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<title>Vietnam War, LGBTQ+ Veterans</title>

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<intro><p>The postwar experiences of those who fought in this war from the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.</p></intro>

<p>One challenge when looking to history has been the silences surrounding LGBTQ+ military service, both in the records and also from veterans themselves. Work on World War II (1939–1945) shows that LGBTQ+ people served in all theaters of war and came from all walks of life. The war was a formative experience for these men and women, as it was for that entire generation. Because so many men and women served in all combatant nations, not surprisingly many members of the homophile movements of the 1950s and 1960s were veterans. An even larger percentage of them remained guarded about their sexuality, though, whether choosing to marry and start families, to visit public places to cruise for sex (“beats” in Australian parlance), or to live quiet lives in relationships. Indeed, one of the national presidents of Australia’s premier veterans’ organization, the Returned and Services League, was a World War II veteran with a same-sex partner; this came out only posthumously when there was a fight over his will. Much the same silence surrounds veterans of the Korean War (1950–1953) and Malayan Emergency (1950-60).</p>

# Medical Issues

The Vietnam War affected a different generation and was the first conflict in which societies seriously grappled with not only the physical scars of war but also the mental and emotional traumas plaguing veterans. LGBTQ+ veterans faced trials common to all Vietnam War veterans, yet in many ways their stories diverged from the dominant Vietnam veteran narrative. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a common challenge experienced by many Vietnam veterans from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, although there are differences in individual veterans' symptoms and how the nations' veterans' administrations responded. LGBTQ+ veterans, like straight and cisgender (those whose gender identity aligns with their sex at birth) personnel, often turned to alcohol, experienced flashbacks, and were prone to fits of anger. Veterans who were trying to repress or hide their homosexuality or gender identity only compounded the mental distress.

The majority of LGBTQ+ service personnel who received honorable discharges retained their entitlements to pensions and medical services. Even so, many seeking medical treatment chose not to disclose their sexuality for fear of being discriminated against, and for decades the support services did not cater to the different needs of LGBTQ+ veterans. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the veterans' administrations have become more attuned to the needs of LGB veterans. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, as there has been an increase in transgender visibility globally, so, too, have veterans' establishments had to consider transgender needs. In the United States, a 2011 Veterans Health Administration directive mandated medically necessary care for transgender veterans. In Australia and New Zealand there have not been transgender-specific directives from the respective departments of veterans' affairs, but

antidiscrimination legislation since 2013 and 1993, respectively, protect transgender veterans' rights to health services.</p>

## <h1>Service Bans and Activism</h1>

<p>Many Vietnam veterans stayed in the armed forces after the war, where they had to continue living a closeted double life. In Australia, which did not have a tradition of rights-based legal challenges, there are no known cases of service members challenging the ban on LGB service until 1990. (The government lifted the bans on LGB service in November 1992 and on transgender service in September 2010.) In the 1970s and 1980s the few gay and lesbian rights organizations in Australia and New Zealand focused primarily on law reform, and Vietnam veterans did not play significant roles in these groups. In the United States, though, there was a period of gay and lesbian activism in the mid-1970s that targeted the military establishment. The most famous challenge to the ban came from Leonard Matlovich, an Air Force sergeant. Matlovich did three tours of duty in Vietnam, was awarded a Bronze Cross and Purple Heart, and was discharged in 1975 when he came out to his superior officer. Matlovich appeared on the cover of <i>Time</i> magazine and had a high-profile battle with the Air Force, which he settled in 1980. Matlovich died of AIDS in 1988. The epitaph on his tombstone famously reads: "When I was in the military they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one." Matlovich's high-profile example was the exception, rather than the norm; Vietnam veterans largely were not involved in American activism against the LGB military ban.</p>

