

Voices from the Battlefield: Personal Narratives as an Historical Tool in Studying the Place of the Vietnam War in Australian Society

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The use of personal narratives has proved a popular method of studying the Vietnam War, both in Australia and the United States. Vietnam was one of the most controversial and longest wars in contemporary history. It was a war that was fought on the home front as well as on the battlefield, and for many, the wounds inflicted are still painful more than a quarter of a century later. The rush of histories that quickly followed previous wars were not so swift to appear after Vietnam. There was no great victory to celebrate and many found difficulty placing Vietnam into the context of a proud military history. When histories started appearing, they focused mainly on how Australia and the United States had become entangled in Vietnam, and how it had all gone wrong. Vietnam Veterans, as a group, felt dispossessed by society, and therefore ultimately, from history. Oral history offered them the opportunity to be heard.

The veterans' desire to have their say coincided with the growing popularity and acceptance of oral history as well as social history. Oral histories of Vietnam veterans began appearing in the early 1980s with groundbreaking works such as Mark Baker's *Nam*, and Wallace Terry's *Bloods*.¹ The latter text told the stories of African American veterans, a group that felt doubly disenfranchised. Australian veteran oral histories began emerging a few years later, with Stuart Rintoul's *Ashes of Vietnam* in 1987² being followed by numerous other titles in the early 1990s. Recent years have also witnessed the recognition of women's roles in the Vietnam War, in particular Siobhan McHugh's book on Australian women, *Minefields and Miniskirts*, which received high acclaim in Australia as well as in the United States.³ Oral sources are not just used for purely oral histories, but also to complement to other sources. This has been put to good effect in various books by Australians Terry Burstall and Lex MacAulay.⁴ Both used such documents as military dispatches and interviews with participants, not only to fill in the gaps of information, but also to give the reader an idea of how it felt to be there and other details that make the story a living one. Oral sources have also been used for more political studies such as Neil Sheehan's Pulitzer Prize winning, *A Bright Shining Lie*, Peter Edwards' Australian official history, *A Nation at War*, and Ambrose Crowe's *The Battle After the War*.⁵ What has been largely missing however, has been an examination of the responses of Australian Vietnam veterans in an attempt to locate their place in history.

My research began with interviewing thirty-five Vietnam veterans in the Cairns area over a period of six months in 1999 and 2000.⁶ Some were sourced by making contact with local veteran associations, such as the Returned and Services League

(RSL) and the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (VVAA). Thirteen made contact after reading an article in a newspaper about the research.⁷ The remainder came from referrals from those interviewed, as almost everyone offered at least one referral, with a couple even inviting me to various functions and meetings to introduce other veterans. Many of those who made contact from the newspaper article were interested because it stated that I also wanted to talk to those not associated with any veteran groups. Therefore, I was able to interview a cross section of veterans with varying views and backgrounds. They were all male and represented all three services.⁸ Participants were checked against the nominal roll of Vietnam veterans⁹ to avoid interlopers, and although this is not a failsafe system, in a place like Cairns where most of the veterans know each other, it can be presumed that most, if not all, were whom they claimed. Unfortunately, no female Vietnam veterans were located.

The interviews were all recorded on tape. These took place at a variety of locations, including veterans' homes, cafés, workplaces, a motel room (with a chaperone), the gym, a truck and the RSL rooms. Naturally, it would be ideal if all interviews could take place in soundproof rooms, where no outside noises or distractions could intrude, but that is not always practical. A few could only be seen during their working hours, and some did not want to be interviewed in their homes, for various reasons. Some wanted to talk in their homes because they felt safe there, and others did not want me to come to their homes because they felt safe there and I was threatening that feeling of safety. A few were secretive at first with details such as telephone numbers and addresses (even their names), but after the meeting, most relaxed. Actually, the more they were assured that I did not require too many personal details, the more willing they were to provide them. Some of the more revealing interviews took place in the more unusual locations. A couple of the ones interviewed at home appeared to be withholding some information, perhaps in fear that a family member would hear them. Luckily, a reasonable quality tape recorder made the interviews perfectly understandable, complete with ambient noise.

