

Going Home

TOPIC

6



*Nobody's got 365 days
and a wakey to go.*

Quotation on the Australian Vietnam
Forces National Memorial

FOCUS QUESTIONS:

- What happened in Vietnam after the Australians left?
- How were the veterans received back into Australian society?

Thousands of residents turned out on 13 November 1970 to welcome home troops from 8RAR, the first battalion to be withdrawn from Vietnam without being replaced. Queensland Newspapers

Teaching Suggestions

1

Background information

The 'wakey'

On their last day in Vietnam, most men crossed out that last, magic word: 'wakey' — the day when they woke up to go home.

Veterans returned from their tour of duty in Vietnam sometimes as individuals or in small groups on Qantas flights and sometimes as part of a large group on HMAS Sydney.

The Australian system generally moved combat soldiers as a unit, but this did not always apply to every member of a particular group.

There were always men who joined at a different time, or left at a different time. National servicemen had to be withdrawn before their two years were finished, regardless of where they were. Reinforcements came in at different times and could finish at different times. This meant that when a battalion left after a twelve-month tour, not all its members would leave together as a unit.

How were they greeted?

Most soldiers who write about the war mention the feeling of emptiness and rejection on their return to Australia. Most write about late night plane arrivals to an empty airport. Many write about the sense of fulfilment of the public acknowledgement they finally received at the 1987 Welcome Home Parade.

Yet the facts sometimes tell a different story. Every one of the battalions had a march through its home city on return — that is 16 marches all told — and each one was welcomed by cheering and applauding crowds. There was only one protest – a woman who dashed out of a crowd and smeared paint over one soldier.

Separation

On return to Australia all service personnel went on leave. The group that they had lived with for the last twelve months was suddenly gone. Many national servicemen then were discharged without seeing their mates again. Regular soldiers went back to their units, so remained in contact with the recent past.

Adjustment to a new life

Back in civilian life, the men, especially those in country areas, may have had nobody who had shared their experiences — and some of these experiences were to haunt them for years and perhaps forever. They were alone and suddenly cut adrift. Many readjusted straight away and got on with their new lives; the reminiscence books tell us that many struggled to do so — and failed. They found that people did not understand them; they had grown apart from their old mates; they did not seem to be able to find a niche in the Anzac tradition that is so important in Australian identity. They and their families suffered.

We do not know what proportion of veterans made an easy adjustment back to society, or what proportion is suffering still, so we cannot generalise about the issue. But we can empathise with and understand the feelings of those who did not fare well on their return.

2

Key learning outcomes

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

- Empathise with the veterans' experiences of returning to Australia
- Appreciate the reasons why some had difficulties after Vietnam
- Devise strategies for dealing with some problems of memory as historical evidence

3 Suggested classroom approaches

ACTIVITY 1 This activity is a simple one to help students understand the ending of the war.

ACTIVITY 2 This activity raises issues that are further dealt with in Topics 7 and 8, but it focuses on one important issue: the feeling of rejection that many veterans felt and some still feel. This is explored further and in a positive way in Topic 8 and teachers may choose to bring Activity 2 forward from Topic 8 to here.

ACTIVITY 3 Students are asked to critically analyse memory as evidence. Students must not discount people's memories, or treat them with disrespect, but the issue is a legitimate one for students to address in an analytical but also empathetic way.

ACTIVITY 4 The issue of people's attitudes to involvement in the war is still a sensitive and strongly-felt one for many people. Students need to keep this in mind when they ask civilians and soldiers about it.

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:

- Write a *Diary Entry* about coming home (Primary and Secondary)
- Analyse a *Vietnam War Roll of Honour* (Secondary)



Some images of the ending of the war are on the DVD Episode 7 (*The Vietnam War*) from the *Australians at War* documentary series.

What happened when the Australians left Vietnam?

In December 1971 the last Australian combat soldiers left Vietnam. Many Australians believed that they had gained control of the province from the Viet Cong and that the local people were able to live better lives than before their arrival.

The bases at Nui Dat and Vung Tau were handed over to the South Vietnamese Army, as part of the 'Vietnamisation' strategy of withdrawal.

In 1975 the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces launched their final assault on Saigon. Part of the advance and attack saw the NVA and Viet Cong troops take Ba Ria, the provincial capital of Phuoc Tuy.

The closing days of the war saw Australia's last military involvement with an Air Force airlift of aid supplies into South Vietnam and evacuation of the Australian embassy staff and Vietnamese war orphans.

