

Commemoration

TOPIC

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On 3 October 1987, 25,000 Vietnam veterans marched in a welcome home parade through Sydney to the cheers of hundreds of thousands. It was the greatest emotional outpouring witnessed in decades.

A quotation on the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial

FOCUS QUESTIONS:

- How has the Vietnam War been commemorated in Australia?
- What is its meaning for you today?

Crowds line the streets to watch the Welcome Home Parade, Sydney, 3 October 1987.

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Teaching Suggestions

1 Background information

Commemoration

Australia's war heritage is a significant part of our national identity. We commemorate our involvement in wars, conflicts and peace operations through memorials and ceremonies. Is the Vietnam War an accepted part of this commemoration?

On 17 August 2006, on the eve of the 40th anniversary commemoration of the Battle of Long Tan, Graham Edwards, the only Federal Member of Parliament who is a Vietnam veteran, wrote: 'Today is a day when our federal Parliament should honour our Vietnam veterans, recognise their service and say to them that they did a good job in the best tradition of the Anzacs ... Today is a day when we should say we are proud of our Vietnam veterans. A day when we honour and recognise their sacrifice, service and their suffering. I think it is also a time to reflect on the horror of war, the lasting trauma of those involved and the terror and suffering of innocent civilians caught in the devastation of war.' (House of Representatives *Hansard*, 17 August 2006, page 42)

How does the nation now commemorate Australia's Vietnam war?

1987 Welcome Home Parade

The first significant act of commemoration of the Australian experience of war in Vietnam was in 1987, when the Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia organised a national 'Welcome Home' march through Sydney. Twenty-five thousand veterans took part. For many this was the gesture of reconciliation by Australia that they had been looking for. This was the admission that they should not have been shunned and abused on their return from Vietnam. The nation was acknowledging the value of what they had done. For these men, they could now let go of much of their anger and feelings of rejection.

1996 Vietnam pilgrimage

In 1996 another gesture of reconciliation and closure took place. A group of 30 veterans, representative of all elements that had served in Vietnam, returned on a pilgrimage. They visited Saigon, Nui Dat, Vung Tau and Long Tan, in a symbolic gesture of 'laying the ghosts'. Most had not returned since the war and they were both apprehensive and excited. Some had a chance to visit the graves of mates who had been killed in the war and were buried at Terendak Cemetery in Singapore. All had a chance to revisit significant places in their lives and to reflect on its meaning to them now. Most were able to see that Vietnam had moved on and the war meant less to most Vietnamese than it did to these foreigners who had fought it; some still had demons that refused to be settled. One veteran of Long Tan who had lain wounded and terrified on the battlefield all night, refused to sit under shelter from the blazing sun during a commemorative ceremony. 'I'm not going to let the bastards beat me now', he said.

Many soldiers make individual or group returns to Vietnam. Many have been involved in aid programs, such as the building of a new school at Long Tan.

2002 National Memorial

In 2002 the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial was re-dedicated, 10 years after it was originally dedicated in 1992. It sits in Anzac Parade, together with the other national memorials to Australia's wars, armed services, allies and some former enemies.

2006 40th Anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan

On 18 August 2006 there were commemorations for the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan. This battle has been adopted as the official Australian commemorative day of the Vietnam War. Speeches, newspaper editorials and reports celebrated the achievements of the men of Long Tan, but also sought to encompass the Vietnam War into the Anzac tradition. Prime Minister Howard said: 'The sad fact is that those who served in Vietnam were not welcomed back as they should have been. Whatever our views may have been—and I include those who supported the war as well as those who opposed it—the nation collectively failed those men. They are owed our apologies and our regrets for that failure. The very least that we can do on this 40th anniversary is to acknowledge that fact, to acknowledge the difficulties that so many of them have had in coping with the postwar trauma and to acknowledge the magnificent contribution that they have continued to make to our nation. (House of Representatives *Hansard*, 17 August 2006, page 41)

How should Australia's Vietnam War be commemorated?

Has this happened? Is the Vietnam War commemorated as part of the Anzac tradition? What image do young people today have of Australia's Vietnam War, and is this changing over time? What should we be commemorating in our public representations of that part of our heritage? These are all issues that students can address in this topic.

