVRS, and he was

¹²⁷ Department of Veteran's Affairs, "Veteran's Vocational Rehabilitation Scheme" (March 1999), pp.1-2.

¹²⁸ D.Melano, Department of Veteran's Affairs, Interview with Researcher (2 November 1999).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ J.Barlow, Interview.

¹³¹ DVA, "Veteran's Vocational Rehabilitation Scheme", pp.3-6.

¹³² Department of Veterans' Affairs, "Annual Report 2001-02: Developments in Health" (Canberra, 2002), http://www.dva.gov.au/media/aboutus/annrep02/ar_dva/departments/health.htm.

¹³³ Department of Veterans' Affairs, "Annual Report 2002-03: Outcomes – Health" (Canberra 2003), http://www.dva.gov.au/media/aboutus/annrep03/ar_dva/outcomes/outcome02.htm.

still in paid employment, but concerned that he could not keep going too much longer.¹³⁴ Few of the others had heard of the program, and most of the others were not interested. This was not because they had no interest in working, but mainly because of a generally cynical attitude towards the DVA. The DVA and the Vietnam Veterans have had a tumultuous relationship, a situation dating back to the beginning of the Agent Orange battle. Most would prefer to deal within their own veteran groups, with programs such as Joblink, or just to do volunteer work. It must be assumed however, that it perhaps a bit late for the scheme to offer any significant level of assistance to Vietnam veterans, nevertheless, the VVRS is for all those leaving the defence force who have seen service, so perhaps the old mistakes will be avoided for the younger generation of veterans.

Employment is just one of the many issues facing Vietnam Veterans, as it is for most people. Service in Vietnam often had an enormous impact on their lives, particularly with the majority at a young age with their adult lives barely begun. A large number came home and went on with their lives with only minimum disruption, but for some, the service for their country had a high price that has been reflected in their workplace experiences. It would not be untrue to say that many felt let down or even abandoned by their country in the aftermath to the war. A significant number suffered problems within their jobs, whether they were stigmatised because their service, had trouble readjusting, or were bothered by health concerns both physical and emotional. Any difficulties they may have had were often exacerbated by a lack of support and useful employment assistance facilities available in the years following their service. Eventually, they decided to help themselves, and ultimately it has been the veterans own support networks that have rendered the greatest assistance, as well as raising the veteran profile in the community.

The situation in the workplace confirmed that the impact of stereotypes played a significant role in the lives of the average veteran. Even if their service had little initial influence on how they lived their lives, it followed them everywhere from the television screen and newspaper report, to the social gathering and sooner or later, to the office. Ultimately though, in regards to employment, the facts are very simple.

¹³⁴ Veteran Interview #8.

Thirty-six Vietnam veterans were interviewed for this study.¹³⁵ They all served their country at war in varying periods between 1962 and 1972, and they all made sacrifices of some sort because their country asked them to do so. Twenty-three of them no longer had full time employment, and twenty-nine of them were diagnosed with a service related health problem. They have all felt disappointed with the government at some time. When they came back from Vietnam they expected normal, productive lives; the Australian dream – a job, a home, a family. Today, they would settle for respect.

¹³⁵ Forty Vietnam veterans in total were interviewed, but data for only 36 had been accumulated at the time of this examination of employment issues.

“We fought ourselves”:
The Battle Continues: After the
Welcome Home



Vietnam Forces National Memorial - Canberra

Chapter Eight

I don't want to blame Vietnam for my problems, but I know Vietnam is part of my problems.

Vietnam Veteran Interview #14

With the Welcome Home parade in 1987, Vietnam veterans had captured the attention of the Australian public, but the question was, how best to utilise that attention? They had discovered that the community was generally sympathetic, and even supportive, as opposed to the hostility that a number of veterans had come to expect. The increased acceptance encouraged many more to be forthcoming about their service. However, they were still disappointed at their inability to dislodge the victim/villain tag, and others were still unwilling to jettison the victim component entirely as there was still assistance to be sought. The Agent Orange issue was far from resolved, the treatment of PTSD was still in its early stages and the relationship between veterans and the DVA remained tumultuous. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the increase in public interest was matched by increased academic output, but little of this reached the general community or even the schools. The majority was again left to the mercy of popular culture, and even as the war dipped from view in cinemas, the veterans remained prevalent in television characterisations. Running parallel to this issue was the debate over the importance of the 'Vietnam Syndrome'. The phenomenon originated as a description of the difficulties of veterans and transformed into a malaise that affected the American and Australian governments' foreign and defence policies. It would ultimately settle in the community consciousness and eventually (and circularly) became almost inextricable from the issues of veterans themselves. The academic work in general paid scant attention to veterans, focusing rather on continuing and revisionist debates about the war itself, encouraging veterans to start writing their own stories.

Through these stories, and in other arenas, veterans continued the battle for a more 'traditional' form and level of recognition and to regain control of their identity. The opening of a dedicated national memorial provided closure for some and marked another milestone in the battle for others. However, continuing differences relating to approaches and tone contributed to conflict among the veteran groups and caused many individuals to distance themselves or search for alternative paths. Meanwhile, time was taking its toll on an increasing number of veterans as the past began to make a sometimes unwelcome reappearance with age increasing the effects of wounds or

the appearance of late onset PTSD and similar conditions. Paralleling these concerns, the continuing questions over the effects of the war on government policy - past, present and future - reinforced the identity issues for veterans as the battle began over whose war was the real one and who had ownership of the 'truth'. Veterans went public with their war in a determined bid to reshape history with a determination to take on the establishment, popular culture, and even each other.

The 1990s therefore witnessed significant changes for Vietnam veterans as positive recognition increased and assistance improved. Despite this, their frustration over the stereotypes that showed little appreciable sign of dissipating began exposing fractures in the already tenuous relationships between groups of veterans. This in turn, did little to ease the tensions between the government and the veterans: even as veterans were gradually having more success in getting their concerns heard and addressed, an increasing number were expressing their anger toward the government on a more individual level through texts and interviews. Yet, every attempt to break from the stereotypes and distance themselves from the American driven popular culture only seemed to have an equal and opposite effect, and the incremental gains would not become visibly obvious for nearly a decade. This was most observable in the construction of the Australian memorial and the reorganisation of the veterans' groups, but it was also apparent in other areas. Academics began to debate the place of the Vietnam veteran, particularly in an effort to debunk the myths and stereotypes. However, there was little agreement between the commentators, even on the most basic issues, and in the US, where some of these were veterans themselves, the interpretations were often starkly different. The battle for the "truth" revealed the sustaining divisiveness of Vietnam, and the element of anger inherent among veterans continued to feed the stereotypes, even as they tried to extinguish them.

The Memorial

The Welcome Home Parade provided the impetus for another, more permanent symbol of recognition for Vietnam veterans: the Vietnam Veterans Forces Memorial in Canberra. In fact, donations towards a memorial were being taken at the parade,

although no plan had yet been formulated.¹ The idea was immediately popular and a committee was established with the assistance and support of the VVAA and other organisations. The idea for a separate memorial was again inspired by American activities, but the Australian memorial was quite different from the American one, particularly in its intent.

The selection committee seems to have been thoroughly consistent in the attempts to introduce a substantial element of the Anzac tradition, and equally...to keep the Australian design far from emulating, imitating or even remotely echoing the Washington memorial.²

The American memorial honoured the dead, with each of the 58000 names carved into black granite walls. The Australian one however, was designed to honour *all* who had served and was much less formal and austere in its creation. A famous photograph of a group of Australians being picked up by a helicopter was recreated on one of the black granite walls, while on another were quotes from the war, as if giving the memorial a voice of its own. The names of the dead were nowhere in sight, but were instead inscribed on a scroll and interred in the circular frame at the top of the structure. The theme of the Memorial was to honour and provide permanent recognition to those who had served their country. It was a clear attempt to step away from the less than valorous image that had previously been portrayed.

Despite the American Memorial's austerity, it is nevertheless extraordinarily dramatic with its enormous black reflective panels built below ground level, forcing the visitor to come close as it is not visible from a distance. This distinguishes it from other memorials in Washington which are all built tall to inspire honour and national pride. There is no doubt that the design of the Vietnam Memorial was intended to send a message, but what that message was exactly became a subject of great contention between even veterans themselves. The Memorial was surrounded by controversy and a number of amendments and delays were experienced.³ However, despite the fact that a few remained unhappy with the structure, the Memorial itself is extremely popular both with veterans and with visitors as one of the most frequented memorials in Washington.⁴ In fact, it has become something of a cultural icon and a "wailing

¹ Rhodes, "Vietnam Veterans' Welcome Home Parade", p.81.

² Doyle, "Short-timers' endless monuments", p.133.

³ For an extended discussion see: Wilbur J Scott, *The Politics of Readjustment: Vietnam Veterans Since the War* (New York, 1993), pp.129-159.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.xix.

wall". It is regularly featured in the reports, books, or films with a Vietnam theme, is the topic of an increasing number of studies and has become a place for many to manage their issues with the war. A large number of people leave offerings at the wall; ranging from heart rending letters to loved ones and comrades to food, pieces of clothing, toys, cigarettes, memorabilia, photographs as well as the ubiquitous flowers and flags. So much has been left that a full time department has been established to collect, catalogue and store the items and protect their historical and cultural value.⁵

One major difference between Australia and the United States in this regard was that Australia had a national war memorial, which is also a museum and research centre, while the US does not have a centrally committed establishment for war remembrance. The Australian War Memorial houses a Hall of Remembrance in which the name of every Australian killed in war is engraved on the wall, while the museum section is charged with telling the story of the wars in which Australia participated. Therefore, the AWM should theoretically have negated the need for a separate national memorial for Vietnam, and it is this belief that brought accusations that the idea of a memorial was simply blindly following the US.⁶ This is an oversimplification of the issue. There is no denying that the idea of an American Memorial provided inspiration, but beyond that, the two projects differed greatly, and not just in design and intent. If Gallipoli (and arguably places like France, Tobruk, Kokoda and Sandakan) was the spiritual place of the Anzac Legend, then the AWM was its Australian home. It was originally designed to remember WWI, opened during WWII and became the emotional centre of Canberra. Vietnam veterans, still trapped in their 'otherness', felt isolated from what that building represented. Although the names of their dead were in the Hall and a small section had been put aside for them in the museum (and that section remained very small until recently), a sense of belonging still eluded them.

The government tendered some funding, though the bulk was raised through donations. The site allotted was on the picturesque empty space of Anzac Avenue, about half way down the avenue that led to the steps of the AWM; a fitting metaphorical site if ever there was one. Built among the tall trees lining the avenue

⁵ Leslie Allen, "Offerings at the wall", *American Heritage* Vol.46 No.1 (February 1995), pp.92-103.

⁶ Doyle, "Short-timers' endless monuments", p.109.

so that it is almost invisible until almost directly in front of it, the Memorial is significantly different not only from its American counterpart, but also from anything down the road at the AWM. Its design is contemporary and stark, partly enclosed but open enough to invite exploration, and less of a place of mourning than the AWM's Hall of Remembrance or the American Vietnam Memorial, both of which have funereal or gravesite overtones. This underlines its intention to be a place for the living as well as for remembering the dead. Perhaps the most physically significant aspect of the Memorial is not the impressively transferred picture of the helicopter, or the wall of "Words from the War", but the large stand alone black lettering of "Vietnam" at the front left of the entrance to the structure, making its purpose unmistakable. It is as if it is a reminder, or even an advertisement to those going past it to the AWM not to forget them in the enormity of the other conflicts.⁷ However, although the Memorial undoubtedly increased recognition for Vietnam veterans, if anything, the placement of it alone and at a distance from the AWM served to underline the 'otherness' of the conflict and its participants. Although this would later change, at the time it could not help but reinforce many of the images that the Memorial committee was trying to eliminate.

The Memorial was dedicated at a ceremony on 3 October 1992, five years to the day after the Welcome Home Parade. More than half of the veterans interviewed had visited the Memorial, with nine of those having been present at the dedication in 1992. They often spoke of the day with the same reverence as they did of the Welcome Home Parade. Some of those who attended the dedication were among the group that had not been at the parade, and the day proved a watershed for them as the parade had been for others. The only sour note according to a couple of those for whom the opening was their first major public experience as veterans was the presence of Labor politicians, particularly Paul Keating and Bob Hawke, who was extremely unpopular among many veterans as being involved in the anti-war union strikes. One claimed that he was "booed" by the crowd at some point in the proceedings,⁸ underlining once again the continuing attitudes of anger towards the

⁷ A problem Korean veterans had as well. In 2000, their Memorial would eventually stand beside the Vietnam one on Anzac Avenue. For a further discussion on Korean veterans see: Ben Evans, *Out in the cold: Australia's involvement in the Korean War 1950-53* (Canberra, 2001).

⁸ Veteran Interview #5. Jane Ross states that a number of marching veterans refused to look at Bob Hawke who was taking the salute at the Welcome Home Parade: Ross, "Australia's Legacy", p.212.

government. However, for all, the Memorial was a permanent and visual symbol of increasing recognition and acceptance. All were extremely happy with the Memorial, summed up by one who described it as "awe inspiring",⁹ and even among those who had not seen it, there was a belief that it was a significant step forward. Keith Payne, who officiated at the dedication ceremony says that "from my veteran point of view, it is spot on".¹⁰ Lieutenant General Grey believes the Memorial was well designed and thinks "it captures very well the Vietnam experience."¹¹ One talked of the "eerie" beauty of the structure: "I could feel all the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and I had to go outside for a while".¹² Others described the emotion when helicopters flew in formation over the group during the proceedings, echoing the importance of the picture on the wall inside:

The helicopter; that's our symbol. That really says it all. You'll see a group of Vietnam vets together, and the minute they hear a chopper, even if it's not a Huey, they all look.¹³

A couple mentioned the length of time it had taken to get a memorial, with one describing the recognition as "25 years too frigging late",¹⁴ while a number of others lamented the financial situation which saw veterans having to raise much of the money for the construction.¹⁵ However, none of these complaints diminished the level of pride held by veterans in their memorial.

The only major disagreement between veterans interviewed on the subject of the Memorial is about the placement of the names of those who died. More than half would have preferred to have had the names displayed where they could be seen. One veteran discussed the importance to a relative or a friend to be able to see the names – "that's the special moment, when they find that name."¹⁶ Several expressed a desire to have the names "where everyone could see them".¹⁷ The situation was not helped when it was discovered that the list had been interred with a number of names missing, which temporarily took the gloss off the success of the dedication.¹⁸ A

⁹ Veteran Interview #2.

¹⁰ Veteran Interview #30.

¹¹ Veteran Interview #35.

¹² Veteran Interview #4.

¹³ Veteran Interview #13.

¹⁴ Veteran Interview #16.

¹⁵ Veteran Interview #2; Veteran Interview #12; Veteran Interview #7.

¹⁶ Veteran Interview #13.

¹⁷ Veteran Interview #1.

¹⁸ Veteran Interview #33.

number compared it to the American Memorial (which several had seen first hand), and while only one preferred the American to the Australian Memorial, they all mentioned the names issue. A couple expressed concerns over the motivation for not having the names displayed with one veteran commenting that "I really couldn't understand why we had to hide them."¹⁹ The unease by some about the names being "hidden" in some way reflects the feeling of a number of American veterans when their memorial was being constructed. They voiced concerns that putting it below ground level where it could not be easily seen was continuing the attitude of shame and hiding which veterans were trying to dispel.²⁰

Others were not concerned about the location of names, pointing out that "they're up at the War Memorial anyway".²¹ Several supported the decision of the Memorial Committee to make it a memorial for all who had served.²² In one of the group interviews, some of those involved became quite defensive about the issue, as if they had been through this discussion many times before, and were anxious to convince that it was better this way. One put an abrupt end to the discussion, asserting that "the memorial is for *all* who served, not just those that were killed".²³ Another was more eloquent in his support, stating the Memorial was "for all those people who made sacrifices, and that doesn't mean just with their life".²⁴ There is the implication that the memorial is also there to recognise the suffering (and occasionally the death) of those who did not die on the battlefield, but perhaps returned never quite the same.

Despite the disagreement among veterans over the issue of the names, the Memorial has been free of the level of controversy surrounding the American one. Doyle believes that the level of "consensus means that the monument itself is the more rich, the more impressive, and just perhaps the more typically Australian for all that."²⁵ The responses of veterans indicate they would agree wholeheartedly with this assertion.

¹⁹ Veteran Interview #18.

²⁰ There has been much discussion of this issue in the US. See for example: Scott, *Politics of Readjustment*, p.143.

²¹ Veteran Interview #2.

²² Doyle, "Short-timers endless monuments", p.125.

²³ Veteran Interview #2.

²⁴ Veteran Interview #5.

²⁵ Doyle, "Short-timers' endless monuments", p.120.

The Vietnam Syndrome

While the social and political phenomenon known as the Vietnam Syndrome may be worthy of a complete study of its own, it has been a significant factor in the manner in which the war, and by extension its participants, have been perceived. It is not without some sense of irony that the term was originally coined to describe the psychological health problems suffered by some veterans shortly after their return from combat.²⁶ However, within a short space of time, the term had come to describe a more widespread malaise. The simplest, and most popular, definition of the Vietnam Syndrome is the collective fear and avoidance of successive governments, and to a lesser extent, the public, to sending the military overseas to trouble spots. While this has certainly been the most obvious and visible effect, it is by no means confined to such a narrow sphere. Over the years, the very mention of Vietnam has been enough to send governments and the military into damage control and a feeling of unease throughout the general community. Marilyn Young has described the Vietnam Syndrome as a "spiritual flu",²⁷ which aptly expresses the views of many commentators as well as illustrating the widespread consequences of the syndrome. Marita Sturken took the analogy further, describing the effect as a "disease" and likened it to the effect of the AIDS crisis, carrying "with it all the associations of a diseased condition – a 'syndrome' as a weakened state, with a vulnerable immune system",²⁸ in relation to both the individual and the society.

The syndrome is most often associated with the United States, as it was the super power whose reputation and supremacy was threatened by the war, but as a supporting actor in the event, Australia was by no means immune from this "spiritual flu". While it did not reach the mythological proportions that it did for Americans, it was still measurable and significant in its repercussions. Peter Edwards identified "similar inhibitions" in the policy making of the Australian government to its American counterpart, claiming in 1997 that the Vietnam Syndrome remained identifiable in Australia, though to a somewhat "lesser degree".²⁹ Politically,

²⁶ Roger Spiller, "The Vietnam Syndrome: A Brief History", Dennis & Grey (Eds), *The Australian Army*, p.4.

²⁷ Marilyn B Young, "The Vietnam War in American Memory", p.253.

²⁸ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p.123-124.

²⁹ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p.354.

American and Australian governments have found these national "hangovers" debilitating, particularly in relation to their foreign and defence policies. As previously mentioned, the military was restructured and reduced in Australia, while the American one, whose reputation was much more seriously damaged, also underwent a major restructuring.³⁰ Australia changed its defence policy from one of "forward defence" to a more independent and continental approach with more emphasis on regional engagement, resulting in successive governments normalising and improving relations with countries that had previously been regarded with suspicion; particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.³¹ While the changes in policy were not solely the result of Vietnam, it undoubtedly remained strongly in the memory of those making the changes. The United States was accused of returning to an almost isolationist stance in the years immediately after Vietnam,³² and remained almost obsessively cautious of overseas military involvement. Stanley Karnow claims that the Vietnam Syndrome prevented American intervention in Angola, Ethiopia and Iran, and the escalation of US intervention in South America, just to name a few.³³ Ironically, two of these would have consequences that would ultimately reinforce the Vietnam Syndrome and would further damage the standing of both the military and the government.³⁴ Even after apparently "kicking the Vietnam Syndrome" in the 1991 Gulf War,³⁵ the US (and Australia) remained wary about sending troops overseas until the beginning of the War on Terror in 2001.³⁶

However, perhaps the most significant consequence of the Vietnam Syndrome has been its overwhelming ability to filter its message through the public consciousness, creating a life of its own. Vietnam ceased to become a country, or even just a war, but instead became a term used to create a discourse or illustrate a point, and almost exclusively with a negative connotation. Whether the situation was related to foreign

³⁰ For example see: DeGroot, "A Noble Cause?", pp.270-271; Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p.32.

³¹ This included Indonesia, China and Vietnam. For a detailed discussion see: Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s*, (Melbourne, 1991), pp.27-31

³² Spiller, "The Vietnam Syndrome", p.1.

³³ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, pp.26-27.

³⁴ These were the taking of American hostages in Iran in 1979, and the 1985 Iran Contra scandal involving the siphoning of funds to Nicaraguan guerrillas. See: Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p.27.

³⁵ President George Bush claimed that America had "kicked the Vietnam Syndrome" in the Gulf War. Cited in DeGroot, *A Noble Cause?*, p.269.

³⁶ Nevertheless, Australia has sent troops to different trouble spots throughout the world as often since Vietnam as before, but it does so with increased political caution. See chapter ten for a further discussion of the current situation.

or military affairs, humanitarian concerns or the treatment of health problems, Vietnam could be used as an example with which to describe and/or publicise a situation. When service persons have been deployed, the public is urged to support them so they will not be treated as those returning from Vietnam had been.³⁷ (It is never said to treat them like those returning from WWII or any other specific conflict, just not like Vietnam). Veterans warn current personnel about health concerns ranging from chemicals to trauma, so that they will not end up in the Vietnam situation.³⁸ There is a constant call that there must never be "another Vietnam", but what is meant by that is unclear, as almost every situation appears to have the potential to be "another Vietnam". Vietnam has come to mean mistakes, civilian deaths (collateral damage), complex political or ethical situations, and almost any factor that could be a description of any other war, but which has found its ultimate domain in the Vietnam War. An Australian newspaper headline in March 2002 announced "Just don't mention Vietnam"³⁹ in relation to the continuing conflict in Afghanistan, and in February 2003 another asked "Vietnam all over again?"⁴⁰ about Iraq. Similarly in the US, headlines in October 2001 suggested "Afghanistan as Vietnam"⁴¹ and more provocatively in 2002, "It Only Looks Like Vietnam" when 600 soldiers were sent as "advisers" to the Philippines to assist in fighting Islamic guerrillas. Sturken claims that the American government made every attempt to align the goals of the Gulf War with WWII, intending to "chart the lineage of war directly from 1945 to 1991 in order to establish the Vietnam War...as [an] aberration" and it was indeed "choreographed as the ending of the 'Vietnam Syndrome'."⁴² As successful as it appeared at the time, the above headlines recorded over a decade later, appear to prove that it is still far from cured.

The Vietnam Syndrome, which has become as much a part of the vernacular as

³⁷ Examples include: Dennis Shanahan, "US alliance working, Howard tells critics", *The Weekend Australian* (18-19 September 1999), p.10; "Adopt-a-Soldier Plan" *The Cairns Post* (11 October 1999), p.7; "Troops Deserve Support" *The Northern News* (23 September 1999), p.1.

³⁸ At the time of the sending of troops to the Gulf War, East Timor and the Iraq War, veterans spoke out about those going knowing "their rights" and warned the government not to make the same mistakes. For example: ABC Online, "Vietnam veterans' warning", *The World Today* – ABC (13 March 2000), <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/s109939.htm>

³⁹ Roy Eccleston, "Just don't mention Vietnam", *The Weekend Australian* (9-10 March 2002), p.14.

⁴⁰ "Vietnam all over again?", *The Weekend Australian* (8-9 February 2003), p.26.

⁴¹ R.W. Apple jr, "Afghanistan as Vietnam", *The New York Times* (31 October 2001), <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/31/international/31ASSE.html>.

⁴² Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p.123.

Rambo in the US and Australia, has also had a similar effect in relation to perceptions of veterans. Certainly it has assisted in keeping the victim/villain mentality firmly in place. In 1974, one of the two people most responsible for the origin of the term, Robert Lifton, wrote a book on the "unique" psychological problems of Vietnam veterans paradoxically subtitled *Neither Victims nor Executioners*,⁴³ though his work substantially laid the groundwork that would help the media and Hollywood create the image that they were both. When the term took on a broader meaning in the ensuing years, veterans had even less chance of escaping the stereotypes. The idea of the Syndrome being an illness as illustrated by Young, Sturken and Spiller, can be expanded to cover veterans, as their service in Vietnam had somehow "infected" them with its symptoms. To be a Vietnam veteran was to be a figure of sympathy, or occasionally of fear, leaving them to feel that they had some sort of illness. They also became a descriptor of sorts. Again this was promoted in popular culture as illustrated in a 2003 episode of the popular Australian drama, *The Secret Life of Us*, with the main character describing himself of feeling like "a Vietnam veteran" when he cannot get an event out of his head.⁴⁴ Rob Watts, writing in 2000 about problems in the Tertiary Education sector, described the issues faced by academics as "something akin to the loss of morale and sense of betrayal experienced by Australia's Vietnam veterans".⁴⁵ Just as servicemen of WWI were automatically thought of in regards to the Anzac Legend, Vietnam veterans were automatically related to the Vietnam Syndrome. The syndrome had become an integral facet of the 'truth' war: what constituted the 'truth', and who owned it?

The 'Truth' War

It has often been said that "truth is the first casualty of war", but sometimes it is also the final prize on the battlefield long after the last shot is fired. While history is often open to contention, it is most often so when the participants of the event are still available for comment. Truth also, as has been previously shown, is contentious and almost impossible to accurately define, particularly from a historical perspective. Neither does the event have to have taken place in the distant past to be an issue, as

⁴³ Lifton, *Home from the War*.

⁴⁴ "The Secret Life of Us", Ten Network (May 2003).

⁴⁵ Rob Watts, "A Circus Run by Clowns" in Paul James (Ed), *Burning Down the House: The Bonfire of the Universities* (North Carlton, 2000).

the Vietnam syndrome attests. This harks back to Portelli's conclusions about the testimony of witnesses to events discussed in chapter one in which he decided that individual interpretations of events were no less valid, than any other, and it was all of these interpretations taken together that made up the truth.⁴⁶

It is these interpretations of the truth that have been the centre of the battle for Vietnam veterans in defining their identity and place in history. Over the past decade, a small number of academics and veterans have attempted to address the myths and stereotypes surrounding veterans. An extension of this analysis has been the debate among veterans themselves about whose experiences were the real ones. The difficulty is compounded by the literature as it rarely makes room for any middle ground with most of those writing from the polar points of the topic, and often with an agenda of some type. While there have been a number of attempts to address the issue of myths and stereotypes in Australia and the US, two American authors in particular – both veterans turned researchers – have attacked the topic with an almost obsessive zeal. Studies by Jerry Lembcke and B.G. Burkett (with Glenna Whitely)⁴⁷ in the late 1990s revealed many of the concerns of veterans over their portrayal, but arguably forfeited the opportunity to make a significant difference to attitudes because they focussed their arguments so narrowly and without allowing for different experiences. If anything, their studies prove the point that the truth lies in different individual experiences as well as collective ones, and their findings reflect their own service and post-war experiences, providing an illustration of the conundrum in which veterans found themselves.

Lembcke focussed on what he described as "the spitting image" and the sociological effects and uses of that image. The spitting image refers to the oft cited claims that veterans were spat on by anti-war protesters and other hecklers, and its continuing references in the media and popular culture, as well as its use as a propaganda tool by successive American governments. Lembcke believes that the spitting image is a myth, an "urban legend" invented as a device by the government and the establishment to make the anti-war movement look "bad" and "wrong", and in the

⁴⁶ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp.viii-ix&26.

⁴⁷ Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*; Burkett & Whitely, *Stolen Valor*.

longer term used to explain the problems of veterans.⁴⁸ He claims that he can find no evidence in archival material or in interviews with veterans and anti-war protesters of a single veteran being spat upon. He does however contradictorily refer to a newspaper article reporting veterans being spat on claiming that it is a misunderstanding, and then says that if some were spat on at other times, it was possibly government agents that were responsible.⁴⁹ Lembcke says that although it is difficult to prove that something "did not happen", members of the anti-war movement would never have abused returned soldiers: "they could not have been spitting on veterans while at the same time befriending them in off-base coffeehouses".⁵⁰ He further asserted that:

Relations between veterans and the anti-war movement were empathetic and mutually supportive. On the basis of that provable truth, I argue that the image of spat-upon veterans must be false.⁵¹

He also claims that the image was used to manipulate the use of PTSD and caused its over use to create the "good" and "bad" veteran; the "bad" being those in particular who joined the anti-war movement on their return.⁵²

Lembcke's broader argument has some validity and makes some points worthy of note, especially his discussion of the overuse of stereotypes in popular culture. Yet, while his findings should not be dismissed, the narrow focus on a single event at a specific time undermines his broader conclusions. Interviews and literature show that for most Australian veterans who believed they had encountered some animosity, it was not always a single event, and rarely singularly dramatic. There were a number of incidents related,⁵³ but perhaps the best example of the most common occurrences was demonstrated at the end of the film *We Were Soldiers*, when in a civilian airport terminal one of the characters pushes his crippled comrade in a wheelchair, both immaculate in their uniforms, and a mother hurries her children away from the soldiers despite there being plenty of room and no apparent danger. It is subtle and may even be missed by a number of viewers (just as other such events were unseen by much of the community), but for veterans, it speaks volumes. While it seems a

⁴⁸ Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, pp.49-70.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4. Lembcke became an active member of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp.49-50

⁵³ See chapter three.

small thing, for someone who has just undergone the most intense and possibly traumatic period of their young lives, it is as unobtrusive as being spat upon. They were often not only hypervigilant, but just as understandably, hypersensitive. Whether it was simply a nervous mother in a public place; a recalcitrant drunk in a bar; a well meaning friend who might have made a seemingly innocent political remark; a run in with anti-war protesters (official or otherwise); or in the most rare but traumatic circumstances, a breakdown of familial relationships, their experiences were often disillusioning and cumulative.

