

Equality in the Ranks: The Lives of Aboriginal Vietnam Veterans

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The 1960s in Australia are often remembered as times of upheaval, social change, youth rebellion and activism.¹ The Vietnam War and its impact on civil society have traditionally been central to studies of the 1960s, and in recent years the significance of the fight for Aboriginal civil rights has also emerged as a key social movement in the 1960s historical narrative.² If race and war were two themes permeating the 1960s, then one area overlooked by historians is their intersection: Aboriginal service in Vietnam. Australian Indigenous people have a long history of military service in Australia dating back to at least the Boer War. Although the Australian Defence Force (ADF) did not record the race or ethnicity of its members until 1993, it is estimated that at least 400 Aboriginal people served in the First World War and at least 3,000 Aboriginal people and 850 Torres Strait Islanders served in the Second World War. These estimates only include active service; they do not account for the countless men and women who participated in the war effort on the home front in various capacities.³ For post-Second World War conflicts such as Korea, the Malayan Emergency and Vietnam, it is more difficult to estimate the number of Indigenous participants. The Australian War Memorial has identified at least 260 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans of Vietnam. Though this number is admittedly incomplete, it represents a hitherto under-studied demographic. All of the identified veterans are men; only forty-three Australian women in the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps served in Vietnam, and none have been identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.⁴

As in previous conflicts, Indigenous servicemen were integrated with other troops and served alongside them. For non-Indigenous personnel, this was often the first time that they interacted with Aboriginal people. Non-Indigenous veterans have described their service with

Aboriginal servicemen favourably and have argued that Aboriginal people were treated as equals. Retired non-Indigenous officer Colonel O.M. Carroll writes, “I would make the point strongly that the men I am referring to were first and foremost Australian soldiers. There is no discrimination in the Australian Army on account of a man’s background, his race, his colour or his creed.”⁵ Carroll’s statement has echoes among the testimonies of Aboriginal veterans, yet Carroll still makes these observations from a position of white privilege.⁶ Only Indigenous people themselves can verify the veracity of Carroll’s observations about their lives in the armed forces, their motivations to serve and the impact of military service on their lives.

This article thus uses oral history interviews to offer some preliminary analysis about the lives of Indigenous Vietnam veterans. This research is based on eight interviews conducted by the author with Vietnam veterans or their families, as well as the oral and written testimonies of another ten Aboriginal Vietnam veterans. Many of the excerpts in this article are long quotations, allowing the veterans to speak for themselves. This methodology aligns with best practice when using Indigenous oral testimonies so as not to editorialise and to preserve the Indigenous speaker’s voice. The Aboriginal ex-servicemen are from across Australia, though a larger number of them come from Queensland and Western Australia. Their locations are indicative of both the more organised Indigenous veterans’ communities in those states, as well as the larger concentration of Aboriginal servicemen from those states.⁷ The author contacted the interviewees through a variety of networks: Indigenous ex-servicemen’s networks, local community contacts and advertisements in the *Koori Mail* and the *National Indigenous Times*. The other testimonies are available from a small number of interviews with Aboriginal Vietnam veterans held at the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), an Aboriginal veteran in the documentary *I Hope the War Will Be Over Soon*, and testimonies published in Alick Jackomos and Derek

Fowell's collection *Forgotten Heroes: Aborigines at War from the Somme to Vietnam*. The testimonies in this article by no means represent a uniform account of the war or its impact on Aboriginal Vietnam veterans. Indeed, that the majority of these veterans currently reside in major cities or regional communities suggests that other Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander veterans in rural or remote communities may have different histories. Furthermore, all of these men served in the Army instead of the other services, so their testimonies are more indicative of the Army Vietnam experience rather than the Navy. Even so, the Army was the largest service involved in the Vietnam War and has traditionally had a larger number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen than the other services.