2 Key learning outcomes

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

- Compare ways in which Australia's Vietnam War has been commemorated over time
- Analyse the place of the Vietnam War in the Anzac tradition
- Determine its meaning for students today

3 Classroom activities

ACTIVITY 1

This activity starts students thinking about public commemoration. The best place to start is with students' own community. After students have listed the memorials in their community, they will be able to consider why these events are being commemorated, and what this community is telling people about its values, attitudes and past through these public statements.

ACTIVITY 2

Students here compare four different images of the Vietnam War as expressed through commemoration. They will see the way different ideas and messages can be presented, as well as changed over time.

ACTIVITY 3

The aim here is to have students think about symbols, ideas, words and shapes in representations and how they can all be brought together to create powerful messages. This activity is also available in an interactive way on the *Australia and the Vietnam War* CD-ROM.

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:

- *Explore the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial* (Primary and Secondary)
- *Analyse a Vietnam War Roll of Honour* (Secondary)

What is commemoration?

Think about your local community. There are many different types of memorials. These memorials have been created to commemorate — formally remember — events that the community says are important and that the community wants its members to keep as part of its values and identity.

1 List any memorials in your community.

Many of these memorials are to do with war. Australia has been involved in many wars, conflicts and peace operations and these are seen as a significant part of our national identity and heritage.

2 Here is a list of some major wars, conflicts and battles that Australia has been involved in. Write down your image of each event's place in Australian identity.

| War/conflict/battle | The meaning that this war/conflict/battle has for Australia is: |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| World War I | |
| Gallipoli | |
| World War II | |
| Kokoda | |
| Korea | |
| Malayan Emergency | |
| Indonesian Confrontation | |
| Vietnam | |
| Peacekeeping (eg East Timor) | |
| Modern conflicts (Iraq, Afghanistan) | |

The idea or image that people have about a war can change. For example, the main popular image of the Vietnam War has probably changed several times. In the 1970s it was a controversial war, with many believing that Australia should not have been involved and that its main meaning was to show the suffering war caused civilians; in the 1980s and 1990s a major image was of the social alienation and the physical and psychological suffering of

many veterans of the war; in the 2000s emphasis is now on the bravery and achievement of the symbolic battle of the war, Long Tan.

In this topic you will be asked to consider how we have commemorated the Vietnam War in the past, what your own image of the war is now and how you think the war should be commemorated in the future.

How has the Vietnam War been commemorated in Australia over time?

1 A popular song

In 1983 the Australian band Redgum wrote the song *I Was Only 19* about the Vietnam War. Look at this song and answer the questions that follow.

- 1 What is the story that this song tells?
- 2 What is the attitude of the soldier at the start?
- 3 What is the meaning of 'God help me, I was only nineteen' the first time it is used?
- 4 The soldier's attitude changes with the experience of war. What keeps him going?
- 5 What is his attitude when he returns home?
- 6 What is the meaning of 'God help me, I was only nineteen' the last time it is used?
- 7 What does he say about the Anzac legend and his place in it?
- 8 The song was written by a man who opposed the war, was for a time a communist and who spoke to several veterans before writing it. How do you explain this apparent contradiction between his opposing the war and writing this song?
- 9 What is the overall image or representation of Vietnam veterans that this song creates?
- 10 Look back at your image of the Vietnam War. Will you change anything as a result of thinking about this song?

I Was Only 19 (A Walk in the Light Green)

*Mum and Dad and Denny saw the passing out parade¹ at Puckapunyal (It was long march from cadets).
The Sixth Battalion was the next to tour and it was me who drew the card.²
We did Canungra and Shoalwater³ before we left.
And Townsville lined the footpath as we marched down to the quay.
This clipping from the paper shows us young and strong and clean.
And there's me in my slouch hat, with my SLR⁴ and greens ...
God help me, I was only nineteen.*

*From Vung Tau riding Chinooks⁵ to the dust at Nui Dat,
I'd been in and out of choppers now for months.
But we made our tents a home, VB and pin-ups on the lockers,
And an Asian orange sunset through the scrub.
And can you tell me, doctor, why I still can't get to sleep?
And night time's just a jungle dark and a barking M16⁶?
And what's this rash that comes and goes, can you tell me what it means?
God help me, I was only nineteen.*

*A four week operation, when each step could mean your last one on two legs:
It was a war within yourself.
But you wouldn't let your mates down 'til they had you dusted off⁷,
So you closed your eyes and thought about something else.
Then someone yelled out 'Contact'⁸, and the bloke behind me swore.
We hooked in there for hours, then a God almighty roar;
Frankie⁹ kicked a mine the day that mankind kicked the moon¹⁰:
God help me, he was going home in June.*

