



NATIONAL VIETNAM VETERANS MUSEUM

Soldiers are Persons

This is not another history book or even a tale of the conduct of the Vietnam War, of which so much has been written over the past forty years. It is however relative to the 50,000 Australian military personnel who served in that ten year war – our longest commitment (to date) of the numerous armed conflicts in which our nation has participated since the beginning of the twentieth Century. It is the story of a unique museum: not a museum that is a record of war but one that pays homage to the Australian servicemen and women (as individual persons) who fought in that conflict and the traumatic events that they were to endure.

This is the story of a dedicated museum that has evolved under the auspices of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (VVAA); it is a form of memorial that was established by concerned volunteers some of who continue to manage, staff and operate this facility today. The museum is a sub branch of the Victorian Branch of the VVAA with its own members who are either Vietnam veterans being associated with or employed at the museum or are generally located in the same precinct as the museum. The rationale for establishing a museum was to permanently record in a non-political and unbiased environment, Australia's commitment to the war in Vietnam and to present the veterans of that war as persons not just warriors. Its specific focus is to preserve those aspects that were unique characteristics and consequences of war service in Vietnam. This museum has now been in existence for some seventeen years; however its gestation period had been much longer than that. The tale it tells is one that shows the kind of existence our troops experienced, what they wore, the transport in which they travelled, equipment and the weapons they used, profiles of their allies and their foes and the people and culture of the country that they gave 'their all' to protect, plus the traumatic frustrations they endured; further it endeavours to minimise the brutality and sometimes boring aspects so evident in any war zone. The very reason for its existence is explained, as is its location; but most importantly, it defines the circumstances and factors that placed Vietnam Veterans in a unique subset within the honoured family of veterans who had 'Returned from Active Service' from all of Australia's other wars or overseas military commitments.

Albeit seventeen years is not a long period for any institution to be subject to historical review, the story of the existence and achievements of the museum needs to be recorded now to ensure that it is seen in proper prospective to warrant its position in the resurgence of public interest in Australia's Military History. At the time of writing this history Australia's commitment to the war had ended some thirty-nine years ago and for the majority of our Vietnam Veteran's their service there is now well over forty years



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past, it follows they are now old soldiers some of whom have faded away and others are heading in that direction. The museum is fortunate that there is still a lot of archival matter available and there are living memories that can be accessed with clarity now, rather than be delayed until memory of such source material is diminished by the passing of time.

The horror of war is an accepted reality. With rare exceptions no Vietnam veteran would claim that their war was more horrific than the trench warfare of World War 1 or the major desert and jungle battles fought during World War 2. The passage of information during WW1 often took some months for specific events to be made public and even during WW2 this could take weeks, resulting in any public dismay being somewhat diminished by the passage of time. This allowed the troops time to recover from any period of intense activity prior to pressure from home reaching them. Modern information technology (even during the Vietnam war years) is so fast that members of the public can now have an awareness of the details of a battle sooner than that of the Digger who has been up to his neck in a fire-fight: under this circumstance recovery time can be virtually zilch before home pressures are upon him. The museum endeavours to encapsulate this emotional burden.

Sadly there were other abnormal pressures, which are identified in the following chapters that were to impose an enduring over-burden that still afflicts some Vietnam veterans today. It was this circumstance coupled with expressed public concerns (animosity) that caused these veterans to seek solace within their own brotherhood and this (in part) ultimately led to the creation of the museum. “Knowledge Disperses Fear”: fear that can range from mild disquiet to mind numbing terror – it is not so amazing therefore that a significant number of mature aged visitors to the museum have indicated that, had they had access during the Vietnam war to a facility such as the museum and the information (knowledge) it provides, their fears and concerns may not have been so starkly manifest as was displayed during the decade that our nation was involved in that war.

As previously stated 50,000 Australian service personnel served in Vietnam over a ten-year period – it is significant to note therefore that some four decades later nigh on 20,000 patrons pass through the doors of the museum ‘each year’. The vast majority of museum visitors express amazement at the high standard of the visual and audio presentation of the museum’s unique contents and they seem well prepared to pass these good opinions and appreciation by word of mouth. This has obviously enhanced the growing awareness by members of the veteran community, the general public and in particular schoolchildren.