Understandably, Lembcke's conclusions are also coloured by his own experiences. He returned from Vietnam deciding the war was wrong, then became an active member of the anti-war movement and remained part of that sub-culture after the war and into his academic career.⁵⁴ This raises two issues of note. One is that Lembcke's attitudes towards those in the anti-war movement, and theirs toward him, were probably quite different to those who did not join the movement, whether they agreed or not. Secondly, because of his beliefs and the supportive atmosphere of fellow travellers, he was almost certainly less vulnerable or sensitive to incidents that could be construed as animosity or disrespect. Lembcke also makes a couple of leaps that are influenced by his experiences, not least of which is the tenuous conclusion that because 75% of veterans in a group interviewed by two counsellors in 1975 were opposed to the war it proved his thesis that most veterans were politically active (therefore anti-war) and provided a threat to the status quo, making the government nervous.⁵⁵ There is also the problematic element of who exactly Lembcke is referring to in regard to the anti-war movement, as has been discussed in relation to Curthoys's statements about the actions of the anti-war movement in Australia.⁵⁶ While it is true that the "official" anti-war movement rarely specifically targeted service persons, it is nearly impossible to separate "official" from "unofficial" actions, or incidents involving individuals opposed to the war or simple hecklers.

There is significant disagreement within the veteran community itself over the spitting image and its associated elements. Bob Greene found this problem when he

⁵⁴ Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, p.ix.

⁵⁵ The number of interviews from which this percentage is taken is not noted. Lembcke, p.106.

⁵⁶ Curthoys, *Public Memory of an Anti-War Movement*, pp.123-130.

attempted to write a book on American veterans in 1989.⁵⁷ He discovered that among the approximately one thousand veterans with whom he communicated, there were one thousand stories and therefore realised that he could not do justice to each individual, though he tried to include as many of their stories as possible. He specifically asked the question "did anyone spit on you"? The question apparently touched a raw nerve with many veterans: a number claimed they had and produced enough detail to be believable, while others claimed that they had been treated with nothing but kindness on their return. However, the majority responded that with the benefit of hindsight:

The question – if taken literally – was irrelevant. They said it didn't matter whether a civilian actually worked up the sputum and propelled it toward them – they said that they were made to feel small and unwanted in so many ways that it felt like being spat upon.⁵⁸

The spitting image appears to have less currency among Australian veterans. A few in the study interviews referred to "spitting", but only one to being actually spat at (and that was in a group of servicemen in a march).⁵⁹ For most, it was described as a concept, rather than an actual event; more of a psychological spitting than a physical one. Their image of abuse is more linked to the throwing of paint (or similar). Two famously portrayed events involved the throwing of paint protesting the Vietnam War,⁶⁰ and these images cemented themselves in the minds of the community as well as veterans. The first was the paint thrown on the car of visiting US president, Lyndon Johnson,⁶¹ and the other, more notoriously, of the woman who daubed herself in red paint in the middle of the welcome home march of 1RAR, making contact with a number of soldiers and smearing them with the paint.⁶² Both events happened in 1966, when the war still attracted popular support, which arguably made both incidents more conspicuous. While it is likely that both events were imitated, or at least attempted at later times, because they were not the actions of a recognisable group, they were not often recorded. Protestors did use red paint (or other red coloured substances) at demonstrations to represent the spilling of blood, and war

⁵⁷ Greene, *Homecomings*, pp.11-12

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Veteran Interview #27

⁶⁰ There may have been other instances, but these two are particularly famous in popular memory.

⁶¹ Langley, *A Decade of Dissent*, pp.57-60.

⁶² *Ibid.*

memorials were also graffitied with paint during the period.⁶³ Curthoys and Ross have claimed that the many veterans who claimed to have been splattered with paint (or blood) is an illustration of false remembering (or worse). However, as with Lembcke's "spitting image", these arguments are an oversimplification of a complex situation. Once again, it is too narrow a point and ignores the larger picture where the physical throwing of liquid is as irrelevant as whether they were spat upon.

Burkett, on the other hand, attacked the stereotypes from another angle. He believed that many returning soldiers did suffer abuse (and he claimed to be one of them).⁶⁴ While he felt that this damaged morale among those returning home and does not deny that it pushed some underground, he tries hard to disprove the "crazy deranged" veteran perception. He has two major arguments, principally the claim that most of those whose actions or publicity reflected the victim/villain mentality – particularly the so-called "trip-wire vets" – are more often than not frauds or fakes. He identifies two categories: one being those who did not serve in Vietnam at all; and secondly, those who did serve but inflated their service.⁶⁵ The second part of his argument is that PTSD is an invented conspiracy between the medical profession and the anti-war movement.⁶⁶ However, while making it clear that he does not believe in PTSD, he contradictorily allows for its existence in some circumstances. He asserts that most veterans came home and went on to lead successful and exemplary lives, which is certainly true, as has been demonstrated in Australia. He claims that the members of the general public are often surprised to discover that a successful professional is a Vietnam veteran, believing that they are all damaged. While trying to obtain donations from business associates for a Vietnam memorial in Texas, Burkett was shocked to discover that when talking to colleagues and telling them he was a veteran they looked at him "as if he had just confessed...he had syphilis", and that he must be the "exception" among veterans.⁶⁷ The experience embittered him and he began a quest to prove that the veterans that had made their problems apparent to society were fakes.

⁶³ See for example: Langley, *A Decade of Dissent*, p.109; Edwards, *A Nation at War*, pp.125-126; Pemberton (Ed), *Vietnam Remembered*, pp.61&156.

⁶⁴ Burkett, *Stolen Valor*, pp.xxiii-xxiv.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.xxv-xxvi.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.139-161.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.42-43.

Burkett's experiences with business associates closely mirrored the situation outlined by many Australian veterans, and as previously indicated, several did not promote their veteran status for exactly this reason. Once again, however, the argument is too narrow and does not allow for differences of experience. In trying to disprove the stereotypes, he denies that Vietnam veterans have *any* problems, while at the same time reiterating how badly they were treated. He claims that PTSD was developed for financial gain:

During the war, the goal of the left was to show that the Vietnam conflict was so immoral that it permanently damaged the psyches of those who fought it. The bottom line now is money.⁶⁸

The anger exuded by Burkett towards the establishment is palpable, sitting uneasily with his claims that "real" veterans are a part of, and have made significant contributions, to that establishment. While this anger appears to a common indicator among even untroubled veterans, it could be argued that he protests just a little too much. Burkett makes some worthwhile points, and his contribution towards striking back at the stereotypes of veterans should not be underestimated. Contradictions in his argument might at times have undermined his point, but it is these contradictions in comparison to those of Lembcke, and other researchers, that characterises the whole veteran identity issue and the continuing battle over the "truth".

The fact of the matter, as demonstrated by Greene's veteran narratives, is that the truth is as individual as every man's experience. Despite the fact that the war took place in a relatively small and seemingly homogenous area in comparison to other conflicts, such as WWI and II, it would be wrong to consider it uncomplicated. Much has been written on this topic that does not require repeating here, except to suggest that the war fought by 1RAR in 1965 was significantly different to that of 7RAR in 1971. The war faced by advisers or those posted to other units were different experiences again. It is also fair to say that the Americans' war was different to the Australian one. War stories are always distinct, but what was intrinsically different about Vietnam was that there was so little agreement about the basic facts. Who were they fighting, and what were they fighting for? Who was right and who was wrong? Who won and who lost? When such intrinsic facts and beliefs could not be agreed upon (even within the government and the military), then it is hard to imagine a clear

⁶⁸ Burkett, *Stolen Valor*, p.233.

consensus among those who survived such a convoluted venture.

There is no doubt that there have been some who have been less than truthful about their service or the aftermath, whether for sympathy, personal glory or gain, but there are also a number who tried to make themselves fit the stereotype, as they felt bereft of an identity (such as the Anzac one). As already suggested by Lieutenant General Grey, some men behaved in such a manner because they believed it was how they believed the public expected them to behave. However, the evidence suggests, that in Australia at least, this was the exception rather than the rule. The truth, if there is such a thing, among Australian Vietnam veterans is complex, as is any group's stories, but it is also less complex than many would suggest. Most have lived average productive lives, though many remain angry at the government and occasionally the Australian public. Despite this, and in spite of the health concerns, most readjusted as well as any returned soldiers had before them, but unlike those before them, they did not have a clear idea of where to find a comfortable place for themselves, and just as problematically, neither did the Australian public.

While veterans such as Lembcke and Burkett attacked the stereotypes on a more academic and sociological level, Australian veterans used a different strategy. Veteran literature appeared in the late 1980s and into the nineties. Apart from a couple of oral histories (and even within most of these), this focussed almost exclusively on the war itself, and the conduct of Australian soldiers. Authors such as Lex McAulay and Gary McKay in particular, attempted to redirect attention to the war years with only minor reference to the post-war issues.⁶⁹ These texts also showed a concerted effort to place Vietnam back within the proud military history of previous conflicts; nowhere more clearly than in the subtitle of McAulay's book on the Battle of Coral – *the Anzac spirit upheld*.⁷⁰ Problematically, these texts rarely made it on to the shelves of those other than veterans or aficionados, with the result that the message did not reach those at whom it was aimed. But even among these texts there was disagreement. Terry Burstall's account of the Battle of Long Tan in *The Soldiers' Story* caused dissent in the veteran community, a state of affairs

⁶⁹ Lex McAulay, *The Battle of Coral* (Hawthorne, 1988); Gary McKay, *Delta Four: Australian Riflemen in Vietnam* (St Leonards, 1996).

⁷⁰ McAulay, *The Battle of Coral*.

publicly aired in Bob Buick's *All Guts and No Glory* (co-authored by McKay).⁷¹ Both Burstall and Buick were present at the battle, seemingly making the search for the "truth" even more convoluted.

The War Within

This disagreement about the "truth" contributed to the increasing discord with the Vietnam veteran groups. The most significant of these eventually caused a schism within the VVAA in 1996. In many respects, it was the disagreement over how to portray themselves that formed the basis of the problems. There had long – or perhaps always – been conflict within the VVAA, as well as with the RSL and some other small groups. Perhaps it was inevitable that a group that had been established to battle the establishment would end up battling itself. There is no doubt that the disenchantment caused by the events surrounding the Agent Orange Royal Commission, followed by the death and desertion of a number of their original members, took a toll on the organisation. Perhaps too, more ironically, the success of the Welcome Home Parade and the building of the Memorial (which resulted in increased assistance and recognition for veterans), reduced the vigour within the association by removing some of the sense of urgency that was intrinsic throughout the 1980s. As within almost every organisation, much of the conflict was caused by power struggles, and even interstate rivalries, but there was also disagreement about how best to deal with the continuing issues. Some areas of the VVAA, in particular those running the head office, were increasingly in favour of scaling back the "war" and "normalising" relations with the government, the RSL and other agencies, in an effort to increase bargaining opportunities. According to Crowe, the Victorian branch "favoured a more conciliatory approach" while their New South Wales compatriots preferred "all-out aggression".⁷² It could be also suggested that this would provide an opportunity to attempt to "normalise" relations with the community and perhaps help disperse some of the stereotypes, although the VVAA had been considered by many to be one of the main offenders in promoting them.

⁷¹ Terry Burstall, *The Soldiers Story: The Battle at Xa Long Tan* (St Lucia, 1986); Bob Buick with Gary McKay, *All Guts and No Glory: The Story of a Long Tan Warrior* (St Leonards, 2000).

⁷² Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, p.169.

Eventually, the disagreements escalated to the point that sections of the group (particularly in New South Wales), broke away to become the Vietnam Veterans Federation.⁷³ On the surface at least, the VVF seemed more radical and less organised than the VVAA. Certainly, the VVF website demonstrates an attitude of less willingness to cooperate with other agencies and its language has more strident and angry overtones. The underlying aims of the group, however, are almost identical.⁷⁴ The most immediate effect of the schism was that the VVF found itself cut from the official "loop", as the VVAA was by then considered to be the spokesgroup for Vietnam veterans as the RSL had been for veterans before them.⁷⁵ The situation did improve for the VVF over time, but it never attained the profile of the VVAA.

However, as with the RSL, neither of the organisations were homogenous throughout the sub-branches, and many were uninterested in the national politics, and with a number of the groups, particularly in the regional areas, the situation was often fluid. At the time of the bulk of the interviews, several of those participating were involved in the VVF. The VVAA was largely inactive in Cairns at the time – although they had a strong sub-branch in Townsville – and many had moved to Cairns from NSW where the VVF was strongest. They had often been involved in the VVAA at the time of the schism and just stayed with their branches at the changeover. However, in 2001, a new branch of the VVAA was established in Cairns,⁷⁶ and there appeared to be no animosity between the groups; if anything, they overlapped to some degree. The fluidity of the groups meant that veterans may not only belong to both or either of these groups, but also to the RSL, Legacy, the VVMC or one of a number of unit or advocacy associations. Perhaps this is indicative of the geographic situation which sees Cairns so distant from head offices (of organisations and government departments), but it may also be indicative of the political motivations, varying personalities and changing needs common in any group. To suppose that Vietnam veterans are in any way homogenous, or even consistently agree on issues, as a group is mistaken.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp.172-173.

⁷⁴ Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia, "VVFA: About Us", (23 January 2004), <http://www.vvfagranville.org.au/page8.htm>

⁷⁵ Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, p.173.

⁷⁶ "New Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, Cairns Branch, Being Formed", *The Cairns Post* (27 June 2001), p.39.

According to a local veteran and advocate, this is one of their greatest weaknesses and a problem that has to be overcome if veterans want to be heard.⁷⁷ Their relatively small numbers and continued division, both among themselves and within the community, will almost certainly be of great disadvantage in the future, particularly when their numbers begin to subside. This advocate believes that veterans are going to have to put aside their differences and decide on one group to speak for them. He believes that ultimately, that may have to be the RSL, as the structure is already in place and Vietnam veterans are gradually becoming a governing force within the organisation.⁷⁸ While this might be an unpopular move for a large number of veterans, at least two other local advocates had reached the same opinion and were moving in that direction.⁷⁹ It also does no harm to their cause that the RSL is a respected institution in Australia, has strong governmental and community affiliations, and in many ways, is the keeper of the "Anzac spirit", being the organisation established by those who returned from WWI. It could be argued that Vietnam veterans have long known that this situation might arise, as suggested by the previously mentioned comment by a veteran who stated that many retained their membership "hoping one day we might be able to do something with it",⁸⁰ and the number of others who remained members even though they rarely, if ever, attended.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these problems have been reflected to some extent in the US veteran groups. Interestingly, despite some of the striking similarities of the circumstances between American and Australian groups and their issues, this has rarely been remarked upon by commentators, except in relation to the claims of the VVAA copying the style of its American counterpart.⁸¹ However, the situation is much too complex to be dismissed as simple imitation. While American war veterans have never had the apparent cohesiveness of their Australian counterparts,⁸² the RSL has an approximate equivalent in the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and to a

⁷⁷ Veteran Interview #19.

⁷⁸ Veteran Interview #19.

⁷⁹ Veteran Interview #3; Veteran Interview #4.

⁸⁰ Veteran Interview #19.

⁸¹ See for example: Ross, "Australia's Legacy", p.195.

⁸² Australian service persons are far from homogenous, but the Anzac Legend, the influence of the RSL (which almost half of WWI&II returnees at some time joined) and the relatively small population has created this belief. On the other hand, the US has a longer history of wars (including internal), a larger population and lacks a cohesive element such as the Anzac Legend around which to unify.

lesser extent, the American Legion.⁸³ Although the VFW originated a few years before WWI, like the RSL it was established to support and gain assistance for veterans, and wielded considerable power as a lobby group, particularly after WWII.⁸⁴ Most small towns have the obligatory VFW hall and their representatives often lead the parades on Veterans Day each year. The VFW also had the reputation of being less than supportive of Vietnam veterans on their return, with many newly returned personnel finding themselves facing the "your war was nothing like our war" attitudes.⁸⁵ Nicosia claims that the VFW had the ear of the Veterans' Administration and its influence slowed assistance and recognition for the younger veterans and made up what was known as "the iron triangle"; the VA, the House Veterans Affairs' Committee and the traditional veteran organisations (VFW and American Legion).⁸⁶ For some Vietnam veterans, and the emerging VVA, the VFW had become the enemy and the example of everything that was wrong with the society to which they had returned. Some found their place in the VFW, while others created their own groups or avoided them completely.

Moving forward three decades, the situation had changed in an almost eerie likeness to the Australian situation. Faced with a diminishing membership as those from WWI disappeared and the WWII/Korea set aged, Vietnam veterans began to find footholds in the VFW structure. Conflict had been endemic in the VVA since its inception, a situation that caused more than one exodus and prevented some from joining altogether. Recent years have witnessed a less combative attitude, and although the VVA remains the public face of the Vietnam veteran, the VFW appears to be regaining ground. Burkett claims that many veterans believe that groups such as the VVA have done veterans a great disservice and it is in the VFW that they now feel more comfortable.⁸⁷ However, this should not suggest that the veterans are split into these two groups, as there are other large and well established veterans' organisations, such as the American Legion, and as any internet search will show, hundreds of smaller Vietnam dedicated groups.

⁸³ The American Legion claims to be the biggest veteran organisation in the world with a slightly bigger membership than the VFW, but its aims are broader than that of a simple veteran organisation. The American Legion, "About Us: Our History" (23 January 2003), <http://www.legion.com>.

⁸⁴ Veterans of Foreign Wars, "History" (23 January 2004), <http://www.vfw.org>.

⁸⁵ See for example: Nicosia, *Home to War*, p.68.

⁸⁶ Nicosia, *Home to War*, pp.348-349&365.

⁸⁷ Burkett, *Stolen Valor*, pp.553-579.

The schism within the VVAA in Australia, the continuing problems with other groups, and the burgeoning problems of the stereotypes saw an increasing number of veterans become disillusioned with the situation. Some avoided groups altogether, while for others it opened the way for organisations such as Veterans Support and Advocacy Service Australia (VSASA). VSASA was created as a non-political organisation with an emphasis on support and advocacy, in order to "provide services and support not available in the general community".⁸⁸ Although it was started by Vietnam veterans, it has made itself inclusive for all veterans and peacekeepers, current and future. It has a minimal social profile, and though continuing the battle for assistance and support, has been careful to take a conciliatory approach to the government, in particular the DVA, believing that it will have more success with a less combative attitude.⁸⁹ This has had some level of success with the organisation securing some government funding and has been rewarded with several community service awards since its inception.⁹⁰ The low profile also indicates an emphasis on assistance rather than recognition, and seems to have little interest in promotion outside of veterans, which is a significant shift from groups such as the VVAA. It does promote a social agenda, but not in the sense of a club: its events are casual and do not require membership. They may entail regular "drop-in" sessions, and occasional events such as picnics, or something that may double as a fund raising opportunity, such as a Melbourne Cup function.⁹¹

VSASA is quite active and has a reasonably sized membership in Cairns, with two thousand throughout Queensland.⁹² However, even those who have not joined have had the opportunity to benefit from VSASA in the area. A "drop-in" morning began several years ago, and although the venue moved quite often, it appeared to find a permanent home at the HMAS Cairns Naval Base. The weekly coffee morning is not advertised under the heading of any particular group, and brings together an interesting mix of people who have little else in common except their service. Some

⁸⁸ VSASA, "Ausvets: Australian Veterans Supporting Veterans" (January 2004), <http://www.ausvets.powerup.com.au/>

⁸⁹ Veteran Interview #19.

⁹⁰ For example: "War Vet Commended", *The Cairns Post* (30 October 1999), p.25; Ian Reid, "Jimboomba Jottings", *Newslink* (Official Journal of VSASA), No.4 (December 2003), p.8.

⁹¹ VSASA, "Ausvets: Australian Veterans Supporting Veterans".

⁹² Veteran Interview #19.

veterans are regular attendees, while others come and go. They rarely discuss their service itself, more often seeking assistance or support on health or welfare issues, but a session might pass with little discussion that would indicate that this was a group of war veterans. Apparently, sometimes it is enough just knowing that there are other people in the community that understand. One veteran who was made aware of the group through an interview for this study, claimed that the group may well have saved him when he found himself struggling.⁹³ As an extension of this "drop-in" group and with the help of VSASA, local veterans obtained government funding to open a support and referral shop front at a shopping centre, operating entirely with volunteers; primarily veterans and their families. Known as the Far North Queensland Veteran and Ex-Services Support Centre, it opens several days a week and veterans can make appointments to see trained advocates or just find simple answers to questions that may take considerably longer through official channels. It is non-governmental and not affiliated with any particular groups, making it more appealing to those that have felt disenfranchised, or just do not wish to join an organisation, but need some advice. Local federal member, Warren Entsch, who was very supportive of the centre, claimed that it was a worthwhile and successful venture, and actively encouraged the concept of veterans helping each other.⁹⁴

The War Without - The Government

Perhaps the most significant obstacle past the stereotypes was the relationship between Vietnam veterans and the government. As discussed, to say that relations between the two were problematic would be an unqualified understatement. Vietnam veterans were not the first returning servicepersons to clash with the government, as demonstrated after WWI, nor will they be the last.⁹⁵ However, rarely has an event in Australian history caused such a sustained anger, or at least disillusionment and distrust, among a group towards its institutions. It is not suggested that all veterans have become radicalised or live their lives in a fog of anti-establishment rage, it is generally more understated, and arguably more powerful as a result. Witnessing a suited business man sitting in his luxurious high rise office or a father in stubbies and

⁹³ Veteran Interview #25.

⁹⁴ Interview with Entsch.

⁹⁵ For example: Some Gulf War veterans have been at odds with the government over a range of illnesses known as "Gulf War Syndrome". See chapter ten for an extended discussion.

t-shirt sitting among his happily (and raucously) playing children and their playgroup, expressing their anger and distrust towards the institutions of a country, of which they are so passionately proud, is more powerful than the same assertions of the lone, socially isolated, and perpetually angry, individual.⁹⁶ They are also the voices least often heard.

The resentment of many veterans towards the government has a number of dimensions making the situation that much more complex and difficult to easily address. For some it was the nature of the war that saw limitations set and decisions made regularly on a political rather than military basis. Others were dismayed by the government's actions (or in their opinion, the lack thereof) in supporting its servicepersons.⁹⁷ Some may find it unfair to blame the government for the actions of members of the public, but as their elected representatives, as one veteran pointed out, it was the government's role to set the tone, and the one it set was that of dismissal.⁹⁸ The seemingly abrupt change of policy direction, the restructuring of the military, and the quick normalisation of relations with Vietnam were also possible points of contention. These issues appeared to be the tip of the proverbial iceberg by the 1980s with the Agent Orange (and other health issues) debate and the emergence of early revisionism of the war. Among the veterans who expressed some anger toward the government, a few identified a particular event, while others were more general in their anger, unable to identify the exact moment at which it began, but for all, it ultimately amounted to an unsatisfactory level of recognition.⁹⁹

Many Vietnam veterans feel that their contribution continues to be undervalued. Although it is now recognised that Australian troops conducted themselves with honour in Vietnam, as their forebears had in previous conflicts, it still fails to ignite the collective pride and admiration afforded the two world wars.¹⁰⁰ One veteran described it as "first and second world war people are sort of held up here [indicates a high level], and Vietnam veterans tread along behind basically".¹⁰¹ They believe that

⁹⁶ Veteran interview #5; Veteran Interview #4.

⁹⁷ Uniform issue, union strikes, "treasonous" activities, the change in policy under Whitlam.

⁹⁸ Veteran Interview #8.

⁹⁹ For further discussion on this see chapter ten.

¹⁰⁰ Alan Ramsay, "Vietnam – a legacy of denial" in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (27 May 2000), www.smh.com.au/news/0005/27/text/features02.html.

¹⁰¹ Veteran Interview #17.

the government must take a certain amount of responsibility for the situation, as they set the tone for the wider community. Ramsay accuses the government of never commemorating anything to do with the Vietnam War: "its beginning, its end or anything in between".¹⁰² He is not alone in his condemnation, as almost all of those interviewed made some comment about the failure in regard to Vietnam veterans, of one or another of the Australian governments since 1965.

Recent years have seen a parade of high ranking politicians visiting foreign battlefields and sites of significance in Australian military history, but none have made the journey to any sites in Vietnam. The year 2000 marked the 85th anniversary of the battle of Gallipoli, 50 years since the beginning of the Korean War, 35 years since the sending of combat forces to Vietnam and 25 years since the official end of the Vietnam War. During 2000, Prime Minister John Howard visited Gallipoli, the French battlefields¹⁰³ and Korea.¹⁰⁴ Former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, visited Vietnam for trade talks in 1994 after touring World War II sites such as the Kokoda Trail and the Burma Railway. Despite the fact that the Long Tan Cross¹⁰⁵ and the other former operating areas of the Australian forces are less than a one hour drive from Ho Chi Minh City, Keating did not visit the sites, causing anger among veterans.¹⁰⁶ He exacerbated the situation by saying that there was "no comparison between what Australian soldiers suffered in World War II and Vietnam",¹⁰⁷ provoking further outrage.

Possibly, Keating thought it inappropriate to use a trade visit to go to a memorial for soldiers who had died fighting the government with whom he was having trade

¹⁰² Ramsay, "A legacy of denial".

¹⁰³ Department of the Prime Minister, "Visit to Turkey, France and Israel" (10 April 2000), www.pm.gov.au/news/media_releases/2000/visitt1004.htm.

¹⁰⁴ Department of the Prime Minister, "Visit to the Republic of Korea" (8 May 2000), www.pm.gov.au/news/media_releases/2000/korea0805.htm.

¹⁰⁵ The Long Tan Cross commemorates the battle of Long Tan in 1966 and is extremely significant because it is the only memorial for foreign soldiers in Vietnam – all others have been destroyed. The cross was rededicated in 2003 after it was restored to its original condition with trees planted in the surrounds and better access provided with money raised by Australian veterans, some of whom had been providing humanitarian assistance to the local villages. ABC Asia Pacific, "Long Tan memorial re-dedicated on Monday", *Asia Pacific Features* (12 April 2002), <http://www.abc.net.au/ra/asiapac/programs/s530279.htm>

¹⁰⁶ Laura Tingle, Joshua Frith and Fiona Harari, "Vets, Coalition Slam PM's Stance", *The Australian* (11 April 1994), p.1.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

talks.¹⁰⁸ This was confirmed by Don Watson in his biography of Keating, indicating that the prime minister did not fully understand the importance of the Long Tan Cross as a memorial and it was a mixture of poor handling by Keating and exaggeration by the press.¹⁰⁹ Keating attempted to rectify the situation (and reduce media criticism) by mentioning Australian service persons in a business speech in Ho Chi Minh City, but the conciliatory measure backfired when it was seen by some as an apology to the Vietnamese rather than commemorating Australians.¹¹⁰ The level of anger among veterans was still measurable years later, as illustrated by the fact that during the interviews, three veterans mentioned the incident without prompting.¹¹¹

However, when government/veteran relations are closely considered, it is the troubled relationship between the veterans and the DVA, particularly during the 1980-90s, that has received the most attention. When examining veterans responses in relation to the DVA, not only was there rarely a good word spoken, but there was an air of almost zealous (occasionally overly-zealous) vehemence in their descriptions. While it is hardly unusual to find public criticism or cynicism about an arm of the government, it is less common to find a group (particularly of middle aged, predominantly Caucasian men) claiming to be in such a level of conflict with a department. Some words were so commonly used in descriptions of dealings with the DVA that they became expected: terms such as "cruel"; "uncaring"; "unresponsive"; "don't understand"; "difficult"; "hoping I'd give up"; "it took forever"; and most commonly, "impossible amounts of red tape".

As discussed, the relationship did not have an ideal start, and by the time of the Agent Orange Royal Commission in 1983, it had already deteriorated to the point that the VVAA accused the DVA in its official submission of "failure through inertia, ignorance or incompetence". It further alleged:

The result of the Departmental incompetence has been to put veterans' lives at risk on occasions. In other instances it has caused suffering and hardships for veterans which was totally unnecessary and could have been

¹⁰⁸ Whether the Vietnamese would have found it inappropriate is open to some conjecture. When this author visited the above mentioned sites in 1999, the Vietnamese made it clear that they had no objection and respected anyone who honoured their war dead, as it is a Vietnamese custom to do so.

¹⁰⁹ Don Watson, *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart: A portrait of Paul Keating* (Sydney, 2002), p.479.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.480-482.

¹¹¹ Veteran Interview #2; Veteran Interview #7; Veteran Interview #32.

avoided if employees of the Department had carried out their work responsibly.¹¹²

The 1985 legislative amendments that changed the balance of the onus of proof for claims,¹¹³ increased the antagonism of the relationship, making the "standard of proof required...the exacting criminal standard".¹¹⁴ Attaining these sort of standards of proof for a war related health problem was extraordinarily difficult, as demonstrated by 55% being denied over the ensuing year, and a large drop in claims lodged.¹¹⁵ The 1988 House of Representatives Standing Committee report, *After the March*, also found evidence of the poor relations between them and made recommendations to keep a number of services independent of the DVA to ensure the best results.¹¹⁶ But over a decade later and after significant improvements in veterans' services, the relationship remained troubled.

