

The Vietnam War

Noah Riseman

‘There was a lot of things that were done that shouldn’t be done and all that business, but when you’re there and that, you’ve got to put that out of your mind and all that business to stay alive and the idea is to keep one another alive and look after one another.’ – Roy

Mundine

The Vietnam War was one of Australia’s longest and most divisive conflicts, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were as involved as non-Indigenous people were. Australia sent its first group of 30 military advisors to South Vietnam in 1962, as the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam. A major escalation of Australia’s commitment came in June 1965 when, at the request of the US government, Australia sent the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) to support the US 173rd Airborne Brigade. In March 1966 Australia moved its enlarged Vietnam taskforce to the newly constructed Nui Dat base in Phuoc Tuy Province, south-west of Saigon. It was here that the majority of Australian soldiers served, although medical units and smaller contingents of RAAF and Navy personnel were based in the coastal town of Vung Tau. This town would also be the site of Australian soldiers’ rest and convalescence leave and the accompanying drinking, brawls and sexual encounters with local women (not to mention with other American and Australian men). As the US slowly withdrew its forces under the auspices of Vietnamisation, so too did Australia begin to draw down its troops from late 1970. The final Australians left Nui Dat in November 1971, and the last combat troops withdrew by December 1972. Throughout this entire period, 1962 to 1973, nearly

60 000 Australians served in Vietnam; there were over 3000 wounded and 521 killed in action.¹

At least 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men were among the ranks of Australia's personnel in Vietnam. This is a gendered history because, notwithstanding visiting Aboriginal performers such as the Sapphires, there have been no identified Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women among the 43 members of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps in Vietnam. In contrast to earlier conflicts where the Aboriginal voice was largely unrecorded, for the Vietnam War there is still a rich oral history from survivors, so I have drawn heavily on interviews conducted as part of the Yarn-ups or recorded for other projects on the history of Indigenous military service. Indeed, 28 of the Yarn-ups were with Vietnam veterans, nine were with family members of deceased veterans, and for a previous study (2010–13) I interviewed an additional nine Indigenous Vietnam veterans and the sister of a deceased veteran. The reliability of memory is a regular challenge for oral historians, particularly when examining memories of conflicts such as the Vietnam War which are clouded in myth. In my analysis I am therefore cautious to discuss not only what the veterans remember, but also *why* they attach particular meanings to their memories – including those which may be (re)constructed, deriving from the dominant mythology of the war and its aftermath.

Those Indigenous servicemen's experiences form a rich history, including: their motivations to serve; their experiences in Vietnam; their interactions with the Americans; and their homecomings. The war left many legacies for the individuals who served: not only their difficulties in adjusting to civilian life and in suffering post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); but also the opportunities military service afforded them. The actual experience of Vietnam War for Indigenous veterans was not dissimilar to that recalled by non-Indigenous men. This is a testament both to the equality instilled in the armed forces, and also the power of the dominant narrative of the Vietnam War to shape veterans' memories.² Even so, both the pre-war and post-war narratives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men address matters such as encountering racism and undertaking leadership roles in Indigenous affairs, thus producing a distinctly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans' experience within the wider dominant narrative of Vietnam veterans' trauma.

Upbringings and enlistments

The majority of Vietnam servicemen were born either during or shortly after the Second World War. This was the assimilation era, a period characterised by segregated facilities, racial vilification and child removal. Like in earlier conflicts, there were numerous Aboriginal servicemen in Vietnam who were members of the Stolen Generations and joined the military for the stability and discipline it provided.³ The service records of over 100 Indigenous Vietnam veterans identified by the Australian War Memorial indicate that the most common education level was ‘reasonable primary’, usually meaning they had left school by year seven. Most listed their professions as ‘labourer’, whether in the railroads, farms, meatworks or other industries. Most of these jobs were seasonal or casual, and often Indigenous men received lower rates of pay or had part of their wages quarantined as part of the Stolen Wages.⁴ In this social environment, the armed forces provided steady employment, a decent wage and, as many interviews affirm, an ‘escape’ from the challenges of daily life. Frank Mallard was working on a farm in Yuna, Western Australia, and ‘joined the Army because it was offering a better pay system than what I was getting. I was working, doing a man’s job at fifteen and getting paid a boy’s wage, so I thought joining the Army would’ve been the best thing to do’.⁵ Claude Malone similarly stated in 2014 that ‘It was hard for me to get a job, me being an Aboriginal, back in the late ’60s and early ’70s, so I joined the Army then’.⁶ Other men enlisted for the sense of adventure or out of a sense of duty. Fenton D’Antoine said in 2015 that his brother Gordon volunteered to go to Vietnam because his mates were going, and he saw it as his duty to join them.⁷

For men who were living ‘under the act’ in more restrictive jurisdictions, enlisting was not so straightforward. Boys who were still under 18 sometimes required the permission of the welfare board, rather than their parents, to enlist. For 17-year-old Phil Prosser, the protection legislation in Western Australia required the local welfare officer to sign his enlistment form. As he described it in 2000:

So here was this bombastic, drunken idiot that came out of the Hotel with alcoholic fumes breathing all over us. And he signed the approval on the bonnet of a car in the main street of Northam, Fitzgerald Street, Northam. And my father also signed it as

a witness to my signature, not as the approving male, or the adult, but as a witness to my signature and to this particular person's signature.⁸

Bill Coolburra confronted similar challenges because he was resident on Palm Island, Queensland. According to his widow, Edna, in 2014: 'When he was sixteen, he [Bill] asked them [chief protector] if he could go to the Townsville show because you had to get permission ... so they gave him permission, and he went to the Townsville show, but then he ran away to some foster parents ... From there he met a friend, and they ended up going into the Army'.⁹

National service

Other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men served in Vietnam as national servicemen, although their relationship with the national service regime was complicated. The specific wording of the *National Service Act 1964* exempted 'aboriginal natives of Australia, as defined by the regulations, other than a class of aboriginal natives as so defined that is specified in the regulations'.¹⁰ However, the Department of Labour and National Service indicated that it was only from *compulsory* national service that Aboriginal men were exempt; they could still *volunteer*. Department representatives also highlighted the *National Service Regulations*, where the complex definition of Aboriginality did not apply to all men of mixed descent. Regulation 18 defined an Aboriginal person as:

- (a) a full-blooded aboriginal native of Australia;
- (b) a person who is a half-caste aboriginal native of Australia or has an admixture of aboriginal blood greater than a half-caste; or
- (c) a person who has an admixture of aboriginal blood and lives as an aboriginal native or amongst aborigines.¹¹

Even though Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men were not obliged to register for national service, almost a quarter of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who served in Vietnam were national servicemen. Though this is a lower percentage than in the Australian forces as a whole – one-third were national servicemen – it still reflects a significant number of Indigenous people doing national service. There are several reasons

for this – one of course being the confusing regulations classifying some Aboriginal men as non-Indigenous. Also, some men who identify as Aboriginal under current definitions may not have identified as such during the Vietnam War era, whether because they did not know they were Aboriginal or did not meet state or Commonwealth definitions. Some men were never told that they were exempt from national service. Des Mayo was working on the railways in north Queensland, where he received a message that he had to register for the national service ballot. He returned to Darwin to register and, as he put it in 2015, national service was: ‘the only lottery I ever won’.¹²

Other men, when they learned they could opt out, chose to serve anyway. David Nean stated in 2014: ‘I had a chance not to go, because I worked on the railway and because I was Aboriginal Dad sat me down one day and said, “It’s up to you, Son. I’m proud of you any way”’.¹³ Les Kropinyeri indicates that the government made no differentiation based on race when his number was called. He went for medical examination along with 19 other non-Aboriginal men and, standing in their jocks and socks, he was informed by the doctor that as an Aboriginal man he could be exempted from call-up. He replied that as the marble did not differentiate from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and as he had come this far, he would continue with the journey.¹⁴ Other men voluntarily signed up for national service. For Alec Illin, interestingly, it was his mother who tried to stop him from signing up in 1965 because she feared he would be sent to Vietnam – which did happen.¹⁵ In 2015 George Anderson recalled going to Rockhampton and being told he did not have to register because he was Aboriginal: ‘So I said, “Hold on mate. I might be black but I’m still Australian! I want to put my name down!” And bugger me dead it came up!’¹⁶ Eventually the definition of Aboriginality’s openness to interpretation would lead to legal problems for Aboriginal people and tricky public relations for the government.

Combat

Like non-Indigenous veterans, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ex-servicemen are uncomfortable talking about their experience of war. Perhaps Geoff Shaw best summarised the sentiments of many of the veterans in a 2015 interview: ‘I don’t like to tell you ... the itty gritty side of war. The lighter side, yeah – I can tell you a lot of [the]

funny side of war'.¹⁷ Whilst veterans' reticence at times makes it difficult to write a historical narrative of their Vietnam experiences, the reticence itself is also telling about how these men have (re)constructed their memories.¹⁸

Aboriginal veterans who were willing to share their memories in interviews spoke of the challenges fighting a guerrilla war: the patrols, the difficult jungle conditions and the psychological dimensions of not knowing who or where the enemy was. Among the 108 men who fought in Australia's most famous battle in Vietnam, the Battle of Long Tan on 18 August 1966, five have been identified as Aboriginal: Thomas 'Buddy' Lea, Vic Simon, Jeffrey Duroux, Dennis Graham and Brian Hornung. Vic Simon described the battle in 2013:

First off we had a contact and then we moved up in sort of like an open box and unfortunately 11 Platoon they sort of walked into the ambush. They copped it pretty bad and then we sort of went in to help them out and that's when it's all started: just there for three hours' solid fighting in the rain and pouring down rain. And the artillery was very good even though they landed pretty close to us but they sort of saved our lives.¹⁹

After the battle, authorities discerned that the 108 Australians had fought an entire Viet Cong regiment of around 1500–2000. Given the incredible odds, Buddy Lea reflected: 'How we all did not get killed, I will never know to this day. 18 of our men got killed; 24 of us, including myself, got wounded'.²⁰

The challenges of fighting a guerrilla enemy feature in veterans' recollections of combat. In 2015 Des Mayo described one time when his patrol came across a bucket system of Viet Cong booby traps, and shots were fired on his patrol. They called in the artillery to fire on the area. In this instance, American jets flew in and carpet bombed the area. The Australians had to hide from them, even suffering casualties from the friendly fire.²¹ In 2014 Roy Mundine described another incident which left him permanently wounded:

Well we were going down into a bunker system and we come in there and that and we moved forward to check the area and I stepped on a mine or hit the side of a mine that went off and it blew us up, blew me up and blew me leg off.²²

The majority of Indigenous troops in Vietnam – approximately 60 per cent – served in the infantry. This was more likely to do with their education levels rather than officials determining Indigenous people to be more racially ‘suited’ to frontline combat. The next most common corps membership, constituting approximately 12 per cent of Indigenous soldiers, was The Royal Australian Engineers; smaller numbers served in specialised corps such as Signals. American scholars have found significant evidence that many commanders viewed Native American soldiers as a martial race who were ‘natural’ soldiers. The martial race construct influenced many commanders to send Native Americans as forward scouts because they could supposedly sense the enemy, or had better eyesight.²³ In Australia, only two Indigenous interviewees hinted at similar sentiments; David Nean speculated in 2014: ‘I reckon over there they looked up to you more because they thought you was better qualified for fight in the bush and that’.²⁴ Edna Coolburra also said in 2014, ‘Every time they were looking for a forward scout, they would pick Bill’.²⁵ None of the other interviews implied that race played any role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers’ assignments.

[Insert Figure 11.1]

Sapper Clement William ‘Bill’ Coolburra gouges a fighting pit from the earth at a jungle camp during Operation Roundhouse, a search-and-destroy mission against the Viet Cong. Coolburra served with the Third Field Troop, Royal Australian Engineers, based at Bien Hoa.

