

NATIONAL WINNER
ASIA & AUSTRALIA



MADÉLINE MOWAT

SHENTON COLLEGE

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE TREATMENT OF
RETURNING AUSTRALIAN VIETNAM
VETERANS BY THE AUSTRALIAN
GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC**

An Examination of the Treatment of Returning Australian Vietnam Veterans by the Australian Government and Public

The plight of Vietnam War veterans has been extensively covered through the media. However the coverage of the treatment of Vietnam veterans upon their return home has to a certain extent been neglected by the media and the medical community. The aim of this paper is to examine the full nature of the treatment these veterans received and the impact this treatment had on their physical and psychological recovery from combat experiences.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s there were several mass demonstrations against the Vietnam War, such as the Moratorium Movement or Marches that drew thousands of supporters from the Australian public. The result of these protests saw the Australian public's anger and hostility being directed towards the returning troops from Vietnam. This is in great contrast to the present day where Vietnam veterans are respected in the same way as World War II veterans or veterans from the Korean War. Unfortunately the general consensus was that all soldiers in Vietnam slaughtered civilians, this idea was reinforced by the extensive media coverage of the Vietnam War which covered events such as the My Lai massacre in 1968. This event caused mass outcry against the war in society. Hence the consequence of the Australian public's rejection of Vietnam veterans often resulted in the isolation and ostracism of Vietnam veterans in society and politics as well as psychological and physical issues associated with their experiences in combat.

Australian Vietnam War veterans upon their return home struggled to assimilate back into Australian society due to the psychological damage they had suffered whilst participating in the Vietnam War. Many suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of their experiences in Vietnam which is a common mental illness among returning soldiers from war zones. It was also prevalent in wars other than Vietnam, such as The First and Second World Wars, the Korean War and the War in Afghanistan and Iraq. There is still relatively significant social stigma surrounding mental illness, particularly PTSD due to its side effects and symptoms such as rage or angry outbursts, edginess, phobias, poor concentration and nightmares. Vietnam veterans returning home often had significant trouble assimilating back into society as many suffered PTSD and this inhibited both their social lives and their working opportunities "Many veterans still live with post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, caused by the war and in some cases exacerbated by what they faced on returning home"¹. Some veterans who suffered from PTSD committed suicide due to the rejection they faced from Australian society as well as their own psychological issues. This can be reinforced by the results of the Second Vietnam Veterans' Mortality Study published in 1997. It showed that Vietnam veterans had a higher cumulative mortality from suicide between 1980 and 1995 compared to the Australian male population². It can be argued that the experiences of Vietnam veterans during their tour of duty in Vietnam may have affected their mental health severely; hence the larger mortality from suicides in these veterans may be due to their struggle with PTSD and attempts of recovery after highly traumatic experiences in Vietnam. This is

¹ "Vietnam Veterans Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Treatment East Timor Development Assistance"; Ms Lee Rhiannon; Senator for New South Wales; Hansard Transcript; Sydney; 2008

² "Mortality of Vietnam Veterans: The veteran cohort study"; Department of Veterans Affairs; Canberra; 1997

supported by statements made by Vietnam veterans that “Some found it very difficult to conform to civilian life. Some even committed suicide. Some drank heavily and many marriages were ruined.”³ Therefore the consequence of the veterans’ experiences overseas appeared to be that they were severely psychologically damaged by what they had seen and done in the war “We’d changed or we knew too much”⁴ and this impacted on their ability to assimilate back into society.

This was amplified by public condemnation of the veterans by the Australian people. Many veterans were instructed by their officers upon their arrival home from Vietnam not to wear their uniforms outside of the airport in order to prevent being spat on by protestors. This rejection of their service in the Australian army, by the Australian public, implies that the public condemned and/or ostracised Vietnam veterans due to their involvement in the Vietnam War. The fact that they were ostracised for fighting in a war where many were conscripted further reinforces the isolation and feelings of self-loathing that many Vietnam veterans would have suffered due to the added psychological issues that came with their return from war.

It may be that Australians objected to these and assumed that all soldiers were the same. However it could also be due to the expansion of the Peace Movement from the early 1960’s and onwards throughout the Western World which was led by several high profile celebrities and musicians such as Jane Fonda. Despite this the effect of this adoption of anti-war ideals often led to misinterpretation as to who was responsible for the war efforts and Vietnam veterans were often caught in the crossfire, receiving rejection or abuse by the public “They couldn’t seem to understand that it was ordinary blokes caught up in a mess beyond their control!!”⁵ as one veteran put it.

However it is also possible that the political purpose for Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War wasn’t abundantly clear and this may have hindered attempts by the Australian public to sympathise with returning veterans. For example Menzies initial reason for entering into the war with the US as stated to the public in 1965 was that the South Vietnamese government had requested Australia’s military aid and Australia had to respond because communism of North Vietnam would threaten Australia’s national security in the long run⁶. However the South Vietnamese did not officially request Australian help until after Australia had already committed itself to the war. It also may have been that the Australian public simply did not know what they were fighting for if communism was no longer a major issue for the country. The kind of guerrilla warfare was unusual for the public to recognise as its structure was entirely different to wars in the past where the enemy was easily identified and confronted openly. Therefore this lack of political direction with regards to the Vietnam War may have contributed to the consequences of the Australian public’s rejection of Vietnam veterans.