Most of the veterans interviewed, at some time since their service, had dealings with the DVA. For most of them, it had been a relatively recent encounter as injuries or other service related health problems increased with age, or they began suffering what has become more commonly understood as late onset PTSD. They often expressed disbelief at how difficult and drawn out the process of obtaining assistance had been. Some gave up, or had several attempts, while those who finally got through the system often felt belittled by the experience. Almost everyone had a "horror" story to tell. One veteran willingly handed over a large file of correspondence with the DVA as proof of the issue.¹¹⁷ Much of it was confusing and contradictory; at one point a pension was granted and then retracted some months later for reasons that remained unclear. This was apparently not an isolated case, as Crowe reported similar incidents, including one veteran who had his status retracted twice, despite the support of the VVCS, and endured six years of appeals and delays (during which he had several periods in hospital) before it was solved.¹¹⁸ Williams, a former public servant and parliamentary staffer for former Labor minister Clyde Cameron, has filled almost two books with reports of veterans' problems with the government, in

¹¹² VVAA, "Submission to 'Agent Orange' Royal Commission", pp.66-67.

¹¹³ See chapter four.

¹¹⁴ Smith, *Medicine at War*, p.353.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *After the March*, pp.12-15.

¹¹⁷ Veteran Interview #6.

¹¹⁸ Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, pp.47-49.

particular the DVA.¹¹⁹ Veterans claim that an attempt to tackle the process without a trained advocate is impossible. The DVA advises the use of such advocates and, indeed, trains veteran advocates to assist others in making claims.¹²⁰ The department has reportedly also become more flexible in its acceptance criteria in recent years. However, if a veteran ever managed to attain the DVA equivalent of the "Holy Grail" – a TPI – the recipient was often feted as if he had won the lottery.¹²¹

More than a third of the veterans interviewed spoke negatively, and often bitterly, about their dealings with the department.¹²² At an April 2000 meeting in Cairns of the National Mental Health Team investigating the needs of veterans in regional Australia, some veterans and their wives described the DVA procedures as "cruel" and "exhausting".¹²³ One claimed that his group of friends referred to the DVA as "Dead Vets Appreciated".¹²⁴ While most veterans would probably find this view extreme, there is ample evidence to suggest that getting assistance can be drawn out and stressful. Advocates interviewed for this study believe that the procedure is starting to get easier and that most of those who apply and genuinely require assistance usually succeed if they persevere. However, that perseverance can take a great toll, particularly for someone already struggling with other issues. Towers, who despite suffering severe PTSD had managed to remain employed and a semblance of a normal life, claims that he was eventually broken by his dealings with the DVA:

After an especially trying encounter with the DVA, I surrendered for the first time in my life and sailed alone to an isolated beach. I scraped a hole in the sand and started a small fire...and burned every trace of my army service.¹²⁵

However, the DVA is sometimes accused of causing more than just distress as a result of its processes. An example of these accusations was an email sent to this researcher by one of the veterans interviewed under the subject heading "DVA wins

¹¹⁹ Williams, *Guinea Pigs of Vietnam* and *The Devil's Rainbow*.

¹²⁰ Four of the veterans interviewed are DVA trained advocates. Veteran Interview #3; Veteran Interview #4; Veteran Interview #29; Veteran Interview #19.

¹²¹ This was witnessed personally on two occasions by this researcher.

¹²² Numerous other veterans have expressed similar views. For examples see: Helen Signy, "Scarred veterans still waiting for help", *The Sydney Morning Herald* (29 April 2000), www.smh.com.au/news/0004/29/world/world05.html; Roz Pulley, "The veterans the world forgot", *The Cairns Post Weekend Extra* (11 December 1999), pp.4-5; Towers, *A Jungle Circus*, pp.222-226.

¹²³ Author's notes of Meeting of the National Mental Health Team, RSL Cairns, 12 April 2000.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Towers, *A Jungle Circus*, p.229

again”:

This is a short message to inform you that DVA have won again by outlasting the resolve of another Vet. Last Friday, a friend of mine...confirmed the government's Vietnam Veterans mortality study by ending his life with a bullet at home in the downstairs bathroom. He was 52.

[He] spent a fair amount of his time assisting other Vets as a Voluntary Area Rep for VVCS, and in that capacity helped me a great deal. He was one of the very few that I could talk to, but I believe that his work probably overloaded him in addition to his own problems, and that, coupled with DVA's constant refusal to grant him a TPI pension finally pushed him over the edge.¹²⁶

While this is an extreme case, it was not the only one encountered, and a couple of others claimed that they had attempted, or considered, suicide during the process.¹²⁷ They did not consider the DVA to be to blame for their problems, but they believed that it exacerbated the situation. A 1994 review of the VVCS discovered that counsellors listed difficulties with pensions and the DVA as the fifth most common problem for which they received counselling, taking up nearly 20% of their time; apparently more significant than substance abuse and employment issues, which came in at sixth and seventh.¹²⁸ The review also interviewed clients of the VVCS and reported that:

Most of the veterans...mentioned problems with DVA benefits and drew attention to a number of features of their interaction with the Department. These were largely as follows: that it was seen to be intransigent and generally inflexible in interpretation of eligibility; that the adversarial process, which often lasted some years, was demeaning and debilitating; and that poorly trained counter staff contributed to feelings of helplessness and anger.¹²⁹

Partly as a result of these findings, along with other comments from staff and veterans citing issues with the DVA, the Review Team recommended that “personnel records be modified to allow identification of VVCS staff, as distinct from DVA personnel”¹³⁰ echoing the calls of the 1987 Standing Committee Report to continue a visual independence for the VVCS, if not an actual one.

¹²⁶ Veteran in personal communication with author via email (18 January 2000).

¹²⁷ Veteran Interview #25; Veteran Interview #12.

¹²⁸ Alun C Jackson, Mark Creamer and Richard Ball, “Report on the Clinical Evaluation of the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service” (Canberra, September 1994), p.46.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.52.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.vii.

This should not suggest that the DVA has done nothing to improve services. The department has reportedly become more flexible in its acceptance criteria, benefits have increased and more assistance is being given to families. Better structures are being built to overcome future problems, and the DVA has done much to publicise its improvements.¹³¹ Scott, of the VVCS admits that Vietnam veterans are now generally well catered for in the area of health and welfare, though there could always be improvements in any system.¹³² Two of the veteran advocates interviewed confirmed that although it had been a difficult road, help was usually attainable for those who needed it if they go about it the correct way.¹³³ However, ultimately this remains a significant part of the problem – knowing how to go about it. The fact that trained advocates are required to help with the paperwork and other areas, is indicative that it remains difficult, and perhaps even inaccessible to some. A representative of the DVA admits that getting assistance for some is difficult because they sometimes “don’t know what they are entitled to”, and others, after bad experiences or are “too proud”, and therefore have no contact with the DVA. However, the department member does point out that there is of course the other side of the situation where there are “some who know every right under the sun”, and about 28000 were currently obtaining some sort of assistance (not necessarily financial).¹³⁴

The term “battle” has constantly been used in reference to veterans attempts to receive assistance and recognition because that is the most accurate description of the attitudes and experiences. Words such as “combative” and “adversarial” have been used by everyone involved on all sides, and anger continued to be the most expressed emotion. Despite improvements, these battles continued into the twenty-first century, even as a new generation of veterans had begun their “battle” for assistance. Problematically, while Vietnam veterans were fighting back at the stereotypes that had stolen their place of honour in history, the continuing battles with the government unwittingly undermined their chances of escaping the victim mentality that gripped their identity. Positive steps during the 1990s such as the dedication of the Vietnam

¹³¹ See chapter ten.

¹³² Scott, Interview.

¹³³ Veteran Interview #3; Veteran Interview #5.

¹³⁴ Interview with officer of the DVA – Younger Veterans and VVRS – Canberra, Interview with researcher (29 October 1999).

Memorial and the increased cooperation and integration between the VVAA and the RSL and the government were helpful to veterans, but did little to combat the popular image, particularly when it continued to be portrayed so regularly.

It became obvious that the so called "Vietnam Syndrome", which was often reported to be on the decline, had seeped so deeply into the understanding (or lack thereof) of Vietnam, that the place ceased to be a country, or even at times, a war, but instead became a state of mind. The persistence of the Vietnam Syndrome, both within the government and the community, and the inability of veterans to produce a consistent and cohesive voice in telling their stories, compounded the difficulties of presenting what was already a complex and contested history. Every attempt to alter the stereotypes to portray an identity that would be acceptable to the majority of veterans only appeared to cement the existing ones even further into the public consciousness. Even the efforts to move away from the Americanness of the depictions and portray a more Australian perspective of veterans seemed to have minimal success. However, as incremental as they appeared at the time, there were indications that attitudes were beginning a slow evolution. As the century came to a close, with renewed interest in Anzac Day and Australia's past, hopes were high that the Vietnam War, and its participants, might find some closure and context, and ultimately, a "place".

A Place of Their Own:
“Project Pandanus” – Local Case
Study



Symbol adopted by veterans for Project Pandanus - appears on roads and signs as directions to Pandanus Park. 20km from Cooktown – 2003.

Chapter Nine

If they [the government] think we're just going to go away, then they're radically wrong. We're in there for the long haul. There's some pretty committed fellows involved.¹

On 8 August 2001 the media reported that a group of Vietnam veterans were illegally “occupying” a piece of land on Cape York, on a property formerly known as Kalpowar Station. This event was widely reported in the national media, with particularly detailed coverage in North Queensland, and was the most prominence attained by a group of Vietnam veterans in several years. As events unfolded, it became obvious that this new “battle” was very much a continuation of the long struggle for recognition and assistance by Vietnam veterans. More significantly, it was part of the quest to find an acceptable symbolic place for themselves; except this time the place they sought was a physical one. The operation, known as “Project Pandanus”, highlighted some of the problems a number of veterans still faced and the uncomfortable place in which many veterans still believed they resided. But it also emphasised the continuing divisions within their own ranks, and above all, the continuing significance of their problematic identity.

The premise for Project Pandanus was relatively simple. For a number of years, some veterans had talked casually of finding a place away from the trappings of modern life where they could get together and relax and perhaps find some peace within themselves. An increasing number were no longer working in the traditional sense, and although sometimes in precarious health, felt too young for conventional retirement. Some were tired of doctors, counsellors and hospitals, and although often receiving acceptable levels of care, felt misunderstood and over-categorised. Others were in good health and held jobs, but sometimes felt an urge to “get away” and either be alone or with members of their peer group. The turning point came in mid-2000 when Vietnam veteran and television personality, Les Hiddins, was visiting Mayor of Cooktown Shire, Graham Elmes.² The topic was raised and Elmes said he knew the perfect spot - the former Kalpowar Station about 100kms north of Cooktown (further by road) near Laura.³ Hiddins knew the area well from his

¹ Interview with Clive Dreis (16 December 2003).

² The Shire of Cooktown is situated approximately 300kms north of Cairns on the edge of Cape York.

³ Interview with Les Hiddins (15 December 2003).

extensive travelling in northern Australia and discussed the idea with other veterans. A group inspected the site and agreed it was ideal.⁴

The land had been purchased with other Cape York property by the Queensland government in 1995 as part of plans for environmental protection. Various areas, though not Kalpowar, had already been classified as National Parks.⁵ At the time, the area around Kalpowar was the responsibility of the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) while its future was decided. To the veterans involved, the piece of land was perfect for their needs. It was off the traditional tourist paths, but accessible with relative ease by four wheel drive (although this was intermittent during the wet season). It was isolated, but only half a day's drive to Cooktown. There were a variety of available activities: excellent fishing; lots of flora and fauna for the enthusiasts, particularly bird watching; and plenty of room to move around and be alone if they did not want to mix with the group.⁶ There was also a sense of symbolism in the fact that the land had been allotted for soldier settlement after WWI.⁷ Those involved decided to approach the state government and ask for a portion of Kalpowar to be made available for their use. The government refused, stating that no decisions could be made about the land as not only had it been put aside for environmental protection, but it was also the subject of a Native Title claim that would almost certainly take years to settle.⁸

Veterans were less than impressed with the outright refusal, and what they considered to be an air of dismissal from the government. Representatives of the group had approached the local indigenous community, as Hiddins was well known and understood the importance of its support. They spoke to members of the community, including aboriginal elders, Stan Rootsey and Joyce Bassany, who said that they were happy for the veterans to use the area as long as they did not erect any permanent

⁴ Interview - Dreis.

⁵ Tanya Targett & Rory Callinan, "Bush tucker battlers grab land", *The Courier Mail* (8 August 2001).

⁶ Anthony Hoy, "Hiddins Agenda", *The Bulletin* (19 November 2002), pp.42-43.

⁷ Lawrence Springborg – Queensland Nationals, "Veterans deserve better" (6 March 2003), <http://npa.org.au/document.php?documentID=102>.

⁸ Targett & Callinan, "Bush tucker battlers grab land".

structures or do anything to damage the environment.⁹ Veterans assumed that a good relationship with the local people and the support of the shire council would assure their request, however this did not prove to be the case. Disappointed but determined, veterans formed a steering committee (with no leader – they would all be equal) with support from the Townsville VVAA and secretly made some preparations and began garnering veteran support through groups and individuals. Approximately one hundred veterans quietly gathered at the site for Anzac Day 2001 to discuss the situation. Frustrated with the lack of response from the state government to requests to open a dialogue with the veterans, they developed a strategy with the name Project Pandanus. Hiddins was nominated as their main spokesman. He used his media connections to announce their plans, and on 8 August 2001, ten days before Vietnam Veterans Day, the story broke.¹⁰

If it was publicity the veterans were after, they certainly got plenty, but whether it was the preferred kind is another matter. Presumably, and perhaps understandably, a group of veterans wanting government permission for a site on which to camp has little newsworthy appeal. But throw in the suggestion of “troubled” veterans, pictures of a couple of men with guns, some ill-advised statements edited just the right way, and repeat the word “Vietnam” as often as possible, and suddenly there is a story. Over the following several days various news sources used words such as “illegally occupying”; “siege”; “perimeter”; “sentries” and other military (and conflict) oriented language.¹¹ Most of the initial stories left little room for doubt that hordes of armed unstable soldiers were running around in the bush and some sort of conflict was imminent. Steering Committee members, Hiddins and Clive Dreis, agreed that the early reporting portrayed them badly and claimed to be disappointed and angry,

⁹ Melissa Ketchell, “Why we’ve seized our own place in the sun”, *The Sunday Mail* (12 August 2001), p.91. It was later revealed that Rootsey and Bassany did not have the authority to speak for the traditional owners, and although most of the local indigenous community remained unconcerned, it did not solve the wider problem.

¹⁰ For example: “Skirmish over veterans’ plans for retreat”, *ABC News* (8 August 2001) <http://www.abc.net.au/news/regionals/cairns/regcrn-8aug2001-8.htm>; Targett & Callinan, “Bush tucker battlers grab land”; *Win Local News*, Nine Network (8 August 2001). An earlier story had appeared in local media in May reporting comments from Mayor Elmes that veterans were pushing for land for a retreat. The story attracted little interest and there was no mention of Project Pandanus or any hint of the controversy ahead. Notably, the word “Vietnam” was not mentioned. Peter Wex, “War vets lobby for bush retreat”, *The Cairns Post* (21 May 2001), p.3.

¹¹ This sort of language was featured in all above examples.

confirming that veterans were upset.¹² They were anxious to set the record straight about the men with guns, in particular. One was apparently a local veteran who has hunted wild pigs in the area for years, and the other a friend, who was not a veteran. Neither were affiliated with the Project Pandanus group: they just happened to be around when the television crew came through the area.¹³ The media seemed little interested in the details, although they did report Hiddins' assertions that no one was armed (usually buried in the article).¹⁴

When the next camera crew reached the area with the local police, they seemed surprised, and perhaps a little disappointed, to be greeted by two late middle-aged veterans on crutches.¹⁵ This was not reported at the time and after a few days, the television media appeared to lose interest in the story, although it remained viable in the less visual media for some time. The aim, from the veterans' perspective, was obviously to have the coverage lead up to Vietnam Veterans Day on 18 August, and give time for more veterans to hear about Project Pandanus and make their way there to offer support. It also presumably gave the state government time to consider its options. Even without any more inflammatory remarks or rifle toting veterans, the story remained controversial during this period. The only politician, apart from the shire council, to publicly support the veterans' aims was Senator Len Harris, the sole representative at federal level of the controversially conservative One Nation Party. Len Harris also took the opportunity to encourage "disadvantaged and community" and "non-Aboriginal" groups to make land claims to prevent a situation where, he alleged, "we will end up with nobody other than indigenous people have right of access".¹⁶ While the veterans involved were surely grateful for any political support, Harris' using of the situation to promote such a contentious policy was unhelpful.

The government avoided attacking the veterans, but environmentalists had no such qualms. Linden Schneiders from the Wilderness Society expressed sympathy for veterans, but stated that because of the land's "superlative conservation values", they

¹² Interview – Hiddins; Interview - Dreis.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ For example see: Targett & Callinan, "Bush tucker battlers grab land".

¹⁵ Margo Zlotkowski, "A place where vets can cry", *The Cairns Post Weekend Extra* (1 February 2003), pp.4-5.

¹⁶ ABC, "One Nation backs community group land claims", *ABC News* (17 August 2001), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/state/qld/archive/metqld-15aug2001-13.htm>.

should not get it and he advised the government to be “firm” on the issue.¹⁷ Henry Boer from the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre was less equivocal in his criticism of the proposal. He claimed that conservationists were “angered” and said that he found the veterans’ actions “worrying”.¹⁸ Both contended that if the veterans wanted land they should buy it, with Schneiders in particular suggesting that with Hiddins high profile (and television earnings), there should be no problem raising the funds.¹⁹ A spokesperson for a local environmental group appearing on the Cairns local news was even more blunt, adding that they did not want a group of men with guns running around a protected area,²⁰ reminding any viewers who might have forgotten that these were dangerous people.

Hiddins and the steering committee attempted to temper the initial stories with a more moderate approach a few days later in *The Sunday Mail*, with the blurb asserting that: “They’re not Rambos, they just want solitude”.²¹ While significantly more balanced and restrained, certain passages, when taken into the context of the previous reporting, failed to dismiss all concerns. Hiddins admitted to spreading some “bullshit”, particularly on their website, and called it “counter-intelligence”. The journalist noted that:

Such “counter-intelligence” was probably the source of concerns within the department about large numbers of veterans wearing army greens who had set up radio communications and posted sentries around Crown land.²²

Hiddins also stated that the group had no intentions of applying formally to the government for use of the land: “They just want us to make a formal application so they can reject it”.²³ Also undermining the seemingly moderate tone of the article was a photograph of a hand painted sign at Kalpowar Station which read:

Australian Vietnam Veterans
Base Camp
For Veterans and Their families Only ²⁴

¹⁷ ABC, “Vietnam vets escape from reality on QLD cattle station”, *ABC Online* (8 August 2001), <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/s343263.htm>.

¹⁸ ABC, “Vietnam vets’ protest angers conservationists”, *ABC News Online* (9 August 2001), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/regionals/cairns/regcrn-9aug2001-1.htm>.

¹⁹ Ibid.; ABC, “Vietnam vets escape reality”.

²⁰ *Win Local News – Cairns* (9 August 2001).

²¹ Melissa Ketchell, “Why we’ve seized our own place in the sun”, *The Sunday Mail* (12 August 2001), p.91.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

The media should not be foisted with the entire responsibility for the reports that created bad publicity for the project. Veterans themselves were partly to blame for some of the misunderstandings. As articulate and media savvy as Hiddins was, some ill-advised sound-bites taken from his television comments lost some of their context and put across an attitude and image that was quite unintended.²⁵ Mixed with the unfortunate timing that saw cameras crossing paths with pig hunters, and the general Vietnam stereotypes, the whole story had a somewhat threatening tone. Using military terms, particularly the more evocative and inflammatory ones, was also a mistake. After being introduced by the veterans themselves, these terms were used continually in reports. This was aggravated by the content of the official website.²⁶ The site stated that they would use tactics they had learnt in the military to assist in attaining the land, including the use of “advance parties”, “scout teams” and setting up radio contact between the “R&R camp” and the Townsville base. It offered veterans “sit reps”, and most disconcertingly, had a “Pandanus secret zone” that could only be accessed by approved veterans with the appropriate passwords.²⁷ Despite the more humorous sections with its larrikin approach, such as “Ginger Mick” and “Chicken Man”, the secrecy and the military overtones were problematic.

Fears abated when 18 August passed without further drama and it was reported that sixty veterans had attended a peaceful and enjoyable Vietnam Veterans Day at the camp, much less than the hundred that attended the Cairns service.²⁸ Hundreds of veterans had not disappeared into the bush and no conflict appeared imminent. The government further defused the situation, in the public’s mind at least, by continually reiterating that it sympathised with the veterans, and although they were breaking the law, it had no intention of trying to remove them. Environment minister, Dean Wells, reassured everyone that his office was negotiating with the veterans to find a solution:²⁹ a claim that veterans denied.³⁰ The “softly softly” approach of the

²⁵ Interview – Hiddins.

²⁶ Project Pandanus, “Base Camp” (11 August 2001), <http://www.users.bigpond.com/fieldguide>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ This was somewhat larger than the usual attendance in Cairns, possibly owing to the fact that it was the 35th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan and also the coverage veterans had in the previous week. Janelle Gullo, “Service honours Vietnam heroes”, *The Cairns Post* (20 August 2001), p.2.

²⁹ ABC, “Vietnam vets allowed to stay on land during retreat talks”, *ABC News* (8 August 2001), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/regionals/cairns/regcrn-8aug2001-6.htm>.

³⁰ “Vietnam vets escape from reality”, *ABC News*; Targett & Callinan, “Bush tucker battlers grab land”; Interview – Hiddins; Interview – Dreis.

government was understandable, as the sight of police and rangers physically dragging frail or disabled veterans off Crown land on the evening news was a politically nightmarish scenario. Despite the calls of environmentalists, the government could see no advantage in moving on a few campers. The apparent tactics of the government were to seem conciliatory, but make no commitments and hope the veterans eventually tired of it and disappeared. Perhaps the Queensland government had not examined the past relationship between Vietnam veterans and the establishment: they were accustomed to battle and not easily fobbed off. The other factor that was given inadequate attention by the media or the government were the numbers involved. Sixty is hardly a huge crowd, particularly in the light of the numbers that were inferred by the media. However, when it is considered that sixty is more than an average Vietnam Veterans Day attendance in Cairns, and Kalpowar's extreme remoteness and relative difficulty of access, as well as the fact publicity was limited until ten days before the event, sixty is significant.

A Place in the Legend?

The most obvious question raised by Project Pandanus is why veterans wanted a private retreat in a remote part of the country? It is also the most complex question. When asked, veterans most often stated that they wanted a place to "get away" and reduce periods of stress.³¹ It would be easy to dismiss this answer, as most people dealing with everyday modern life sometimes feel the urge to "get away" from the stresses. Further examination uncovers the difficulties of living for many years with PTSD, even if it is mild or under control. Those suffering from the disorder most often cite the major difficulty as dealing with other people in ordinary situations. Many feel the need occasionally to have a break to reduce the possibility of a major episode. Hiddins said he becomes "toey" and knows he must get away, while Dreis described a similar feeling.³² One veteran's wife claimed that she was forced to sleep in another room because of her husband's violent nightmares, and says that he is more relaxed after visits to Kalpowar.³³ Certainly these descriptions of the everyday difficulties of PTSD were not uncommon among veterans interviewed, and are also

³¹ See for example: "Vietnam vets escape from reality", *ABC News*.

³² Interview – Hiddins; Interview – Dreis.

³³ Zlotkowski, "A place where vets can cry", p.5.

well documented in other literature.³⁴ It was suggested that the ability to go to a place and live simply for a while away from the non-veteran community - with the exception of family - might be helpful. This idea had some support from the medical community with claims that such an experience could “assist veterans process their memories” and therefore give them context and closure.³⁵

However, it was not only those with PTSD who believed they could get something from a retreat. There are few experiences as intense as war, and even fewer that are as likely to create a sense of comradeship and belonging. Veterans believed that a place such as Kalpowar could give those who had little or no contact with other servicepersons an opportunity to be with others who had a shared experience. It was a case of having other people who understand without having to “fill in all the gaps”.³⁶ It offered a chance not only to be understood, but also to understand as well. One article promoted this view with the title “A place where vets can cry”,³⁷ as that sort of behaviour would not be seen as acceptable elsewhere. This sense of understanding was also extended to families - the opportunity to hear other peoples’ stories would assist wives and older children to better comprehend the issue, and perhaps even find comfort.³⁸ Most of all though, they simply wanted a place they could call their own; a space to avoid prying eyes, and the stability afforded by a legalised claim on a piece of land would offer a comforting sense of control of their own destiny.

The proposal had some historical precedence, as did the site itself. The land had been granted as a soldier settlement after WWI, a factor which gave credence to the veterans’ claim.³⁹ This link to the past has at least two aspects for Vietnam veterans. The first is what they considered the lack of satisfactory repatriation assistance given to them in comparison with previous wars, particularly on their immediate return. The second, and perhaps more important, is their feelings of difficulty fitting in to the

³⁴ See chapter four.

³⁵ “Doctor backs vets’ retreat”, *The Cairns Post* (10 August 2001), p.5

³⁶ Interview – Dreis.

³⁷ Zlotkowski, “A place where vets can cry”, pp.4-5.

³⁸ Interview – Entsch; Interview – Hiddins; Interview – Dreis.

³⁹ While land under the soldier settlement scheme was given on the condition that it had to be worked to be retained, and so it was no longer officially soldier settlement land, it was the principle and symbolism that its past history evoked that interested the veterans involved.

community and the legacy of serviceperson that had gone before them. This second factor was an important issue when it was decided to give land to returning soldiers in 1916:

Repatriation was largely the product of a conference which defined the ground rules for both soldier settlement and the ultimate re-establishment of Australian service people in the community. In the eyes of early policy makers, this meant settling many of them on the land.⁴⁰

The soldier settlement scheme was considered essential not only for initial recruitment and later, repatriation, but also to provide jobs and increase production in Australia after the war.⁴¹ It was presumed that most soldiers would want to take up the offer of farming land and it was suggested “that it was highly desirable for returned soldiers to get away from the metropolitan areas at the earliest possible moment”.⁴² The fact that the scheme was largely disastrous could perhaps have sounded a warning to the superstitious among those who were promoting the site on those grounds.

Project Pandanus was by no means the first group of Vietnam veterans to retreat to the bush. A number of service personnel from every war have found themselves unable or unwilling to live in communities for various reasons, including trauma, and have isolated themselves.⁴³ Vietnam veterans were no different. One of the interview participants lived in this manner, and two others were partially isolated.⁴⁴ Many had a friend living in these circumstances, while others expressed a wish to live that way themselves but were unable to escape responsibilities. However, a greater understanding of the problems of some veterans during the 1990s saw the evolution of a more acceptable middle ground. One of the earliest of these can be seen as a first step towards a place such as Kalpowar. In 1990 the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Bush Retreat was opened at the remote though easily accessible, Lake Sorell in Tasmania. Built by Vietnam veterans and maintained by the VVAA state branch of Tasmania, the five bedroom house was built not only for the needs of Tasmanian Vietnam veterans and their families, but was open to all those around the country.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Lloyd and Rees, *The Last Shilling*, p.43.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp.44-46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.49.

⁴³ See chapter four.

⁴⁴ Veteran Interview #9; Veteran Interview #16; Veteran Interview #26.

⁴⁵ Central Queensland VVAA, “Vietnam Veterans Memorial Bush Retreat Tasmania” (27 January 2004), <http://veteranretreat.tripod.com/Tas.htm>.

However, few other veteran groups around the country were fortunate enough to have such an undertaking⁴⁶ or easy access to Tasmania, and others did not feel that a comfortable house was what they required.

Operation Flinders Foundation in South Australia was a successful scheme that took troubled teenagers into the bush in remote areas of the Flinders Ranges to encourage team building, life skills and self-confidence.⁴⁷ One of those involved, veteran Bob Kearney, thought that a similar idea might be useful for Vietnam veterans, particularly those struggling. In 1998, in a joint initiative between the VVCS and Operation Flinders, “Trojans Trek”, a six day self-help style program was launched, and in August, the first group of sixteen, with veteran counsellors, set off into the South Australian Bush.⁴⁸ The veterans and counsellors involved concluded that the experiment was successful.⁴⁹ A year later, the scheme was being promoted nationally and veterans seemed enthusiastic, with Operation Flinders director John Shepherd, stating:

They find they can do things and they can socialise effectively, and they can move forward with some self-esteem.⁵⁰

Kearney and Peter Haran produced a book, *Crossfire*, describing the outcomes of the 2000 “Trojans Trek”, with events and discussions on the trip being the introduction to each chapter that then went back to their experiences three decades earlier that had inexorably led to that particular moment in 2000. They found that “there are many Vets who haven’t moved outside their home for years. Some moved into their garden shed or garage; established a perimeter in their own backyard.”⁵¹ Most on the trek had apparently had alcohol or drug problems, and all but medication was banned on the trip. As the trek progressed, most veterans began to relax with Kearney claiming:

Coming to the Flinders has washed away a lot of the Bad Thoughts. It’s also saving some of us from a lot of Bad Things we just may have done.⁵²

⁴⁶ All states did gradually develop small amounts of emergency accommodation for veterans, but they were not retreats as such. For example: “Zac’s Place” – operated by the VVAA in Townsville; and The Veterans Community Hostel – operated by VSASA in Brisbane.