Source: AWM BLA/66/0109/VN/

Men who served in the RAAF and the RAN had different experiences from the infantry. Of the 260 Indigenous Vietnam veterans identified by the Australian War Memorial in 2010, 19 were Navy. Many sailors were involved in transporting servicemen to Vietnam from Australia and patrols off the North Vietnamese coast. Clarence Williams recalled in 2015 an incident in Vung Tau Harbour when a turbo generator blew in the aft engine room. While he was not hurt at the time, he stated: ‘what I remember about it was all the asbestos falling like a cloud, like a snowstorm’.²⁶ The RAAF had the fewest Indigenous members and the smallest Australian force in Vietnam – only five identified

by the Australian War Memorial in 2010. Rob Bryant was an airframe fitter who served with 9 Squadron in Vung Tau for 12 months from April 1970–71. He remembered two other Aboriginal RAAF members working in maintenance roles in Vung Tau during that period.²⁷

Social relations in Vietnam

The hub of Australian life in Phuoc Tuy province was the base at Nui Dat. Located in the rubber and banana plantations, it was often muddy and wet, given the tropical climate. As Glenn James recalled in 2001:

The living quarters in Nui Dat were sandbags and tents, a canvas tent over the top to four corners and then after some time they were renewed with corrugated iron, tropical hut type accommodation, at this time with no sandbags around them and quite often the enemy would fire into those.²⁸

Notwithstanding such dangers, there was a comforting sense of safety when returning to Nui Dat from patrols. Several men spoke of the boozers, and others remembered the outdoor theatre, movies and visiting performers such as Col Joye and Little Pattie.

Like the entire Australian military, Nui Dat was integrated, and in later interviews Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans recalled that they did not experience racism. As Geoff Shaw said in 2015: ‘I don’t know where they get the perception of this racism ... the only colour that everybody knew was green – their uniform’.²⁹ George Anderson remembered serving in Vietnam with three other Murri men, and he said in 2014 that there was no time for segregation.³⁰ All of the veterans interviewed emphasised the mateship and sense of brotherhood, which endured for years after the war. Bill Coolburra, for example, was so close to George ‘Snowy’ Wilson that they were nicknamed twins – ironically – since Coolburra was very dark, while Wilson was so white that he looked like an albino. When Prime Minister Harold Holt visited Vietnam in 1966, he wanted to meet the twins. As Coolburra’s widow Edna told the story in 2014, Holt asked Wilson:

‘Well where’s your other twin brother?’ He looked at him, he said – he just kidded himself laughing. He said, ‘My twin brother is out on the frontline doing some sort

of job there; that's where I should be, with him.' And he said, 'Didn't he want to come?' And he explained to him, he said, 'No, my brother is a full-blooded Aboriginal ... and his name is Bill Coolburra!'³¹

Whilst interviewed veterans were unanimous about active service in Vietnam being free of prejudice, there were some who recalled racism during training in Australia. Usually it took the form of taunts or epithets such as 'black bastard'. Sometimes it was other trainees who made these statements, and on other occasions, drill sergeants. George Bostock and John Schnaars said that when faced with taunts, they confronted the offenders; Bostock said in 2010: 'I copped no shit; the racist remark, bang [a punch]'.³² Claude Malone said in 2014 that he would say, 'If you don't like it, then lump it!' and then fight the 'rednecks'.³³

[Insert Figure 11.2]

Yon Ivanovic cutting Des Mayo's hair in Nui Dat outside their accommodation in 1968.

Source: Des Mayo.

[Insert Figure 11.3]

George Anderson (third from left) remembered of his time serving in Vietnam that 'there was no time for segregation'.

Source: George Anderson.

Interestingly, several Indigenous ex-servicemen reported witnessing racism among the American forces.³⁴ Frank Mallard remembered in 2010, 'But they did treat their Hispanics and their Negroes with contempt. They were always calling them by name and whatever; there was always some sort of a fight going on within their ranks and we found it difficult to understand that'.³⁵ However, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander troops themselves were not targets of American racism. Coolburra befriended African-American and Native American soldiers; in 2014 his wife said that the African-Americans asked, 'How come you come from Australia when they're all white?' He

would answer that the African-Americans were brought to the US as slaves, and similarly the Aboriginal people were treated as slaves in Australia. He also talked to Native American soldiers, saying: ‘You know when the British came there and took your land? Well that’s the way they came to Australia and took our land away from us’.³⁶

For rest and convalescence, Australian soldiers went to Vung Tau – a site of excessive drinking, fighting and engaging in sexual relations. Interestingly, scholarly texts about Australia’s Vietnam War mostly gloss over the behaviour in Vung Tau, though it does receive minor attention in some popular histories.³⁷ Most interviewees were similarly reticent to talk about Vung Tau, as best indicated by Frank Mallard’s witty comment in 2015: ‘Never got into any mischief at all. I was a good boy’.³⁸ Several service records have charge reports of going AWOL, and a few have reports of soldiers clashing with local people. In 2015 Des Mayo remembered one night at the Grand Hotel when a few mates got into a fight with some Vietnamese people. They grabbed Mayo, and as he remembered:

We all getting into it, knocking these people left and right the next thing the old police come along and start rattling off their machine-guns. So hands on heads and on the floor, you don’t want on our beds and you still getting rocked until the MPs come and they picked us up and took us back to camp.³⁹

A staggering omission from almost all interviewees’ discussions about Vung Tau is references to relationships with Vietnamese women. One exception is David Nean’s 2014 allusion: ‘Worst ones [Vietnamese] were the girls. You couldn’t trust the girls. You know what I’m talking about. They had terrible ideas of, you know, terrible [pause] ways of getting at people. [pause] I won’t go into it, but they were the worst of them all, the ones you couldn’t trust, especially if you going with them’.⁴⁰ These allusions, combined with the wider knowledge base of Australians in Vietnam, suggest that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, too, were participating in the sex trade in Vung Tau. If so, it is likely that they were among the large percentage of troops who contracted venereal disease.⁴¹

