



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS**

**Vietnam Veterans Day**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 24 August 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

<p><b>Date</b> Wednesday, 24 August 2011  <b>Page</b> 9360  <b>Questioner</b>  <b>Speaker</b> Mr ROBERT</p>	<p><b>Source</b> House  <b>Proof</b> No  <b>Responder</b>  <b>Question No.</b></p>
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(Fadden) (NaN.NaN pm)

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (17:3 8): There are a few days in the national conscience when we stop to remember and reflect on battles and wars fought and won. We remember the soldiers, sailors and air men and women who served. We think of Anzac Day on 25 April, and we think of Remembrance Day. I personally reflect on Kapyong Day, 24 April. In the Korean War, the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment stayed the Chinese offensive at Kapyong. Of course, 18 August marks a special day, Vietnam Veterans Day. This is a special day in our national conscience when we stop and remember Vietnam—the longest war Australia has been engaged in. This war began on 31 July 1962, when Colonel Ted Serong alighted from a civilian airliner onto the tarmac at Tan Son Nhut Airport, Saigon. Three days later his unit arrived. This was a small group of 29 officers, warrant officers and engineers—mostly infantry and some elements of engineering and signals. They were specifically chosen for their tasks. More than half had served in Malaya and had been trained in the art of counter guerrilla warfare. Indeed, the early days of the war saw the arrival of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam, which included my old school sergeant, Warrant Officer Class 2 Jim Geedrick. He had fought in World War II, in the Malayan emergency, in the confrontation in Vietnam and then with my old unit, the 3rd Battalion, in Korea. Vietnam would end on 8 December 1972, and the Australian Army training team in Vietnam received orders to return to Australia 10 days later, thus completing the commitment to Vietnam.

Fifty-nine thousand Australians served in Vietnam. It turned out to be a very costly war. 2,122,244 is the official number for those killed during the war. Over 3.65 million were wounded. There were 58,169 Americans killed and 11,465 of them were teenagers. There were 304,000 wounded. More than 74,000 French had been killed before the first Americans arrived in 1956. Australia lost 511 of its finest, and seven civilians were killed. Six more were missing in action, their bodies have now all been recovered. I give credit to the Labor government for ensuring that was finalised and occurred. There were 2,069 wounded.

The average age of the combat soldier from Australia in Vietnam was 20 years old. The average Australian combat soldier saw 314 days of combat in a period of

one year. That is a long time with a weapon in your hand. By comparison, the average Second World War soldier in the Pacific was 26 years old and saw, whilst it varied, about 40 days of combat in a period of a number of years. There were 444,000 North Vietnamese, over 220,000 South Vietnamese military personnel and over half a million civilians killed. 2,590,000 Americans, and over 59,000 Australians served in Vietnam and 6,700,000 tonnes of bombs were dropped compared with 2,700,000 tonnes dropped on Germany during the Second World War. Vietnam truly was a destructive period of combat.

It has left its mark on our nation. I think it is seared into the souls of Australians that war indeed is hell. There will come a time when we will beat our weapons into ploughshares, and that time will be welcomed. But that time is not now. An effective diplomatic policy must be backed up by an effective force of arms. The nation must retain an effective deterrent in the form of combat of arms. We all pray that the articles of war are not used, that the machines of war are not rolled out, and that the men and women who fight those combat operations are not used. But alas, we find ourselves in this debate in the middle of combat operations in Afghanistan. But this year, this year we stopped, paused, reflected and remembered. We considered the Australian Vietnam veteran community, as together we marked the 45th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan and of course the awarding by her Excellency the Governor General of the citation for those who served with D Company.

All Australians owe a great deal to the men and women who fought in Vietnam, as we do for all those who fought for freedom. Freedom is not free, someone pays the price. The price of eternal vigilance, of course, is what we pay for peace. We owe a great deal to those who fought in Vietnam, and to their families who stayed behind and have borne some of the pain, the sorrow, the joys, the happiness, the tears from those who have returned from their service. As we mark this 45th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan, it is appropriate to make special mention of the 108 men of D Company 6RAR who fought off as many as 2,500 determined Vietcong soldiers in the rubber plantations of Long Tan and Phuoc Tuy Province of South Vietnam, on 18 August 1966.

Eighteen Australians lost their lives in that battle and a further 24 were wounded. More than 245 enemies were killed in action, their bodies found on the battleground when fighting ceased. Hundreds and hundreds of more blood trails indicated the damage that Australia's combat fighters from D Company 6RAR had inflicted. It is fitting that the efforts of the men of D Company, 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, will be honoured and have been honoured when they received Australia's military's highest honour, the unit citation for gallantry from the Governor General.

This award, many years later I acknowledge, is an important recognition of the decisive efforts of that battle. Never underestimate the horror of combat operations at the best of times, let alone in the teeming rain in a rubber plantation, when you are outnumbered 20 to one. You are vastly outnumbered with monsoonal rains driving mercilessly across you as you move forward, radio communications almost non-existent, to fend off a combatant that is determined and aggressive. I think this country has dealt with the shame of those 15 years post Vietnam when there was no recognition of their service. It is a stain on our nation's history. I believe the nation has dealt with it; I believe the nation has addressed it. I think the nation has resolved in its conscience that never again do we bear upon those men and women who have fought in our name, in our uniform with our flag emblazoned across their shoulders, and not recognise their service and their sacrifice.

I pay tribute here this evening to the families of the Vietnam veterans: you have endured so much; you have shouldered a burden many of us can never understand. Thank you for caring for those men and women who returned, in many cases broken and questioning why the nation had not embraced them as its sons and daughters. We will not forget the service and sacrifice of our Vietnam veterans, nor of their families. We resolve once again as a parliament of people representative of our nation that the sacrifice of any Australian who serves in any theatre of combat, sent by its democratically elected government, will be recognised, remembered and embraced. We have learnt the lessons of our past.

We acknowledge today the bravery and the Anzac spirit which prevailed and which continues to prevail, even under the sometimes difficult circumstances of those who come back wounded and those who have been killed in action. Their bravery and the spirit in which they fought is forever forged in our memories. We have come a long way since 1972, when it all ended. I was two years old then. We have had several welcome home parades. We have unveiled and rededicated, quite rightly, a magnificent Vietnam veterans memorial in Canberra. We have issued the

Australian Service Medal. We have seen the RSL and other organisations become safe havens for many Vietnam veterans who took on the office-bearer roles when our World War II diggers passed the mantle.

Australians are incredibly proud of you veterans. It is great pleasure to recognise you for the incredible service you have rendered. That is the great joy of Vietnam Veterans Day on 18 August: it gives us all as a nation an opportunity to honour the service and sacrifice you have made. I remember a tombstone in Gallipoli of a very young soldier who gave his life on the first day there, on 25 April, 1915. It said simply, 'When you return, tell them of us and say: for your tomorrow we gave our today.' The same can be said for those who served in Vietnam: many gave their tomorrow for our today. We will not forget that freedom is not free. We will remember them.