⁴⁷ Terry Plane, “A chance to heal angry scars of Vietnam”, *The Weekend Australian* (4-5 September 1999), p.10.

⁴⁸ Peter Haran & Robert Kearney, *Crossfire: An Australian Reconnaissance Unit in Vietnam* (Sydney 2001), p.227.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Plane, “A chance to heal angry scars of Vietnam”, p.10.

⁵¹ Haran & Kearney, *Crossfire*, p.26.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.85.

However, nobody concluded that it was a miracle cure, and some found they were unable to connect with the group; for most, though, it was a first step, with psychologist Doug Knuckey stating:

Results were very encouraging. All who completed the program regarded it an unqualified success, meeting or exceeding their expectations. Respondents and their partners who were surveyed reported that the program resulted in significant improvements to personal and social functioning.⁵³

It is no coincidence that the Preface for *Crossfire* was written by Les Hiddins at about the same time that Project Pandanus was being planned.

Central Queensland Vietnam Veterans began seriously discussing a bush retreat at about the same time as the Operation Flinders foundation, but they wanted something to which they could go at any time, in any number, without supervision. Psychologist Bruce Acutt offered veterans the use of a section of his sixty acre property at Cawarral, 30kms east of Rockhampton and Cockscomb Veteran Camp was established in 1999.⁵⁴ Cockscomb offers a small amount of simple fixed accommodation or camping, depending on the needs of those using the retreat. Despite its relative proximity to the metropolitan area, the camp itself is relatively isolated in heavy bushland close to an area that was a gold mine in the 1880s. According to the veterans who established Cockscomb it was:

A place where fellow veterans could go, when things were getting tough, or when they felt the need to be out of it and alone for a while, or the need to lean on someone for moral support, or find someone that could walk the walk, talk the talk and understand the burden.⁵⁵

This could well be the exact description of what veterans involved in Project Pandanus also wanted. To further give a sense of symbolism and permanence to Cockscomb, a memorial with the names of all those from the Central Queensland who died in Vietnam, and significantly, those dying in the time since from what many believe to have been war related causes, was unveiled on the site on Vietnam Veterans Day in 2002.⁵⁶

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.121&227.

⁵⁴ Central Queensland VVAA, "Cockscomb Veterans Camp: History", <http://veteranretreat.tripod.com/History.htm>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ ABC Central Queensland, "The Forgotten Fighters" *ABC Online* (23 August 2002), <http://www.abc.net.au/centralqld/stories/s657232.htm>.

A similar isolated retreat has been established on 14 acres of bush land at Palmwoods near Nambour in South East Queensland and is known as Ian Gibbs House.⁵⁷ This retreat is close enough to allow relatively easy access to the largest population of Vietnam veterans in the country, though how many are aware of its existence is unknown. In 2003, South Australian members of the VVF also discussed purchasing land near the Murray River for a permanent bush retreat.⁵⁸ Apart from being permanent, unlike the Flinders expeditions, it would be more easily accessible from Adelaide and would be available for families. Perhaps to avoid the problems of Kalpowar, the suggestion was made that a piece of land be purchased to ensure permanence and “offer peace and privacy” to veterans, with any donations being tax deductible.⁵⁹ Although the outcome was unknown at the time of writing, it seems unlikely that these will be the last group of veterans to propose the idea of a bush retreat for peace, privacy and self-help.

The choice as the bush for a retreat is not simply because of its isolation and its “back to basics” attractions. One of the most significant factors in the appeal of bush retreats to Vietnam veterans is its inherent Australianness. It is perhaps the one activity in which the veterans cannot be accused of following their American counterparts in some way. Australians have a long history of feeling symbolically tied to the bush, despite the fact that the majority of the population live in metropolitan areas or on the coastal fringes of the continent. But the bush is considered part of Australia’s heritage and is often used to colloquially describe Australia “from the beaches to the bush”. Russel Ward famously addressed this theme in the late 1950s as part of what he termed *The Australian Legend*.⁶⁰ Ward’s central thesis claimed that the national identity hinged on the ideal of the “bushman”, a “romanticized stereotype” of how many Australians wanted to be viewed:

This cluster of character-traits – adaptability, mateship, hatred of affection and so on – was seen as typically Australian, *not* because most Australians ever possessed these traits but because the minority of bush-dwellers that did differed most graphically from the average Briton and so were seen as identifiably Australian. It is not argued that the average nineteenth-century bushman possessed all or even most of these traits. It is argued

⁵⁷ CQVVAA, “Ian Gibbs House: Veteran Retreat”, <http://veteranretreat.tripod.com/gibbs.htm>. Even though there is fixed accommodation, camping is often preferred

⁵⁸ VVF South Australia Branch, *Snafu* - official newsletter (November 2003), p.3.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* 2nd Ed (Melbourne, 1978).

that the material conditions of his life caused him to value these traits very highly and so to like to think that he possessed them.⁶¹

Ward claimed that the ideal of the “noble bushman” continued well into the twentieth century as a “basic component of the national mystique”.⁶² Linzi Murrie made similar conclusions when researching masculinity in Australia, believing that the bush culture had a significant influence on the construction of character.⁶³ As Ward did, she also points to the link between the bush traditions and the Anzac Legend, where it was often claimed that Australia’s soldiering ability was mainly the result of bush skills and the other traits that Ward had described. Murrie claims that these are the dominant masculine values:

According to the legend, the ‘heroic Anzac’ takes over from the ‘noble bushman’ as the embodiment of the ‘typical Australian’. The frontier masculinity is merged with that of the warrior.⁶⁴

Examining this transition, Murrie believes that there is no doubt that the “bushman was indeed the forerunner of the digger.”⁶⁵ This connection between the bush and servicemen illustrates another important factor in the bush retreats of Vietnam veterans. It can be suggested that they can also be seen as an attempt to reclaim their masculinity, their identity and ultimately reinforce their link to the Anzac Legend.

Battleground or Sacred Site

The relative silence surrounding Project Pandanus since August 2001 ended abruptly in October 2002 when veterans achieved a major breakthrough. Les Hiddins, using his contacts at the ABC, had managed to interest the producers of the popular weekly documentary, *Australian Story*, in the project. The story was filmed around Vietnam Veterans Day in August and screened in October.⁶⁶ The show opened with an endorsement from Major General Michael Jeffrey, who would become Australia’s Governor-General the following year, stating that the “concept is a good one”.⁶⁷ This respectable opening heralded a very different approach from the previous year, which continued throughout the presentation. The focus was mainly on Hiddins and he

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.23.

⁶³ Linzi Murrie, “Australian Legend and Australian Men”, Richard Nile (Ed), *The Australian Legend and its Discontents* (St Lucia, 2000), pp.81-94.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.91.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ “Once Were Soldiers”, *Australian Story*, ABC Television (7 October 2002).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

quite openly talked about the personal problems that had emerged in the past few years, and about how a place such as Kalpowar could help him and others. The park had been renamed “The War Veterans Retreat”, and it was made clear that it was veterans of all conflicts and peacekeeping missions, young and old. This immediately broadened the appeal, and it pulled the focus from Vietnam. One veteran, addressing an informal meeting at the campsite, asserted:

We’ve got to look at getting the word to the guys that are coming out of Afghanistan, particularly the SAS blokes, because, shit, they’re gonna have stress problems that some of us have not even thought about.⁶⁸

The show also portrayed the family orientation of the retreat, interviewing Hiddins’ son and showing the partners of some of the veterans. They were anxious to encourage partners in particular. Clive Dreis claimed that about half of those going to Kalpowar are accompanied by them.⁶⁹

Australian Story was a huge success for the veterans involved in Project Pandanus. Although it reiterated the image of the “victim” Vietnam veteran, it removed the “villain” overtones. The use of military jargon was almost entirely absent, and the late middle-aged participants failed to look dangerous or deranged. The show increased public support and promoted increased positive public awareness.⁷⁰ This in turn put more pressure on politicians. The Queensland Government sounded ineffectual and overly bureaucratic, which resulted in a more sympathetic portrayal for veterans. The episode was well received and won an encore performance over the Christmas break as one of the most popular episodes of the season.⁷¹

In response to the show, Queensland Minister for Natural Resources and Mines, Stephen Robertson, asserted that the government was exploring “alternative areas of land which meet their needs but don’t cause us to have issues with native title or environmental issues.”⁷² He stated that his department was exploring an option west

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Interview - Dreis.

⁷⁰ See for example: Zlotkowski, “A place where vets can cry”; The ABC Online Forum about the episode received considerable traffic, all positive: <http://www2b.abc.net.au/localforum/austory/transcripts/s690368.htm>. *The Cairns Post* printed several of supportive letters (and no critical ones) in the days following the broadcast (15 October 2002, p.9; 17 October 2002, p.9; 11 October 2002, p.9).

⁷¹ ABC Television, “Australian Story :Summer Series”, *Australian Story* (December 2002), http://abc.net.au/austory/archives/2002/05_AustoryArchives2002Idx_Saturday23November2002.htm.

⁷² “Bush Tucker Man is in trouble”, *ABC News* (7 October 2002), <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/s695310.htm>.

of Cairns, on the other side of the tablelands, though veterans claim the suggestion was never made to them, and the supposed continuing negotiation was non-existent.⁷³ Robertson was firm that the veterans could not stay at Kalpowar, as was the state member for the Cook, Steve Bredhauer, despite the fact that both stated that the veterans would not be forcibly removed from the property.⁷⁴ Local government politicians remained supportive, and were joined by the Mareeba Shire Mayor, Mick Borzi, who wrote to Premier Beattie in September 2003 urging him to excise a small portion of the southern part of Kalpowar for the use of the veterans.⁷⁵ State Opposition Leader, Lawrence Springborg, weighed into the issue in March 2003. He announced that the National Party “fully supported” the Pandanus Park project and called on the government to “have a deed of trust drawn up to allow veterans to use the land in perpetuity”.⁷⁶ Robertson responded that “grandstanding” would not help solve the problem of Pandanus, and repeated that he sympathised and his department was continuing to investigate options.⁷⁷

One politician from whom veterans had expected support was Federal Member for Leichhardt (which includes Kalpowar), Warren Entsch. While the matter was a state one and Entsch was a federal member, his support would have been useful, and veterans were fairly certain they would obtain it as Entsch was a regular champion of Vietnam veteran issues and had a good working relationship with the local veterans.⁷⁸ Clive Dreis, as an acquaintance and constituent of Entsch’s, was nominated to make contact and request his support. Dreis was surprised to find that Entsch did not support the veterans’ bid for Kalpowar, suggesting another place west of the tablelands on private property⁷⁹ - interestingly, a similar suggestion to Stephen Robertson’s. Entsch did not simply refuse to support Kalpowar, but went further and spoke out against it, and a war of words broke out between Entsch and Hiddins.

⁷³ Interview – Hiddins; Interview – Dreis.

⁷⁴ “Once were soldiers”, *Australian Story*.

⁷⁵ Mick Borzi, “Correspondence with Peter Beattie” (10 September 2003).

⁷⁶ Queensland Nationals, “Veterans deserve better” (6 March 2003), <http://www.npa.org.au/document.php?documentID=102>.

⁷⁷ Natural Resources and Mines, “Vietnam Veterans and Kalpowar Station” (6 March 2003), <http://us.altnews.com.au/article.php?sid=4266>.

⁷⁸ It must be noted that few of the veterans with whom he regularly dealt were not involved with the Kalpowar Steering Committee as it was at that stage based in Townsville.

⁷⁹ Interview – Dreis.

Another veteran claimed that although Entsch had mentioned another piece of land, he had suggested that they buy or lease it, rather than have it granted to them.⁸⁰

When approached directly, Entsch confirmed that, in relation to Kalpowar, “I don’t agree with it” although “I think the concept is brilliant.”⁸¹ He thought the idea of veterans having a place solely for themselves and their families to be a valuable one. He claimed that his objection was solely to the site chosen by the Pandanus committee, and he was committed to helping them find more suitable land. While he believed that what the state government was trying to accomplish in the area around Kalpowar is not in the best interest of the general community, he says that it is the unsuitability of the place rather than its unavailability that is at issue. The biggest problem, he asserted is its remoteness:

They’re all on medication and a lot of them are suffering from mental problems and are needing treatment for them, and you’re literally half a day from help. And that’s to Cooktown, another half a day to Cairns. The prospect of someone dying unnecessarily is serious.⁸²

He also pointed out the inaccessibility of Kalpowar during much of the wet season and its lack of suitability for conventional vehicles at any time, claiming that this restricts those wanting to get there. Entsch believes that veterans would be better off finding a place on private property and negotiate some deal for access with the owners. He gave an example of this system already in practice on his own property – Hurricane station, a cattle station 250km from Cairns on the Mitchell River. Entsch allocated a riverfront piece of the property to the local chapter of the VVMC (of which he is an honorary member) to give them a place to get away: other veterans are welcome to use it as long as they arrange it with the VVMC, who has “custody”.⁸³ All but 30kms of the road is sealed, and is accessible all year round to conventional vehicles with only two and a half hours driving time from Cairns. The site allowed for veterans is apparently only 3kms from the station house where they can go to use the telephone or get help, along with a conveniently placed airstrip. A member of the VVMC confirmed that they were using the place on a regular basis and were happy

⁸⁰ Veteran Interview #40.

⁸¹ Interview - Entsch.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

with the arrangement, despite the minor annoyance of the road being unsuitable for their bikes.⁸⁴

Entsch further claims that Kalpowar has been chosen as part of one individual's personal agenda through which veterans are being "used" as a means to an ends. He also believes that the unavailability of the property is of no assistance to their wider issues, not least of which are their health and public perception, and the situation compounds the problems brought on by their long battles for assistance:

So here we have a situation where we have guys who have basically spent their adult life in conflict, being looked at I guess, with a level of disdain. Suddenly up in a place that they're never going to be able to get, being judged by the broader public as a group of crazy vets, Vietnam Vets! And you see some of those first images...and the media would have been looking for images like that. It's hoped that they will go away. But the reality is, they are being incited into further conflict. So they will maintain that rage and that conflict until they die, because they won't get it.⁸⁵

Entsch says he has "copped a lot of flak" over the issue because it has been alleged – correctly - on the Pandanus website that he is not in favour of the project, and so has received a lot of abusive calls and letters from veterans, which he finds unfair considering his history of supporting them.⁸⁶

Hiddins and Dreis dispute Entsch's criticisms of the unsuitability of the site. They particularly object to the idea that veterans should not go to so remote a place because of their "mental problems" (Hiddins: "yeah, we'd better stay in our house at home then") as they believe it to be a help rather than a hindrance.⁸⁷ Indeed, very few of those going to Kalpowar (or veterans in general) are seriously ill. Hiddins also said that there were *two* usable airstrips within suitable distance, and one in particular quite close to the main camp,⁸⁸ which they have already used to bring in fuel and supplies. Both also point out that there have been no emergencies in the three years they had been involved, although it could never be ruled out, which is why they had established contingencies.⁸⁹ Hiddins claimed that Entsch's agenda in the issue was a personal one, and although Dreis would not be drawn on this issue, both admitted that

⁸⁴ Veteran Interview #25. (Second interview - 29 January 2003).

⁸⁵ Interview - Entsch.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Interview – Hiddins; Interview - Dreis.

⁸⁸ Consultation of a map of the area show this to be true.

⁸⁹ Interview – Hiddins; Interview - Dreis.

Entsch had offered them use of the section of his property at Hurricane. Hiddins said that it had been rejected by the committee because it did not suit their needs and did not have the attractions of Kalpowar. Hurricane apparently does not have the fishing, wildlife, space or privacy of Kalpowar and Hiddins says that veterans want to come and go as they please; not having to make arrangements with the VVMC or anyone else.⁹⁰ Dreis, who does not live far from Hurricane, also agreed that it was unsuitable.⁹¹

The publicity from *Australian Story* had certainly proved useful in increasing public and veteran support for (or at least knowledge of) Project Pandanus, but the state government, with the exception of Robertson's reactions to criticism, had lapsed into silence on the issue. After the headiness of their good publicity wore off, veterans realised that they were really no further ahead. Just as had been the case in past battles with the government when events reached a stalemate, some gave up and others became more radicalised. The committee began to make plans for an alternative and controversial approach, but nevertheless made another attempt at conciliation by sending Premier Beattie a personal invitation to attend Kalpowar for Vietnam Veterans Day 2003.⁹² Hiddins had his local member for Thuringowa, Anita Philips, hand deliver the letter, so there was no possibility of the letter being lost in the bureaucracy. No one was surprised that Beattie did not attend, but they were angered by his failure to even acknowledge the invitation.⁹³

The new tactics appeared on the Project Pandanus website in mid-2003 and displayed an increased level of anger and frustration that was endemic in much of the veteran community. If the government would not hand over the site willingly, then they would just take it. Their website listed a section called "Phoenix Program":

The Phoenix Program has been initiated as a more Pro Active supporting role for the Project Pandanus. It would therefore tend to be more "upfront" and "in your face" in its approach, than the Pandanus Project has been to date. The Phoenix Program is designed to place increasing embarrassment and confusion in the Queensland State Government, whilst at the same time, keeping the population on side.

⁹⁰ Interview – Hiddins.

⁹¹ Interview - Dreis

⁹² Les Hiddins, "Letter to Premier Peter Beattie" (March 2003).

⁹³ Interview - Hiddins.

Given the fact that the original Phoenix Program in Vietnam was nothing than a CIA sponsored assassination operation, we should make it very clear that the name is the only element the two Phoenix Program's have in common. Well...that's almost true. Even so, this program will indeed envelope a number of aspects that do have comparisons. It will however embrace the strategy of Gandhi, the tactics of Ho Chi Minh, and the execution employed by General Giap. At a more contemporary level, it will embrace the aspects associated by Asymmetric Warfare, to gain the end results...⁹⁴

As part of this new program, "Operation Taipan" was planned to be launched to coincide with Vietnam Veterans Day. Details were sketchy as most was buried in the secret zone, but one of its main aims was to make the role of the QPWS "untenable" in the area.⁹⁵ Volunteers with various skills were called for such as electricians, mechanics, builders, technicians, bush skills, carpentry and experience with water reticulation for the initial phase of the operation.⁹⁶ Publicity was also urged, and the group adopted the symbol of three vertical red stripes, which was daubed at intervals on government property on the roads heading north towards Kalpowar.⁹⁷

Operation Taipan was publicly announced in *The Sunday Mail* on 17 August 2003 reporting a "revolt" on the part of Vietnam veterans, and including the quote from Hiddins about Gandhi, Ho Chi Minh and General Giap.⁹⁸ However, this was mild in comparison to the front page of *The Cairns Post* on 18 August: an enormous headline announced "Battleground".⁹⁹ The article outlined a little about Operation Taipan and said several hundred veterans were expected to converge on the site, but somewhat curiously, did not use Hiddins Gandhi/Ho/Giap quote. Hiddins insisted that all action has been, and will be, non-violent, despite the inflammatory language, and was surprised to think that people might see the approach otherwise.¹⁰⁰ However, the newspaper headlines implied a different story.

⁹⁴ Project Pandanus, "The Phoenix Program: In support of Project Pandanus" (8 July 2003), <http://phoenixprogramme.info/>. The website defines Asymmetric Warfare as "unanticipated or non traditional approaches to circumvent or undermine an adversary's strengths while exploiting his vulnerabilities through unexpected technologies or innovative means."

⁹⁵ Project Pandanus, "Phoenix Program: Intelligence" (8 July 2003) <http://phoenixprogramme.info/intelligence.html>.

⁹⁶ Project Pandanus, "Phoenix Program: Operation Taipan" (8 July 2003), <http://phoenixprogramme.info/newfile.html>.

⁹⁷ As of June 2003, more than half a dozen symbols were apparent between Cairns and Cooktown.

⁹⁸ "Melissa Ketchell, "Viet vets revolt", *The Sunday Mail* (17 August 2003), p.28.

⁹⁹ Margo Zlotkowski & Jordan Baker, "Battleground", *The Cairns Post* (18 August 2003), pp.1&4.

¹⁰⁰ Interview - Hiddins.

The day apparently passed peacefully and enjoyably with a memorial service and barbecue, with over one hundred participants. The most significant part of the ceremony however, was the building and unveiling of a memorial on the site. The memorial comprised pieces of memorabilia from various wars in which Australians had fought, and was blessed by a priest.¹⁰¹ Apart from wanting the memorial as a focal point for their services, there was also the suggestion that they were making it some sort of “sacred site” over which they could therefore have some claim in the same way of some as indigenous Native Title claims.¹⁰² The government response expressed sympathy for the cause, urged patience and promised that they would continue to negotiate with the group.¹⁰³ The veterans claim that this is not true and they have had no official dialogue with the government since early in the project.

While any progress with the “sacred site” sort of strategy seems unlikely, Hiddins highlighted the problems surrounding the issue by claiming that the government was caught between “two of its sacred cows”; the aborigines and the veterans.¹⁰⁴ Environmental issues could also be added. The situation was a complicated and problematic one for the state government, but their strategy towards it did little to defuse the anger and despair of the veterans involved. It is also fair to note that some of the tactics used by veterans had not been well advised, particularly the use of inflammatory military language and the air of secrecy. While there seems to be a fair amount of sympathy for the veterans and their proposal for a bush retreat, some in the veteran community have been dismayed by the tactics employed in Project Pandanus, compounding the complex and sometimes divisive politics among the various veteran groups. The end of 2003 saw the “handover/take over”¹⁰⁵ of a new steering committee, which shifted the base from Townsville to Cardwell, though Hiddins claims that this is simply intra-veteran politics and has made no difference to the project:¹⁰⁶ a claim supported by the announcement on the website.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ Margo Zlotkowski, “Vets gather for service”, *The Cairns Post* (13 August 2003), p.2.

¹⁰² Melissa Ketchell, “Their place in the sun”, *The Sunday Mail* (24 August 2003), p.81; “Give vets their piece of mind”, *The Cairns Post* (26 August 2003), p.13.

¹⁰³ “Govt to work with Vietnam vets over station use” *ABC News* (18 August 2003), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/australia/qld/metqld-18aug2003-5.html>.

¹⁰⁴ “Once were soldiers”, *Australian Story*.

¹⁰⁵ Project Pandanus, “Base Camp” (27 January 2003), <http://www.pandanuspark.info/newfile.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Interview – Hiddins.

¹⁰⁷ Project Pandanus, “Base Camp” (27 January 2003), <http://www.pandanuspark.info/newfile.html>.

Project Pandanus provided a vivid example of the continuing struggle of Vietnam veterans to find an acceptable place for themselves in Australian society. While underlining the discord still obvious between groups, both internally and toward the establishment, it also displayed the willingness of all participants to use the various stereotypes to suit their needs. Pandanus did little to alter the manner in which much of the community perceived Vietnam veterans: if anything, it embedded the stereotypes even further, particularly in relation to the victim mentality. The situation was further exacerbated by the media, who had their own agenda to follow and were as much a hindrance as a help. While much of the coverage was positive, and if anything, biased towards the veterans' cause, a number were unable to overcome the lure of tabloid style reporting. And unwisely, some veterans provided them with adequate ammunition. While the theme predominantly followed, and propagated, the victim veteran, there were enough isolated (and usually exaggerated) incidents and poor choices of words to remind everyone that some of these people might be "dangerous" or at least "disturbed". But even as threat of "armed soldiers" and "war" in the bush was being contemplated by the public, the attitudes were overwhelmingly sympathetic and supportive. It seemed that Hiddins might have been correct in his assertion that Vietnam veterans had become one of the "sacred cows" with whom the government did not want to seem to be injuring in any way, but appeared to have no clear plan on how to resolve the issue.

The battle over a piece of bushland is symbolic of the wider battle for recognition and illustrates the complexity of the Vietnam veterans' relationship with their history, even as it continues to unfold. Disagreement between veterans over Pandanus on a range of levels continued, even as to whether they should have a place at all, and from a political perspective, the future of the retreat remains unresolved. No situation could better reflect the wider issues facing Australian Vietnam veterans. If the supporters of Project Pandanus are to be believed, they will not back down from this fight. Asked if the veterans would accept a suitable alternative if offered to them by the government, Hiddins replied that they almost certainly would not.¹⁰⁸ Too much water had flowed under the proverbial bridge and there was too much at stake to give up. They felt that they had been unable to attain their rightful symbolic "place", but

¹⁰⁸ Interview - Hiddins.

Project Pandanus offered them something else; a place of their own, on their own terms. Whether it will ever be legitimately successful is unknown, but the war continued, as it had for three decades.

A Place in the Legend?:
The Reformation of the Vietnam
Veteran?

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Veterans gather for the Dawn Service at the AWM for the Vietnam Memorial Rededication -
2002

Chapter Ten

Historians of the Vietnam War will have the same problem Thucydides had with the Peloponnesian Wars. You begin with a military history and find yourself writing about civilisation.

Bruce Grant, *The Age*, 21 August 1971.

The turn of the century arrived with a sense of optimism for Vietnam veterans who hoped the uncertainties of the past might not follow them into the next millennium. They had good reason to be hopeful on a number of levels. Recognition and assistance had been gradually improving and the apparently successful deployment of the military to East Timor in 1999 – in the largest mobilisation of the forces since Vietnam – had raised the status of the military once more and provided some good publicity for Vietnam veterans. An increased interest in the past, in particular Anzac Day as its original soldiers dwindled, offered Vietnam veterans an opportunity to take advantage of the renewed attention. But even as the fresh expectations of the millennium were vaporised in two American skyscrapers in the first year of the new century, veterans continued to hope that the deteriorating world situation might offer them a chance to resurrect their reputations as heroes, or at least accord them an increased level of respect. The unfolding events put them in a unique position: becoming sometimes respected spokespersons for caution and/or support, even as the Vietnam Syndrome re-surfaced on public debate in both Australia and the US.

However, the struggles were far from over for those who had served in Vietnam, even as the broader situation began to improve for them. Assistance, though sometimes generous, still contained faults and sometimes significant flaws. Relations between veterans and the government, in particular the DVA, remained problematic, and occasionally volatile. Veterans themselves remained divided on many issues, sometimes due largely to their continued lack of a unified voice. The stereotypes remained intact to a significant degree, often assisted by the media and other sources, but evolving events, time, and by extension, advancing age, began to finally reduce their damaging stain. Significantly, and unfortunately, some individuals attempted to take advantage of the improved position of Vietnam veterans and the ‘trendiness’ portrayed by some aspects of popular culture, and fraudulently portrayed themselves as Vietnam veterans in order to gain standing or attention. Despite the derision this behaviour invoked, it demonstrated the improving appeal and representation of the veterans.

Besides the continued though gradual reduction in problems, there were still two major, and connected, issues. When was it enough (recognition, respect, assistance), and what was 'enough'? The other was the problematic issue of their place in history: did they belong in the Anzac Legend (whatever that was); were they to be left to wander the wasteland of a shameful and uncomfortable history lesson; or would they have to (and could they) create and be part of a new chapter of the Australian story? The long struggle of the veterans for recognition, the passing of time and a series of national and world events raised the possibility of a goal previously thought unachievable: the reformation of the Vietnam veteran.

The Anzac Revival, East Timor and September 11

The revival of the popularity of Anzac Day was a gradual development that took place throughout the 1990s (though attendance numbers had been slowly increasing since 1980) owing to various events that changed the uncomfortable overtones of the tradition that had arisen in the seventies and early eighties. The seventy-fifth and eightieth anniversaries of the landing at Gallipoli, which were celebrated with much pomp and ceremony in 1990 and 1995 respectively, and the eightieth anniversary of the armistice in 1998, were significant in raising the awareness of a younger generation. The vision of frail, elderly men being led around Anzac Cove and the French battlefields by Australian school children were not images easily dismissed by the populace.¹ This interest fuelled an increasing passion for Gallipoli and the French sites on the Australian backpacker trail, and by the end of the century, record numbers of young people were making what was becoming a pilgrimage to Gallipoli for Anzac Day services.² Thousands of young and old stood side by side in the cold darkness listening to the haunting notes of the Last Post, imagining those men, often younger than themselves, making that fateful ride to those shores.

Anzac Cove had become 'sacred ground',³ with some appearing to forget that the site was not actually Australian soil, and that many more Turks had died protecting their

¹ For an extended discussion of veterans returning and battleground tourism see: Peter Pierce & Robin Gerster (Eds), *On the Warpath: An Anthology of Military Travel* (Melbourne, 2004).

² "All out of respect: The backpacker trail to Anzac Cove", *The Australian* (25 April 2002), p.6.

