

**ADDRESS AT A SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE FOR
VIETNAM VETERANS' DAY BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE BARBARA BAKER AC,
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
HOBART CENOTAPH, 18 AUGUST 2021**

I begin by acknowledging all the veterans of the Vietnam War who are here with us.

We gather to commemorate, as we have done every year since 1987, Vietnam Veterans' Day. Today, we remember all of the men and women who served in Vietnam¹. I would also like to pay my respects to all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have contributed to the defence of Australia in times of peace and war.

This day began as a commemoration of the men of D Company, 6th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR), who fought in 1966 at the Battle of Long Tan.

At the 1987 Welcome Home Parade for Vietnam Veterans in Sydney, Prime Minister Bob Hawke announced that Long Tan Day would be known as Vietnam Veterans' Day. Since then, it has been commemorated every year, as the day on which service of all those men and women who served in Vietnam is remembered²; a war that was the second longest military conflict, in which Australia has been involved.³

From the time of the arrival of the first members of Australian Army Training Team Vietnam in 1962 almost 60,000 Australians, including ground troops and air force and navy personnel, served in Vietnam; 521 died as a result of the war and over 3,000 were wounded.⁴

In recent years, it has become a tradition on Vietnam Veterans' Day to commemorate the 50th anniversary of a significant engagement during the war.

¹ <http://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2008/08/15/vietnam-veterans-day/> accessed 10 August 2021

² <https://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2008/08/15/vietnam-veterans-day/> accessed 10 August 2021

³ <https://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2008/08/15/vietnam-veterans-day/> accessed 10 August 2021

⁴ <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/event/vietnam> accessed 17 August 2021

This year we concentrate our remembrance on the Battle of Long Khanh during Operation Overlord. This battle in early June 1971 took place during one of the last major joint US-Australian operations. It resulted in three Australians killed and six wounded during heavy fighting in which an RAAF UH-1H Iroquois was shot down.⁵

By June 1971, Australia had been involved in the Vietnam War for nine years. With no end in sight to an unpopular war, we Australians – like the Americans – were reducing our forces, and preparing to pull out of Vietnam. The soldiers posted as part of the 3rd and 4th Battalions, the Royal Australia Regiment (3RAR and 4RAR) were no doubt looking forward to their return home.

According to the Australian War Memorial official history, our withdrawal would take time and would not be easy. Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army forces hoped to lure our Australians into a large-scale ambush to inflict a heavy defeat and win a propaganda victory. They began preparing to move troops from Long Khanh Province back into Phuoc Tuy Province.

Aware of the enemy movement, our Australian troops launched Operation Overlord named after the 1944 invasion of Normandy. Overlord aimed at destroying the enemy forces and preventing them from interfering with the Province's security and with our Australian withdrawal.

On 5 June, our Australian troops were deployed by helicopter and armoured personnel carriers north to the province border of Phuoc Tuy, near the Courtenay Rubber Plantation. 3RAR would take the lead in the assault, while 4RAR, NZ and American troops held blocking positions to prevent the escape of enemy forces. Australian armoured personnel carriers from 3rd Cavalry Regiment, tanks from 1st Armoured Regiment, artillery from 12th Field Regiment and sappers from 1st Field Squadron deployed in support of the infantry units.

3RAR found what they believed was the main enemy position and, on 7 June, B Company's 5th Platoon, led by Lieutenant Graham Kells began a morning assault. Facing immediate automatic gunfire from numerous concealed bunkers, the understrength platoon was pinned down, and unable to move. Several men were wounded. The Battle of Long Khanh had begun.

⁵ <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/battle-long-khanh> accessed 17 Aug 2021

RAAF helicopters were called in to deliver ammunition and evacuate the wounded. They bravely hovered low over the battle. The platoon was low on ammunition and in danger of being overrun. Later that morning, a helicopter was shot down. Two men were killed in the crash and others wounded. Air support and artillery kept the enemy at bay. Reinforcements started to reach the 5th Platoon. During the afternoon, tanks and armoured personnel carriers fought their way through enemy positions, to link up with B Company. After a tense night holding a defensive perimeter, the Battle of Long Khanh was over. The enemy had quietly withdrawn during the afternoon.

The operation was successful in driving the enemy from their bases in the area. The operation thwarted plans for further incursions into Phuoc Tuy – at least temporarily, although the enemy force had not been destroyed.

For their bravery under fire, eight Australians were recognised with awards, including Lieutenant Kells who was awarded the Military Cross.

The Vietnam War was a difficult chapter in Australia's history. For those who served, the experience forged strong bonds and a commitment to look out for each other. This deep sense of mateship led Vietnam veterans to lobby for a specialised counselling and support service for veterans and their families.

The result was the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service (VVCS) which was established by the Australian Government in 1982.

Since then, access to VVCS has been extended to veterans of all conflicts, their families, and other members of the ADF and ex-service community. In 2007, the service was renamed VVFC – Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service. Eligibility has further expanded and, in 2018, VVFC became Open Arms.⁶

It is especially important to mention this service today. Chief of the Defence Force, General Angus Campbell, announced just over a month ago, that the ADF has officially completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan. This brings Australia's longest-ever war to a close.

⁶ <https://www.openarms.gov.au/about/our-story> accessed 17 Aug 2021

The withdrawal and consequent resurgence of the Taliban across Afghanistan has prompted reflection on the nature and purpose of our military commitment there. Similar reflection occurred following the end of the Vietnam War. In many ways, the Australian Government and people have demonstrated a very different reaction to returned service men and women. However, there remains much that could be done to ease the transitions, especially for those who have struggled physically and mentally on their return.

To all who served in Vietnam and to those who supported you while deployed and at home, on behalf of a grateful nation, I thank you for your service and for your sacrifice. Your example and actions are part of our history of our Australian Defence Force. This history has a lasting impact. Your example and actions also have a lasting impact, both now and into the future.

Lest we forget.