

**AN ADDRESS AT THE VIETNAM VETERANS ASSOCIATION  
SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE**

**BY**

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HOBART - SATURDAY 18<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 2012**

The other day I was talking to the Senior Defence Force Officer in Tasmania about how social media had the capacity to influence large numbers of people and that led on to us discussing the fact that these days, the students didn't take to the streets in large protests like they did in the sixties and seventies. And of course that led to us talking about the street protests against the Vietnam War; a war that lasted for an incredibly long 20 years until the defeat of Saigon on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1975. Like so many popular protests or mob voices, anger and protest was largely uninformed and as you all well know aimed at the wrong people - those Australians who had gone to war in Vietnam - many of them conscripts. I think with hindsight most people would say that we should never have been involved in that war but of course, hindsight is wonderful 20/20 vision.

But what made me speak about that the other day and now to you on this day when we gather together to remember all those who were killed or suffered shocking injuries - physical or psychological and often both - is that the Vietnam War was the first war that reached into everybody's lounge room every evening. This was the biggest communication revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. All Australians saw what those who were fighting in Vietnam saw every day. The daily news stories and pictures were largely uncensored.

We can all recall the shocking images of the savage cruelty of war involving not only the troops but also innocent bystanders, often women and children. What we saw frightened and angered us and forced us out to protest and so it should have forced us out to protest. We were shocked for until the advent of television and the Vietnam War news stories from the battlefields were heavily censored. Before the Vietnam War the censored press always referred to our soldiers with adjectives such as brave, gallant, fearless, courageous and so on. We at home were told that our gallant lads laid down their lives so that we would be free. But the televised Vietnam War told us that those words were unreal euphemisms, inappropriate and inadequate to describe the horror of napalm, the terror of night fighting an enemy that was difficult to see and hear or the sight of a young child with his arm shot off and his inconsolable mother weeping over him. Graphic footage of casualties on the nightly news eliminated any myth of the glory of war.

It is now a notorious and shameful fact that we at home vented our anger and fear on those of you who returned from the fighting in Vietnam. Right across Australia people turned out to shout abuse and sometimes throw paint and other things at those who should have been welcomed home with gratitude. But there was no other readily identifiable target upon whom the angry and frustrated mobs could vent their spleen. But today those who took part in that abuse acknowledge that such conduct was completely wrong and apologise for taking part in it. That was evidenced by the popular reaction to

the Welcome Home March in 1987 and the opening of the Vietnam Memorial on ANZAC Parade in 1992.

Australian troops went to serve in Vietnam because their government called upon them to do so; conscripts and volunteers. They went into the horror of war not because they wanted to and not because they believed in a cause but because the people of their country, through their elected representatives said “your country needs you.” Thus I say to those who responded to that call that it was a noble thing that you did. Yours was not to argue and debate. Your country called for you to act and you responded and today as we remember those who fought and died or were wounded in Vietnam we salute you and thank you for the service you gave your country when your country said you were needed. The poet Laureate Lord Tennyson wrote about this during the Crimean War in the poem, the Charge of the Light Brigade:

Forward, the Light Brigade!"  
Was there a man dismay'd?  
Not tho' the soldier knew  
Someone had blunder'd:  
Theirs not to make reply,  
Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do and die:  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.

Lest we forget