³ Tony Stephens, "Holy Wars", *The Sydney Morning Herald* (23 April 2001), <http://www.smh.com.au/news/0104/23/text/features1.html>.

own shores than Australians had invading them.⁴ There was also no small irony in the fact that there was some controversy in 2002 over the behaviour of the younger Australians who camped overnight at the site on the eve of Anzac Day, sometimes making a party of it with drinking, singing and music.⁵ While to many it was disrespectful to engage in frivolity at the site of so much tragedy, it was a similar irreverence which has often been celebrated as part of the Anzac tradition in the larrikin attitudes and behaviour of those troops. It seems unlikely that they would have missed any opportunity for a drink and a song; a fact highlighted upon the death of Queensland's last WWI serviceman, Ted Smout, in 2004, when footage of him recounting the most memorable part of his service focused on his going AWOL at the end of hostilities in France, apparently partying in Paris for a couple of weeks before being picked up.⁶

'Australia Remembers', the official commemoration in 1995 of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WWII, the war that had physically affected more Australians than any other, was also influential, if for no other reason than the sheer volume of events, both nationally and at community levels.⁷ The majority of those involved were also still alive to tell their stories; stories of hardship, suffering, occasional lighter moments, but most of all the story of a great victory. It was perhaps also a propitious time to be commemorating old wars, as the world (the developed world, at least) appeared to have moved into a new cycle of more peaceful and cooperative relations. The Cold War was over, and with the exception of small specialised forces in the Gulf War and various peacekeeping missions, a generation had not known war. The world appeared a safer place, perhaps even a closer community. Even Vietnam was becoming more distant, a 'bump in the road' of a proud military history; a group that deserved sympathy and support. But even with

⁴ ABC News Online, "Gallipoli nominated for heritage list" (18 December 2003), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200312/s1012746.htm>.

⁵ ABC News Online, "Hill criticises drunken Gallipoli behaviour" (29 April 2002), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200204/s542762.htm>.

⁶ Leisa Scott, "Ted Smout, larrikin soldier dead at 106", *The Australian* (24 June 2004), p.6. See also footage of interview with Ted Smout shown on: National Nine News (23 June 2004), Nine Network Australia.

⁷ Literally hundreds of events took place and the government sponsored many publications – for example: Rob Linn, *Their Sacrifices: Australia Remembers 1945-1995* (Adelaide, 1995), Department of Veterans' Affairs and Open Book Publishers.

‘living heroes’, it was that group of fading elderly souls that captured the imagination of the public.

That last handful of surviving WWI servicemen were the vessels through which Australia held on to their past, and each year, as there were fewer of them, there were more Australians attending Anzac Day commemorations, as if to take their place and to reassure them that they would never be forgotten. The death of the last Gallipoli veteran in 2003 received unprecedented coverage,⁸ and the community was encouraged into a public mourning. Alec Campbell received a state funeral, attracting the who’s who of politics, the military and society, with countless eulogies that would have befitted a head of state or feted general.⁹ The mourning was less for an ordinary man from an extraordinary time, than for a country losing the last tangible links to its history and identity.

Among the tributes, pleas to remember that these were average Australians were largely ignored. Some family members and historians, while not wanting to diminish the war service of these men, wanted others to know that they had accomplished other things in their lives; that they had been more than soldiers in the many decades since WWI.¹⁰ Other commentators used their passing to highlight many of the myths surrounding the history of the period,¹¹ but there was still too much currency in the status quo. Nowhere was this more obviously illustrated than in a visit by the prime minister, to vocal WWI veteran, Eric Abraham, in 2001, when Abraham told John Howard that he was the best PM Australia had ever seen and for all intents and purposes, endorsed his leadership in an important election year.¹² Howard and his media people could not have orchestrated anything more significant, than to have an actual Anzac endorse him in front of the press.

⁸ “Farewell to the Anzacs”, *The Australian – Special Tribute Edition* (17 May 2002), p.1.

⁹ Department of Veterans’ Affairs, “Final salute to Anzac”, *Vet Affairs*, Vol.18, No.2 (June 2002), p.1

¹⁰ Tony Stephens, “Alec Campbell, the adventurous one 1899- 2002”, *The Age* (18 May 2002), <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/05/17/1021544071207.html>; Peter Rubinstein, “Alec William Campbell: Gallipoli’s Last Anzac”, Keynote Speech at the Oral History Association of Australia National Conference (Perth, 5 September 2003).

¹¹ For example: David Day, “Let’s lay the Anzac myth to rest”, *The Australian* (20 May 2002), p.11.

¹² “Boost for Howard”, *The Cairns Post* (10 March 2001), p.11; “Howard campaigns among old friends”, *The Courier Mail* (10 March 2001), p.11.

However, perhaps the most significant event in the change of attitude in the perception of the military tradition (and by extension, the Anzac tradition, as they are inextricably linked), was the deployment of an Australian force to East Timor in 1999. After 25 years of brutal occupation under Indonesia, and many years as a European colonial holding before that, the East Timorese had the opportunity to vote for independence.¹³ Some with close ties to the Indonesians were less than happy when the overwhelming majority voted for independence, and anarchy and violence erupted. As the tragedy unfolded so close to Australian soil, the decision was made to send in a UN backed force (INTERFET), led by Australia, to restore law and order and protect the population.¹⁴ This was a significant shift in policy and attitude for Australia, both in relation to the specific situation, and in the deployment of a large force to foreign soil.¹⁵ Specialised units had been deployed throughout the 1990s to places such as the Persian Gulf, Somalia and nearby Bougainville, but the troops themselves had received little attention. They were relatively small groups, and, with the exception of Bougainville, part of a much larger international force rather than under an Australian flag. East Timor would be different, and would have unexpected repercussions for Vietnam veterans.

The East Timor intervention did not have a promising start for the hopes of veterans when they received further proof of the community's lack of knowledge about Vietnam when troops were deployed to East Timor in 1999. Numerous media outlets

¹³ For extended discussions see: Rodney Tiffen, *Diplomatic Deceits: Government, Media and East Timor* (Sydney, 2001); Rawdon Dalrymple, *Continental Drift: Australia's Search for A Regional Identity* (Hampshire, 2003); David Savage, *Dancing with the Devil: A Personal Account of Policing the East Timor Vote for Independence* (Melbourne, 2002)

¹⁴ Tiffen, *Diplomatic Deceits*, pp.66-67. However, Indonesia accepted the intervention of INTERFET.

¹⁵ Dalrymple, *Continental Drift*, pp.186, 206-207. Australia had largely ignored East Timor since the Indonesian invasion in 1975. Perhaps it was the timing of the event. The Whitlam Government, while more friendly with Asia than previous governments, had no intention of getting into any further conflicts there. Vietnam had fallen to the communists just months before, and the government was in turmoil and would soon be out of office. But successive governments were just as unwilling to intervene, even after the death of five journalists in the area in 1975. The case involving what would be known as the 'Balibo Five', was given little attention until lobbying and publicity by other journalists twenty years later, and even then never resolved: Jill Jolliffe, *Cover-Up: the inside story of the Balibo Five* (Melbourne, 2001). Even in the light of these deaths, East Timor received scant attention until the 'Dili Massacre' in 1991, when Indonesian troops firing on a large service at a cemetery was captured on camera. However, owing to the importance placed on the relationship with Indonesia, little was done. This caused a few to point out the hypocrisy of Australia acting as the "heroic liberator". For example: Tiffen, *Diplomatic Deceits*. These feelings however, were in no way aimed at any point at the military as their mission was short, professional and successful.

announced that the action was the largest military deployment since World War II,¹⁶ prompting one veteran to ask “what happened to Vietnam? Didn’t it exist?”¹⁷ While no official correction was made, several days later it was being reported as “biggest since Vietnam” or “largest in thirty years”.¹⁸ Lieutenant General Grey agreed that Vietnam is often forgotten and pointed out that one of these incorrect statements was actually made by the Chief of the Defence Force, Admiral Barrie, which annoyed him because he “should have known better”.¹⁹ Even after the deployment, the prime minister was quoted as claiming “the service by Australian troops in East Timor represents Australia’s most significant commitment of troops since World War II”.²⁰ While VVF President, Tim McCombe refused to go so far as to call it a “slur” on Vietnam service, he did feel it was a thoughtless political stunt, which did nothing to advantage service personnel in either intervention.²¹ Other veterans expressed anger about the inaccurate reporting, but few were surprised and a startling number were quite resigned to the state of affairs. When questioned, one veteran simply shrugged and stated:

I think it was buried by the government and buried by the people, and it only really matters to the blokes that served there.²²

East Timor opened a lot of old wounds for Vietnam veterans. Those working with veterans reported an increase in the numbers requiring counselling around the time of the deployment,²³ and newspaper articles urged the public to support the soldiers.²⁴ John Howard appealed to Australians not to forget the troops on their return, proclaiming that “they shouldn’t suffer what some of our Vietnam veterans suffered thirty years ago”.²⁵ Several veterans spoke of their concerns that the Vietnam experience would be repeated and of their determination that it should not be so. One asserted that he would be willing to go to jail to protect soldiers returning from East

¹⁶ For example: National Nine News (12 September 1999), Nine Network Australia.

¹⁷ Veteran Interview #2.

¹⁸ For example: Don Greenlees, “Enter the Peacemaker”, *The Australian* (21 September 1999), p.1

¹⁹ Veteran Interview #35. Admiral Barrie made the statement at the announcement of the deployment of troops to East Timor: National Nine News (12 September 1999).

²⁰ ABC Online, “Vietnam veterans’ warning”, *The World Today* (13 March 2000), <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/s109939.htm>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Veteran Interview #10.

²³ Veteran Interview #26; Veteran Interview #29; Veteran Interview #4.

²⁴ Examples include: “Adopt-a-Soldier Plan” *The Cairns Post* (11 October 1999), p.7; “Troops Deserve Support” *The Northern News* (23 September 1999), p.1.

²⁵ Dennis Shanahan, “US alliance working, Howard tells critics”, *The Weekend Australian* (18-19 September 1999), p.10.

Timor,²⁶ and while most others were somewhat less extreme in their assertions, they were equally resolute. This was demonstrated by a number of newspaper articles promoting RSL campaigns (led by Vietnam veterans) such as “Adopt a soldier” after the deployment,²⁷ and the appearance of links on almost every veteran website to encourage the sending of support emails to those on active duty.

One claimed, quite prophetically, that although Vietnam veterans were anxious to make sure that the East Timor soldiers were treated well, the public acclamation would eventually “upset” some veterans.²⁸ This proved to be true, with a number of the later interviewees expressing the opinion that the acclamation was a bit excessive. One commented that the soldiers were being treated like “pop stars”.²⁹ While this description may have been an overstatement, for those who had served in Vietnam, the statement had a certain validity and irony. Speeches had the participants dubbed “as part of a great Australian military tradition” before even leaving Australian shores,³⁰ and following in the “precious legacy” of the Anzac tradition,³¹ within a couple of months of the deployment. The media advertised email links, as well as telephone and fax numbers to send messages of support to the ‘diggers’, and even the troops themselves seemed a little taken aback by the attention.³² From the moment of their arrival in East Timor, they were heroes to the nation.

Once the situation on the ground was stabilised – a task that did not take long because the damage had already been wrought and most of the rebels and much of the population (though most soon returned), had fled – high profile visitors began

²⁶ Veteran Interview #26.

²⁷ Examples include: “Adopt-a-Soldier Plan” *The Cairns Post* (11 October 1999), p.7; “Troops Deserve Support” *The Northern News* (23 September 1999), p.1.

²⁸ Veteran Interview #11.

²⁹ Veteran Interview #34.

³⁰ Prime Minister John Howard, “Address to the Nation” (19 September 1999), <http://www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/1999/address1909.htm>

³¹ Prime Minister John Howard, “Launch of the Gallipoli 2000 Campaign” (11 April 2000), http://www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/2000/gallipoli_0704.htm.

³² Philip Siebler, *Supporting Australian Defence Force Peacekeepers and Their Families: The Case of East Timor* (Canberra, 2003), pp.81-82. The defence force went to previously unknown lengths to make sure their people has access to contact with family through email and regular telephone access, as well as standard mail services. See: *Ibid.*, pp.44-45; and Kate Elliott & Wayne Scott, “Support to Families during Military Deployments: The East Timor Experience” in George Kearney, Mark Creamer, Ric Marshall & Anne Goyne (Eds), *The Management of Stress in the Australian Defence Force* (Canberra, 2001), pp.187-188.

arriving in droves to visit, support and congratulate those on the ground.³³ Soon the visitors turned from politicians and dignitaries, to celebrities, with some of Australia's most famous dropping by for photo opportunities. These included performers such as John Farnham and Kylie Minogue, who, with a group of other well known celebrities, staged "Tour of Duty", a large concert for the forces and the population.³⁴ On their return from the mission, each group were treated to ticker tape parades and receptions, and while almost certainly grateful, some could have been excused for suffering from acclaim overload.

While this 'pop star' treatment did have a bitter taste for some veterans, they certainly meant no disrespect or criticism towards the soldiers, rather towards the government which they felt was over-reacting because of "guilt over how Vietnam veterans were treated".³⁵ Another claimed that "this is conscience time... this is the way to cleanse ourselves", but continued on to say that for Vietnam veterans, it has made them realise that "it's all too late. The damage has been done. You can't go back."³⁶ Not all veterans agree with this view, as demonstrated by one who claimed to be very happy about the treatment of the East Timor troops, and that it had a positive effect on attitudes towards Vietnam veterans:

We were ignored, but we were ignored because politicians didn't want to speak about it... Now Vietnam veterans are treated differently and people are quite proud of them.³⁷

It could be suggested that Vietnam veterans were over-personalising the issue, as veterans of other deployments had sometimes been ignored in the short term - as has been previously discussed in relation to the Boer War and WWI - and even for a longer period, such as those who served in Korea. But the lingering bitterness, and the regular invocation of Vietnam as a point of reference, while carefully avoiding mentioning the ultimate failure of that venture, demonstrated the continuing lack of

³³ While an Australian led the mission, and Australia had the largest contingent, INTERFET was a multinational force, but the media seemed to forget (or just ignore) the other nations almost as soon as they were deployed - an eerie echo of the reverse situation in Vietnam three decades earlier.

³⁴ Department of Defence, "Aussie Bands to Rock East Timor: Media Release" (5 December 1999), <http://www.defence.gov.au/media/DepartmentalTpl.cfm?CurrentId=1144>. The concert was beamed live throughout the area for those outside Dili, as well as throughout Australia, with cuts to interviews with service persons and occasional bio's and tales of suffering and heroism. It was an extraordinary scenario, making the entertainment of those in previous conflicts seem stingy in comparison, though this was largely a result of improved technology.

³⁵ Veteran Interview #4.

³⁶ Veteran Interview #36.

³⁷ Veteran Interview #18.

closure perceived not only by many veterans, but also among sections of the political and wider community.

It was as if many aspects of the deployment to East Timor were handled with Vietnam veterans prominent in people's minds. The government and the community seemed almost fervent about their 'welcome home', and a successful (though difficult) peacekeeping mission became a major military 'victory'. The attitudes were well demonstrated in relation to the commander of the peacekeeping force, Major General Peter Cosgrove. Cosgrove was featured in the media almost daily and moved around East Timor with an energy and exuberance that made for good copy. While obviously efficient and taking his role very seriously, he put across an image of being 'one of the men'; appearing to have a sense of humour and to make time for everyone. This made him popular because it made him seem to be "just an ordinary bloke":³⁸ sensible, down-to-earth and a hint that there might be a larrikin lurking under the title. But what stood out was the status he attained throughout the Australian community. He was a military hero for his management of East Timor, held in a standing unusual for military leaders in Australia as the "country's first true celebrity soldier".³⁹ The government found his status as the "big guy with a big hat" particularly useful on a number of occasions it was employed to "divert attention from other defence problems and failings."⁴⁰ It was a scenario that most were accustomed to witnessing in the United States with generals such as Eisenhower, MacArthur, Patton and Schwarzkopf.

What became significant about the status of Cosgrove was that he was a Vietnam veteran. He had seen combat as a platoon leader straight out of officer training in 1969, and though not universally liked, was respected.⁴¹ When first being sent to East Timor, he appeared to avoid discussing Vietnam with the media, and made comments implying disdain of those veterans claiming problems, as if distancing

³⁸ "Cosgrove still tops to the nation", *The Cairns Post* (26 January 2001), p.7.

³⁹ Cameron Stewart, "No stopping our first celebrity soldier", *The Australian* (29 May 2002), p.2. Perhaps it could also be attributed to the fact that Cosgrove was not serving under a larger ally and created an aura of independent 'victory' – a state of affairs to which Australians were unaccustomed.

⁴⁰ Graeme Cheeseman, "Facing an Uncertain Future: Defence and Security under the Howard Government" in James Cotton & John Ravenhill (Eds), *The National Interest in a Global Era: Australia in World Affairs, 1996-2000* (South Melbourne, 2001), p.206.

⁴¹ Gary Linnell, "Made in Vietnam", *Good Weekend – The Age Magazine* (20 April 2002), pp.18-22.

himself from the image;⁴² perhaps afraid that it would interfere with people's confidence in his abilities. However, when the venture was successful and he was incontrovertibly a national hero, suddenly Vietnam became the basis – or at least a large part – of his success. The title of one of the many articles written about him as he completed his tour in East Timor demonstrated the new perspective: “Made in Vietnam”.⁴³

Cosgrove was the ultimate reformed Vietnam veteran: successful; happily married; and heroic. It was as if he (or at least the Vietnam service) had been redeemed by the mission (“going back”) and its success (“winning this time”), as if he were an undamaged Rambo. He was a national hero, and not the anti-hero type that had plagued previous Vietnam veterans. Gary Linnell concluded that “Cosgrove became one of the few to use Vietnam as a springboard to better things.”⁴⁴ He was Australian of the Year in 2001,⁴⁵ touted as ‘President’ if the republican move succeeded, or if not, as Governor-General.⁴⁶ But Cosgrove was not yet finished with his career and quickly became Chief of the Army, and soon afterwards, Chief of the Defence Force.

He had a much higher profile in these jobs than most of his predecessors, perhaps because of his fame, and by extension, had a better handle on his relationship with the media. Nevertheless, these are supposed to be non-political positions and rarely evoke publicity, let alone controversy through non-sanctioned statements or opinions.⁴⁷ Extraordinarily, Vietnam was the topic that landed Cosgrove in trouble, when he stunningly turned on Australia's participation in a speech at the least discreet venue imaginable – the National Press Club.⁴⁸ He denounced the intervention in Vietnam as a mistake, claiming that “it was simply not going to work” and “we

⁴² Paul Toohey, “Major-General Achiever”, *The Australian Magazine* (5-6 February 2000), pp.29-30.

⁴³ Linnell, “Made in Vietnam”.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.32.

⁴⁵ “Australian of the Year – Lt General Peter Cosgrove AC MC 2001 Award”, *Australian of the Year Awards* (26 January 2001), <http://www.australianoftheyear.gov.au/recipient.asp?ID=50>.

⁴⁶ ABC News Online, “Hollingworth's resignation not unexpected in QLD” (26 May 2003), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200305/s863407.htm>.

⁴⁷ However, political controversy is not unprecedented in this role, as demonstrated by his predecessor, Admiral Barrie and the “children overboard” affair in 2001: ABC Online, “Defence chief retires after controversial term”, *ABC News Online* (3 July 2002), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200207/s597028.htm>.

⁴⁸ General Peter Cosgrove, “Speech to the National Press Club” (30 July 2002), <http://www.defence.gov.au/media/DeptTpl.cfm?CurrentId=1750>. The comments appeared to contradict previous statements in which he strongly implied support for intervention in Vietnam.

probably shouldn't have gone".⁴⁹ Within hours it was being reported in all sources of the media. The two sentence comment by the Chief of the Defence Force, and a national hero, provoked a mixture of speculation, consternation and jubilation.⁵⁰ It was almost as if the ultimately reformed and most respected Vietnam veteran had announced it was all a mistake and it was time to 'move on' from it. Some felt that it was a statement inferring that it was a "mistake" that should never be repeated, with a few taking it so far as to suggest he was making a comment on a proposed deployment for the impending Iraq War (which of course did take place in 2003).⁵¹ Significantly, no member of the government made any public comments either in support or disagreement in relation to Cosgrove's remarks, though a number of former service persons and organisations made statements. This attitude reflects the unwritten policy of every government since the Vietnam War to avoid discussing the issue in any depth, and the repeated refusal to examine it as a 'mistake' (or anything else). Only those safely out of political life, such as Malcolm Fraser, defence minister during much of the war, have previously admitted that mistakes were made in Australia's Vietnam policy.⁵² Cosgrove had certainly wandered into unknown territory, but despite extensive media coverage, there was no significant backlash. The only serious condemnation came from Stephen Morris, an academic from Johns Hopkins University in Washington, who claimed that the general was "very poorly informed",⁵³ a statement that seems disingenuous considering Cosgrove's service in Vietnam and long career in the defence force.

Whether Cosgrove was rebuked by the government was never made public, but he thereafter avoided the topic completely. There was little further discussion. Vietnam veterans were not sure what to make of the situation. Deputy President of the RSL, Ian Kennett, stated that he thought Cosgrove "100% right on the issue,"⁵⁴ while New South Wales VVAA president, Barry Billing, claimed that veterans were split on the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ ABC News, "Cosgrove on Australia's Vietnam engagement", *ABC AM* (31 July 2002); Mark Metherell, "Our role in Vietnam a mistake: Cosgrove", *The Sydney Morning Herald* (31 July 2002), p.2; Stephen Morris, "Fatal flaws in general's strategy", *The Australian* (2 August 2002), p.11.

⁵¹ "Cosgrove's code for Iraq war?", *The Sydney Morning Herald* (1 August 2002), <http://www.smh.com.au/text/articles/2002/07/31/1027926912613>.

⁵² Paul Strangio, "Listen up, you warmongers", *The Age* (2 August 2002), <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/08/01/1028157814729.html>.

⁵³ Stephen Morris, "Fatal flaws in General's strategy", *The Australian* (2 August 2002), p.11.

⁵⁴ ABC, "Cosgrove on Australia's Vietnam engagement".

issue and “I’m one of the 50 per cent who don’t” agree.⁵⁵ Ultimately, the topic was dropped and Vietnam was once again buried, although its warriors were now running the military with the reshuffle of the military hierarchy in 2002.⁵⁶ The Australian military had finally accomplished a high profile task independently of a dominant ally, and in fact as the leader. The defence force was held in a new regard and its leaders were heroes of the ‘last real conflict’: Vietnam.

The Gulf War raised the profile of the American military, reclaimed their status as ‘victors’, and re-affirmed their ability to conduct successful foreign military interventions. East Timor had a similar impact in Australia.⁵⁷ It increased confidence both within and towards the Australian military and certainly encouraged a greater willingness to deploy the military overseas. It also continued, and in fact increased, the interest and participation in Anzac Day, a key factor in the resurrection of the reputation of the military and its veterans. But what started with changing attitudes in the 1990s, and dramatically accelerated with East Timor, was increased by the events of 11 September 2001⁵⁸ in the United States.⁵⁹ Reverberations from the terror attacks were felt globally, and demonstrably so in Australia. This was probably due to an amalgam of reasons. The US and Australia have long shared a cultural and historical closeness, and the Howard government since its election had highlighted and enhanced the importance of the US alliance.⁶⁰ From a wider perspective, it was not simply an attack on a western democracy, but ‘the western democracy’: the one superpower. A handful of Australians died in the attacks and many worried that Australia was also vulnerable. Most significant perhaps, was the stunningly shocking

⁵⁵ John Ellicott, “Defence force chief splits war veterans”, *The Australian* (12 August 2002), p.4.

⁵⁶ John Kerin, “Cosgrove leads the new guard”, *The Australian* (29 May 2002), p.1.

⁵⁷ The first President Bush had claimed that the 1991 Gulf War had “kicked” the Vietnam syndrome, but it had little effect outside the US. Australia’s contribution had been small, though successful and professional, but it was relatively low key (particularly in publicity) and short.

⁵⁸ Will be referred to hereafter as “September 11” throughout the text.

⁵⁹ In the biggest peacetime attack on the United States, terrorists (reputedly from the Muslim fundamentalist group, Al Qaeda) hijacked four commercial jets in a coordinated manner to use as missiles. Two were flown into the World Trade Centre in New York, one into the Pentagon in Washington, while the fourth crashed. Almost 3000 people died.

⁶⁰ In fact, the prime minister was in Washington at the time of the attacks attending high level talks, and commemorating the 50th anniversary of the ANZUS Pact, and his physical proximity to the events should not be underestimated in its influence on the decisions made. It may well have contributed to Howard’s invoking of the ANZUS Treaty with such swiftness; the first time it had been invoked in its fifty year history. John Howard, “ANZUS Treaty – Media Release”, Department of Prime Minister (14 September 2001), http://www.pm.gov.au/news/media_releases/2001/media_release1241.htm

visual event, with most of the attack and its aftermath captured in hundreds of pieces of graphic footage.⁶¹

The Howard Government – especially Howard himself – made it clear that Australia would do anything it could to help the Americans in its mission to find those responsible. It would be fair to say that this position was supported by most Australians initially, though when Australia sent a small force to the first phase of the so called “War on Terror” in Afghanistan two months later, some misgivings began appearing.⁶² However, the government’s facade of ‘pomp and ceremony’ surrounding the sending of troops to Afghanistan belied the relatively small size of the commitment.⁶³ There were numerous appeals to support those involved, and once again the email addresses and telephone numbers appeared. Vietnam was again evoked and pleas were made to get behind those deployed.⁶⁴ The initial component of the war was short and apparently “victorious”, with reports that the Australian SAS contingent had been vital to the undertaking.⁶⁵ Australia quickly withdrew its force before the continuing mission was called into question, and the participants were once again hailed as heroes. To overcome the problem of the anonymity of the SAS, a couple were singled out to receive honours in a public ceremony and give the heroes a ‘face’, particularly as their group had suffered the only Australian fatality.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Regular programming was largely cancelled on most networks for almost three days, and the footage of large jet airliners being flown into skyscrapers was so shockingly surreal and played so often that it will almost certainly be the most remembered image of the early 21st century.

⁶² Adrian D’Hage, “Got in a terrible jam up yonder in Afghanistan”, *The Australian* (17 December 2001), p.11. Nevertheless, as long as the footage of the extended process of digging bodies out of the World Trade Centre site continued, the majority remained in support of the policy.

⁶³ Australia still had a large contingent in East Timor, making it difficult to send a larger number. The focal point of the Afghanistan group was the elite SAS detachment, which created an interesting dilemma in the government pledge and encouragement to show public support for the deployment. Because of the policy that protects the identity of the SAS, their ceremonies, send-offs and welcome home were private affairs attended only by family and dignitaries, while those who saw the least contact were the ones who were able to accept the acclamation and were the public face of the commitment. This should not suggest that this latter group were any less deserving of acclamation of their service. The government later, perhaps recognising the problem, singled out a couple of members of the SAS for publicity when presented medals for actions: John Kerin, “Afghanistan heroes out of the shadows”, *The Australian* (28 November 2002), p.1.

⁶⁴ For example see media sections of the department’s of the Prime Minister, Defence and the DVA for October/November 2001 at <http://www.fed.gov.au>. Little seen by the public as discussed above.

⁶⁵ Kerin, “Afghanistan heroes”.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

American Politics

September 11 had another more explicit and unexpected consequence for Vietnam veterans.⁶⁷ While the status of Vietnam veterans had been gradually improving, the stereotypes were still in evidence to a significant degree. September 11 dramatically thrust the group into the public eye. In New York, many of the senior fire fighters, Port Authority officers and others in similar occupations, were Vietnam veterans, including a number who were killed that day.⁶⁸ One veteran who died in particularly tragic and heroic circumstances was eulogised in *The New York Times* (and was the subject of a book), outlining his apparently adventurous, if troubled life - including a post-Vietnam stint as a mercenary - but his difficult past was wiped clean by September 11.⁶⁹ Another was highly decorated fire fighter and veteran, Captain Pat Brown, who came home from Vietnam “covered with medals but angry and choked up on adrenaline, daring anyone to knock the chip off his shoulder”, yet after many struggles he had finally overcome his problems and obtained some stability, for which he credited the fire department.⁷⁰ The heroic deeds of these men on that day was their redemption; their chance to be reformed.

Heroes were needed, and quickly, to reassure a jittery public, and significantly, it was often Vietnam veterans to whom they turned. Perhaps the WWII stalwarts were getting too old, and the Gulf War group too young, or still in the military, but it was also part of a changing mentality and a realisation that these were often the best candidates for the job. One of the most public examples of this was the appointment of veteran, Tom Ridge, to head the newly established and very influential Department of Homeland Security. His Vietnam service was promoted as proof of his ability to

⁶⁷ While this pertains most directly to American veterans, the significant influence of the American events caused a flow on effect in Australia as had been the case with previous issues such as perceptions and popular culture. Good publicity for the military, particularly specifically Vietnam veterans, had applications for all. See the Australian Politics section for examples.

⁶⁸ As discussed in chapter seven, many joined law enforcement and the like after their service. US Department of Defence, “Army Reservists on the Front Line From the First Day” (25 September 2001), *American Forces Information Service*, http://www.dod.gov/news/Sep2001/n09252001_200109252.html; Jeff Williams, “His training in Vietnam helped him as a fire fighter”, *Newsday* (7 October 2001), <http://cf1.newsday.infi.net/911/victimsearch.cfm?id=1149>.