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This is interesting because (sight unseen) some agencies and individuals, external to the museum, seem to have considered it a kind of amateurish “backyard” operation and this could have inhibited important assistance that they may well have been in a position to offer.

All written histories must meet the same demands of structure and presentation. Each must be the subject of thorough research and critical analysis. Chronology and referenced details must be correct, ambiguous content avoided, statistics reliable and facts proven. It is essential that the relevant history be presented as both informative and readable, with a proper balance between clinical data and reader interest; it is important therefore that a stack of statistical data should never be the cause of an otherwise interesting story becoming unreadable.

It would be difficult with any degree of accuracy to estimate how many museum visitors I have conversed with over the past ten years, but it would be well into four figures. The progressive sum of all these conversations has shaped the general thrust of this book. Without this interrelationship with both veteran and public members, the content, format and text may well have been quite different to that used in the following pages.

It will be seen from the early chapters that (in the beginning) the museum wasn't remotely near the dimension or sophistication of the present day facility. During those early days 'Taskings' and 'Presentations' were sometimes impromptu, opportunistic or changeable at short notice and this oft caused many such activities to go unrecorded in any detail. Likewise staffing was often sporadic or a matter of convenience with the identity of participants not always listed. Although seldom necessary this did create the need for me to apply some poetic licence for those early days to maintain chronological order and the continuity of a logical story line. Further where actual dates have been supported by the applicable documentation such dates have been used, on other occasions it has been necessary to make more generalised references. Likewise for elements that predate metrification imperial measurements have been used, as is the case when such has been recorded in appropriate documentation.

Most other books that have been written on the Vietnam conflict have to a varying degree included coverage of the troubled return home of veterans from that war, much of which is revisited in this book. This was considered necessary because other authors have used the trauma of the homecoming as an end piece to their respective stories whereas in this work it is the beginning, the very causation of the whole museum project. Perhaps this book can be read as an addendum to those other books or more accurately as an extension to Australia's Vietnam story. The following chapters explain why the museum exists, the purpose it serves, and how it came about, why it is in its present location, its



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method of operation, plus why it is still relevant and the details of plans for its continued existence; plus, importantly, profiles of those notable entities who made it all happen.

The Australian Force in Vietnam was tri-service and the overall content of the museum's presentations and displays reflect this mix. Matters of scale, significant variations in the shape and size of each operational environment – land, sea, air – and the magnitude of major equipment differences (ship, aircraft, tank) has, by necessity, caused some unfortunate inequities to occur.

An author should be aware of his/her target reading audience, which is generally governed by the genre of the authors work. For this book it is easy to suggest veteran interest, however, as an addendum to the outcome of a critically sensitive tumultuous social issue in Australia's recent history, it may well have wider reader appeal. This has been indicated by the numerous complementary entries made by members of the general public in the Museum's "Comments Book" The central focus of this history book has been concentrated on the museum and its contents. However, inevitably some reference(s) may inadvertently allude to specific events, incidents or persons. No intrusion or compromise to any person or military unit has been intended. Likewise it would not be possible to identify every individual whose comments have been so valuable in the preparation of the following history. A more structured (bricks and mortar) approach could have demanded an author more clinically minded than myself – perhaps to be even more objective, one who was not a Vietnam veteran.

There is a belief held by most Vietnam veterans that had they been able to return to their homeland with honour and received appreciation for a 'job well done'; and had their specific to war needs been readily accepted by proper authorities, then in all probability such organizations as the VVAA may well not have been deemed necessary and hence not formed. If this be so then, as a consequence, the need for a facility such as the National Vietnam Veterans Museum would never have eventuated; nor would there have been any need for this book.

It was indeed an honour to be permitted by the Museum's Committee of Management to undertake this project because I sincerely believe it is a story well worth telling.

<https://www.vietnamvetmuseum.org/shop/soldiers-are-persons>



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