There can never be uniform Aboriginal Vietnam veterans' experience, just as there is no homogeneous non-Indigenous veterans' history. Yet the fact that Aboriginal people across Australia confronted similar policies, practices and opportunities between the Second World War and the Vietnam era suggest that these veterans constitute a representative sample of Aboriginal Vietnam veterans of the Army. There are a stark number of parallel themes permeating several veterans' testimonies, and this article examines some of the more pronounced subjects: motivations to join the Army, sentiments of equality within the Army, witnessing American racism, an ambivalent return to Australia then professional links to Aboriginal affairs later in life. Many of their experiences are not dissimilar to non-Indigenous Vietnam veterans – particularly their memories of Vietnam, their alienated homecomings and the lingering impacts of post-traumatic stress disorder. This convergence of narratives reflects oral historian Alistair Thomson's observations about how public memory and national narratives may shape veterans' oral histories of war.⁸ Such warnings do not mean we should disregard the common portions of veterans' testimonies. Rather, we should be aware of the impact of popular memory and take it into account when analysing oral testimonies of war. In the context of Indigenous service in Vietnam, though, the hitherto lack of public discourse

suggests that there is less scope for public memory to shape Aboriginal veterans' testimonies. Unlike non-Indigenous veterans, Aboriginal Vietnam veterans had to confront life as Aboriginal men after the war. Diverging from the dominant Vietnam veterans' narrative, the skills they acquired in the Army in conjunction with their newfound self-confidence made Aboriginal Vietnam veterans apt community leaders in a variety of capacities.

Veterans' Backgrounds and Motivations to Serve

Like most Vietnam veterans, the majority of Aboriginal men who served in Vietnam were born in the immediate post-Second World War period. This was a time when assimilation policies dominated Indigenous affairs in all states and child removal was widespread.⁹ Some Vietnam veterans were themselves members of the Stolen Generations. Those men faced childhood hardships including institutionalisation in boys' homes, physical and mental abuse and emotionless foster relationships.¹⁰ Even many men who were lucky enough not to have been removed have memories of hiding from the Welfare as children, fearing removal.¹¹ The links between child removal and the armed forces are an area of growing research because the institutionalisation experienced by removed children – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – made them suited to the regimentation of military life, and a large number of removed children ultimately did join the armed forces.¹²

For the majority of interviewees' childhoods, though, their parents did not come "under the Act" and consequently they were fortunate enough to remain connected with their families. All attended school but left at age 14. Canvassing several dozen service records of Aboriginal Vietnam veterans, the most common education level listed on enrolment forms is "Reasonable Primary". This was not uncommon among non-Indigenous Vietnam servicemen as well. The majority of service records list Aboriginal servicemen's previous occupations as "labourer". The interviewees indicate that they laboured in various industries – railroads,

forestry, farm labour, meatworks and construction. Some had white friends, and others recall that Southern European migrants tended to be more accepting of Aboriginal people. This sentiment has been echoed in the biographies of other Aboriginal people who grew up during the assimilation era.¹³ All recalled experiencing some racism in their youth, such as taunts at school, police harassment and segregation in public spaces. But the veterans do not dwell on specific incidents of racism. Veteran Dick Bligh summarises the attitude of several Aboriginal veterans towards childhood racism: “I do [remember] but, but it never bothered me and it’s, it doesn’t bother me now you know, ah it was something that happened back in that era ah, and ah yeah it, as far as I’m concerned it can stay back in that era you know, because there’s nothing you can do about it you know, but it happened yeah.”¹⁴

How and why the Aboriginal men enlisted in the armed forces varied, which suggests that like non-Indigenous men, everyone had his own personal reasons to join. Even so, a few common threads are discernible among the testimonies. For instance, Ron Wenitong entered the Army because it was one of the few opportunities for an Aboriginal man living in Gladstone, QLD. He states, “[t]here was nothing else. All the young kids, my two cousins were both in the Army, one was in the SAS, I don’t know what the other was in and it was just a way out. You know, there was a job; you got fed; you got a roof over your head basically that’s all.”¹⁵ Frank Mallard was working in rural Yuna, Western Australia, and similarly saw the Army as a chance to earn a better wage:

Well you know I’d been working on the farms and uh I was getting £5 a week and my keep [laughing] and believe it or not, the military was offering £22 a fortnight and travel. They didn’t, at that stage, they didn’t say to you that where your travel was going to be but you get to travel overseas and I thought that was a good uh, a good idea so I um, so I joined up uh in ’62.¹⁶