⁶⁹ Janet Maslin, “One Last Act of Bravery for an Intrepid Adventurer”, *The New York Times* (20 November 2002), <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/20/books/20MASL.html>.

⁷⁰ Elin Martens, “The Victims: They knew the odds”, *Time Magazine* (24 September 2001), p.69.

do such a difficult and stressful job.⁷¹ Another was Secretary of State, Colin Powell, who had previously played a limited political role, but gained a higher profile and his Vietnam experience highlighted - instead of his Gulf service which may have been more useful - as he was sent around the world to encourage support for America's stand against terrorism.⁷²

Following the trend, military service in Vietnam was publicised by a multitude of American politicians as it appeared to imply the experience and credibility needed in difficult times. Suddenly, being a Vietnam veteran had become less of a burden, and was in fact, increasingly an advantage. This state of affairs became even more pronounced throughout the following year in the lead up to the Iraq War. A number of these politicians voiced their misgivings or cautioned against it, and President Bush, underestimating the level of deference they had gained, accused them of "not [being] interested in the security of the American people" because of their dissention.⁷³ The backlash caused by this poor choice of words pointed out that they had put their lives on the line for their country, which was more than he had ever done, and demanded an apology.⁷⁴ This also heralded the emergence of the "warrior doves": a group of veterans who expressed concern over the direction of policies and pointed to the mistakes made in Vietnam, and urged that they not be made again.⁷⁵ Apart from Vietnam veterans in political and non-political life, this group included some unlikely participants, including Bush's special envoy to the Middle East, General Anthony Zinni.⁷⁶ Reports also claimed that there was some level of dissension between Colin Powell and the administration's policy, although he publicly "followed orders".⁷⁷

⁷¹ "Mr. Ridge Goes to Washington", *The New York Times* (8 October 2001), p.A16.

⁷² For example: Michael Elliot, "'We're at War'", *Time Magazine* (24 September 2001), pp.36-37; ABC Online, "Powell holds talks with Afghan leaders in Kabul", *ABC News Online* (17 January 2002), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200201/s460849.htm>; ABC, "Analysis of PM's involvement statement", *Lateline* (25 October 2001), <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2001/s401000.htm>.

⁷³ "Daschle delivers remarks from the senate floor", *The Washington Post* (25 September 2002), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/transcripts/daschle.html>.

⁷⁴ Carl Hulse & Todd Purdham, "Daschle defends democrats' stand on US security", *The New York Times* (26 September 2002), p.A1; Terry M Neal, "Chickenhawk Vs Chicken Little", *The Washington Post* (6 September 2002), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A45835-2002Sep6/html>.

⁷⁵ Carl Hulse, "Some in Congress, Recalling Vietnam, Oppose War", *The New York Times* (21 September 2002), <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/21/politics/21PEAC.html>.

⁷⁶ "US envoy a veteran warrior and sceptic", *The Weekend Australian* (9-10 March 2002), p.16

⁷⁷ Der Spiegel, "They believed there was a risk", *The New York Times* (12 July 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/mem.tnt.html?intget=2004/07/12/international/europe>.

This new wave of respect had a flow on effect to ordinary Vietnam veterans with increased attention and respect. These were the men who knew about war. Numbers increased in veteran groups and at Memorial Day,⁷⁸ as they did at Anzac Day, giving the impression that the mantle was being increasingly handed to the Vietnam veterans. This was obvious in the 2004 Presidential race. The Democrat hopeful (and later nominee), Senator John Kerry, was a decorated Vietnam veteran, and perhaps recognising the social changes, began promoting his military record alongside his political one.⁷⁹ It could be argued that some had previously considered their Vietnam service to be a political burden, when war service had previously been an asset. Bush's rival Republican candidate in 2000, Senator John McCain, a pilot, POW and high profile Vietnam veteran, found his service less than useful, despite being considered a "real hero", and it played a role in his failure to get the nomination.⁸⁰

This was not the first time this had occurred. Bill Clinton, the first president of the Vietnam era age group, did not suffer because of his lack of service. His rivals pointed to his draft evasion and anti-war activities, but it seemed to work for him more than against, or at the very least, the public was indifferent.⁸¹ Certainly, in the initial post-Cold War and Gulf War atmosphere, most people were looking towards a more peaceful future and were increasingly concerned with domestic issues. In fact, his Democrat rival for the nomination, Senator Bob Kerrey, attempted campaigning on his service and had it turn against him with the whiff of a war massacre scandal.⁸² Kerrey claimed that long before those accusations, his service had not been an asset for much of his political career because "Vietnam veterans were expected to wig out".⁸³ It appeared that the days where war service was an asset were over.

⁷⁸ In Australia, it renewed and reinforced what had started with East Timor, and increased the momentum (as will be examined later in this chapter).

⁷⁹ Jodi Wilgoren, "Oh, Did He Mention That He's a Vet?", *The New York Times* (30 May 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/30/weekinreview/30wil.html>. This was not the first time that a Vietnam veteran had run for the presidency, but previous attempts had been unsuccessful – though not specifically because of their service. Democrat, Al Gore, barely mentioned his service in his 2000 campaign against George W Bush, and it seemed to hold little importance.

⁸⁰ Cameron Forbes, "Ready for take-off", *The Weekend Australian* (5-6 February 2000), pp.19,22.

⁸¹ David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals* (New York, 2002), p.113.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp.111-113.

⁸³ Robin Toner, "Still the Question: What did you do in the war?", *The New York Times* (15 February 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/15/weekinreview/15stone/html>.

All that seemed to change with September 11 and the War on Terror: suddenly it was the warriors with the credentials. Two Democrat candidates campaigned on their Vietnam service; John Kerry, and the recently retired General Wesley Clark.⁸⁴ But, Kerry was better at the political game: he was a long time politician; well presented; charming; and appealed to a wider audience because he did not style himself on the military elite as did Clark.⁸⁵ When Kerry realised how well it was working for him as the Iraqi conflict dragged on, he surrounded himself with veterans – including high profile ones – and targeted the veteran (from all conflicts) vote which had become salient in some regions.⁸⁶ He brought out fellow soldiers for testimonials and began showing footage of Vietnam in television advertisements, while Democrat rival Howard Dean, found himself criticised for escaping service.⁸⁷

The attack widened as the Kerry machine gained momentum, and a major scandal erupted when Kerry's people claimed that President Bush, Vice-President Cheney, Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld and senior adviser, Karl Rove, had avoided service in Vietnam through less than valorous means.⁸⁸ The Bush allegations were particularly damaging when it was questioned whether Bush had even completed his home based National Guard responsibilities. It was claimed that his father's political and monetary connections had not simply saved him from Vietnam, but also perhaps the inconvenience of part time service: a claim that was not helped when some of the appropriate paperwork that would have cleared the allegation was "missing".⁸⁹ It had a marked effect on the campaign and Kerry received the Democrat nomination in a landslide.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Robert Lusetch, "Hero general plots Bush's demise", *The Australian* (18 September 2003), p.7.

⁸⁵ This was demonstrated when his campaign was damaged by an ill conceived comment berating Kerry: "With all due respect, he's a lieutenant and I'm a general." Roy Eccleston, "Former frontrunners back from dead", *The Australian* (21 January 2004), p.10. Kerry also used his Vietnam service more efficiently than Clark, who focused more on his post-war record with NATO and in Kosovo. Kerry also straddled the liberal fence with his well known anti-war stance after his return from Vietnam.

⁸⁶ Elisabeth Rosenthal, "Veterans move to Kerry, even from afar", *The New York Times* (3 February 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/03/politics/campaign/03VETS.html>.

⁸⁷ Ceci Connolly, "In Iowa Fight, Kerry Wields War Record" *The Washington Post* (13 January 2004), p.A14.

⁸⁸ Dan Balz, "Citing his Vietnam service, Kerry assails Cheney, Rove", *The Washington Post* (17 April 2004), p.A04.

⁸⁹ Mark Thompson & James Carney, "An Absence in Alabama", *Time Magazine* (16 February 2004), pp.26-27.

⁹⁰ Roy Eccleston, "Another bites the Kerry dust", *The Australian* (12 February 2004), p.7.

However, that was not the most extraordinary or significant outcome of the debate. What was least expected was that ‘Vietnam’ would become Kerry’s slogan; his battle cry. At his appearances, he only had to utter the word ‘Vietnam’, and the crowd would erupt.⁹¹ The only backlash regarding Kerry’s Vietnam service, was ironically (in comparison to previous veteran Presidential candidates), the issue of whether his service was worthy enough. There were two streams to the opposition. One was the issue of the early end to his tour of duty (owing to injury) and whether he had really earned his three purple hearts (though no one ever questioned his Silver or Bronze Stars).⁹² The other involved his anti-war activities after the war. Significantly, most of these criticisms came from other veterans,⁹³ and they started choosing sides, with some publicly endorsing President Bush – such as the representatives of the major Veteran motorcycle clubs at the 2004 Rolling Thunder rally on Memorial Day weekend.⁹⁴ However, what was most important was that whichever candidate was endorsed, being a Vietnam veteran had gained currency and would prove to be an important political factor.

Australian Politics

Vietnam veterans were also gaining increased political importance in Australia. Some were high profile and prominent, while others found themselves in better positions in less public arenas, in what one commentator termed “the revenge of the Vietnam veterans”.⁹⁵ Among the better known were those such as Cosgrove, and perhaps nearly as significantly, the appointment of Major General Jeffrey as Governor-General in 2003.⁹⁶ A couple of Vietnam veterans had been state

⁹¹ Mark Leibovich, “Kerry’s One-Word Speech: ‘Vietnam’”, *The Washington Post* (9 February 2004), p.C01. He further expanded his veteran group, and even more astonishingly, serious discussions took place about offering McCain the position of running mate. While McCain was the political opposite, a Republican conservative, he was also a friend and fellow traveller on the veteran scene, but despite the fact that sources reported a genuine interest to run as a veteran team, McCain gracefully refused and loyalty drew him back to the Bush camp to campaign as their veteran representative. Mike Allen, “Bush, McCain look beyond differences”, *The Washington Post* (19 June 2004), p.A06.

⁹² Jodi Wilgoren, “Veterans group criticizes Kerry on his record in Vietnam”, *The New York Times* (5 May 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/05/politics/campaign/05VETS.html>.

⁹³ Sheryl Stolberg, “Conservatives shine spotlight on Kerry’s antiwar record”, *The New York Times* (13 February 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/13/politics/campaign/13VETS.html>.

⁹⁴ “Bikers roll thunder out behind Bush”, *The Australian* (1 June 2004), p.8.

⁹⁵ Tony Stephens, “Out of Vietnam, a battalion of leaders”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (24 July 2003), <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/06/23/1056220542414.html>.

⁹⁶ Stee Creedy, Luke McIlveen, John Kerin & Patricia Karvelas, “Howard picks war hero G-G”, *The Australian* (23 June 2003), p.1.

Governors, such as Jeffrey himself in Western Australia and Peter Arnison in Queensland, but none had ever held the office as representative of the Head of State. What was most notable about the appointment was that the government needed a candidate above reproach, as the previous Governor-General had resigned in scandalous circumstances.⁹⁷ Jeffrey was also promoted as a war hero by the government and the media.⁹⁸ Commentators described his appointment as “safe” and much was made of the first Australian born Governor-General to have come from a full time military career, as well as his Military Cross, awarded for courage in Vietnam.⁹⁹ A ‘hero’ was apparently needed to see Australia through troubled times, and the media obligingly referred to Jeffrey as such at every available stage. This office is seen by much of the public as ceremonial and not overtly political, but it is the most important state position in the country and its considerable powers are mainly limited only by custom and tradition.

Other established politicians gained new prominence owing to greater respect for their Vietnam service. One of these, Labor backbencher, Graham Edwards (who lost both legs in Vietnam), appears to have gained a higher profile, both within the party and the media.¹⁰⁰ He had in many ways, become untouchable, as demonstrated during heated debates over a new veterans’ entitlements package. Edwards made some comments about the Veterans’ Affairs minister and the government in general, and Wilson Tuckey, a frequently controversial Coalition MP, retaliated with comments questioning Edwards’ integrity. Tuckey was publicly condemned; and rebuked by the Prime Minister.¹⁰¹ The retiring deputy prime minister, Tim Fischer, who had never made much of his service, now was more willing to discuss it, and was suggested for the Governor-General position, despite being a confirmed republican.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Peter Hollingworth’s integrity had come into question regarding his handling of sexual abuse issues during his time as an Anglican Bishop. John Kerin, “Serious check despite safe background”, *The Australian* (23 June 2004), p.2.

⁹⁸ John Kerin, “Honoured for courage and competence”, *The Australian* (23 June 2004), p.1.

⁹⁹ Creedy et al, “Howard picks war hero G-G”.

¹⁰⁰ Edwards was more regularly interviewed over political issues, particularly anything to do with veterans. For more on Edwards see: Matt Price, “The Sitting Member”, *The Australian Magazine* (30-31 January 1999), pp.12-17.

¹⁰¹ ABC Online, “PM labels Tuckey’s veteran comments as ‘unacceptable’” (4 March 2004), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newitems/s1057899.htm>.

¹⁰² Alan Ramsey, “Send in Tim the Hat to do the job properly”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (28 May 2003), <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/05/27/1052301397348.html>.

Vietnam was also a boon for local politicians. The election campaign for Mayor of Cairns in March 2000 certainly proved that attitudes had changed, with Mayoral hopeful, Kevin Byrne using his service in Vietnam in his campaign. Television advertisements showed scenes from the Vietnam War with a voice-over explaining that his skills in leading a platoon in Vietnam would assist him in running the Cairns City Council.¹⁰³ Although it is difficult to gauge how successful this tactic was for Byrne, it certainly did him no harm as he won the election. He obviously considered it to be a theme worth continuing – attending many veteran based events and taking regular opportunities to bring out his medals.¹⁰⁴ Others used relationships with Vietnam veterans for political gain. In North Queensland, federal member for Leichhardt, Warren Entsch, had spent a number of years in the air force late in the Vietnam era (though he never served overseas despite requesting a posting to Vietnam). This gave him a certain level of credibility with many veterans, and he paid special attention to them, attending many events and publicising issues.¹⁰⁵ For these efforts, the VVMC awarded him an honorary membership; a very rare privilege. Not all appreciated his interest, with accusations of him as being a “vet junkie” or “wannabe”.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Entsch was hardly the only politician basking in the ‘reflected glory’ of war veterans, as it was also a feature regularly exhibited by Prime Minister John Howard.

Howard was more than willing to jump on the proverbial “bandwagon” in relation to veterans and military service. More than one commentator noted how enamoured Howard was with the military and history; a history for him very much rooted in the Anzac Legend.¹⁰⁷ He has been accused of usurping the role of the Governor-General whose job, traditionally, it is to receive the salute at parades and conduct observances: Howard has certainly been the person most often leading the ceremony.¹⁰⁸ He has

¹⁰³ Campaign advertisement for Kevin Byrne, Win Television Network (22 March 2000).

¹⁰⁴ “Neither age nor the rain beat them”, *The Cairns Post* (26 April 2004), pp.2,7.

¹⁰⁵ For example: Megan Everitt, “Vets fight for dignity”, *The Cairns Post* (24 July 2002), p.7; Katrina Swanson & Janelle Gullo, “At last, Nashos receive medals”, *The Cairns Post* (23 April 2002), p.5.

¹⁰⁶ Interview #40 & #41.

¹⁰⁷ Dennis Shanahan, “Foreign fields unearth new PM”, *The Australian* (12 July 2004), p.11; Mark McKenna, “Enjoying the political spoils of war”, *The Age* (13 November 2003), <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/11/12/1068329629107.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Mark McKenna, “Howard’s Warriors” in Raymond Gaita (Ed), *Why the War was Wrong* (Melbourne, 2003), pp.197-199.

been accused of politicising troops, particularly in election years,¹⁰⁹ with McKenna claiming that:

Wherever there is a cup of tea to be had with the military, John Howard is there, delivering the major address, being photographed with servicemen and women and their families, and generally basking in the reflected glow of the diggers' glory.¹¹⁰

He has said on a number of occasions that the search for a national identity is decidedly over; and the military tradition has a solid place in that identity.¹¹¹ During the various overseas deployments during his tenure he has insisted and reminded the public a number of times that those serving must be supported and not treated as Vietnam veterans were on their return.¹¹²

Intriguingly, military service has never had the political importance that it has in other countries, such as the United States. This is perhaps curious considering the importance of war, security and the 'Digger' to the Australian identity. Admittedly, an office such as President of the United States - a position that includes the role of Commander in Chief of a superpower - does lend itself to someone with military experience, but it is still perhaps surprising that so few Australian politicians, particularly prime ministers, have military experience. Of the twenty-three prime ministers who served for more than a month, five had seen military service, with only four seeing war service. More significantly, in the post-WWII - Cold War - period, when security was at its highest level of concern, only three out of eleven had war service, and it was rarely campaigned upon; particularly in regard to the last of these, Gough Whitlam.¹¹³ Consequently, no prime minister since 1975 has had military experience. Comparing these figures to American presidents of the twentieth century, nine out of eighteen had war service, and eight out of the eleven since the beginning

¹⁰⁹ Michael Perry, "Australian PM Accused of Politicizing Troops", *The Washington Post* (10 July 2004), <http://washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A40454-2004Jul10.html>.

¹¹⁰ McKenna, *Howard's Warriors*, p.172.

¹¹¹ John Howard, "Address at the Prime Minister's 30th Anniversary Dinner" (20 May 2004); James Curran, "Last word on who we are?", *The Australian* (5 April 2004), p.9.

¹¹² "PM fields questions from journalists", *The Age* (18 March 2003), <http://www.theage.com/articles/2003/03/18/1047749753387.html>; Alex Devine & Nicolle Shepard, "Appeal on to back our troops", *The Australian* (31 March 2003), <http://www.news.com.au/common/0,6093,6213202,00.html>.

¹¹³ National Museum of Australia, "Prime Ministers of Australia" (15 June 2004), <http://www.nma.gov.au/primeministers/contents.htm>.

of the Cold War period were ‘war heroes’.¹¹⁴ More significant however, is the fact that war service has always been an issue in campaigns – whether for or against.

However, following in the wake of the improved profile of Vietnam veterans in the Australian community, and events in American politics, the lack of military service among politicians suddenly came under scrutiny in the lead up to the 2004 federal election. Citing the fact that it was likely to be a ‘khaki election’ owing to continuing deployment of troops and security concerns, politicians began to be questioned about whether they had avoided service in Vietnam. It was an ironic turn of events that would see politicians embarrassed by their non-participation in a war that previously they would have been considered lucky to have avoided because of its political baggage. Independent candidate for Mayo, Brian Deegan, challenged politicians to present their credentials or explain how they avoided service, asking the loaded question “where did they sit out Vietnam?”¹¹⁵ A number of prominent politicians were questioned, including defence minister Robert Hill, who claimed: “Well, I deferred due to my studies”, as did his opposition counterpart, Kim Beazley.¹¹⁶ However, it was not only aspiring politicians that were making the accusations, as the information had come from a list being distributed on the internet, apparently compiled by one or more Vietnam veterans.¹¹⁷

The measurable change in the Australian political scene towards Vietnam veterans was in attitudes; a situation that had a significant flow on effect to how they were perceived by the general community. (This aligns with the point made previously by many veterans that it was the government’s responsibility to set the tone, and it had failed in regard to Vietnam.) Vietnam veterans gained more positive attention on various levels: whether towards individuals as previously mentioned, or the wider veteran community. No example better demonstrated this than the Western Australian state government apology to Vietnam veterans in December 2001. The motion was passed unanimously:

¹¹⁴ The White House, “The Presidents of the United States” (15 June 2004), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents>.

¹¹⁵ “Confusing personal and political records”, *The Age* (4 August 2004), <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/08/03/1091476498887.html>.

¹¹⁶ Rory Callinan & Rebecca DiGirolamo, “Hill, Beazley top list of MP draft avoiders”, *The Weekend Australian* (31 July-1 August 2004), p.2.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

That this House –

- (1) Records that Australia's military involvement in the Vietnam War is a matter of regret in regard to the treatment of Australian troops on their return home from duty in Vietnam.
- (2) Supports the continuation of policies and programs that assist Vietnam Veterans and their families and their families to recover from the trauma associated with service in Vietnam and its aftermath.
- (3) Acknowledges their hurt resulting from the negative treatment they received, or still receive, as a result of their service during the Vietnam conflict.
- (4) As part of the process of healing and rehabilitation, extends its apology to Vietnam Veterans and their families for the loss and hurt they have suffered and may still suffer as a result of the Vietnam War, to say we are truly sorry.¹¹⁸

This was the first such move by any government, although some political parties and organisations had endorsed the idea for many years.¹¹⁹ While still perhaps promoting the victim image, it was also meant as an attempt to normalise their place into the wider group, as well as an attempt to heal rifts with the community and show a level of taking responsibility - admitting the mistakes.¹²⁰

Another example of the different approach could be seen in the 2004 revamp of a veterans' entitlements package. After an inquiry and years of 'discussion' about veterans' entitlements, representatives of veterans' organisations (comprising almost exclusively Vietnam veterans) were invited to Canberra for the long awaited introduction of the bill to parliament. But to the extreme embarrassment of the Veterans' Affairs minister, Danna Vale, and Prime Minister, Howard, a backbench revolt by their own party forced the cancellation of the bill because it was not generous enough.¹²¹ The representatives who were there for the reading were furious, both over the inconvenience and the exposed failings of the legislation. It seemed that neither the majority of the public nor their politicians, were willing to allow 'war heroes' to be treated shabbily, or even half heartedly, as demonstrated by one MP stating that "everyone has an interest in ensuring veterans are satisfied – we all have

¹¹⁸ Legislative Council of Western Australia, *Apology to Vietnam Veterans* (19 December 2001).

"WA apologises to Nam vets", *The Cairns Post* (22 December 2001), p.26.

¹¹⁹ For example: Young Liberals – NSW Division, "Vietnam Veterans", *Policy Handbook 2001*, p.29.

¹²⁰ This may seem a trivial and much delayed, but for many it is about reconciliation and redemption; something aboriginals have wanted for many years. For a further discussion see: Legislative Council of WA, *Apology to Vietnam Veterans – Debate* (6 December 2001).

¹²¹ Steve Lewis, "Second backbench revolt for PM" *The Australian* (18 February 2004), p.1.

an RSL in our electorates.”¹²² The government announced a new package more than double the first several weeks later.¹²³ This concern was also evident in the stalemate over the Pandanus site for veterans on Cape York, with the state government’s unwillingness to throw veterans off the land despite refusing to give it to them officially. As Les Hiddins had indicated, they had become part of a group of “sacred cows” and therefore, a problem.¹²⁴

The statements in relation to supporting service persons led to claims that Howard, along with the majority of the Australian public, had fallen into the ‘myth’ of the Vietnam veteran treated poorly.¹²⁵ But as demonstrated previously, these arguments often miss the point. While these comments might continue to contribute to the victim mentality, Howard is certainly familiar with the attitudes of the Vietnam era, as he was heavily involved in student politics at the time, attending a number of university campuses as part of the pro-war movement.¹²⁶ He could not be accused of lacking first hand knowledge and the same could be said of his immediate predecessors, Labor prime ministers’, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, both of whom were against the war,¹²⁷ but under whose governments the battle for assistance began and made significant advances.

Veterans’ Self Help

As indicated by the raising of their profile, the many battles and the changed attitudes, assistance had certainly improved. Wayne Scott of VVCS claims that Vietnam veterans may be the best looked after minority in Australia in regard to health issues, a statement supported by a couple of veterans working in advocacy positions. But all agree that it has been a hard fought battle – if too late and at a high price.¹²⁸ While local/regional assistance had improved, more practical help and family assistance was offered, and more advocates were being trained to improve

¹²² Annabel Crabb, Louise Dodson & Michael Gordon, “Revolt to shift PM on vets’ pensions”, *The Age* (18 February 2004), <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/02/17/1076779973430.html>.

¹²³ Mark Metherell, “Veterans win as PM gives more”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (3 March 2004), <http://www.smh.com.au/text/articles/2004/03/03/1078191334753.html>.

¹²⁴ Hiddins Interview. See chapter nine for a detailed discussion.

¹²⁵ McKenna, “Howard’s Warriors”, pp.180-181.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Hawke in the union movement and Keating as a young parliamentarian.

¹²⁸ Scott, Interview; Veteran Interview #5; Veteran Interview #19.

dealings with the DVA, other health problems known in the veteran community for many years, gained wider attention. These included the recognition of more conditions to which veterans were prone, the health problems (particularly psychiatric) of their partners, and most controversially, the release of figures on the health of Vietnam veterans' children. A validation study released in 1999 showed significantly higher levels of a number of physical complaints, including congenital abnormalities and a suicide rate three times higher than the Australian community standard.¹²⁹

The government had previously refused assistance to the children of veterans with physical illnesses, and had allowed only limited counselling opportunities that ceased when they turned eighteen, but the evidence forced the government to reconsider these policies.¹³⁰ Funding and further research was pledged, and shortly after the VVCS launched the "Sons and Daughters" program, with a task force travelling the country conducting interviews with the children of veterans.¹³¹ Such was the response in Cairns, that an extra meeting was scheduled to cope with the numbers. Many of the stories related were disquieting and not easily dismissed. The consultant in charge stated that the Cairns findings were typical of other places in which the meetings were being conducted,¹³² and the findings prompted the DVA to agree to the establishment of specific "Sons and Daughters" programs to be conducted by the VVCS.¹³³ But as many were adults with children of their own, there was a feeling once again, that it was too little too late.

Veterans' wives, many of whom struggled for years to hold their families together, also came forward in greater numbers looking for support. Wives in Cairns established a support group, sponsored by VVCS with a female psychologist as a

¹²⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans: A Study of the Health of Australia's Vietnam Veteran Community: Volume 3 Validation Study* (Canberra, 1999), www.dva.gov.au/health/HlthStdy/validation/index.htm.

¹³⁰ Increased funding for Vietnam veterans and their families was announced in the Federal Budget for 2000, including raising the age limit for assistance from VVCS for veterans' children to 35 years. Department of Veterans' Affairs, "Increased Support for Vietnam Veterans and their Families" (9 May 2000), www.dva.gov.au/media/media/2000/may/vietnam.htm.

¹³¹ VVCS, "Sons and Daughters of Vietnam Veterans – Announcement", *The Cairns Post* (7 July 2001), p.29.

¹³² Amanda Robinson [VVCS Townsville], "Sons and Daughters of Vietnam Veterans Discussion Group – Cairns" (26 July 2001).

¹³³ VVCS, *Vietnam Veterans Sons and Daughters Project Plan* (Canberra, 2001), http://www.dva.gov.au/health/vvcs/Project_Plan.doc.

convenor.¹³⁴ However, the bulk of psychological support comes from the sharing of feelings and experiences among the wives themselves. The group meets twice a month and tries to have weekends away a few times a year. The women involved claimed that the most useful aspect of the group was that they no longer felt as if they were alone,¹³⁵ which was a similar sentiment to that of their husbands. Scott said that the amount of wives and children coming to the VVCS for assistance had risen dramatically over the past few years, with this group making up 50% of the service's business.¹³⁶

Ultimately, it would be fair to conclude that veterans have attained a better level of assistance largely as a result of their own efforts, a situation perhaps not unlike that of their WWI counterparts – although the latter were more revered overall. This has been a recurring theme, as indicated in detail throughout this research. It continues at the time of writing and undoubtedly will for many years to come. The fighting skills taught to these men in preparation for a distant war had stood them in good stead for the obstacles many of them would face during future decades. If the government and the community wondered at the apparent combative mentality (sometimes overly so) that was exhibited, they need look no further than their training, their homecomings, and the long history of battles for assistance by previous service persons. Consequently, as the DVA trains increasing numbers of advocates, many of them veterans themselves, the Vietnam veterans seem, in many ways, as crusaders for current and future service persons.

Veterans now warn personnel being deployed overseas of what happened to them and that they should not assume that they will be taken care of in the manner in which they have the right to respect.¹³⁷ They were also unwilling to mince words, with one claiming that “the soldiers of today are looking down the barrel of not getting looked after in years to come when the world starts to collapse around them.”¹³⁸ These claims were given some unfortunate credence by the widow of the single Australian

¹³⁴ Meeting of the Vietnam Veterans' Wives Support Group, West Cairns RSL (4 April 2000).

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Scott, Interview.

¹³⁷ For example: ABC Online, “Vietnam veterans’ warning”, *The World Today – ABC* (13 March 2000), <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/s109939.htm>; SBS, “Veterans protest about compensation payments”, *Insight – SBS* (3 July 2003), <http://www.sbs.com.au/insight/trans.php3?dte=2003-07-03>.

¹³⁸ SBS – Insight, “Veterans protest”.

fatality in Afghanistan. Kylie Russell claimed that the level of compensation is inappropriate and even scandalous, and accused the government of ignoring her pleas for help and changes.¹³⁹ There were also claims of problems in regard to some returning from East Timor, as well as Iraq and Afghanistan in both Australia and the US. The warnings by Vietnam veterans and the structure of assistance that they have largely built through their own hard work and persistence have had benefits for some post-Vietnam service personnel. Both military and government agencies have made substantial changes in the manner in which the training, deployment and return of personnel are conducted. Everything from debriefing and counselling to domestic issues and post-military employment issues have been addressed. Reports on military stress and research into outcomes have increased in number.¹⁴⁰ Notwithstanding the fact that these studies appeared at a time when ‘counselling’ and its associated components had become *de rigueur* in the community for any event that might cause apprehension,¹⁴¹ much of the raising of awareness, particularly in the military context, had come from the many years of lobbying by Vietnam veterans. Their role in the increased understanding of the health concerns of service personnel, particularly PTSD, should not be underestimated.

