

Vietnam War Veterans Memorial Day Service

Tuesday, 18 August 2015

RSL Memorial Rose Garden & Wall of Remembrance, RSL
Cockburn Sub- Branch

Frederick Street, Hamilton Hill

Distinguished guests, Veterans, Members of the Australian Defence Force, ladies and gentlemen.

Today brings us together to commemorate the contribution of young men to the Vietnam War at a time when involvement in the war itself was a hotly debated topic in Australia, the United States of America and other anti – communist countries.

As we know, casualties were high on both sides with over one million dead, over two million wounded and tens of thousands of others estranged when returning to their homelands by a confused and apprehensive community that had supported or opposed the war throughout its long and arduous duration.

Terms such as the Second Indochina War, the Resistance War against America, the American War, the Colonial War, The People's Army of Vietnam, The Tet Offensive, The Paris Peace Accord, the Vietnam Conflict and others are probably not widely known to today's generation.

However for those involved and those at home at the time will vividly recall how those references invaded our newspapers, our airwaves and added to the homeland debate about the war.

The Vietnam War impacted on me in different ways:

Firstly, there was the Notice that my mate received advising of his 'call up'. We were professional cray fishermen at the time and so it was this somewhat scruffy looking individual who left our small community to head off for training and eventually war.

As we exchanged goodbyes my long haired, unshaven and unkempt mate quietly slipped out of the small community we lived in – just 32 of us; now it was 31.

He returned two years later almost unrecognisable, short hair, shaven and neatly dressed – he had survived his contribution to the war effort.

However within a few weeks he was to lose his life on the sea off our coast – his body would be found washed up on the shoreline that he had fought to protect.

Secondly, I had waited for the draw of the numbered marbles myself. As I opened the envelope and slid the enclosed card out and read the carefully typed words:

Commonwealth of Australia

Department of Labour and National Service

National Service Registration Office Perth 6000

Dear Sir,

This is to advise you that you have been granted indefinite deferment of your liability to render national service, and consequently, under present arrangements you will not be called up.

You also have permission under Section 56 of the National Service Act to leave Australia should you wish to do so.

Please keep this notice as evidence of your indefinite deferment and permission to leave Australia.

Yours faithfully

Signed NW Robertson, Registrar

I know my Mother constantly harassed me to carry the card on me everywhere I went in case I was approached by the 'authorities', such was her anxiety that I could be called up and 'taken away'.

I imagine many Mothers felt that same anxiety less their sons be taken off to war – well we know that many thousands were – some made the ultimate sacrifice.

Finally, I know many Vietnam Veterans who went away to war or completed their national service training within Australia.

I can best sum up their contributions to the defence of Australia and their direct involvement in the Vietnam War by a visit I made to the Vietnam Memorial Pavilion in Kings Park several years ago.

Standing in front of the Memorial I gazed out on a blue sky, felt the light breeze on my face, admired the finely manicured greens lawns, the splash of colour from the flower gardens, listened to the birds singing in the nearby trees, heard the children laughing and playing in the water playground, saw their parents nearby watching their loved ones taking those risks that will turn them into the young men and women of tomorrow, felt the change in air as the sun began to set and the children return to their parent's arms, saw them pack up and head for home.

I turned to reflect on the 61 names engraved on black marble – they too would have experienced those childhood days of blue skies, time with their parents, laughing and playing, heading for home – day done.

Their names will forever be held in our hearts as will all that returned home – with each passing year their contributions, whether in war or in preparedness for war, gain a special meaning.

Lest we forget.