The anti-war movement at home

As news of advances by the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong, such as the 1968 Tet Offensive, and US atrocities, such as the My Lai massacre and the use of napalm, filled the Australian press, the anti-war movement within Australia grew substantially. By the time of the First Moratorium in May 1970, the anti-war movement was drawing members from across the spectrum of Australian society: mothers, the New Left, unionists, students, religious figures and members of the professional and middle class. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, too, were involved in the anti-war movement. In 2013 the unionist Kevin Cook recollected marching against the Vietnam War with the Builders Labourers' Federation.⁴² Patricia O'Shane recalled in 1993 being heavily involved in both the anti-Vietnam War movement and Aboriginal civil rights causes while she was a law student.⁴³ Yet Margaret Culbong, whose brother Len served in Vietnam, indicated in 2015 that while she was personally anti-war, she and many Aboriginal communities did not get involved in the protest movement: 'It didn't affect me in that much way, and I think that the same applied to most of the Aboriginal community because that was their fight. They were the invaders, they were the ones who had to go and fight. We're still fighting for our country'.⁴⁴

One significant difference between the American and Australian anti-war movements is that in the US, the Black Power, Red Power and Chicano movements all took up opposition to the Vietnam War as part of their mantras. Yet, in Australia there is little evidence of the Black Power Movement becoming involved in the anti-war movement. Instead, Black Power activists were primarily focused on issues such as land rights, police abuse and the living conditions of urban and remote Aboriginal communities.⁴⁵ Another difference from the United States is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans themselves, unlike black and Native American veterans, played little if any role in the anti-war movement. Indeed, like non-Indigenous veterans, many of the Indigenous ex-servicemen interviewed blamed the anti-war movement for Australia and the US losing the war.

There was, however, almost a convergence of Indigenous and anti-war issues around the issue of national service. In the early 1970s, the Department of Labour and National Service continued to adhere to its confusing definition of Aboriginality. These problematic regulations proved untenable in 1971, when two Aboriginal men were

convicted for failing to register for national service. Drawing on essentialist ideas of Aboriginality, the magistrates determined in both cases that the fact that the men lived in houses, dressed in modern clothes, owned a car and spoke English meant that they were not living as Aboriginal people.⁴⁶ The cases caused outrage in the press, with numerous op-eds and letters condemning the criteria by which the magistrates were judging Aboriginality. It was likely that the timing of the two verdicts, in December 1971, and June 1972 respectively, prevented the issue of Aboriginal people and national service from continuing to have traction. They were delivered just before and during the Aboriginal Tent Embassy protest, which garnered much more media attention. Moreover, by December 1972 the staged withdrawal of Australian troops from Vietnam was nearly completed. When Gough Whitlam's Labor Government was elected, it soon repealed the *National Service Act* – although the final clause exempting Aboriginal men from compulsory call-up in a time of war remained in the *Defence Act* until amendments in 1992.⁴⁷

Homecomings

It is a common trope of the memory of the Vietnam War that the anti-war movement made veterans' transition to civilian life even more difficult. This was echoed in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ex-servicemen's interviews, reflecting their hatred for the movement. As James Tang Wei put it in 2015: 'Why should we have to put up with stuff like that [name-calling]? We were only doing what we were told to do. It's our job. It's not that we wanted to go there. It's something that we had to do, whether we liked it or not'.⁴⁸ In 2014 David Nean remembered anti-war protesters disrupting his welcome home march in Sydney in 1968: 'You had those protesters, you know, like throwing eggs in front of you – rotten eggs and rotten tomatoes and things like that. That hurt us a bit'.⁴⁹ George Anderson also recalled a march in the city of Adelaide, claiming in 2014 that he was hit in the side of the head by a potato thrown by an anti-war protester.⁵⁰

Ray Minniecon relates a story about how his brother Joseph reacted to anti-war protesters:

He done four tours in Vietnam. And when he came back, I don't know if this is the reason behind it, but they were marching in the streets of Sydney here, at that time when all this anti-Vietnam protests were on. And this white woman came out there and poured a whole bucket of white paint all over him [laughter] ... First thing he did, he went back and signed up and went back to Vietnam.⁵¹

This story is actually about anti-war protester Nadine Jensen disrupting 1RAR's welcome home parade in June 1966, and it was Minniecon's commander whom the protester smeared with red paint and turpentine. Historians such as Ann Curthoys and Chris Dixon have written about how many Vietnam veterans have unconsciously taken this particular story and (re)constructed their own memories around it. Essentially, the story has become so dominant that it has become part of many servicemen's own memories, and as such there is a strong mythology and collective memory of hostile encounters with the anti-war movement.⁵² Only one testimony explicitly recalled a positive welcome home parade; Ray Orchard said: 'We marched through Sydney and everybody said hooray'.⁵³

(Re)constructed memories and mythologies permeate other aspects of the dominant Vietnam War narrative. Several veterans talk about returning home at night and being told to change immediately into civilian clothes so that they would not be targeted by anti-war protesters. However, as author Mark Dapin points out, planes returned at night, not to avoid protestors, but for operational reasons. Nor is there any evidence of anti-war protestors at Sydney Airport.⁵⁴ Yet, veterans' testimonies tend to dwell on reconstructed memories of confrontational protesters and the supposed mistreatment they received at their homecomings. Such examples align with Alistair Thomson's research about First World War veterans reconstructing their own memories of war to fit a collective memory of war and return.⁵⁵

Another common, though not unanimous, memory of homecoming for Indigenous veterans is that they were not welcomed in RSL branches. In some instances they were rejected for being Vietnam veterans, and in others for being Indigenous, so it is sometimes hard to separate those two intersecting identities for Indigenous veterans. A dominant narrative of Vietnam veterans' return is that the local RSLs rejected them on the grounds that Vietnam was not a real war. In 2015 Geoff Shaw remembered one Second World War veteran telling him it could not have been a real war because there

was no front line.⁵⁶ In 2014 Eric Law attributed the RSL hostility more to the fact that Australia lost the Vietnam War, and the RSLs did not want Vietnam veterans to be present as a reminder.⁵⁷ Over time there was generational change at the RSLs, and nowadays most RSL leadership consists of Vietnam veterans.

