

University of  
**Southern  
Queensland**

**A Sweet Use of Adversity – National Servicemen in  
Vietnam**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The motives and attitudes of volunteers and conscripts during the Australian military commitment to South Vietnam were examined using oral histories recorded in interviews with ex-national servicemen. Two groups of veterans were interviewed, the first comprising men who volunteered for national service using the early registration option, and the second were conscripts who had their birthdates drawn in one of the sixteen ballots conducted between 1965 and 1972. News media influence on their attitudes and decisions was also examined. Changes in the tone and content of newspaper reportage of ANZAC Day between 1962 and 2018 were identified using a succession of news archives.

The study found that there were consistent differences in options given to the conscripts depending on their corps allocations, and that a proportion of the volunteers did not understand the implications of early registration at the time. The myth of the volunteer as highlighted by Dapin and Morris, amongst others, is revisited and clarified.

Participants reported that the media treatment of the conflict did not influence attitudes and decisions prior to and during service, but it contributed to anger and bitterness post service. Reporting of the war became less supportive and more critical after 1965. Decisions made by those interviewed were essentially pragmatic and owed little to what is understood as the ANZAC tradition.

## **CERTIFICATION OF THESIS**

I Robert Whittaker declare that the Master of Arts Thesis entitled *A Sweet Use of Adversity – National Servicemen in Vietnam* is not more than 30,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes. The thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Date: 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023.

Endorsed by:

Principal Supervisor: Dr Caryn Coatney

Student and supervisor signatures of endorsement are held at the University.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the support provided by my Principal supervisor Dr Caryn Coatney and previous coursework supervisor Richard Gehrman. Supervising a septuagenarian who had been absent from academia for over forty years would have been far from straightforward. I am also grateful for the encouragement provided by Dr Libby Connors to return to study.

My wife, Heather, provided loving and patient support, and my daughter Claire was an invaluable copy editor. All grammar and spelling errors are mine.

Most of all, I acknowledge the patience, cheerfulness and honesty of the ex-national servicemen interviewed, some of whom I served beside in South Vietnam in 1970.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the 200 national servicemen who were killed in the Vietnam War, the 1,279 who were wounded and the 15,300 who served.

A Sweet Use of Adversity - William Shakespeare's "As You Like It"  
(II.1.12-17)

## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig 1. Scattering of Volunteers' Motivations..... P. 90

Fig 2. Options Offered to Balloted Veterans ..... P. 96

Fig 3. *The Sun-Herald* – October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1987..... P. 118

## ABBREVIATIONS

ADF –	Australian Defence Force
ANZAC –	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
ANZUS -	Australia, New Zealand and United States
AWM -	Australian War Memorial
DLNS –	Department of Labour and National Service
DVA –	Department of Veterans Affairs
PTSD –	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
PTG –	Post Traumatic Growth
RAR –	Royal Australian Regiment
VVAA -	Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	i
CERTIFICATION OF THESIS.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
DEDICATION .....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
ABBREVIATIONS.....	vi
LIST OF CONTENTS.....	vii
CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION.....	9
CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW.....	22
CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY.....	59
CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS.....	82
CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION .....	102
CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSIONS.....	124
CHAPTER 7- FURTHER STUDY.....	144
REFERENCES.....	147
APPENDIX 1 - TRANSCRIPTS.....	155
APPENDIX 2 – CORRESPONDENCE.....	172



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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## The Study – Background

This thesis explores a significant episode in Australian military and social history from the point of view of those most affected by it, the men who served, and examines the role of journalism during the Vietnam war. As a veteran of this war, this study is important to me, but the significance of the study goes beyond the personal. The motivation to pursue this investigation originated in an event described below which was significant to me as a veteran.

The study is based on an application of the concept of active memorialisation, focusing on in-depth interviews of fifteen Vietnam veterans, an archived interview with one indigenous national serviceman and a comparison of newspaper reports of ANZAC Day commemorations from five different publications between 1962 and 1972. Memoir has limits and is often criticised as a reflection of the narcissistic tendencies of the day but has its place if approached with caution.<sup>1</sup> By observing ethical practice and a duty of care, the memories of a group of septuagenarians have been accessed through this study to provide insights into a unique chapter in our recent history.

During the lead-up to ANZAC day in 2017, the principal of the high school I attended in the early sixties invited me to present a veteran's

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<sup>1</sup> Marie O'Rourke, *Memory's Fracture, Instability in the Contemporary Memoir*, in Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles, Sue Joseph (Editors), *Mediating Memory, Tracing the Limits of Memoir*, 1st Edition, Routledge eBook ISBN9781315107349, 2017, P16.

commemorative address to students. I accepted the invitation with enthusiasm, and with a determination to research the topic thoroughly. When I attended this school, I had formed a friendship with a lad who was later killed in the Battle of Long Tan in 1967, and this was an opportunity to honour his memory. Preparation for the address began with accessing the available online resources, including an extensive catalogue of information collected and posted by the ANZAC Day Commemoration Committee on their website for schools. To my bewilderment, introducing the section devoted to the war in Vietnam, was the statement: "Every national serviceman who fought in Vietnam was a volunteer".

From personal experience as a national serviceman who saw service in Vietnam in 1970, I knew the "every national serviceman" reference to be untrue. The statement was removed from the website after correspondence with the Commemoration Committee.<sup>2</sup> It had however, been published as a fact for student consumption for over a decade. I decided to attempt to discover the reasons for this misrepresentation of the history on website for schools, and if possible, to set the record straight.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Dapin, *Australia's Vietnam, Myth Vs History*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2019, P40.

## The Research

The principal research questions addressed by this study are –

- 1) How did national servicemen recall opportunities to avoid service in South Vietnam prior to embarkation?
- 2) Were some national servicemen true volunteers?
- 3) What influence did the news media have on decisions made by national servicemen before, during and after their operational service in South Vietnam, and how did the news media reporting of ANZAC commemorations change in tone and content during the war in Vietnam?

The research questions, administered using questionnaires via interview, address all three topics, and speak to the general issue of volunteering and compulsion in Australian military history, and changes in the way military service has been represented in the popular media.

Related questions interrogate the motives of a small subgroup of these men who volunteered for national service when they had reached the age of eighteen years and nine months. Whilst not well known and understood, this was an option available under The *National Service Act, 1964*.<sup>3</sup>

During the interviews, the veterans were also asked to recall what effect the news and media treatment of the issue at the time had on their attitudes to service. This was combined with an investigation of the tone

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<sup>3</sup> Sue Langford, Appendix: *The national service scheme, 1964-72*, Australian War memorial website: [https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet\\_app](https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet_app) Accessed 24th March 2023

and content of ANZAC Day reporting between 1962 and 1972, and later comment in Australia media through until 2018. The study uses oral histories and focuses on the memories recorded by these men, all by now in their seventh decade.

Veterans' memories applied to their attitude towards news coverage of their service have rarely been interrogated extensively. Precise options given to national servicemen, and their attitudes and motivations at the time of their enlistment is a neglected area of study. In that sense, this research is novel. It focuses on a case study driven by a series of fifteen interviews and one archived oral history, conducted with ex-national servicemen asking them to recall their approach to the callup, and any media influence on these approaches. Fourteen newspaper reports are included in the investigation to trace the changing reporting of Australia's commitment to Vietnam over the period between 1965 and 1972. The relevant coverage of the 1987 Welcome Home march is linked to the oral histories. The links between the media coverage and the veterans' reactions to it are outlined by describing media narratives, initially supportive, then generally negative, and finally supportive again after the 1987 Welcome Home march.

Conscription has long been a divisive issue in this country. The introduction of conscription for service overseas was twice rejected by Australian voters in referenda held in October 1916 and December 1917. Significantly, the scheme that operated between 1964 and 1972 marked the only occasion in Australian history when conscripts were sent to fight

on foreign soil during peacetime, in this case on the Asian mainland. In addition, the scheme was not universal, based as it was on a ballot of birthdates. These two factors made this last scheme an historical anomaly seen against the background of previous Australian engagement with conscription.

## **My Experience**

A brief description of my unremarkable experience with national service is relevant to this study. Along with about 8 percent of twenty-year-olds I was “called up” as a primary school teacher in Goondiwindi, South-western Queensland, was enlisted in January 1969, and posted to Vietnam in February 1970 with 7th battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (7RAR).<sup>4</sup> My birthdate had been drawn in the fifth National Service ballot held on 10 March 1967, the year of my twentieth birthday. As a full-time student on a teacher’s scholarship and “bonded” by the Queensland Department of Education to serve three years post-graduation, my enlistment was deferred until the completion of one year’s teaching service. This arrangement was an elegant compromise by the state and federal governments of the day. The state had committed resources outlaid on teaching training including two years of living allowance, and the Commonwealth wanted twenty-year-olds in uniform to help meet the Army’s manpower requirements created by their commitment to Vietnam.

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Government, Department of Veterans Affairs, Vietnam War Service – <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1227707&c=VIETNAM#R>, Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023

As for all “bonded” teachers my enlistment was delayed by a two-year deferment comprising the final year of my teacher training and one year of teaching practice. This arrangement managed one of the many unintended consequences created by the introduction of conscription in peacetime.

To put this situation in the context of the time, along with a minority of students in the sixties, I had participated at teachers’ college in anti-Vietnam protests, albeit in a half-hearted manner. During World War Two, my father had volunteered for the RAAF and served in New Guinea. He held a dim view of conscription, but advised caution, not protest. 1967 was a few years before the protest movement had gathered steam and developed into the Moratorium movement which generated marches in 1970, coinciding with the year of my service in Vietnam. 63,735 national servicemen were called up in the scheme.

I had suffered a mild form of infantile Polio when eighteen months old during the epidemic of the late forties and had convinced myself that I would not pass the army medical examination. This belief turned out to be wishful thinking, as I was classified medically fit.

As a teacher my assumption was that after recruit training, I would be posted to Education Corps and sent to Papua New Guinea to teach members of the Pacific Island Regiment. This would have aligned neatly with my reluctance to serve in Vietnam. After recruit training, written corps preferences were sought. My preferences were Education Corps first and Transport Corps second with the clear intention of avoiding service in

Vietnam. My posting was Infantry. Later, towards the end of the Infantry Corps training programme, unit preferences were sought. I lodged my posting preference as 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (4RAR). This was deliberate because that battalion was about to return from Vietnam at that time, and had it been met, I would have spent the remainder of my national service obligation garrisoned in Townsville in my native Queensland. Instead, my unit posting was 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (7RAR), which shortly after I was marched in, was warned for operational service in Vietnam.

In the early stages of my service during recruit and Corps training, I was never offered any opportunity to decline service in Vietnam, either formally or informally, and that same situation was maintained after my posting, in July 1969, to 7RAR. Throughout the lead-up to embarkation on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1970, no opportunity to opt out was presented. Although I had exercised every opportunity to avoid service in Vietnam through corps and unit preferences, military manpower requirements came first. This personal experience was used as a framework to develop the focus questions for the survey.

### **The Legislation and The Mythology**

Even without knowledge through personal experience, the ANZAC Day Commemoration Committee's statement was questionable. The third national service scheme with its birthday ballot would have been completely unnecessary had there been sufficient willing volunteers to



support manning the nine infantry battalions which were rotated through Vietnam between 1965 and 1972. Another consideration throwing this statement into doubt was the fact that any commander giving national servicemen the option to decline operational service would have been in breach of the *National Service Act 1964*.<sup>5</sup> The act legislated that once enlisted, no distinction was to be made between regular soldiers and national servicemen regarding unit and corps postings. As noted above, the driving concern was the army's manpower requirements.

A mythology had developed which was durable enough to be presented as historical fact on a website provided to school students encouraged to commemorate ANZAC Day.<sup>6</sup> My discovery of this myth promoted on a website for schools used to teach young Australians the facts of our military history was sufficient encouragement to undertake this project. Perhaps the statement on the ANZAC Day Commemoration Committee's website for schools was correct and my experience was unique.

## **Recruitment**

A cross section of ex-national servicemen was recruited for the study using invitations in social media, unit newsletters, veterans' networks, and chain referral. Chain referral, also known as "snowballing", is a strategy associated with respondent-driven sampling and is used as a

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<sup>5</sup> Australian Government, National Service Act, 1964, Federal Register of Legislation, accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C1964A00126>

<sup>6</sup> Mark Dapin, *Australia's Vietnam, Myth Vs History*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2019, P 21.

method to recruit participants who then recruit others they know to participate, and so on.<sup>7</sup> An anticipated study size of fifty participants was planned, but it quickly became apparent, because of the consistency of responses, that fifteen interviews would supply sufficient data to develop reliable conclusions. Efforts were made to secure a cross section of participants, acknowledging a spread of rank, corps and posting, but most participants were ex-infantry. Given that the largest proportion of serving members in Vietnam were posted in infantry units, this distribution is appropriate.

Invitations were included in unit newsletters and other publications as described above, and when prospective participants expressed interest, a participants' information statement and a consent form were forwarded. These documents can be perused in Appendix 2.

## **Interviews**

Participants were interviewed using two different questionnaires (see Appendix 1) either face-to-face, or via telephone. Because a proportion of the participants may have been traumatised by their war service, extensive precautions were taken to ensure their safety. These precautions included disclaimers referring participants to support agencies, questions that avoided direct reference to traumatic events, and

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<sup>7</sup> Kelly E. Tenzek, *Snowball Subject Recruitment* In: [The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods](https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411) Chapter DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411>

a methodology that ensured that the veterans were secure and supported during the interviews.

Written participant consent was secured prior to interview, all interviews were recorded, transcribed, and copies sent to participants for revision, if necessary, post interview. The results were analysed, patterns and consistencies observed, and conclusions drawn.

## **Hypotheses**

These conclusions were compared with the following hypotheses –

1. Most national servicemen do not remember being given opportunities to avoid operational service in Vietnam. Their memories contrasted with the substance of the material on the ANZAC Day commemoration site, and some of the news reporting at the time about enthusiastic patriots. It is untrue to say that “every” national serviceman who served in Vietnam was a volunteer.
2. Some national servicemen took the opportunity to volunteer for service in Vietnam through the early enlistment process available under the amendments to the *National Service Act 1964*. The motivations of those interviewed would coalesce around issues such as seeking adventure, family history, and escape from boredom. Patriotism would not loom large.
3. The news coverage at the time had little or no influence on decisions made by national servicemen interviewed about the

circumstances of their enlistment but did affect how they saw their service in hindsight, and how their memories have been shaped. These men were too occupied when in uniform with their immediate day-to-day survival to place much store in media tropes. Oral histories including the work of Mia Martin Hobbs, describe a range of stereotypes of Vietnam veterans including collective notions of victimhood, the volunteer Nasho, the noble and skilful digger, the absence of a welcome home, the taunts of “baby killer”, being banned from the RSL, and belated recognition. The veterans interviewed would acknowledge these tropes but would not identify strongly with them.<sup>8</sup>

However, they would acknowledge the significance of their experience in Vietnam as foundational to the shape of their lives. This study used oral history as a methodology and paid regard to the voices of these men, observing a duty of care to those elderly veterans who may have been traumatised by their experiences.

## **Study Goals**

The general goals of the project were threefold. It explored the ways in which the young men caught up in these commitments dealt with them, and the choices they made. It also sought to understand the memories and myths surrounding national service, through which the

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<sup>8</sup> Mia Martin Hobbs, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Volume 64, Issue 3, pp 480-497, *We went and did an Anzac job: Memory, Myth, and the Anzac Digger* in Vietnam 05 October 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12512>

government of the day ensured the availability of sufficient military manpower created by the strategic and political commitments it had made. Finally, it tested the influence of the news media on these veterans and investigated how the tone and content of journalism changed during the conflict.

## **Previous Studies**

This is a neglected area of scholarship in the context of Australian military history. National servicemen have been surveyed before, but these studies were general in nature and did not target options and choices. Jane Ross (1975)<sup>9</sup> conducted interviews with national servicemen in Vietnam, and Michael O'Brien (cited by Dapin in 2018)<sup>10</sup> surveyed members of 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, many of them national servicemen, after their return from Vietnam. A study conducted by Morris and Riseman in 2019 used interviews with national servicemen to examine the myth of the volunteer national serviceman, focusing on legislation relating to national service, government statements, military records, and the memories of Vietnam veterans, but did not use interviews with these men as their primary methodology<sup>11</sup>. These three studies will be discussed in greater detail in the review of literature in Chapter 2.

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<sup>9</sup> Jane Ross, *The conscript experience in Vietnam*, Australian Outlook, 01 December 1975, Vol.29(3), pp315-322.

<sup>10</sup> Michael O'Brien, cited in Mark Dapin, *Mythmaking and Memory, the Vietnam War and national service*, Ph D Thesis, USNW, 2018, P148

<sup>11</sup> Ben Morris & Noah Riseman, *Volunteers with a legal impediment: Australian national service and the question of overseas service in Vietnam*, Published online:11 Jun 2019, pp 266-286  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2019.1590151> Accessed 20th May 2023

The questions asked of the participants in this study were simple, open-ended, and concise. The first cohort (those conscripted for service in one of the sixteen ballots conducted between March 1965 and September 1972) were asked if they were given any opportunity to avoid service in Vietnam. In a series of sub questions, they were asked to specify the circumstances under which this option was offered, and whether they had heard of fellow soldiers being given this option. Members of the volunteer cohort were asked to remember their motives for joining up when they registered for national service without waiting for the ballot. Both groups were asked a question about the influence of the news and media on their decisions. Newspaper reports of ANZAC Day commemorations between 1964 and 1972 were reviewed for changes in tone and content.

The goal of the study is to establish as clearly as possible, what these men remember. These recollections of their options and choices will be placed both into the context of their service and the news coverage and myths that surrounded the last national service scheme. The thesis is organised in chapter form.

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## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

In order to make sense of the circumstances surrounding these veterans fifty years ago, a broad understanding of available literature dealing with the Vietnam war and national service is important. The broader context of the ANZAC tradition in the literature is also relevant, and attention is paid to its influence to help understand the reactions of these men, and the narrative that emerged after the war.

This review will consider a range of publications dealing with the issue, ranging from comprehensive official histories, works by popular military historians, memoirs written by veterans and their writings in newspapers and magazines. Studies that concentrate on oral histories that involve the national servicemen telling their own stories will be reviewed. Sources which have direct relevance to the issues covered by this study including the reliability of oral history will be identified. Reference will be made to previous studies involving interviews with Vietnam war veterans.

### **Official Histories**

The official histories of the conflict provide a reliable understanding of the course of the war, and the political and strategic background that explained its conduct. These works furnish authoritative and detailed

commentary and offer an accurate chronology of events, providing scaffolding for this study.<sup>12</sup> Official historians Ekins and McNeill had complete and unrivalled access to official records. These records included defence files which were classified and generally unavailable to other historians. They also conducted extensive interviews with participants, although these interviews were not their major focus. They also spoke with former Viet Cong fighters and investigated the Vietnamese communist histories. Their work is analytical and detached and deals frankly with both the successes and failures of the Australian task force between 1965 and 1972.

### **Background to the Commitment**

In order to develop an understanding of this general literature surrounding Australia's war in Vietnam, and the political environment of the time, it is useful to look at the narrative dealing with one aspect of the involvement, the circumstances leading up to the announcement of Australian troop deployment. A detailed account of the circumstances of Australia's entry into the war can be read in Michael Sexton's *War for the Asking*.<sup>13</sup> Sexton had access to leaked documents which revealed that Australian diplomats in Saigon worked frantically to generate a request from the then South Vietnamese government for troops to satisfy

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<sup>12</sup> Ashley Ekins with Ian McNeill, *Fighting to the Finish, The Australian Army, and the Vietnam War, 1968 - 1975*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2012

<sup>13</sup> Michael Sexton, *War for the Asking: Australia's Vietnam Secrets*, Penguin Paperback - January 1, 198, P 1.



Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies' political narrative. For the then government's justification to be credible, Menzies had to insist that sending Australian troops was a response to a South Vietnamese request. Sexton found the sequence was the other way round. The Menzies government secured a letter from American President Lyndon Johnson, thanking them for providing an infantry battalion to be sent to Vietnam. The appearance of this document was sufficient pressure to encourage the South Vietnamese president Phan Huy Quat to make the sought-after request before Menzies' intent was leaked to journalists.

Another account, this time by the popular historian Paul Ham, describes Menzies as presenting: "... the troop decision as an urgent response to a non-existent plea for military help"<sup>14</sup>

Three separate works, one an official history and two non-official accounts, have come to the same conclusion about the initial deployment. The influence of Australian journalism during this process should not be understated. As recorded by Bruce Davies in *Vietnam, the Complete History of the Australian War*, referring to the role of Australian journalists in the lead up to Menzies' announcement:

Questions and answers developed into a cat and mouse game with some very hazy and dubious replies. If asked for assistance, Australia would meet the request, Sir Garfield Barwick (Minister for External Affairs) answered one request 'Asked by whom, Sir?' 'By the Vietnamese', came the reply. 'Have you been asked yet?' 'Not by the Vietnamese' ..... And one questioner humorously enquired: 'Who will tell the Vietnamese to ask us?'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Ham, *Vietnam, The Australian War*, Harper Collins, Australia, P 123.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Davies, *Vietnam, the Complete History of the Australian War*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2012, P 71.

Except for left-wing newspapers such as the *Tribune*, and Rupert Murdoch's independently critical *The Australian*, founded in 1964, the news coverage was, as Peter Edwards describes it: "sombre but supportive".<sup>16</sup> The literature is consistent in its treatment of the circumstances surrounding the commitment to Vietnam. There is less agreement about choices given to national servicemen.

### **The Veterans' Voices and the Mythology**

This study searches for the voice of the veteran, especially the ex-national serviceman. Australian oral histories dealing with national service generally, and Vietnam in particular, are plentiful and available, most often in the form of edited collections of stories, anecdotes, and compilations. Structured interviews are rare. Literature dealing simultaneously with Australia's commitment in Vietnam and conscription can be organised into veterans' memoirs (some self-published), military publications (including unit and official histories) and works attributed to journalists specialising in military history. This last sub-group includes bestsellers authored by writers such as Paul Ham<sup>17</sup> and Max Hastings.<sup>18</sup> There is a plethora of American literature available about the war in Vietnam, but for the purposes of this study, only Jerry Lembke's work *The Spitting Image* has relevance to the Australian context.<sup>19</sup> Lembke notes

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2014, P122.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Ham, *Vietnam, The Australian War*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 2007

<sup>18</sup> Max Hastings, *Vietnam, An Epic Tragedy, 1945 - 1975*, William Collins, London, 2018

<sup>19</sup> Jerry Lembke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*, NYU Press, 1998

the absence of credible evidence of spitting on Vietnam veterans by anti-war activists and describes an empathetic and supportive relationship between American veterans and anti-war forces. Mark Dapin came to similar conclusions in the Australian context, although he did not examine the relationship between protestors and veterans, except to describe one incident in Adelaide involving violence in May 1970.<sup>20</sup>

Initially the works broadly relevant to Australia's commitment to Vietnam will be identified. How national service was incorporated into this, and how three works dealing specifically with the issues of identity, experience, and the changing attitudes of these men throughout the duration of their service will be considered. These were all issues that emerged through the voices of the ex-national servicemen interviewed.

In the chapters dealing with findings and discussions, the changing tone of news journalism to the conflict, as exemplified by a series of newspaper reports following ANZAC Day commemorations between 1965 and 1972 will be noted, and reference made to more recent treatment.

### **The Veterans Speak**

Australian memoirs written by the conscripts themselves conform to a narrative driven by regret and betrayal. They typically follow a pattern describing the initial shock of recruit training, the experience of operational service, the treatment of the authors after returning to

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<sup>20</sup> Mark Dapin, *Australia's Vietnam, Myth Vs History*, NewSouth, Sydney 2019, P182.

Australia, and their struggles with the psychological aftermath. Examples include *Well Done Those Men*,<sup>21</sup> *The Sharp End*,<sup>22</sup> and *A Jungle Circus*.<sup>23</sup>

For the first few years after the Australian withdrawal from Vietnam, very little appeared on the local literary scene which referenced the war, and what did emerge was bitter in tone. The fall of Saigon, five days after ANZAC Day in 1975 seemed to reinforce the message that the war was a debacle, best forgotten. For many Vietnam veterans this event compounded the moral injury they had suffered on returning to Australia to be met with indifference by most, and hostility by some.

Journalism reporting about the Vietnam war between 1975 and 1987 generally conveyed bad news. Saigon had fallen on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1975, and the lead-up to the capitulation had featured in almost daily news reports of battles lost and refugees fleeing the conflict. Once the fighting was over, reports in the Australian news media about Vietnam continued to reflect negative views of the war, and Australia's participation in it. This very negative view of the aftermath is probably best captured by Stuart Rintoul's *Ashes of Vietnam* which was published in 1987. This is a compendium of anecdotes by Vietnam veterans collected by Rintoul as interviews, which were initially broadcast by the ABC before being compiled in his book. The stories are exclusively stark, and very few of them are positive. Apart from conveying the reality of the conflict from the point of view of those who fought it, they reflect the attitude of many

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<sup>21</sup> Barry Heard, *Well Done Those Men*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2005

<sup>22</sup> Brian Hennessey, *At The sharp End, the trauma of a war in Vietnam*, Allen & Unwin, 1997

<sup>23</sup> Mike Towers, *A Jungle Circus*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1999

Australians towards the soldiers who felt rejected on return. How much of this was in the eye of the beholder (in this case Rintoul) and how much was reality is debatable.

Normie Rowe, the entertainer, was interviewed by Rintoul:<sup>24</sup>

When I came back, I did one concert, realised that it was all wrong — I looked around, felt uncomfortable, like I was on a different planet. I didn't know what to do on stage. For a long time, I didn't want to think about Vietnam, because the rest of the population of Australia didn't want to think about it. I said, 'That was two years out of my life, I don't want to know about it anymore'.

After an interval, however, a literary genre began to emerge which was largely a product of the experience of the soldiers, both national servicemen and regulars. It most often took the form of memoir, although several veteran-authored newspaper articles began to appear, usually around significant events, such as ANZAC Day, or the Long Tan battle anniversary. There was no special significance about the timing of the emergence of these writings, except that the veterans penning them by the mid 1980s had time to reflect on their experience, and some had written accounts, often for family, and occasionally for local newspapers.

The themes of shame, regret, and futility are characteristic of memoirs written by other national servicemen. Brian Hennessy served with 6RAR in 1967, and after his return from the war in Vietnam studied on a rehabilitation scholarship, subsequently graduating with a degree in education. He worked initially as a teacher and was promoted to the

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<sup>24</sup> Stuart Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam: Australian Voices*, January 1, 1987, Heinemann Australia

position of special school principal until he eventually succumbed to the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. Hennessey writes in his 1997 memoir *The Sharp End* –

“I should let matters rest now, but I can’t. I keep trying to end this war, but it still rages. And sometimes when I’m off the air, I reconstruct traumatic events that occurred all those years ago in an effort to come to terms with their reality, searching for some special insight that might reveal itself if I go over them one more time. It’s a futile exercise because these events stand as they are in frozen fruitless indifference.”<sup>25</sup>

Hennessey eventually overcame his PTSD by challenging himself to set up a successful consultancy business in China.

