

Reporting and Representing the War

TOPIC

4



What we did on the battlefield in the morning was on our living room tv screens that night.

More than ever before TV showed the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of war — Richard Nixon.

Quotations on the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial

FOCUS QUESTIONS:

- How was the Vietnam War reported to Australians?
- What impact did TV reporting have on people?

Sergeant Kevin Thurgar, official army photographer, using a 16mm Bach Auricon sound and film movie camera to film in Vietnam in 1968.

AWM CRO/68/0408VN

Teaching Suggestions

1

Background information

Was Vietnam a TV war?

It is generally accepted that the Vietnam War was the first television war, with people sitting at home and watching death and destruction with their evening meal. The result was that TV helped lose the war for the Americans and their allies.

Is that really true, or is it an example of a 'false memory' that has originated because the power of certain images makes it seem that there were also many of them?

An American war

Most of the footage that Australians saw was of American troops. Australia did not have the full-time reporters and cameramen in the field to provide a view of the Australian war, and even if they had been there, Australia's counter-terrorist style of war was not conducive to spectacular 'grabs'.

Australia's war

One Australian, Neil Davis, did have an enormous impact on the image of the war, but he was working for an overseas organisation, and mostly shot the South Vietnamese war.

When footage was received, it was edited in Australia, and in a way that would not cause offence.

Similarly, photographic images of the war came through official Defence channels and they were designed for the 'home town' audience and not for gritty realism.

This meant that the emphasis in war reporting was on home front events, and that increasingly meant protests. The protesters came to realise that to be filmed they needed to be provocative. While violent protest alienated many people, it made sure that the war, or rather issues about the war, were constantly in the newspapers and on television news.

Dealing with controversial and confronting representations

The lack of realistic images of the war has helped create a relatively benign image of the war. It is no accident that the iconic image of the war, reproduced on the National Vietnam memorial and on the cover of this resource, is a non-violent and non-confronting one.

How do we deal with representations of the war that are confronting? There are several in this resource. It is for teachers to decide whether they use them or not.

2

Key learning outcomes

By the end of this topic students will be better able to:

- Appreciate the nature of news gathering and presentation during the war
- Decide if the idea of Vietnam as a 'TV war' is a myth
- Analyse a series of images as representations of the war
- Decide if confronting aspects should be accommodated in the official image of the war

3

Some suggested classroom approaches

ACTIVITY 1

This activity helps students to understand that their sources of and access to news is very different to that available during the Vietnam War.

ACTIVITY 2

Students will learn more detail here about the understandings they have started to develop from the first activity.

ACTIVITY 3

This is a sensitive activity. It deals with the death of an Australian soldier and the possible misrepresentation of the nature of that death. It is a valuable exercise in exploring the nature of evidence and how we know, **but teachers need to decide if it is appropriate for their particular classes to explore this idea in this way.**

ACTIVITY 4

This also is a valuable but confronting activity. It contains several images of dead soldiers. The activity asks how we should deal with these images and with other brutal realities of war. It requires students to consider both the rights and responsibilities associated with telling Australia's Vietnam story fully and accurately, but at the same time with respect and understanding.

4

Interactive CD-ROM and DVD resources



Interactives on the *Australia and the Vietnam War* CD-ROM that are appropriate learning tasks for this unit are:

- *Produce a TV Report on Long Tan* (Secondary)
- *Curate an Exhibition* of a controversial aspect of the Australian experience (Secondary)



Some discussion of the popular image of the war is on the DVD containing Episode 7 (*The Vietnam War*) from the *Australians at War* documentary series.

How do you get your news?

This topic is about how news was presented during the Vietnam War and how images can be created that have an impact on our ideas and attitudes.

I Think about how you get your world news today and what sort of news you get. Tick the appropriate boxes for each of the aspects listed in the **Today** column.