Five of the thirty-five interviewed were willing to allow their names to be placed with their words. Many of the others agreed to be recorded only on the understanding that I alone would hear the actual tape. Most were happy to have their words quoted, but not to be identified, and releases were signed to that end. While some may be willing to lift the restrictions over time, or after their death, others have concerns about their families and may never want their names put against their words for one reason or another. Several indicated that they would be willing to be identified — but they would then be less forthcoming.

Various seminars and meetings of veterans were also attended, and some of the most fascinating information was obtained during these, or in personal communications, which were followed up where ever practicable. Facts were cross-referenced as much as possible, but opinions and emotions cannot be, and should not be, as they come with their own validity in that they have been expressed. They are therefore placed in the wider context of other responses and known information to increase their usefulness in telling the larger story.

One of the greatest hurdles oral history has had to face has been its reliability in comparison to that of documentary sources. While oral sources can certainly

have their weaknesses, it would be wrong to assume that documentary sources are beyond reproach. Douglas, Roberts and Thompson have pointed out that many documentary sources are recorded from oral information, including births, deaths and marriages, census information and legal proceedings, not to mention newspapers.¹⁰ The main difference with oral history is that the source can be questioned. This is an advantage that cannot be underestimated. The oral source can fill in the gaps left by a documentary source. A living source can be questioned not only about facts, but also about motives and feelings. The great historical question of 'why?' can be addressed by an oral source. Whether oral sources are used for purely oral histories or to complement other sources in research, it can be a powerful and interesting tool. British historians Peter Liddle and Matthew Richardson believe that the 'historian who dismisses oral history altogether is attempting carpentry without a full bag of tools'.¹¹ This does not mean that oral sources are infallible, as no historical sources ever are, but neither should they be dismissed or undervalued in historical scholarship.

The reliability of the narrator is the most debated element of oral history scholarship. Discussion on the subject of memory is prolific. There have been many criticisms particularly in regard to interviewing older people about events that happened long ago, for example, fifty or sixty years previously.¹² However, it is also widely believed that significant events which take place 'at critical junctures' in a person's life will remain clear throughout their lives.¹³ This would appear to be common sense. People would surely be more likely to remember important events such as the birth of a child, or traumatic ones, such as a death, or going to war, than they are to recall what they had for breakfast last Tuesday. Some details may be forgotten, such as an exact date or location, but other details will be retained. Strong feelings, for example, often remain clearly in the memory.¹⁴

The Vietnam veterans interviewed were asked to remember back on average about thirty years, and discuss events that occurred both then and in ensuing years. Few had any difficulty remembering even the smallest details, and several were able to recall the exact date they left for Vietnam, or came home, or finished their military service. Almost without exception, those who had been wounded, or lost a friend, could remember the date and circumstances. Their service in Vietnam occurred when most of them were young adults and it was generally the defining moment of their young lives. Whether it was a great adventure, or a terrible trauma, it was the most significant episode in their lives up until then, and for some, in all of the years afterwards. Most of their service and the couple of years after are remembered with startling clarity, but what is remembered even more clearly is feelings. An event is often remembered in the context of the emotion that accompanied it and is therefore given more significance. One veteran recalled a Christmas spent with a 'good mate' at a remote location, where they had no hot food and worst of all, no beer. He remembers with anger that this was because of a strike on the waterfront in Australia preventing supplies going to Vietnam. They ate a tin of cold beans, watched the tracer fire in the distance, and wished each other a merry Christmas. 'Two days later he was dead. That's what it's [war] all about'.¹⁵ A military despatch might have given details about where and how a soldier was killed in action, but it does not say that he was a 'good mate', or about

his last couple of days, or that for one man, his death symbolised the horror of war.

Another man told of listening to the first moon landing on a small radio while harassment and interdiction fire went over his head: 'And I thought, God. So many millions of miles away, that guy is saying peace for all mankind, and here is us sitting in a bloody foxhole thinking, why am I here?'¹⁶

He felt that the event exacerbated the feeling of pointlessness of the situation when a mission of peace could be taking place so far from where a war was continuing, made more poignant in retrospect, as the friend with whom he shared the radio was killed some weeks later. Not all recollections are memorable because of their horror. One veteran discussed a much anticipated football match between army and air force team, and the bizarre sight of the minesweepers checking the field before play could start.¹⁷ (None were found and apparently the air force won the game.) Documents cannot compare with the descriptions that come from the mind's eye of the horrors witnessed daily by a medic, the good times on leave with mates in Vung Tau, or the ordinariness of the bureaucracy that was as continuously intrusive in a war zone as it was at home.

