

Interviews with Veterans

It needs to be noted that of the 58 000 Australian soldiers who fought, 504 were lost, 494 died and 2398 were wounded. The soldiers experienced many sensory atrocities, visual exposure to horrific killings, napalm gas and Agent Orange, and the sound of screams in the jungle and helicopters overhead. Soldiers may have had duty of either one or two years and then possibly returned for a second stint later in the War. Soldiers returned to Australia often at night, and were asked to take off their uniform and arrive in civilian clothes.

Below are various statements made by Vietnam veterans after they returned from their service. As individuals they experienced the war differently. The observations, often recorded long after the events, are not without complications; however, they provide a valuable insight into their understandings of their experience in Vietnam. The statements are from McKay, G. *Vietnam Fragments: An Oral History of Australians at War*.



Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam. 1968–05. Two soldiers from 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR). Australian War Memorial Negative Number CRO/68/0585/VN.

Source 23: G. McKay, *Vietnam Fragments: An Oral History of Australians at War*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, p. 261.

Ian Ferguson, Troop Commander, A Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment, Phuoc Tuy Province, 1970–71.

The war was not like it is painted on American TV or movies. It wasn't anywhere near that. There were some difficult times and hard decisions for individuals and for the system, but it wasn't anywhere near as traumatic as people make out. Most people who went wanted to go, they enjoyed it and I think they had a pretty good time. That

side of the equation hasn't ever really been told. On the whole you could argue the ethics and the morals of Vietnam until you went blue in the face, but if you want to just stand back from it, on the whole it was a good experience for the individuals who went, even though it may have been a bad experience for the nation. But a lot of those guys, and you can go around and talk to them on Anzac Day, so many years after the event, and their reflections and recollections now are the same as World War II Diggers Twenty years ago or World War I Diggers 40 years ago. So that seems to be no different from their fathers or grandfathers – nothing. On the whole they did a bloody good job – especially the nashos.

Source 24: McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, p. 264.
David Kibbey, Infantry Platoon Commander, 7 RAR, 1970.

It has always been one of the perversities of war that the Army, Navy and Air Force go off to war and people get killed but the community essentially goes on in the same way as it did before the war. That sometimes is a bit disappointing because society doesn't always recognise the sacrifices that are being made by such a small part of the community of their behalf. I guess it is really one of the essences of democracy that people can get up, whether we are at are or not, and express a view on whether we should or should not be there. So in a sense that we are over there fighting for their right to say what they want to say, then I'm not tortured by that in any way shape or form. ...

... If media portrayal of the horror of war can prevent or reduce it then good – but soldiers doing their countries' will should never be denigrated.

Source 25: McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, p. 269.
Al Pinches, Canberra Bomber Navigator, Phan Rang, 1970–71.

In a democracy I believe we do what we are told by the government. By that I mean that the military do not try and influence government policy. I believe the idea of going to Vietnam was right ...

Source 25: McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, p. 269–270.
Dan McDaniel, Platoon Commander, 4 RAR South Vietnam, 1971.

I thought the anti-Vietnam protestors were a bit of a pain in the arse. While I accepted their right to protest, and I remember this quite clearly, I objected to them attacking soldiers as targets in their marches through cities. I detested their inability to distinguish between governments who were involved in the political fracas and soldiers who were just doing what they were told to do. Quite often these soldiers were members of their own class in society; the nashos came from all walks of life.

... I think my greatest weakness before going to Vietnam was the fact that I didn't think enough about the big picture and where I was heading, what the Army was doing and what was morally right, what was politically right.

Source 26: McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, p. 271.
Les Hayward, Qantas B707 2nd Officer, Sydney-Saigon, 1969–1970.

In hindsight, Australian involvement may have been a mistake, but at the time it was a valid decision of the Australian Government.

Source 27: McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, p. 272.
Ernie Chamberlain, Intelligence Officer, South Vietnam, 1969–1970.

Australia's involvement in Vietnam was not worth it because we didn't get the result we wanted, and we lost over 500 soldiers. Many people do not understand how multi-faceted the US and Vietnamese programs were in Vietnam.

| **Source 28:** Poem – Father Denis Edward O'Brien (date unknown)

It is the soldier
It is the soldier, not the reporter,
Who has given us freedom of the press.
It is the soldier, not the poet,
Who has given us freedom of speech.
It is the soldier, not the campus organiser,
Who has given us the freedom to demonstrate.
It is the soldier,
Who salutes the flag,
Who serves beneath the flag,
And whose coffin is draped by the flag,
Who allows the protester to burn the flag.

| **Source 29:** Poem (not reproduced in full) – returned veteran, Peter L. Wynd (date unknown)

Only the Good Times
It's amazing how people say silly things
'Do you find it hard to forget Vietnam?'
No. I say.
I only remember the good times.
The flight home. Early morning. Dark. Cold.
No protesters. Having a beer in uniform.
Nice looking blonde uni student. Murderer.
Baby killer. You wear civies and shut your mouth.
Discharge.
Hard to forget?
No.
I only remember the good times.

TASK 2

The above sources reflect the attitudes of Vietnam veterans. The comments were made on their return from a period of service in Vietnam.

1. Create a table – label the columns positive and negative, list adjectives from the extracts under the relevant heading.
2. Refer to your lists and conclude about the general attitudes of returned soldiers to their war experience.
3. What are the soldiers' attitudes towards the Australian government? Support your answer by quoting from the extracts.
4. What are the soldiers' attitudes towards the general public in Australia? Support your answer by quoting from the extracts.
5. What does Source 28 (the poem by Father Denis Edward O'Brien) suggest the soldier achieved for the general public? Support your answer by quoting from the poem.
6. What does Source 29 (the poem by Peter Wynd) suggest was the experience of returned soldiers? Support your answer by quoting from the poem.
7. How does Peter Wynd overcome the negative experience of returning from Vietnam? Use words from Source 28 to help support your response.