Aspect	Today	Then (Vietnam 1962–1972)
1 Main source:	<input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper <input type="checkbox"/> Radio <input type="checkbox"/> TV <input type="checkbox"/> Internet <input type="checkbox"/> Magazine <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper <input type="checkbox"/> Radio <input type="checkbox"/> TV <input type="checkbox"/> Internet <input type="checkbox"/> Magazine <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
2 How often:	<input type="checkbox"/> Once a day <input type="checkbox"/> Several times a day <input type="checkbox"/> Fewer	<input type="checkbox"/> Once a day <input type="checkbox"/> Several times a day <input type="checkbox"/> Fewer
3 How long does it take to get news to you from each of these?	<input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper <input type="checkbox"/> Radio <input type="checkbox"/> TV <input type="checkbox"/> Internet <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone <input type="checkbox"/> Letter <input type="checkbox"/> Magazine	<input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper <input type="checkbox"/> Radio <input type="checkbox"/> TV <input type="checkbox"/> Internet <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone <input type="checkbox"/> Letter <input type="checkbox"/> Magazine
4 Think about how this source gets to you. What are the roles in this of:	<input type="checkbox"/> Reporter on the spot <input type="checkbox"/> People on the spot <input type="checkbox"/> Government Officials <input type="checkbox"/> Camera operator <input type="checkbox"/> Editor at newspaper/TV station	<input type="checkbox"/> Reporter on the spot <input type="checkbox"/> People on the spot <input type="checkbox"/> Government Officials <input type="checkbox"/> Camera operator <input type="checkbox"/> Editor at newspaper/TV station
5 Think about a major event – say, a war. What sort of news do you get?	<input type="checkbox"/> Uncensored or censored? <input type="checkbox"/> Delayed or live stream? <input type="checkbox"/> Edited or not edited?	<input type="checkbox"/> Uncensored or censored? <input type="checkbox"/> Delayed or live stream? <input type="checkbox"/> Edited or not edited?
6 What type information do you get?	<input type="checkbox"/> Facts <input type="checkbox"/> Opinion/s <input type="checkbox"/> Interpretation	<input type="checkbox"/> Facts <input type="checkbox"/> Opinion/s <input type="checkbox"/> Interpretation

2 Do you think that you get accurate, honest and reliable news reports? Explain your answer.

3 Now look at this information about the way print and film news was gathered and distributed during the Vietnam War period and tick the appropriate boxes in the **Then** column.

You will have seen some similarities, but many differences, between the way you get news and the way it was provided during the Vietnam War. We need to investigate this further.

SOURCE I

Some characteristics of news gathering in Vietnam

- The reporters were usually not Australian. Australian journalists, if they were in Vietnam, were usually only there for a short period.
- The internet did not exist.
- International telephone lines were few and expensive.
- Film had to be flown to its destination.
- If film were flown to Australia it was edited and a commentary written by people in the Australian newsroom.
- Journalists had to have the permission of local military commanders to be with the troops.
- The Australians were rarely engaged in large and spectacular battles.
- There was no front line and soldiers frequently went days and even weeks without seeing any enemy.
- The Army had a Public Relations film unit.
- Most cameramen were American and shot footage of American action.

How was news about the Vietnam War reported?

Here are two quotations from the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial.

What we did on the battlefield in the morning was on our living room TV screens that night.

More than ever before TV showed the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of war.

Richard Nixon

These quotations were chosen as representing statements that were accepted as true of the Vietnam War.

- 1 What do you think these statements suggest about how the war was presented to people?
- 2 If they are true, how might the media and especially TV, have influenced peoples' attitude to the war?
- 3 The man who provided more footage of the war than anyone else was Neil Davis, an Australian cameraman who filmed the war largely from the South Vietnamese side. (For a brief biography see <http://www.awm.gov.au/people/264.asp>.) In a documentary made about him by David Bradbury, *Frontline*, Davis and some other journalists were interviewed about the way news was created for Australia. Look at these brief synopses of aspects of the interviews and answer the questions that follow.

SOURCE I Interview summaries

A Interview with Neil Davis

Neil Davis as a cameraman correspondent describes his opinion of Visnews' presentation of his film; hard hitting stories sometimes downplayed in the editing.

B Interview with Noel Bennell and William Roland Pinwill

Noel Bennell as a journalist with the O-10 network in Vietnam 1972. The story of two correspondents who would have a picnic lunch at a staging post every day. Opinion on why journalists pride themselves on objectivity and how he did not use television to espouse his anti war opinions. He believes his television station gave equal coverage to both pro and anti war views.

William Pinwill as an ABC journalist. The ABC gave little in the way of directives on how to report the war. He was severely criticised by ABC head office for his reporting of the alleged water torture of a female Viet Cong prisoner by Australian troops. Accused of raising common gossip as fact.

C Interview with Tim Bowden

Tim Bowden as an ABC journalist in Vietnam. Bowden explains that to report the war you could not afford to be emotionally involved. Bradbury comments that technology could not win the war and the media coverage could not change the minds of the people as well. Bowden attributes this to the sameness of the television coverage. Difficulty in getting actual combat footage. The unreality of television cut people off emotionally from what they were viewing.

D Interview with Mike Carlton

Mike Carlton as a correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) describes his first impressions of South Vietnam in 1966 and 1970; censorship and objectivity within the ABC; effect of TV on public opinion; ABC didn't interpret the political situation.