Guilt also emerges as a theme in Barry Heard’s memoir, *Well Done Those Men* -

Today I feel no bitterness, only sadness, as I move amongst my veteran friends and see their depression, poor health, isolation, and struggles. They now have opportunities to improve their lot and are well catered for by governments. But, for many, the guilt remains. They are not like the Second World War veterans I saw as a youngster on those wonderful ANZAC days. I believe, for many Vietnam Veterans, nothing will make them feel deserving enough.<sup>26</sup>

A professional soldier who served with distinction expresses regret:

My concern is simple. Regardless of the political and ethical considerations of whether a war should have been fought by foreign troops on the soil of Vietnam (that will always be a matter of endless debate), I remember with sadness that over 500 Australians were killed in that war and many more wounded and maimed; over 50,000 Americans lost their lives. And we left. And we lost. We mustn't do that with our men and women. Sending troops to war is without doubt the most difficult and agonising decision for any leader.

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<sup>25</sup> Brian Hennessey, *At The Sharp End, The Trauma of a war in Vietnam*, Allen & Unwin, 1997, P 139.

<sup>26</sup> Barry Heard, *Well Done Those Men*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2005, viii.

My advice to leaders is never to take the decision lightly and, having done so, never to stop until the outcome is worth the cost.<sup>27</sup>

General Peter Cosgrove was not a national serviceman, but his sentiments echo those of the national servicemen he commanded in his rifle platoon in 9 RAR in 1969. It is abundantly clear that the tone of the memoirs written by the national servicemen does not mesh well with the stereotype of the Australian digger as represented in the ANZAC myth.<sup>28</sup>

Laconic, confident and self-assured reporters with a disdain for convention and authority, like Neil Davis, promoted these same larrikin instincts in the ANZAC tradition, but they had given way to something very different.<sup>29</sup> The national psyche had shifted a great deal between 1964 and 1972.

### **Overcoming the Weathering of Memory**

Essential to the success of the project was a choice of a methodology which overcame what can be described as the “weathering of memory”. Subjects were ex-service personnel, all men in their seventh decade. Memory for this group was shaped by time, their experiences, their wounds, both emotional and physical, and the political and social context of their lives. A significant hurdle to be overcome was the difficulty in separating what participants genuinely remembered from what they believed they remembered.

This problem of weathered memory is acknowledged by many journalists and historians. Peter Stanley, in his discussion relative to veterans of the Pacific campaign in World War Two, observed:

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Cosgrove, *My Story*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 2006, P105.

<sup>28</sup> C.E.W. Bean, *Anzac to Amiens*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1946, P181.

<sup>29</sup> Josie Vine, *The Larrikin Paradox: An Analysis of Larrikinism’s Democratic Role in Australian Journalism*, PhD Thesis, (Deakin University) School of Applied Communication Department of Journalism RMIT, University February 2009, P 225.

We have learned a great deal over the years about how we remember the past as well as what we remember of it. We know that the 'voice of the past' is really the voice of the present with a selective memory; our understanding today shapes our memories of the past, a contention borne out by listening to memories of 1942.<sup>30</sup>

Another barrier to be overcome was the substantial lapse of time.

In O'Brien's work carried out in 1990, the recollections had aged 20 years. For this project the time lapse is over 50 years. The unreliability of the official accounts which I had initially hoped could be used as scaffolding for specific situations is simply another complicating factor. My search of army records did not reveal reports of "opt-out" parades. It is possible that they did occur, but were not recorded as they would have, if formally conducted, been in breach of the *National Service Act 1964*.

As recounted in the introduction to this study, mythology can become so embedded in news accounts and written history, that separating all trace of it from any oral history can be very challenging. The task was not to remove all trace of myth from the historical record, but to identify and acknowledge it. Mythology can be defined as a series of untested but attractive assumptions. An example of an attractive assumption is the notion that volunteering is more honourable than conscription in the context of Australian military history, as in the highly sanitised and heroic news accounts of ANZAC volunteers in World War One.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is possible that subjects may have coloured their responses with this attractive assumption. To acknowledge the possibility, the questions in the survey designed for those soldiers conscripted acknowledged this and asked them to report any anecdotes they may have heard about opportunities to opt out of

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Stanley, *Invading Australia: Japan and the battle for Australia, 1942*, Penguin Sydney, 2008, P 243.

<sup>31</sup> Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath, *Witnesses To War - The History Of Australian Conflict Reporting*, Melbourne University Press, April 2011, P 40.



service in Vietnam, even if they were never offered the choice themselves. This question allowed for identifying the myth, if it existed.

In the quest for honest reports of recall, there were several obstacles to be overcome in this project, and a few additional sub-methodologies were employed to this purpose. The first complication was the problem of the narrative of identity, as conceptualised by Antoinette Errante in her work as an oral historian interviewing in Mozambique after the African Border Wars.<sup>32</sup> She describes how the discipline of oral history, when implemented in the interview situation, creates a narrator/listener relationship, in which the listener is the interviewer, and the subject the narrator. The person being interviewed – the narrator – almost always assumes a conscious or subconscious identity during the process. This identity may distort recall. The subjects of this study are exclusively Vietnam veterans, and it is reasonable to assume that this was the identity they adopted in their narration of their experience. This was not necessarily a problem, so long as I was aware of it. In addition, the prior separation of the two groups of veterans into volunteers and conscripts, avoided the possibility of one or the other group members adopting a false identity, which could skew the information provided. In addition, as I was the listener in this study as a fellow veteran, the participant had nothing to prove by consciously or subconsciously putting identity ahead of factual recall.

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<sup>32</sup> Antoinette Errante, *But Sometimes You're Not Part of the Story: Oral Histories and Ways of Remembering and Telling*, Source: Educational Researcher, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Mar. 2000), pp16-27 Published by: American Educational Research Association Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1177053> Accessed: 30-10-2022 03:15 UTC

Examples of less personal and more analytical approaches to memoir are Terry Burstall's *A Soldier Returns*<sup>33</sup> and *Answering the Call*,<sup>34</sup> by Bob Grandin. Burstall's work holds credibility because of his membership of 6RAR as an infantry soldier during the Battle of Long Tan in August 1966, and his return to Vietnam in 1987 when he interviewed local Vietnamese who lived near the site of the battle. One of those interviewed by Burstall was Nguyen Thanh Hong (Hai) who was the Viet Cong officer responsible for the planning of the incident which developed into the battle of Long Tan. Burstall describes his interview with Hai –

Hai said it was left to him to plan the attack. He decided upon what he described as "the luring of the tiger from the mountain". This tactic would not only test the Australians in battle, he reasoned, but also give him a clue to the "characteristics of the Australian commanders' thinking". By this, he said, he meant the reaction that the Task Force would take to provocation by the VC. The plan was for the 275 Regiment to move close to the Task Force and to mortar the base. This occurred on the night of 16 August 1966 and Hai said that elements of the 275 as well as some members of the D445 were involved.<sup>35</sup>

The significance of Burstall's account, as a member of 6 RAR, is that it differs substantially from published sources discussed in this chapter, including the official histories, and departs substantially from the after-action reports of the incident described as an encounter battle.<sup>36</sup> The question that emerges from this departure focuses on the reliability of oral histories.

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<sup>33</sup> Terry Burstall, Burstall, Terry, *A Soldier Returns*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1997

<sup>34</sup> Bob Grandin, Grandin, Bob, *Answering the Call: Life of a helicopter pilot in Vietnam and beyond*, Big Sky Publishing, 2019

<sup>35</sup> Op. Cit. P 99.

<sup>36</sup> DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) (2020), *Battle of Long Tan*, DVA Anzac Portal, accessed 30 March 2023, <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/vietnam-war-1962-1975/events/combat/battle-long-tan>

Community division about the war in Vietnam is reflected in literature such as *Save our Sons* (Carolyn Collins)<sup>37</sup> and Ric Teague's *Born on Anzac Day*.<sup>38</sup> Teague's work is relevant, as it describes the service, return to Australia, and subsequent apparent suicide of an indigenous soldier, Allan Aldenhoven, who served at the same time in the same unit (B Coy, 7 RAR) as myself and the indigenous volunteer whose interview is reported in Chapter 4. Aldenhoven served with distinction as an infantry section commander in Vietnam. He encountered hostility to his service in Adelaide in an incident described by Teague and died in police custody in Adelaide in February 1979. Teague wrote that this hostility was a contributing factor to his demise.

### **The Veterans Write**

Self-published memoirs (for example *Contact, Wait Out*,<sup>39</sup> by Bruce Ravenscroft and *Fun, Fear, Frivolity, a Tale of the Vietnam War*,<sup>40</sup> by Ian Cavanaugh) vary in quality, but provide a raw and authentic insight into veterans' views of their experiences. They expose the emotion the veteran authors invest in the narrative which has implications for my methodology. As noted above, the official histories are qualitatively very different accounts from personal memoir and unit journals.

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<sup>37</sup> Carolyn Collins, *Save our Sons, Women, dissent and conscription during the Vietnam War*, Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2021, P 244.

<sup>38</sup> Ric Teague, *Born on Anzac Day*, Rosenberg, Dural, 2015, P 237.

<sup>39</sup> Bruce Ravenscroft, *Contact - Wait Out*, Self-Published, Lismore Printery, Lismore, 1997

<sup>40</sup> Ian Cavanaugh, *Fun Fear Frivolity: A tale of the Vietnam War by an Aussie Grunt*, Kindle Edition, 2019

## Previous Surveys

Embedded in these writings about the soldiers' experiences are a small number of formal surveys of Australian troops who served in the Vietnam war. These should be considered in the background to this project because they provide guides for the data collection, and their results provide a baseline for comparison between attitudes fifty years ago and those apparent today in the men interviewed for this study. Some of these surveys target attitudes but none have targeted choices in any depth. In chronological order, the relevant body of work includes collections by Jane Ross in 1969-70, Michael O'Brien in 1991, Robert Hall in 2000, and Mia Martin Hobbs in 2018.

Jane Ross visited Vietnam as a civilian during the war and conducted interviews with soldiers of all corps in country. She later (in 1989) interviewed additional veterans for an oral history project through the Australian War Memorial.<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that O'Brien's and Hall's subjects were all members of Infantry battalions.<sup>42</sup> In the case of O'Brien, the unit was 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (7 RAR), and for Hall, 8 RAR.<sup>43</sup> Both authors were serving officers at the time of the interviews. O'Brien and Hall conducted their surveys in Australia, well after the subjects had completed active service, but Ross as a civilian, interviewed personnel on active service in a war zone.

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<sup>41</sup> Jane Ross, *The conscript experience in Vietnam*, Australian Outlook, 01 December 1975, Vol.29(3), pp315-323.

<sup>42</sup> Michael O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars – With the Seventh Battalion in Vietnam*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995

<sup>43</sup> Robert A Hall, *Combat Battalion: The eighth battalion in Vietnam*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 2000

Both Hall and O'Brien were collecting material for later books. In Hall's case, *Combat Battalion*, and in O'Brien's, *Conscripts and Regulars*. O'Brien, a two-tour veteran of Vietnam, used interview techniques which produced by 1991 an archive of data he used in *Conscripts and Regulars*. The data consists of more than two hundred completed questionnaires distributed amongst former members of 7 RAR who took part in one or other of the battalion's two tours of duty. Hall's strategy, implemented in 2000, was similar. O'Brien's interviews took place during 1991, twenty-one years after the service of his subjects in Vietnam, and twenty-nine years earlier than this study.

O'Brien and Hall came to very similar conclusions. They accepted that the attitudes of national servicemen differed very little from those of regular soldiers in all aspects of recollections of their service. Ross, on the other hand, found that these attitudes were poles apart. She concluded that national servicemen often did:

...the least possible without overtly defying the authorities or actively negating the behavioural prescriptions of the role...[and] the most striking feature was their almost complete lack of commitment to the army, to its efforts in Vietnam, to being a soldier.<sup>44</sup>

Ross' different conclusions, drawn from interviews with young soldiers in a war zone during active service may be explained by her civilian status, the timing, and perhaps her gender. Those interviewed by a female civilian in Vietnam during the war may have been more

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<sup>44</sup> Op.Cit. P315.

spontaneous and unguarded than the subjects who responded to both O'Brien and Hall, both uniformed commissioned officers studying attitudes decades after the event.

Jane Ross returned to interviewing Vietnam veterans much later in 1989. In an interview with veteran Brian Day, a regular soldier who had served twice in Vietnam. In 1967 he was a Corporal, and in 1971-72 he served as a Temporary Warrant-Officer Class 2. She asked about the problem of official accounts differing from oral histories as reported by the soldiers in the field. His response was more about the individual soldier's isolated experience than it was about official accounts:

Because I know all this detail now, but as a soldier on the ground, as a corporal, all you know is what's happening around you, immediately around you. You have no idea really of the overall picture. Anything outside of the unit that I was attached with was merely, 'You have a mob on the right and a mob on the left'. The overall picture really, at soldier level, was not very interesting anyway. There are more pressing, important things. That is, yourself, your survival, your friend's survival and doing what you must do or what you're supposed to do. So, the overall picture really comes out later, and you think, 'Oh, is that what we were doing?'<sup>45</sup>

This response describes an understanding, also observed in this researcher's interviews, that soldiers in this war against an insurgency were concerned most clearly with their individual situations, and the survival of a small group of men at section or platoon level. This may help to explain why impacts from the wider world, especially through the media, faded into the background and relates to a hypothesis

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<sup>45</sup> Australian War Memorial sound collection, Jane Ross, Oral History Recording, Brian Day, December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1989, P 5.

that the daily reality of small group survival in jungle warfare outweighs external factors such as sanitised accounts published in newspapers.

Ross asked Day about how the situation changed for the Vietnamese people between his first and second tours:

'Did the situation change rapidly between 1967 and 1971?'

"If the Government troops came and got you first and took you away, you were in the Government forces, and then your family was open to retribution. The actual little VC soldier or the government soldier, politically most of them didn't care less, all they wanted to do was live and they wanted their families to live. But that was the sorry part of it."

'On your first tour did you have any feeling like this?'

"No, not at all".<sup>46</sup>

In this series of questions relating to the attitude of the Vietnamese people, and the despair they felt, especially as the reality of impending withdrawal of foreign forces loomed, Day reflects a significant decline of morale, of both civilian population and the military sent to protect them. Declining morale became a major issue, more so in American than Australian units once the drawdown had been announced. Incidences of "fragging", a name given by American soldiers to incidents in which officers, both commissioned and non-commissioned, were targeted and killed using hand grenades by angry disillusioned soldiers reached epidemic proportions in American units.<sup>47</sup>

Mia Martin Hobbs has surveyed veterans and written about this topic:<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid P13.

<sup>47</sup> J. Michael Ferguson, *Fragging: Why U.S. Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam*. By George Lepre. Pages 216-218 | Published online: 1<sup>st</sup> Dec 2019

<sup>48</sup> Mia Martin Hobbs, *We went and did an Anzac job: Memory, Myth, and the Anzac Digger in Vietnam*, University of Melbourne, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*: Volume 64, Issue 3.

'What was your impression when you were there, about the people wanting to go to Vietnam? Do you think that most of them who were in the army said, 'Since I'm in I might as well go?'

"Oh yes, oh yes. There is a certain thing ... prestige being a professional soldier, you must have the ribbons that denote that you are a professional soldier. There were some staff members in Kapooka who had not been to Vietnam, usually because of medical grounds. I'd gone to Kapooka because I was medically downgraded after my service. Other people had gone to Kapooka because they couldn't go to Vietnam, medically, sergeants, warrant officers. Most people looked upon them as failures because they had not fulfilled their role as a professional soldier".

### **The Third Scheme**

The third national service scheme (1964-72) culminated in the conscription of 63,735 young men from the pool of 804,286 registrants. Of these, some 15,300 served in Vietnam. This means that 567,238 were "balloted out" because their birthdates weren't drawn in one of the sixteen ballots conducted between 1964 and 1972. The status of the men who saw active service, is clear. They were in the army (and subsequently in Vietnam), literally through an accident of birth. Of that cohort, some who registered early when they had turned eighteen years and nine months were indeed volunteers, but a breakdown of the numbers of these early registrants is not archived. They are undisguisable on the Department of Veterans Affairs nominal roll, as their regimental numbers have the second numeral "7", the same as all other national servicemen. It is theoretically possible to identify early registrants by comparing balloted birthdates with birthdates of Vietnam veterans shown on the nominal roll. An anomaly should identify a volunteer, but that onerous



process involving over 15000 names has not been undertaken for this project.

### **What is a Volunteer?**

The language describing the status of the remaining fifty thousand plus, the subject of this study, needs to be clarified. Mia Martin-Hobbs concludes that there is a trope that national servicemen, who went to Vietnam for a variety of reasons, including mateship, family tradition and a quest for adventure are described as volunteers.<sup>49</sup> This trope defies the logic of the conditions of national service, and mocks the language, but it is durable, and persists in the literature. Put simply, a volunteer is someone who “offers to do something of his or her own free will, such as a soldier who is not conscripted”.<sup>50</sup> This dictionary definition is apt, as it uses the example of conscription to define what volunteering is not.

Apart from the dictionary definition, there is a logical problem with the trope of the volunteer Nasho. If a twenty-year-old had decided to volunteer for military service, he could have done so by presenting himself to a recruitment depot. Those men balloted into the army because of their birthdates did not take this action. Once enlisted, they went along with the probability of operational service, but it would require a severe mauling of the English language to describe them as volunteers.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. P 485.

<sup>50</sup> Heinemann Australian Student Dictionary, 6th Edition, Heinemann Sydney 1999, P 1390.

## Dapin's Work

As covered above, Mark Dapin's published works on the topic of national service focus on the reliability of the recollections of veterans, and he addressed the myth of the volunteer by devoting a chapter of his most recent work to the issue. His monographs, the publications of which were separated by five years, are the *Nashos War* in 2014,<sup>51</sup> and *Australia's Vietnam – Myth Vs History* in 2019.<sup>52</sup> These were noted above, but his PhD thesis is a more detailed source of information relevant to this project.<sup>53</sup>

Dapin travelled some distance conceptually in the interval between his first and second works, discovering many of the assumptions he accepted as fact for *The Nashos War* were mythology. His almost forensic approach to *Myth Vs History* was informed by the research completed for his PhD revealing the unreliability of the narrative he initially accepted.

This unreliability is also analysed by Jerry Lembke in the American context. Dapin's thesis explains it as largely a product of a powerful popular culture which effectively distorts the soldiers' experience. This media context is undoubtedly entertaining but serves to distort the wartime reality and the veterans' recollections of it. In *the Spitting Image*,<sup>54</sup> Lembke analyses and debunks the narrative that Vietnam

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<sup>51</sup> Mark Dapin, *The Nasho's War*, Viking, Penguin Imprint, 2014

<sup>52</sup> Mark Dapin, *Australia's Vietnam – Myth Vs History*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2019

<sup>53</sup> Mark Dapin, *Mythmaking and Memory: Australia, the Vietnam War, and National Service*, Ph D Thesis, UNSW, 2018

<sup>54</sup> Jerry Lembke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*, NYU Press, 1998

veterans were generally “losers”, mentally damaged, and victims of the war. He posits that American popular culture through cinematic productions such as *The Deer Hunter*<sup>55</sup> (1978), *Apocalypse Now*<sup>56</sup> (1979) *Platoon*<sup>57</sup> (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket*<sup>58</sup> (1987) overwhelmed attitudes after the war and helped shaped the veterans’ understandings of it.

Dapin follows Lembke’s approach and shows in *Myth Vs History*<sup>59</sup> that the perceptions held by many Australians, including the veterans themselves, are far from reliable. He explains that he formed his initial misguided beliefs after interviewing hundreds of ex national servicemen. The fact that he initially believed these myths and consolidated them in *The Nashos War*<sup>60</sup> is significant for this project. A comparison of Lembke’s work with Dapin’s two monographs provides an explanation for the latter’s similar journey with Australian Vietnam veterans.

As noted above, Dapin’s *Australia’s Vietnam – Myth vs History* contains a chapter devoted to the issue of national servicemen volunteering for Vietnam, the focus of this study. In this chapter he traces the origin of what he calls the “myth of the volunteer in Vietnam”, pointing out that it originated in a chapter written by John Healy in a work produced for the Royal Australian Regiment, and edited by David Horner.<sup>61</sup> The assertion that all national servicemen were given the

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<sup>55</sup> Michael Cimino, *The Deer Hunter*, Universal Pictures, 1978

<sup>56</sup> Frances Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*, United Artists, 1979

<sup>57</sup> Oliver Stone, *Platoon*, Hemdale Film Corporation, 1986

<sup>58</sup> Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*, Warner Brothers, 1987

<sup>59</sup> Mark Dapin, *Australia’s Vietnam – Myth Vs History*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2019

<sup>60</sup> Mark Dapin, *The Nasho’s War*, Viking, Penguin Imprint, 2014

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, P 22.

chance not to go was repeated in Paul Ham's *Vietnam, the Australian War*, in which he described a signed form which national servicemen allegedly completed during training which specified that they were volunteering for overseas service.<sup>62</sup> I located no such form on my record of service, and my only recollection of paperwork referring to choices related to Corps and unit preferences, neither of which were granted. The men interviewed reported the same, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Nevertheless, despite Dapin's work, my recollection, and the information gleaned in interviews for this study, many veterans, especially long serving regular soldiers continue to insist that all national servicemen volunteered. The myth seems to have originated from two sources: from David Horner's *Duty First* the fact that some units had (illegally, and in defiance of the *National Service Act 1964*), asked conscripts to sign volunteer forms; and the framing some Coalition politicians put on 'volunteering' when they declared that not signing up for the Citizens Military Forces (a way of avoiding the National Service ballot) made them volunteers by default.<sup>63</sup> As noted above, Mia Martin Hobbs's references to the ANZAC myth, including a combination of mateship, family tradition and a quest for adventure help to provide a rationalisation for this belief.

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<sup>62</sup> Ham, *Vietnam, The Australian War*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2007, P 170.

<sup>63</sup> Noel Turnbull, *The myth and the veterans' problems that will not die*, Pearls and Irritations, John Menadue's Public Policy Journal, Sep 11, 2020, <https://johnmenadue.com/the-myth-and-the-veterans-problems-that-will-not-die/> Accessed 2nd May, 2023

To make this review of the literature meaningful, it is important to consider how the characteristics of the men interviewed and their attitudes to their service are reflected in the literature about Australia's war in Vietnam, national servicemen in that war, and the relationship between the two.

## **News Media**

To arrive at a thorough understanding of the motivations and attitudes towards national service for the veterans involved, this project considered how they were influenced by the media prior to their enlistment, during their service, and across the decades since. As this is written, the influence of journalism and the media, especially social media, continues to be a major topic of discussion in the Australian community. Social media was used to recruit for this study, but was not a factor six decades ago, although it undoubtedly has influenced the veterans surveyed more recently. The plethora of social media sites set up and frequented by service veterans is an indication of this.<sup>64</sup>

The questionnaires used for both cohorts of veterans (volunteers and conscripts) posed a dedicated question probing the influence of the media. Before examining and analysing the participants' responses to this specific enquiry, the role of journalism and the media during Australia's commitment to the conflict was analysed. In addition, it was important to

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<sup>64</sup> Ex-Service Organisation directory RSL Queensland; <https://rslqld.org/find-help/eso-directory>;  
Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2023

consider whether the approach of the media at the time helped to explain why most conscripts enlisted without protest, and elements of an explanation emerged throughout the interview process.

The news media's treatment of the experience of Vietnam veterans after the war was also considered, as whilst it would not have contributed to attitudes and motivations of those surveyed prior to their service, it obviously had potential to influence their views fifty years after enlistment.

### **Three Chronologies**

This chapter is organised across three chronologies. The first deals with the period of six years between the deployment of the first cohort of Australian national servicemen in 1966 and the departure of the last in 1972. The complete Australian involvement continued for ten years (1962-72) but the first and last soldiers deployed were regulars. The drawdown of Australian forces began in 1970 leading to full withdrawal in 1972.

The second period covers what has been called "The Decade of Silence"<sup>65</sup> from 1972 until the Welcome Home march in 1987. The third component relates to the period of more than thirty-five years that followed that reconciliatory march and includes a brief examination of genres of cinema and fictional narrative.

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<sup>65</sup> Peter Yule, *The Long Shadow, Australia's Vietnam Veterans Since the War*, NewSouth 2020, P 149.

Looking at the first of the three chronologies noted above, newspapers of the time (1962 – 1972) reflect both the strength and universality of the ANZAC tradition, but also the change in the social context that occurred across the eight-year period and beyond. These social changes are reflected in changes in the tone of the reporting.

Denis Warner, a doyen amongst Australian war correspondents, wrote in the Melbourne Herald in May 1962:

“Why is Australia getting involved in the Vietnam war? .... It’s a sort of life insurance cover.”<sup>66</sup>

Max Hastings, in *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945 – 1975*, commented:

“The premiums got steeper. In 1969, the number of Australians serving in Vietnam peaked at 7672, of whom five hundred died”.<sup>67</sup>

On 29 April 1965 Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced in parliament that Australia would send a battalion of combat troops to Vietnam. The National Museum of Australia observed that when the announcement was made, the press reaction was generally positive, and reflected popular opinion at the time, as indicated in a Gallup poll taken two weeks after the announcement.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Denis Warner, Melbourne Herald 12 May 1962, quoted in Peter Edwards, *Some Reflections on the Australian Government’s Commitment to the Vietnam War*, Jeffrey Grey and Jeff Doyle (eds), Australia’s Vietnam War, Texas A&M University Press, 2002, P 7.

<sup>67</sup> Max Hastings. *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945 – 1975*, William Collins, London, 2018, P 124.

<sup>68</sup> Defining Moments: National Museum of Australia: Australian troops committed to Vietnam <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/Australian-troops-committed-to-Vietnam#:~:text=On%2029%20April%201965%20Prime,communism%20in%20South%2DEast%20Asia>. Accessed 12.02.23.

According to the U.S. Department of State, in the early sixties, the Australian press was generally content to rationalise the commitment based on obligations to the Americans, even though the ANZUS Treaty did not apply to this situation. ANZUS does not (and did not in the early sixties) require Australia, New Zealand or the United States to provide military support to each other. Signatories were required only to respond to acts which constituted a common danger. A Communist insurgency on the Asian mainland did not meet this criterion.<sup>69</sup>

### **Controlling the Narrative?**

The political narrative shaping Australia's relationship with Vietnam in the period 1965 – 72 is comparatively uncomplicated. It was framed in the context of the cold war between Communism and the West, originating in the McCarthy era in the USA, and Australia's role in this. There was also the history of the Korean conflict and the notion that the Americans had delivered Australia from an Imperial Asian invasion between 1940 and 1943.

There has been a great deal of debate about the news coverage of the war in Vietnam and its influence on the outcome. Much of it examines the role of the correspondents covering the war in Vietnam and the access they had to the soldiers serving. Rodney Tiffen, writing in 1983,

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<sup>69</sup> US Department of State, Office of the Historian, MILESTONES: 1945–1952 The Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty (ANZUS Treaty), 1951, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/anzus#:~:text=The%20Australia%2C%20New%20Zealand%20and%20United%20States%20Security%20Treaty%2C%20or,security%20relationship%20between%20their%20countries.> Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2023.



saw Australian news media as 'overwhelmingly timid ... [with a] far more restricted range of opinion and analysis ... deplorably inferior to their American counterparts'.<sup>70</sup> Other analyses have attempted to clarify this judgement of timidity and blamed it on efforts made by government, the ADF, and news editors and managers to curate the content and presentation of war news.<sup>71</sup> Prue Torney-Parlicki claimed that Australia 'discovered' Asia and the Pacific through the eyes of correspondents going back as far as newsreel cameraman Damien Parer, and investigative journalists Osmar White, and Denis Warner during World War Two.

