

VIETNAM VETERANS DAY 2017

KEY NOTE SPEECH AT COCKSCOMB RETREAT CAWARRAL

Vietnam and other veterans, ex-servicemen and women, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour and privilege to be here with you today.

I thank the Cockscomb management committee for their invitation and reiterate the acknowledgement of guests undertaken at the commencement of the service.

From the time of the arrival of the first members of the Australian Training Team in Vietnam in 1962 until the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, almost 60,000 ground troops, air force, navy personnel, and nurses served in Vietnam. 521 died as a result of the war and over 3,000 were wounded.

We are here today to commemorate Vietnam Veterans Day and remember and honour the 521 Australian servicemen who gave their lives for their country during the Vietnam War, and those who served and have since passed on, especially those local veterans whose names show on the plaques attached to the cenotaph.

For Australians, Vietnam remains one of the most difficult and controversial wars we have fought. This year marks the 55th anniversary of Australia's first involvement in the war and today marks the 50th anniversary of the battle of Long Tan.

The war was the cause of the greatest social and political dissent in Australia since the conscription referendums of the 1st World War and I would like to address these matters in my presentation today.

Many of us here today lived during these times and many of us still try and understand why Australia was involved in this war. Some conclude that we should not have been there at all and others believe we should have been. In answering this question, we need to consider the geography and history of the region and the politics of the time.

As most of you will know, Vietnam is a country in South East Asia, situated south of China, with the South China Sea to the east and the countries of Cambodia and Laos in the west.

Like a number of the Asian countries, Vietnam was colonised by the French and at this time was known as Indo China. During World War 2, the Japanese invaded Indo China and many Vietnamese fought on the side of the allies.

At the war's end in 1945, the French again moved back into Indo China and this angered the Vietnamese who expected to be left to run their own affairs. Open conflict broke out between the French and the Viet Ming, an underground guerrilla force, and this led to a war which lasted until the mid-1950's when the French were defeated and withdrew from Indo China.

Once the French left Indo China, this left the country vulnerable to a takeover by the communists who already ran China and North Korea. While there was a lot of sympathy for communism in Indo China, a large number of the people especially in the south of the country, were Christian and Buddhist.

In response to this, the western world, through the United Nations, decided to divide Indo China into two countries, North Vietnam and South Vietnam, North Vietnam to be run by a communist regime with South Vietnam to be run by a democratic government.

Of course North Vietnam did not accept this solution and almost immediately began to destabilise the government of South Vietnam. The American Government was concerned about the spread of communism in Asia and backed the South Vietnamese Government. By the early 1960's, the Americans were providing military advisors and this soon led to the commitment of ground forces.

The Australian Government's support for South Vietnam in the early 1960's was in keeping with the policies of other nations, particularly the United States, to stem the spread of communism in Europe and Asia. After a request from the South Vietnamese Government, the Australian Government decided to provide military support.

The Australian commitment to the war began modestly in 1962 with the dispatch of 30 members of the Australian Army Training Team to South Vietnam. But by 1965, as the political and military situation deteriorated, the Australian Government decided to increase its commitment.

The Training team was increased to 100 men and the 1st Battalion Royal Australian Regiment was deployed to South Vietnam as part of a battle group. In March 1966, the battle group was increased to a Task Force consisting of 3 battalions.

At the height of Australia's involvement, the Task Force numbered 8,500 troops. Three RAAF squadrons were also deployed and destroyers of the Royal Australian Navy joined US patrols off the North Vietnamese coast. Australian nurses also served at the Australian Field Hospital at Vung Tau

Meanwhile, the Australian Government decided that the Army's voluntary system of recruitment would not provide sufficient new recruits in time to meet the commitment to raise the Army's battalion strength to 9. On 24 November 1964, national service was introduced. The scheme was selective: birth dates were used to select from the population of 20 year old males, who were to be called up for national service in the Army for a 2 year period.

Of the 804,286 young men who registered for national service, 63,970 actually served in the Army with around one third of national servicemen serving in Vietnam.

For those who lived through these times, the Vietnam War period was a very controversial part of our history. Towards the end of the 1960's, the war and national service was becoming politically unpopular. A moratorium was run against the war and this was supported by the opposition party at the time. This pitted friends against friends, and in some cases family members against each other.

The most unforgivable thing that happened was that some demonstrators against the war began to target the soldiers who were fighting the war and this made a lot of them very bitter as they felt that their government and in some cases, the Australian public had betrayed them.

This perception by the veterans was reinforced towards the end of the 1960's as demonstrations against the war increased. Soldiers returned from Vietnam in the dead of the night and were immediately sent on leave. There was no welcome home parades for the battalions and units.