In other interviews, it was Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander veterans' race which barred them from entering the RSLs. In 2014 Edna Coolburra told the following tale about Bill:

They went drinking at a pub place in the RSL. He had one drink with his mates and then, because of his colour, 'Oh, you're not allowed in here.' He said, 'Why? Why not? I fought beside my friends.' They all said, 'Yeah. He fought beside us. He our friend, drink with us.' 'No. No blackfella allowed in here. No blackfella allowed in any pub.'⁵⁸

Dave Cook, George Anderson and Phil Prosser related similar stories. Cook stated in 2010:

They wouldn't let me into their RSL [Karuah, NSW] because I was Aboriginal. This was in the early '70s. And they said, 'No way! You can't come in here!' I said, 'Mate, I'm a fucking returned serviceman!' I was with a policeman, as a matter of fact. Still they said, 'You can come in; he can't'. So, we just all went up to the local hotel and drank there and came back home.⁵⁹

This treatment was not universal. The RSL is often mistaken for a monolithic organisation, when in reality it is a highly devolved institution with most local branches setting their own rules about admission.

The racism that many Indigenous veterans experienced within the RSL echoed across civilian society. In Western Australia and Queensland, for instance, there were still restrictions on Aboriginal movement and alcohol consumption (repealed in 1971 in Western Australia). Indigenous veterans endured police harassment. In 2015 Des Mayo remembered when he bought a new car and was pulled over 15 times by police over a four-month period. On the 15th occasion, he asked the cop: 'Isn't a black man allowed to own a new car?' He also said to the cop, "'I've been in Vietnam, mate, and Malaya ...

You were probably swimming around looking for a home while I was out there fighting.” And they don’t like that comment’.⁶⁰

A common element among Indigenous and non-Indigenous veterans’ experiences was suffering post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) upon their return. Many interviews reference alcohol abuse, while alcohol-related charges are listed in numerous service records of Indigenous men who remained in the Army. James Tang Wei stated in 2015: ‘When you’re young, you get drunk and just hide everything through grog and stuff like that. And as you get older, it comes back and then, you know, you just think, “Holy hell, all these blokes.” And then you get a bit angry again – you know, like a lot of anger, a lot of hurt’.⁶¹ In 2000 Phil Prosser talked about recurring nightmares that he suffered for years: ‘I used to have nightmares of him [Vietnamese boy] and me walking down the road when suddenly the ground would open up and he’d fall in. I’d grab him by the arm and try to pull him out but the next thing he’d turn into a North Vietnamese soldier who was pointing a gun at my head’.⁶²

Tang Wei’s mental health deteriorated to the point that he contemplated suicide. He confessed to mood swings and thoughts like: ‘Maybe I should just run off the road and hit the tree. You know, I thought about it a couple of times, you know ... and the only thing that kept me going was the grannies [grandkids]’.⁶³ Another discussion of suicidal ideation came from Des Mayo. He recalled in 2015:

I tried once to do meself in. Having a few beers, and the shotgun upstairs, well I walked up ... just cocked it and, luckily me brother-in-law was there run up, and knocked me out, sober head got back home and then took me a while, I didn’t stay at home for about three months.⁶⁴

Not all veterans experienced PTSD right away, but even if it were decades later, almost all veterans interviewed as part of the Serving Our Country project did claim to have had mental health problems related to their war service.

PTSD symptoms affected not only the veterans, but their families as well. Dave Cook admitted in 2010: ‘It felt like I had been in the bush looking for anything you can shoot and twenty-four hours later I was sitting in my lounge in Green Valley with two screaming kids and a missus that I didn’t know whether I was in love with or not. And it

was the kids that I couldn't handle. The change was so horrific; I just couldn't handle it'.⁶⁵ Robyn Kropinyeri remembered in 2015 that when her husband Les used to drink, he would get aggressive (though never violent), and Robyn would send the children away.⁶⁶

The psychological care of Vietnam veterans was, and continues to be, contentious. It was not until the early 1980s that the term PTSD entered psychological and popular discourse. In 1983 the Hawke Labor Government established a *Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam*. Among its findings in 1985 were reports that, contrary to popular opinion, the majority of veterans were not suffering behavioural problems, criminality or alcoholism often associated with PTSD. Moreover, the Royal Commission concluded that chemicals used in Vietnam, including Agent Orange, were not responsible for veterans' ill-health.⁶⁷ Yet, the Royal Commission and subsequent health studies – including a comprehensive Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) survey in 1998 – have still indicated higher rates of mental health problems and cancers among Vietnam veterans.⁶⁸

There were several reasons why veterans did not receive adequate psychological care. Sometimes it was the veterans' own pride or hesitancy to seek help which prolonged their and their family's suffering. Victor Slockee said in 2015, that for him, it was support groups with other veterans that helped him through his PTSD as well as with advice to apply for pensions.⁶⁹ Des Mayo only sought psychiatric assistance around 1989, after some of his veteran mates quizzed him about his mental health and told him he needed help. They filled out the DVA forms for him and he was then sent to a few doctors and psychiatrists.⁷⁰ Michael Markham said in 2015 that the DVA was 'excellent' at referring him to appropriate services, and he had no problems with them because he filled out the right paperwork.⁷¹

Most interviewees, though, criticised the DVA (formerly Department of Repatriation), especially in the early post-Vietnam years. Often the doctors would prescribe medications which only temporarily reduced PTSD symptoms or did not work. By the mid- to late 1980s, particularly owing to the activism of the Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia, there were more psychologists and counsellors trained to work with veterans suffering PTSD. New approaches to therapy were also helpful in

supporting family members. Robyn Kropinyeri said in 2015 that it was when her husband Les invited her to accompany him to counselling that she began to understand what he was going through and how they could support each other. She talked about courses and family workshops for partners which have been more effective forms of therapy.⁷²