As a soldier, I had personal experience of this curation when the then Minister for Defence, Malcolm Fraser, visited my platoon and company at Nui Dat in April 1970 after Operation Finschhafen and before Operation Cung Chung. Fraser approached me, trailed by a senior officer from Army Public Relations, and asked me what I thought about being in the army in Vietnam. My answer was that I was "doing OK" but would prefer to be posted to Education Corps undertaking Civil Action work rather than Infantry, as I was a teacher. Fraser's response was, "Well if you're in the army, you might as well be a fighting soldier". I was about to reply that my preference was not to be in the army in any case, but Fraser was hustled away before that opportunity was presented. The senior public relations officer could see the direction in which the conversation was heading. This "shepherding" of the media was typical of

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<sup>70</sup> Rodney Tiffen, *News Coverage of Vietnam*, in P. King (ed.), *Australia's Vietnam: Australia in the Second IndoChina War* (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), 167, 187.

<sup>71</sup> P Torney-Parlicki, *Somewhere in Asia*, 194-5, P 206-7.

the army's handling of the press where they were able to manage it, but many freelance journalists refused to be shepherded.

Correspondents such as Peter Davis were more interested in authentic and stark portrayals of those involved in the conflict, the fighting soldiers, and generally relied on the military simply to get them to the conflict locations, which was an important aspect of cooperation. These reports were delivered to the public audience as television footage, and their immediacy undoubtedly influenced public perceptions, which gradually became negative.

### **Cinema and Television**

Reviews of the 1979 production *The Odd Angry Shot*, the screenplay directed and written by Tom Jeffrey, and adapted from the novel by William L. Nagle, generally note its realistic depiction in comparison with the American Vietnam genre movies of the time and downplay references to sentiment for or against the war.

In his review of *The Odd Angry Shot*, Jeff Doyle writes –

Jeffrey's film gives to the senior member of the squad, Harry, a series of statements. These define the political locus of the fighting man as the sticky-fingered politicians' playthings, as counters in the politicians' next election campaign.<sup>72</sup>

He contrasts this treatment with the overtly patriotic message contained in American cinema of the genre such as *Green Berets*.

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<sup>72</sup> Jeff Doyle, *Disremembering the Anzac Legend: Australian Popular Culture and the Vietnam War*, In *Representations and Reinterpretations of Australia's War in Vietnam*, Jeff Doyle and Jeffrey Grey, P 114.

For Doyle, the focus is on the section or squad, and the relationships between the diggers at that level, rather than any view of the war in a wider context. This is clearly expressed in the following dialogue between Harry, the section commander, played by Graeme Kennedy, and Bung played by John Hargreaves. In response to Bung's questioning the reasons for the war – the "Why are we here?" issue:

Because there's no one else and everyone's gotta be somewhere and you're here, so get used to it."<sup>73</sup>

The answer is delivered at a personal, rather than political level, and eloquently sums up the dilemma of the conscript (although in the movie, Bung was a volunteer). Doyle makes a connection here with the ANZAC myth, and its egalitarian appeal to the notion of a fair go -

"Harry's speeches expose the fact that the 'fair go' is a myth observed more in the breach".<sup>74</sup>

This is an allusion to the difficulty of the ANZAC myth accommodating the fact of a method of conscription through random birthdates, a process neither fair nor egalitarian.

Other reviews focus on the relationships forged between the members of the squad, and a sense of fatalistic complacency which seems to develop throughout the narrative. *The Odd Angry Shot* is significant for its timing, as it was the first product of the Australian cinema dealing with the war made during the decade of silence following the fall of Saigon in 1975. It also presents a narrative which focuses on the relationships

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, P119.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, P120.

between the diggers set in a background of deep absurdity. It projects the image of the laconic larrikin Australian digger against the contradictions of the situation in Vietnam, inferring that the archetype is a poor fit in that setting. *The Odd Angry Shot* also makes much of the above-mentioned significance of the relationships between the soldiers. For many national servicemen, there is no doubt that these relationships, which endure for decades, make perhaps the only sense of their experience. This theme emerged frequently in interview.

### **Three Veterans – Their Narratives**

Finally, for this review of the literature, I have chosen three works from the abundance of material available to specifically examine the relationship between the war and the national servicemen. The works are *Disquiet* (Paul Tapp)<sup>75</sup> *The year I Said Goodbye* (Peter Winter)<sup>76</sup> and *The Platoon Commander* (Ric Teague with John O'Halloran).<sup>77</sup>

Tapp wrote about a national serviceman called Joseph Gilewicz who was a member of my rifle platoon in Vietnam in 1970. Gilewicz was shot dead by police in a siege situation at Ploverata near Hobart in July 1991. A Tasmanian police ballistics officer, Stanislaw Hanuszewicz, called in to investigate the incident, became a whistleblower alleging a cover-up. Two subsequent Commissions of Inquiry (the Matterson inquest in 1991, and the 2000 Gilewicz Commission of Inquiry) were held into police handling

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<sup>75</sup> Paul Tapp, *Disquiet, The Justifiable Homicide of an Australian Vietnam Veteran*, Hobart, 1998

<sup>76</sup> Winter, Peter, *The Year I Said Goodbye*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, 2003

<sup>77</sup> John O'Halloran with Ric Teague, *The Platoon Commander*, Hachette, Sydney, 2021

of the situation. Both inquiries absolved police of misconduct. The behaviour Gilewicz exhibited after returning from Vietnam showed he was obviously affected by his service. Gilewicz was a volunteer initially keen to serve. He was born on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1948, a date not drawn in the eighth national service ballot held on 13th September 1968. His parents were Polish refugees. It is likely that his motives for volunteering may have included a strong belief in the merits of the deployment, given his heritage, and his death was likely an outcome of the trauma of his service and how he was treated on return.

The relevance of Tapp's *Disquiet* to this study is embedded in the fact that Tapp, Hanuszewicz and Gilewicz have only one characteristic in common. They are all Vietnam veterans. In chapter 5, I describe the bonds of identity forged in training for, and service in Vietnam which became obvious in the comments made at interview by the ex-national servicemen. It is significant that the author, Paul Tapp, was a national serviceman who toured with 7 RAR, (Gilewicz's unit) in 1967, and that Hanuszewicz, as regular soldier who served two tours of Vietnam, spent a considerable amount of time training national servicemen in Australia in the interim between these operational tours. Tapp makes it abundantly clear in the prologue to his work that his motivation for writing it was driven by his identity as a Vietnam veteran, and fellow feeling for the plights of both Gilewicz and Hanuszewicz.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Paul Tapp, *Disquiet, The Justifiable Homicide of an Australian Vietnam Veteran*, Hobart, 1998, P 5.

*Disquiet* is significant in that it consolidates the themes of mateship and loyalty that emerged consistently during interviews and coloured the attitudes and memories of the participants.

Another soldier that served in my unit in 1970 (at company, rather than platoon level) is Peter Winter, who was called up in the first national service ballot held on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1965. Winter was selected for officer training, graduated as a second lieutenant, and disembarked for Vietnam with 7 RAR in February 1970. He became platoon commander of 6 platoon B Coy, a companion unit to 5 platoon of which I was a member. Winter's book is a reflection on the separation from family endured by young men during the twelve-month duration of the tour. He was married with a ten-month-old son on embarkation, and his book uses the letters he wrote to his wife, and his subsequent reflections on them, forty years later, as its structure. Significant to information provided in interview by the participants in this study are his writings about the conflict towards the end of his tour. His attitude on departure for Vietnam on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1970, is noted:

.... I was a professional soldier, I believed in Australia's commitment to Vietnam, and I knew that overseas service, even if it was in a war zone, was part of the deal.<sup>79</sup>

Winter describes the burden of command, the relationships he developed with the men in his platoon which were generally positive, and

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<sup>79</sup> Peter Winter, *The Year I Said Goodbye*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, 2003, P 3.

those with his senior ranks (generally negative) and by the end of his narrative, his views on the conduct of the war:

I'm sick and tired of the whole thing now and feel that what we're doing is a waste of time. I'm convinced that most of the Vietnamese don't care who wins or who is in government, just as long as they can get some kind of normality in their lives. The younger generations need some kind of security for their future. If that is under the Communists, so be it.<sup>80</sup>

Winter signed on for a further sixteen years in the ADF and did not return to civilian life until 1986. Like many other Vietnam veterans, his first marriage did not last, and he was divorced from the recipient of the letters he wrote in Vietnam ten years after his return. He puts the origin of the end of the relationship down to the initial enforced separation while he was in Vietnam as well as the stresses created for soldiers' families by the nature of service life, both in war and peace. These themes from Winter's reflections of disillusionment about the war and the grief of separation were repeated by the participants in several interviews.

John O'Halloran was another national serviceman who was selected for officer training and commanded an infantry platoon in Vietnam in 1966-67 and was involved in the battle of Long Tan. He was decorated (Mentioned in Despatches) for his part in Operation Bribie, an action in which seven Australians were killed and another twenty-seven wounded.<sup>70</sup> In 2021 he co-wrote *The Platoon Commander* with Ric Teague.

In the last chapter, O'Halloran writes:

When I embraced national service, I did so with a sense of adventure, without thinking too much of the consequences. Unlike

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, P 220.

my late mate Gordon Sharpe, I did not analyse the rights and wrongs of conscription or the war in Indochina. None of us had any inkling of what was ahead of us. We were only pawns in the game.<sup>81</sup>

Whilst not expressed with O'Halloran's characteristic clarity, this sentiment was typical of the men interviewed.

## **An Indigenous Australian Volunteer**

Another veteran interviewed from the volunteer cohort was of indigenous background. The issue of conscription for Indigenous Australians has been discussed in detail in two different articles by Ann-Mari Jordens<sup>82</sup> in 1989 and Noah Riseman<sup>83</sup> in 2013 and has relevance for this veteran. Both Jordens and Riseman conclude from different standpoints that the government believed that managing conscription politically was difficult enough without complicating it with concerns about indigenous identity. The Department of Labour and National Service essentially left the issue well alone, and indigenous men could (and did) volunteer for the scheme. In summary, whilst indigenous young men were not required to register, some did, and some were called up, enlisted, and served in Vietnam. One of those was a soldier from my sub-unit, identified previously, for whom material from a 2005 interview is included in this project. Whilst this participant's information is exceptional

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<sup>81</sup> Anzac Portal, Australian Government, Department of Veterans Affairs, Australians in Operation Bribie 17 February 1967, <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/vietnam-war-1962-1975/events/combat/operation-bribie-1967> Accessed 23rd May 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Jordens, Ann-Mari. *AN ADMINISTRATIVE NIGHTMARE: ABORIGINAL CONSCRIPTION 1965-72*. Aboriginal History, vol. 13, no. 1/2, 1989, pp. 124-34. JST <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24045614>

<sup>83</sup> Noah Riseman, *The Curious Case of Mervyn Eades: National Service, Discrimination and Aboriginal People*, Australian Journal of Politics and History: Volume 59, Number 1, 2013, pp. 63-79.



in this study in that he was not specifically interviewed for it, but for an oral history research project conducted by the Museum of South Australia, the material he supplied for that project is completely relevant, readily accessible in the public domain, and is transferred to this study.<sup>84</sup>

In his interview the Indigenous Australian veteran reported that he believed that his background was a barrier to employment. Whilst he did not use the word “racism” in the body of the interview as a reason for volunteering, he was seeking fairer treatment in the military. This assumption cannot be confirmed, as the subject in this case was interviewed in 2005 and is now unavailable for health reasons. However, references can be traced throughout his interview to his belief that his indigenous background was no disadvantage in the military. He reported that this was the case when in training and on operational service, in contrast with what he had become accustomed to as a civilian, prior to military service.

#### **Four Themes – Politics, Betrayal, Cliché and Myth**

Reviewing the literature about Australia’s commitment to Vietnam, and the choices given to national servicemen and their attitudes towards it, reveals several observable themes. The deployment was political, rather than strategic, and most ex-national servicemen came to

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<sup>84</sup> Sue Anderson, State Library of South Australia, Digital Collection, Interview with Gil Green, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2005, <https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/4199> Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> May 2023

understand this post service. The popular histories do not pay much attention to the attitudes of national servicemen, and when they do, they reflect cliché. The veterans' voices are initially reflective of a sense of betrayal, but most find solace in the unique identity that service provided. Their experiences are clearly individual, and many of the vast generalisations made in the literature do not acknowledge this. Surveys conducted since the war with national servicemen and others struggle to find data that allows for generalised conclusions, and these conclusions are often contradictory.

Peter Yule's 2020 monograph, *The Long Shadow*, commissioned by the Australian War memorial's Council, chronicles the early struggle of the VVAA to have chemical injury recognised and outlines the history of the Evatt Commission, which failed to determine a link between Agent Orange and war related disabilities. The findings of the Evatt Royal Commission were roundly rejected by the VVAA, and the Australian Democrats provided political support at the time:

Senator McClean (3.25) —The Australian Democrats view the statement of the Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Mr Humphreys) of last Thursday, which now comes to the Senate as a paper, as a statement of enormous consequence. On the surface, it would seem that few are affected by the Cabinet's endorsement of the findings of the Evatt Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam that agent orange is innocent. It would seem that only a handful of Vietnam veterans and their families are being told that their fears of cancers resulting from exposure to agent orange is a figment of their imaginations. They are being told to follow the example of the Minister and the Cabinet and to pay no attention to the incidence of premature death or birth mutations among them and to pay no attention to the

growing body of evidence since the Evatt Royal Commission linking exposure to agent orange with cancers.<sup>85</sup>

Senator McClean went on to allege malfeasance on the part of the Commission:

“Why are there such reservations about Evatt's methods and findings? It is now a matter of public record that the Commission plagiarised huge slices of the evidence of chemical companies. Veteran witnesses believe they were deliberately intimidated and relatively disadvantaged in legal representation. Two eminent Swedish scientists allege gross misrepresentation of their evidence and have sought compensation through direct representation to the Prime Minister and the Governor-General”.

Vietnam veterans have seen a vindication of sorts since that time, with the Department of Veterans' Affairs now being prepared to recognise various cancers and skin conditions as qualifying veterans for compensation, but the bitterness created by the outcome of the Evatt Royal Commission served to unite Vietnam veterans and separate them from their ANZAC forbears. The commemoration of Long Tan Day, inaugurated in 1987, when the then Prime Minister Bob Hawke announced that it would now be known as Vietnam Veterans' Day, is an enduring reminder of that separation.

Finally, the background of the ANZAC myth distorts much of what has been written since the commitment, especially when referring to national servicemen.

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<sup>85</sup> Peter Yule, *The Long Shadow, Australia's Vietnam Veterans Since the War*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2020, P 265.

## Chapter 3 - Methodology

### Introduction

In this outline of methodology, the connection between the information sought, and the techniques used to gather it will be explained. The methodology was chosen as an activity in tracing memories at work, examining the way in which the news narrative shapes the events, the characterisation of actors and story making that involves oral memoir. This process is known as “active memorialisation”.<sup>86</sup> The oral questionnaire format was based on principles of simplicity, efficient use of time and resources, and reliability. The reference to all national servicemen being volunteers as noted in the introduction to this project, may have its roots in a rationalisation which over time developed into an attractive mythology. The methodology attempted to avoid assumptions leading to rationalising cliché. An analysis of newspaper articles provides the context of the changing media narrative of the time.

A primary goal of this project is to separate myth from history, and the most immediate and authentic method in achieving this is to listen to those who have lived the history. Oral history in the form of the structured interview format is a suitable tool for this exercise. In an ideal world, it might be conceivable to interview veterans for hours at a time, without introducing any structure to the process. In the real world, this is

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<sup>86</sup> O'Rourke, Marie, *Memory's Fracture, Instability in the Contemporary Memoir*, in Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles, Sue Joseph (Editors), *Mediating Memory, Tracing the Limits of Memoir*, 1st Edition, Routledge eBook ISBN9781315107349, 2017

impractical, and some means of keeping the subject focused on specific elements of his experience is necessary, hence the use of standardised questionnaires. Alistair Thomson, in *The Oral History Reader* describes the interview as an essentially collaborative process -

Not only is the interview now viewed as a co-construction, a collaborative and dynamic process of interactivity where there is a recognition that the interviewer takes a major role in shaping the interview, but we now recognise that there is a complex multiplicity of gendered, cultural, and identity-specific variables that we must negotiate as interviewers.<sup>87</sup>

### **The Participant as Researcher**

Given that I came to this study as a veteran (although my service was a long time ago), possible conflicts of interest generated because of this status need to be addressed.

On 6 October 2016, the Defence Research Network held a workshop in Bristol UK which brought together veterans and academics to explore what it meant to cross the military-academic divide.<sup>88</sup> The Defence Research Network, as its title suggests, is an organisation that studies research into the cultural and social aspects of military service.<sup>89</sup> Discussions at the Bristol conference supported the notion that veterans are entirely suitable as researchers into their military history, because their status holds a set of advantages. These advantages include

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<sup>87</sup> Robert Perks, and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015-11-16, P 139.

<sup>88</sup> Hannah West and Sophy Gardner, *War Stories, Personal tales and cultural narratives about war, veterans and society*, <https://warandnarrative.wordpress.com/2019/01/28/what-it-means-to-be-a-veteran-researcher/>

<sup>89</sup> Harari, Y.N., *Scholars, eyewitnesses, and flesh-witnesses of war: A tense relationship. Partial Answers. Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 7, 2009, no. 2: pp 213–228.

experiential knowledge, pride and criticism, and an understanding of military culture and language. Veterans also have a unique societal understanding of their subjects and hold two distinct instrumental advantages. These advantages are ease of access to the veterans they are seeking to survey and a degree of credibility in their subjects' eyes through shared experience. The value of this shared experience is neatly illustrated in the old joke, which for years has been shared within Vietnam veteran networks. It goes something like this –

“How many Vietnam veterans does it take to change a lightbulb? The answer is ‘You don’t know. You weren’t there...’”

This joke acknowledges the existence of a fraternity of veterans, forged through a shared experience of often outlandish experience creating a unique and robust bond. The value of experiential knowledge is obvious, as the veteran researcher has a deep understanding of the veteran experience and can tune his or her methodology to suit.<sup>90</sup> Pride and criticism refer to a veteran’s critical, and sometimes cynical, attitude to aspects of service, whilst at the same time holding pride in that service. Collaboration depends on mutual trust and respect. People who have a shared and deep understanding of an experience are those who have lived it. Veterans, providing they are clear about their goals, can make very suitable students of the facts of conflict. This is just one of many rationalisations for the integrity of the practice of one veteran

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<sup>90</sup> Sophy Antrobus, Sarah Bulmer, Nick Caddick & Hannah West (2023) *Voices of veteran researchers*, *Critical Military Studies*, 9:1, 1-4, DOI: [10.1080/23337486.2023.2172530](https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2023.2172530)

interviewing another which embeds mutual trust and respect into what becomes a reliable and credible process.

In the literature review introducing this study, reference is made to the research carried out in 1992, by Michael O'Brien into the experience of members of 7 RAR during its tour of Vietnam in 1970-1971. This very comprehensive study was cited in Mark Dapin's 2018 PhD thesis on national service.<sup>91</sup> O'Brien used a large field of subjects, (over 250) all veterans of that tour. He was a serving officer in the unit during its second tour of duty in 1970-1971. This is one very convincing example of a veteran working as a successful researcher although O'Brien would probably not willingly accept the title of "academic". Whilst not published as a separate study this research was used both by Mark Dapin in his PhD study into national service and by O'Brien when he wrote *Conscripts and Regulars* in 1996

## **Recruitment**

Project methodology involved engaging participants in face-to-face interviews where possible and telephone interviews when time and distance demanded it. The relevant questionnaire was emailed to the participants who were interviewed using one of the two surveys as a script depending on whether the subject was a member of the volunteer or balloted group.

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<sup>91</sup> Mark Dapin, *Mythmaking and Memory, Australia, the Vietnam War and National Service*, PhD Thesis, 2018, UNSW

Participants were recruited by requesting the editors of the various Vietnam veterans' unit associations to publish invitations to participate in the project in their newsletters. (Copies of these invitations can be seen in the appendix D of this thesis). Not all unit associations maintain newsletters, and the memberships are aging. These associations are a mixture of ex-regular soldiers and ex-national servicemen, and the invitations must clearly target the latter. The newsletter editors are volunteers and those unit associations that do publish online newsletters, do so intermittently, so contacting them was occasionally difficult. Several unit associations were contacted and informed of this project. Unit associations contacted included 1 RAR, 2 RAR, 3 RAR, 4 RAR, 5 RAR, and 7 RAR. In each case, the full title of the unit is its numerical designation, followed by the words "Royal Australian Regiment", hence 1 RAR is the First Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment. All were cooperative and posted invitations to participate in their newsletters.

The units listed above are the associations maintaining current newsletters. There were other regimental associations, but sufficient participants were recruited from the listed cohort. All units contacted were infantry, and this narrowed the scope of the survey, but this is not seen as limiting in terms of the purpose of the study. Service in an infantry unit is generally recognised as the most dangerous and difficult of military occupations, so the options given to these men, and their reasons for volunteering (for those who did) are particularly significant. As these ex-infantrymen knew that their conditions of operational service were the



most dangerous, their decision-making is even more interesting. Options remain for a wider study comparing experiences of different corps, but that is beyond the remit of this project. Members of other corps were recruited through snowballing, a technique also known as chain referral or respondent driven sampling.<sup>93</sup>

Newspapers were examined to trace variations in tone and content in fourteen feature reports of ANZAC Day commemorations including the *Canberra Times*, *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Tribune* and *The Advertiser*. Reference is made to reports from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Herald* and *The Sun-Herald* respectively in reference to the Welcome Home march and Australia's commitment of troops covering the period between 1962 and 2018.

The people to be interviewed for this project had a range of common characteristics. They were all men at least seventy years of age. The last Australian troops were withdrawn from Vietnam in June 1973. The youngest national serviceman who saw operations in Vietnam would have had his birthdate drawn in the sixteenth National Service ballot on 22 September 1972.<sup>94</sup> These men balloted in September 1972 were born in the period between 1 July 1952 to 31 December 1952 and the youngest would be seventy in 2022. A few national serviceman (who

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<sup>93</sup> Kelly E. Tenzek, *Snowball Subject Recruitment*, In The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods, Chapter DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411>, Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> April 2023

<sup>94</sup> Sue Langford, Appendix: *The national service scheme, 1964-72*, accessed 25.10.22, [https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet\\_app](https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet_app)

could volunteer by enlisting at age eighteen years nine months) were included in the cohort, and the youngest of these was sixty-eight in 2022. Nevertheless, the bulk of subjects were in their mid-seventies.

Volunteers have been a hidden group in previous research into national service, as by definition the notion of a “volunteering” conscript does not appear to make sense, but under the legislation, the cohort exists. The confusion has been caused by substitution of the term “national service” for “conscript”. To ensure that participants recruited for the volunteers’ group were indeed volunteers, a verification filter was applied. The process was as follows –

- 1) The veteran’s details were checked on the Department of Veterans Affairs Nominal Roll for Vietnam.<sup>95</sup>
- 2) The veteran’s birthdate as published on the nominal roll was compared with the list of balloted birthdates published by the Australian War Memorial.<sup>96</sup>
- 3) The greatest difficulty confronting this aspect of the study was identifying these men, a process which began with contacting those known through veteran networks to have been volunteers, and then comparing their birthdates with those drawn in the sixteen ballots held between March 1965 and September 1972 to verify their

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<sup>95</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, Nominal Roll of Vietnam Veterans, accessed 25.10.22, <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/vietnamWar>

<sup>96</sup> Sue Langford, Appendix: The national service scheme, 1964-72, accessed 25.10.22, [https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet\\_app](https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet_app), accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2023

status. If the soldier's date of birth was not drawn in a ballot, it was assumed he was a volunteer. It is theoretically possible that an early registrant did have his birthdate drawn in the later ballot for his age cohort. In this case, which occurred with one of the participants, his age, eighteen months younger than those in his national service intake, indicated that he was most likely a volunteer and this status was accepted. The birthdate comparison is the only reliable means of separating volunteers from the bulk of national servicemen who were enlisted through the birthday ballot, as regimental numbers which can be used to distinguish national servicemen from regular army enlistees are the same for volunteer and balloted personnel under the 1964 – 1972 scheme. Information for one of the volunteers was taken from an oral history project conducted through the Museum of South Australia in February 2005.<sup>97</sup> After this filter was applied, the four volunteer national servicemen were recruited and interviewed.

No form of verification to distinguish volunteers from conscripts was necessary for the second group, as balloted birthdates are readily available, but their status as Vietnam veterans was established by checking their bona fides using regimental numbers published on the DVA nominal roll. National servicemen, whether balloted or volunteers, are identifiable on this roll by regimental number. Men enlisted during the

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<sup>97</sup> Sue Anderson, State Library of South Australia, Digital Collection, Interview with Gil Green, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2005, accessed 7<sup>th</sup> May 2023, <https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/4199>

Vietnam War under the National Service Scheme were issued a seven-digit number. The second digit was always the number seven or eight (for example 1735099) to distinguish National Servicemen from members of the CMF who were also allocated seven-digit numbers from the same blocks. Australian Regular Army male personnel had five or six-digit service numbers.

### **Duty of Care**

A duty of care was owed to the participants in this study. Many of them, as ex-infantry soldiers who saw operational service, would have been diagnosed with a range of service-related conditions, most notably post-traumatic stress disorder. The incidence of this diagnosis in Vietnam veterans is assessed as between 20 percent and 30 percent as found through a range of studies. Given that flashbacks can be triggered in these veterans by questions relating to service, caution throughout the interview process was necessary. It is worth observing, however, that one accepted cognitive behaviour therapy approach to treatment of PTSD involves the subject being asked to recount the trauma so it can be analysed by the therapist.

Trauma-focused Cognitive Behaviour Therapy [CBT] typically includes both behavioural techniques, such as exposure, and cognitive techniques, such as cognitive restructuring. CBT that includes exposure to the traumatic memory uses imaginal exposure, writing the traumatic narrative, or reading the traumatic memory out loud. CBT that includes exposure to trauma-related stimuli typically uses *in vivo* exposure or teaching patients to identify

triggers of re-experiencing and practice discrimination of 'then vs. now'.<sup>98</sup>

Referring to the use of trauma focused CBT described above, Musicaro, Bellet, and McNally, published in *Psychosocial Trauma, Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*, explored this practice with a Vietnam veteran who attributed positive behaviour changes in his struggle with PTSD to self-triggering behaviour.<sup>99</sup> This veteran saw self-triggering as a way of honouring the life of a child whose likely death he observed in Vietnam. An interviewer is not a therapist, and this project is not treatment, but the above acknowledgement of this technique puts the problem in perspective.