It was not until the Welcome Home Parade which was held in Sydney on 3 October 1987 and the later parade and unveiling of the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial in Canberra on 3 October 1992 that Vietnam veterans felt that their service in the Vietnam War was recognised and valued by the Australian Government and the Australian people.

It is pleasing to note that during the later unpopular 2nd Iraq War, that the Australian people held the politicians accountable rather than directing their anger against the soldiers who were fighting the war.

Australian forces in Vietnam faced a formidable enemy consisting of the Viet Cong, a locally organised guerrilla group which consisted of many who had fought against the French, and the North Vietnamese regular army. Most of the fighting that took place was jungle warfare. The Australian soldier was well trained for this type of fighting and quickly gained a reputation as a formidable jungle fighter.

Australian troops fought in a number of battles in Vietnam such as the Battle of Long Tan and the Battles at Coral and Balmoral and acquitted themselves well.

The legend of the ANZAC fighting spirit which was forged on the beaches and steep slopes of Gallipoli, is now articulated as enshrining the qualities of courage, endurance, sacrifice, and mateship. By the Second World War, the word ANZAC was so embedded in the national memory that the men of the 2nd AIF were seen as heirs to an established tradition and judged by the values which their fathers had manifested, and, in time, this has passed on to all Australia's fighting forces from Korea to Afghanistan.

Many Vietnam veterans were the grandsons of World War 1 veterans and/or the sons of World War 2 veterans, and they upheld the Spirit of ANZAC in the same way as their forefathers.

In the words of Major General (Retired), A J(Jim) Molan AO, DSO " Regardless of who won or lost in Vietnam, it is fair to say that the Australian soldier, regular and conscript, fought well. The Australian soldier has never lost any war in which we have been involved. Wars are lost by civilian and military 'generals'".

For many Vietnam veterans, 1972 was not the end of the war for them. They had another fight on their hands and that was due to the perceived indifference of the government to health problems they suffered as a result of their service in Vietnam and the disagreements with the RSL that the league was not proactive enough in its aid to the Vietnam veterans.

It soon became clear that there were major effects on their health and the health of their families due to the use of agent orange and other chemicals in Vietnam. Even though "shell shock" had been around since the 1st World War, there had been little research into the topic and as a consequence there was little understanding of the post service mental health problems veterans were suffering. A study in the US had found that veterans were in fact twice as likely as civilians to die from suicide. There was no post-war counselling in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

The veterans became frustrated with the government and the RSL and turned to themselves to form organisations like the Vietnam Veterans' Association in 1979 and the Vietnam Veterans' Federation in 1981 to carry the fight to the Department of Veterans Affairs regarding the special circumstances under which the veterans had fought.

I believe it is clear that if any good came out of the poor post-war treatment of Vietnam veterans, it is that there is now a much better understanding of the hidden impacts of combat on a veteran. Today's warriors of Iraq and Afghanistan have a better chance of recovering from the stress of battle and this is largely due to the Vietnam veteran associations.

For each and every one of us here today, Vietnam Veterans Day can be a very personal and emotional experience as it is a time when you remember a loved one, a relative, a friend, or a mate who was lost in the Vietnam War or has since passed on. It is also a time to give thanks to these servicemen and women for their valiant service in the defence of our freedom and to demonstrate the value we place in these freedoms so selflessly forged.

Today we pay homage to the 521 servicemen who gave their lives during the Vietnam War. And to those who served and died prematurely or took their own lives as a result of the dark struggle they had with the demons of their war experience. Sadly, there are still veterans in our midst who returned and choose to fight their post service battles unseen and in the shadows.

However, casualty numbers alone cannot adequately chronicle this nation's loss, as each had a family and friends whose lives were enriched by their love and diminished by their loss. Each added to the life of a city, a suburb or a country town. Each worked before enlistment or their call up for National Service, as a teacher, a farmer, a labourer, a nurse, a doctor, a clerk, or any one of the countless occupations which added to the prosperity and the richness of our nation. These men and women were denied the full span of human existence, and our nation needs to acknowledge and remember their contribution in life and their sacrifice in death.

In ending, I would like to say to those Vietnam veterans who are still with us, especially those here today:

1. Yes, the Vietnam War period was a very controversial period in Australian history and Vietnam veterans in general were treated poorly.
2. However, today, the Australian Government and the Australian public value your service to your country and are proud of you.
3. They recognise that you served this nation at a time when the western world was engaged in an undeclared war against communism. Even though South Vietnam eventually fell to the communist North Vietnamese, your service contributed to protecting a number of other Asian countries from falling under communist suppression.
4. We pay homage to you as well. Today is your day. Enjoy yourselves and have a beer with your mates.

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