



# After 20 years of our campaigning, the new history is published

*The Long Shadow, Australia's Vietnam Veterans Since the War*

by Peter Yule

(NewSouth Publishing, 2020)

**W**e campaigned for 20 years to have the War Memorial commission this book, then waited another five while it was researched and written.

And here it is at last.

*The Long Shadow* is a kaleidoscopic story of the health and medical legacies of the Vietnam War. Dr Peter Yule's vast research has resulted in the gathering of information to make a complete story of our homecoming.

The story is told with accuracy, compassion and eloquence. (Remarkably, there is only one suggestion on which we have a reservation).

**D**r Yule's story begins with asking what it was like to be on a tour of duty in Vietnam.

This story is told not so much from archival document study; but through the eyes of the over one hundred veterans Dr Yule and his team interviewed.

So what was it like?.

\* There was a wide variety of views.

National Service signaller Colin Lamb believed his tour of duty in Vietnam was 'the best thing in the world' while another signaller, David Morgan experienced it as 'living a horrific nightmare from which there was no escape'.

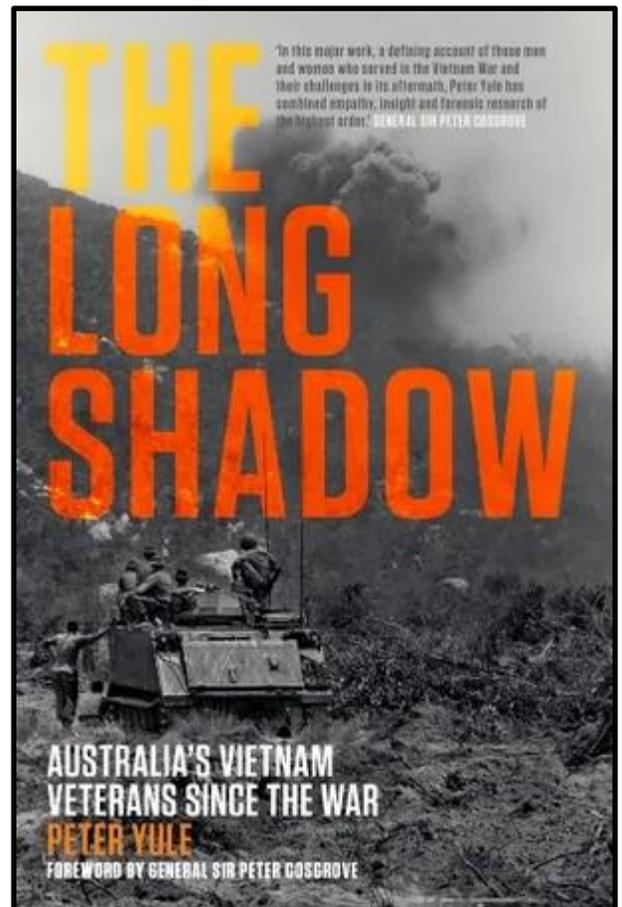
\* There was confusion.

Garry Graham was stressed by 'not knowing who the enemy was. The Vietnamese were working in the rice paddies by day and saying 'Hello' and Uc Dai Lai [Australians] No. 1, Viet Cong No. 10, and then they come after you that night...'

\* There was exhaustion.

Peter Winter told a tale of exhaustion, which will resonate with many readers, in a letter home: 'It's been fairly hectic for the platoon lately, especially in the night ambush roles which leave us tired and a bit on edge. Some of us have been out every night for the last nine nights. We've been going out at 1800 and coming in at 0630. Then its straight into our daily routine of strengthening our defensive area and when that's finished, preparing for the coming night's activity... The constant effort that is needed to keep ourselves alert and ready for any kind of action is really tiring'.

\* There was the horror of mine warfare.



Gary McKay's platoon arrived to find: 'The APC had literally had its back taken off and most of one side. The men inside had suffered a similar fate....'

\* There was the trauma of combat.

As [HMAS] *Perth* approached, she came under fire from batteries along the coast. Jones recalls that 'down below you could hear these sounds like someone with a handful of rocks, big rocks going ...against the ships side...The crew felt extremely vulnerable as 'it doesn't take much to sink a 4,500 ton destroyer'...*Perth* suffered a direct hit on top of the aft gun mount...

