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# **An Uneasy Legacy**

Vietnam Veterans and Australian Society

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## *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.