Notwithstanding Michael Markham's comment about needing to fill out the right paperwork, several veterans testified to there being a large number of forms, boards, tribunals and appeals processes before they secured pensions or coverage for medical ailments. Most claimed that neither the military, nor DVA, provided adequate assistance to transition back to civilian life. An extreme example of the maladjustment came from Geoff Shaw. When he returned to Alice Springs, he could not find a job and became homeless. He stated in 2015: 'From 1970 to '73, I was in skid row. You know what skid row is? Yeah, like down in the riverbed drinking plonk and so on. Then I went up at Katherine looking for work, and so on, skid row there, living in the long grass, no accommodation whatsoever, and trying to find work there'. Shaw moved back to Alice Springs and worked at the Tangentyere Council. He applied for a disability pension when he started seeing a psychiatrist in 1991. He was in and out of hospitals, having regular meetings and diagnoses with psychiatrists and other doctors before he was finally awarded a disability pension. As he put it: 'And, Christ, I'd been to Malaya and Borneo, two tours of Vietnam, and they took seven years to realise that, you know, that I'm a bit messed up in the brain'.⁷³

Despite the findings of the Royal Commission, several veterans also claim to have suffered significant health problems as a result of Agent Orange. In 2014 Laurel Williams said of her Uncle Ross: 'He had to have a really massive operation on his stomach, and he said then, you know, that he was – that was a result of part of the Agent Orange thing'.⁷⁴ Some of the most interesting allegations of Agent Orange health problems came from Claude Malone: 'I suffer from a skin disease. They don't want to know about that. It's the American government, they don't want to – veterans getting it'. Malone's skin disease is so severe that he needs to wear mittens on his hands.⁷⁵ The Navy also used lead-based paints and ships had asbestos on them, so James Tang Wei said that he was terrified about what sorts of health problems he and others might develop.⁷⁶

Whilst over the years veterans eventually received their entitlements, there remain perceived shortcomings. Les Kropinyeri lamented cutbacks within DVA counselling services which have disadvantaged veterans in country areas.⁷⁷ Patrick Mills discussed a 25-year battle to receive his medal entitlements. It was resolved when another veteran took down Mills' information and wrote a letter to the Queen which then filtered through the governor-general down to DVA. Mills stated in 2014: 'When I got the medal, just walked away and got around, just chuck it in the bush. I said forget it. Until today. I haven't got it'.⁷⁸ Admittedly, Mills' story is an outlier because most Indigenous Vietnam veterans have indeed received their medals, but it is an indicator of the sense of grievance many have faced interacting with the DVA bureaucracy.

Legacies

Importantly, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans have overcome the challenges of PTSD. They have not only functioned in Australian society, but in many cases have gone on to hold significant leadership positions. Two themes are prevalent among veterans' memories about their experience of war: learning leadership skills to relate to whitefellas, and ongoing mateship. Some men continued in the armed forces through the 1970s and 1980s and even into the 1990s. Buddy Lea served for 33 years total; Frank Mallard served until the 1990s, and even after retiring in 1993 he went to Croatia and Bosnia as a reservist working with the United Nations Peacekeeping force. Roy Mundine had joined the Army in 1958 and served until 1995. In recognition of his long service and role as a mentor, in 2015 Chief of Army Lieutenant-General David Morrison appointed Mundine the Army's inaugural Indigenous Elder.⁷⁹

Many other Australian Indigenous Vietnam veterans partook in other community leadership roles later in life, some of which are discussed in chapter 13. George Bostock years later became a playwright and an actor and was a consultant in the 2014–15 productions of *Black Diggers*. He has also been a member of Queensland's Murri Court, which brings Elders into the judicial process to find appropriate non-gaol sentences for young Aboriginal offenders charged with particular crimes. Michael Markham has served on nine boards of several Aboriginal organisations and as president of the Northern Territory branch of the Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia. John Kinsela

represented Australia as a wrestler at the 1972 Munich Olympics – in fact he had competed in 1968 before going to Vietnam – and now works in New South Wales’ circle sentencing at the Mt Druitt Justice Group. Glenn James became a VFL umpire and was the first Aboriginal person to umpire an AFL-VFL Grand Final in 1984. Geoff Shaw returned to Alice Springs in 1972–73, helped to set up the local Aboriginal medical service and did work for legal aid; in 1974 he began working on the Tangentyere Council until about the year 2000. He, like several of these veterans, credited his Army experience as preparing him for such leadership roles because of the mateship, camaraderie and discipline that it instilled.⁸⁰ Vietnam veterans have also been at the forefront of efforts to organise and honour Indigenous military service in Australia, playing key roles in groups such as Honouring Indigenous War Graves.

The mateship generated during war has offered emotional and psychological support to veterans over the years. Reflecting a common trope, in 2014 Ray Minniecon said of his brother Sonny: ‘He holds a lot of that stuff in, and the only time that he spoke about those matters is when he’s with other Vietnam vets’.⁸¹ To return to the tale of ‘twins’ Bill Coolburra and Snowy Wilson: by 2001 Coolburra was suffering severe renal problems. When he was in South Australia for a unit reunion, he told Snowy about his illness. His wife Edna said in 2014 what happened next: ‘That’s when I told Snowy that, “Oh, Bill need a new kidney – you know, another kidney or else I’ll lose him.” And he said, “Oh, what? Why didn’t you tell me that early part.” I said, “Well I didn’t, you know, think...” That’s where he said, “Nah. I’m gonna give my brother one of my kidneys.” Which he done.’ The families went to Brisbane together for the operations, which were successful.⁸²

It is hard to balance the legacies of mateship and leadership skills against the mental and physical scars that Indigenous Vietnam veterans have carried. All veterans say that war is a terrible thing that should be avoided. Some interviews also acknowledge the suffering of the Vietnamese people, whom Roy Mundine described in 2014 as ‘In a no win situation probably like a lot of civilian communities that get caught in the meat in the sandwich and that’.⁸³ Des Mayo’s reflections on Australia’s costs of the war seem a fitting conclusion:

What were we over there for, you know, really? Cos the French tried to kick 'em out, and how many people have tried to kick 'em out and it didn't eventuate? And we weren't really threatened like the Japanese. It was just the political backyard, you know, sort of thing. 'Cos we lost a lot of young lives over there, you know – their early 20s, also a couple of 17, 18 year olds. We didn't have to go if we didn't wanna but, you know, adventure.⁸⁴

-
- ¹ For histories of Australia's Vietnam War see Peter Edward, *Australia and the Vietnam War*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2014; John Murphy, *Harvest of Fear: A History of Australia's Vietnam War*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993; Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2007.
- ² See Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, 2nd ed., Monash University Publishing, Melbourne, 2013; 'Anzac Stories: Using Personal Testimony in War History', *War & Society* vol. 25, no. 2, 2006, pp. 1–21.
- ³ Noah Riseman, 'The Stolen Veteran: Institutionalisation, Military Service and the Stolen Generations', *Aboriginal History* vol. 35, 2011, pp. 57–77.
- ⁴ See Rosalind Kidd, *Trustees on Trial: Recovering the Stolen Wages*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2006; Andrew Gunstone, *The Government Owes a Lot of Money to Our People: A History of Indigenous Stolen Wages in Victoria*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2009.
- ⁵ Frank Mallard, interview, 31 August 2015. See also Frank Mallard, interview with Noah Riseman, 24 November 2010, Perth, ORAL TRC 6260/2, NLA.
- ⁶ Claude Malone, interview, 8 July 2014.
- ⁷ Fenton D'Antoine, interview, 11 September 2015.
- ⁸ Phillip Prosser, interview with John Bannister, 22 January 2000, Perth, 'Bringing Them Home Oral History Project', TRC 5000/183, NLA. See also Phil Prosser, 'Show Respect', in *Speaking from the Heart*, Sally Morgan (ed.), Fremantle Press, Perth, 2007, p. 139.
- ⁹ Edna Coolburra, interview, 14 April 2014.
- ¹⁰ *National Service Act 1964*, section 18(e).
- ¹¹ *National Service Act Regulations*, 1964, section 18.
- ¹² Des Mayo, interview, 10 September 2015.
- ¹³ David Nean, interview, 24 October 2014.
- ¹⁴ Les Kropinyeri, interview, 11 April 2015.
- ¹⁵ Alec Illin, interview, 15 April 2014.
- ¹⁶ Leslie Anderson, aka George Anderson, interview, 1 April 2014.

-
- ¹⁷ Geoff Shaw, interview, 18 September 2015.
- ¹⁸ See Noah Riseman, “‘Describing misbehaviour in Vung Tau as ‘mischief’ is ridiculously coy”:
Ethnographic Refusal, Reticence and the Oral Historian’s Dilemma’, *Oral History Review* vol. 45,
2018 (forthcoming).
- ¹⁹ Vic Simon, interview with Fabri Blacklock, City of Sydney Oral History Program, 25 November 2013.
- ²⁰ Thomas ‘Buddy’ Lea, *SpeakingOut*, ABC online, <<https://soundcloud.com/abcspeakingout/buddy-lea>>. Joan – what do you think we should do? It looks like Speaking Out is still going but they must have taken down the older stuff. Just give the info we do have without the link?
- ²¹ Des Mayo, 10 September 2015.
- ²² Roy Mundine, interview, 21 March 2014.
- ²³ Tom Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1996.
- ²⁴ David Nean, interview, 24 October 2014.
- ²⁵ Edna Coolburra 2014.
- ²⁶ Clarence Williams, interview, 23 April 2015.
- ²⁷ Rob Bryant, interview with Fabri Blacklock, 27 December 2013, City of Sydney Oral History Program.
- ²⁸ Glenn James, interview with Ina Bertrand, 23 January 2001, Melbourne, Victorians at War – Oral History Project. [have just taken out this link as that’s probably enough info], <<http://www.victoriansatwar.net/archives/james.html>>.
- ²⁹ Geoff Shaw 2015.
- ³⁰ Leslie Anderson (aka George) 2014.
- ³¹ Edna Coolburra 2014. See also Sandy MacGregor, as told to Jimmy Thomson, *No Need for Heroes*, CALM Pty Limited, Sydney, 1993, pp. 89–90.
- ³² George Bostock, interview with Noah Riseman, 18 June 2010, Brisbane.
- ³³ Claude Malone 2014.
- ³⁴ See James E Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2008; James E Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War*, New York University Press, New York, 1997.
- ³⁵ Frank Mallard, ORAL TRC 6260/2 NLA.
- ³⁶ Edna Coolburra 2014. See also MacGregor 1993, pp. 89–90.
- ³⁷ See Ham 2007, pp. 278–288; Mark Dapin, *The Nashos’ War: Australian National Servicemen and Vietnam*, Viking, Melbourne, 2014, pp. 199–205.
- ³⁸ Frank Mallard 2015.
- ³⁹ Des Mayo, 10 September 2015.