\* Graham Chandler recalls: Fifty four of us infanteers along with some engineers and some tracking dogs went to a secret location called the Hat Dich which was renowned to be a VC stronghold. It was our mission to find them, and either destroy them or bring in the heavy stuff and get rid of them. Yeah, we found them all right. Like I said, there were fifty four of us and in about three or four minutes we'd lost one dead and 37 wounded...'

Only a minority were combat troops. The book also canvasses the experiences of a wide variety of those in army, navy and air force support roles.

And what of the dangers?

Dr Yule describes in detail the ordeals of battle deaths and wounds, accidents, diseases and the self-medication of alcohol and tobacco as well as the sleeping monster, the trauma of war.

Here are some snippets.

\* On 21 September 1971, five Australians were killed in the Battle of Nui Le in the north of Phuoc Tuy, when D Company 4RAR attacked an enemy bunker complex without tank support...

\* The high velocity blast of a land mine explosion caused traumatic injuries...'

\* Ted Holden...was seriously injured falling into a newly dug weapon pit at Nui Dat...

\* For many Vietnam veterans, particularly gunners and infantry, the most common long term medical legacies are hearing loss and damaged knees and backs.

\* Vietnam was full of natural hazards. Snakes, scorpions, bees and ants were constant dangers. Kraits were the most dangerous of the local snakes and they appeared to be attracted to the dark corners of tents at Nui Dat.'

\* ...dozens of Australian soldiers were bitten by possibly rabid dogs, monkeys and mongooses.

\* Soon after arriving in Vietnam in June 1965, medical officers realised that most local strains of malaria were resistant to chloroquine and some appeared to be resistant to paludrine.'

\* [A medical officer] was sent to Vietnam in February 1963 to investigate the disease environment, and he found that, even without the war, Vietnam was one of the most dangerous places in the world. A lack of public health facilities especially sewerage and safe water supplies, made hygiene-related diseases common, notably worm infestations, dysentery, gastroenteritis, infective hepatitis, cholera and enteric fevers. Leprosy, tuberculosis and even bubonic plague were endemic, as were a wide range of tropical fevers additional to malaria, including scrub typhus, Japanese B encephalitis and dengue fever. In rural areas, leptospirosis, melioidosis and rabies were all common. Polio was still endemic...

\* Combat fatigue cases peaked in 1969...

These experiences and dangers set the scene for a troubled homecoming.

With the scene set, Dr Yule delves deeply into what happened on our return to Australia.

Here's a couple of veterans' first impressions from the many related in the book.

\* On his return to Australia, flying from Sydney to Canberra, Geoff Hazel reports:

'I had this big bandage round my neck. One bloke's got his arm in a sling. We're in uniform. The other bloke was on crutches with his lower leg in a cast. We sat down and talked to the hostess and said, 'Can we get three



Historian Dr Peter Yule whose book has done so much to bring clarity to the troubled homecoming of Vietnam veterans.

painkillers as soon as we take off?’ She said, ‘What flavour?’ They arrived and ‘That’s paid for by so-and-so. We just got drinks the whole way home.’

\* There were, of course, less uplifting experiences. Kev Tapper recalled: ‘When we arrived in Sydney, we were fumigated by these cockroach spray things on the plane. We got off the plane. There was no one there at all. We were all going to different parts of Australia, so... we laid down in the passengers’ terminal with whatever gear we had, and all that night, people just stepped over us or around us or whatever. No food: we had to buy our own food, till the plane picked us up to take us back to Perth.’

\* And there was confusion. Vince Restuccia relates: ‘I had got used to living with a group of blokes that by and large I got on with very well. And we trained together worked hard together and we formed a good team...and all of a sudden I was home and...I was living back with my parents and...I got on with my father OK but...I guess I’d changed a lot and...I didn’t feel in a good space for a while I have to admit...I almost felt like going and re-joining.’

And where was the Department of Veterans Affairs in all this?

Dr Yule’s answer seems to be, ‘nowhere much’.

\* The official history of repatriation in Australia hardly mentions Vietnam veterans until the late 1970s when the rising storm of anger over Agent Orange forced the

department to recognise their existence.

