

**Address by**  
**17132 Major William Alfred Wallace (Ret)**  
**6 Battalion RAR Vietnam 1969-70**  
**at the Ballarat Long Tan Day Commemorative Service on 20 August 2006**

Colonel John McRae, a Canadian Medical officer in WW I (formerly Professor of Medicine at Macgill University) was the composer of "In Flanders Fields", which he had written in 1915, but was not published (at first anonymously) until 1923. He died of wounds in May 1918, and on the night before his death said his doctor, he gave this quote from the last stanza. Tell them this, "If ye break faith with us who die we shall not sleep".

Today we honour those who sleep and help them to sleep peacefully.

In recognising that 18th August is the anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan (this being the 40th anniversary of that battle), the headline battle from the Australian involvement in the Vietnam conflict, it was not the largest in which the Australian forces were engaged. But it has come to symbolise the conflict in the Australian community.

However we are here because this day was appointed by the Parliament of Australia, on advice from the Veterans, to honour the service of the 50,000 Australian servicemen and servicewomen who served in Vietnam between 1962 and 1972. So we gather here not to reflect specifically about the few hundred Australians and New Zealanders who fought the Battle of Long Tan, but all those who served. We are honouring also those who fought at Bien Hoa, in War Zone D, FSB Coral and Balmoral, Binh Ba, Baria, Dat Do, along Route 44, in the Long Hais, Mai Tao Mountains, Hat Dich, Tui Tich, Xuyen Moc, The Horseshoe, The Light Green and the Long Green, in the Courtney Rubber, and along the Song Rai. Not forgetting the heroism of the AATTV Members in 1 Corps and 2 Corps which resulted in the awarding of many honours including the Victoria Cross on 4 occasions. We must also honour the service of the members of 1 Australian Logistic Support Group in Vung Tau whose efforts kept the combat elements in the field supplied with all the materials needed to wage war, repaired all the damaged equipment, and mended wounded and diseased bodies. And we remember those who served at HQ AFV in Saigon, keeping contact with Australia, and coordinating the activities of the Australian forces with those of the allied nations.

We must also remember the members of the RAAF whether flying Hueys with 9 Sqn out of Vung Tau, with Wallaby Airlines flying their Caribou aircraft to all parts of the country, with the Canberra bombers, destroying enemy installations, isolating the battlefield and disrupting enemy supply lines, or with the C130 Hercules taking men and supplies to and from Vietnam, especially providing those special medical evacuation flights which had a 10 year unblemished

record. We also remember the service of the members of the RAN ferrying men and materials from Australia on "The Vung Tau Ferry", HMAS Sydney and on HMAS Jeparit, conducting combat and fire support operations along the coast on the DDG Destroyers, the clearance divers keeping the harbours secure, or the pilots of Fleet Air Arm either with the Assault Helicopter Coy at Bear Cat or on attachment to the RAAF Units.

But why do we remember these Veterans? What is so special about being a Veteran? The answer quite simply is that these are the only servants of the Australian Nation who have had to be prepared to die to implement national policy. No others are required to make this commitment. When undertaking this service to the nation, these men and women are deprived of any of the personal rights which properly protect our freedom and democracy. When you don a uniform, you lose the right to refuse a lawful command at every level from the CDF to the lowest recruit. If the Government says that this is what is required, the defence force has no alternative but to say "Yes Sir". This is why the nation does not have occasions such as this to remember the service of government employees who work in the ATO or in the Diplomatic Service. Only Veterans have been required by the Australian Nation to make this ultimate commitment. Only Veterans have been required to be prepared to die in the service of the nation.

This makes all Veterans "special". However, to the veterans it appears that the nation has forgotten this and has allowed Veterans issues to become part of party politics. Veterans believe that if the maintenance of the Defence Force is the premium on the Nation's Insurance Policy, Veterans are the payout on that policy, and as such are above politics. To provide appropriate support to the veterans is a national obligation, and must progress from being considered "adequate" to being appropriate before those who did not come home will be able to rest peacefully.

But we are here today specifically to honour the Veterans of the conflict in Vietnam. Why are these Veterans specially honoured? What is special about being a Vietnam Veteran?

For the first time in Australian History a war was lost. There was no return of conquering heroes to a grateful nation. The attempt to prop up the corrupt military dictatorship in South Vietnam failed and the reunification of Vietnam under the North Vietnamese Government is now a permanent fixture. Australia fought this war with limited political aims, mainly to convince the United States that we were a true and valuable ally, and that the US should fill the vacuum created in SE Asia by the British decision to withdraw to Europe. It could be argued that this also has failed and that Australia is still pursuing a foreign policy to achieve these objectives.

It is now beyond dispute that the intelligence advice to the government before the decision to deploy combat troops was taken, was that the war was not winnable. Yet the decision was taken which cost the lives of 501 young Australians. As the ADF knew this, the motivation for the soldiers deployed to Vietnam was based purely on mateship, pride and professionalism. When they returned, none of this was recognised.

