CONTINUING THE GREAT ADVENTURE?
AUSTRALIAN SERVICEMEN AND THE VIETNAM WAR

No one service person's war is the same as any other. While there might be a few similar threads of continuity, 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 a conglomeration of these factors and many others. But while every story is different, recurring themes can be woven together to create a recognisable pattern.

59520 Australians 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 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 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 regimen was considerable whether National Service or Regular, and all underwent the 6 week to 3 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. 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. 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 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 a general one as were the American and previous Australian ones, but a selective one. 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.

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 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. 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." Lieutenant General John Grey (Retd) 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."

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. "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." 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." Some had something specific to escape, such as looking for a way to "leave home," or more obtusely, to "avoid accountancy."

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. 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. War service home loans featured on some wish lists, whereas 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.”

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,” 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. Another described it simply as being “part of my heritage.” 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. Going to war, one believed at the time, “was a good thing to do, because Dad had done it, and Grandpa had done it.” McKay found that the family tradition was a popular motivation, as did Stuart 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.”

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 it, particularly in the early years of the war. They were protecting Australia as thousands had done before them; it was their “patriotic duty.” Several discussed the feelings within the community at the time and how the “Domino Theory felt like a real threat” 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.” 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. 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.”

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. Another remarked that “it was an honour to fight for Australia, and we were professional soldiers, so that’s what we were expected to do.” 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.” A seventeen year old volunteer was annoyed at having to wait for his eighteenth birthday to go overseas, while another resigned from the navy and joined the army in order to get to the war. 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.” 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.” 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. 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.”

These stories dispute the popular perception 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, but much of that pressure was family and community based, rather than the army itself. These attitudes are reflected throughout veteran narratives. In a collection of 104 stories from veterans, only two indicate a serious unwillingness to go to Vietnam, while one respondent to a questionnaire of National Servicemen felt that he was forced, claiming that he “resisted” his deployment to Vietnam. The rarity of this sort of claim is not surprising when
the evidence is examined. Noel Charlesworth, 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”.

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.”

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, 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, Brigadier General Peter Cosgrove, arriving in Vietnam as a replacement platoon leader, was greeted with what was later described as “indifference and hostility”, and Cosgrove himself described it as “pretty intimidating.” 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.”

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.
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, and by midnight his platoon had already suffered losses in Vietnam. Twelve months later, he came into Nui Dat 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. 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, 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. These men resented being “sneaked back in” as if 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.” 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.” Jane Ross described the veterans who returned by ship as being “the lucky ones,” 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.” 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 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. 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 those from WWI and II, which could
take months. Another possible factor is the society to which they returned.

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 supposed “enemy.” They encountered some hostility, and if the incidents
in most cases were isolated and short lived, their demoralising effect cannot
be underestimated. Some commentators 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-three of the thirty-five 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 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 veteran marching in Townsville claims that they were welcomed, but then hustled away “quick time before the university students came out.” 66 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. 67

Historian Jeffrey Grey agrees that Vietnam veterans suffered a significant level of hostility, 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. 68 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 became the recipient of the disillusionment and discontent.

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 to this day, even though quite a number of these now believe that it was probably a mistake to go to Vietnam.69

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 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.

Endnotes

4. Ibid.
6. Veteran Interview #8.
9. Veteran Interview #35.
13. Few missed the irony in telling me this 30 years and many battles later.
24. Ibid.
35. Williams, “Doctrine, Training and Combat with 1st Battalion”: 125.
36. Vietnam Veteran Interview #1, 29 September 1999.
38. Veteran Interview #8.
39. Rowe, *Vietnam Veterans*.
43. Veteran Interview #2.
47. Nui Dat was where the First Australian Task Force (1ATF) was based from 1966–1972.
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: 181–183.
54. Veteran Interview #38.
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.
60. Vietnam Veteran Interview #10, 18 October 1999.
64. Ibid.: 111.
65. Veteran Interview #38.
69. Veteran Interview #8; Veteran Interview #5; Veteran Interview #3; Vietnam Veteran Interview #7, 16 October 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #26, 2 November 1999.