*I can still see Frankie, drinking tinnies in the Grand Hotel
On a thirty-six hour rec. leave in Vung Tau.
And I can still hear Frankie lying screaming in the jungle.
'Till the morphine came and killed the bloody row
And the Anzac legends didn't mention mud and blood and tears,
And stories that my father told me never seemed quite real.
I caught some pieces in my back that I didn't even feel ...
God help me, I was only nineteen.*

*And can you tell me, doctor, why I still can't get to sleep?
And why the Channel Seven chopper chills me to my feet?
And what's this rash that comes and goes, can you tell me what it means?
God help me — I was only nineteen.*

- 1 Graduation from Recruit Training
- 2 Volunteered to go to Vietnam
- 3 Training camps to prepare those going to Vietnam
- 4 Self Loading Rifle — infantry weapon
- 5 Transport helicopters
- 6 M16 Rifle — infantry weapon
- 7 Medical evacuation of wounded by helicopter
- 8 Infantry drill when engaged by the enemy
- 9 Frank Hunt
- 10 Neil Armstrong walked on the moon on July 20, 1969

Words and music by J Schumann © Universal Music Publishing P/L. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved. (John Schumann discusses the writing of this song for Mick Storer and Frank Hunt at http://www.abc.net.au/dimensions/dimensions_people/Transcripts/s881927.htm) Frank Hunt's story is included in Gina Lennox, *Forged By War*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2006)

2 1987 Welcome Home March

On 3 October 1987, 25 000 Australian ex-servicemen and women who had served in Vietnam gathered in the Sydney Domain. They set off behind 500 Australian flags – each one representing one of the Australian dead in the Vietnam War. They were cheered by the huge crowd. Many of them wept at the reception and recognition they received.

Why was this event so important in the lives of so many of these Vietnam veterans? Look at these stories of the experiences of some of the veterans in Sydney on that day and answer the questions that follow.

A *We didn't all come home together. So there was no sense of a proper farewell to all the mates. We had become very close as a unit and then suddenly we were separated, never to see each other again.*

B *I was injured, lost my legs. Suddenly I was gone, with no chance to say farewell. I was on patrol, in the hospital, then back in Australia. Just like that. There was no 'closure' on my experiences in Vietnam.*

C *We got in at 4 am in Sydney. We walked off the plane — and I kissed the tarmac. We went through Customs, I remember the Customs bloke saying 'Welcome home' to each of us. But that was it. We'd come in on the quiet through the back door like we'd gone.*

D *When I got home there were demonstrations against the war going on. At one stage I was still in my uniform. I could feel the people laughing at me. I felt like running out and grabbing their placards and asking what first hand knowledge they had about what they were protesting about.*

E *Catching up with family and friends was weird. Nobody asked me about what had happened. The only ones who could understand anyway were those who had been through it.*

F *We met mates again, we were welcomed by the Australian people, we no longer had to feel almost unclean about what we had done and where we had been. At last Australia was recognising those men and women it had shunned for so many years. Call it an emotional healing. Call it a Welcome Home. The fact is that many of us are now able to stand up and say with pride 'I'm a Vietnam veteran'. And people are listening.*

Quotations are all adapted from veterans' comments in Noel Giblett, *Homecomings*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1990. Copyright Commonwealth of Australia. Reproduced with permission.

- 1** What was the problem with the way many Vietnam veterans had returned to Australia?
- 2** Why do you think Australians had not welcomed the troops back at the time?
- 3** Why was the 1987 event so important to so many of these veterans?
- 4** Look back at your image of the Vietnam War. Will you change anything as a result of thinking about this parade?

3 The Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial

In 2002 the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial was re-dedicated to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the commencement of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War.

It is located in Anzac Parade, with the national memorials to Australia's other major wars and conflicts.

The main elements of the memorial are:

- A wall of words — quotations from the war.
 - A huge engraving of a famous photograph.
 - Six small blocks of stone, naming the six Australians whose bodies were never recovered.
 - A suspended halo, containing the names of the 520 Australians who died during their Vietnam War service.
- Three walls creating a gloomy and dappled interior.



Look at these images of the memorial and answer the following questions.

- 1 What is the significance or symbolism of the location?
- 2 What are the main features of the memorial?
- 3 What messages or meanings do you think it is presenting?
- 4 What is being commemorated here?