The soldiers felt betrayed by the nation and because of this, and buried themselves back into the community. But the recognition that was given to the men after WW II was not afforded to them. Allowances were not made for the effects of war on these young men. I remember when I was a boy that a man's shortcomings would be tolerated because he was a "Returned Man". This did not happen in Australia in the 1970's and 1980's. Happily it is now being done, but for a great many, the damage is irreparable.

During the Vietnam War, the nation was not at war. Other than the families of the soldier, no-one in Australia was required to make any sacrifices. As a result, after the war, veterans issues quickly disappeared over the political horizon, and with some minor exceptions, this continues to be the case today. Veterans feel betrayed. The Minister for Veterans Affairs is no longer a stand alone figure, having dual responsibility as a junior minister reporting to the Minister for Defence. Recently the Minister made an important announcement regarding issues about which Vietnam Veterans feel passionate. This media release was widely circulated in the veteran community but ignored in the media. The Prime Minister will attend dinner with the Long Tan Veterans in the Great Hall but will not grant the national president of the TPI Association 10 minutes in his office. Politicians are happy to accept the recommendations of an independent tribunal to fix their own salaries and conditions, but accepted less than 20% of the recommendations made by Justice Clark who had been appointed to independently review veterans' entitlements. The electorate accepted without question the spin that the veterans were being looked after, (albeit only after a backbench revolt in the lead up to the election in 2004).

Besides the Veterans, the casualties of the Vietnam War have been our beautiful and long suffering families. The one positive is that it is now accepted, although not yet at the policy level, that war has an effect on families. The divorce rate in Vietnam Veterans is almost twice the national average, and the affect on our children has been horrendous. It has been confirmed that in the tragedy of youth suicide, sons and daughters of Vietnam Veterans are over represented by a factor of 3.5. This is not a fact for which the Prime Minister apologised in Parliament on Wednesday. This needless waste of so many wonderful young people continues and is largely ignored.

Happily, things may well be changing. Despite world-wide recognition of the effect of dioxin exposure on the health of individuals and their offspring, The Australian Government hides behind a limited scientific opinion, and refuses to

revisit this issue. Although is too late for our children, there are signs that it is being recognised that war effects families and that programs are being developed to attempt to limit these effects. One could say that this is just an extension of occupational Health and Safety which is mandatory on all employers.

Vietnam Veterans feel betrayed. In 1969 when I was placing my life on the line for this nation, the special rate of pension paid to permanently incapacitated servicemen was 90% of average weekly earnings. TPI's did not receive welfare. The neglect of all governments since, which has been accepted by the electorate, has resulted in those people now being welfare dependant. When the automatic adjustments are made next month, for the first time welfare will constitute more than 50% of the income of most TPI's, and the special rate of pension will be about 40% of the average weekly earnings. Of the 40,000 Vietnam Veterans still alive (5,000 have taken their own lives – 10 times as many who died during the conflict), 18,000 are now classed as Totally and Permanently Incapacitated. They feel betrayed as since 1997, all Centrelink Benefits and Parliamentary Superannuation payments have been indexed at the more advantageous rate of MTAW which has been a serious disadvantage to veterans. I return to my earlier comment that Veteran entitlements should be appropriate, not adequate.

This is why Vietnam Veterans are "special". Mainly for reasons we would rather have ignored or wish had not occurred at all. Whilst there are 40,000 of us still alive, the nation has a chance to make amends, not merely by public expressions of sorrow and gratitude, not by glittering dinners and ceremonies at the fine memorials which have been built, but by changing things which affect the everyday lives of veterans.

I found this poem by James D Young which captures the spirit of my address in a fine anthology of Australian Military poetry.

### **The Folly of War**

The cannons roar, the bullets whine,

The soldiers' dreaded fate,

The reason why, not clear to see

Thoughts of logic, far too late.

Where hide the ones who make the war,

Who fashion all the rules,

Not for the battlefield  
This honour – left to fools.  
Yet fools we are, we men of arms,  
Who hold our honour high,  
While those who make this world of war  
Care not that soldiers die.  
Vested power to politicians  
Who, for greed, would sell their soul,  
But never they in gunshot sound  
For them, no bells do toll.  
Never yet in history's time  
Were problems solved by force,  
Still Man must pay the devil's price  
The biblical rider, on a pale horse.  
Where men of science boldly tread  
No man has been before,  
Yet humanity prospers not a whit  
When it comes to the folly of war.

To extrapolate from the words of Colonel John McRae in May 1918; you as the Australian Nation have not kept faith, and those who died are not yet sleeping.

**The willingness of future generations to serve in our military will be directly dependent upon how we have treated those who have served in the past - George Washington**