

When we came home the aftermath

By Bob Freshfield

Not for us, the march down capital city streets. Not for us, the bands playing, or the flag waving, and the sounds of a cheering throng. Yes, some returning soldiers marched in battalion formation as they embarked from HMAS Sydney in their home port States. Many, many more, like National Servicemen, doctors and nurses, were more likely to be flown into Sydney's airport on a late night journey, then dispersed among their waiting families, or wait hours for a connecting flight or train ride home.

Reported in some historical pieces as more anecdotal, and summarily dismissed, it is this type of reporting that provides an insight into the root causes that became an undesirable aftermath of a dreadful war.

The manner of our homecoming affected the way in which we Vietnam Veterans recovered from the war, those who arrived late at night to no fanfare and the seeming indifference of the military had more trouble adjusting to life at home than did those whose return was more public and who had had the benefit of a couple of weeks, debriefing and unwinding on board HMAS Sydney, with those they had served with, before reaching Australia.

Of the nearly 60,000 men and women who served in Vietnam, almost 20,000 were National Servicemen. That is a large 1/3rd of a fighting force. In 1971 45% of 4RAR soldiers were 'Nashos'. The fact is that when their time of 2 years national service was almost completed, these men were returned to Australia for discharge. Not in the company of their friends on a leisurely journey home, but on 8 to 10 hour night time flights with mixed troops. Some reported straight away to an Army camp close to their homes to prepare for a discharge. Others were afforded any leave owing at home before reporting for discharge a few weeks later.

The plight of the 'Nasho' worsened during 1971, when in July of that year National Service was reduced to 18 months. Suddenly, a stream of soldiers were despatched home as their time was up. National Servicemen, yet to be posted to a unit found themselves shunted from one unit to another, or from a platoon in 3 or 4 RAR(s), to another platoon, just as Australia's commitment was being wound down. They did not have the distinction of a permanent posting, and lost any chance of the awarding of insignia that would provide some distinction of their service in later life. Some 3,000 soldiers still await the right to wear the Vietnam Star medal. Some 500-600 were denied the 'Infantry Combat Badge', only because they were never officially 'posted' to a Regiment, many of them serving far longer than the 93 days on active service required, and even longer than some of those proudly displaying their badge today.

But the return home was only the beginning of a long period of readjustment. For a long time after the war large numbers of Vietnam veterans felt that many in Australia blamed them, rather than politicians, for the war and the way it had been conducted. Images of the war relayed almost endlessly on TV, had an effect on public opinion and fostered public ignorance. The fact that these images related more to the *American/Vietnamese* experience in Vietnam was less thought of. People associated the role of Australians in the war with that of the Americans in a way that showed an ignorance to the two countries' different approaches to fighting in Vietnam, and the way Australian media showed more American imagery than that of Australian troops.

Some veterans recall being abused as baby killers, rapists and murderers on their return. For men who regarded themselves as generally having fought with more humanity and professionalism than their American counterparts. For men far more skilled and trained than the Americans, and who had proven themselves as the equal, or superior to, the enemy, never losing a skirmish or battle, this was a bitter blow. Veterans who had lost friends in combat, who had seen death and who had killed, were appalled at the way in which their having done their duty asked of them by their government, was used to denigrate them.

Even the RSL proved less than welcoming. Returned soldiers from earlier conflicts suggested that Vietnam was not a real war, or even refusing to believe that National Servicemen were sent to Vietnam, hurt men seeking the comradeship and understanding of fellow veterans. This experience was not endemic to all RSL clubs, and some sub-branches did welcome men returned from Vietnam. However, it happened often enough for some veterans to harbour a life-long resentment of an organisation from which they expected much more.

Think also of the returned and now discharged 'Nasho' seeking out his former employer for his position in that employment to resume. The promise made to all who were called up, and served their time, only to be told that now National Service was to be abolished, those laws did not apply anymore. Another slight.