Memory is not just about remembering an event that occurred. It is also about putting those memories into a context. Oral historians have to be aware of the role played by retrospect in remembering. The passing of time, changes in social attitudes, and the intervening period will have an effect on how incidents are remembered. Elizabeth Tonkin believes also that 'tellers are constructing retrospective accounts for audiences with different time scales, and they may adjust their own narrations to the memories and understanding of their listeners'.¹⁸ There was much evidence of placing events in retrospective contexts in the Vietnam veteran interviews. A common example was to talk of the war as having been a mistake. Most did not think of it that way then, but changing beliefs have had a significant effect on the way some of the veterans remember their experiences in hindsight. A few went to great pains to explain their reasons for going to Vietnam, and how they really believed in what they were doing, as if desperate to excuse what are now considered unpopular views. A significant number said, 'we shouldn't have been there', and gave examples of things that they considered mistakes. One man talked about search and destroy missions which would clear an area of enemy, and then leave the area unattended, so that they would be back the next week fighting over the same piece of land.¹⁹ It is interesting to consider how differently these things might have been remembered if the war had been successful and popular (if that can be said about any war), as, for example, the second world war.

The study of a war does not cease with the last shot fired, or in this case, the last echo of rotor blades. What occurs in the aftermath is often as significant as the war itself. Many veterans relate disturbing stories of their treatment on their return to Australia, but there is much disagreement, amongst scholars and veterans themselves, about how much of it is true. Some claim that the reports of mistreatment are exaggerated, and point out that many were welcomed home with marches through cities attracting large crowds.²⁰ However, how the public perceived veterans was not as important as how they felt they were perceived. One of the veterans interviewed showed me a letter from his girlfriend, a university student, who called him a 'baby killer' and broke off the relationship when he

returned from Vietnam. Later in the interview, when discussing problems with how he was treated, he said: 'the worst ones were young women, particularly in academia'.²¹ He did not give any other specific incidences of abuse, so it is possible that his girlfriend and all young women in academia had merged in his mind, making the one incident a series of incidences. There are many examples of similar situations, but ultimately, it does not really matter whether they were spat on or called names once, or a dozen times. The event has taken on greater significance in their minds, making them feel as if they were reviled by a larger group, or even by the whole country. The idea that their country ignored or despised them has become a truth for many veterans. Whether or not it is an actual fact is not as important as what they believe, because what they believe to be true is what has made them the people they have become. Nevertheless, it might be remembered that all truths have a basis in fact, just as it is a fact that a large number of veterans did suffer some amount of mistreatment on their return from Vietnam.

Italian historian Alessandro Portelli contends that although an interviewee may remember details of an event incorrectly, it does not necessarily make his or her testimony worthless. He claims that 'rather than being a weakness, this is however, their strength: errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings'.²² Portelli believes that meanings can be just as important, if not more so, than the facts themselves. This has been a matter of debate amongst oral historians for some decades, but many have begun to follow Portelli's school of thought over recent years, although it is by no means new. Barbara Allen and William Montell wrote in 1981:

The truth in orally communicated history does not always lie in its factual accuracy. What people believe happened is as important as what actually happened, for people think, act, and react in accordance with what they believe to be true.²³

Most veterans marched through cities shortly after their return with decent sized crowds and a good deal of support, but for many, the overwhelming memory of those marches were the anti-war protesters and other hecklers. One recalled a march through Sydney in 1968 in which 'we were booed. We were spat on. We had condoms full of water thrown at us. Lunches thrown at us as we marched through the city. And then back at the Domain with blokes with tears in their eyes, ripping parts of their uniform off'.²⁴ Four veterans spoke of a march in Adelaide in 1971 where they were similarly targeted by groups.²⁵ One veteran marching in Townsville claims that they were welcomed, but then hustled away 'quick time before the university students came out'.²⁶ Not all veterans remember the experience of their parades negatively. Two mentioned the day fondly, feeling as if they had a large amount of support, although one encountered problems with protesters at a later time.²⁷