However, the work (and perhaps the battle) is far from over, and a significant number of those helping service persons outside of the military, are often veterans themselves (or family); predominantly those of the Vietnam era. This occurred for a number of reasons, most of which have previously been discussed, and for many, it remained a significant issue. Whether they were unable to get help elsewhere, as was often the case earlier, or they did not trust or expect understanding from the non-veteran operated agencies, the willing (and sometimes less willing) veteran volunteers, found

¹³⁹ Vanda Carson, “War widow slams ministers”, *The Australian* (4 February 2003), p.6. The latter claim is given further credibility by her exclusion from a ceremony honouring those who served when President Bush visited in 2003: Margo Kingston, “Snub for war widow”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (27 October 2003), <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/10/27/1067233083792.html>.

¹⁴⁰ For example: Kearney et al, *Management of Stress in the ADF*; Siebler, *Supporting Australian Defence Force*; George Kearney, Mark Creamer, Ric Marshall & Anne Goynes (Eds), *Military Stress and Performance: The Australian Defence Force Experience* (Melbourne, 2003).

¹⁴¹ It could be argued that ‘counselling’ has become almost an accepted part of everyday life (perhaps partly because of legal concerns). One example was the case of a group of primary school students who were offered counselling after coming to school one morning to find that one of the classrooms had been burned down. None of them witnessed the emergency and no one was hurt: Ten News (2 July 2004). One veteran expressed disgust with a situation that appeared to have diminished the seriousness of actual PTSD by offering trauma counselling for anything from “running over a cow” to critical events: Veteran Interview #10.

themselves responsible for their former comrades well being. Warren Entsch has continually encouraged these initiatives, claiming that there is nothing better than the assistance from within the group: “When someone comes in for help, they have a shared experience”.¹⁴² While a number of veterans have stated that they prefer the assistance of their former comrades because of understanding and trust issues, Lieutenant General Grey highlighted the danger of relying solely on this approach. Pointing to the fact that “quite often those that are trying to do the looking after are not as well as the fellas they’re trying to look after”, and find themselves stretched, especially when many of them lack appropriate training and skills, can be a recipe for disaster.¹⁴³ Nonetheless, if the interviews and other sources are considered, many veterans believe that a mixture of both approaches is the most sensible and useful option.

Certainly, this approach has proved the most sensible for government from a financial perspective. Getting more volunteers involved (particularly veterans), and encouraging self help initiatives, has allowed an increase in services with what can only be assumed to be less monetary output, or certainly only minimal increases. Providing limited funding for infrastructure (such as the Westcourt drop-in centre or the VVCS wives group), or providing small grants for groups to conduct activities in their local community (such as VSASA) – a scheme promoted heavily by the DVA – has increased services in regional areas.¹⁴⁴ The training of advocates to assist veterans interact with the DVA (and other agencies), does not only save time and stress for veterans, but reduces pressure on the DVA resources. This process has been duplicated by providing basic counselling skills to Voluntary Area Representatives for the VVCS to deal with emergencies and referrals.¹⁴⁵ The encouragement of group counselling (similar to the American ‘rap’ groups of the 1970-80s), also reduces costs.

It could be argued that if these initiatives work, then it is a worthwhile outcome for veterans, the government, and the wider community. It is too soon to speculate as to their long term success, although limited early evidence is mainly positive. Yet there

¹⁴² Entsch Interview.

¹⁴³ Veteran Interview #35.

¹⁴⁴ DVA, “Veteran and Community Grants” (July 2004), <http://www.dva.gov.au/health/grants/>.

¹⁴⁵ Scott, Interview.

are issues that may well prove problematic. One is the question of what occurs when the current volunteers are no longer able to continue, as there is a large age group between the Vietnam era veterans and the next group, of whom there are a much smaller number. There is also the issue of Grey's warning of the possible overload on the group, for which there is some precedent.¹⁴⁶ Perhaps it is hoped that for younger and future veterans, new programs will void the necessity of the current assistance structure. It is certainly an issue that must be addressed. In the meantime, it seems it will remain up to veterans to maintain the level of assistance they have attained.

The Stereotypes

Problematically, this work by veterans was one of the factors that continued to promote the victim stereotype that they were trying to escape. Despite all the changes in attitudes towards them, the Vietnam veterans remained largely trapped within their stereotype. Nevertheless, there have been significant efforts to distance themselves from the mentality over the past few years. While many of these attempts have been through the actions of individuals and groups, some have attacked the issue more directly. One prominent example of this is a statement on the VVAA website (part of their mission statement):

Over the years there has been a persistent media presentation of Vietnam veterans as 'victims'. The Association believes that this is counter-productive. This is not an image that the VVAA wishes to perpetuate either for itself or for its members. Rather, it sees Vietnam veterans as achievers. Vietnam veterans have reached the highest level of business, professional and political ranks within Australia, and every one of them who has overcome psychological or health problems in order to raise a family and live a relatively normal life has overcome adversity in order to achieve. Vietnam veterans aren't victims, they are achievers.¹⁴⁷

It has also been seen in the veterans' rise through the ranks of the RSL; they now hold many of the major office positions, including national president, and are more willing to promote their service in a positive manner.¹⁴⁸ Larger numbers are attending Anzac Day, Long Tan Day and reunions,¹⁴⁹ and a multitude of veteran authored (or co-

¹⁴⁶ See Chapter Eight.

¹⁴⁷ VVAA, "A Short History of the VVAA", <http://www.vvaa.org.au/history.htm> (July 2004).

¹⁴⁸ Stephens, "Out of Vietnam, a battalion of leaders".

¹⁴⁹ This became obvious during the interviews as many had only started attending in recent years.

authored) pieces of literature on the war itself have appeared, in an effort to normalise their activities and war among Australia's others; highlighting the similarities of service rather than the difference of the aftermath (and perhaps also the war itself).

Many are therefore not unwilling to promote themselves, if not purely as heroes themselves, nevertheless with the ability to fit the heroic mould of previous service persons. The community itself appears to be more willing to accept Vietnam veterans as heroes – even as bonafide war heroes – but there is still a difference between them and those who came before. Even as heroes, they are somehow still victims, even if to a lesser extent. As indicated, the veterans and their war experiences have gained increased respect, rather than just the previous focus on the 'mistakes' of the war in general. Anzac Day 2004 saw a series of two to three minute radio 'spots' which gave potted stories of Australian war events – particularly battles – with a generous number featuring Vietnam.¹⁵⁰ This trend has also been noticeable in print media and television specials around the commemoration day. This is almost certainly in part because they were increasingly looked towards for guidance and leadership, as seen with Cosgrove and the other Chiefs, Jeffrey, and more ordinary Vietnam veterans.

The villain stereotype is greatly reduced (much more than the victim one), but it still exists to some degree. While fading, particularly with early 21st century events, it has been occasionally resurrected. The Vietnam veteran was still sometimes the 'bad' or 'unhinged' character in a television show or movie,¹⁵¹ and still mentioned in a negative manner on occasion.¹⁵² It was also sometimes revived by news reports of events, such as revelations in 2001 about American Senator Bob Kerrey's alleged involvement in a civilian massacre during his Vietnam service, which destroyed any hopes of a presidential run and received considerable media coverage in Australia as well.¹⁵³ Even the inhumane acts committed at the Abu Ghraib prison by American soldiers in Iraq in 2004 was linked back to Vietnam through atrocities and cover-ups.¹⁵⁴ There were also the rare occasions where publicity surrounding some veterans

¹⁵⁰ This was a national campaign – in Cairns they could be heard on: 4CA FM 102.7 (25 April 2004).

¹⁵¹ This continued even post - East Timor and September 11 – See Chapter Five.

¹⁵² See Chapter Six.

¹⁵³ Johanna McGeary & Karen Tumulty, "The Fog of War" *Time Magazine* (7 May 2001), pp.24-32.

¹⁵⁴ For example: Elizabeth Becker, "Eerie echo of Iraq in Vietnam transcripts", *The Age* (28 May 2004), <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/05/27/1085641649378.html>; "The damage is done", *The Australian* (8 May 2004), <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/o,5942,9497865,00.html>.

and their problems, such as the early media reports regarding Project Pandanus, which were either isolated incidents or put into the wrong context (by mistake or design), provided undesirable attention. These incidents have the ability to resurrect and reinforce stereotypes which many have strived to refute, and continue to frustrate, no matter how rare they become.

The villain stereotype has also receded to a large extent for reasons other than changing attitudes to service. These include a mixture of the obvious and the curious. One factor is the veterans advancing age, with most in 2004 being in their mid to late fifties at least. Their age has made them appear more 'average' and less 'dangerous' in appearance.¹⁵⁵ There is also the aspect of time: with few under forty actually remembering Vietnam, the war itself has become history, as has much of the popular culture that produced the villain stereotype. But perhaps most significantly, there are now those to take their place. Gulf War (first Gulf War) veterans are increasingly appearing as the 'bad guy' in the media and popular television shows.¹⁵⁶ There has also been publicity surrounding the health issues of this group (including alleged chemical poisoning) and what is known as Gulf War Syndrome. While it has received the most publicity in the US, it has also appeared in both Australia and Britain.¹⁵⁷ Perhaps more unsettling have been the claims of problems among those returning to the US from Afghanistan and Iraq in 2002-2004, in particular the notorious murders of four army wives in a short period at one army base by their recently returned husbands,¹⁵⁸ as well as reports that indicate as many as one in six soldiers from Iraq were suffering from PTSD by mid-2004 – one year into the conflict.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Even members of the VVMC look more like grandfathers than Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*.

¹⁵⁶ For example: "Muhammad found guilty in Virginia Court", *The New York Times* (18 November 2003), p.A1; Walter Kirn, "Bring it all back home", *The New York Times* (17 November 2002), <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/17/17WWLN.html>; Sarah Edmonds, "Gulf vets' angry battle cry", *the Cairns Post* (19 November 2002), p.14; *Law and Order* (9 June 2004); *CSI Miami* (2003).

¹⁵⁷ [USA] - Sheryl Stolberg, "US Reports Disease Link to Gulf War", *The New York Times* (11 December 2001), <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/11/health/anatomy/11GULF.html>; [Britain] - Michael Evans, "First official backing for Gulf war syndrome", *The Australian* (13 January 2004), p.7; [Australia] - Tom Allard, "Gulf War vets' illness risk higher", *The Sydney Morning Herald* (17 January 2003), <http://www.smh.com.au/text/articles/2003/01/16/1042520723498.htm>.

¹⁵⁸ "Rash of Wife Killings Stuns Ft. Bragg", *The New York Times* (27 July 2002), <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/27/national/27BRAG.html>; Roy Eccleston, "Disquiet on the home front", *The Australian* (2 August 2002), p.9.

¹⁵⁹ Claudia Wallis, "Hidden Scars of Battle", *Time Magazine* (12 July 2004), p.15; Eric Schmitt, "US army finds its suicide rate in Iraq is higher than for other GI's", *The New York Times* (26 March 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/26/international/middleeast/26ARMY.html>.

There were also examples in Australia. Apart from the Gulf War Syndrome, it is those who served in East Timor who are finding their way to the headlines, despite its public popularity and the fact that it was not a ‘conventional conflict’. A number of stories have emerged of suicide, crime and mercenary activities – most of which have been blamed on adjustment difficulties relating to their service.¹⁶⁰ In June 2004, two current SAS soldiers – both of whom it was noted had seen combat (both in Iraq and one also in Afghanistan) – were arrested on charges of conspiracy to assault,¹⁶¹ providing what appears to be a new group on which to focus. At the sentencing hearing of the more decorated of the two, a psychiatric evaluation stated that his “training...desensitised him to aggression and violence”, causing the judge to suggest that the army should investigate these issues.¹⁶² Notably however, these are not merely looked upon as villains: there is also an aspect of the victim within the stories (perhaps most particularly in regard to East Timor).

It seems that all who have seen war are potential victims (and/or villains), and there is little doubt that it is very much a legacy of Vietnam. They are automatically victims, as they were once automatically heroes, although their victim status does not negate their ability to also be heroes. In a time where there is a greater awareness of the effect of trauma, and simply the experience of training can be traumatic, the defence force has endeavoured to address these issues; albeit some would argue still not sufficiently.¹⁶³ But it is questionable how much difference can be made. It could be argued that the difficulty is in the entrenched nature and structure of warfare itself and may be impossible to remove. The military experience cannot be made into a ‘warm and fuzzy’ one, or even follow the accepted conventions of the corporate arena. Soldiers are trained to use weapons, to defend, to kill. War cannot be victimless.

¹⁶⁰ For example: Jamie Walker & Martin Chulov, “Bin Laden convert suffered trauma”, *The Australian* (7 March 2002), p.3; Steve Barrett, “A hero’s descent into the abyss”, *The Weekend Australian* (28-29 February 2004), p.1.

¹⁶¹ Ian McPhedran, “SAS pair charged for bash plot”, *Herald Sun* (15 June 2004), <http://www.news.com.au/common/0,6093,9846194,00.html>.

¹⁶² Amanda Banks, “Call for reform after SAS plot”, *The Australian* (11 August 2004), p.3.

¹⁶³ For example: Rohan Wade, “Troop stress alarm”, *news.com.au* (14 December 2003), <http://www.news.com.au/common/0,6093/8161234,00.html>.

Trendiness and Frauds

With increased respect and admiration as heroic figures, public attention had made the Vietnam veteran almost a ‘trendy’ figure, with even veterans of previous wars claiming that they have become the “flavour of the month”.¹⁶⁴ The popular culture icons have also contributed, and instead of finding this development positive, a number of veterans alluded to it with disgust. However, there are positive aspects as is shown in attitudes to the VVMC, who have become almost folk heroes. This is perhaps not surprising in a country whose folk heroes are often outlaws – such as Ned Kelly and the rebels of the Eureka Stockade – or other anti-authoritarian figures. The VVMC’s disagreements and rebellion against the establishment, in particular sections of the RSL, have also endeared them to a public who admired their Anzac diggers for the same reason. The veteran motorcycle groups in the US, which were often much more radical and on the fringe in comparison to their Australian counterparts, have also become largely ‘respectable’, with President Bush putting in an appearance at their “Rolling Thunder” rally in 2004, and meeting representatives to receive their endorsement of his candidacy over their former ‘brother-in-arms’, Kerry.¹⁶⁵ But the VVMC are not folk heroes in exactly the same style of the ‘larrikin diggers’ of a long past era, despite several similarities. There is a more contemporary quality to its implications; almost the Rambo/outcast style – the anti-hero - with a bit of Ned Kelly combined for Australian context.

This ‘trendiness’ is perhaps partly because of the popular culture image in which the veteran may appear dangerous, edgy, exciting and unpredictable. They are seen as respectable enough, but not in the traditional manner, and even the methods of telling their stories – their history – have been different. Their history emerged with ‘new’ styles, such as oral history and the increase of multimedia technology that was perfectly suited to such a visual war - showing all its realities and distortions. Vietnam has even become *de rigueur* in video games in the new millennium, having lost its taboo with a new generation.¹⁶⁶ Vietnam has always provided a clearer

¹⁶⁴ Jonathan King, “Changi veteran’s last duty”, *The Weekend Australian* (16-17 February 2002), p.6.

¹⁶⁵ They particularly object to Kerry’s anti-war activities after Vietnam: “Bikers roll thunder out behind Bush”, *The Australian* (1 June 2004), p.8.

¹⁶⁶ Stephen Totilo, “A Belated Invasion: Vietnam, The Game”, *The New York Times* (1 April 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/01/technology/circuits/01viet.html>.

picture of war in the public mind through footage and movies; despite the misrepresentations and significant amounts of artistic licence.

The increased trendiness created another by-product, encouraging a rash of frauds in later years. War service has always encouraged frauds, but although there were cases, Vietnam ones were less common initially. While veterans are pleased that their status is now more acceptable, it has also unfortunately attracted interlopers who falsely claim that they are Vietnam veterans. The problem is particularly rampant in America where the Vietnam War seems to have a popular sub-culture all of its own, and the veteran population is so large. The situation made headlines in America in 1999 when a number of high profile frauds were exposed, including actor Brian Dennehy, who had been outspoken about the problems of veterans.¹⁶⁷ In 2001, well known academic and author, Joseph Ellis, was exposed when his tales became increasingly outrageous because no one questioned them, and his behaviour attracted an enormous amount of publicity, including in the Australian media.¹⁶⁸ The issue has been less widespread in Australia, with a smaller veteran population, fairly comprehensive public lists and more stringent controls on military files, but veterans claim that there are an increasing number of frauds.¹⁶⁹ A group of veterans received a considerable amount of publicity and appeared on a national current affairs show in March 2000 after a campaign to expose frauds in Victoria. When asked why it was so important to publicly humiliate people, they explained that they had fought for many years for recognition, and did not believe that others should take advantage of this, particularly for personal gain.¹⁷⁰ Veterans interviewed for this study echoed this opinion. One explained that he and a group of other veterans had discovered a couple of interlopers in the Cairns area, and were at that time investigating another man.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ B.G.Burkett and Glenna Whitely, "Crying Shame" *The Sunday Mail* (4 July 1999), pp.6-7. See also: Burkett & Whitely, *Stolen Valor*.

¹⁶⁸ Josh Tyrangiel, "A history of his own making", *Time Magazine* (2 July 2001), p.56; Ana Marie Cox, "Historian who invented a past", *The Australian* (18 July 2001), p.34.

¹⁶⁹ Ian McPhedran and Michael Lund, "Phoney Diggers get veterans' pity", *The Sunday Mail* (4 July 1999), p.7.

¹⁷⁰ *A Current Affair*, Nine Network Australia (24 March 2000).

¹⁷¹ Veteran Interview #32. On one occasion, this author was also given tips on what to look for and encouraged to report anyone whose credentials seemed suspicious.

A few do take the risk though, and can be convincing, especially to civilians, and a small number have managed to maintain the charade for quite a period of time.¹⁷² Medals can be bought or made, but it is harder to be convincing than it often was for previous wars. Veterans claim that they can usually pick a fake with just a few questions – assisted enormously by the fact that most of the force served in such a limited area. Some claim that their lack of records is a consequence of their time with “special forces” or on “government missions”, of whom there were only a tiny handful in Australia. Federal legislation was made more stringent on the issue in 2002 after a couple of public exposures, with fines being increased and jail terms threatened: such was the outrage that a number of pieces of publicity have urged the “dobbing in” of fakes with dramatic headlines such as “Watch for Impostors” and “Veterans declare war on phony vets”.¹⁷³ But the ones that veterans find the most reprehensible are the ones that do not lie about the fact they served as much as the type of service, with one commenting that the “biggest talkers have usually seen the least action”;¹⁷⁴ a scenario that has probably occurred after every war.

The Vietnam Syndrome Revisited – The ‘War on Terror’

For a time in the 1990s, it appeared as if the Vietnam syndrome was fading, or at least was much less of an issue. If the Gulf War had “kicked the Vietnam Syndrome” for the US, then East Timor appeared to do the same for Australia. At one point shortly after the deployment the dreaded ‘V’ word was used by former prime minister, Paul Keating, in criticising the policy,¹⁷⁵ but Howard was quick to dismiss the comment and it soon became clear that East Timor reflected Vietnam in no recognisable manner. Concerns in that regard were buried with its success, limited casualties and scandals, its relatively short duration (for the large group) and its strong international support through the UN. The military was back in ‘fashion’, so to speak: it had regained its honour.

¹⁷² Warren Owens, “Court to break bogus Viet vet”, *The Sunday Mail* (6 April 2003), p.39.

¹⁷³ Janelle Gullo, “Watch For Impostors”, *The Cairns Post* (25 April 2002), p.1; Mark Scala & Tory Maguire, “Veterans declare war on phony vets”, *The Courier Mail* (22 April 2002), p.4.

¹⁷⁴ Veteran Interview #5.

¹⁷⁵ BBC News, “Howard under fire over Timor”, *BBC World Media Watch* (6 October 1999), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/466947.stm>; ABC News, “Keating and Howard slug it out over East Timor”, *ABC AM* (5 October 1999), <http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s56905.htm>.

While Howard was never actually crass enough to say that the syndrome had been “kicked”, he obviously thought it gone as he opened the door willingly, if not enthusiastically, to increased militarism.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, when the “War on Terror” began after September 11, there was little hesitation on the part of Australia to join in. The government invoked the ANZUS Treaty, and in November 2001, troops were sent into combat and support positions in Afghanistan. Although they had significant, certainly majority, public support, questions over the wisdom of commencing a “limited war” in a disunified, extremely troubled country, began almost immediately.¹⁷⁷ Brigadier Adrian D’Hage, former director of Defence Joint Operations and a Vietnam veteran, suggested that the “present strategy is a potential quagmire. It does have echoes of Vietnam.”¹⁷⁸ The ghost of the Vietnam Syndrome – if it had in fact ever been dead or just in remission – re-emerged.

But the relatively mild reaction to Afghanistan was almost totally consumed in 2003-4 by Iraq.¹⁷⁹ The invasion of Iraq caused not only international, but also domestic division. In Australia, it lacked bipartisan support even before the final commitment was made, and large protests began almost immediately. Opposition leader Simon Crean, surprised and upset many in a speech at the farewell of troops leaving for Iraq, stating: “I don’t support the deployment of our troops in these circumstances (but) I do support our troops”, while a group of anti-war protestors could be seen outside the perimeter.¹⁸⁰ While a number agreed with Crean’s stand, several felt that neither the time nor place were appropriate.¹⁸¹ Fears were raised that these attitudes would cause

¹⁷⁶ For a further discussion see: Alan Ryan, “The Australian Army and the Vietnam War in retrospect” in Dennis & Grey (Eds), *the Australian Army and the Vietnam War*, pp.280-281; Henry S. Albinsky, “Issues in Australian Foreign Policy: July –December 1999”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 46, No.2 (2000), p.205; Norm Dixon, “Did the East Timor intervention kill off the ‘Vietnam syndrome’?” *Green Left Weekly* (December 2001), p.11.

¹⁷⁷ R.W. Apple jr, “Afghanistan as Vietnam”, *The New York Times* (31 October 2001), <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/31/international/31ASSE.html>; Roy Eccleston, “Just don’t mention Vietnam”, *The Weekend Australian* (9-10 March 2002), p.14.

¹⁷⁸ D’Hage, “Got in a terrible jam up yonder in Afghanistan”.

¹⁷⁹ The Iraq war began in March 2003, ostensibly to remove dictator Saddam Hussein, and find the ‘weapons of mass destruction’ that US and British intelligence claimed were there. He was also linked to the September 11 terrorist attacks. However, no WMDs or evidence of links to the terrorists were ever found. The war continued in Afghanistan with a US installed leader, a divided people, difficult terrain and an invisible enemy.

¹⁸⁰ Steve Lewis, John Kerin & Roy Eccleston, “Troops leave a divided nation”, *The Australian* (24 January 2003), p.1.

¹⁸¹ For example: National Nine News (23 January 2003), Nine Network Australia; Tom Allard & Kelly Burke, “Not since Calwell has Labor risked such a speech”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (24 January 2003), <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/01/23/1042911493882.html>.

a backlash towards the troops, illustrated by one soldier claiming that his experience “has made me think a lot about the treatment of Vietnam veterans.”¹⁸² Even though the war was officially ‘over’ and ‘won’ by mid-2003, the deepening problems controlling Iraq, with increasing guerrilla activity and the unravelling of order, brought only one word to the lips of commentators: ‘Vietnam’.

A war of words broke out between the commentators and the government over the issue (in Australia and the US). Some supporters of the war mounted a reasonable defence and examples of its difference to Vietnam¹⁸³ – others were farcical. One commentator, satirising some of the less than inspiring comments coming from the White House and military leaders pronounced that: “Here are the reasons Iraq is not Vietnam: It is a desert, not a jungle”, before going on to explain the situation in a more serious context.¹⁸⁴ But the assertions seemed to have some credence, or at least some psychological currency, as it was at this time that John Kerry began to seriously promote his Vietnam service, perhaps trying to instil the idea that if it was ‘another Vietnam’, someone who knows about it would be needed. Although it also became a catchcry in Australia and was strongly denied by the government, there were some parallels from which even John Howard and his sustained popularity could not avoid.¹⁸⁵ It was not the same war, but even to those who had some knowledge of the Vietnam War, there was a terrible symmetry – a sense of *déjà vu* with similar mistakes; similar statements; similar problems. It is perhaps because of this that most of the group sent to run the American embassy in Baghdad had spent time in Vietnam; causing the quip that it was becoming “Saigon on the Tigris”.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² Peter Wilson, “Aussie soldiers fear Iraq backlash”, *news.com.au* (16 March 2003), <http://www.news.com.au/common/0,6093,6133776,00.html>; “Fears ‘ratbag’ protesters will vilify troops”, *The Age* (19 February 2003), www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/02/19/1045330652704.html.

¹⁸³ For examples: Charles Krauthammer, “This is Hardly Vietnam”, *The Washington Post* (16 April 2004), p.A21; Greg Sheridan, “No defeat in comparisons”, *The Weekend Australian* (15-16 November 2003), p.13; David Burchell, “Times have a-changed”, *The Australian* (13 April 2004), p.11.

¹⁸⁴ Richard Cohen, “Blind in Baghdad”, *The Washington Post* (13 April 2004), p. A19.

¹⁸⁵ Paul Kelly, “It’s like Vietnam, says Latham”, *The Australian* (8 April 2004), p.1; “Government rejects Vietnam comparisons”, *news.com.au* (8 April 2004), <http://www.news.com.au/common/0,6093,9225093,00.html>. For example: There were the large public protests; the lack of bipartisan support; the exposure of misleading reasons for going to war; the too close alignment with US policy which clouded independent actions (political and militarily); the small but politically significant contingent; arguments from the Opposition about withdrawing “before the job is done”; the increasing messiness on the ground; alleged atrocities and cover-ups; questions of “what the war was really about”; and the spectre of the problems of the returning personnel.

¹⁸⁶ Robin Wright, “Old Vietnam Hands in Charge in Iraq”, *The Washington Post* (3 August 2004), p.A15.

Although at the time of writing, it is impossible to predict the eventual outcome of the Iraq conflict, and commentators and scholars will spend years discussing its level of alignment with Vietnam, it has certainly demonstrated that the Vietnam syndrome is far from cured. In fact, Charles Krauthammer believes:

There is no cure for the Vietnam Syndrome. It will go away only when the baby boom generation does, dying off like the Israelites in the desert, allowing a new generation, cleansed of the memory and the guilt, to look at the world clearly once again.¹⁸⁷

This is supported by the previously mentioned backlash and consternation in Australia over protestors and comments made by the Opposition. Vietnam is raised each time there is controversy, with veterans making comments of disappointment. There were constant reminders to support and not take any opposition out on troops. Certainly, the Vietnam issue remains an uncomfortable, or at best complex, one. However, the situation lacks the fire of the US – possibly because of the lack of Australian body bags from Iraq and the quick withdrawal of the bulk of the combat forces after the fall of the government. The Vietnam syndrome, however, is far from gone.

Place in History

The issue of the War on Terror and the Vietnam Syndrome leads directly back to the crux of the problem. Vietnam seems unlikely to ever be a comfortable piece of history, so how do the events of such an uncomfortable event find a comfortable, or at least acceptable, place for their history? It raises many questions about whether ‘bad’ wars can have heroes, and can a victim really be a hero, and vice versa? This ultimately leads to the Anzac Legend, that remarkably sustaining epicentre of military and identity beliefs, and whether a place can ever be found in its hallowed memories. If the recent reformation of the Vietnam veteran is anything to go by, then they can certainly be heroes, despite the inability to shake off the victim tag, which, ironically, has been somehow helpful in cementing their hero status. But the Anzac Legend is another problem. It seems increasingly possible that the veterans might be considered entitled to carry the mantle, but the war itself may be a different matter, as it remains, and likely will for the foreseeable future, a ‘bad’ war. This continues to be

¹⁸⁷ Krauthammer, “This is Hardly Vietnam”.

emphasised as illustrated during the D-Day 60th Anniversary celebrations in 2004, with headlines and stories proclaiming “the last good war” and “the greatest generation”.¹⁸⁸

There may never be another ‘good’ war. Modern war no longer carries the allusions and illusions it once did and the community generally considers war negatively; less as solutions to problems than they were once perceived. Technology and weapon capacity have tended to make wars smaller and more focussed, and despite claims to the contrary, with more visually devastating results. But while ‘smaller’, they are often more confusing; both the enemy and the reasons for the conflicts seem less clear cut – although, perhaps they never were. Their beginnings and ends are more fluid and ‘victory’ has become more abstract and less unambiguous.¹⁸⁹ Greg Sheridan suggests that wars based on “blame and revenge”, as modern ones tend to be, may “last for decades and offer no decisive victory.”¹⁹⁰ Most significantly perhaps, the community has less tolerance for casualties and destruction.¹⁹¹ ‘Collateral damage’ is no longer an acceptable euphemism.

