

2013 LONG TAN DAY SPEECH

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It is some 47 years since the members of Delta Company, 6th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment clashed with a force of 1500 to 2500 North Vietnamese regular soldiers and Viet Cong near the village of Long Tan, Phuoc Tuy province in what was then South Vietnam. It was an encounter battle. After an initial heavy clash the Australian's withdrew into a defensive location and called in close artillery support.

By the end of the action, of the 108 men of or attached to Delta company, 18 had been killed in action and 25 wounded. The official history lists North Vietnamese and Viet Cong casualties as 245 dead and an estimated 350 wounded, although it is generally held that the toll of both killed and wounded was much higher.

It was an action where deeds of valour were common. By all standards, the Australian's should have been overrun and wiped out. They were against odds of 20 to 1. But a combination of training, discipline, and leadership won out. Critical to the battle was constant, heavy very accurate artillery support, an ammunition resupply from helicopters of 9 Sqn RAAF undertaken in appalling flying conditions, and the arrival of a relieving force mounted in armoured personnel carriers in the nick of time. It was more than a close run thing. It is a battle that is studied even today in officer training.

Historians have argued over the consequences of Long Tan. That it was a decisive Australian victory is unchallenged. That Long Tan stopped a major assault on the Australian base at Nui Dat is debated. That following Long Tan, the Australian Task Force in Phouc Tuy province was essentially unchallenged for the rest of the war is undoubtedly true. Long Tan became the first battle honour of the Vietnam war. In the years that followed there would be others; Bien Hoa, Coral-Balmoral, Hat Dich, and Binh Bah.

Long Tan however has become the icon of the Vietnam war, much the same as Gallipoli and the Kokoda Track symbolise previous much larger conflicts.

Over 50,000 men and women served in all 3 branches of the ADF in Vietnam, doing what their country asked of them. By the time the last Australian forces came home, 521 Australian servicemen had died as a result of service and over 3000 were wounded, injured or recorded as ill as a result of service. Six were initially listed as missing presumed dead. Thankfully, they have all now come home.

One of those who died while serving was CPL David John Brennan of 9 RAR. He was killed during a mortar attack on Fire Base Thrush on 6 June 1969. CPL Brennan came from Bathurst. His father, Hugh Brennan was also a veteran and was active as an officer in the Air Training Corps for many years. Hugh resided in Rockley, a small village near Bathurst and was a family friend. He mourned the loss of his son until the day he died.

Today it is our solemn duty to remember those who fell while serving, those who have passed on in the years since from the effects of their service, all those who served, including many of whom continue to suffer ill effects today as a result of their service. I also pay tribute to your families who have stood by you. Australia owes those of you present here today and all who served a debt of gratitude not only for your service at the time, but in my humble view, more so in what you have done since you returned.

Vietnam at the time was a deeply unpopular war. It divided the nation. It was the last conflict that Australia resorted to conscription or national service. There were large scale demonstrations in the streets. To our national shame, opposition to the war was vented on returning service men and women. Some were publically vilified, spat on and called horrific names. Many, returning after completing their period of service, could be patrolling the jungle one day and a few short days later, flown home and discharged with advice best not to talk too much about where you had been and what you did. There were no coming home parades, no public acknowledgement of a job well done, and few support services for those for whom the war did not end when they came home to Australia but remained with them. Some were even told by those who should have known better, that they were not welcome in some ex-service clubs, as Vietnam Veterans were not real soldiers, they had not been in a real war.

As a result, the veterans decided to help each other in that time honoured Australian manner of mates helping mates. They formed groups, advocated, lobbied and agitated.

Public recognition was slow to come and it was not until October 1987 that Vietnam Veterans were properly recognised with a welcome home parade.

In the years since, Vietnam Veterans have continued to work and advocate on behalf of all veterans, not just their own. They have helped to change the face of the repatriation system in Australia. By international standards we have always had a very good repatriation system however it is even better today. That is not to say it is perfect. It is not and never will be. However, the intense focus on the ongoing mental health of veterans and their families is a direct result of the years of work of Vietnam Veterans. The creation of the Vietnam Veterans Counselling service, now the Veterans and Veterans families counselling service is stark evidence of this.

Today, those who serve the nation and go in harms way are publically welcomed home. While there is proper, vigorous public and political debate about when and why we deploy troops overseas and how long they should remain, there is overwhelming public support for those serving the nation. As a community we are able to maturely differentiate between the rights and wrongs of decisions to deploy but at the same time unequivocally support those who deploy and the families they leave behind. Vietnam veterans have now assumed positions of responsibility in ex-service organisations. New veterans are not only welcomed, but actively encouraged to join ex-service organisations. Their opinions are actively sought on what their particular needs are and how they can be better supported. What a difference 47 years have made. Those who serve in the Australian Defence Force today owe the veterans of Vietnam an enormous debt of gratitude, as it has been your struggles and efforts in the years post Vietnam that have made the difference for those who serve today..

So the legacy of Vietnam lives on, in many ways. It lives on with those who remember their mates or loved ones who fell all those years ago. It remains as we remember those who have passed on years before their just time as a result of their service. It lives on with those who stand with us today, and with their families and all those who have been touched by the conflict. But most of all it lives on with those for whom the war did not end in 1972, but lives on today still, in injuries, illness and disabilities.

So on behalf of a grateful nation and Defence Force I say thank you for all your service in and out of uniform. Well done.

Lest we forget