More than 80% of those interviewed were involved in some sort of incident or altercation in relation to their service. Home on leave from Vietnam in 1969, Lieutenant General John Grey (Retd) — then a Captain with the 3rd Cavalry — was horrified to discover that his daughters' school teachers 'had described us in Vietnam as murderers'.²⁸ He spoke to the headmaster and the matter was resolved, but 'it left a bitter taste'. One veteran, who did two tours in Vietnam, said that his wife refrained from saying that he was in Vietnam for fear she would be harassed,

as others had been, and also to avoid constant comments.²⁹ Victoria Cross recipient Keith Payne reports that his children were harassed at school, and he was often targeted because of his high profile.³⁰ Veterans returned to a sense of hostility that some families had been suffering in their absence.³¹

The altercations mentioned in the interviews are too numerous to list, but many apparently became physical. Keith Payne claims that the media often portrayed the soldiers as violent troublemakers, a situation that only served to isolate them further.³² One veteran made the interesting observation that nobody seemed to understand that returned soldiers were often still tense and had recently been shooting at people, so 'were probably not the best people to annoy'.³³ The uniform made them an easy target and most soldiers interviewed were advised not to wear them in public, a situation that was made actual policy in the nation's capital for a period to prevent incidents.³⁴ Many resented having to hide their identity and felt that hiding was somehow an admission of guilt. This resentment was summed up by General Grey, claiming that:

We were told that appearing in uniform in public was likely to upset the community, and we were better off not to wear uniforms. It made me resolute, and I have marched every ANZAC Day since.³⁵

The uniform, which had been a symbol of pride for previous generations, had become a symbol of something quite different. A navy veteran, who was expected to wear his uniform to and from work when in port, said that no one would sit beside him on the train in the later years of the war.³⁶

Veterans soon discovered that rejection did not necessarily come only from strangers. Most returned to supportive networks of families and friends who were at least eager to have them home, if not to discuss their experiences, but as the war continued and its popularity continued to decline,³⁷ a number began to experience dissension closer to home. One veteran, a regular churchgoer, was shocked one Sunday to hear a sermon against the war and those fighting it coming from the pulpit. He walked out and never went back.³⁸ Nine of the veterans reported incidents within their places of work. Returning to his civilian job with the Department of the Navy, one veteran found that the 'people in that department were openly derogatory about the people in Vietnam'.³⁹ Another veteran returned to his civilian job as an employee in a small business in his home town. The business lost some long-time clients, some of them friends, when they discovered he had been in Vietnam, and he had to suffer comments from several others.⁴⁰ Others also experienced derogatory remarks or exclusion, with one veteran claiming that 'it was always mentioned — got mentioned probably more than it was warranted'.⁴¹

While there has been considerable disagreement amongst historians as to the level of hostility towards Vietnam veterans,⁴² Jeffrey Grey describes the tensions caused as 'clear cut and obvious'. His research also confirms the veterans' stories of demonstrators at several of the marches on their return home.⁴³ The best option for oral historians attempting to verify a narrator's information is to check it against other sources, such as documentation, although verification is not always available, which is of course one of the reasons for interviewing them in the first place. Therefore, the next best option is cross analysis with other interviewees.⁴⁴ Although it is not a foolproof methodology, logic states that the more people who

offer the same answer to a question, the more likely it is to be accurate. A homecoming march in Adelaide in 1971 provides an illustration of this method. Four separate veterans, three from the battalion in question, and the other assisting in providing security, were all present at the march, and all recalled being targeted (physically and verbally) by a group of protestors.⁴⁵ None of these men had seen each other since the march, neither were they particular friends at the time (two knew each other in Vietnam), and none of them knew I was interviewing any of the others.⁴⁶ Although testimony from four people does not mean that the facts are unquestionably correct, logic suggests that the story is more likely true than not.

To suggest that Vietnam veterans were treated poorly by the Australian community is a generalisation, but it is also a truth. While it might be reasonably maintained that the silent majority in Australia were supportive of servicemen, they were generally as their description suggests — silent. The loudest voices were those raised in dissent, and even if they intended no disrespect to those fighting and dying, those doing the fighting and witnessing the dying took it personally. While it is true that the main target of the organised anti-war movement was the government and its Vietnam policies, the military was the physical incarnation of those policies and therefore sometimes became the recipient of the dissension and discontent.