E Interview with Darrell Ford

Darrell Ford as an Australian Army sergeant cameraman in Vietnam describes the difference in covering a war as to any other story; a certain risk in covering stories in Australia but in a war there is uncertainty; excitement of being the only cameraman to capture a good action; helping comrades if needed — not letting the camera be in total control; adrenalin rush of combat and capturing people's expressions in those situations; how soldiers will not place full trust in a civilian cameraman or journalist but would in a soldier cameraman.

F Interview with Jack Gulley

Jack Gulley as a correspondent describes Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) and overseas coverage of the Vietnam war; realisation of the US bias; the ABC's policy of objectivity; the impact of television on public opinion; constraints in providing Australian film coverage; rotation of correspondents; the decision to show the film of Police Chief General Loan executing a Viet Cong prisoner supported by ABC management; ABC censorship and the destruction of the Wilfrid Burchett interview. [Burchett was a pro-Communist Australian journalist who had close contacts with the Viet Cong.]

G Interview with Phillip Koch and Noel Bennell

Noel Bennell as a television correspondent and editor for Channel 10 and Phillip Koch as a correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) describe TV coverage of the Vietnam war era; Prime Minister John Gorton's request that the ABC withhold a story that could affect the troops' morale; reasoning behind the destruction of the Wilfrid Burchett interview; objectivity or committed coverage of the ABC; how Defence Public Relations film on Australian activities didn't give a true picture; evaluation of media coverage; the first war fought with daily television coverage and how it became monotonous.

H Interview with Jim Revitt

Jim Revitt as a correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) Radio News and Television News and Radio Australia describes being the only ABC reporter in South Vietnam; utilising Visnews cameramen; lack of ABC resources; ABC policies guiding reporters and talks [current affairs] department; no in-depth interpretive reporting carried out; ABC policy of reporting singular events, without context; frustration of not being able to report the progress of the war; how Australian public opinion would have been more informed by interpretive reporting; lack of management awareness; lack of ABC equipment in Saigon.

<http://www.awm.gov.au> Frontline documents

4 What issues seem to be raised in these interviews about:

- how much Australian coverage there was of the war
- what type of coverage that was
- how balanced and objective the coverage was
- how accurate and detailed it was
- what impact television coverage of the war had in Australia?

5 Do the journalists all seem to agree? Explain your views.



You can explore these ideas more if you:

- Produce a TV Report on Long Tan
- Curate an Exhibition of a controversial aspect of the Australian experience.

SOURCE 2

A study of the content of news shown in the US during the Vietnam War has found:

- Most news stories on TV did not show footage of combat
- Only 3–4% showed any graphic footage
- Most news was information (95%), not opinion
- News about protests represented 8% of items about Vietnam in 1968–9, 9% in 1969–70, 14.6% in 1970–71, 6.9% in 1971–72, and 2.6% in 1972–73.

Oscar Paterson, *The Vietnam Veteran and the Media*, University of Tennessee PhD, 1982

6 If these figures are true for Australia as well, then the quotations do not represent reality. Why might people have a 'false memory' about the nature of TV coverage of the war?

7 Is the idea of the 'TV war' myth or reality? We do not know. You can be an historian and try to find out. Talk to people about their memories of the impact of television and other media

on them. Try to ask questions that require the person to be specific in their recollections. You will need to be careful and sensitive in exploring this issue and not challenge people's integrity if they say things that you do not think are true. Your task is to gather evidence and come to your own conclusion.

How do we represent the war now?

The Australian War Memorial has a collection of more than 10 000 images of the war. Most of these are photographs taken by Defence Public Relations photographers. Most books on Australians and Vietnam include some of these images.

Do they give us an accurate and complete representation of the Australian experience of war?

Look at these comments on the collection and answer the questions that follow.

SOURCE 1 An historian and Vietnam veteran comments

For the most part, the Army succeeded in preventing unfavourable images reaching the media. Official photographs and other published photographs of the war are almost devoid of images of the bodies of the dead or wounded, whether Australian or VC. There seemed to be no similar constraints during World War II, when official photographs often showed the bodies of the dead and wounded. Images of badly wounded Australians being helped along jungle paths seemed to capture a sense of the cost of the national struggle. In Vietnam, the political sensitivities were different. Mindful of domestic political opposition to the war, the Army sought to downplay graphic evidence of the nasty reality of combat. The war, as it appeared in official photographs, was to be bloodless.

Robert Hall, *Combat Battalion*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000, page 94

- 1** Why does Hall suggest that there was a deliberate policy of shielding the public from the reality of war?