The book’s chapter headings, *Hitting the Wall* and *Everyone Has Their Way of Coping* may ring loud bells with many veterans.

Here are a couple more snippets.

\* Peter Aylett recalled: ‘I guess I covered everything by being a workaholic...then about the age of 55 the flashbacks started...’

\* John Bertini in the midst of a successful career, ‘hit the wall’: ‘One morning in early 1997, I got up to go to work, showered, dressed and had breakfast, but that was all I could do. I could not bring myself to get into the car and drive into the city to my office...’

\* Tony ‘bomber’ Bower-Miles remembered his first psychiatric consultation. ‘I was in an extremely agitated state. I was crying. It was a day of mixed emotions, being upset, being angry. All that shit. [The psychiatrist] later told me he was scared of me that day...I lied to him about how much I drank. I said 30 or 40 pots a day. I knew he wouldn’t believe me if I told him the truth...’

Then there was the effect on families.

\*Dave Morgan recounts. ‘I am one of the lucky veterans to successfully maintain a close relationship with my family [though they] have all suffered because of my PTSD. I feel for them given what they have had to endure— my nightmares, depression, anger outbursts, and mood swings. I am aware how overprotective I was while [my children] were growing up. Because of my own exposure to dangers in Vietnam, I became suspicious and overly conscious of their safety. A parent out of control with my own emotions and feelings. I brought them up in a world of military discipline—drill, drill, drill and study and education.’

The book describes in detail the failure of DVA to take seriously veterans' health problems until the 1990s when, under more pressure, they sent their people to the US to consult experts there. What they found led them to realise they were guilty of neglect. From then they have been trying to catch up after those lost years.

Dr Yule goes on to explain in plain English the results of the multitude of studies on veterans' health and mortality. They show that as the decades pass, veterans' health problems do not recede but grow in magnitude.

Dr Yule's coverage of this intensifying and expanding ill-health of veterans and their families is engrossing, if disturbing, reading.

**D**r Yule delves deeply, too, into the Agent Orange controversy.

Vietnam veterans, led by the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (VVAA), demanded a Royal Commission to determine what was their exposure to herbicides and insecticides while in Vietnam and whether that exposure might have harmed them or their subsequent offspring.

Having examined the evidence available at the time, Dr Yule judges that: '...the scientific position in 1982 was one of 'uncertainty'.

The VVAA in 1982 held the same belief, as there was good evidence for and against the harmfulness of the chemical agents.

That uncertainty was important because Repatriation legislation prescribed Vietnam veterans be given the 'benefit of the doubt' when claiming compensation for war caused illness. It was clear to the VVAA that this 'uncertainty' constituted 'doubt' of which they were to be given the benefit.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) in 1982 was rejecting almost all compensation claims on the grounds of chemical exposure. The VVAA believed that these rejections resulted from DVA not abiding by the legislation's 'benefit of the doubt' provision.

It was these rejections that motivated the veterans' successful demand for a Royal Commission.

It was established in 1983.

Dr Yule suggests that demanding a Royal Commission may not have been the campaigning veterans' best option.

In October 1981 the Nancy Law court case strengthened significantly the 'benefit of the doubt' provision. Dr Yule refers to a DVA First Assistant Commissioner writing that, in view of this court's decision, DVA may not be able to hold the line against 'chemical exposure' cases.

Dr Yule also refers to a 1998 interview with the RSL National President of that time who voiced his belief that the 'benefit of the doubt' provisions would eventually have been properly applied anyway, so the Royal Commission was unnecessary and risky.

The VVAA's experience led it to believe DVA would not simply 'roll over' and 'pay up' under pressure from the Nancy Law decision.

Indeed, the VVAA felt sure DVA would continue indefinitely to resist relaxing its hard line.

After all, there was a 'chemical exposure' case won on appeal in January 1982, well after the Nancy Law decision,



giving DVA an ideal opportunity to change its hard-line policy. No such change was made or forecast. Indeed, DVA instructed staff that there was to be no policy shift as a result of the appeal decision.

Then there was a year and a half between the Nancy Law decision and the announcement of the establishment of the Royal Commission when DVA could have changed policy or indicated it was contemplating changing. It did neither.