Despite this, this potential for triggering is a real issue that needs to be very carefully considered in the application of a process that interviews a group of aged and vulnerable men. The journalism aphorisms as described by Vine, Batty and Muir<sup>100</sup> of "first do no harm" and "protect the vulnerable" are important in the context of the life experiences of the subjects.

Avoidance of the possibility of harm was ensured by spending time building rapport, providing information, allowing the participant to control

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<sup>98</sup> Watkins L.E., Sprang K.R., Rothbaum B.O., *Treating PTSD: A Review of Evidence-Based Psychotherapy Interventions*. Front Behav Neurosci. 2018 Nov 2; 12:258.

<sup>99</sup> Musicaro, R., Bellet, B.W., McNally, R.J., *Is Avoidance the Only Issue? A case study of self-triggering in combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder*, *Psychosocial Trauma, Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*, Advance Online Publication

<sup>100</sup> Josie Vine, Craig Batty & Rilke Muir (2016) A question of ethics: the challenges for journalism practice as a mode of research, *Journal of Media Practice*, 17:2-3, pp 232-249.

the flow of the interview, and providing an option to withdraw. Care was taken with the language used during interview.

Therapeutic techniques have a record of success when used with young victims of violence and are applicable when applied to a group of men whom, if they have PTSD, have been living with the diagnosis for half a century. PTSD takes a range of forms and usually persists throughout the subject's life, but the participants in this study, because of their age, had been living with the diagnosis (or the undiagnosed condition) for over fifty years. This does not mean that it can be ignored but as noted above indicates that these men have lived experience of managing the condition. All participants were treated as if they had PTSD, even though perhaps only one third had a diagnosis. Participants were not asked if they had that diagnosis, as to do so would have been an invasion of privacy.

Flexibility was necessary when interacting with these men, whilst questioning them about their military service. Josie Vine observes:

Interviewing allows for flexibility when dealing with individual characteristics and can extract useful responses to sometimes-sensitive personal, professional and workplace issues.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Vine, Josie, *The Larrikin Paradox: An Analysis of Larrikinism's Democratic Role in Australian Journalism*, PhD Thesis, (Deakin University) School of Applied Communication Department of Journalism RMIT, University February 2009, P 249.

## **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or Post Traumatic Growth?**

In the case of the men interviewed for this project, the effect of past trauma on memory is a consideration, as between twenty and thirty percent of Vietnam veterans have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). There is no reason to believe that the sample of men interviewed for this study varies in any way from the population of surviving veterans. In fact, because the study sample contains a positively skewed proportion of soldiers posted to infantry, the incidence of trauma in the sample is probably higher than the reported percentages in the study cited above. Apart from avoiding risk of harm to traumatized participants presented by this condition, the survey process needed to consider the affect that trauma has on recall. It also is reasonable to assume that some veterans have experienced trauma but have not been diagnosed, so the incidence of PTSD among the participants is likely higher than assessed above. Just as the bulk of infantrymen suffered back injury because of patrolling daily with packs and ammunition weighing one third of their body mass, most of them experienced trauma through being exposed to incoming fire, either from the enemy or during one of the many incidents of friendly fire. Thus, the infantrymen and other first line soldiers interviewed for this study may report differently from their peers who, because of their postings "behind the wire," were not exposed to enemy or friendly fire.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> O'Toole BI, Marshall RP, Grayson DA, Schureck RJ, Dobson M, Ffrench ML, Meldrum L, Bolton *The Australian Vietnam Veterans Health Study: III. psychological health of Australian Vietnam veterans and its relationship to combat*, 1996 Apr;25(2): pp 331-40.

A great deal of research has been conducted with veterans to establish the effects of trauma, but because it has been concentrated on developing therapeutic approaches to improving functioning, rather than assessing accuracy of recall, it does not bear directly on this project. By inference, some conclusions can however be established. Research conducted examining alcohol dependence in traumatized American veterans in 2006 examined memory deficits. In this comprehensive study which used a control group, participants with PTSD did not exhibit deficits on immediate or delayed visual memory.<sup>103</sup> More broadly, individuals with PTSD who have impairments to their memory generally have this impairment in their verbal memory, not their visual memory.

Observations that can be made from the interviews conducted for this study are threefold. The men interviewed have clear memories of incidents, these memories are consistent with after action reports, and there is no reason to conclude that questions asked about choices and options have been answered with any less clarity.

A standard view suggests that memories are initially labile. This means that at first, they can be modified by interventions, but will stabilize over time and will consolidate to a point at which they become set and can no longer be modified.<sup>104</sup> For the purposes of this study, the memories held by the veterans need to be authentic. Should a participant

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<sup>103</sup> Samuelson KW, Neylan TC, Metzler TJ, Lenoci M, Rothlind J, Henn-Haase C, Choucroun G, Weiner MW, Marmar CR, *Neuropsychological functioning in posttraumatic stress disorder and alcohol abuse*. *Neuropsychology*. 2006 Nov;20(6):716- 726. doi: 10.1037/0894-4105.20.6.716. PMID:17100516; PMCID: PMC2443729.

<sup>104</sup> J. L. McGaugh, *Memory: A Century of Consolidation*, Science, Vol. 287, No. 5451, 2000



have received treatment for diagnosed PTSD, it is conceivable that he may have taken medication including beta blockers that may subdue emotional responses to traumatic memory. This treatment will not however eliminate the actual memories. All these factors support the notion that PTSD is not a barrier to the validity of reports made in interviews conducted in this study.

### **Stabilising Memories**

Elsewhere in this project when discussing the effect of journalism in Chapters 6 and 7, I refer to the decade of silence as a term coined by Peter Yule to describe the period between the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the Welcome Home march in 1987.<sup>105</sup> It is reasonable to assume that during this time, the recall that the veteran had for any incident, traumatic or otherwise, stabilised, and that it did not change and will be accurately reported at interview fifty years after the event. When the veteran was exposed to the media at the end of this period of relative silence, there may have been an effect, but by this time, two decades after their service, it is unlikely that the veterans either subconsciously or consciously would alter their recall in any significant manner. These memories would have been “set”. Both these factors, the effect of trauma and the silence of many journalists during the period when memory remained labile, should not present barriers to the viability of the project.

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<sup>105</sup> Peter Yule, *The Long Shadow, Australia's Vietnam Veterans Since the War*, NewSouth, in Association with the Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 2020, P 149.

## Questionnaires

Conscious of the rationalisations about volunteering, this study sought to ensure that conclusions were based, as accurately as possible, on simple and verifiable recall. A sound questionnaire format is essential in the process of eliciting recall in a group of septuagenarians remembering events in their lives fifty plus years ago. The topic has always been contentious, and the experiences investigated are clouded both by the passage of time, and an accretion of mythology, so simplicity is a virtue. The primary tool used was the scripted interview.

Journalistic techniques as suggested by Sedorkin<sup>106</sup> were employed, including icebreakers, sharing of common experiences, and careful preparation, including an understanding of the individual participant's service from accounts published by his unit, and knowledge of his postings from the Department of Veterans' Affairs Nominal Roll for Vietnam.<sup>107</sup> Telephone interviews were occasionally used, with their concomitant disadvantages, but important cues, as suggested by Sedorkin, including the use of an empathetic tone of voice, pausing, silence, volume and laughter were noted.

Two questionnaires were used as verbatim scripts for the interview questions. Questionnaire One was addressed to those participants identifying as volunteers. In this questionnaire, the first two enquiries

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<sup>106</sup> Gail Sedorkin, *Interviewing*, 2nd Edition, ISBN9781003116189, First Published 2011, Routledge P 11.

<sup>107</sup> Australian Government: Department of Veterans' Affairs, Nominal Roll of Vietnam Veterans, <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/vietnamWar#Search>, accessed 30<sup>th</sup> April 2023

sought to establish clearly that the subject was a volunteer and were therefore closed questions. Question 3 was open-ended, giving the subject seven prompts to choose from in specifying his reasons for volunteering. If the subject did not nominate one of these reasons, an open-ended response was available, by which he could list other reasons. The next four questions were open-ended, and the subject was invited to recall in turn the reactions of others, his view of his decision in hindsight, and any media influence on his decision-making.

Questionnaire Two was used with the balloted national servicemen, and the first two questions sought to establish their details of service and unit and were closed questions. Question 3 was also closed, as it requested specification of a date, but question 4 invited interpretation, and was open. Question 5 asked whether an option to avoid active service was offered, and elicited a yes/no answer, and question 6 had two alternative responses, one a "nil" response, and the other a description of a recalled event. Question 7 examined the phenomenon of options offered as reported by others and was also open. The last question sought information about media influence on the attitudes of these men.

The questionnaires were designed using contemporary understandings on survey design as a guide. Response alternatives are offered in both surveys. A basic investigation of questionnaire design reveals some issues around the use of response alternatives. Gaskell, O'Muircheartaigh and Wright have studied these effects.<sup>108</sup> They found

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<sup>108</sup> Gaskell, O'Muircheartaigh and Wright, *Context effects in the measurement of attitudes: A*

that where alternative answers were offered, these alternatives encouraged interpretation of the questions. This distortion is called “response shift”, defined as bias brought about by a catalyst external to the subject, in this case, the response options available to the subject as listed in the questionnaire.<sup>109</sup> O’Muircheartaigh and Wright showed response alternatives are not neutral and need to be eliminated or minimised when structuring questions.

Because the surveys attempted to elicit raw information from the subjects and any interpretation may distort the results, the use of response alternatives was minimised. When open-ended questions were used, the expected responses were be confined to basic recall. In both questionnaires, where there was scope for more complex responses, the subjects could determine, in an open-ended manner, and without risk of their responses being shaped, the degree and depth of that complexity by responding to the alternative labelled “other”. A guide to the design and application of online questionnaire surveys recommends simplicity as a guiding principle.<sup>110</sup> These principles are universal, whether applied to on-line surveys, telephone facilitated questionnaires or one-to-one interviews.

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*comparison of the consistency and framing explanations*, in the British Journal Psychology, June 2011, 34 (4): pp 383-393.

<sup>109</sup> Frans J. Oort. *Towards a Formal Definition of Response Shift (In Reply to G.W. Donaldson)*. Quality of Life Research, vol. 14, no. 10, 2005, pp. 2353–55. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4039971>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2022.

<sup>110</sup> Regmi PR, Waithaka E, Paudyal A, Simkhada P, & van Teijlingen E., *Guide to the design and application of online questionnaire surveys*. Nepal J Epidemiol. 2016 Dec 31;6(4):640-644. doi: 10.3126/nje.v6i4.17258. PMID: 28804676; PMCID: PMC5506389.

Conclusions were evidence based. To gather this evidence, the survey design encouraged clear comprehension of the question and was designed to retrieve relevant information from memory. In the case of this project, a considerable passage of time has elapsed which challenged memory, so several general recommendations developed by Petra Lietz in her examination of literature on research into questionnaire design were followed.<sup>110</sup>

These recommendations included emphasis on clarity, simplicity, specificity, and relevance when questions are constructed. The survey questions adhered to these principles and attempted to avoid complications of attitude and hindsight. Any questionnaire, to be effective, must have a user-friendly design and layout. Participation in this project was by invitation. Participants challenged by a complex survey would have opted out. Whilst hindsight can be interpreted as a complication to factual recall, the questionnaire for volunteers referred to how participants feel now about the decisions they made, as this was relevant in their case. Those conscripted were not asked this question.

To determine the effect the reporting of negative events, such as the My Lai massacre and the Tet Offensive had on the attitudes of the veterans interviewed, an additional activity was included in the interview process as it related to news reporting. Participants were first asked if they had been influenced by media reports, and if so, what effect these reports had. Each participant was asked if he could recall any detail of

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<sup>110</sup> Lietz, P. (2010). *Research into Questionnaire Design: A Summary of the Literature*. *International Journal of Market Research*, 52(2), pp 249 – 272. <https://doi.org/10.2501/S147078530920120X>

these events, and if so, whether they had any influence on his attitudes and motivations in relation to service.

The results are included in the Findings chapter.

## **Recording Data**

All interviews were audio recorded, and all participants were required to provide informed consent using the consent form in the appendix for this process. A laptop loaded with voice recorder software was used, and this method was unobtrusive, secure, and simple to use. All interviews were transcribed and emailed to participants for corrections if applicable. The corrected data was collected and secured in conformity with the University of Southern Queensland's information technology policies. All the other interviews were recorded, transcribed, and these transcriptions emailed to participants for clarification and correction. All but two were satisfied that their comments were recorded accurately and did not request alterations or additions. Two participants requested minor clarifying alterations, and two others made further comments via SMS. The clarifications were emailed to the two participants, checked, and approved. One of these added comment without altering the original transcript, and the other requested minor clarification. All interviews were characterised by a willingness on the part of the participants to share experiences, attitudes and perspectives.

## Organising Data

Two datasets were collected, one each for the volunteer group and the balloted group. Whilst the information was essentially qualitative, it was organised in such a way that some limited quantitative analysis could be performed. Observations, quotes, and narratives (if provided) were recorded as text, and common patterns and themes noted. Any patterns observed were analysed, and conclusions drawn. The data was probed for comparisons of patterns of experience within and between units, and sub-units, and across the time span of deployments. Any patterns emerging were examined against the background of the conduct of the war, the political context, and significant external events such as the My Lai massacre in 1969, the Moratorium marches in 1970, and the announcement of the drawdown of Australian forces also in 1970.

A basic count was made of –

- The reasons the volunteers gave for their decisions based on the various prompts provided.
- The reasons given outside of those prompted.
- The frequency of reports (by the balloted participants) where they were given an option to avoid operational service.
- The circumstances of these reports (formal/informal; public/in confidence etc).
- The frequency of third-person reports, where veterans recalled hearing accounts of national servicemen being given formal or informal options.

- The circumstances of these third person reports.
- A classification and count of the various reports of media influence (e.g., newspapers/television/cinema).

When all the data was compiled, a series of conclusions were formed, and these conclusions compared with the original hypotheses.

It is conceivable that subjects may have consciously or otherwise, introduced confected narratives into their responses. The interviews were conducted by using journalistic techniques of checking sources and cross-checking the information the veterans shared about their experiences in the army. Much of this information is readily accessible through the Australian War Memorial Australian Army commanders' diaries, and other archival material available through the AWM.<sup>111</sup> In order to elicit sufficient insight, it was necessary to recruit a field of fifteen participants.

## **Interviews**

Two separate cohorts of subjects were interviewed, the first comprised of those who were volunteer national servicemen and the second made up of those balloted through one of the sixteen birthdates drawn between March 1965 and September 1972. As noted above, they were recruited through unit association newsletters, and whatever opportunities arose once the recruiting process was initiated through word of mouth. Strong veteran networks persist, mainly through subunit associations, and they helped in attracting recruits. The group of

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<sup>111</sup> Australian Army commanders' diaries, Australian War Memorial Website, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1372714> Accessed 23rd May 2023



volunteer national servicemen was limited, and strenuous efforts had to be made to find these participants.

When a prospective subject responded to the unit newsletter invitation by email, the following process was followed:

The participant information form was emailed with a request to make phone contact, so the participant could ask any questions he had about the project prior to consenting to participate. The consent form was then emailed if the participant agreed to proceed. Once the signed consent form was received, arrangements were made to schedule the interview.

Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, which allowed for rapport and observation of body language. The interviewer was alert for behaviours such as defensiveness or irritation, distraction, and withdrawal. These behaviours may not be noticed during a phone interview, and care was taken to ensure that the participant was comfortable using verbal cues. Behaviours indicating discomfort which identifiable during a phone interview are mitigation (the action of somehow verbally reducing the significance, seriousness or painfulness of an idea or memory) and abstraction (a verbal behaviour which transforms an event into an idea).<sup>112</sup>

During the interviews conducted by phone, the interviewer was alert to these behaviours, and the provision of "time out" or termination of the interview was available, and the participant was reminded of this as the interview commenced. Safe venues were used. Examples of safe venues included public libraries, RSL sub-branches, and in some cases the participant's home.

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<sup>112</sup> de Lourdes R da F Passos M., *B. F. Skinner: the writer and his definition of verbal behaviour*. *Behav Anal.* 2012 Spring;35(1):115-26. doi: 10.1007/BF03392270. PMID: 22942540; PMCID: PMC3359847.

Recruiting and contacting volunteers represented a challenge for this project, as they are not identified through available archival material such as the Vietnam veterans' nominal roll. The volunteers are also a very small group, so the strategy adopted involved conversations and discussions with the balloted (more numerous) cohort, to identify volunteers essentially by exploring the knowledge of volunteers held by these men. This method successfully found three veterans whose status as volunteers was verified and were subsequently interviewed. A fourth volunteer, known to be such because I served with him, was identified after discussion with members of 5 platoon, B Coy, 7 RAR. That volunteer was Gilbert Green, an Indigenous Australian, who had been interviewed in February 2005, as part of an oral history project conducted by the Museum of South Australia.<sup>113</sup> There were two forty-five-minute sound recordings in the archive, and the material collected was transcribed and analysed based on the topics addressed by the volunteers' questionnaire used for this project, and Green's responses included in the findings.

The only topic not covered in the original oral history interview with Green was the role of the media, so this information is not available for this veteran. His poor health precluded use of a live interview.

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<sup>113</sup> Sue Anderson, State Library of South Australia, Digital Collection, *Interview with Gil Green, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2005*, <https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/4199> Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> May 2023

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Introduction

A total of fifteen interviews was conducted for this study between September 2022, and May 2023. Twelve of these interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the remaining three via telephone. As referred to in the methodology chapter, another volunteer national serviceman was not interviewed by this researcher, for health reasons, but this study has included his previous oral history. His information was taken from two 45-minute interviews recorded, transcribed and posted online in an oral history archive by the South Australian Museum.<sup>114</sup> His name is Gil Green, and he is an Indigenous Australian. The findings for the two different groups (conscripts and volunteer national servicemen) are dealt with separately, as the respective questionnaires targeted different information for each cohort.

### Findings – Volunteer National Servicemen.

A volunteer national serviceman is defined as a soldier who enlisted voluntarily under the rules set out in the *National Service Act 1964*. Under the act, young men who had reached the age of eighteen years and nine months, could volunteer for national service.<sup>115</sup> Using this option, a male who had reached that age could register, rather than waiting for the

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<sup>114</sup> Sue Anderson, State Library of South Australia, Digital Collection, Interview with Gil Green, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2005, accessed 7<sup>th</sup> May 2023, <https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/4199>

<sup>115</sup> Sue Langford, Appendix: The national service scheme, 1964-72, Australian War Memorial, [https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet\\_app](https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet_app), accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2023

outcome of the ballot conducted for those turning twenty between the specified dates. For example, a man born in June 1947 could register early (from March 1966) when he was eighteen years and nine months old.

The question referring to the primary motive for volunteering was answered by two respondents that they had volunteered by mistake through early registration. Both men provided the same narrative in that they were seeking certainty in terms of planning their futures. By registering early, they had believed that they would have been included in an earlier ballot and would not have to wait the eighteen months for an outcome. After early registration, correspondence they received from the Department of Labour and National Service indicated that were now regarded as volunteers for enlistment. Both accepted that advice and enlisted, although volunteering had not been their intention:

So I registered early, and got a letter saying "Dear Sir, did you realise that by registering early, you have volunteered for national service?" I didn't realise it was volunteering because I hadn't read the fine print. So I thought if the Air Force didn't want me, I'd join the army, as I considered military service was a required thing of the day.<sup>116</sup>

The other "accidental volunteer" reported:

I thought I'd probably get called up anyway, being pessimistic, and registered early. That would have been a year earlier than I would have normally gone in and would have meant less disruption to whatever I ended up doing. I was naively thinking I was registering for the ballot and didn't find out until years later that you couldn't do that – that I had volunteered.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Transcript V2200123

<sup>117</sup> Transcript V1180423

Another respondent gave “patriotism” as his primary motive:

When I was a young bloke growing up, all the men who had come back from World War two were treated as heroes. War service was something to be very proud of. For myself, I was living in a small country town, and was a clerk in the public service. I was really heading nowhere, and I was thinking I would have to do something with my life. My brother was a national serviceman a few years before me. I thought if I join the army, it would be for three or four years, so I wrote away to see if I could volunteer for national service, because that way you were only in for two years, and you get your job back. So a combination of adventure-seeking, patriotism, and common sense in getting my job back. My father was in a protected industry, so there was no family history. As a kid people would ask ‘What did your father do during the war?’<sup>118</sup>

A fourth volunteer surveyed provided the inability to find suitable work as a motive:

“I couldn’t get the job I wanted (Butcher’s apprentice) so I went to Sydney for the medical”.<sup>119</sup>

Secondary motives included attractive post service benefits and adventure seeking. This same respondent indicated that he was influenced by media reports about the threat of Communism, but described being hurt when he returned to Australia:

“At the time we were brainwashed into thinking the Communists were taking over the world. I believed it until we came home, and then was hurt by the reception”.<sup>120</sup>

This report was significant in that it was the only one in which a veteran responded in the questionnaire that the media portrayal of the threat of Communism had an influence on his attitude towards enlisting for national service.

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<sup>118</sup> Transcript V3190123

<sup>119</sup> Transcript V4040205

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

A participant who indicated “adventure seeking” as a secondary motive described his situation as a “dead-end” job and was also influenced by a family history of military service. Another was seeking an apprenticeship but gave up when he had tried without success which he put down to discrimination as he was an Indigenous Australian. He then enlisted through early registration.

Of the other prompts used in the questionnaire (shorter enlistment period, family background and expectations, and financial security), none were specified directly by respondents, but some were mentioned in the context of the primary motives.

Fig 1. Scattering of Volunteers’ Motivations – (Top 3)

Volunteer	Adventure	Job Security	Patriotism	Racism	Certainty
V1180423	√	√	√		
V2200123	√	√			√
V3190123		√	√		√
V4040295		√		√	√

The question addressing the reaction of family and friends was answered by two of the volunteers reporting that their mothers were “upset”, but their fathers accepting, although the two fathers who were returned servicemen from the Second World War issued warnings about the dangers. These reactions were not characterised as being seen as strong or significant by the participants.

Question 5 for this cohort addressed the reaction of fellow national servicemen when they heard that the participants had volunteered. Two

reported that while they did not “broadcast” their status, when mentioned, it did not induce any reaction. A third noted that in his cubicle of four in his recruit training accommodation, all four said that they were volunteers. It was impossible to corroborate this report.

Question 6 asked the volunteers how they felt about their decision in hindsight. There was some variation in the responses. One participant reported that once the decision was made, there was nothing he could do to change it, and that he had actively considered not returning to the army after Christmas leave knowing that he would be sent to Vietnam. The others did not express regrets, but highlighted the good times, usually interpreted as going on local leave in Vietnam and in other places in Asia on Rest and Recreation leave, interspersed with “moments of pandemonium” experienced when contacts with enemy occurred. One described volunteering and serving in Vietnam as probably the best thing he ever had done because it changed his life positively. Three reported feeling bitter as a result of the reception they received on return from active service, one of whom described being refused a drink in an RSL club because he was an Indigenous Australian.

The last question addressed the influence of the media of the day on attitudes and motives. One respondent considered that the media had little influence on him, because he paid it little attention, as the army kept him too busy. In addition, this soldier was part of an earlier cohort for whom the issue of conscription had not begun to appear to any extent in the media. The other two, both of whom served after the Tet offensive,

saw the media influence as malicious. One considered that he volunteered "to deliver a poke in the eye" to news reports of university students protesting. Another noted that "the media had turned against us, so I hid my identity".

Additional comments made by the volunteers all covered their behaviour post-service. One described being active in anti-Vietnam war marches and avoiding participation in ANZAC Day commemorations for 23 years. His reason given was that he wanted to forget about his experience in Vietnam. Since his old battalion has been stationed in his home city, however, he has become involved with them and admires the current battalion leadership.

Another, disclosing a diagnosis of PTSD, has fond memories of the camaraderie of the men with whom he served and described resultant treatment after diagnosis allowing him to return to a normal life. Another believes that the medical process surrounding callup was rigged in favour of those who told the examining doctors that they did not want to serve. He also believes there was a higher representation of men from rural areas called up because they were attractive to the army because they were "trouble-free".

Gil Green, the Indigenous Australian volunteer, reported no experience of racism during service in Vietnam, but said he encountered it once back in Australia. He described his operational experience as a combination of "good and bad times". He found the friendships he made



were lifelong, and that soldiers become “the greatest pacifists”. He believes that service in Vietnam made him a better person.

### **Findings – Balloted National Servicemen.**

The first question was a protocol query confirming that the interviewee was indeed a balloted national serviceman. Question 2 sought information regarding corps and unit postings, and the year of service in Vietnam. Corps posting for this group consisted of eight men allocated to Infantry, and four to corps of Signals. An analysis of the period served in country showed four men who served in Vietnam during 1968 and seven who were in the country during 1970.

Question three addressed the issue of the participant’s awareness that he would be required to serve in Vietnam. Four reported becoming aware of an operational posting upon enlistment, three upon posting to an operational unit, and the remaining five became aware when posted for corps training.

The next question asked the veteran if he had been given any opportunity to opt out of service in Vietnam. Six veterans reported that they had not been given any option prior to disembarkation. Four described situations where there was no formal option offered, but they could determine whether they were to serve in Vietnam by the location postings they chose. These men were all from Signals corps. Their responses varied, but indicated that they were given options:

Yes. They asked me where I wanted to be deployed, and I said Malaysia, Vietnam or New Guinea.

We were, at the end of Corps training with preferences. I wanted to go to Vietnam rather than cool my heels in Australia. Marked units in Hobart, Darwin, Vietnam in that order.<sup>121</sup>

We were asked if we wanted to go to Vietnam. Some didn't, but I did. While we were at 1 Sig we were asked if we were willing, and 139 Sig was the holding station for Vietnam. If you weren't suitable for Vietnam, or didn't want to go, you were sent to a unit staying in Australia. We replaced one on one.<sup>122</sup>

I remember signing something giving my consent. I don't remember a parade, for example. I may have been treated differently because I had a security clearance at that time.<sup>123</sup>

The balloted veterans who served in infantry described a different process. Only two reported being given options. One reported being interviewed by the commanding officer of his recruit training battalion in the context of deciding his corps preference and being told he would serve in Vietnam if he joined infantry:

"My recollection was that I remember fronting (what must have been) the CO at Puckapunyal whose first question - which I remember distinctly - was "If there was an opportunity to go to Vietnam, would you be ready to do so?" And I responded "Yes". That was during recruit training. He then said to me that he would like to make me aware that 7 RAR who were based at Holsworthy were likely to be the next battalion to tour Vietnam. He then said, "Would you like to have the opportunity to join that battalion which would expedite (if you like) service in Vietnam?" Again, I said "Yes". He then asked me about corps training - which corps training. This was where I was scammed, if you like, because he never really gave me an option. I remember distinctly him saying that if I joined the infantry, I would get the experience of many corps in the infantry, like artillery, engineers etc, so I was given the impression that being in infantry meant that I would have quite a range of different activities to do. That wasn't correct, because in the infantry all we did was foot slog basically. I was hoodwinked at that point".<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Transcript C9090223

<sup>122</sup> Transcript C4270223

<sup>123</sup> Transcript C2250123

<sup>124</sup> Transcript C8050523

Another infantry veteran reported a formal parade where members were asked to move to a specific table adjacent to the parade ground if they did not want to serve in Vietnam:

Yes. The whole battalion was paraded, and the CO came on and said "This battalion has been warned that we are going to Vietnam. Those who don't wish to go, head for a particular table after you've signed to say you've been warned. I remember some (married) blokes who didn't want to finish their national service in Vietnam opted out and were transferred. We thought we were going to be the last battalion there."<sup>125</sup>

The participant selected for officer training who served in infantry assumed that when he accepted, the army understood that he was willing to undertake operational service. He exercised his options by asking for an active posting, and Vietnam was the only situation where that was available:

"We graduated as second lieutenants, as did the Portsea graduates, and were on probation in the early part of our service just as they were. Was posted to 4RAR which went to Borneo in 1968 prior to Vietnam. First posting was training platoon commander at Singleton 3TB. I had a connection through my father with the CO at 3TB, and when I was interviewed by him, I told him I wanted an active posting. He undertook to post me to 4RAR because he knew it was destined for Vietnam".<sup>126</sup>

The remaining infantry veterans indicated that they were given no option about service in Vietnam:

"No. Definitely not. Although I believe that if I had of objected, I wouldn't have gone. That's how I always remember it".<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Transcript C1190123

<sup>126</sup> Transcript C9250223

<sup>127</sup> Transcript C1270423

"I'm pretty sure there wasn't a process, formal or informal".<sup>128</sup>

"I can't recall at any stage being given the option of not going. So, I'd say 'No'".<sup>129</sup>

"No. The question "Do you want to go to Vietnam?" was never asked. That was never asked - It was presumed".<sup>130</sup>

"Not at any point, through recruit and corps training, and once posted to 7 RAR".<sup>131</sup>

The responses for both veterans of Signals and veterans of Infantry were completely consistent in that for the former group all reported a choice, and for the latter none, with the exceptions of the Scheyville graduate, and the member of 4RAR in 1970.