SOURCE 2 A discussion of images of the war

The following extracts A–J are from the Australian War Memorial publication *Impressions*, discussing a range of aspects of photographs and paintings from the war.

A *The [Defence Public Relations] photographs were intended as promotional material rather than factual records of the war. Few formal guidelines were issued to the photographers yet the majority of the images they captured were self-censored, officially vetted or had inherent restrictions imposed by their use in the Defence 'home town' program.*

The 'home town' program was an extensive public relations scheme whereby the Department of Defence sent, solicited and unsolicited, photographs and news stories to the media across Australia, deliberately tailoring the content to have local appeal. It is for this reason that almost all personnel depicted in the photographs are identified by name and rank and their place of civilian residence or origin is given. In this way Defence was able to provide its campaign with an element of 'local-boy-makes-good', concentrating on lighter, human interest stories ... Informal, chatty captions were included with the photographs.

B *Many of the photographs were taken on the bases used by Australians, and these are imbued with a typically Australian ethos of mateship and camaraderie. Others, taken in cities and towns such as Saigon and Vung Tau, have a deliberate tourist feel to them. A large number of photographs deal with the civil aid programs and show Australian troops dispensing medical and humanitarian aid and gifts to grateful villagers, particularly the elderly, women and children.*

Photographs of patrols and operations generally depict Australian troops in heroic, deliberately posed shots of helicopter 'insertions' and 'extractions', or stoically pressing on through mud or forest. Images of Australian wounded appear, but the injured are always conscious and being given medical attention.

- 2** What effect would this have on how the war was represented?

- 3** Showing the wounded should give negative or realistic messages about the war. How might the particular way the photographs were composed provide positive or reassuring messages instead?

C There is only one series of photographs that documents the death of an Australian soldier. These few colour photographs depict a chaplain giving the Last Rites to the dying man, already partially wrapped in the hoochie [small tent] used as a substitute body bag in the field, and several later stages as his body is removed to a helicopter pick-up point, winched aboard and flown away. These images were never released during the war.



AWM EKN/69/0183/VN

- 4** Why might this image have not been released during the war?
- 5** Do you think it should have been? Explain your reasons.

D The enemy is always depicted as defeated. They are shown hands tied, blindfolded, awaiting interrogation. Although now unarmed and looking meek, they are always closely guarded.

- 6** What positive messages about the enemy might this style of photograph convey?

AWM BEL/69/0378/VN

E Although enemy dead are photographed on many occasions graphic images were never made public at the time of the war. Army Public Relations photographer Sergeant Chris Bellis' image taken on the morning after a night ambush against Viet Cong at Thua Tich in June 1969 is an example. The contorted body of a Viet Cong wearing a light shirt and shorts, his head haloed by barbed wire, dominates the entire foreground. In the middle distance, with a second Vietnamese body, are [two] Australian soldiers ... In the original albums presented to the Australian War Memorial by Defence Public Relations 'NOT FOR RELEASE' is written heavily over the small print of this negative.



- 6** Why might this image have not been released during the war?
- 7** Is it acceptable to see it now?
- 8** Should it be in this resource? Explain your ideas.

F The subjects of the Department of Defence Public Relations photographs have been carefully chosen, posed and edited. They have been further manipulated through association with the pre-written captions. They use a background of myth and symbol familiar to Australians including mateship, courage, a belief in the rightness of the country's cause, implied references to the original ANZACs, as well as tourism and travel advertising, to promote political and military ideologies within a broader social context.

- 9** Look at the Australian War Memorial photographs in Topics 2 and 3 of this resource. Do you agree with this assessment?

G Perhaps the most famous Australian photograph of the Vietnam War is by the Army Public Relations photographer Sergeant Mike Coleridge. Taken on 26 August 1967 at Phuoc Hai it depicts members of 5 Platoon, B Company, 7RAR, beside the road to Dat Do after completing a cordon and search mission. US Army Iroquois helicopters are landing in the dusty road to pick up the Australians and return them to the base at Nui Dat.



AWM EKN/67/0130/VN

- 10** Describe the elements in this photograph.
- 11** What message does it convey?
- 12** Why do you think it has become the 'iconic' photograph of the Australian Vietnam War experience?

H The status of this photograph as the epitome of Australia's experience in Vietnam has come about for a number of reasons. It is a well-composed action shot with a close-up group of young Australian men in the foreground, tired but successful after their mission. It shows helicopters, singly the most dominant symbol of the war in a US-influenced public mind. The photograph has been seized by publishers of both fiction and non-fiction and used on endless book covers, in magazines, journals and newspapers across the country. It has become etched into Australia's consciousness because of its constant reproduction. The image is also non-confronting. There is a safeness about it that almost belies the fact it was taken in a war zone; it could be from any training exercise in Australia. What it ultimately reveals is that Australians have claimed an image that is comfortably familiar in a popular culture influenced by American stereotypes to represent their actions in Vietnam.