Perceptions were an important issue to the veterans interviewed. They believe that the bulk of the Australian community sees the war through mainly American eyes, or more precisely, Hollywood's eyes, and therefore also has a skewed perception of veterans. They are overwhelmingly critical of the American movies, claiming that they are generally inaccurate even from an American point of view. The two movies that attract the most scorn from veterans are *Apocalypse Now* and *Rambo II*, which are also among the best known. They believe that *Rambo*, in particular, has done them a great disservice, best described by a veteran who said that 'the thought that everyone who'd been to Vietnam was a gun crazed psychopath with a red rag around their head really pissed me off'.⁴⁷ Another veteran claimed that his grandchildren perceived him as being like *Rambo*.⁴⁸ One veteran when discussing the inaccuracy of the portrayals managed to see the lighter side of the situation, proclaiming that 'if we'd had a half a dozen guys like *Rambo*, we would have kicked their butts in six months'.⁴⁹ However, one veteran admitted that movies such as *Rambo* had at least raised the issue of veterans and gave them an audience for whom they could build a more accurate picture of Vietnam veterans.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, *Rambo's* image has proved surprisingly resilient.

Reactions varied when the veterans were asked if they believed that they had received enough recognition. While some found it ample and others were dissatisfied, they all agreed that whatever recognition they had received had been slow in appearing and was somewhat distorted. General Grey echoes most of the veterans in saying that:

I think there was an attitude that continued after the war that we shouldn't have been there and that you were all mental morons for obeying your government's order to go. But that has changed ... In fact, I think the public have almost tipped over the other way, where they're very sympathetic these days to Vietnam veterans.⁵¹

Another veteran was more blunt, claiming that although he felt there had been increased recognition, he was not sure that it was the 'right recognition. There has been a bit of a perception of the whingeing Vietnam vet'.⁵² This image concerns many. They feel that being a Vietnam veteran has developed certain negative connotations, that it is mentioned much more than necessary: one claimed that the 'unstable guy' in a television show is always a Vietnam veteran.⁵³ Another felt that:

What is forgotten is that the Vietnam War was fought by a lot of average Dads. There is a portrayal that all the other wars were fought by average people, and that Vietnam was fought by a bunch of loose cannons.⁵⁴

While Vietnam is now mentioned and honoured in the context of other conflicts at events of remembrance, veterans still feel that they are treated as being somehow lesser in worth. Military legends such as those of the Anzacs of Gallipoli and the Western Front, and the Rats of Tobruk and the soldiers of Kokoda, have no equivalents in Vietnam, and therefore do not capture the imagination of the community in the same manner. Journalist Alan Ramsay has claimed that the legacy of Vietnam is that there are 'no glorious victories to immortalise, no heroic defeats to mythologise'.⁵⁵ One veteran claimed that whenever Vietnam is mentioned the images usually show a 'little girl with no skin running down the street, or a guy getting his head blown off ... so what hope have you got'.⁵⁶ A number of veterans voiced similar concerns about the images used to portray Vietnam in comparison to those of other wars, and all agreed that Vietnam veterans had been treated differently. One veteran described it as 'first and second world war people are sort of held up here [indicates a high level], and Vietnam veterans tread along behind basically'.⁵⁷

It has been said that the 'legacy of a war lasts about a century',⁵⁸ when all the participants and their dependents are gone and their memories are relegated to history.

Unfortunately, that also means that the voices of the participants of history are silent, and history is interpreted rather than remembered. Vietnam veterans are concerned that history will not be kind to their memory, or true to their experience. They fear that the sacrifices made for their country may be forgotten, or even worse, distorted by hindsight. Not one interviewee was unable or unwilling to answer the question 'how would you like history to remember the Vietnam War?' They knew exactly how it should be remembered, because it was their history. More than anything else, veterans want to be remembered as servicemen who went to war for their country. They want recognition for doing what their country asked of them. For most, it is no longer important who was right or wrong because 'it's over and there's nothing we can do about it',⁵⁹ but they do want the respect of their country.