It can also be argued that the public’s disinterest or rejection of the returning Vietnam soldiers was also encouraged by the lack of acknowledgement by the Australian government. Vietnam veterans weren’t officially recognised until the ‘Welcome Home Parade’ in 1987, nearly twenty years after their return

³ Peter Hopper; Returned Serviceman from Vietnam; March 2012

⁴ John McFadden; Returned Serviceman from Vietnam; April 2012

⁵ John McFadden; Returned Serviceman from Vietnam; April 2012

⁶ “Australia Since 1890”; Dennis, Lionel; Pearson Education Australia; Melbourne; 1996

home. This rejection by the Australian government is further reinforced by the fact that the Returned and Services League (RSL) made it difficult for Vietnam veterans to become members in the 1970's as they weren't perceived to have participated in a "real" war⁷. By doing so, the RSL had effectively rejected the contribution made by Vietnam veterans to Australia's defence. Prior to this, Vietnam veterans had received minimal support from the government and it wasn't until 1981 when Vietnam veterans were provided with a limited counselling service by the Australian government to facilitate access to other community services⁸. In this the government recognised that some Vietnam veterans had problems that could not be dealt with through normal department arrangements. The lack of support the veterans received including the lack of acknowledgement by the Australian government and the RSL implies that the Australian government was either embarrassed about their involvement in a 'lost war or their lack of concern over the welfare of returning soldiers. The consequence of this lack of acknowledgement by the Australian government was further isolation and ostracism of Vietnam War veterans from both social assimilation and political recognition. Hence it can be argued that the lack of acknowledgement of Vietnam veterans by the Australian government further exacerbated the Australian public's attitude towards Vietnam Veterans.

Exacerbating this rejection by society, Vietnam veterans suffered physical consequences of their involvement in the Vietnam War. Many veterans were exposed to widespread use of harmful defoliants like Agent Orange which seriously affected their physical health when they returned home. In 1982 a Royal Commission was set up to investigate claims made by the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia that the use of Agent Orange in the Vietnam War directly harmed the veterans who had been exposed to it in Vietnam. Its report in 1985 was that Australian soldiers' exposure to chemicals was very small and that it had not affected them adversely⁹. However the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia rejected the Royal Commission's findings. The findings given by the Royal Commission in 1985 implies that there was little governmental or organisational support for Vietnam veterans during that time. Therefore the lack of support Vietnam veterans received for physical injuries brought about by their involvement in Vietnam served to further isolate them from society and prevent their physical and psychological recovery after the end of the war. This continues to be a prevailing issue for Vietnam veterans even to the present day as they never completely recover from the physical effects of these harmful chemicals. In some cases, the children of Vietnam veterans were born with physical disabilities while other veterans suffered permanent rashes from their exposure to these chemicals¹⁰. The consequence of this isolation from society by the Australian government resulted in the prevention of physical recovery of Vietnam veterans from their experiences in the Vietnam War.

⁷ "Australia and the Vietnam War: Aftermath"; Department of Veterans Affairs; Board of Studies NSW; Sydney; 2012

⁸ "History of the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service and National Advisory Council"; Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia; <http://www.vvaa.org.au/vvcs2.htm>; 2012

⁹ "The Impact of the War on Soldiers: Agent Orange"; Red Apple Education Ltd; <http://www.skwirk.com.au>; Sydney; 2012

¹⁰ "Agent Orange Legacy: Reported Illnesses"; Agent Orange Legacy; <http://agentorangelegacy.com/reported-illnesses/>; 2012

Despite this there appears to be a change in society's opinion of Vietnam veterans since the 1990's. Vietnam veterans now march in ANZAC Day ceremonies and are treated with a higher amount of respect than in previous decades¹¹. This may be due to the emerging knowledge of the effects of PTSD on returned servicemen as well as the increasing number of international conflicts that involve guerrilla warfare such as the Iraq War 2003-2011 and the War in Afghanistan 2001-Present¹².

The consequences of the rejection of Vietnam veterans by the Australian public ultimately can be argued as being highly significant and influential in hindering and prohibiting the recuperation and recovery of these returned servicemen from psychological and physical damages from the war. However these negative and/or hostile responses from the Australian public may have been somewhat influenced by the role of the media in negatively portraying the soldiers of the Vietnam War. Although it can also be argued that the lack of acknowledgement or support for Vietnam veterans by the Australian government may have also adversely affected the recovery of Vietnam veterans from psychological and physical injuries from their experience in combat. This is in great contrast to the treatment of veterans in the present day as they are regarded with great respect which can be seen in their being placed in ANZAC Day marches and being accepted into the RSL as war veterans. Ultimately the consequence of the rejection and ostracism of Vietnam veterans by the Australian public was the impairment of the recovery of Vietnam veterans from their combat experiences and their assimilation back into history.

¹¹ "Vietnam Vets Take Rightful Place in Anzac Day Marches"; Lutton, Ellen; Brisbane Times; Brisbane; 2010

¹² "The Taliban, Guerilla Warfare and No Surrender"; Huckabee, Garth; Clarity Digital Group LLC d/b/a Examiner.com; 2009