Question 5 asked the participants if they had heard during their service or since that other national servicemen were given the opportunity to refuse service in Vietnam, and how this was done. Five said that they had no knowledge of this anecdote. One said that he had heard it but doubted its veracity. Another recalled first hearing the story over twenty years after service through veterans' networks. The men who had served in Signals repeated their narrative that all signalmen were given the option through their location postings. The veteran who had answered question 4 by remembering a clear formal opt-out process, said that the only anecdote he had heard was that some units simply gave soldiers no choice.

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<sup>128</sup> Transcript C3230323

<sup>129</sup> Transcript C5180323

<sup>130</sup> Transcript C7180423

<sup>131</sup> Transcript C11030523

Fig 2. Options Offered to Balloted Veterans

Transcript	None	Choice of Location	Formal Interview	Formal Parade	*Other
C11030523	√				
C10190123				√	
C9250223					√
C8050523			√		
C7180423	√				
C6170323		√			
C5180123	√				
C4270223		√			
C2250123		√			
C3230323	√				
C1270423	√				
C12090223		√			

\*Offered and accepted officer training

## News and the Media

Question 6 asked the veterans whether their attitudes and motivations had been influenced by news and media coverage before, during and after their service in Vietnam. Four reported no influence at all, whilst two veterans said that any influence was slight. Two veterans asserted that their access to the news was prevented prior to embarkation because of the demanding training regime. One described his understanding of the domino theory (the prediction that if Vietnam fell to the Communists, other Southeast Asian countries would follow) through the media as an influence in encouraging him to be prepared to fight in Vietnam, although this opinion was reversed by his service. One said that the news media had no influence prior to service but was negative towards veterans afterwards. Another said that he had always been against the war, and the news media reports did not alter this opinion to any extent before, during and after service in Vietnam.

## Newspapers Reporting on ANZAC Day

The *Advertiser* reported on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1965:

The Prime Minister will undoubtedly carry the country with him in his deeply considered announcement that an Australian battalion is to be sent to Vietnam. It is the strongest possible reminder that the alliances contracted by this country impose demands as well as affording security.<sup>132</sup>

An article in *The Australian* on the same day adopted a sombre tone:

The decision by the Australian Government to send a battalion to South Vietnam is a grave one and commits Australia to a more direct role in this cockpit of war, where the conflict for power between Communist China and the West in South-east Asia has been joined. It also extends our military commitments on more fronts in South-east Asia than any other Commonwealth country.<sup>133</sup>

Negative reaction, such as this headline, came predominately from the left-wing *Tribune*, such as this headline:

"Menzies Govt decision arousing anger."<sup>134</sup>

*The Australian*, was also consistently critical, noting on its front page:

"Draftees may have to go too".<sup>135</sup>

There was some attempt at analysis of the decision as in this editorial in the *Canberra Times*:

The one thing that must be said about the government's decision to send an infantry battalion to Vietnam is that it is essentially political not military.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> The Advertiser 30th April 1965, P 1.

<sup>133</sup> The Australian, April 30th, 1965, P 1.

<sup>134</sup> The Tribune, 5 May 1965, P 1.

<sup>135</sup> The Australian, April 30th, 1965, P 1.

<sup>136</sup> The Canberra Times, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1965, P 1.

In general, most Australian newspapers were supportive, if cautious, and the issue of conscription was beginning to emerge in the reporting. The significance of conscripting one in twelve twenty-year-olds was not an issue taken up by any enthusiasm with the press. The concept of conscription (the term generally softened to 'national service' in the media) was challenged, but not its selective nature. The "birthday ballot", as it was called, was reported more as a curiosity than a moral compromise. Morality only became an issue when the fact emerged, that for much of the period of the scheme, the conscripts affected by it were too young to vote.

In 1965, the *Canberra Times* printed a very traditional and inspirational message from the Queen:

"Today my thoughts are with all of you who recall and are encouraged by the high-spirited gallantry of the Anzacs. Remembering their courage which did so much to ensure victory in two world wars, we can draw strength to face the problems of our own time."<sup>137</sup>

Harold Holt became Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration in Holt's cabinet, Hubert Opperman, acknowledged both the war in Vietnam and conscription at an Anzac Day service in Geelong. *The Age* introduced a tone of danger in reporting Opperman's speech:

"Distances have shrunk, and danger is closer to our shores,' he said, 'and if we have always gone abroad to meet it there has never been a period when the same practice is more essential than in the current situation'".

On conscription, from the same report:

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<sup>137</sup> The Canberra Times, 26<sup>th</sup> April 1965 P 1.

“There have always been conscripts. Volunteers of the past had to be conscripts of their own conscience.”<sup>138</sup>

It could be assumed from this comment that the Minister felt especially obliged to defend his government’s policy on this day of commemoration. Vietnam (although not conscription) is also mentioned the following year.

A headline in the *Canberra Times* above the report was “Vietnam joins list for Anzac Day” -

A new name — Vietnam—joined the list of campaigns remembered at yesterday's Anzac Day ceremony in Canberra. It was recorded in the requiem for the first time in 52 years. Reading the requiem at the Australian War Memorial, the national treasurer of the RSL, Air Vice Marshal F. Biadin, paid tribute to Australians and allies of two world wars ‘and those who died in Korea and Vietnam’.<sup>139</sup>

By 1968, the Vietnam war had become relevant enough to have had a horse race named in its honour:

With only yards to go in the Long Tan Improvers at the Canberra Anzac Day race meeting yesterday Prince Skyline's jockey, N. Dickens, on the outside, sneaks a quick look across to his rival, Irish Lad, ridden on the rails by P. Dries.<sup>140</sup>

The tone had changed by 1972, when reports of peace demonstrations at the ceremony at the War Memorial appeared in the *Canberra Times*. By this time, reporting of the annual commemoration was beginning to reflect a shift in public attitudes. Accounts of attendance and speeches were now mingled with protests, substantially about

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<sup>138</sup> The Age, 26<sup>th</sup> April 1965, P 7.

<sup>139</sup> The Canberra Times, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1965, P 1.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, P 16.



conscription, and the way in which these incidents were handled by the authorities.

Incidents were reported in the *Canberra Times* on that day in Canberra, Sydney, and Perth:

CANBERRA, Yesterday -

Earlier several protesters demonstrated at the dawn service attended by about 2,000 people. The students, who were ignored by the crowd, held placards reading 'Peace now' and 'Sink a beer for the Viet Cong'.

SYDNEY, Tuesday -

Police arrested two youths after an anti-conscription placard had been placed on the Cenotaph during Anzac Day celebrations today. The youths will appear in Central Court tomorrow. Police were still continuing investigations tonight into an incident in which a smoke bomb exploded among wreaths at the Cenotaph as the march was about to begin at 9am".

PERTH, Tuesday - An unidentified middle-aged man with a chest full of medals laid a wreath today for victims of the My Lai massacre".<sup>141</sup>

By this time, the 1970 Moratorium had taken place, and reports of the My Lai Massacre in 1969 and images generated during the Tet Offensive in 1968 had begun to appear. Australian casualties reached a peak in 1969, and for the first time, polling indicated that more Australians opposed the war than supported it. In an August 1969 Morgan Gallup Poll, 55 per cent of Australians supported withdrawal; 40 per cent were in favour of continuing the war and 6 per cent were undecided.<sup>142</sup> The Australian task force had been reduced in size by one infantry

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<sup>141</sup> The Canberra Times, Friday 26<sup>th</sup> April 1968, P 1.

<sup>142</sup> *Vietnam - Australia's Longest War*, A Calendar of Military and Political Events, Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia, <http://www.vvaa.org.au/calendar.htm> Accessed 20th May 2023

battalion in 1970, and by 1972 the announcement of a complete withdrawal had been made.

### **Findings – Newspaper Archives**

A separate, and supplementary element of this study assembled reports written after the annual ANZAC Day commemorations. These are included above. The tone of the reporting in the sample varied over time. From 1964 until 1968, more reports can be classified as traditional and inspirational, and some as sombre or negative, and only two reports mentioning that conscripts were likely to be involved in the future. Only one report refers to the political nature of the commitment.

After 1968, there was a change in both the tone and content of the reporting, by references to demonstrations, vandalism, and the My Lai massacre.

### **General Comments**

To complete the questionnaire, participants were asked to make general comments. Not all participants took that opportunity, but for those that did, their comments are listed verbatim. These comments covered a range of issues, not necessarily responding directly to the questions asked. They are organised based on themes.

## Doubts about the conflict

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It was interesting to read Ham's book about Vietnam. What we suspected about politicians is true. Most diggers have a disrespectful distrust of any politician. Particularly after Menzies got up and said "We are going" after asking Thieu to invite us.<sup>143</sup>

And:

I actively considered not returning to the army after Christmas leave knowing I would be sent to Vietnam. In Vietnam I quickly formed the opinion that we were not welcomed by the locals – they just wanted to get on with their lives free of outside intervention by either Saigon or communism. Working with an ex-soldier who had experienced doubts about his side helped me in my adjustments. About 18 months after returning, [November 1968 – referring to the Moratorium marches in June 1970] I was active in anti-Vietnam war marches. I could not bring myself to march on ANZAC Day for 23 years and then it was only matters of employment that led me to march. Since 7 RAR have come to Adelaide I have been involved with the battalion leadership and admired most of them.<sup>144</sup>

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## Camraderie

I have fond memories of the comradeship of the blokes I served with. My diagnosis of PTSD with the resultant treatment has allowed me to return to a normal life.<sup>145</sup>

There were good times and bad times. Soldiers become the greatest pacifists. Friendships were important. It made me a better person; it made me grow up quickly. If I had to do it again I would. I saw no racism. I joined the MPs [Military police] because I didn't want to sleep on the ground anymore.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Transcript C1190123

<sup>144</sup> Transcript V1180423

<sup>145</sup> Transcript V2200123

<sup>146</sup> Transcript V4040205

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I made a lot of good friends in Vietnam and am glad I served, even though the history books tell us we shouldn't have been there.<sup>147</sup>

## Personal Growth

Probably the best thing I've ever done. It formed my life. When you do something like that and you do it well with pride, you have the self-satisfaction that you don't have to prove yourself to anyone. When you meet another Vietnam veteran who says, "I was only doing such and such", I believe they are not proud of their service. I say to them, "If your job was supporting the grunts out in the scrub, and you did it well, you should be proud of your service". I don't know how many blokes I've had to say that to. The local RSL President was happy to let me give my speech without checking it because he respected me through my service.<sup>148</sup>

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I was a little bit gung-ho when I was in the army. I was quite excited about going to Vietnam, to tell the truth. I hadn't much life experience at the time, as I was only twenty when I went in. I turned twenty-one at Rockhampton (Shoalwater Bay).<sup>149</sup>

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Most people benefited. Some who would have gone off the rails were saved by national service.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Transcript C2250123

<sup>148</sup> Transcript V3190123

<sup>149</sup> Transcript C1270423

<sup>150</sup> Transcript C5180323

I didn't consider myself a national serviceman once I'd made the decision to go for officer training. I didn't come across any people who were opposed to the point that they were conscientious objectors. Attitude seemed to be - OK, we're here - we'll make the best of it. My brother who was called up was older than most because he was deferred for a time before enlistment. Once called up I took the opportunity to go to Scheyville. I made the decision to make the best of it.<sup>151</sup>

## **Coming Home**

"Being from Perth, I can remember when the Sydney pulled into Fremantle docks, we got the warmest welcome. We were welcomed home as heroes. There was no protest or anything to indicate we were baby killers etc. It was totally positive and very emotional - the way we were welcomed back. What happened in other parts of Australia - I believe some were flown back at night and told not to wear uniforms - was certainly not the case in Perth. We were given the warmest welcome".<sup>152</sup>

## **The Volunteer Myth**

The notion of all national servicemen being volunteers is absurd. It was driven by the ANZAC myth, which held that volunteering was a characteristic of the bronzed ANZAC. It completely ignored the fact that national servicemen who were balloted into the army were compelled to serve. That is not 'volunteering'.<sup>153</sup>

## **Summary of Findings**

The veterans saw their service as the most significant event in their lives, and an experience which strengthened them, and helped them cope well with adversity. They reported valuing the unique bonds developed

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<sup>151</sup> Transcript C5180323

<sup>152</sup> Transcript C8050523

<sup>153</sup> Transcript C11030523

with the men with whom they served. They resisted and rejected the stereotypes presented by the media.

They dismissed two contrasting stereotypes. The first is that they were all bronzed ANZACs enthusiastically joining up to fight for Queen and country, and the second that they were all bitter victims of a cynical politically driven conflict.

The tone of the news reporting changed markedly over time, especially after the pivotal year of 1968.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### **The Third National Service Scheme – The Politics**

*The National Service Act 1964* required 20-year-old males, if selected, to serve in the army for a period of twenty-four months of continuous service (reduced to eighteen months in 1971), followed by three years in the Reserve. The Defence Act was amended in May 1965 to provide that conscripts could be obliged to serve overseas. The announcement that National Servicemen would be sent to Vietnam to fight in units of the Australian regular army was made, in March 1966, by Prime Minister Harold Holt. The two pieces of legislation were introduced separately in sequence, rather than simultaneously. Sending conscripts to fight overseas in peacetime was controversial, so it made political sense to separate the two announcements. The first was the commitment of troops to Vietnam, and the second the new requirement for conscripts to be sent overseas to fight in peacetime. Hubert ADA's speech reported in the age was explicit in reference to conscription<sup>154</sup>.

Many of the men interviewed for this project were the sons of veterans (called "returned soldiers" before the Americanisation of the term to "veterans") and a few were brothers or cousins of men who had fought in Korea. Some of their NCOs had participated in the Malayan emergency, where the acronyms were different, but the enemy similar

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<sup>154</sup> The Age, 26<sup>th</sup> April 1965, P 1.

(C.T.s - Communist Terrorists - rather than V.C. - Viet Cong). Their world view, inherited from their fathers' memories and experiences, was framed by that history.

This is a qualitative study and uses the framework of active memorialisation to gather information. Discussion of the findings will be framed around themes which include pragmatism, rationalisation, and reflection. The first and last questions drove the formulation of the questionnaires used. Conclusions relevant to the second question are based on the interviews and records accessed through the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Australian War Memorial. Conclusions relevant to the first and last questions are based purely on the participants' responses at interview and news coverage.

### **Morris & Riseman**

Relevant to this paper is a study completed in 2019 by Ben Morris (who served as a platoon commander in Vietnam in 1967), because it addresses similar questions, especially regarding posting options for national servicemen.<sup>155</sup> Morris also used active memorialisation, interviewing thirty-eight surviving members of his platoon and other soldiers who served during that era. His work is significant for this study, as he interviewed men he served with, and it provides a framework for

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<sup>155</sup> Ben Morris and Noah Riseman, *Volunteers with a Legal Impediment: Australian National service and the Question of Overseas Service in Vietnam*, *History Australia*, 16:2, pp 266-286.



conclusions around the second enquiry about volunteering as they relate to this research.

## **The Context**

Young Australian men during the years between 1964 and 1972 lived through a tumultuous era. Their obligation to register, under pain of penalty, for military service, was just one aspect of that period, which included the Moon landings, the birth of a civil rights movement, the beginnings of legal recognition of First Australians and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the emergence of a feminist movement heralded by nascent moves towards equality for women in the workplace. The Australian currency was converted to a decimal system, an American president visited the country for the first time, and the Prime Minister, Harold Holt, disappeared. Rapid cultural transformation was underway, and these young men were making life changing decisions against a bewildering background.

The findings from interview reflected the complicated context of that decade, and the veterans' attempts to make pragmatic sense of their situations. The oral histories reflect a wide variety of attitudes, perceptions and behaviour responding to callup, but they share a pragmatic quality. The men interviewed were without exception, attempting to make the best of their situations. Each reacted with some form of plan, which varied from early registration to deferment whilst studying, but the motives reported were essentially pragmatic. There was

very little evidence of idealism or patriotism, a fact somewhat at odds with the ANZAC tradition. The individual situations of each veteran at the time shaped all responses. Each veteran's experience is unique, challenging the stereotypes of Vietnam veterans that have lingered in popular media and cultural consciousness since the mid-sixties.<sup>156</sup>

In 1993, after a question had been asked in parliament about the number of Vietnam veterans, the best answer that could be given at the time was "about 53,000".<sup>157</sup> This answer was taken from information provided on 26 October 1993, by an officer of the Department of Veterans' Affairs in response to a query from Air Commodore F Burt, at the time the Director-General Service Conditions, Department of Defence<sup>158</sup>. The development since of an online Nominal Roll<sup>159</sup> has addressed that problem, but 1993 was twenty-one years after the last Vietnam veteran had returned to Australia. This lack of even the most basic knowledge concerning Vietnam veterans suggests an extended period of indifference or disregard had followed the end of hostilities.

What has been revealed in the responses to the questionnaires used for this study is the variety of experience, attitude and motives of the men interviewed, which defy any attempt to create a stereotype.

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<sup>156</sup> Mia Martin Hobbs, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Volume 64, Issue 3, P 480-497, *We went and did an Anzac job: Memory, Myth, and the Anzac Digger in Vietnam* 05 October 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12512>

<sup>157</sup> Peter Yule, *The Long Shadow, Australia's Vietnam Veterans Since the War*, NewSouth, in Association with the Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 2020, P 392.

<sup>158</sup> CPD (S) 26 October 1993, p2570, DVA Archives, File 94/0464

<sup>159</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs Nominal Roll, <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/vietnamWar>

Because no archived documentary evidence exists of the voluntary status of veterans, identification of these men is very difficult. The fourth national service scheme was implemented to increase manpower without the enlistment of volunteers, so there was no mechanism in place to identify them. As noted in the Findings chapter, recruiting veterans who volunteered for national service for this study relied on word of mouth from and within ex-military networks. Because I had served with veterans whom I knew anecdotally to be volunteers, the small pool of this cohort was used to find others but was successful in locating only two more who were interviewed, making a total of four. Although this is a very small sample, it is representative of the cohort of volunteers.

### **The Volunteer Stereotype**

One stereotype of the volunteer soldier is that of a patriot putting aside any concern for individual safety and comfort to fight for Queen and country. Thus, a finding of a lack of reports of idealism as a motive can be seen as surprising in the case of the four volunteers interviewed. Two of this cohort registered early, however they reported unambiguously that their volunteer status was a consequence of a misunderstanding of the early registration process. This process is not explored by this study, but its availability as an option is mentioned by Sue Langford:

Young men who had reached the age of eighteen years and nine months, and men aged twenty who had been granted indefinite deferment or exemption, could volunteer for national service.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Sue Langford, *Appendix: The national service scheme, 1964-72*, Australian War Memorial. [https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet\\_app](https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet_app)

The early registration option has been all but ignored in the literature published about the fourth national service scheme and deserves further investigation.

Two of the volunteers reported using the early registration process as a tool to help organise and resolve their future status regarding military service. When their applications were lodged before the required date, they found that the Department of Labour and National Service regarded early registration as an application to enlist, and they were told that enlistment would proceed dependant on meeting the army's medical standards.

"I thought I'd probably get called up anyway, being pessimistic, and registered early. That would have been a year earlier than I would have normally gone in and would have meant less disruption to whatever I ended up doing. I was naively thinking I was registering for the ballot and didn't find out until years later that you couldn't do that – that I had volunteered".<sup>161</sup>

One volunteer recalled:

"So, I registered early, and got a letter saying, "Dear Sir, did you realise that by registering early, you have volunteered for national service?" I didn't realise it was volunteering because I hadn't read the fine print".<sup>162</sup>

Whether this process can be classified as "volunteering" in the true sense, is debatable, but because each of these men accepted enlistment, for the purposes of this study, it has been classified as such. They report

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<sup>161</sup> Transcript V1180423

<sup>162</sup> Transcript V2200123

that the correspondence received made it clear that enlistment was a choice, not an obligation, and they took that choice. Each regarded themselves as volunteers. They are most accurately described as “accidental volunteers”.

Only one volunteer gave patriotism, in the context of the threat of communism, as a motive in for volunteering.<sup>163</sup> This veteran had applied for entry into the air force at age eighteen. He reported that he was rejected because he was too short. At the time, he was working for the Department of Defence, in the company of veterans of both the Korean and Vietnam conflicts and suggested that as a young man he had been encouraged by them to join the army. In the context of the question about news media influence, this veteran said the reported criticism of the war by protesters was a factor in his decision-making. He recalled:

The number of volunteer national servicemen in my intake was a poke in the eye to all those university students that were protesting. We were ready to go and do a job that nobody wanted to do. Was it a worthy cause? There were political things behind it as I’ve learned later in life, but the Australian government wanted us to go and do these things – do a good job. The media didn’t influence me. When I was there, my sister used to cut out and send me stuff from the papers, and the absolute rubbish and exaggeration was beyond belief.<sup>164</sup>

This veteran had made the pragmatic decision to volunteer for national service, because he wanted to serve, and his rejection by the air force did not stop him. The fact that he did not know at the time that

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<sup>163</sup> Transcript V2200123

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

early registration was taken as volunteering is irrelevant, as that was always his intention. His remarks about the media are relevant to that later question.

### **Reactions – Family and Friends (and Others)**

Responses to the question about reaction of family and friends to volunteering for national service reflect parental anxiety, advice from fathers who had seen service, and general acceptance. None of the volunteers reported family or community division over the issue, even though there is reference to that in many historical accounts of the time.

This community division is best understood by the experience of Graham Edwards, a regular soldier who served in 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion and lost both legs in a mine incident on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1970. After Vietnam service and rehabilitation, he was elected to parliament in state and later federal jurisdictions based in Western Australia between 1983 and 2007. As federal member for Cowan on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2006, he made a speech to parliament during an apology to Vietnam veterans by the then Australian government. In that speech he told of a letter written to his mother by a person who upon hearing of his serious wounding in 1970, expressed the wish that he would not recover.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Hon. Graham Edwards, Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, Vietnam veterans day and the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the battle of Long Tan, <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=CHAMBER;id=chamber%2Fhansard%2F2006-08-17%2F0040;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2F2006-08-17%2F0000%22> Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023.

The remaining two volunteers reported very little reaction from friends and family, although both pointed out that they hadn't "broadcast" the fact that they had volunteered. Fifty years ago, in the absence of social media, young men were not so inclined as they are now to share important aspects of their private lives with those who knew them.

The fifth question asked the volunteers to recall how their situation as volunteers was viewed by their fellow conscripted national servicemen. As background, it is important to understand that fellow soldiers would have no idea of their status unless they chose to disclose it. All national servicemen whether volunteers or balloted men, were collected from rendezvous points around the country, usually local military depots. They were then bussed or put on flights to one of the three recruit training battalions located at Singleton and Kapooka in New South Wales and Puckapunyal in Victoria. Once assigned regimental numbers, issued with clothing and equipment, and allocated to a training platoon, volunteer national servicemen and balloted men were indistinguishable. The only distinction observable in terms of status and origin lay in the second digit of the assigned regimental number. For reasons best known to the military hierarchy, these numbers rotated clockwise geographically, based on the state of origin of the recruit. Queenslanders were assigned "1", New South Welshmen "2", Victorians "3", South Australians and Northern Territorians "4", and West Australians "5". This neat clockwise geographical progression was broken by Tasmanians being allocated "6". Thus, the only information clearly available about each recruit, was his

state of origin. This situation was an outcome of the legislation, which made it clear that no distinction was to be made between national servicemen and regular soldiers in the way the army treated them.<sup>176</sup>

Volunteer national servicemen were simply lumped together with balloted men.

Question 5 for volunteers about how other national servicemen regarded volunteering was not answered with clarity, as one volunteer described not “broadcasting” it, and the other two interviewed never recalled it as an issue discussed. Gil Green, the veteran interviewed by the South Australian museum, was asked a broader question about how he was regarded by other soldiers, but he answered it from the point of view of an indigenous soldier, rather than a volunteer.

### **News Media Influence**

The last question addressed to the volunteer national servicemen (and identical to the final question for the balloted men) enquired about how much influence the news media had on their attitudes, motives and decisions at the time of enlistment. This was an open-ended question, and some respondents separated their responses to media before their enlistment and after returning from Vietnam and explained the difference.

The two participants who separated their experience with the media into pre-Vietnam and post-Vietnam stages, describe a malignant media which had turned against them. One explained that this negative view



was a factor behind his denial of veteran status until ten years after he returned to Australia. The other believed he was brainwashed into thinking the Communists were taking over the world prior to service and was hurt by the reception he received on return, believing that news media reports turned the Australian public against Vietnam veterans. All four volunteers believed that the news media had little real influence during the war because they were simply too busy to pay it much attention prior to service and could not access it in Vietnam.

In summary, the four volunteers interviewed differed from their balloted comrades in that they were attempting to organise and plan their futures. This distinguishes them from the balloted men who were content to take their chances with the system. Their motives ranged from the belief that they were destined for dead-end and boring jobs, to an experience of racial discrimination. Patriotism was a factor, but not common to all, and all were disillusioned to differing degrees by the experience of service.

### **Summary - Volunteers**

When the volunteers were asked about their attitudes, motives and behaviour, they respond in a manner that throws common cliché about Vietnam veterans into doubt. These findings are consistent with the conclusions of writers such as Dapin, Lembke and most recently, Morris and Riseman.

The small group of men interviewed who identified as volunteers have come to terms with their service, and have lived successful lives since, despite two battling PTSD. The relationships they developed during service have endured for over fifty years, and they share a common belief that service in Vietnam has stood them in good stead and strengthened them as individuals.