I think we went there to do a job, and I think we did the job to the best of our ability.⁶⁰

My idea is that Vietnam is no different to any other [war] we've been involved in. No better and no worse [than] any other stupid war. I would like people to be more realistic about it.⁶¹

I'd like to think it would be remembered more kindly as far as the actual soldiers are concerned. I would like to think that we would be looked upon as having done the best job we could in difficult circumstances.⁶²

My worry would be that the coming generation will not even know what, where or why 504 gallant men died. It is important that we remind our younger generation that these soldiers were ordered to go and do a job by the government of the day, regardless of how they felt, and they did it with valour.⁶³

I'd like it to be remembered that the Australian forces that served there were very professional and fought well. And I'd like it remembered for the contribution that the National Servicemen made, because I think for people who were unlucky enough to have their marbles come out in a lottery, they served their country very proudly.⁶⁴

Eventually, it will be put into perspective. What dies with time of course, is the emotion.⁶⁵

As simple as not to forget those who served. It's just as simple as that. No big balah, no big write-up. Simply just not to forget us. Just don't forget us.⁶⁶

The Vietnam War provides an excellent example of events in the past that can benefit from oral history scholarship. The veterans interviewed all provided some unique facts or perspectives. Not one minute of any of the recordings could ever be considered wasted. Oral history provides the community with the right to have their say as to how events are remembered. It has the ability to give worth to the lives of those who may have felt disenfranchised by traditional history. Despite all the questions surrounding the reliability of the narrator, the power of the spoken word should never be underestimated. Memory may be fallible, facts may be questionable, but the human heart is never wrong. Ultimately, that is what oral sources provide. They fill in the gaps left by documents, tell untold stories, and the emotions expressed give history a heart and soul that no piece of paper can ever supply.

Those interviewed for this study served their country in a war made more difficult by doubts on the home front about the wisdom of the conflict. Three decades later, these veterans are still searching for their place in Australian history. Many claimed that they had come forward to tell their stories because they hoped it would help raise community understanding of their plight, not just in regard to health issues, but also as forgotten soldiers. They are not interested in sympathy: just respect. They were ordinary men with fairly average lives. They talked about their families, their interests and their everyday concerns. They were not armed, they were not dangerous and they were all grateful that someone showed interest in them. The only thing unusual about these men was that for one year three decades ago, they were willing to give their lives to serve their country, and whether it was right or wrong, they would like to be recognised and remembered for this contribution.

discussion in MI9 about the priority to be given to particular prisoners. Why should one merit more risks by O'Leary's helpers and sub-agents than another? Whatever we decided would never be popular with those who stayed behind'. It was decided that special steps would be taken where the prisoner was 'of exceptional value to the war effort because of his training or record of service [or] had already shown initiative and resources in evading capture or had worked for one of the escape lines'.

- 18 Neave (1971) and Dear (1997) account for the activities of Cole who was shot dead by French police in 1945. My brother remembers Griffin telling him that he had always been suspicious of this English agent. A brief biography of Bruce Dowding can be found on journalist Christopher Long's website at: www.christopherlong.co.uk/tape.garrow.html
- 19 A book based on the thesis has just been published by S Ottiss, *Silent Heroes: Downed Airmen and the French Underground*, University of Kentucky, 2001.
- 20 It has been suggested that Marcel Ophul's documentary film *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970) is the catalyst for revisionist studies of French resistance and collaboration. Historians Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, Knopf, New York, 1972; H. R. Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France: A Study of Ideas and Motivation in the Southern Zone, 1940-1942*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978; and Kedward, *Occupied France: Collaboration and Resistance, 1940-1944*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1985, have been major contributors to these studies. For feminist perspective, see R Halbreich, 'Women in the French Resistance', *Ex Post Facto*, vol 3, 1994; M Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998; M Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance*, Praeger, New York, 1986; and P Schwartz, 'Partisans and gender politics in Vichy France', *French Historical Studies*, vol 16, no 1, 1989, pp 126-152. For a discussion about the ambiguities and ambivalences separating witness testimony and memory from the traditional research of professional historians see H Diamond and C Gorrara's intriguing investigation of the controversy surrounding the unanswered questions plaguing the celebrated Resistance members Raymond and Lucie Aubrac: 'The Aubrac controversy', *History Today*, vol 51, no 3.
- 21 Article in Weekend Australian, June 23-24, 2001, p. 12, 'War trauma surfaces 55 years on'. 'Michael Robertson, the director of the Mayo-Wesley Centre for mental health at Taree in NSW, said veterans in their 80s were showing signs of late-onset post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) more than half a century after their war service ended'.