Although these ‘small’ wars are by no means new, it was Vietnam that was the one in Western modern history that made people question so many accepted norms; coming at a time when the focus of the world was changing so dramatically.¹⁹² Vietnam became the benchmark for disastrous war (although there have been many others with similarly devastating consequences).¹⁹³ A super power - and its allies - had made a series of mistakes and miscalculations, and more than one lie was exposed to further undermine their policies. Australia found itself attached to a lost war and was tarnished with the consequences, and remained unable to come to terms with its role. Ultimately though, for Australia, it *was* a small war, with a small number of participants, that through poor government handling (before, during and after), became a serious publicity problem. Australia had taken part in few small wars since

¹⁸⁸ For example: “D-Day – 60th Anniversary Tribute”, *The Weekend Australian* (5-6 June 2004).

¹⁸⁹ Peter Wilson, “Battle Fatigue”, *The Australian – 40 Years: Part 5 – World Events* (July 2004), p.5.

¹⁹⁰ Greg Sheridan, “Defeat of new enemy a distant hope”, *The Weekend Australian* (5-6 June 2004), p.8.

¹⁹¹ Examples can be seen in the death of the single Australian SAS soldier; the refusal of the American government to allow coffins to be shown; outcry over civilian casualties; and the Abu Ghraib scandal.

¹⁹² See chapter two.

¹⁹³ Wilson, “Battle Fatigue”, p.5.

federation, and the government seemed unable to manage the political complexity. Therefore, because Australia appeared to have so much difficulty placing it into an acceptable context, many participants felt compelled to take some of their cues from their American counterparts; even if this was not always conscious and then often expressed in a much more Australian manner. Nevertheless, the veterans were not alone in taking this path, as successive governments followed (and continue to do so) in the footsteps of American policy. The Australian backlash against these policies, particularly in the organised protest groups, also had its origins in the US. To accuse the veterans of following too closely the actions of American veterans is somewhat short sighted and disingenuous (and perhaps even hypocritical).

Yet, even as Australian veterans sometimes looked to the US for guidance, ironically America appears to regularly forget that Australia went to war in Vietnam with them.¹⁹⁴ This provides another perspective in the occasional alignment of Australian veterans to their American counterparts, because they feel that they have no clearer identity outside Australia as they do within. Few outside of Australia are even aware that Australia was involved in Vietnam. There was little of the war that was distinctly theirs – distinctly Australian – except in spirit, and even that seemed reduced in the public arena. It was a thoroughly Americanised experience, even in Phuoc Tuy province. There was no Gallipoli; Lighthorsemen at Beersheba; no reputation for larrikin behaviour; no holding back of a huge force by apparently second class soldiers in the mud of Kokoda; no large scale suffering at the hands of an ‘inhumane’ enemy; and definitely no triumphant marches into liberated towns. It was an American war (it is even called that by the Vietnamese) in which Australia played a supporting role; like one of those character actors whose name no one can ever remember. When even the ally they assisted, and the country they represented, appear to forget them at times, their war becomes more difficult to pin down and identify.

¹⁹⁴ There are many examples in texts, but perhaps the most surprising came from Robert McNamara in the award winning documentary, “The Fog of War” (2003). He claimed that America was alone in Vietnam, having been deserted by all of its traditional allies.

How Much is Enough?

While most veterans believed that the recognition of their service had been poor, how much it had improved over time and whether it was enough was harder to answer. A few felt that recognition was still inadequate, and while others thought it sufficient, there was something discomfiting in their response to the question. A couple identified what was so problematic with the issue: there was plenty of recognition, but it was not always the ‘type’ they wanted – it had been slow in appearing and was somewhat distorted. Lieutenant General Grey echoed most of the veterans in saying that:

I think there was an attitude that continued after the war that we shouldn’t have been there and that you were all mental morons for obeying your government’s order to go. But that has changed... In fact, I think the public have almost tipped over the other way, where they’re very sympathetic these days to Vietnam veterans.¹⁹⁵

Another veteran was more blunt, claiming that although he felt there had been increased recognition, he was not sure that it was “the right recognition. There has been a bit of a perception of the whingeing Vietnam vet.”¹⁹⁶ This image concerns many: it was more ‘victim’ than ‘hero’.

Nonetheless, even as it improved and they were even sometimes singled out for special recognition; there was still a feeling that something was lacking. It was still not ‘enough’. But working out how much was enough, and what that consisted of has proved to be much more difficult. Grey has not been the only veteran to identify the fundamental change in direction, and sometimes exaggerated response. One stated that: “I can’t believe everyone isn’t totally sick of it. I know I am.”¹⁹⁷ The constant reminders and reiterations by politicians, the media (and some veterans as well) of how poorly they had been treated, how there must be redress and how it must never happen again, while somewhat useful, have a dual effect. This theme was also apparent at the 10th Anniversary Rededication of the Vietnam Memorial in Canberra in 2002. The attendance of so many veterans (the estimates ranged from 3-5000) was

¹⁹⁵ Veteran Interview #35.

¹⁹⁶ Veteran Interview #32.

¹⁹⁷ Veteran Interview #5.

significant considering the lack of general publicity:¹⁹⁸ nearly 10% of the force deployed and from as far away as Perth, Darwin and Cairns. But in the speeches, the DVA commemoration booklet and the later media reports, it seemed less a rededication, reunion and commemoration; instead becoming another ‘welcome home’.¹⁹⁹ While it was another step towards reconciliation: with themselves; society; and with history – the DVA information and assistance booths dotted along Anzac Avenue were a reminder that the problems were still far from absent. This should not suggest that the availability of assistance should not be publicised – in fact, its availability should be lauded – but it reflects part of a wider issue as indicated in the speeches.

However, it could be argued that it will never be enough because, ultimately, what they really want is unattainable. They want the ‘victory’ they were ‘denied’ (which a number felt was accomplished). They do not want their sacrifices to have been futile, and for their comrades to have died, and the destruction and the killing they committed to have been for anything less than honourable reasons. As Hynes had indicated, there were plenty of heroics to go around, but little honour.²⁰⁰ It would be fair to suggest that few wars are ever fought for truly honourable reasons, or in an honourable manner, but in the history of the proud tradition of post-federalism military endeavour, no other war had ever been called into question in such a way, over a sustained period and with so little honour attached. Peter Wilson points to the waning popularity of conflict since Vietnam, having lost the “comradeship and sense of purpose” often felt in previous wars, and concluded that:

While the allure of the Gallipoli legend grows, the Australian public’s attitude to war and military service has hardened since the early days of Vietnam, due to more confronting and realistic portrayals in the media and popular culture.²⁰¹

Vietnam veterans felt cheated: of their honour; their victory; their place in history – the place they thought had been promised and of the lives that were forever altered.

¹⁹⁸ Even afterwards, there was little coverage of the event outside of Canberra, and then mainly a few seconds on television news.

¹⁹⁹ For example: Department of Veterans’ Affairs, *Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial* (Canberra 2002); Speeches by Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, Danna Vale and Major General Michael Jeffrey at the Rededication ceremony, 5 October 2002.

²⁰⁰ Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale*, pp.214-215.

²⁰¹ Wilson, “Battle Fatigue”, p.7.

When all was said and done, their main concern was attitudes; both in the past and looking toward the future. Attitudes toward them by the Government; the community; popular culture; academics, and therefore by extension, history. There is no single agreement on what their place in history should be, just as all histories are contested and rarely composed of a single ‘truth’. Some veterans want the war remembered as a mistake: a “folly”²⁰² in which Australia should never have become involved.

I wouldn’t say it was a waste of time, although that’s what it feels like. I’d probably say it was a mistake. But then again, you could say any war is a bloody mistake. But from a personal basis, being there was a mistake. I’m one bloke out of thousands that’s still paying for it years down the track, and that’s something that makes me angry.²⁰³

I think it should be exposed for exactly what it was. No myths. No legends. No glorification. Just the absolute maggots guts of it.²⁰⁴

It should be remembered as a warning I guess. I’d hate to see another generation having to fight another war. Three generations is enough.²⁰⁵

Others would like to see the war remembered in the same context of all the other wars in which Australia has participated.

My idea is that Vietnam is no different to any other we’ve been involved in. No better and no worse to any other stupid war. I would like people to be more realistic about it.²⁰⁶

I’d like it remembered that it happened. It’s part of our ANZAC tradition. And I’m an ANZAC, and I’m quite proud of that.²⁰⁷

It should be remembered along with all the other conflicts... There was nothing lost in terms of commitment, devotion, and that old expression – the ANZAC spirit.²⁰⁸

Eventually, it will be put into perspective. What dies with time of course, is the emotion.²⁰⁹

More than anything else though, veterans want to be remembered as servicemen who went to war for their country. They want recognition for doing what their country asked of them. For most, it is no longer important who was right or wrong because

²⁰² Veteran Interview #2.

²⁰³ Veteran Interview #10.

²⁰⁴ Veteran Interview #9.

²⁰⁵ Veteran Interview #27.

²⁰⁶ Veteran Interview #6.

²⁰⁷ Veteran Interview #15.

²⁰⁸ Veteran Interview #20.

²⁰⁹ Veteran Interview #5.

“it’s over and there’s nothing we can do about it”,²¹⁰ but they do want the respect of their country.

I joined the army to be a soldier, and the government of the day said to me, ‘we want you to go over there’, and hey, I went.²¹¹

I’d like to think it would be remembered more kindly as far as the actual soldiers are concerned. I would like to think that we would be looked upon as having done the best job we could in difficult circumstances.²¹²

They don’t have to remember Vietnam, but I want them to remember the people who went there... and to be accorded the proper place in history that they deserve.²¹³

My worry would be that the coming generation will not even know what, where or why 504 gallant men died. It is important that we remind our younger generation that these soldiers were ordered to go and do a job by the government of the day, regardless of how they felt, and they did it with valour.²¹⁴

I’d like it to be remembered that the Australian forces that served there were very professional and fought well.²¹⁵

As simple as not to forget those who served. It’s just as simple as that. No big balah, no big write-up. Simply just not to forget us. Just don’t forget us.²¹⁶

The passing of time (and of war heroes of previous eras), along with events such as East Timor and September 11, have helped to reform the reputation of Vietnam veterans from a no man’s land to a more heroic figure. And paradoxically, although Iraq has resurrected the Vietnam Syndrome, there are indications that Vietnam veterans may even attain higher esteem as a result. Ironically, if the trend of technological warfare, smaller conflicts and an emphasis on peacekeeping missions continue, Vietnam might one day be considered the last “real war” for Australia. However, it is impossible to know what history may bring for them, for far from being static and predictable, it is constantly evolving and no person’s place in it is guaranteed. Heroes become villains; villains are redeemed; and the dead provide fodder for the controversies of the living.

²¹⁰ Veteran Interview #21.

²¹¹ Veteran Interview #4.

²¹² Veteran Interview #13.

²¹³ Veteran Interview #25.

²¹⁴ Veteran Interview #29.

²¹⁵ Veteran Interview #35.

²¹⁶ Veteran Interview #14.

Conclusion

When does a war end? Is it when the treaty is signed, when the soldiers go home, or is it when all the participants and their families are dead? Plato claimed nearly 2500 years ago that “only the dead have seen the end of war”,¹ and evidence suggests this is still as true today. Although Plato’s statement was meant in the broader meaning of humanity’s propensity to make war, it can also be effectively applied in a narrower sense to Vietnam. One of the problems with examining recent history is that it is somehow not yet finished. Its participants are still living the history while scholars are trying to make sense of a time not quite past. However, the great advantage of recent history is that its participants are still available for comment. They are therefore able to give the past a voice and a personality it would not otherwise contain. The living participants of history can also influence how that history is told and interpreted, correcting misconceptions and offering alternate insights. Australian Vietnam veterans know that they cannot change the past, but they would like to change the perceptions of the past in order to improve the future.

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In relation to the research aims outlined in the *Introduction*, this thesis has provided an alternative and more comprehensive perspective on the divisive topic of the history of Vietnam veterans, and in a more general sense, the war itself. Previous conclusions regarding the influence of public memory on the categorising of historical events have been questioned, and alternative explanations offered to explain how and why the behaviour of veterans, the community and the government created a continuing discourse on the Vietnam War. The study provided a contribution to oral history and provided an opportunity to hear the stories of history from those who participated.

The questions surrounding the creation of stereotypes and myths, and their utilisation as a means of contextualising the position of Vietnam veterans, were examined and explanations offered for their development. The thesis further examined the consequences of these stereotypes, both positive and negative, and how they were difficult to remove even after adequate evidence had been provided to the contrary.

¹ Plato’s quote is featured prominently on the Wall of Remembrance at the Imperial War Museum in London, and although often used, was most famously quoted by General Douglas MacArthur in his farewell speech at WestPoint Military College. The script of the speech is available from: The West Point Organisation, “General Douglas MacArthur’s Farewell Speech: Given to the Corps of Cadets at West Point” (12 May, 1962), http://www.west-point.org/real/macarthur_address.html.

It was demonstrated that the influence of popular culture on history and remembering has long existed, and is in fact increasing with the expansion of multimedia, and the expectations and demands of commentators (particularly historians) that those who produce work (even fictional) have certain 'responsibilities' to factuality. However, even without the expectation of reality (particularly in regard to movies and television), popular or repeated representations will still find their way into community consciousness and have an effect on perceptions. It was concluded that, although stereotypes "invariably contain an element of truth", and some veterans did suffer difficulties, that veterans actually do not fit the victim/villain perceptions, and are as diverse as the veterans of any other war.

The thesis also explored the influence of war on Australian identity and how this has caused Vietnam veterans difficulties in finding an acceptable place for themselves in Australian history and in a 'legend' that while still significant to society, is now closed to all others. In the light of this problem, the rise of the war 'hero' from a community that is firmly gripped by a 'victim' mentality was considered from a contemporary perspective. The endurance of the Vietnam Syndrome was discussed and demonstrated, not simply as a political quandary, but also as an endemic framework in the understanding of the war throughout the wider community. Evidence and examples analysing the influence of the Vietnam War and its veterans on changing societal attitudes to war were provided – exploring the idea that the 'good' wars are in the past and now Australia has participated in 'bad' wars and has to try to fit them into the traditions of Australian history.

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This thesis determined that Vietnam veterans – as with all returned servicepersons - have struggled with the legacies of their service in some way; whether it was simply annoyance with community attitudes, readjustment to civilian life, difficulties with employment or serious health problems. Most returned home from war to unsatisfactory or confusing homecomings. While the majority were welcomed by families and friends, and many were cheered by crowds of well wishers, they all felt that there was something missing from their homecoming experience. Whether it was the marchers in the streets, a fight in a bar, or a mumbled comment from a friend or passer-by, veterans felt rejected by a society that had traditionally revered its warriors.

These incidents were isolated, but to suggest that veterans were not treated poorly in a general sense, is a vast oversimplification and misses the point. They came back to Australia, leaving an unfinished war, to a tumultuous society that either was not sure whether Australia should be involved, or had little understanding of the war. Most had seen mates die or be wounded – or were injured themselves – or at the very least lived in a state of constant alert during their time in Vietnam. To come home and discover that the meaning of their service was ambiguous – even to themselves - was a difficult cross to bear. To have the necessity and the justification of those sacrifices called into question, could be very damaging. When the shooting in Vietnam and the shouting in the streets had stopped, a silence fell, blanketing the veterans in a fog of denial that lasted for years.

Unfortunately, it was tragedy that brought veterans back into public view. Death, illness and despair among an inordinate number created a hail of publicity and heralded the beginning of a new war: the battle for recognition. Unhappy with the lack of representation from the government and the existing service organisations, veterans established their own, creating a platform from which they could be heard. Events such as the Welcome Home Parade and the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial went a long way to healing the wounds and raising the profiles of veterans, but the situation was far from resolved. Veterans found themselves battling against the image of Hollywood's veterans, as gun-crazed psychopaths or whingeing malcontents, an image that has remained resiliently in the community's subconscious. While veterans want recognition in regard to health issues, they do not wish to be thought of only as victims, and it has proved difficult to find a balance between the two.

Because of the initial problems in getting the assistance they deemed appropriate, publicity was sought through the media. The media was more than willing, and the headlines certainly attracted attention. In the US, there were incidents of violence apparently related to the attackers' Vietnam service, and suddenly, it was not just the media that had a story. The movie industry, or more correctly, Hollywood, had difficulty initially with Vietnam. It did not fit the heroic traditional war movie template - but with 'crazy', 'damaged' and 'sick' veterans, along with government

cover-ups and plenty of visual imagery to exploit, they had a context. The veterans had been split into two stereotypes: the victim and villain, with the victim most often playing the part of the hero – or the anti-hero. Australia did not know what to do with the conflict initially (with a couple of exceptions), so it moved Vietnam to other wars and tried to hide it within the Anzac Legend. This only succeeded in allowing the Hollywood image to acquire more authority.

Although undoubtedly treated poorly in some quarters, the veterans themselves were at least partly responsible for the emergence of the stereotypes – a spectre over which they quickly lost control. While the veterans almost universally, with the exception of a few fringe dwellers, despised the villain image and did their best to disprove it (with remarkably little success), they were not so quick to dispose of the victim one. Groups in Australia such as the VVAA used the trend to raise their profile and pressure the government, and while it did assist with that, the repercussions are still obvious today. No matter how mainstream the VVAA has become, or how many break away groups appear, or how many enter the hierarchy of the RSL, the victim mentality seems inexorably etched into their image. The only way to be rid of it would be to deny all of the health problems and the necessity for assistance, and that could not be done. It became a circular problem and for many years, there was no middle ground that they were able to successfully negotiate. This conundrum is also demonstrated in the continued influence, and the recent resurgence, of the Vietnam Syndrome; highlighting the manner in which it has gone from being a health issue to a political problem and ultimately to a diagnosis to describe a multitude of ills and complexities.

Vietnam veterans have occasionally had to look to their American counterparts or research in order to further their aims and widen their knowledge base. However, as this study has demonstrated, this should not suggest that Australian veterans have blindly followed their US colleagues; there were simply more of them with greater resources from which to acquire information. Australian veterans were inspired by some of the tactics used by their counterparts, yet, just as during the war when the ‘Americanness’ seemed overwhelming, the Australians still did things differently. And while it is difficult to ignore the interconnectedness of their experience, just as it is in so many other aspects of life, the Australian veterans also want something

different from American ones. America has had problematic wars in the past, and although they have a 'proud military tradition' (much of it wrapped up in patriotism and the American Revolution), they do not have anything quite like the Anzac Legend. This research has discovered that Australian veterans want respect more than anything else, but many of them also want that 'untouchable' prize: they want a place in the legend. However, evidence suggests this might not be possible until all the memories are gone, and only the history remains, and even then, there is no certainty, as history is rarely neat and predictable. There is also the problem that the legend, as the term suggests, is no longer attainable, as it exists in a past that is now passing from memory to history, and the validity of that legend is fading.

The country at the end of the Vietnam War was a different one from 1918 and 1945. Yet despite the changing face of society and attitudes that question the legitimacy of the Anzac Legend in contemporary times, any belief that it has any less currency for those soldiers, or is less important in the 21st century, stands against the outpouring of emotion with the passing of each of the last original Anzacs'. The revival of Anzac Day over the past decade and the reverence in which many people hold the occasion belies the protestations of some commentators that it is no longer relevant. This is also apparent in John Howard's announcement that all searches for an Australian identity are over – for him that identity appears to have been lifted largely from the Anzac Legend. Although several commentators disagree with Howard's conclusions, his political longevity and sustained prominence within the electorate may suggest that he reflects beliefs shared by many in the community. As one Vietnam veteran noted prophetically, as a child watching the WWI soldiers marching on Anzac Day: "They were like the Phantom. They would never die".² Most who went to Vietnam expected to partake in this immortality, only to find that their legend had feet of clay. This thesis examined this paradigm at length, forming the conclusion that perhaps the best they can hope for is to be remembered kindly, respectfully, even heroically – though for many, that will never be enough.

The study demonstrated that there is no doubt that recognition and acceptance of veterans of the Vietnam War has improved. This is a situation that should continue

² Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*, p.3.

as increasing numbers of them find their way into executive positions in the traditional bastions of power for returned service people, such as the RSL. Every year, more Vietnam veterans attend services such as Anzac Day, raising their profile and therefore encouraging more veterans to do so the next year. Vietnam veterans are gradually becoming more prominent in the community. It is rarely a handicap to a position of power, whether corporate or political, and few now hide their service like some guilty secret. With the past fading away, and the realisation of a less certain world, the public looked to the veterans of a difficult war for direction – people such as General Peter Cosgrove and Governor-General Michael Jeffrey among others. In the US presidential election, at one stage it seemed that it might come down to the ‘Vietnam hero’ (John Kerry) versus the ‘draft avoider’ (George W Bush).

The situation did not begin to change in any significant manner until the Anzac Revival of the mid-nineties, followed by the ‘success’ and hype of the East Timor deployment, the ‘War on Terror’, and the gradual demise of the last WWI ‘diggers’. Howard’s increased militarism and return to more ‘traditional’ notions of identity made an unwitting contribution to a change in attitudes towards Vietnam veterans; with the public constantly reminded that current service persons should not be treated like Vietnam veterans. Other high profile political turning points such as the WA state government’s formal apology to Vietnam veterans and the backroom ‘backlash’ over the generosity (or lack thereof) of the revamped Veterans’ entitlements package, have demonstrated the significant impact these events have had on their reputations and stature; a situation reflected in the number in positions of power and importance. However, veterans still feel there is something lacking. The media and the country’s leaders continue to overlook them in favour of other veterans, reinforcing the idea that their war, and therefore their sacrifices in that war, were somehow lesser in value than the sacrifices of previous wars.

It certainly can no longer be claimed that the Vietnam War is ignored by scholars. Studies of the war are so prolific that it is arguably the most examined topic in the political history of the second half of the twentieth century. However, the veterans of this ‘topic’ have remained virtually lost in this academic ocean. It seems that despite – or even perhaps as a result of – the increased academic scholarship, veterans continue to feel alienated. Notwithstanding the appearance of a small number of

revisionist histories of the Vietnam War, it has continued to be considered negatively: a “mistake”, whether politically or militarily. Attempts to have their voices heard have resulted in a veteran literature almost as large as the academic literature. This literature has been generally well received by the veteran community, but has rarely made it far beyond the bookshelves of the veterans themselves. Somewhere between the academic and veteran literature is the general Australian community whose only option in the absence of alternate sources, or even a context to place Vietnam in Australian military tradition, seems to be to turn to Hollywood for its knowledge of the Vietnam War and its veterans - which only induces further feelings of alienation within the Vietnam veteran community.

This thesis established that while some minor aspects of the stereotypes had some justification, they reflected little reality for the majority of Vietnam veterans. When all things were considered, these men really had only one thing in common – be it an ever so significant one. Overwhelmingly, they appeared to be a group of what would be considered ‘average’ Australians. They were generally productive, law-abiding, tax paying and family orientated (in some form), with most living in suburbia, or close to it. Their main concerns were usually the standard ones: financial; family; and general community issues. Many were as anxious to discuss their personal interests, which were rarely Vietnam related, as they were to talk about their service. Most were keen to put across their stories and take the opportunity to voice their concerns, but they also wanted it to be clear, that Vietnam was not the sum total of their lives. It did not, as a rule, dominate their everyday lives. It was a part of their lives; one that had consequences – either large or small. But it was rarely the thing through which they defined themselves, even if it had sometimes been a defining experience. Ultimately, it was established, those who served in Vietnam had more in common with other service persons than not: every war has its own unique attributes, but also considerable similarities.

Examining the interviewees in the light of the stereotypes was somehow both a simple and complicated task. If the idea of the quintessential ‘whinging malcontent’ victim is used as a barometer, then there were only a couple that seemed pleased to have someone listen to their many grievances and appeared driven by them; unwilling - or perhaps unable - to get past them. There seemed nothing else in their lives.

From the other perspective, the idea of the ‘dangerous/gun-crazed/unhinged/psychopath’ villain veteran appeared elusive. One or two were a bit paranoid or unpredictable - not in any violent manner - and lived in isolation, but they were loners and gave no indication of having lost touch with reality in any significant manner. Some knew someone who did fit the description (names were provided, but not approached), and one was also known to this researcher, but they seemed rare, probably rarer than in the community at large.

This research found that among the participants of this study, somewhere between 5 and 10% (depending on where the boundaries are placed), fell somewhere within the broader definitions of the stereotypes, a figure that reflected the other sources considered. Therefore, this thesis has concluded that these generalisations are largely without substance in 2004, and the issues from which they emerged are increasingly in decline. This does not mean that the others were without problems – physically or psychologically – or that at some time in their lives, issues related to their service have not been the most significant feature in their life, or at times, difficulties did dominate their lives for a period. There was damage, and the damage could range from minor and temporary to serious and debilitating. A couple of them could well have been described as ‘broken men’, but the vast majority were resilient and anxious to get on with their lives. While the sources (particularly the interviews) revealed some extraordinary stories, most significantly it identified a group of average Australian men who, for a short period thirty years ago, were asked to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Ultimately, this thesis has established that Vietnam veterans might be the first victims of a more contemporary view of war. They may fit the legend, as incompletely as anyone ever really did – but the war does not. In a new era of warfare, with the last ‘good war’ fading into memory, Vietnam appears the turning point for the place of military history in the wider Australian context. Vietnam veterans can be reformed – they are able to attain redemption – but their war probably never will. They are the heroes of Australia’s first ‘bad war’, and so their history remains unresolved, as is often the case in controversial events (and sometimes less controversial ones). Their history is as unresolved as their war was for them; no clear start and finish, not victorious, but not really lost. Nothing was clear cut. But this is also where the

Vietnam Syndrome remains in consciousness, as it is inseparable from the struggle for a suitable context for veterans: it arises out of a largely disastrous policy that has haunted governments for decades. This study shows that the issue remains unresolved. Nothing was ever really settled, particularly as it was part of a wider war; the euphemistic Cold War that was anything but cold. The problems it caused dragged on (and still do): for veterans; for governments; foreign policy; relations with Vietnam; health issues; and the military. It was messy, with few real conclusions, and the conclusions are only given in retrospect when the ending was already known.

Nevertheless, the most significant finding of this thesis is that more than thirty years after the end of Australia's Vietnam War, veterans have gained much of what they have fought so hard to attain, but the battle is not over, and for some, there is still something amiss. The value of using popular memory to examine and analyse the various sources demonstrated its advantages when examining this quandary. One answer can be found in one of the most prevailing topics that emerged in the research (both in interviews and other sources): the continuing atmosphere of anger. It is hard not to conclude that the underlying sense of 'betrayal' is endemic, even among those to whom 'betrayal' may seem a bit melodramatic. Because of the problems, the battles, the popular culture influences and not least of all, the war itself, 'betrayal' has become a term or emotion most associated with Vietnam - both in regard to veterans and the war itself. Consequently, the veterans have, not necessarily individually but as a group, grounded their identity in this factor. Whether or not this was done wittingly is hardly important, though complicated, but it has proved enormously difficult to escape. Although it is never too late for recognition (though it can be too late for assistance), as long as there is even one to remember, or be remembered, it may never be enough. So, as the veterans and their families gathered on Vietnam Veterans Day 2004, they continued to search for the elusive conclusion of a war that refuses to end, but if Plato is any guide, they will never see that end.

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- Heaven & Earth* , dir. Oliver Stone (1993)
- Iron Eagle*, dir. Sidney Furie (1986)
- Law and Order* (TV Series 1990-)
- Law and Order: SVU* (TV Series, 1999-)
- Law and Order: Criminal Intent* (TV Series, 2003-)
- Lethal Weapon*, dir. Richard Donner (1987)
- Lethal Weapon 2*, dir. Richard Donner (1989)

- Lethal Weapon 3*, dir. Richard Donner (1991)
- Lethal Weapon 4*, dir. Richard Donner (1998)
- Magnum P.I.* (TV series, 1980-1988)
- MASH* (TV Series, 1972-1983)
- Miami Vice* (TV Series, 1984-1989)
- Missing in Action*, dir. Joseph Zito (1984)
- Missing in Action II: The Beginning*, dir. Lance Hool (1985)
- NYPD Blue* (TV Series, 1994-)
- The Odd Angry Shot*, dir. Tom Jeffrey (1979)
- Pearl Harbour*, dir. Michael Bay (2001)
- Platoon*, dir. Oliver Stone (1986)
- The Quiet American*, dir. Philip Noyce, (2002)
- Rambo: First Blood Part II*, dir. George P. Cosmatos (1985)
- Rambo III*, dir. Peter McDonald (1988)
- Saving Private Ryan*, dir. Steven Spielberg (1998)
- Sword of Honour*, dir. Pino Amenta, Catherine Millar (TV mini-series, 1987)
- Stingers* (TV Series, 1998-)
- Taxi Driver*, dir. Martin Scorsese (1976)
- Three Kings*, dir. David O. Russell (1999)
- Tour of Duty* (TV Series, 1987-1990)
- Vietnam*, dir. John Duigan and Chris Noonan (TV mini-series, 1986)
- Vietnam: A Television History*, dir. Judith Vecchione (PBS Documentary in 7 parts by The American Experience; 1983)
- The War at Home*, dir. Emilio Estevez (1996)
- We Were Soldiers*, dir. Randall Wallace (2002)
- Without a Trace* (TV Series, 2002-)