

VIETNAM VETERANS' DAY ADDRESS: 18 AUG 09.

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This day commemorates the service and sacrifice of all Vietnam veterans. It also celebrates the spirit of mateship and mutual assistance that characterises the self-help attitude we now share, learned the hard way - in the face of political hostility, media misinformation, official neglect and dishonest dealing. This date is auspicious, for it is on that day in 1966 that 'D' Company, the 6th Battalion RAR, fought its splendid action in the rubber plantation of Long Tan. But, while acknowledging that gallant action by those men, we remember also that the South Vietnam Campaign fought by our nation during the ten long years to 1972 was noted for a number of intense Australian combat actions that should be equally well known.

Heavily fought actions such as the 1967 battle of the "Long Green" during Operation Bribie, when VC and NVA main force battalions lay in ambush of our infantry/cavalry combat teams; the killing ground at Firebases Coral and Balmoral in mid 1968 where the NVA mounted multi-regimental assaults over many weeks on Australian units deployed across the enemy's approaches to Saigon; and the 1969 Battle of Binh Ba where a NVA/VC main force battalion was destroyed by infantry/armoured assault just seven kilometres from Nui Dat.

There were other fierce combats too, whether on patrol, clearing mines, waiting in ambush or protecting civil infrastructure construction teams. Finally, we should always remember our history: that Australian combat forces were withdrawn from South Vietnam in early 1972; that the January 1973 Paris Peace Accords were signed by North Vietnam and US - leading to the US withdrawal by March 1973; and that North Vietnam, in the face of the Paris peace terms, invaded the South in such strength that Saigon rapidly fell to enemy armoured assault in March 1975. Except for the crowing of the media, the world was silent.

The 1962-1972 Vietnam Campaign history that we Veterans share has a backdrop of an Australian society that seems no longer to exist. Then, most were prepared to undertake their military duty - after all, the institution of National Military Service had only been absent from our society for five years before its re-introduction in early 1965. Then, a man could still count on a handshake to seal an agreement; politicians could still be publicly held to account; a nation could be expected to support its military forces in the field, as the experiences of Korea, Malaya and Confrontation showed. And strong moral concepts of right and wrong were still clearly visible within Australian society and community, despite the new concept of television starting to push the boundaries of public acceptability. We took responsibility for our actions, and the handout was a rarity.

So we marched off to war, confident in our Nations' support, the cheers of the people who farewelled us at dockside and airport, and relying on our political leaders and the RSL to provide the leadership that any nation still needs when it overwhelmingly votes to send its young to war. As our casualties mounted, the national and community leadership

failed to maintain a proper moral direction. The media much preferred to describe and revel in the wasteful tactics of our major ally rather than cover the far more steady, thoughtful but far less flamboyant, Australian tactics and the concrete results these tactics produced. Within three years however, and after some of our biggest combat actions, our troops were repatriated home at night, return home marches were plagued with demonstrators, our leading opposition politicians consorted openly for and with the enemy: and while returned veterans were disowned by RSL and community leaders alike, the majority of our people remained silent. Despite the fact that our combat reputation and humanitarian actions throughout our participation in Australia's longest war remained unsullied, the more irresponsible of the media attempt still to sensationalise events taken out of context or simply misquoted without apology.

We never lost a battle.

But most of us battled through this intense disappointment. Some could not, because the scars of dispossession by Nation, RSL and local society was simply too much to carry in the absence of any comrades' support mechanism. They remain broken men. Most of us recall the immense damage that was done to fine young men by those spineless community and political leaders who purported to speak in our name. We Vietnam veterans are determined that the same must not be allowed to happen to another generation of servicemen and women who, like us, served their country faithfully and with honour. To this purpose, we as a veteran community welcome to our ranks and support those veterans of the many conflicts following that of the Vietnam Campaign.

The counselling service founded by Vietnam Veterans assists all veterans; this Veterans' sub-Branch welcomes the Peacemakers and Peacekeepers as members; we continue to combat the bureaucracy and obtuseness that every veteran finds when seeking redress for war-damaged health. This day also reminds us again of our duty to those who have served our nation after us, to ensure that Australia is not allowed ever again to remain silent and to forget. As we repatriate the last two of our missing comrades from the battlefields of Vietnam, let us now resolve again to look after each other and also those comrades who made and kept the peace after us.

This is the day that we Vietnam veterans remember and commemorate our dead, we acknowledge the debt we owe to our mates, but recall the circumstances of the sad standard of political and community neglect that greeted us on our return home. It is this last factor that truly makes Vietnam our longest war, because it is only now that many of our comrades are achieving that peace of mind which should be the right of every warrior who has bravely done his duty first.

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