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- 1 Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There*, New York, 1981; Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*, New York, 1984.
- 2 It is probably no coincidence that more books began appearing from 1987, as that was the year of the Welcome Home Parade, which is popularly believed to be the turning point for attitudes towards the Vietnam War and veterans. Stuart Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam: Australian Voices*, Richmond, 1987. Other examples of oral histories of Australian veterans include: Gary McKay, *Vietnam Fragments: An Oral History of Australians at War*, St Leonards, 1992; Kenneth Maddock, *Memories of Vietnam*, Sydney, 1991.
- 3 Siobhan McHugh, *Minefields and Miniskirts: Australian Women and the Vietnam War*, Sydney, 1993. For critical acclaim see: Donald A. Ritchie, 'Minefields and Miniskirts: Australian Women and the Vietnam War (Review)', *The Oral History Review*, Summer-Fall 1999, p.171.
- 4 For example: Terry Burstall, *The Soldiers Story: The Battle at Xa Long Tan*, St Lucia, 1986; Lex McAulay, *The Battle of Coral*, Hawthorne, 1988.
- 5 Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, London, 1990; Peter Edwards, *A Nation at War: Australian Politics, society and diplomacy during the Vietnam War 1965-1975*, St Leonards, 1997; Ambrose Crowe, *The Battle After the War: The Story of Australia's Vietnam Veterans*, St Leonards, 1999.
- 6 I also had discussions with at least a dozen more which were not recorded because they took place unexpectedly at functions and the like.
- 7 Hamish Patterson, 'Vets' Views Sought', *Cairns Post*, 14 October 1999, p.19.
- 8 31 were Army, with 2 each from the Royal Australian Navy and the Royal Australian Air Force.

- 11 were National Service. These figures are reflective of service in Vietnam.
- 9 A nominal roll of Vietnam veterans was compiled by the Department of Veterans' Affairs before beginning the various veteran health studies as no comprehensive list had existed before. This is particularly useful, because although still rare in Australia, there has been an increase in recent years of people claiming to be veterans when they are not.
 - 10 Louise Douglas, Alan Roberts and Ruth Thompson, *Oral History: A Handbook*, Sydney, 1988, p.21.
 - 11 Peter H Liddle & Matthew J Richardson, 'Voices from the Past: An Evaluation of Oral History as a Source for Research into the Western Front Experience 1914-18', *Journal of Contemporary History*, October 1996, p.652.
 - 12 For a comprehensive discussion of this issue see: Donna J Spindel, 'Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Fall 1996, Web version available at Infotrac.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists*, Thousand Oaks, 1994, p.21.
 - 15 Vietnam Veteran Interview #36, 10 March 2000.
 - 16 Vietnam Veteran Interview #15, 20 October 1999.
 - 17 Vietnam Veteran Interview #1, 29 September 1999.
 - 18 Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The social construction of oral history*, Cambridge, 1992, p.66.
 - 19 Vietnam Veteran Interview #12, 19 October 1999.
 - 20 Ann Curthoys, 'Vietnam: Public Memory of an Anti-War Movement' in Darian-Smith and Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia*, pp.123-130.
 - 21 Vietnam Veteran Interview #8, 16 October 1999.
 - 22 Allesandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, Albany, 1991, p.2.
 - 23 Barbara Allen & William L. Montell, *From Memory to History: Using oral sources in local historical research*, Nashville, 1981, p.89.
 - 24 Vietnam Veteran Interview #27, 4 November 1999.
 - 25 Vietnam Veteran Interview #11, 18 October 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #12, 19 October 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #25, 1 November 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #26, 2 November 1999.
 - 26 Vietnam Veteran Interview #34, 9 January 2000.
 - 27 Vietnam Veteran Interview #31, 11 December 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #32, 13 December 1999.
 - 28 Veteran Interview #35, 18 February 2000.
 - 29 Vietnam Veteran Interview #33, 20 December 1999.
 - 30 Vietnam Veteran Interview #30, 27 November 1999.
 - 31 Crowe, *The Battle After the War*, p.10.
 - 32 Ibid.
 - 33 Vietnam Veteran Interview #38, 26 June 2000.
 - 34 McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, p.238.
 - 35 Vietnam Veteran Interview #35, 18 February 2000.
 - 36 Veteran Interview #27.
 - 37 Morgan Gallup Poll found in 1969 that 55% were against the war, up from 28% in 1965. Greg Langley, *A Decade of Dissent: Vietnam and the Conflict on the Australian Homefront*, North Sydney, 1992, pp.33 and 111.
 - 38 Vietnam Veteran Interview #16, 21 October 1999.
 - 39 Vietnam Veteran Interview #6, 15 October 1999.
 - 40 Vietnam Veteran Interview #19, 26 October 1999.
 - 41 Vietnam Veteran Interview #7, 16 October 1999.
 - 42 Australian historian, Ann Curthoys, believes that it is overstated because of an incorrect public memory that has developed. Curthoys, a former anti-war protester herself, says that she cannot remember any occurrences where any returned soldiers were jeered, booed or demonstrated against, except the woman who daubed herself with the red paint during a march of the returning 1st Battalion in 1966, and knows of no group that advocated such behaviour. However, this