<p>Most LGBTQ+ Vietnam veterans in all three countries avoided both veterans' and gay rights activism. Of course, some did become involved in grassroots movements, and this is most

discernible during the AIDS epidemic, which took the lives of many gay Vietnam veterans. For instance, one of the cofounders of the New York organization Gay Men's Health Crisis was the decorated Vietnam veteran Paul Popham (1941–1987). Ken Jones, portrayed in the television miniseries *When We Rise* (2017), fought in the 1970s for the gay liberation movement in San Francisco to be inclusive of people of color. Jones became the first black person to chair what was then called the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade and Celebration Committee, worked with homeless LGBTQ+ young people, and pushed for needle exchange during the AIDS epidemic. The Australian Army veteran David Bradford was a sexual health doctor who was running Melbourne's public sexual health clinic during the early years of the AIDS epidemic. Bradford treated patients and also sat on numerous community, state, and national bodies that formulated Australia's public health response to the epidemic.

## Commemorative Events

Many LGBTQ+ veterans had little interest in participating in events commemorating the Vietnam War. This is partly attributable to the homophobia of key veterans' organizations from the 1970s to the 1990s, such as the Returned and Services League in Australia. It is also not surprising that national narratives and commemorations of war avoided the topics of homosexuality and transgenderism. In early 1982 a group of disgruntled ex-servicemen in Melbourne, including the Vietnam veteran Max Campbell, formed the Gay Ex-Services Association (GESA). GESA planned to lay a wreath at Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance on Anzac Day, which is Australia and New Zealand's public holiday to commemorate military service, past and present. The ribbon accompanying the wreath read: "For all our brothers and sisters who died during the wars. Gay Ex-Servicemen's Association." A group of five GESA

members climbed the steps of the shrine, but the guards refused them access and escorted the men off the premises. Max Campbell alone returned on Anzac Day in 1983 and 1984 and successfully laid wreaths on behalf of GESA. GESA folded shortly thereafter.</p>

<p>The United States and New Zealand did not have similar moments of LGBTQ+ service commemorations, but those nations, too, excluded LGBTQ+ people from dominant narratives of military participation. LGBTQ+ veterans of more recent conflicts such as the Gulf War, Iraq War, and Afghanistan, as well as peacekeeping missions such as those in Somalia and East Timor, have been leading the push for LGBTQ+ inclusion in the respective militaries. The first known post-Vietnam LGBTQ+ veterans' group in the United States was the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Veterans of America (GLBVA), founded in 1990 and renamed American Veterans for Equal Rights in 2005. Whereas GESA in Melbourne had focused on commemorations and social meet-ups, the GLBVA focused primarily on defending servicepeople under threat of discharge and advocated for the repeal of the infamous “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. Transgender veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan have also been playing active roles contesting the ban on transgender service in the United States.</p>

## <h1>Partner Benefits</h1>

<p>One final topic of significance for LGBTQ+ Vietnam veterans is partner benefits. When an LGBTQ+ service member died in the Vietnam War, there would be no notification for same-sex partners, whose identities were unknown to military authorities. That said, oral histories from the United States and Australia suggest that rarely did service members have same-sex partners when they went to Vietnam. Later in life, though, when many LGBTQ+ veterans did enter into lasting relationships, federal laws in both Australia and the United States denied access to partner

benefits, including partner service pensions, counseling services, and education assistance. The Australian government passed legislation in 2009 to remove eighty-five areas of discrimination against same-sex couples. Among those reforms was the extension of veterans' partner benefits to same-sex couples. In the United States, when the Supreme Court struck down part of the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013, spouses of LGBTQ+ veterans gained access to the same family entitlements.

Many LGBTQ+ Vietnam veterans remain guarded about their sexuality or gender identity, and many "out" veterans have long since cut ties to their military compatriots. One significant silence is also around South Vietnamese LGBTQ+ veterans; as homosexuality is still culturally taboo for many Vietnamese from the war generation, studies into both LGBTQ+ service and South Vietnamese refugee experiences have yet to come across LGBTQ+ veterans. From a 2015 oral history interview with Noah Riseman, the words of the Australian veteran David Bradford are a fitting way to summarize openly LGBTQ+ veterans' reflections on military service: "I think that LGBTI people can make an equal contribution, and that their contribution is as good and as solid as anything, any contribution made by heterosexual people."

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