As it turned out, far from contemplating respecting the Nancy Law case, DVA was developing amendments to Repatriation law to counter the decision and make it harder for veterans to succeed in disability claims. These amendments were passed into law during the final year of the Royal Commission.

As it turned out too, the very deep resistance DVA had to respecting the Nancy Law decision was revealed by the Royal Commission itself. It found that DVA had been training staff to find ways of circumventing the 'benefit of the doubt' provision in Repatriation law, a behaviour that continued even after this exposé.

And what of the Royal Commission?

In the Conclusions and Recommendations volume of its report (the only volume referred to by most readers) the Royal Commission declared 'Agent Orange—Not Guilty'. This verdict was not at the standard required by Repatriation law with its 'benefit of the doubt' concession, but at the higher civil court standard.

Some scientists rejected the definite Not Guilty verdict even at this higher standard, objecting there was too much uncertainty in the existing science to make such an unequivocal finding.

The Royal Commission had other weaknesses.

It was guilty of plagiarising large sections of the chemical company, Monsanto's, submission. Dr Yule's forensic examination shows that: 'Of the first four volumes of the report, dealing with exposure, toxicology, general health, birth defects and cancer, approximately 85% was virtually identical to the Monsanto submission.'

To make matters worse, Monsanto's dodgy criticisms of studies favouring the veterans' case were copied uncritically.

**D**r Yule says that the VVAA was knocked for six by the Royal Commission's findings.

That is true.

This was because there was almost universal focus on the Not Guilty verdict.

The RSL crowed that the issue 'should never be raised again'.

But there was another finding buried in volume four of the nine volume Royal Commission report. It identified two cancers that, under Repatriation law with its 'benefit of the doubt' provision, could be linked with exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam.

Almost no one noticed this favourable finding because the Royal Commission failed to point it out or explain its significance.

But a few years later, under Tim McCombe, the VVAA regrouped, changed its strategy and, encouraged by these hidden findings, had another go.

Dr Yule relates this resurrection in a chapter titled, *Fight it Case by Case*. He says:

\* Thwarted in its attempt to obtain a blanket finding that Agent Orange was responsible for a wide range of veterans' illnesses, the VVAA set out to wind back the Royal Commission's findings and overcome DVA's resistance by fighting carefully chosen cases through the appeals system and the courts. As Tim McCombe told the Melbourne Herald, 'the commission's findings would be appealed against case by case'.

How these cases succeeded is analysed by Dr Yule in fascinating detail. One key to their successes was that not only Agent Orange's harmfulness was advanced in evidence. Selections of herbicides, insecticides and anti-malarial tablets, were also included.

Dr Yule describes in detail too, the intricacies of Repatriation law, with its 'benefit of the doubt' provision, as each case unfolded.



**1993** saw a dramatic twist.

The US Veterans Administration began a list of certain cancers it would attribute to Agent Orange exposure. This caused the DVA's wall of obstinate denial to come crashing down.

Dr Yule tells the fascinating story of the science, politics and passion that led to the US Veterans Administration's acceptance.

There is so much more that could be said about this information and story blockbuster. But space dictates this review must end.

For many veterans the Welcome Home march was the first time they had seen each other since Vietnam. (AWM photo reproduced in *The Long Shadow*)

So here's two of the many possible extracts from the book that offer food for thought..

\* When Ted Harrison (5RAR, 1966) and a mate were talking about Vietnam, Ted's wife told them to get over it because 'Vietnam was a long time ago'. Ted's mate replied simply, 'Vietnam will never be a long time ago'.

When the US Veterans Administration accepted the link between Agent Orange exposure and certain cancers, the VVAA put its pursuit of toxic insecticides on the back-burner. Dr Yule comments:

\* In recent years there has been an increased interest among Australian veterans in the possible health impacts of some of these other agents to which they were exposed. In particular, the work of John Mordike has drawn attention to large scale misuse of insecticides in and around Australian bases. Not only were these bases regularly sprayed with malathion by American aircraft...but fogging of bases ... with inappropriate and undiluted insecticides took place on an industrial scale... some epidemiological studies have found links between malathion exposure and some of the cancers often linked with exposure to dioxin [in Agent Orange]... Exposure to Agent Orange is uncertain, but there is no question that all Australians in Vietnam were exposed to malathion.