argument is disingenuous: whether the actions of individuals were officially advocated by the more organised areas of the anti-war movement was of no consequence to servicemen who had just returned from war. There was no way to tell someone with genuine beliefs from anyone else, and the fact that the incidents might be isolated ones did not lessen their effect. Most of the incidents reported in the interviews were isolated ones, which is why they would not have appeared in the press. For a comprehensive examination of public memory and Vietnam see: Curthoys, 'Vietnam – Public Memory', pp.113-134.

- 43 Jeffrey Grey, 'Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran' in Peter Pierce, Jeffrey Grey and Jeff Doyle, *Vietnam Days: Australia and the Impact of Vietnam*, Ringwood, 1991, pp.77-78.
- 44 Allen and Montell, *From Memory to History*, pp.76-77.
- 45 Vietnam Veteran Interview #11, 18 October 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #12, 19 October 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #25, 1 November 1999; Vietnam Veteran Interview #26, 2 November 1999.
- 46 The other aspect that made the stories more believable was that there were subtle differences in each relating of the story. The facts remained fairly constant, but interpretations of the event were different with each individual, reducing the possibility of a created group memory.
- 47 Vietnam Veteran Interview #2, 5 October 1999.
- 48 Veteran Interview #12.
- 49 Vietnam Veteran Interview #13, 20 October 1999.
- 50 Vietnam Veteran Interview #39, 14 July 2000.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Veteran Interview #32.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Veteran Interview #34.
- 55 Alan Ramsay, 'Vietnam – a legacy of denial', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 May 2000, www.smh.com.au/news/0005/27/text/features02.html.
- 56 Vietnam Veteran Interview #6, 15 October 1999.
- 57 Veteran Interview #17, 21 October 1999.
- 58 Grey, 'Vietnam, Anzac and the veteran', p.92.
- 59 Vietnam Veteran Interview #37, 13 March 2000.
- 60 Veteran Interview #1.
- 61 Veteran Interview #6.
- 62 Veteran Interview #13.
- 63 Veteran Interview #29.
- 64 Veteran Interview #35.
- 65 Veteran Interview #5, 14 October 1999.
- 66 Vietnam Veteran Interview #14, 20 October 1999.

* Thirty-five veterans were interviewed: four were interviewed twice therefore making a total of thirty-nine interviews.

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- 1 Ruth Padel, *New York Times Book Review*, May 16, 1999, p 15.
- 2 Matthew Steven interview, Op. Cit.
- 3 Michael Fitzgerald, *Time International*, July 27, 1998, v.150 n. 48, p. 61.
- 4 Matthew Steven interview, Op. Cit.
- 5 Charles Bean, *Official history of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Vol. VII, H.S. Gullett, pp. 709-711.
- 6 A Hyslop, *Australian Cultural History*, #16, 1997-98, pp 60-
- 7 Manning Clark, *A History of Australia*, Vol VI, Melbourne, 1986, p 166.
- 8 'In a Working Forest' contained in Les Murray, *The Quality of Sprawl*, Sydney 1999, pp. 91 -120.
- 9 Studs Terkel, *Hard Times*, New York, 1970. See especially the section 'Hard Travelin', pp. 44-79.