### **The Balloted Men**

The group of balloted veterans interviewed provided responses that were, in most respects, very similar to those given by the volunteers. Because these individuals were much easier to identify and recruit, a larger group was interviewed. The pattern of questioning was similar, in that there were two protocol questions (establishing national service intake and year of service in Vietnam), followed by questions on the timing of information about deployment overseas, options (if any) available, anecdotes heard from others, and news and media influence. These veterans came primarily from service in infantry, although there was a scattering of other corps. This was one characteristic of the balloted group that differed from the volunteer group which was comprised entirely of ex-infantrymen.

Most of the veterans interviewed reported that they understood that there was a possibility of service in Vietnam once their birthdates were balloted. This possibility was confirmed as a certainty once they had commenced corps training, which followed the universal ten-week recruit

training for all national servicemen. The two veterans interviewed who were posted to corps of signals reported that towards the end of corps training they were told they could apply for geographical postings, one of which was Vietnam. This decision point was earlier for signalmen than it was for most in infantry, although one infantryman reported being given the opportunity to serve in Vietnam in interview towards the end of corps training. He took the opportunity but remains unclear on what his posting would have been had he declined it.

The understanding that they were most likely destined for Vietnam seemed to constitute some form of grand assumption, built on media reports, and the focus of both recruit and corps training, which concentrated on counter-insurgency warfare. This assumption was not challenged by any of those interviewed. Once infantrymen were posted to a battalion, their fate depended on the battalion deployment, organised around rotations for Vietnam. There was simply no point, as far as army manpower requirements were concerned, to post newly trained infantrymen to battalions that were about to return to Australia.

One infantry veteran who made it clear in interview that he had planned to avoid service in Vietnam by requesting a unit posting to a battalion which was about to return to Australia, found that his preference was ignored, and he was posted to a unit with six months training ahead of it (including an exercise at Shoalwater Bay and the preparatory stint at Canungra Jungle Training Centre), before being officially warned for Vietnam service.

## Summary – Balloted Men

Like the volunteers, the balloted men have come to terms with their service, even though they had no say in it. They reported doing their best to be effective, if not enthusiastic soldiers. Motives for this behaviour were not immediately clear, but the mutual respect and support for each other permeated the quality of their responses and made recruitment for the study straightforward. The strength and durability of the veterans' networks is a feature of the lives of these men, and most referred to these relationships as secondary only to family.

From the many references to the quality of these relationships in interview, it is easy to detect a common view that these men were fighting for each other, rather than for either South Vietnam or Australia. David Horner, a Vietnam veteran and a respected military historian refers to this:

I also had some understanding of the reaction of soldiers, and some appreciation of the human face of war: what it is like to be weary, hungry and under stress, and how mateship holds things together. A platoon in Vietnam might spend up to thirty days on patrol, and there is still a shared bond that can only be understood by those who have served on operations.<sup>166</sup>

This theme of mateship "holding things together", continues for the balloted men interviewed over fifty years since their involvement, and to some degree explains why they accepted their lot and served. What can

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<sup>166</sup> David Horner, in *Vietnam, Our War, Our Peace*, Australian War Memorial Commemorative Publication, Published by the Department of Veterans Affairs, Canberra 2006, P 133.

coldly be termed “peer pressure” helped form their motivations and behaviour when they were twenty-year-olds.

The veterans interviewed saw this comradeship as a “sweet use of adversity” and continue to value it today.

### **A Decade of Silence**

For the first few years after the Australian withdrawal from Vietnam, very little appeared in local media which referenced the war, and what did emerge was, like the literature of the time, bitter in tone. The fall of Saigon, five days after ANZAC Day in 1975 seemed to reinforce the message that the war was a debacle, best forgotten. For many Vietnam veterans this event compounded the moral injury they had suffered on returning to Australia to be met with indifference by most, and hostility by some. It can be argued that veterans who had difficulty in settling into civilian life post discharge after returning from Vietnam were as traumatised by what they encountered in the media as they were by their experiences during active service. This media context, characterised by disregard and condemnation, was for many veterans, a further moral injury.

As far as most media was concerned, the subjects themselves, the national servicemen, effectively disappeared in the period between 1972 and the 1987 Welcome Home march. Lachlan Irvine, a Vietnam veteran (not a national serviceman) who served in 3 RAR between December

1967 and November 1968 acknowledged as much in a paper he delivered at Curtin University in 1999, in which he said:<sup>167</sup>

37 years after the beginning of Australian involvement in Vietnam, 34 years after that involvement was upgraded to include combat units, 26 years after the last Australians were withdrawn from Vietnam, and 24 years after the war ended, *Historical Studies* has not published a single article about Australia and the Vietnam war.

The journal *Historical Studies* was generally regarded at the time as the flagship journal of the Australian history profession. Irvine was National Secretary of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia in the 1980s, during the peak years of the Agent Orange controversy and was also one of the organisers of the Welcome Home Parade for Australian Vietnam veterans, held in Sydney in October 1987. He attributed the lack of reference to the war in Vietnam to the political affiliation of most Australian academic historians.

### **Breaking the Silence**

Apart from the broad issue of the Australian deployment, the rationale behind sending one in twelve twenty-year-olds to Vietnam did not figure predominately in the media discourse. There were exceptions. Journalism historian Ken Inglis put this argument succinctly in an article on conscription in *The Australian* –

If the danger to Australia was real then volunteers, as in past wars, should have been encouraged by the Government to come forward in defence of their country. If the danger was not that great and the

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<sup>167</sup> Lachlan Irvine, *Vietnam Veterans in Australian history, a "Trahison des Clercs"*, Paper Presented at the Annual Humanities Postgraduate Research Conference, Curtin University, W.A, 1999.

presence of Australian troops in Vietnam was 'intended as a symbolic gesture towards our American patron rather than a serious contribution towards a military 'Solution', then is there not a case for sending, as to Korea, no more than a token force of volunteers?'<sup>168</sup>

Whilst deployed in South Vietnam in 1970, my father sent me copies of the *Courier Mail*. Some of what I read about the Moratorium in Australia at the time was disturbing. Other men also received papers from home, and they were shared and circulated. What was represented in dailies such as *The Advertiser*, *The Australian*, *The Canberra Times*, and the *Sun- Herald*, was equally disturbing. This report from *The Age*, on May 8 was representative of other metropolitan dailies on the same day –

'Seventy thousand citizens took to Melbourne streets yesterday, shouting, "Peace", "Stop the war!"'<sup>169</sup>

There were a series of events reported, especially in the American news media, which had a profound effect on public opinion at home which was obviously becoming unsupportive of our commitment. The inattention of national journalism to the plight of veterans is remarkable during this decade of silence, but it began to notice them after the Welcome Home march. The spectacle of thousands of Vietnam veterans, many in wheelchairs, and the parade of flags representing those who had died, was presented in all national dailies examined in his study.

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<sup>168</sup> K. Inglis, Compelled to kill. A war against the tide of history, *The Australian*, 26 March 1966, P7.

<sup>169</sup> *The Age*, May 8, 1970, P 1.



Fig 3. Front page – *The Sun-Herald* – 4 October 1987

Prior to the Welcome Home March, the 1983 release of John Schumann's song "I was Only Nineteen – A Walk in the Light Green" began to generate a flood of support and sympathy for Vietnam veterans, and the decade of silence was broken.<sup>170</sup>

### **Political Motivations**

It is important, at this point, to understand another set of motivations, those of the members of the Australian cabinet at the time who made the decision to introduce national service in peacetime. The situation that had developed in Vietnam after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 could be interpreted either as part of a development in the cold war, or as an exercise in decolonisation in

<sup>170</sup> Claire Hunter, *The real-life story behind Redgum's 'I was only 19'*, in the Sydney Morning Herald, April 21, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/the-real-life-story-behind-redgum-s-i-was-only-19-20180409-p4z8lq.html> Accessed 20th May, 2023



Indochina.<sup>171</sup> Sir Percy Spender, Minister for External Affairs between December 1949 and April 1951, took the position that the cold war would be fought in Vietnam, and this view was echoed by Sir Robert Menzies, and was fundamental to decisions made a decade later. The Indonesian policy of confrontation ('Konfrontasi') a three-year conflict on the island of Borneo and the Malay Peninsula, with Australian troops involved as part of a Commonwealth force under British command, was also occupying the minds of the Menzies cabinet. The conflict, which centred on whether the former British colonies of Sabah and Sarawak, which bordered Indonesia's provinces on Borneo, would become part of Indonesia, or of recently federated Malaysia. The conflict involved Australian infantry battalions in support of a British troop commitment. By the time it was over, it had cost the lives of twenty-three Australian soldiers on operations, or through accidents.

Konfrontasi presented a challenge for the army in terms of manpower, and a new battalion (4 RAR) was raised in South Australia in February 1964.<sup>172</sup> Australia's military resources were not up to the task of meeting the demands created by confrontation by Indonesia, and the perceived threat of Communist expansion on the Asian mainland in Vietnam, and cabinet began to grapple with these simultaneous strategic challenges. The politics of the situation were straightforward, even if the

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<sup>171</sup> Peter Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2014, P 35.

<sup>172</sup> Bruce Davies, *Vietnam, The Complete Story of the Australian War*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

manpower situation was not. The Coalition government of the time believed correctly that there would be support for the notion that the Communists should be stopped in Vietnam, and this notion became a central plank of their policy rhetoric.

### **The Manpower Dilemma**

In order to back up this rhetoric with action, the size of the army needed to be increased, and rapidly. An early election for the House of Representatives was held on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1963, at which the Coalition increased its majority. Menzies assumed that a troop commitment to Vietnam would have broad popular support and would also serve to drive a wedge between the left and right wings of the Labor party, and that he would maintain the support of the DLP in the Senate. The demands to increase manpower in the army precipitated discussion about the return of national service. The third national service scheme under which all Eighteen-year-old men were required to undertake 176 days of military training had been abandoned in 1959. One of the reasons for its abandonment was the strain on manpower resources to support the recruitment and training of a high number of short-term personnel. The army needed the reliable supply of a smaller number of men, but needed them for a longer period of time, than had been possible under the old scheme. The solution was a scheme of selective service, which enlisted a smaller number of soldiers, but which was able to train them to a higher standard of efficiency than was available under the 176-day scheme. It

was decided to introduce a birthday ballot system which had the advantage of flexibility in that the number of birthdates drawn at each ballot could be tuned to number of men required at the time. The army was also content with this arrangement as it did not draw a disproportionate number of skilled and experienced personnel away from operational duties to train the national servicemen. The cabinet briefing of 6<sup>th</sup> December 1967 makes the situation very clear.<sup>173</sup>

This scheme, for the first time in Australian history, enlisted men during peacetime to fight remote from the Australian mainland and disrupted a tradition of conscription to fight only in Australia, or on Australian mandated territory. This tradition had been maintained even when the country was under existential threat in World War Two. Initially, compulsory military training had been introduced on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1939 when Prime Minister Menzies had announced the Universal Service Scheme, with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1940. Labor Prime Minister, John Curtin after succeeding Menzies, and as the threat from Imperial Japan loomed large, argued that it was necessary to extend compulsory service in the theatre known as the South-West Pacific Zone. Curtin pushed past objections from his party to have the *Defence (Citizen Military Forces) Act 1943* passed on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1943. This was despite his earlier opposition

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<sup>173</sup> National Archives of Australia, National service – Policy, Contents date range -1964 – 1967, NAA: A4940, C162 PART 2, <https://www.naa.gov.au/students-and-teachers/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/war/vietnam-war/cabinet-proposing-national-service-scheme-secret-memorandum> Accessed 20th May 2023 2012, P 101.

to conscription for overseas service, for which he had been briefly jailed in Melbourne in 1916 for failing to enlist in accordance with the Military Service Proclamation.<sup>174</sup>

There were two significant elements of the third national service scheme that set it apart from earlier schemes. First, it was applied in peacetime. There was never a declaration of war in South Vietnam. This is more than a technical point. It represented a precedent that flew in the face of previous understandings about the role of conscription in defence of the country as an undertaking to be used only in the face of existential peril. Secondly, it was selective, not universal. A young man was enlisted to fight based on his date of birth. It seriously affected the lives of these men. From 1965 to 1972, over 15,300 national servicemen served in Vietnam. Two hundred were killed and 1,279 wounded, and a large proportion of these men were traumatised, which affected their quality of their remaining lives, and that of their partners and families. Nevertheless, it solved an immediate problem for the government of the time, and the army believed they could manage it. The costs were felt by the conscripts, especially those who served in infantry. Their responses at interview reveal a pragmatic response to their situation.

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<sup>174</sup> Lloyd Ross, *John Curtin, A Biography*, MacMillan Australia, 1977, P 52.

## **CHAPTER 6: Conclusions**

### **Introduction**

This project set out to investigate memories of the options given to national servicemen regarding operational service in Vietnam, the motives of the few who volunteered, and the influence of the news media on their attitudes, experiences and behaviour of both volunteers and conscripted men. The hypothesis regarding choices given to balloted men was largely confirmed across the sample of veterans interviewed. However, the fact that half of the volunteers reported that their volunteering was accidental, was not predicted, and introduced complexities into the formation of conclusions. Information gleaned from the interviews with both volunteers and conscripts, indicated that the news media had little influence before enlistment, was seen as generally not accessible during service, and had a negative influence and generated feelings of bitterness post service.

### **The ANZAC Tradition**

Expectations that the ANZAC tradition was influential in the volunteers' enlistment and preparedness to put themselves in harm's way were not met by the responses in the interviews. That tradition, as described in Chapter 2, loomed large in the early news media coverage of the conflict, especially around the annual ANZAC Day commemorations, but was not a reference point for veterans interviewed, whether they

were volunteers or conscripts. One volunteer gave his experience of delivering an ANZAC Day address as important to him, but more as it added to his credibility as a veteran than his understanding of the significance of the commemoration. He said:

The local RSL President was happy to let me give my speech without checking it because he respected me through my service.<sup>175</sup>

The ANZAC tradition, as variously described by Bean<sup>176</sup> and Gammidge<sup>177</sup> and analysed in Seal's *Inventing ANZAC*,<sup>178</sup> did not figure large in the material collected from the veterans interviewed. Vietnam veterans have created a separate day of commemoration of their war, known as Long Tan Day. The development of Long Tan Day saw its origins in the work of the Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia (VVAA). The VVAA was formed in late 1979 by the veterans themselves. Many felt that their exposure to chemicals in Vietnam was causing problems with their health and the health of their children. The chemicals, known as Agent Orange, included 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D, a by-product of which is the extremely poisonous substance TCDD or dioxin. This was often exacerbated by psychological disorders caused by what was later diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Transcript V3190123

<sup>176</sup> C.E.W. Bean, *Anzac to Amiens*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1946, P 181.

<sup>177</sup> Bill Gammidge, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War*. Australia: Penguin. 1974

<sup>178</sup> Graham Seal, *Inventing ANZAC, The Digger and National Mythology*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2004

<sup>179</sup> Our History, Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia website, <https://www.vvaa-sa.asn.au/history/> Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> May 2023

The question of what motivated the veterans who identified as volunteers (even though two of them did so accidentally), reflects the zeitgeist of the period. Young Australians in the sixties and seventies were not confronted with the variety of choices available to today's millennials. At this time, completing secondary education was not a universal experience. In Queensland, for example, the school leaving age was only raised to 15 by the Education Act of 1964 (operative in 1965).<sup>180</sup> Young men found a trade, either early in the decade at school leaving, or completed secondary education and took an apprenticeship at that point. A proportion entered tertiary studies at one of the universities or training institutions. Those who were called up whilst engaged in tertiary study were deferred until the successful completion of their courses.

Deferment was obviously not an issue for the volunteers, but when their responses at interview are analysed, several themes emerge. Through misunderstanding of the early registration process, the two who followed this process were not attracted by the idea of military service for its own sake, but by the post service benefits that the national service scheme offered. Two aspects of this scheme were attractive. The first was training under the National Service Vocational Training Scheme. Under this arrangement a national serviceman's skills could be supplemented by a course of study or a refresher course, whether full-time, part-time or by

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<sup>180</sup> Queensland Government, Department of Education, Chronology of education in Queensland, <https://education.qld.gov.au/about-us/history/chronology-of-education-in-queensland>, Accessed 19th May 2023

correspondence, post discharge. Alternatively, if the serviceman had no job to return to on completing national service, he was eligible to apply for vocational training. The scheme was generous, covering the cost of post-discharge training, including compulsory fees, travel fares, textbooks and equipment, and a living allowance for those studying full-time. I took advantage of this scheme in 1972, which led to two undergraduate degrees and a postgraduate qualification. As one volunteer commented:

I was working in public service fourth division because I only had Junior qualification. Planned to do Senior at night school. Realised I would have to register for national service halfway through first year at night school.<sup>181</sup>

Whilst both these men were content to enlist when they learned that they had an option to back out from their accidental commitment, neither did, but their motives were mixed, and not driven solely by anything to do with the ANZAC tradition. The other two volunteers also enlisted for a complicated set of motives, which included security:

"I couldn't get the job I wanted (butcher's apprentice) so I went to Sydney for the medical".<sup>182</sup>

I was not a successful student. When I got to Leaving level (in those days) I was in dead end jobs. At that time, I was a production clerk and had been sent from one company to another one and would be away from home for most of the week. I was occasionally driving forklifts and couldn't see much future in that. I had always wanted to join the police force but hadn't really picked up any goals and national service came along. I thought I'd probably get called up anyway, being pessimistic, and registered early.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Transcript V1180423

<sup>182</sup> Transcript V4040205

<sup>183</sup> Op. Cit.



## **The Infantry Experience**

Whilst the interviews reflected the lack of choice provided to the balloted men, there were patterns revealed. The army needed to ensure adequate manpower levels at all times. This was a much greater challenge for some corps and postings than others. It was not difficult to maintain manpower for postings where soldiers filled relatively secure support positions at permanent bases such as the task force base at Nui Dat, the Australian Logistics Support Group at Vung Tau, and the permanent fire support base at the Horseshoe, near Dat Do. In the case of national servicemen posted to support units in corps such as Signals, Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, Ordnance Corps and Transport, men were simply repatriated at the conclusion of their obligation. This meant that for these postings there was a strong element of manning predictability available.

This became obvious when interviewing Signalmen. They reported being given a choice of units, and once posted they knew that would remain in that unit or sub-unit for the duration of their tour. Their duties were essentially routine and predictable, and resembled to some extent, civilian working situations:

I was a signaller looking after the station. The sergeant and corporal were there all day from 7am until 7pm, and we did shifts. We used to have to change frequencies to stay on the air because the ozone layer would move.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Transcript C6170323

And:

Was a tech storeman. Store was opposite HQ. Used to do the laundry run to Baria. Was issued with a Land Rover and truck licence in Vietnam.<sup>185</sup>

Maintaining manpower strength for units posted on operational duty outside the wire was much more difficult. Apart from the routine risks of infantry service presented by its demanding physical nature, which included patrolling for weeks at a time, sleeping on the ground without shelter in the tropical environment, and carrying 50kg of rations, weapons and ammunition, these soldiers were exposed to death or maiming injury. They were routinely sleep deprived and exhausted most of the time whilst on operations. Operations lasted for periods between three and six weeks. This meant that infantry soldiers frequently succumbed, completely unpredictably, to illness (malaria, for example), injury, and exhaustion, even if battle casualties from contact with the enemy were not routine.

The army's solution to this problem was the maintenance of the Australian Reinforcement Unit at Nui Dat which supplied a pool of infantry reinforcements at short notice when replacements were required. Seventy percent of casualties (killed and wounded) between 1963 and 1972 were infantry (2359 of a total of 3499).

The number of soldiers available to ARU had to be kept constant, so newly trained infantry corpsmen were flown at regular intervals from

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<sup>185</sup> Transcript C427022

Australia when they had completed the Jungle Training Centre course at Canungra in Queensland. This was the primary reason for infantry soldiers not being given the options available to members of other corps, such as Signals. Manpower requirements simply did not permit it.

Once allocated to infantry, soldiers were usually not given an option. This is evidenced by the answers provided by the balloted infantrymen at interview in response to the question "Were you ever given the choice, formally or informally, to opt out of service in Vietnam?"

"Not at any point, through recruit and corps training, and once posted to 7 RAR".<sup>186</sup>

"No. The question "Do you want to go to Vietnam" was never asked".<sup>187</sup>

"I can't recall at any stage being given the option of not going. So, I'd say 'No'".<sup>188</sup>

Two infantrymen did describe a choice being given, one in a personal interview with his recruit training battalion commander, where he believed he was "sold" the notion that infantry was a corps in which the greatest variety of experiences were available –

"He then asked me about corps training – which corps training. This was where I was scammed, if you like, because he never really gave me an option. I remember distinctly him saying that if I joined the infantry, I would get the experience of many corps in the infantry, like artillery, engineers etc, so I was given the impression that being in infantry meant that I would have quite a range of different activities to do. That wasn't correct, because in the

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<sup>186</sup> Transcript C11030523

<sup>187</sup> Transcript C7180423

<sup>188</sup> Transcript C5180323

infantry all we did was foot slog basically. I was hoodwinked at that point".<sup>189</sup>

The other instance of an infantryman being given a choice conformed to the anecdote describing a battalion parade after which those who did not want to serve in Vietnam were separated from the rest of the group -

"Yes. The whole battalion was paraded, and the CO came on and said "This battalion has been warned that we are going to Vietnam. Those who don't wish to go, head for a particular table after you've signed to say you've been warned. I remember some (married) blokes who didn't want to finish their national service in Vietnam opted out and were transferred. We thought we were going to be the last battalion there".<sup>190</sup>

This veteran's report is of a parade that occurred in Easter 1970. It was only about a month later, on 22<sup>nd</sup> April, that Prime Minister John Gorton announced the beginning of the Australian drawdown.<sup>191</sup> The drawdown reduced the number of infantry battalions in Vietnam from two to three when 8 RAR was not replaced on its return to Australia in October 1970. It is reasonable to question whether the option provided by the battalion commander to the veteran reported above was connected to an easing of replacement pressure created by the imminent reduction of the infantry component of the Australian task force in Vietnam by one third. The veteran's reference to "last battalion there" reflected rumour at the time which was later

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<sup>189</sup> Transcript C8050523

<sup>190</sup> Transcript C1190123

<sup>191</sup> Ashley Ekins with Ian McNeill, *Fighting to the Finish, The Australian Army, and the Vietnam War, 1968 – 1975*, Allen & Unwin, 2012, P 416.

proved accurate when the first drawdown announcement was made a few weeks after this parade.

### **Reliability of Recall**

My investigation of the reliability of recall for the participants centered on comparing the details of the public records held on their service with what they divulged in interview. An introductory question asked for details of date of enlistment, unit, posting, and time in Vietnam.

Every participant provided these details with complete accuracy. The participants were less clear on what intake of national service they were personally enlisted in, but their recall of dates, locations and units was completely, and without exception, accurate. There were sixteen ballots held between March 1965 and September 1972, so confusion about which intake an individual was involved in is understandable. These men were more interested in the individual results of their ballot, rather than the position of that ballot in the sequence. Other specifics, such as regimental numbers, were recalled with one hundred percent reliability.

After the series of interviews has been conducted, it has become obvious that the effect of fifty years on the recall of the men interviewed is not a barrier to reliability of their reports. They have been influenced to some extent by journalistic treatment of their service post the 1987 Welcome Home march. Any feelings of bitterness reported in interview occurred after returning from Vietnam. The negative reception experienced by the veterans had an emotional impact which for many was

exacerbated by trauma experienced on operations. Responses at interview, compared with archived army reports, show that any trauma that they have endured has not damaged reliability of recall. These men remember their experiences and recount them with honesty and integrity.

One such honest piece was written by Graeme Cornes, a conscript who served in my company in 7th Battalion RAR in 1970. Cornes, a successful AFL footballer, was something of a celebrity when called up for military service. He went on after the Vietnam war to coach the Adelaide Crows and forged a successful media career. He writes in the context of returning to Vietnam for the first time since his service:

When I was a soldier in Vietnam, and in the 39 years since, I never once doubted that we were doing the right thing by coming here. Perhaps that is the effect of the brainwashing that is military training, but we thought we were the best soldiers in the world, protecting an oppressed, terrorised country from Communist insurgency. We were wrong on both counts.....  
Sure, there is some anger that our casualties were for nothing, but I don't know who to blame for that. However, I simply did not expect to be overwhelmed with guilt, or to have such vivid memories of the violence, only the milder forms of which have been recorded here. In their developing, recovering country, the Vietnamese are a united, industrious, optimistic people. More importantly, they have one other great quality: they are forgiving. They shame me.<sup>192</sup>

### **One National Serviceman's Story**

The newspaper reporting analysed in the last chapter includes reference to the political nature of the conflict. By the time I was in

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<sup>192</sup> Graham Cornes, *A Duty to Remember*, News.com, October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009. <https://www.news.com.au/news/a-duty-to-remember/news-story>, Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023

Vietnam, this characterisation of the war was a recurring theme in news media coverage. The tension between the political demands of the war, and the army's conduct of it, were becoming increasingly evident. Those caught in the vortex were the national servicemen. The men interviewed for this study are all survivors of the war in Vietnam. Their voices can be heard. The voices of the two hundred national servicemen who died in the conflict, are mute, but their stories can still be told. One story that highlights the tragic circumstances of many conscripts at the time, that of Stanley Larsson, a soldier from Adelaide, is illustrative of the tensions involved in managing the political and military conduct of the war.<sup>192</sup>

Stanley Larsson was a volunteer national serviceman, as his birthdate of 9<sup>th</sup> October 1946 was not drawn out in the in the fourth National Service ballot conducted on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1966 for men born in the period 1<sup>st</sup> July 1946 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1946. The October dates drawn in that ballot were October 1<sup>st</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, and 29<sup>th</sup>. The Department of Veterans' Affairs nominal roll shows that Larssons was initially posted to 7 RAR on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1970, by which time the battalion had been in Vietnam for nearly three months. He was killed in a mine incident on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1970.

For reasons not entirely clear fifty-three years later, Larssons did not travel to Vietnam with 7 RAR, even though he had been a member of the unit and trained with it in 1969. What is clear is that Larsson's father,

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<sup>192</sup> In Memoriam: Stan Larsson, 7RAR website, <http://7rar.asn.au/wp/?p=1971> Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> May 2023

also called Stanley, had made representations to the Minister for the Army at the time, Andrew Peacock, to have his son remain in Australia. Stanley Larssons had poor eyesight, but his very thick set of spectacles had allowed him to pass the army medical tests. The representations made by Larsson's father through the member for Sturt at the time, Hon. Norman Foster, appear to have initially succeeded in having him reposted into a unit that had recently returned from Vietnam.<sup>193</sup> After his reposting, and early in 1970, his case was reviewed by the board of Eastern command, and he was reposted back to 7 RAR. He was flown to Vietnam in May 1970 and marched into C Coy. He was killed on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1970.

On June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1970, a letter was read into the parliamentary Hansard by Norm Foster, Labor member for Sturt. The letter was written by Stanley Larsson's father. It was addressed to John Gorton, Prime Minister at the time. It is worth noting that both Prime Minister Gorton, and Stanley Larsson Snr. were returned servicemen from the Second World War.