-
- ⁴⁰ David Nean 2014.
- ⁴¹ See Brendan O’Keefe, *Medicine at War: Medical Aspects of Australia’s Involvement in Southeast Asia 1950–1972*, Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 1994; David Bradford, *The Gunners’ Doctor: Vietnam Letters*, Random House Australia, Sydney, 2007.
- ⁴² Bobby Baker, in Kevin Cook and Heather Goodall, *Making Change Happen: Black and White Activists talk to Kevin Cook about Aboriginal, Union and Liberation Politics*, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2013, p. 33.
- ⁴³ Patricia O’Shane, in Stuart Rintoul, *The Wailing: A National Black Oral History*, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1993, p. 46.
- ⁴⁴ Margaret Culbong, interview, 1 September 2015.
- ⁴⁵ See Gary Foley, ‘Black Power in Redfern 1968–1972’, *The Koori History Website*, <www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_1.html>; Ann Turner (ed.), *Black Power in Australia: Bobby Sykes versus Neville Bonner*, Heinemann Educational Australia, Melbourne, 1975; Kathy Lothian, ‘Seizing the Time: Australian Aborigines and the Influence of the Black Panther Party, 1969–1972’, *Journal of Black Studies* vol. 35, no. 4, March 2005, pp. 179–200; Kathy Lothian, ‘Moving Blackwards: Black Power and the Aboriginal Embassy’, in *Transgressions: Critical Australian Indigenous Histories*, Ingereth Macfarlane and Mark Hannah (eds.), ANU E Press, Canberra, 2007, pp. 19–34; Kathleen Lothian, ‘“A backward step is a forward step”: Australian Aborigines and Black Power, 1969–1972’, Masters thesis, Monash University, 2002.
- ⁴⁶ ‘At the Court of Petty Sessions Held at Albany Before H.J. Ryan, Esq., S.M. This 22nd Day of November, 1971; Date of Decision: 13th December, 1971, Between: Nigel Frederick Spitz, Commonwealth Police, Complainant, and Mervyn Eades, Defendant’, A2354, 1968/1, NAA.
- ⁴⁷ For more on the Eades case, see Noah Riseman, ‘The Curious Case of Mervyn Eades: National Service, Discrimination and Aboriginal People’, *Australian Journal of Politics & History* vol. 59, no. 1, 2013 pp. 64–80.
- ⁴⁸ James Tang Wei, interview, 7 September 2015.
- ⁴⁹ David Nean 2014.
- ⁵⁰ Leslie Anderson (aka George) 2014.
- ⁵¹ Ray Minniecon, interview, 20 March 2014. Joseph Minniecon did two tours in Vietnam: 6/1965–6/1966 and 12/1967–12/1968, but according to the nominal roll it was within four units.
- ⁵² Chris Dixon, ‘Redeeming the Warrior: Myth-Making and Australia’s Vietnam Veterans’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* vol. 60, no. 2, 2014, pp. 214–28; Ann Curthoys, ‘Vietnam: Public Memory of an anti war movement’, in *Memory and History in 20th century Australia*, Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, pp. 113–134.
- ⁵³ Ray Orchard, in Rintoul 1993, p. 306.
- ⁵⁴ Dapin 2014, pp. 338–40.
- ⁵⁵ Alistair Thomson, ‘Anzac Stories: Using Personal Testimony in War History’, *War & Society* vol. 25, no. 2, 2006, pp. 1–21; Alistair Thomson, ‘Anzac Memories Revisited: Trauma, Memory and Oral History’, *Oral History Review* vol. 42, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–29.

-
- ⁵⁶ Geoff Shaw 2015.
- ⁵⁷ Eric Law, interview, 4 July 2014.
- ⁵⁸ Edna Coolburra 2014.
- ⁵⁹ Dave Cook, interview, 20 January 2010; see also Noah Riseman, *In Defence of Country: Life Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Servicemen and Women*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2016, p. 53.
- ⁶⁰ Des Mayo, interview, 3 March 2015.
- ⁶¹ James Tang Wei, interview, 7 September 2015.
- ⁶² Prosser, 146.
- ⁶³ James Tang Wei 2015.
- ⁶⁴ Des Mayo, 10 September 2015.
- ⁶⁵ Dave Cook 2010; Riseman 2016, p. 43.
- ⁶⁶ Robyn Kropinyeri, interview, 11 April 2015.
- ⁶⁷ FB Smith, 'Agent Orange: The Australian Aftermath', in *Medicine at War*, 281–363.
- ⁶⁸ Commonwealth Department of Veterans' Affairs, 'Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans: A Study of the Health of Australia's Vietnam Veteran Community', Commonwealth Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra, 1998.
- ⁶⁹ Victor Slockee, interview, 24 April 2015.
- ⁷⁰ Des Mayo, 10 September 2015.
- ⁷¹ Michael Markham, interview, 14 September 2015.
- ⁷² Robyn Kropinyeri 2015.
- ⁷³ Geoff Shaw, interview, 18 September 2015.
- ⁷⁴ Laurel Williams, interview, 11 March 2014.
- ⁷⁵ Claude Malone 2014. See also Eric Law, interview, 4 July 2014.
- ⁷⁶ James Tang Wei 2015.
- ⁷⁷ Les Kropinyeri, interview, 11 April 2015.
- ⁷⁸ Patrick Mills, interview, 9 April 2014.
- ⁷⁹ 'Army's first Indigenous Elder', Australian Army <www.army.gov.au/Our-people/Army-Indigenous-community/Armys-first-Indigenous-Elder>. See also Roy Mundine, interview, 21 March 2014; Thomas 'Buddy' Lea, *Speaking Out*, ABC online, <<https://soundcloud.com/abcspeakingout/buddy-lea>>; Frank Mallard 2015; Frank Mallard, ORAL TRC 6260/2, NLA.
- ⁸⁰ George Bostock, interview with Noah Riseman, 18 June 2010, Brisbane; Bob Blair, interview, 22 June 2010; Graham Atkinson, in Jackomos and Fowell, *Forgotten Heroes: Aborigines at War from the Somme to Vietnam*, Victoria Press, Melbourne, 1991, p. 72; Graham Atkinson, BOSTOCK_G01-

016549, AIATSIS; Michael Markham 2015; John Kinsela, interview with Fabri Blacklock, 14 November 2013, City of Sydney Oral History Program; Glenn James, in Jackomos & Fowell 1991, p. 69; Glenn James, interview with Ina Bertrand, 23 January 2001, Melbourne, Victorians at War – Oral History Project <<http://www.victoriansatwar.net/archives/james.html>>; Geoff Shaw, interview, 18 September 2015; Geoff Shaw, in *I hope the war will be over soon*, directed by John Ruane, produced by Juniper Films, 1988.

⁸² Edna Coolburra 2014. See also Charles Wooley, ‘Blood brothers: kidney donation’, *60 minutes*, 19 August 2001, produced by Stephen Taylor.

⁸³ Roy Mundine 2014.

⁸⁴ Des Mayo, 3 March 2015.