In 1980 some veterans formed the Vietnam Veterans' Action Association which later became the Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia (VVAA). Established partly as a crisis counselling service and as a vehicle through which to prosecute a case for veterans claiming to suffer from the effects of herbicides and defoliants used in Vietnam, the VVAA played an important role in the lives of veterans. Its membership grew to more than 12,000 in New South Wales, but due to the split and formation of the VVFA membership including both organisations, -- and the appalling attrition rate of Vietnam Veterans -- would total between 15,000 – 19,000 Australia wide.

Vietnam veterans were given a welcome home parade in Sydney in 1987. Some 25,000 veterans marched to the cheers of several hundred thousand onlookers. Five years later, in 1992, a National Memorial for the Vietnam War was unveiled on Canberra's Anzac Parade. A further rededication of the memorial in 2002 showed that the public opinion of the Vietnam Veteran was changing. These gestures showed to veterans that public opinion was changing, and it felt okay to be a Vietnam Veteran. Albeit nearly twenty years after the war finished.

The stories of disturbed veterans, suffering from PTSD and other disabilities, might cause some historians to over simplify war related illnesses and disabilities, and try to push the theory that most Vietnam Veterans did not suffer much and got on with life as usual on their return. They will summarise that ' Many Vietnam veterans simply returned to Australia and settled back into the routines and habits of civilian life'.

The lucky few did indeed acclimatise back into normality, but not straight away, and not in a permanent way. Even the Repatriation Medical Authority (RMA) recognises that men and women sent to war will develop PTSD at some point of their lives. That some will suffer debilitating disabilities is due to the nature of the beast. That is why governments prepare for and administer a Veterans Affairs portfolio.

The soldier profession is the only industry that trains its workforce to hunt and kill another human without retribution. It is the only profession that prepares men and women for death in the face of an enemy intent on hunting you down and killing you. When a government sends its soldiers off to war it must be prepared to compensate them and their families when that war destroys their body and mind.

When the evil of war strikes back to stricken our children and grandchildren with known and proven side effects of toxins, we are prepared to fight like hell for just compensation. If that fight takes too long and we make noises causing a few to claim we are too monetary focused, we will remind them that the suicides of Vietnam Veteran children is 3 times greater than the national average. We will remind them that toxins we ingested in Vietnam has caused Spina Bifida, Cleft Palate, and Non Hodgkin's Lymphoma, to name a few, in our children and grandchildren.

The injustice thrown at us by an ignorant but influential few has made us evolve, over 40 years, into a body prepared to take governments and the DVA to task whenever that injustice impacts on the lives of those who serve their country. Every time a highlighted cause comes before government, such as suicide rates among serving soldiers, governments will invariably embark upon a well publicised enquiry, then consultation, then a study to determine the facts, costing many, many millions of dollars. The same result as previous study after study will be developed, recommendations made, the least costly ones adopted, and we roll on to the next disaster, and a further study is carried out.

When the VVFA joined with the VVAA, RSL and VVCS to develop the ASIST Program, that became Operation Life, and trained people in the preparedness for and prevention of suicides. It was set up because a 'Study' alerted government that the children of Vietnam Veterans were committing suicide at 3 times the national average for non veterans children.

Later, when Vietnam Veterans wives started suiciding at a younger age than other veterans of other wars, an enquiry led to a decision to allow partners of veterans access to the VVCS, and Operation Life. Within a few years it was reported that current serving ADF members were suiciding, and yet another enquiry and report was called for. No mention was made of the previously set up arrangements, and the timely intervention of suicide awareness training went begging.

When enquiry after enquiry, and commissions are reporting that DVA operatives are behaving contrary to the law, and in deliberate flaunting of the 3 ACT's of parliament governing veterans, it is a duty of care that we as a contributing lobbyist on behalf of veterans make our presence felt. That long transition period from Baby-killer to acceptable human, and veteran has created another entity. One that continues to support the welfare of veterans, and importantly, today's serving Soldier, Sailor and Airman/woman.