The date was significant to me, as at the time I was serving in Vietnam as a member of Stan's battalion, 7 RAR, and had turned 23 on 5<sup>th</sup> June, the day before the incident. Stan was a member of 9 Platoon C Company, whereas my posting was 5 Platoon B Company. We were both

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<sup>193</sup> Michael O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars: With the Seventh Battalion in Vietnam*, in association with Seventh Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment Association Inc., Allen & Unwin Sydney, 1995, P 191.



serving as riflemen in our respective infantry platoons, although Stan was a volunteer national serviceman, and I was a conscript.

Although records of the incident show it wasn't Stanley Larssons who triggered the mine, Stan and the other three soldiers involved (two who were killed, and one seriously wounded) did not see it.<sup>194</sup> Stan, and one other man had walked over the mine, before it was detonated by a following soldier. There had been heavy rain the night before the incident, and the humidity was very high. In those conditions, it was almost impossible to prevent glasses from misting up.

In contextualising the letter in his speech during the grievance debate, the Hon Norm Foster said: <sup>195</sup>

On behalf of the parents of this soldier I wrote to the Minister for the Army (Mr Peacock) early in January requesting that this soldier not be sent into active combat in Vietnam because of his extremely poor eyesight. The soldier, as the Minister informed me, was transferred from his then regiment, the 7th Battalion, into the 5th Battalion and he was in due course boarded.

The letter, addressed to John Gorton, Prime Minister at the time, reads:

Thirty years ago, you and I were engaged actively in a conflict on an issue that was beyond doubt. We fought for freedom from individual oppression and tyranny, and I was proud to be an Australian.

A short while ago, I was informed that my son was killed in action in Vietnam.

In Vietnam there emerged a terrible armed struggle between the peoples of one race - father against son, brother against brother,

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid, p192

<sup>195</sup> Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, 11 June 1970, 27<sup>th</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Grievance debate, P 3352.

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/hansard80/hansardr80/1970-06-11/0068/hansardfrag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf>

each fighting desperately for principles I no longer understand, but it was a family struggle, which in the final event will only be resolved between the people of Vietnam.

Yet into this conflict, Mr Prime Minister, powerful neighbours intruded, and so you committed Australia. You felt that by armed force, your ideals might be thrust upon these people. Through your intrusion, you and your colleagues introduced into Australia, the very principles against which I was prepared, with others, to die if necessary. This is your Australia, Mr Prime Minister, and I no longer have pride in being an Australian.

Into the conflagration that is Vietnam, you sent my son, a man whom you knew that without his glasses, could not see a hand, held four feet away, or a car at 30 feet, and whom you told could see reasonably well with glasses. You advised him to keep them clean, yet in the torrid humidity of Vietnam, you could not tell him how. He went, Mr Prime Minister, because you told him it was right and honourable.....

.....Perhaps if in the interests of human justice, and of truth, the news media and journals of our day can find the courage to publish my letter to you, I may find truth, or perhaps, Mr Prime Minister, time may show that my son did not die in vain.

This tragic series of events is significant because it demonstrates very clearly the political nature of decisions made about deployment of national servicemen. The commanding officer of 7 RAR at the time had made a compassionate decision to free a national serviceman of his obligations under the legislation by reposting him. Because the case had become politicised once it came before federal parliament, that decision could not stand because it made a mockery of the requirement under the act that national servicemen would be treated as regular soldiers in terms of manpower demands. It also made the point, that even senior and respected military commanders had to put political concerns before their professional military judgement.

About a month after Larsson's death, all riflemen with spectacles in 7 RAR were removed from rifle platoons and reposted to garrisoned

locations behind the wire. One of them was a member of my rifle section who served the remainder of his tour as a storeman in the Australian Logistic Support Group at Vung Tau. The timing of his reposting from a rifle platoon to the logistics base can be seen on the DVA nominal roll.<sup>196</sup>

Every death in war is a tragedy, but the narrative of Stanley Larsson's demise highlights the suffering and grief caused by decisions made by a government trapped by influences it did not fully understand. The circumstances of the commitment of conscripts to Vietnam was unique in our military history. This situation had ever happened before, has never happened since, and given the political blowback of conscription for Vietnam, will likely never happen again. These men were caught in a confluence of social and political forces without precedent in Australian history.

The historical circumstances of the time are all clearly reflected in this soldier's tragic experience. These circumstances include the rapidly changing view of the Australian commitment by mid 1970, the decisions being made by the government of the time to begin a drawdown of forces, the ongoing controversy about conscription, and the ever-increasing political divisions reflected in (amongst other events) the 1970 Moratorium marches. These events were coalescing in May 1970.

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<sup>196</sup> CONNELL, Keith Geoffrey, Service Number 2791510, <https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/veteran?id=1282919&c=VIETNAM#R>

Coupled with the powerful imagery generated from the USA surrounding the My Lai massacre<sup>197</sup> and the shootings at Kent State University, both of which emerged in the media in 1970, the year I was in Vietnam, sentiment at home in Australia began to shift, as evidenced by the 1970 Gallup polling:

In June 1969, Richard Nixon announced that the US would begin unilateral withdrawals of its forces from Vietnam. For the remainder of 1969 and into early 1970 the US Army withdrew over 59,000 troops from Vietnam. As US withdrawals progressed there was some discussion in Australia about whether Australian forces should also be withdrawn, and if so, whether they should be withdrawn completely, ..... In these circumstances, the attitudes of Australians towards continuing the campaign changed dramatically and most Australians expressed the view that the troops should be brought home.<sup>198</sup>

This poll was conducted a year after the US announcement of a unilateral withdrawal of the nation's troops from Vietnam. Australian officials then began discussions about a withdrawal. The main issue to be considered was whether it should be "one out – all out" or a phased withdrawal.

There remains a strong belief that the western media was manipulated by the Communists during the war:

The PRG's Truong Nhu Tang spoke contemptuously of the ease with which the Communists manipulated Western media, saying, "We were not so much looking for supporters, but rather for opponents of the American and Saigon regimes .... Not only were the South Vietnamese and the

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<sup>197</sup> *Miscue on the Massacre*, Time Magazine, Friday December 5th, 1969, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0%2C9171%2C901651%2C00.html>; Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023

<sup>198</sup> Gallup Polls #2 – *Australian support for Vietnam deployment*, Robert Hall, 14 March 2020, Articles - Australian Army, Uncategorised, Vietnam War [https://vietnam.unsw.adfa.edu.au/gallup-polls-2-support-for-vietnam-deployment/#\\_ftn7](https://vietnam.unsw.adfa.edu.au/gallup-polls-2-support-for-vietnam-deployment/#_ftn7) Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> May 2023

Americans lied to by the Communists. Even those who of us who lived in the jungle and made sacrifices and fought .... were made victims.”<sup>199</sup>

And this media manipulation also generated anger in Australians who served because what they read about the war on returning home was very different from what they had experienced. This was especially true for the national servicemen who returned immediately to civilian status and were not rehabilitated in their units after operational service as the regular soldiers were. Josie Vine’s reference to Tim Bowden as a “lovable larrikin” and a “seemingly fearless” war correspondent who was antiauthoritarian and non-conformist in his determination to film the war from the South Vietnamese soldier’s viewpoint is light years from my personal experience of being prevented from departing from the conformist narrative of a soldier happy in the service in April 1970 at Nui Dat in conversation with the Army minister.<sup>200</sup>

The effect of media, whether print and television, did have some influence, but that influence came after the conflict, and had much to do with the way veterans identified rather than any alteration of their recall. The men interviewed universally identified first as “Nashos”, and then by their military posting. Infantrymen were always keen to be identified as such, and members of less respected corps, were likewise content to be labelled as “POGOs”, army slang for personnel on garrison operations, or

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<sup>199</sup> Gallup Polls #2 – *Australian support for Vietnam deployment*, Robert Hall, 14 March 2020, Articles - Australian Army, Uncategorised, Vietnam War [https://vietnam.unsw.adfa.edu.au/gallup-polls-2-support-for-vietnam-deployment/#\\_ftn7](https://vietnam.unsw.adfa.edu.au/gallup-polls-2-support-for-vietnam-deployment/#_ftn7) Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> May 2023

<sup>200</sup> Josie Vine, *The Larrikin Paradox: An Analysis of Larrikinism’s Democratic Role in Australian Journalism*. Ph D Thesis, RMIT University February 2009 P 225.

base soldiers not routinely exposed to danger outside the wire. These identities are hierarchical, inflexible, and important to veterans. What is flexible, and changes as a person ages, is the way in which these survivors of trauma identify and socialize.

### **Post Traumatic Growth**

There is a great deal of discussion in the psychological literature about PTSD, but far less attention is given to post traumatic growth. When it has been investigated, and an index of post traumatic growth developed to measure positive outcomes, some interesting findings have been identified, many of them relevant to this study. For example, survivors of trauma often report –

“An increased appreciation for life in general, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life”.<sup>201</sup>

Many of the veterans interviewed expressed the view that their experiences on operational service had increased their self-confidence, and others noted that their appreciation for the routine comforts of life, and the security of their peaceful post-conflict existence was never taken for granted. From the transcripts of interviews:

National service was the best thing I have ever done. It provided a foundation for the rest of my life. Doing it well provided a lifelong sense of satisfaction. I feel now that I don't have to prove anything to anyone. Everybody should be proud of service in whatever

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<sup>201</sup> Marijn C. W. Kroes and Guillén Fernández, *Dynamic Neural Systems Enable Adaptive, Flexible Memories*, *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, Vol. 36, No. 7, 2012

capacity. Everybody had a job to do, and if they did it well should be proud.<sup>202</sup>

And:

I survived operational service in Vietnam and returned physically unscathed but have been diagnosed with PTSD. I manage it and have lived a successful life despite it. But on the positive side, my experience in Vietnam taught me that I could cope with whatever challenges, physical and emotional, I encountered, and believe that it made me stronger as a person. I also made lifelong friendships with the men I served with. These friendships are second only to family in their significance.<sup>203</sup>

If the experience of trauma is not a barrier to accurate recall, then perhaps the passage of time is. This study asks participants to recall events that happened to them when they were young men, over fifty years ago.

This study has sought to set the record straight in reference to the veterans interviewed, and in so doing, to honour all those who served, and the families who waited for them. It has also sought to pay attention to the voices of the veterans as expressed in memoir, and in the answers to the questions they were asked in the interviews. Throughout the process of listening to the veterans it became clear that they treasure their unique experiences, and to a large extent identify through them as men apart:

....memory, despite its unreliability, remains central to people's sense of self and identity and, therefore, central to the literature of remembering.....Current research proves remembering is an unpredictable activity, an inherently creative process of selection, omission, and recreation. Imperfect as it is, however, memory

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<sup>202</sup> Transcript V3190123

<sup>203</sup> Transcript C11030523

remains central to people's sense of self and identity and, therefore, central to the literature of remembering.<sup>204</sup>

The attitudes, motivations, and recollections of the fifteen thousand national servicemen who served in Vietnam between 1965 and 1972 are important and their experiences mark a unique episode in our military and social history. They should be clearly understood, and this study pays attention to their voices.

Those voices, as represented by the men interviewed for this study, defy myth and cliché. They have made the best of adversity.

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<sup>204</sup> Marie O'Rourke, *Memory's Fracture, Instability in the Contemporary Memoir*, in Bunt Avieson, Fiona Giles, Sue Joseph (Editors), *Mediating Memory, Tracing the Limits of Memoir*, 1st Edition, Routledge eBook ISBN9781315107349, 2017 P 16.



## CHAPTER 7 – Further Study

Several questions emerged during this study that deserve further enquiry. Whilst most of them are beyond the scope of this thesis, they remain relevant to its findings.

### Early Registration

The first issue highlights the plight of young men who submitted forms for early registration for national service. They were eligible to do so once they had turned eighteen years and six months. The complete statement about early registration on the Australian War Memorial's website reads –

Young men who had reached the age of eighteen years and nine months, and men aged twenty who had been granted indefinite deferment or exemption, could volunteer for national service. Volunteers could also request to serve in limited duties of a non-combatant nature.<sup>205</sup>

Two of the men interviewed in this study reported registering early and receiving a notification from the Department of Labour and National Service that by doing so they had effectively volunteered to enlist. They reported that was not their intention, and they had misunderstood the process. There is nothing in the Australian War Memorial archive addressing this process, and it bears further investigation. There is also

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<sup>205</sup> Sue Langford, Appendix: The national service scheme, 1964-72, Australian War memorial website: [https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet\\_app](https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/viet_app) Accessed 24th March 2023

no record of young men serving “in limited duties of a non-combatant nature”.

### **Duties of a Non-Combatant Nature**

There is some reference to this alternative being discussed at cabinet level and being rejected as impracticable. It was mooted in the USA during the American commitment to Vietnam.<sup>206</sup> In Australia, the term ‘national service’ has always been interchangeable with ‘conscription’, but that has never been the case across the Pacific.

### **The Role of the Department of Labour and national Service**

Participants reported being visited by police when they failed to register when out of the country. Considering that at the time these men were not on any electoral roll as they were not old enough to vote, investigating the methods used by the Department of Labour and national Service, and how they coordinated with federal and state authorities would be historically worthwhile.

### **National Service and Indigenous Australians**

Finally, further exploration of the application of the *National Service Act 1964* to the population of indigenous men at the time would produce a useful line of research for students of Indigenous Australian news and

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<sup>206</sup> John E. Wagner, *National Service as an Alternative for Military Conscription*, Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1971, P 1.

history. It would provide an insight into the aspirations of the indigenous men who volunteered for national service and the incapacity of the authorities to reconcile this phenomenon with attitudes held about their place in the Australian community in the decade between 1960 and 1970.

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# Appendix 1 - Transcripts

## Interview Transcripts – Balloted Men

ID Code – C1270423

### Balloted Questionnaire

Questions –

1. Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
Yes.
2. What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
*7RAR 1970*
3. At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*When I was marched into 7 RAR.*
4. How did you feel about this?  
*I was a little bit gung-ho when I was in the army. I was quite excited about going to Vietnam, to tell the truth. I hadn't much life experience at the time, as I was only twenty when I went in. I turned twenty-one at Rockhampton (Shoalwater Bay)*
5. Were you ever given any opportunity to opt out of service in Vietnam?  
*No. Definitely not. Although I believe that if I had of objected, I wouldn't have gone. That's how I always remember it.*
6. If "yes", can you remember how this was done? Was it formal or informal? If formal, can you remember the date and location of the formal parade? If informal, can you detail the circumstances, including personnel and rank involved, situational context, date, and location. Names are not required. If another opt-out process was used that is not covered by the above, please describe it.  
Not applicable.
7. If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please specify these reports, if you can. Names are not required but unit and rank would be helpful.  
*Not within 7 RAR, but I have heard veterans say that they did. But I've heard lots of recollections of veterans that I know are clearly untrue. It's all anecdotal and I didn't take too much notice of it at the time. I can recall there were oblique references about that both in rookie training and corps training. But not directly. There was a 7 RAR guy, I can't think of his name, whom I knew reasonably well – not in B Coy - who told me that he had challenged them on the history of South Vietnam, and what the war was about, and I remember that his punch line was "so we're fighting the South Vietnamese in South Vietnam". And from that moment he was put aside and eventually left the battalion. That was in Holsworthy.*
8. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*Not really. I was pretty uninformed, to tell the truth. If somebody had held up a map of the world and asked, "Where are you going?" I would have struggled to show them. I didn't even know where it was in relation to Singapore.*

### **Balloted Questionnaire**

#### Questions –

1. Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
*Yes. Called up for national service.*
  
2. What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
*1968. 110 Signal Squadron. Was stationed at Vung Tau and Nui Dat. I ended up at Nui Dat.*
  
3. At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*I'd heard that Australian troops were going to Vietnam and understood that would include national servicemen.  
I was aware on enlistment.*
  
4. How did you feel about this?  
*I was young man who had just come out of a seminary and had a job in the public service. Life was interesting. I was going in with blokes I knew. From around the Stanthorpe area there were about a dozen, two of them were old schoolmates. I had the incorrect assumption that we'd all serve together, but as we know, that was not to be the case.*
  
5. Were you given the option to opt out of service in Vietnam?  
*I went in with an open mind on the assumption that life was going to be interesting. There was lot of paperwork at Watsonia prior to going to Vietnam, around the time when the PM disappeared. We had to do a will. I remember signing something giving my consent. I don't remember a parade, for example. I may have been treated differently because I had a security clearance at that time.*
  
6. If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please recall unit, date, and location. Names are not required.  
*I had heard that. I'd also heard some say they were given no choice. My recall was that if I signed this piece of paperwork, I was giving consent.*
  
7. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*Absolutely – definitely. We read about the Domino theory in the media, and the impression I was given was that the enemy was coming for us, and we were better off fighting them outside Australia than inside Australia, so we were doing Australia a service by defending our country in another country. Does that make sense? History has shown the Domino theory wasn't a fact. The Americans probably should never have been there and consequently we should never have been there. That's for me to say now as a seventy-seven-year-old. Hindsight is a lovely thing.*  
  
*I made a lot of good friends in Vietnam and am glad I served, even though the history books tell us we shouldn't have been there.*

### **Balloted Questionnaire**

Questions –

- 1 Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
Yes.
- 2 What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
*I was with 7th Battalion, and we toured in 1970.*
- 3 At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*I knew that beforehand. Once my number came out, I knew there was a high chance of that. I was very fit, and I knew that there was a high probability that I'd be able to go to Vietnam because of that fitness.*
- 4 How did you feel about this?  
*My dad was an ex-serviceman, and I was philosophical thinking maybe it was my turn. It was for the country and the propaganda at the time was that we were doing it for our country. I was sort of a willing participant.*
- 5 Were you ever given any opportunity to opt out of service in Vietnam?  
*I don't think it came up as an issue, but we had a couple of conscientious objectors, and it was put round when we were doing our Corps training at Singleton that we had a couple of these. One was a schoolteacher and I forget what the other guy was, but there were two who went off and fronted saying they didn't want to go to Vietnam. They ended up in Education Corps or something. They were very vocal around the unit saying there was no way they were going to fight for the government or put their lives on the line and that was it. I was surprised that they got to that stage because they were really against it and were starting to put doubts in our minds. They made it very obvious they weren't going to Vietnam, and that was during Corps training at 3TB Singleton.*
- 6 If "yes", can you remember how this was done? Was it formal or informal? If formal, can you remember the date and location of the formal parade? If informal, can you detail the circumstances, including personnel and rank involved, situational context, date, and location. Names are not required. If another opt-out process was used that is not covered by the above, please describe it.  
*I'm pretty sure there wasn't a process, formal or informal. It was just these guys who were very vocal and starting to put the thought processes to us. They were very good orators. As I said, one was a teacher, and they were very good at getting their opinion across. We stopped and listened, and as I said, they were very vocal about it. Those were the only doubts I had. As far as being in a parade, I'm very doubtful that we ever had that. There was one thing when I did my medical. My eyes weren't fantastic, and they said to me (the doctors there) "How do you feel about going to Vietnam?", and I said – "To be quite honest, I'd be sort of disappointed if I didn't go". I had the option of getting out straightaway, but I told them I'd be disappointed if I didn't go, and they said – "OK, you've passed!"*
- 7 If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please specify these reports, if you can. Names are not required but unit and rank would be helpful.  
Not applicable.
- 8 Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*No. They weren't. I saw it as my duty. It's funny, isn't it? – national pride or something.*

**Balloted Questionnaire**

Questions –

- 1 Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
*Yes. 14th intake. Was in New Guinea when my date of registration came up. I was working for Jascar Ltd in Kainantu in the Eastern Highlands. Thought of going to Rhodesia but couldn't get a passport because I was required to register for callup. Advised by cousin to make my callup address NSW, so ended up having medical (after failing first one) and being posted to 3TB Singleton in 14th intake. Corps selection was Signals, and this was my posting, first to 1 Sig then 139 Sig at Enoggera. Posted as truck driver but lost licence. Passed storeman/tech course at Balcombe late 1969.*
- 2 What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
*Was in 104 Sig Squadron from 04 Mar 1970 until 26 Nov 1970. I extended my tour for three months.*
- 3 At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*We were asked if we wanted to go to Vietnam. Some didn't, but I did. While we were at 1 Sig we were asked if we were willing, and 139 Sig was the holding station for Vietnam. If you weren't suitable for Vietnam, or didn't want to go, you were sent to a unit staying in Australia. We replaced one on one.*
4. How did you feel about this?  
*Had a cousin who had served with Sigs, and he advised me to apply for Sig because they'd put you in a posting where you had a good choice. Everyone at Singleton who put in for Signals got it.*
5. Were you given the option to opt out of service in Vietnam?  
*Yes – see above. I remember signing something but can't remember what it was. Will look at my records at home to see if I have a copy. Did Canungra. Was a tech storeman. Store was opposite HQ. Used to do the laundry run to Baria. Was issued with a Land Rover and truck licence in Vietnam.*
6. If "yes", can you remember how this was done? Was it formal or informal? If formal, can you remember the date and location of the formal parade? If informal, can you detail the circumstances, including personnel and rank involved, situational context, date and location. Names are not required. If another opt-out process was used that is not covered by the above, please describe it.  
*See Q3. Above.*
7. If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please recall unit, date and location. Names are not required.  
*Yes – see above. I remember signing something but can't remember what it was. Will look at my records at home to see if I have a copy. Did Canungra. Was a tech storeman. Store was opposite HQ. Used to do the laundry run to Baria. Was issued with a Land Rover and truck licence in Vietnam.*
8. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*Definitely. My father was proud of my service in Vietnam. He told me to join the RSL. I went to the RSL to sign up, was given a card, and my uncle who worked at the club bar sold me a beer. I was told by an RSL employee that I couldn't drink there. I got angry and flicked the card at him. I went home and told dad that I'd joined and resigned at the same time. The media was largely responsible for people calling us "baby killer" and other negative things. I buried my medals with my dad when he died.*

### **Balloted Questionnaire**

Questions –

- 1 Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
*Yes.*
- 2 What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
*4RAR. 1968.*
- 3 At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*Anybody who did infantry training had a good idea that they would serving in Vietnam.*
- 4 How did you feel about this?  
*My number came up. End of story.*
- 5 Were you given the opportunity to opt out of service in Vietnam?  
*I can't recall at any stage being given the option of not going. So, I'd say "No".*
- 6 If "yes", can you remember how this was done? Was it formal or informal? If formal, can you remember the date and location of the formal parade? If informal, can you detail the circumstances, including personnel and rank involved, situational context, date, and location. Names are not required. If another opt-out process was used that is not covered by the above, please describe it.  
*No. After recruit training I put down one of my choices as Infantry because we were encouraged to do so. I put down artillery because of family history.*
- 7 If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please recall unit, date, and location. Names are not required.  
*No. Not at all. I think most people who went to Vietnam thought it was a foregone conclusion. There were some who were disappointed that they didn't go.*
- 8 Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*No*

*Most people benefited. Some who would have gone off the rails were saved by national service.*



## Balloted Questionnaire

Questions –

- 1 Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
*Yes.*
  
- 2 What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
*Yes. 10th. Mid 1967. I served in 110 Sig Squadron in 1968/69. I got there just before Christmas 1968. Went to the Canberra billet in Saigon for two weeks and was posted to Long Binh. That was a receiver station. There were Yanks, Koreans, Aussies and locals, mostly domestics. I was a signaller looking after the station. The sergeant and corporal were there all day from 7am until 7pm, and we did shifts. We used to have to change frequencies to stay on the air because the ozone layer would move. The transmissions went from Digger's Rest in Melbourne to Long Binh. I didn't know anything about the content of the messages but had to maintain the transmissions. We had to do guard duty every night. Sometimes a flare would be let off to liven the place up, but we were never attacked. We had a few "stand tos" where we had to race out to the bunkers.*
  
- 3 At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*I didn't realize it was a certainty.*
  
- 4 How did you feel about this?  
*I didn't mind because I volunteered. All the signals staff who went over there were volunteers. I was OK with it because I wanted the war service home benefit. They asked me where I wanted to be deployed, and I said Malaysia, Vietnam or New Guinea.*
  
- 5 Were you given the opportunity to opt out of service in Vietnam?  
*Not an issue because I was OK to go.*
  
- 6 If "yes", can you remember how this was done? Was it formal or informal? If formal, can you remember the date and location of the formal parade? If informal, can you detail the circumstances, including personnel and rank involved, situational context, date, and location. Names are not required. If another opt-out process was used that is not covered by the above, please describe it.  
*Don't know. Didn't come up.*
  
- 7 If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please recall unit, date, and location. Names are not required.  
*I heard of a few – not many. Only with the blokes who didn't want to go.*
  
- 8 Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*No, not really, but I remember napalm girl, not sure exactly when. I also heard of the My Lai massacre but can't remember when.*

### **Balloted Questionnaire**

#### Questions –

1. Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
Yes
2. What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
My unit was Charlie Coy 7 RAR, that was 1970. I didn't complete the full term because my two years was up.
3. At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*When I finished recruit training at Puckapunyal, I was told I was going into infantry. I put in for artillery, as a physical instructor, as I was very fit. I put infantry second, and infantry won over artillery.*
4. How did you feel about this?  
I wasn't fussed.
5. Were you given the option to opt out of service in Vietnam?  
*No. The question "Do you want to go to Vietnam?" was never asked. That was never asked - It was presumed. It's the presumption "closed" – in everything – in the army. You don't get to debate anything in the army. You were just told – "This is what's happening". Going straight to the battalion at Holsworthy, not going to Corps training, we didn't have any regular soldiers; they were all Nashos. There was only enough for one or two companies. As the battalion was getting ready to go to Vietnam, they all came in from everywhere. We went straight out to training there. We didn't have any NCOs. I was made a temporary NCO. Lieutenant Pothof (I thought he was a very fair guy). The reason he went out on the APC (we were at FSB Brigid) was because he stubbed his foot on reo mesh covering the sand and couldn't go out on foot. He went out on the APC for the ride, and we were dropped off. There was a rule that you didn't go in and out the same way, and I think they did. Very unfortunate – a lovely bloke.*
6. If "yes", can you remember how this was done? Was it formal or informal? If formal, can you remember the date and location of the formal parade? If informal, can you detail the circumstances, including personnel and rank involved, situational context, date, and location. Names are not required. If another opt-out process was used that is not covered by the above, please describe it.  
Not applicable.
7. If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please recall unit, date, and location. Names are not required.  
Not applicable.
8. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*No, and I'll tell you why. I think this was a deliberate ploy by the army when we were training. We would go out on Monday morning, some of us still hungover. We'd be out all week and come back on Friday. Nobody watched television – we had no television. There was a media blackout. Saturday and Sunday we be out partying, and Monday we're back on the trucks again.*