The war was over. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had won.

A memorial that had been built at Vung Tau to commemorate the Australians' efforts was destroyed.

One legacy that remained was the effects on people of the use of Agent Orange as a defoliant. There had been an extensive use of this defoliant [a chemical to kill vegetation] by the Americans in many parts of Vietnam and to some extent in Phuoc Tuy by Australians. Look at this recent report.

SOURCE 1 *The effects of Agent Orange in Vietnam*

Nguyen Thi Kim Vang had never seen a child with a birth deformity before the American War [the description given by the Vietnamese to what Australians call the Vietnam War]. Thirty years later she lives with a constant screaming reminder.

Of her children, three died in the first few months, two are normal and the sixth still cannot recognise her despite the fact Mrs Vang has nursed, changed her nappies and fed her every day for 25 years. Her husband spent years in the jungle fighting for the Viet Cong and was exposed to defoliants sprayed by US forces.

Her daughter, Duong Thi Thu Huong, now 25, was born apparently normal but a week later developed marks on her skin. Today she is a twisted shell, with the body weight of a 10-year-old, twitching in her dilapidated wheelchair in the simple family home in Vung Tau, a small coastal town two hours south of Ho Chi Minh City [Saigon] ...

In Vietnam, it's impossible to ignore Agent Orange; its casualties are everywhere. An estimated four million Vietnamese were exposed to Agent Orange, a chemical mixture of two synthetic herbicides, 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T, which was used to strip foliage from the jungle, depriving the Viet Cong guerillas of shelter and food. It contains dioxin, which does not dissolve in water, is thought to have contaminated the water supply and entered the food chain through the soil.

Between 1961 and 1971 the US sprayed 80 million litres of herbicides over southern Vietnam.

In the US, the government has found ways to look after its own casualties without admitting guilt, but the Vietnamese get very little airplay and have received no compensation.

The Vietnamese Government wants to change that. In March last year it lost a lawsuit against 37 chemical companies that provided the US government with Agent Orange ...

Undaunted by the loss, the Vietnamese Government has launched an appeal ...

The clinching evidence in the appeal will be new research from the Military Medical Institute on 50,000 people, said Professor Nguyen Trong Nhan, deputy chairman of the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin.

He told the state-owned Family and Society newspaper "it shows people who live in AO/dioxin-affected areas will have up to 2.95 per cent and 2.69 per cent of their children and grandchildren respectively deformed. The rates in other areas are 0.74 to 0.82 per cent." ...

In Vung Tau, the provincial chapter of the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin says it has 3390 registered cases ranging from severe to mild, affecting first generation to third.

Connie Levett, Sydney Morning Herald, 28 August 2006

- 1** Do you agree that the makers of the chemicals used in the war ought to pay reparation for the damages done?
- 2** Is the use of the defoliant any different from bombs or bullets? Explain your views.

- 3** Many Australian veterans are involved in building programs in Phuoc Tuy. Why might they feel the need to do this?

Would you visit Vietnam today?

Many veterans are returning to Vietnam to see what has changed and to 'lay the ghosts to rest'.

Here is one account of that:

Visiting Vietnam Today

(Written by Gary McKay)

For veterans, [returning] to Vietnam can be an emotional experience. For some it will finally put to rest the feelings they've had or the fears they want to face. In most cases they want to see the country now that it's at peace ...

Bob Hansford was an airframe fitter with 161 Recce Flight at Nui Dat and wanted to put some memories — or, as he called them, 'ghosts' — to bed. His trip put him in a reflective state of mind: *Returning to Nui Dat and other areas where I served, where everyone strived so hard to achieve the best as soldiers/tradesmen, I found that almost every trace of our occupation had gone. It just shows how insignificant human beings really are in the greater plan... and was it all really worth it in the end?*

Steve Campling was a rifleman with the 6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment, in 1969 and wanted to see Vietnam as it is today. He was not disappointed: *This trip made me confront my experience in Vietnam. I feel more at peace with myself now that I can see this country striving ahead,*

quite united and devoid of war. I would recommend that any Vietnam veteran return. It was amazing to experience the lack of animosity toward us. To return to this country so plagued by war for so long and to finally see them at peace would have to quell any veteran's doubts and fears ...

Vietnam is a land of constant change and it seems that only religious buildings and French colonial-era structures have withstood the ravages of progress. Most other buildings have been remodeled, rebuilt, refurbished or, in some cases, demolished. Returning veterans need to be aware that what they remember probably won't be there now. For example, the two fire support bases, Balmoral and Coral, are now also covered with rubber trees.