**T**his review of only a few pages can give but a bite-size taste of Dr Yule's story telling feast.

That feast is 568 pages long (not counting the annexes).

But don't be put off by the book's length.

It is readable, enjoyably so, because of Dr Yule's clear writing and his explanation of studies and statistics in understandable terms.

Our ex-Governor General and Vietnam veteran, General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK AC (Mil) CVO MC (ret'd) [Cozzie] said this in his Forward to the book:

'When I first picked up *The Long Shadow*, noting its length and great detail on the subject of 'Australia's Vietnam veterans since the war', I thought I would read it over four or five days, but once I started, I read it through in one go. I couldn't put it down.'

It is both a good read and also a reference book.

The book, *The Long Shadow*, is highly recommended. ■

# Why was the book written?

In the late 1970s the Vietnam veteran movement began a campaign for a Royal Commission into the effects of veterans' exposure to herbicides (the best known of which was Agent Orange) as well as insecticides, whilst on war service in Vietnam.

In 1983, a Royal Commission was established.

The Royal Commission made findings under two separate standards of proof; one at the civil court standard, the other under Repatriation law's which requires giving veterans the 'benefit of the doubt'.

At civil court standard the verdict was 'Agent Orange – Not Guilty'.

Under Repatriation law, however, the Royal Commission found two categories of cancer could be linked with chemical exposure.

In 1994, Volume 3 of the Official History of the Vietnam War was published. It included a section on the Agent Orange controversy.

The author, academic FB Smith, in a wickedly flawed account, claimed the veterans had no case and that they were motivated by greed.

In fact, the Royal Commission had vindicated the veterans' concerns by recognising two cancers which, under Repatriation law, could be linked to exposure.

And Smith's claim that the veterans were motivated by greed was ludicrous. If he had bothered to interview any of them, he would have realised that they were, in the best ANZAC tradition, fighting for a fair treatment of their brothers in arms.

Amongst many other flaws, FB Smith failed to mention that the Royal Commission castigated the Department of Veterans Affairs for purposely finding ways round obeying Repatriation law.

Outraged by this shockingly wrong account, the veterans began a campaign for that part of the Official History to be rewritten.

After 20 years, in 2015, the campaign succeeded. That success was helped by Australian War Memorial Director, Dr the Hon Brendan Nelson AO while Vietnam veteran The Hon Graham Edwards AM, a member of the War Memorial Council, was active in support.

As a result, the Council commissioned the writing of a new 'official' but independent history about the health and medical legacy of the Vietnam war. The council gave the job to historian Dr Peter Yule.

After five years of research and writing by Dr Yule and his team, the book was launched in October 2020.

**W**e had, of course, been wondering what Dr Yule would make of FB Smith's account of the Agent Orange controversy with which we so emphatically disagreed. Perhaps he would find Smith's work reasonable and credible. After all it was strenuously defended by Dr Peter Edwards who had been head of the official history Vietnam War project. Ashley Ekins, then AWM head historian, also inexplicably defended FB Smith's account.

We need not have worried.

In his book, *The Long Shadow*, Peter Yule devotes a chapter to a forensic examination of Smith's account. He is scorching in his criticism. Here's just a taste.

On Smith's dishonesty (or at least gross incompetence), Dr Yule writes:

'It is almost unbelievable that an official historian could denigrate a veteran with no supporting evidence, and attempt to disguise the lack of evidence by giving misleading references.'

In reference to FB Smith not seeking the veterans' point of view, Peter Yule writes:

'The two veterans he interviewed were employed by the government, and neither interview is cited in the text. Beyond them, he spoke to no veterans, although this did not prevent him making defamatory assumptions about their motives for pursuing the Agent Orange issue.'

Of Smith's bias when dealing with scientific evidence Dr Yule writes:

‘Smith was emphatic in his judgement of scientists who researched Agent Orange-related issues. Those whose evidence supported the official narrative of Agent Orange were uniformly ‘eminent’, ‘leading’ and ‘authoritative’, while those who questioned it were relentlessly disparaged.’

On Smith’s incompetence or malevolence (or both) in dealing with the science, Dr Yule spends many pages. This whole chapter should be read if just to experience being gob-smacked. ■

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