- 5 Look back at your image of the Vietnam War. Will you change anything as a result of thinking about this memorial?



You can explore this memorial further on the CD-ROM



4 The 40th Anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan

In 2006 Australia commemorated the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan. This battle is symbolic of the Australian involvement in the Vietnam War. Look at this newspaper account of the official ceremonies in Canberra and answer these questions:

- 1 What is special about Long Tan?
- 2 What is the main message in the article about the men who fought at Long Tan?
- 3 What does the writer say is Vietnam's place in the national consciousness?
- 4 How is Vietnam linked by Prime Minister Howard to the Anzac tradition?
- 5 Look back at your image of the Vietnam War. Will you change anything as a result of thinking about this event?

Tears and cheer as Vietnam veterans find home

Gillian Lord

Hundreds of veterans turned out at 6.30am yesterday for a stand-to ceremony on the memorial parade ground to honour the men who fought the bloody and determined battle of Long Tan on August 18, 1966.

Later in the morning about 3000 veterans and their families gathered for a Vietnam Veterans' Day memorial service at the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial on Anzac Parade, to pay their respects to those who served in Vietnam, and those who didn't come home ... Vietnam has matured in the national consciousness, from being a bitter, unacknowledged and unpopular war, to becoming part of Australia's identity.

Paying tribute and noting that 2006 marked the anniversary of both the Battle of Fromelles and the Battle of Long Tan, Prime Minister John Howard said that both events, although 50 years and thousands of miles apart, had helped shape Australia and define the common characteristics of Australians — courage, initiative, individual fortitude and mateship.

After apologising the day before for the past treatment of Vietnam veterans, Mr Howard was visibly moved at yesterday's memorial service; solemn and sombre as the honour roll of the 18 young men who died at Long Tan was read out, with their average age of 21.

And, if the reaction of the veterans yesterday was anything to go by, it was a case of "apology accepted" ...

With medals clinking on their chests, the unbreakable bonds that formed in war were very evident — quiet hands that steadied a mate when emotions swelled, warm embraces shared among friends who hadn't seen each other in a while, eyes shining with pleasure and even some tears ...

At both ceremonies the Iroquois helicopters flew overhead, and on both occasions the diggers' faces flooded with emotion, with one man, trembling and faint, being held tightly by friends on either side. They were all veterans. They all understood ...

For Canberra's Adrian Roberts, it was a day to honour the five blokes from his troop who lost their lives between June 1966 and May 1967. A lieutenant and the commander of 3 Troop Armoured Personnel Carriers, that effectively ended the Battle of Long Tan, Roberts had designed the wreath he laid with special care for the men of 1 Armoured Personnel Squadron/A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment: Five white roses, "one for each of my blokes — white being the colour of death in Vietnam"; green leaves for the rubber of Vietnam — "we were always in rubber", and red gerberas for the sacrifice. A card with the name of each man and the date he died accompanied, with the message, "We have gone on ahead and will meet you at the end of the day."

The Canberra Times, Saturday, 19 August 2006



You can find out more by *Analysing a Vietnam War Roll of Honour*

How would you commemorate the Australian experience of the Vietnam War?

Imagine that you have been asked to design a memorial for your local community to commemorate Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Design that memorial, taking into account the following possibilities or considerations:

- Physical appearance:** What will it look like? Will it be realistic or abstract? Why choose that shape and style?
- Facts:** Do you need to give any explanation of the war to people looking at your memorial? If so, what will you say?
- Symbols:** Are there any symbols that particularly represent the Vietnam War? For example, a helicopter, or a jungle hat? Any special colours? Shapes? Textures? Plants?
- Messages or meanings:** What are the main messages or meanings that you want people to gain from the memorial? Is it to do with peace? War? People's qualities? The impacts on people's lives? Ideas?
- Controversies** Will you include the home front aspect of the war as an element? (This is done in many World War I memorials, where local memorials often include the names of those who volunteered, as well as those who died — how would those 'eligible' men in the community who chose not to go have felt about this constant public comment on their behaviour?) Should those men who, out of conscience, went to prison for their anti-conscription or anti-war beliefs be included on the memorial?
- Words:** Are there particular words or phrases that you would use? Will you include 'message' words about remembrance? Will you, like the national memorial, include characteristic phrases from the war?
- Other:** Are there any other features that you will include? List and discuss them.

