

[Vietnam Vets in From Cold - Australians in Battle 1950 - 2000](#)

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We did remember the veterans of our most controversial war -- but too often as misfits or madmen, writes Peter Edwards. THE two most highly admired men in Australian public life over the past year, Tim Fischer and Peter Cosgrove, both served in Vietnam. That simple fact shows how much has changed in public and media attitudes towards Vietnam veterans in the quarter-century since the war ended.

When Mr Fischer stepped down from front-bench politics last year, there was a spontaneous surge of affection for him that not only crossed party lines but also reached into areas of the media not noted for their sympathy for conservative politicians. The fact that Mr Fischer had been a national serviceman in Vietnam was not held against him. On the contrary, commentators respectfully mentioned his selection for the unit at Scheyville, in NSW, which turned the most promising of the young conscripts into officers. This was seen as an important part of the growth that enabled the country boy from Boree Creek to become a national and international statesman.

Public reference to Major-General Cosgrove's Vietnam service was even more striking. When he was named as the likely Australian commander of the Interfet operation in East Timor, media reports suggested that the public was already looking for that rare phenomenon in this country -- a military hero, a soldier who would bring honour to the nation where the politicians and diplomats were struggling.

Major-General Cosgrove's experience as a platoon commander in Vietnam, including the award of a Military Cross, was only seen as a recommendation. It was an indication that he had already proved himself a brave and competent soldier in combat. Nowhere was it suggested that any association with the Vietnam War was somehow disgraceful, a taint that had to be expunged.

It was not always so. If Korea was the forgotten war, Vietnam has been the unforgettable war. Every aspect of the war -- military, political, diplomatic, social, medical -- has been mired in endless controversy since Australian combat soldiers were committed 35 years ago. It was Australia's longest war, so the agonies and the controversies had years in which to be etched into public memory.

Vietnam was also the first war in which Australia had not fought alongside Britain. It was certainly not the first time that Australians had fought alongside Americans but, without the traditional link to Britain to act as counterbalance, the Australian experience became heavily overlain with American images.

Nowhere was this more important than in the image of the Vietnam veteran. The term "veteran" is itself a sign of the way in which the Australian experience of Vietnam has been seen through American eyes. Where earlier generations spoke of "the returned man" and his encounters with the Repatriation Department or "the Repat", now we speak of the Vietnam veteran and his dealings with the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

For some years after the war, the image of the Vietnam veteran in Australia was one based heavily on the picture promoted by a group of American veterans. This group was vocal, well organised and, in the aftermath of an unsuccessful war, politically significant. They painted the picture of the veteran who had been horrendously wounded, not only in body but perhaps more seriously in mind, by the whole Vietnam experience, not least by the group of toxic chemicals known collectively as Agent Orange. This picture was taken up by groups such as the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, whose name and style reflected their debt to similar organisations in the US. The VVAA is generally thought to have included about 8 to 10 per cent of the total number of Australians who served -- a significant number and a powerful lobby group, but a minority of the roughly 50,000 Australians who served in Vietnam. Others who had served in Vietnam joined what is now known as the Returned and Services League, despite the RSL's sometimes antagonistic relationship with the VVAA. Others again, probably the majority, joined neither organisation.

The VVAA pressed two particular arguments, which for several years received a sympathetic hearing in the media and wide public acceptance. First, they said that Vietnam was greatly different from previous wars, in the stresses that it placed on those who served. Secondly, they asserted that the physical and mental problems faced by many veterans were largely caused by the exposure to Agent Orange.

With the wisdom of hindsight, both of these arguments now seem questionable. In recent years, histories and medical scientists have tended to emphasise the similarities between Vietnam and earlier wars, rather than the differences. Post-traumatic stress disorder is now seen as the close relation of what was known as shell shock in the first World War and combat fatigue in the second.

The findings of the Evatt royal commission in 1985, which essentially acquitted Agent Orange of causing the ailments suffered by veterans, left stranded those veterans who were confident that it would condemn an eminently suitable villain -- a toxic chemical manufactured by an American-based multinational company.

If the veterans had simply asserted that they had problems and wanted them to be investigated, they would have received a sympathetic hearing. Instead, this group particularly targeted Agent Orange and demanded the establishment of a royal commission to examine its effects. This probably delayed by a decade or more the creation of counselling services and other measures that are now tackling the range of physical and mental problems undoubtedly suffered by some veterans and, according to recent reports, their children.

Many Australians who served in Vietnam had long been unhappy with the image of the veteran portrayed by the VVAA and its sympathisers. On one occasion in the 1980s, before the Evatt royal commission had been established, a writer spoke to what he probably thought would be a sympathetic audience, taking up the cause of the veterans and the wrongs inflicted by Agent Orange. He was startled when several members of the audience turned on him.

They had served in Vietnam, but they did not want to be seen as damaged physically or mentally. As they saw it, they had served their country at the direction of the lawful government; they had done their job honourably; they had returned physically, mentally and morally intact, and they were now getting on with the rest of their lives.

Their views on the political wisdom of the commitment varied. Some thought it had always been a mistake. Others only regretted that they had not been allowed to stay and "finish the job". But they were united in their anger and dismay at the way in which Vietnam veterans were being portrayed as misfits or walking time bombs, ready to explode if a car backfired or a helicopter flew overhead. As one of them once said to me: "You see headlines saying: 'Vietnam vet in murder-suicide'; but you don't see the headlines saying 'Vietnam vet becomes Oxford professor'."

Fittingly, a largely American-influenced problem had a largely American-inspired solution. In 1987, a Welcome Home march was held in Sydney, modelled on similar marches in Washington and other American cities. It was a huge success, with thousands turning out to wave and cheer. Many of those who felt that their Vietnam service had damaged their lives declared that the march had achieved its goal. Until then, they felt they had been unfairly blamed for all the wrongs of a failed war; now they felt absolved and welcomed back into the general community.

The impact of the Welcome Home march was so strong that its fifth anniversary was chosen for the official opening in 1992 of the Vietnam Memorial on Anzac Parade in Canberra. The symbolism was powerful. Vietnam veterans now had their sacred place, alongside those dedicated to earlier Australian heroes such as the Light Horse and the Rats of Tobruk. Vietnam veterans were received into the Anzac tradition.

That is the place in the Australian mind that Tim Fischer and Peter Cosgrove have both demonstrated and helped to strengthen. By achieving success in their respective fields, while also showing strong commitment to their families, they have given a new dimension to the place of the Vietnam veteran in Australian society.

There was a time when some who had served in Vietnam tried to hide the fact. Now, in Australia as in the US, government officials and ex-service organisations are contending with the opposite problem -- the bogus veteran, the man who falsely claims to have served in Vietnam or who tells lies about his distinguished and dangerous military career.

Most Vietnam veterans have not held office or attracted popular acclaim, as have Mr Fischer and Major-General Cosgrove. Nor are they the suicidal and feral victims who were so widely portrayed in the years after the war. Some suffered genuine damage in body, mind or spirit, and they deserve compassion and generous support. Some have achieved great things, and they deserve recognition. But most of those who served in Vietnam want only to be recognised as having served their country, with as much honour and success as a difficult and controversial commitment permitted. They deserve no less.

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