### **Balloted Questionnaire**

#### Questions –

1. Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
Yes
2. What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
7RAR 70-71
3. At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*It was never a certainty. My recollection was that I remember fronting (what must have been) the CO at Puckapunyal whose first question - which I remember distinctly - was "If there was an opportunity to go to Vietnam, would you be ready to do so?" And I responded "Yes". That was during recruit training. He then said to me that he would like to make me aware that 7 RAR who were based at Holsworthy were likely to be the next battalion to tour Vietnam. He then said, "Would you like to have the opportunity to join that battalion which would expedite (if you like) service in Vietnam?" Again, I said "Yes". He then asked me about corps training - which corps training. This was where I was scammed, if you like, because he never really gave me an option. I remember distinctly him saying that if I joined the infantry, I would get the experience of many corps in the infantry, like artillery, engineers etc, so I was given the impression that being in infantry meant that I would have quite a range of different activities to do. That wasn't correct, because in the infantry all we did was foot slog basically. I was hoodwinked at that point. Having said that, I still would have taken the opportunity. There was no point, although if I had been aware truly of what the infantry was all about, I wouldn't have taken that opportunity. But at that time, I was happy to take his suggestion and go with infantry. All of us were given the opportunity, because I remember different digger friends opting to go to RAEME and Sigs, and Ordnance, etc, and we got together afterwards, and everybody gave a bit of a run down. Some didn't want to go to Vietnam, and they were put in corps other than infantry and were relocated to a posting in Australia to serve out their National Service. When I did get back, I met up with one of the guys from WA who I'd been on the same plane to Puckapunyal, and he'd served in Ordnance and never went to Vietnam. I caught up with others since, and it seems everybody in that group was given the option. I've got no suggestion that we were coerced in any way - it was a straight-out question - "Would you be happy to serve in Vietnam?" I remember one of my mates from WA opted not to join 7 RAR, and he ended up in 8 RAR and they ended up over there before we did. If you need to classify what happened to me, you would describe it as a formal interview.*
4. How did you feel about this?  
*It was never a certainty.*
5. Were you given the option to opt out of service in Vietnam?  
Yes
6. If "yes", can you remember how this was done? Was it formal or informal? If formal, can you remember the date and location of the formal parade? If informal, can you detail the circumstances, including personnel and rank involved, situational context, date, and location. Names are not required. If another opt-out process was used that is not covered by the above, please describe it.  
*Interview with CO Puckapunyal*
7. If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please recall unit, date, and location. Names are not required.  
*Don't recall.*
8. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*Pre-Vietnam it had no influence whatsoever. Being from Perth, I can remember when the Sydney pulled into Fremantle docks, we got the warmest welcome. We were welcomed home as heroes. What happened in other parts of Australia - I believe some were flown back at night and told not to wear uniforms - was certainly not the case in Perth. We were given the warmest welcome.*

### Balloted Questionnaire

#### Questions –

1. Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
*Yes, but there were complications in my case. The process of enlistment was run through DLNS from information they gleaned from employment documents, and in my case that information was incorrect. This birthdate information determined when you had to register. I was working in Dalby and aware that the registration date was coming up. I could have left it until the next year but decided to register that year for NS at CPS office in Dalby. I was relieving in Dalby and came back to my normal position in Brisbane the following week. At 10am one morning two burly policemen turned up at my door, identified me, and said that I'd failed to register. I suggested they check the record in Dalby, pointing out that I had registered there. Subsequently - lucky me - my birthdate **was** drawn. I was selected for officer training after a fairly rigorous three-day series of tests, deciding that I might as well make the most of the opportunity, and went to Scheyville as a member of the first experimental class from Kapooka. Scheyville was a six-month compression of the Portsea Officer Training course, and a product of the need to train national service officers quickly to meet manpower needs.*
2. What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
*4RAR. 1968.*
3. (Did you ever come across any resentment from more senior regular soldiers having to take orders from younger, more junior national servicemen who outranked them?)  
*Didn't find that a problem. It would also have applied to Portsea graduates. We graduated as second lieutenants, as did the Portsea graduates, and were on probation in the early part of our service just as they were. Was posted to 4RAR which went to Borneo in 1968 prior to Vietnam. First posting was training platoon commander at Singleton 3TB. I had a connection through my father with the CO at 3TB, and when I was interviewed by him, I told him I wanted an active posting. He undertook to post me to 4RAR because he knew it was destined for Vietnam.*
4. At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*Never knew it was a certainty, but asking the CO for an active posting made it very likely.*
5. How did you feel about this?  
*I was a regular army officer so was gung ho.*
6. (Did you come across any Nashos who didn't want to be in Vietnam?)  
*Not really. Most were resigned to the situation and were making the best of it.*
7. If "yes", can you remember how this was done? Was it formal or informal? If formal, can you remember the date and location of the formal parade? If informal, can you detail the circumstances, including personnel and rank involved, situational context, date, and location. Names are not required. If another opt-out process was used that is not covered by the above, please describe it.  
*Not applicable. Can't really answer in terms of recruit training, as was at 3TB very briefly.*
8. If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please recall unit, date, and location. Names are not required.  
*Not applicable.*
9. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*Had been in Borneo prior to and during media coverage of Vietnam. Terendak garrison was a little bit isolated. I didn't consider myself a national serviceman once I'd made the decision to go for officer training. I didn't come across any people who were opposed to the point that they were conscientious objectors. Attitude seemed to be - OK, we're here - we'll make the best of it. My brother who was called up was older than most because he was deferred for a time before enlistment. Once called up I took the opportunity to go to Scheyville. I made the decision to make the best of it.*

**Balloted Questionnaire**

Questions –

1. Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
Yes.
2. What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
*2RAR NZ (ANZAC battalion – 1970-71). Int Section.*
3. At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*Knew Vietnam was a certainty at recruit training.*
4. How did you feel about this?  
*Prior to national service I'd been in a CMF infantry unit, and after discussion with my father who was a returned soldier from WW2 about defence force benefits, he reminded me about the war service home scheme. I had a couple of years to go before I could be admitted to university as a mature age student, to study law. We saw the opportunity to go into the army all expenses paid with a scholarship at the end. I was looking forward to the benefits, the mateship, and the bravado. It didn't worry me except that the bullets were coming back the other way.*
5. Were you ever given the choice, formally or informally, to opt out of service in Vietnam?  
*Yes. The whole battalion was paraded, and the CO came on and said "This battalion has been warned that we are going to Vietnam. Those who don't wish to go, head for a particular table after you've signed to say you've been warned. I remember some (married) blokes who didn't want to finish their national service in Vietnam opted out and were transferred. We thought we were going to be the last battalion there.*
6. If "yes", can you remember how this was done? Was it formal or informal? If formal, can you remember the date and location of the formal parade? If informal, can you detail the circumstances, including personnel and rank involved, situational context, date, and location. Names are not required. If another opt-out process was used that is not covered by the above, please describe it.  
*It was at Lavarack Barracks in Townsville, 2 RAR parade ground, early in 1970. It was prior to pre-embarkation leave in Easter. Guys who opted out were transferred to other units not going to Vietnam. There was no animosity from my perspective towards those who wanted to opt out.*
7. If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please recall unit, date, and location. Names are not required.  
*No. I've since found out that in other units, individuals were told they were going – end of story. They were "compulsory volunteers". I've heard from fellows, particularly reinforcements, and people from smaller units, not battalion size – alright, you've done JTC Canungra and done your three weeks, and you're going to go.*
8. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*I don't think they were. I saw it as a positive thing. We were supporting our allies. Bravado from a nineteen-year-old who wanted to take on the world. I wasn't aware or savvy to news about soldiers being killed. I tried to disenfranchise myself from the news. It wasn't a major influence on me and my decisions.*  
  
*It was interesting Ham's book about Vietnam. What we suspected about politicians is true. Most diggers have a disrespectful distrust of any politician. Particularly after Menzies got up and said "We are going" after asking Thieu to invite us.*

ID Code – C11030523

**Balloted Questionnaire**

Questions –

1. Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
Yes.
2. What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
*In 7 RAR in 1970.*
3. At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*When I was marched into 7 RAR in July 1969.*
4. How did you feel about this?  
*Very unhappy, as I'd tried to make sure through my corps and unit preferences that I would avoid service in Vietnam.*
5. Were you ever given the choice, formally or informally, to opt out of service in Vietnam.  
*Not at any point, through recruit and corps training, and once posted to 7 RAR.*
6. If "yes", can you remember how this was done? Was it formal or informal? If formal, can you remember the date and location of the formal parade? If informal, can you detail the circumstances, including personnel and rank involved, situational context, date, and location. Names are not required. If another opt-out process was used that is not covered by the above, please describe it.  
*It did not happen.*
7. If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please recall unit, date, and location. Names are not required.  
*The first I'd heard about this anecdote was in the early 2000s on a veteran's blog.*
8. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*Not really. I was always critical of government policy on Vietnam, and everything I read and heard from the media simply reinforced that.*

*The notion of all national servicemen being volunteers is absurd. It was driven by the ANZAC myth, which held that volunteering was a characteristic of the bronzed ANZAC. It completely ignored the fact that national servicemen who were balloted into the army were enlisted without volunteering.*

## Balloted Questionnaire

### Questions –

1. Did you serve in Vietnam as a national serviceman?  
*Yes. Balloted first ballot. Doing Ed 1 externally. Deferment letter. First year out Killarney. Failed the Uni subject (Ed 1). Second deferment letter. Transferred to Maryvale. Did medical in Warwick. Opted for 2 years part time rehab course. Married in 1969.*
2. What was your unit, and what year did you tour?  
*104 Sig squadron. Radio Troop. OKR. Trained at Balcombe. Arrived SVN 11.03.68. Landed during mortar barrage?? At Tan Son Nuit. RTA 10.12.68.*
3. At what point after enlistment did you learn that service in Vietnam was a certainty?  
*Preference – 1. Sigs. 2. Artillery. Reasons – built crystal set. Posted to Signal Corps. 7<sup>th</sup> Intake 240 Queenslanders/ 120 teachers. Wanted a trade qualification. Did not apply for officer training and was (with others) admonished for this. Records showed - "To be watched – easily led". Believe that OC training Coy had it in for Sergeant, and we (recruits) were meat in the sandwich.*
4. How did you feel about this?  
*Always knew we were going to Vietnam. Was OK with this, as I didn't want to sit around in a unit in Australia.*
5. Were you given the option to opt out of service in Vietnam?  
*We were, at the end of Corps training with preferences. I wanted to go to Vietnam rather than cool my heels in Australia. Marked units in Hobart, Darwin, Vietnam in that order. Posted to 139 Sig Squadron in Enoggera. Did battle efficiency at Puckapunyal. Opted in rather than opted out. Prior to this (September at Balcombe) were ordered to go to Vic Barracks for interview to be posted to Education Corps. Was told "You're going to New Guinea". I said "No, I'm not!". I insisted, so they didn't push it. In deciding to go to Vietnam, reasons were selfish, not patriotic. I wanted adventure and a trade. War service home also appealed, although eventually everyone got it. Knew one mate who was against the war but "volunteered" to go. Soon was aware that this war couldn't be won. Took twenty years to reconcile the contradictions of Vietnam. Ignorance was rife. When one staff member found out I was a veteran she said - "You're too young for World War 2".*
6. If "yes", can you remember how this was done? Was it formal or informal? If formal, can you remember the date and location of the formal parade? If informal, can you detail the circumstances, including personnel and rank involved, situational context, date, and location. Names are not required. If another opt-out process was used that is not covered by the above, please describe it.  
*Those who didn't want to go could put in other preferences. Can't remember any pressure being put on us one way or another.*
7. If you were not given the opportunity to opt out, can you recall others reporting that they were. If so, please recall unit, date, and location. Names are not required.  
*Not applicable.*
8. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*I suppose I was aware of media, but back then it was mostly positive. In Vietnam Some postings were with battalions, and some were with Engineers which restricted access to media in country. I did both and also worked with a Thai liaison group at*

*Bear Cat. Spent 11 weeks at Black Horse with ACR. Didn't hear news until back in squadron. They organised for Courier Mail to come across, and we were able to read that material. Not greatly influenced.*

ID Code V1180423

### **Volunteer's Questionnaire**

1. Your birthdate on the nominal roll indicates you were a volunteer. Is this correct?  
*Correct.*
2. If "yes", can you recall national service intake for which you registered?  
*Third intake – first one in 1966.*
3. Please list your reasons for doing so.  
*I was not a successful student. When I got to Leaving level (in those days) I was in dead end jobs. At that time, I was a production clerk and had been sent from one company to another one and would be away from home for most of the week. I was occasionally driving forklifts and couldn't see much future in that. I had always wanted to join the police force but hadn't really picked up any goals and national service came along. I thought I'd probably get called up anyway, being pessimistic, and registered early. That would have been a year earlier than I would have normally gone in and would have meant less disruption to whatever I ended up doing. I was naively thinking I was registering for the ballot and didn't find out until years later that you couldn't do that – that I had volunteered. I didn't find this out until eons later when one of the chaps in my intake had the same birthday, and we became "brothers in arms" – it made us twins. The fact that he was born in Hungary a year before I was immaterial as far as we were concerned. I never worried about whether my birthdate did come up twelve months later or not. I thought two years really wouldn't matter and it gave me a good chance to see the rest of Australia at the government's expense which I wouldn't have done otherwise. So, it was a bit of an adventure. The post-service benefits didn't enter my mind. Not really interested in fighting Communism and I demonstrated that when asked during an officer selection interview "Should conscripts be sent to Vietnam?" and I said "No, not if they don't want to go". I had gone all the way through officer selection, and I think that was the termination point of the process. Both grandfathers were in the First World War, Gallipoli, and the Western Front. My father was in the Air Force constructing airfields and my mother was a WRAAF doing nursing and so forth in repat. I was told that it was almost inevitable that I'd end up in the army at some stage.*
4. Please recall the reactions of your friends and family.  
*I can't remember any reaction one way or another. My girlfriend wasn't overly impressed. I got support from my family, and I didn't talk much about it at work.*
5. Please recall the reactions of fellow National Servicemen when they knew you had volunteered.  
*Most of them knew and just thought that I'd registered twelve months early and was just in, same as they were. I've heard that there were more volunteers for national service than there were objectors.*
6. Please comment on how you view that decision in hindsight.  
*That was the decision I made, and I can't change it. There were consequences that were both good and bad. It gave me an opportunity to think about my future, without pressure. It helped me realise that I wasn't going to achieve any development career-wise unless I took the initiative. I started with RMIT, but that didn't work because I kept getting moved around within the army. I didn't have more than three months in any one barracks before the move to Vietnam. It made me think about things which I didn't have to do before. I learnt a lot by observing different people, different attitudes. I went with the flow to some extent but took opportunities. I did a signals course, and just before Christmas leave, all the national servicemen in the group were sent to Canungra and then Shoalwater Bay, and then Vietnam.*
7. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?



*No, not really. it was early days before conscripts had gone to Vietnam and it wasn't mentioned. They were just "called up". There was no TV at that stage, and we didn't read the papers except for the comments and the cartoons. I watched the ABC news, but not avidly.*

Additional comments (By SMS on 19<sup>th</sup> April) –

*I actively considered not returning to the army after Christmas leave knowing I would be sent to Vietnam. In Vietnam I quickly formed the opinion that we were not welcomed by the locals – they just wanted to get on with their lives free of outside intervention by either Saigon or communism. Working with an ex-soldier who had experienced doubts about his side helped me in my adjustments. About 18 months after returning, I was active in anti-Vietnam war marches. I could not bring myself to march on ANZAC Day for 23 years and then it was only matters of employment that led me to march. Since 7 RAR have come to Adelaide I have been involved with the battalion leadership and admired most of them.*

ID Code V2200123

### **Volunteer's Questionnaire**

1. Your birthdate on the nominal roll indicates you were a volunteer. Is this correct?  
*Absolutely.*
2. If "yes", can you recall national service intake for which you registered?  
*16<sup>th</sup> Intake 1969.*
3. Please list your reasons for doing so.  
Had applied for Air Force at age 18. Was down to last ten. Was half an inch too short. Was working in public service fourth division because I only had Junior qualification. Planned to do Senior at night school. Realised I would have to register for national service halfway through first year at night school. Was working for Department of Defence at Gaythorne with Ordnance Corps people many of whom were Korean or Vietnam veterans. They would have thought I was a piker if I had got deferment as a student. There was a little bit of peer pressure in my thinking. So I registered early, and got a letter saying "Dear Sir, did you realise that by registering early, you have volunteered for national service?" I didn't realise it was volunteering because I hadn't read the fine print. So I thought if the Air Force didn't want me, I'd join the army, as I considered military service was a required thing of the day. I made the decision that I was going into the army, into infantry, and going overseas because I didn't want to end up in uniform and then doing the clerical work that I had been doing with defence. I took the letter from DLNS to my father because I had to get his approval because of my age, (I was eighteen years and nine months at the time) and said to him - "Sign this - I'm going into the army, and I'm going to Vietnam". I was nineteen when I enlisted and turned twenty-one at the Horseshoe in Vietnam.
4. Please recall the reactions of your friends and family.  
*They accepted it - my father and my mates. My mum was deceased. I was twelve when she died.*
5. Please recall the reactions of fellow National Servicemen when they knew you had volunteered.  
*We were in huts of sixteen in rookies and cubicles of four, and the three guys in my cubicle were all volunteers.*
6. Please comment on how you view that decision in hindsight.  
*I don't regret it. It was weeks of boredom interspersed with moments of pandemonium. We had a lot of fun even when we were out in the bush. A lot of funny things happened.*
7. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*The number of volunteer national servicemen in my intake was a poke in the eye to all those uni students that were protesting. We were ready to go and do a job that nobody wanted to do. Was it a worthy cause? There were political things behind it as I've learned later in life, but the Australian government wanted us to go and do these things - do a good job. The media didn't influence me. When I was there, my sister used to cut out and send me stuff from the papers, and the absolute rubbish and exaggeration was beyond belief.*

*I have fond memories of the comradeship of the blokes I served with. My diagnosis of PTSD with the resultant treatment has allowed me to return to a normal life.*

ID Code V3190123

### **Volunteer's Questionnaire**

1. Your birthdate on the nominal roll indicates you were a volunteer. Is this correct?  
*Correct. My birthdate wasn't called out.*
2. If "yes", can you recall national service intake for which you registered?  
*Yes. 17<sup>th</sup> intake, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1969, when the astronauts were heading towards the moon.*
3. Please list your reasons for doing so.  
*There were a couple of things. When I was a young bloke growing up, all the men who had come back from World War II were treated as heroes. War service was something to be very proud of. For myself, I was living in a small country town, and was a clerk in the public service. I was really heading nowhere, and I was thinking I would have to do something with my life. My brother was a national serviceman a few years before me. I thought if I join the army, it would be for three or four years, so I wrote away to see if I could volunteer for national service, because that way you were only in for two years, and you get your job back. So a combination of adventure-seeking, patriotism, and common sense in getting my job back. My father was in a protected industry, so there was no family history. As a kid, people would ask "What did your father do during the war?"*
4. Please recall the reactions of your friends and family.  
*My mother was very upset. My father said something like - "They fire live bullets over there, son". They'd already had a son who had come back. I didn't really broadcast it.*
5. Please recall the reactions of fellow National Servicemen when they knew you had volunteered.  
*I didn't broadcast it. I mentioned it to my close mates, and I don't think they understood. I read a book called "A Man Called Horse" about a man who was captured by the Indians during the frontier wars. He used to be tied up so he couldn't escape at night. An opposing tribe attacked the tribe that captured him when the braves were away, and he defended the group, killing some of the attackers, and became a hero. He would say "I am not a dog - I am a horse". The horse was seen as a noble animal. The book was written by a woman. When he returned home, people used to ask him about his experiences. I identified with the protagonist in that story when I came back from Vietnam. I generally didn't make it known that I had volunteered at the time, but I've been surprised years later by the number of blokes that volunteered for Nasho. I was the same age as those called up, so seemed no different.*
6. Please comment on how you view that decision in hindsight.  
*Probably the best thing I've ever done. It formed my life. When you do something like that and you do it well with pride, you have the self-satisfaction that you don't have to prove yourself to anyone. When you meet another Vietnam veteran who says, "I was only doing such and such", I believe they are not proud of their service. I say to them, "If your job was supporting the grunts out in the scrub, and you did it well, you should be proud of your service". I don't know how many blokes I've had to say that to. The local RSL President was happy to let me give my speech without checking it because he respected me through my service.*
7. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
*No. And I took ten years to admit I was a Vietnam veteran after I came home. The media had turned against us, so I hid my identity. After a while I became comfortable to talk about it but found it difficult to explain the experience to anyone who hadn't been there.*

*Over the years I began to believe the callup wasn't rigged, but the medical process was. I believe that if during the medical, the person told the doctor doing the examination he didn't want to go to Vietnam, he'd fail the medical. As the war became unpopular, the doctors were feeling guilty sending men to their death. I believe there was a higher representation of country blokes in Nasho. Also, a lot were Catholics. I think that country blokes with religious upbringings were attractive to the army because they were trouble-free.*

ID Code V4040205

### **Volunteer's Questionnaire**

1. Your birthdate on the nominal roll indicates you were a volunteer. Is this correct?  
*Correct.*
2. If "yes", can you recall national service intake for which you registered?  
*I was born in 1951. Went in with Nashos who were in 10<sup>th</sup> intake.*
3. Please list your reasons for doing so.  
*I couldn't get the job I wanted (Butcher's apprentice) so I went to Sydney for the medical. They were glad for me.*
4. Please recall the reactions of your friends and family.
5. Please recall the reactions of fellow National Servicemen when they knew you had volunteered.  
*We were all in it together. Not an issue.*
6. Please comment on how you view that decision in hindsight.  
*At the time we were brainwashed into thinking the Communists were taking over the world. I believed it until we came home, and then was hurt by the reception.*
7. Were your views about service influenced by television, newspapers, and the media?  
Not answered.

Additional comments –

*There were good times and bad times. Friendships were important. Soldiers become the greatest pacifists. Made me a better person.*

*Made me grow up quickly.*

*If I had to do it again I would. Saw no racism. I didn't see any.*

*Joined MPs on return for three years.*

*Rank of sergeant.*

*Didn't want to sleep on the ground anymore.*

NB – Original recording can be accessed at-

<https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/4198>

(Recorded by Sue Anderson on 4<sup>th</sup> Feb 2005, and transcript made from the recording of the interview).

## **Appendix 2 - Correspondence**

### **Attention Ex-Nashos!**

National Service Research Project - Invitation to Participate

Between 1965 and 1972, 63,740 young Australians were called up under the National Service scheme. 15,381 of them saw operational service in Vietnam. Of these, 200 died and 1279 were wounded.

The history of this period has been extensively chronicled in the Australian literature, but very little research has been conducted into the choices offered to these soldiers, and their attitudes to service.

Their service, like that of all soldiers, sailors and airmen and women, deserves to be thoroughly researched, remembered and chronicled.

In an effort to address this anomaly, I am working on a master's thesis supervised through the University of Southern Queensland. If you are an ex-national serviceman, you are invited to participate.

I am seeking to recruit two groups of ex-national servicemen for interview.


The first group are those who volunteered for national service after reaching the age of eighteen years and nine months (early registration).

The second group are those who had their birthdates drawn in one of the sixteen ballots held between 1965 and 1972.

Members of both groups will have seen operational service in Vietnam. If you would like to participate, please make contact using the following email address – [REDACTED] or contact me on [REDACTED].

Please indicate which group you belong to. Detailed information, including a more comprehensive outline of the project will be provided to respondents. Deadline for completion of the project is July 2023.

Thanks

 University of Southern Queensland **Participant Information Sheet**

UniSQ HREC Approval number: H22REA212

**Project Title**

**1.1. National Servicemen in Vietnam - Volunteers or Conscripts?**

**Research team contact details**

**Principal Investigator Details**

Mr Robert Whittaker



**Supervisor/Co-investigator details**

Dr Caryn Coatney



**Description**

The research examines the experience of National Servicemen who served in Vietnam between 1965 and 1972. It has two distinct strands.

The first examines the motives of men who enlisted when required to register for national service without waiting for their birthdates to be drawn in one of the sixteen ballots. The second examines the choices given those who were enlisted when their birthdates were drawn in one of the sixteen national service ballots between 1965 and 1972. A third area of investigation examines the influence of the media on the attitudes and choices of these veterans.

The research is being conducted to set the record straight for those men, so that their service is honoured by the facts of history. Your participation in this research will involve a brief (30 min) interview. If possible, this will be conducted face to face. Where a face-to-face interview is not possible, the survey will be conducted online via Zoom.

To be eligible to participate, you will have served in South Vietnam as a National Serviceman between 1965 and 1972. Eligibility will be confirmed by perusal of the DVA nominal roll. To separate participants into the groups of those who volunteered for National Service and those who were balloted, the birthdates drawn in the sixteen National Service ballots will be reviewed. Those whose birthdates were drawn will be given survey two, those whose birthdates were not drawn will complete survey one. It is statistically possible that a volunteer also had his birthdate drawn in one of the ballots, but this will be clarified through the nominal roll.

**Participation**

Your participation will involve participating in an interview that will take approximately 30 minutes of your time.

Questions will investigate your attitudes and motives at the time, the choices made available to you, and the influence of the popular media on these attitudes, choices, and motives.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. If you do wish to withdraw from this project, please contact the Research Team (contact details at the top of this form).

Your decision whether you take part, do not take part, or take part and then withdraw, will in no way impact your current or future relationship with the University of Southern Queensland.

### Expected benefits

It is expected that this project not directly benefit you, however setting the record straight will contribute to the body of knowledge on the public record.

### Risks

Participating in the interview may involve minimal risks such as the possibility for participants diagnosed with Post Traumatic Disorder to be triggered by recollections of service. Note - You will not be asked if you have this diagnosis. With this as a consideration, the following precautions are suggested –

- You may wish to include a support person in the interview (partner/friend/family member/counsellor)
- Ensure you are in a safe place. The bulk of interviews will be conducted using the Zoom App, so any location where you can access the internet is suitable.
- Note the referral information at the bottom of this form and use it if necessary.
- If you need to talk to someone about this immediately, please contact one of the following –
  - 1) Your counsellor (if applicable).
  - 2) Open Arms Veterans and Family Counselling Service – phone 1800 011 046 (<https://www.openarms.gov.au/>)
  - 3) Lifeline Counselling Service - phone 13 11 14 (<https://www.lifeline.org.au/>)
  - 4) Beyond Blue – phone 1300 22 4636 (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>)

### Privacy and confidentiality

All comments and responses are confidential unless required by law. The interviews will be audio recorded for transcription. You will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript for review and endorsement prior to inclusion in the project data.

You will be allowed two weeks to review and request any changes to the transcript before the data is included in the project for analysis. Only the principal researcher and his supervisor will have access to the recording. Your data will be anonymised and made available for future research purposes. Any data collected as a part of this project will be stored securely, as per University of Southern Queensland's [Research Data and Primary Materials Management Procedure](#).

You will be able to access, upon request to the principal researcher, a summary of the project results.

### Consent to participate

Please sign the written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate in this project. Please return your signed consent form to the principal researcher prior to participating in your interview.

### Questions

Please refer to the Research team contact details at the top of the form to have any questions answered or to request further information about this project.

### Concerns or complaints

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project, you may contact the University of Southern Queensland, Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics on +61 7 4631 1839 or email [researchintegrity@usq.edu.au](mailto:researchintegrity@usq.edu.au). The Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics is not connected with the research project and can address your concern in an unbiased manner. **Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project. Please keep this document for your information.**



## **Consent Form**

I hereby give consent to participate in an interview regarding my experiences as a national serviceman.

I have read and understand the information provided in the participation information sheet.

My participation is confined to the interview process as described above.

I provide this consent without reservation and have not been subjected to any form of coercion to participate.

I understand the purpose of the research and any risks to myself involved, and I have carefully considered the information provided.

Full name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_