

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

BY

**THE HONOURABLE JUSTICE ALAN BLOW OAM
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
HOBART - MONDAY 18TH AUGUST 2014**

In July of 1962, the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam arrived in South Vietnam and began Australia's decade-long participation in the Vietnam War. Though never formally declared, for Australia the War ended on 11 January 1973 when the then Governor-General, the Right Honourable Sir Paul Hasluck, signed a proclamation stating that our defence forces were no longer engaged in war-like operations in Vietnam.¹ During the intervening period, almost 60,000 Australians from the Navy, Army and Air Force had served in Vietnam; of those 521 died and more than 3,000 were listed as wounded.²

As Lieutenant General Mark Evans said, war 'is always a source of sadness and loss, [and] ... lives spent on the battlefield are the brutal currency of combat.'³

The War in Vietnam had a significant effect on those who served. For many, the consequences of their homecoming to a cloud of public discontent and misunderstanding have been profound. In the words of one soldier who served in Vietnam:

"It's not that I was ashamed I was in Vietnam, but I'd been given the feeling I should be ashamed. I mean it was

1

http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/09/10/ParliamentaryInvolvement#_Toc257028863 accessed 11 Aug 14

² <http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/vietnam/> accessed 25 June 14

³ Cantwell, J, 2012. *Exit Wounds*. Melbourne University Press, p 571.

obvious at that time we were going to lose, so you had no comeback. For a man that was a dedicated Australian, and thought I was doing the right thing, it was very hurtful... We were fighting a war that was not only unpopular; no one had a clue where we were. Young blokes of twenty were dying for their country through no choice of their own, and the people didn't know and couldn't care less."⁴

On reading such accounts, I am moved to echo the words of the former Governor-General Michael Jeffery, who said, in 2006, that 'it was to our country's shame that it did not recognize the sterling performance of its armed forces in Vietnam until almost 20 years later.'⁵

As you are all aware, Vietnam Veterans' Day is commemorated on 18 August each year. The day was originally known as Long Tan Day, to commemorate the men of D Company, 6 RAR, and the battle that they fought against an overwhelming force of Viet-Cong and North Vietnamese Army soldiers. Though nearly overrun, the men fought on and were saved by accurate supporting artillery fire, by the timely arrival of reinforcements in the form of Armoured Personnel Carriers from the 1st APC Squadron, and by ammunition resupply dropped from helicopters operated by 9 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force. Following the successful Welcome Home parade in 1987, the then Prime Minister Bob Hawke announced that

⁴ Brett, J. & Moran, A. 2006. *Ordinary People's Politics: Australians talk about life, politics and the future of their country*. North Melbourne: Pluto Press Australia. p86.

⁵ http://203.6.144.29/events/talks/speech_jeffery/ accessed 11 Aug 14

Long Tan day would be known as Vietnam Veterans' Day, to be commemorated every year to remember all of the men and women who served in Vietnam.⁶

It is all very well to remember, but remembrance is futile unless it motivates action. The motto of the Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia is to 'honour the dead, but fight like hell for the living'⁷. It is, I think, a fitting encapsulation of that idea. Significant success has been achieved by the Association including the establishment of the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service - now known as the Veterans' and Veterans' Families Counselling Service - a service that provides an ongoing treatment option for veterans and their families, as well as for others exposed to significant trauma, such as the survivors of the Port Arthur massacre.⁸ Actions such as these have a lasting, positive impact on the lives of veterans and those around them, and are a fitting form of remembrance.

It is important, too, to remember the families of those who served. When soldiers return from operations overseas, it is often their families who see the true suffering; the nightmares and overwhelming emotions that are often the human mind's mechanism for dealing with the trauma to which it has been exposed.⁹ I am sure many of you here are be able to attest to that fact.

Australian soldiers, whether volunteer or conscript, whether they served in direct combat or in supporting roles, on the ground, on the sea, or in the air, served in Vietnam not because they wanted to,

⁶ <http://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2008/08/15/vietnam-veterans-day/> accessed 23 June 14

⁷ <http://www.vvaa.org.au/motto.htm> accessed 11 Aug 14

⁸ <http://www.vvaa.org.au/index.htm> accessed 11 Aug 14

⁹ Cantwell, J, 2012. *Exit Wounds*. Melbourne University Press, p 597.

but because the Nation, through their elected representatives, decreed that they would do so. As Lord Tennyson wrote of another war, many years ago:

Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die¹⁰

Today we remember those who fought, those who died, those who returned with wounds both physical and mental, and those who remained behind to support them. We salute your service and say a heartfelt 'thank you' for doing your part when asked.

Lest we forget

¹⁰ <http://poetry.eserver.org/light-brigade.html> accessed 11 Aug 14