But don't be put off by this situation: the real thrill of visiting the battle sites is simply 'being there'. The heat and humidity and the smell of the bush haven't changed. Be prepared for goosebumps and various feelings that could be disquieting in some ways — but beautiful in others.

<http://www.vietnamexpeditions.com/webplus/viewer.asp?pgid=10&aid=224> (cached)

Imagine that you have been asked to organise a tour to Vietnam. It is not necessarily for veterans, but it may be for their children and grandchildren, to give them a better knowledge and understanding of how the place has changed.

I Organise an illustrated brochure for that trip, using material on modern Vietnam from websites and travel guides.

In your tour you could include:

- places that were significant to Australians — mainly Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), Vung Tau, Nui Dat and surrounding areas any commemorative sites where memorials exist — such as at Long Tan
- any museums that will tell you about the war and how it is represented by the Vietnamese
- a description of the main changes that veterans would see between Vietnam then and Vietnam now
- a description of scenes that would seem unchanged — such as rural scenes of people working the land
- how to get there — details of flights and costs
- 'cultural tips' — a list of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour that visitors should observe in that society
- accommodation and itinerary suggestions
- other aspects that you think will be helpful and relevant.

You will find material at travel agents, in travel books such as the Lonely Planet guides, on tourist websites and on official country websites. Gary McKay's book *Australia's Battlefields In Viet Nam – A Traveller's Guide* (<http://www.garymckay.com.au/products.htm>) is an excellent resource for this task.

How did soldiers respond to their homecoming?

Soldiers had different reactions on their return.

- I** Look at these extracts from interviews with veterans and list the range of reactions that you see there.

A Barry Roe

I remember landing at Melbourne and it hit me that I was home when I came out of the plane and saw my mum and dad and my sister and a couple of mates. They had a big sign up: 'Welcome home Barry'. I came down the walkway and put my feet on the ground and I thought, 'Well beauty, I'm home'.

I walked across the tarmac and came inside Essendon airport and I think I gave my mother a kiss and I think I shook hands with my old man. I remember him saying, 'Come on, we'll jump in the car and we'll go home now'. It sounded funny, 'jump in the car'. I couldn't kind of get it through my head that I was home and I was safe and all I had to do was get in a car and drive home.

I remember driving down Mt Alexander Road in Moonee Ponds and I thought, '... this isn't happening this is not happening,' because eighteen or nineteen hours ago I was in Vietnam. It still didn't click.

We got home and there was a big party organised and I still couldn't believe it. There were uncles and aunties there, I just got bombed out of my brain and stayed that way for three or four weeks.

B Michael Scrase

One minute I was in Vietnam and the next minute I was home, and I was totally lost. Cars backfiring scared ... you, you were on edge the whole time for weeks afterwards. There was no debriefing, no time to melt back in. I know my mum and dad found it very hard to handle me. In fact, they told me quite plainly that I wasn't the same person any more. I was prone to get violent, punch walls, get into rages very quickly. I've never slept right since the day I came home.

C Lachlan Irvine

Arrived at Sydney airport, met the family, went home, spent the next couple of weeks going around seeing old friends, having parties. At this stage I was twenty years old and my old school friends and people that I'd known before Vietnam just seemed like kids, which of course they were and which of course I should have been. But it was as if we were living in different worlds.

D Bob Pride

I suppose I had this idea of coming home to a brass band ticker-tape procession and women falling at your feet and coming up and shaking your hand and all that sort of stuff the way it was for the Anzacs and the Second World War guys.

I think we landed at Sydney airport about ten or eleven o'clock at night, went through customs, and got our pay. When the doors opened up there were these people waving placards and someone was holding up a page out of a newspaper about women and children being killed.

E John Skinner

What was left of the battalion were lined up on the deck of the HMAS Sydney, looking spick and span with polished boots, all ready to go and do this march through Sydney, and all of us nervous with excitement waiting to meet our families. I remember Colin Kahn, the battalion commander. He marched out, very brusque, like on the parade ground and he looked around at us and said, 'For twelve months you've been carrying this pack on your back and you're all bent and stooped and you're weary, but today you're walking through this town and I want you to throw that pack off your back and march because you are the Tiger Battalion'. It was, I guess, you'd call it gung-ho stuff now, but it made us all feel good and proud.