- 13** Do you agree with these comments?
- 14** When this image was used for the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial the American markings on the helicopter were removed. Why do you think this was done?

I Ray Beattie was a national serviceman in Vietnam between 1970 and 1971. After the war he studied at the Victorian College of the Arts. The war left an indelible impression on him and has formed a major theme in his work. Although it has not been shown publicly, he is working on a series of postcard-size images, one for every day he spent in Vietnam, that explore his response to the events and people there.

Image for a dead man, 1980, is one of three large paintings from a series by Beattie called Sentimentality kills.



AWM ART 40885

- 15** Describe the features of this painting.
- 16** What do you think they symbolize?
- 17** What is the message of this painting?

J In these paintings Beattie expresses his reactions to the personal ramifications of having participated in the Vietnam War. Image for a dead man is a large photorealist still life depicting a wooden chair with an army jacket hung over its back. Painted medals are pinned to the jacket (as is the real 'Rising sun' badge from Beattie's uniform). His identity discs and slouch hat are also depicted hanging on the chair. On the seat is a folded Merchant Navy flag. Behind the chair is a vast expanse of cold grey wall and a disconnected telephone line running along the skirting board at the bottom.

This painting expresses a soldier's grief at the loss of comrades. The jacket, hat and medal are Beattie's. The jacket retains the shape of a wearer who is no longer there. Although Beattie survived the war he has stated that every time he heard of a comrade's death in Vietnam he felt that a small piece of himself died as well. The empty wall behind the chair symbolises the nothingness

that is death; the disconnected telephone line the impossibility of communication between the living and the dead. The Merchant Navy flag was a present from the artist's father who sailed under it during the Second World War; it evokes memories of other casualties in other wars.

This is a particularly poignant painting, full of genuine emotion and sadness, that also has meaning as a memorial for the dead. But it has also provoked strong antipathy from some sections of the Vietnam veteran community; they see the work as disrespectful, claim that the order of display of the painted medals is incorrect, assert that there should not be two Vietnam service medals as shown (Beattie was in fact mistakenly presented with two) and, without realising it is a Red Ensign, object that the flag too is incorrect. But Beattie did not intend to make a formal portrayal of an army uniform. He intended it to be a contemplative, personalised statement about the repercussions of war and his tribute to the dead.

http://www.awm.gov.au/events/travelling/impressions/aust_vietnam.htm

18 Would you change your answer to Question 16?

There are still controversies about representing the war.

Bob Buick, a Long Tan veteran, has revealed in his book *All Guts and No Glory* that he killed a mortally wounded Viet Cong soldier.

19 Does this shock you? Why or why not?

20 Does it worry you? Why or why not?

21 Does it influence your image of the Australian war in Vietnam? If so, how? If not, why not?

Look at this news article on criticisms of a recent book, *Long Tan and Beyond*. Colonel Morrison was an artillery commander at the Battle of Long Tan.

SOURCE 3 A newspaper report

A retired senior military officer has come under fire over a photograph that mocks an enemy soldier. The photograph, taken by Australian soldiers after the bloody Battle of Long Tan on August 18, 1966, shows the skull of a Vietnamese soldier wearing an Australian army hat ... The protests include letters to Australian Defence Force chiefs and the Commonwealth Government.

A second picture in Colonel Mollison's *Long Tan and Beyond* has also drawn criticism. It shows the upper torso of a Vietnamese officer killed by an Australian marksman two days before the Battle of Long Tan.

Colonel Mollison says he had the corpse dug up and then photographed it for identification and intelligence purposes.

Of the photograph, he said: "It is confronting, but it was meant to be confronting. This book is meant to tell it as it was — the truth and nothing but the truth. These things happened."

Black humour was a psychological defence mechanism, he said. "It was one way of trying to cope with killing people."

Some Vietnam veterans insist that Colonel Mollison is damaging Australia's good reputation for respecting enemy dead.

"It is an affront to every decent soldier who served in Vietnam," one veteran said.

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Enemy-skull-photo-seen-as-an-affront/2005/04/29/1114635747880.html>

22 What do you think? Should writers tell the whole truth about events, or is it an insult to people? Does the context make a difference? Or the audience? Or the degree to which it is placed in an appropriate context? Discuss your ideas.



You can explore these ideas more if you:

- Produce a TV Report on *Long Tan*
- Curate an Exhibition of a controversial aspect of the Australian experience.