We spent about two hours with our families and then we marched through Sydney. I felt ten feet tall, I really felt good. They had ticker-tape and there were people in the street, but what I didn't realise was that most people were only curious. They weren't cheering us home. They were just lined up to see something.

F David Beahan

My homecoming [in 1966] was great. I was met [near] town by probably a hundred and sixty people, my friends, out on the highway and they followed us into town. There were parties every night for a week afterwards. I was treated like a king. I was the first guy from Armidale to go into national service, the first one to go to Vietnam and the first one to return from Vietnam.

G Bob Walker

I copped some flak in my home town. A woman who taught me at school spat at me. She was in the Save Our Sons. Yeah, spat at me and I adored that woman. The best teacher I'd ever had I thought. You remember one or two teachers in your life and she was a magnificent woman. I didn't think any less of her; she had her axe to grind. It was just surprising more than anything else.

Stuart Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*, William Heinemann Australia, Melbourne, 1987, pages 181–4, 187, 189

- 2** Here is a range of possible reasons to help understand this. Discuss each and explain how it might have been a contributing factor to the sense of alienation and dislocation that some felt.

Possible factors and how these might influence the impact on the individual.

Factor	Comment
Regular soldier or national servicemen	
Age – Many who were discharged were now 22	
Where they lived – City or country	
Whether had a job or not	
Attitude of family	
Attitudes and experiences of old friends	
Type of war experienced	
Other possible factors	

How do Vietnam veterans assess their service?

Service in Vietnam was an important part in the lives of many men and women. How do they feel about that service now?

Look at these comments by a number of veterans and answer the questions that follow.

A Ron West

Even though tinged with sadness at the loss of some good mates and soldiers, I would not have wanted to miss it. I feel as though I proved to myself, as a Regular infantryman, that I was capable of performing to the best of my ability the tasks that I had been trained to perform. [For] some results I would have preferred a better outcome. [Nevertheless] today I am proud to be a Vietnam veteran.

B Bob Lubcke

8RAR done well in Vietnam and all the guys served with her can be very proud indeed. I know I am. If I had life over again I would do exactly the same again. It was an honour to be a soldier in the Australian Army.

C Allan Handley

There is not one day goes by that I don't give a thought to Vietnam and the guys who got killed. I try to forget, but I can't. First, I felt guilty about leaving early. I've never gotten over that. Second, not being accepted when we returned home. I felt guilty about killing people. It will last forever.

- 1 What different elements do these veterans take into account in making their assessment? For example one is the military outcome. What others can you see?
- 2 Are there any other factors not mentioned that you think are relevant in making such an assessment?

You can understand this more if you write a diary entry about coming home.

D Pam Barlow

Australia's involvement was not worth it. Not in terms of loss of life, maiming of bodies, not to mention the psychological scarring that will be, and is, a long legacy. Man's inhumanity to man. I am sure the same question has been asked of many before me. Was it worth it? No. The Australian soldier in Viet Nam showed great courage and acceptance. To the people of Australia I would say, if only you had witnessed the courage of these young men, in battle and in death, there would have been no need for conflict concerning conscription. They were proud young men, I know, I was there. That is probably a bit subjective, but that is the way I saw it then, and the way I see it now.

E Rod Curtis

I learned a lot about myself and about my own personal strengths and weaknesses and I think I came to terms with those. I learnt a lot about mateship and I became more tolerant and I learnt a lot about the Australian soldier and what he is prepared to do and what he will fight for if he believes in it. The most important thing to me while I was in Viet Nam was probably mateship in the battalion ... Was our involvement worth it? As a soldier and officer in the Australian Army and setting aside the political restrictions that we operated under, I think the answer is yes. I think the Australian soldier did his job professionally and very well and there is no question in my mind that if you isolate Phuoc Tuy Province, there is no doubt that the Australians won the battle and they clearly demonstrated militarily that they did it very well indeed.

B Bruce Davies

When I look back on Australia's involvement in South Viet Nam, where we lost 519 dead, it was not worth it. But that is in hindsight with 20/20 vision ... The Australian involvement with South Viet Nam, if you want to be crude about it, wasn't really worth a damn at all. I know from reading other books and listening to other interviewers that Australia really doesn't rate a mention in the history of the war.

Sources A–C: Robert A Hall, *Combat Battalion*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000, pages 257–9; Sources D–F, Gary McKay, *Bullets, Beans & Bandages*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999, pages 241, 254–7