Phil Prosser, also from Western Australia, says: “I made up my mind that I was going to use the Army, or the services, to benefit me at the better part of my life. Cos to me it was a way from getting away from this welfare mentality that you could see what was happening in the terms of the old Native Welfare days. The way they treated Aboriginal people or Aboriginal people were treated. And so to me it was a way out.”¹⁷ Dick Bligh claims that he accidentally signed up for the Army when responding to an advertisement he saw in the Post. He then filled out the application forms with a friend’s assistance, and when he was summoned to training he went.¹⁸ George Bostock also joined on a whim; he was at the employment office in Sydney, and the Army recruitment office happened to be next door. He thought it would be a good job opportunity that would keep him out of trouble.¹⁹ Bob Blair does not even remember why he signed up for the Army. He says, “I just signed up and that was it.”²⁰

Some veterans such as John Schnaars entered the Army through the national service scheme, which had a complex policy in relation to Aboriginal people. The Menzies Government passed an amended *National Service Act* in November 1964, reinstating what had been a defunct scheme since 1959. Almost all men aged twenty were required to register for national service, and documents regularly asserted the equal applicability of national service.²¹ Despite such claims to national service as an egalitarian scheme, from the beginning Aboriginal people were the only civilian British subjects not required to register. Section 18 of the *National Service Act* excluded “aboriginal natives of Australia, as defined by the regulations, other than a class of aboriginal natives as so defined that is specified in the regulations.”²² The definition of Aboriginal people caused problems and confusion for Aboriginal men of mixed descent. Glen James of Victoria recalls:

I was twenty when I got a notice to say I was called up for National Service.

Then I got a notice to say I didn’t need to go because I was Aboriginal. Then I got a third notice to say I had to go after all. I tell you, that put a damp outlook

on the whole thing right from the start. I was going, then I wasn't going and then I was going again, and they'd raised this question of Aboriginality right at the start.²³

Although under the law Aboriginal people who fit the prescribed government definition were not *required* to register for national service, they could *voluntarily* sign up for national service. Most of the Aboriginal veterans conscripted through national service have not indicated why they signed up, but at least one testified that he enrolled for national service because he considered it a matter of equal rights to be eligible.²⁴ John Schnaars says that at first the Department of Labour and National Service knocked back his registration for national service:

Yep. Got a letter back saying that they didn't want me, no, no explanation, so I wrote them another letter then saying, well this is gonna look good in the media, I'm, I'm volunteering for National Service and you're knockin' me back and you're forcing others to go in that don't want to go in. So it was about two to three weeks later got another letter saying, go for your medical. And that was that.²⁵

Schnaars' testimony only further problematises the inconsistencies and confusion over Aboriginal people and national service.

Several Aboriginal veterans acknowledge family connections to the Army, though few indicated it was their motivating factor to join. Family reactions to the men's enlistment varied, with male family members generally more supportive than females. Frank Mallard recalls:

Well my Mum was not all that happy to sign the paperwork, uh I took it home to her and I said you know I really, I really want to, to join the Army. And she was saying you know it's a dangerous job and that you can get killed there, I

said well you can get killed anywhere you know. Life is like that, I mean you can get hit by a bus or fall under a tractor or whatever it, on the farm so what's the difference? She said well because people in the Army, they use weapons and you've gotta go to war and – I said well we're not at war, you know. But she said it could happen again, and of course it did but uh you know. I survived it all.²⁶

Mallard's mother's reaction is quite striking because his family has a long history of military service in Australia.²⁷ On the other extreme, though, was Jeffrey Duroux, whose parents both encouraged him to enlist. Jeff's sister Dianne Gage remarks: “[s]o, being young I think Dad have had a word to him and Mum, you know get yourself together, do something with your life, join the Army. You know, and ‘course you know people thought the Army would be a good discipline, good um, motivated, keep you under control. So maybe they thought he needed those things, so he did that.”²⁸ For all of the Aboriginal men who served in Vietnam, what was clear was that they were continuing a tradition of Aboriginal service to Australia, and despite some misgivings, they received the support of family and community to serve their country.

Race and the Army in Vietnam

Almost all of the interviewed Aboriginal men served not only in Vietnam, but also in places such as Borneo and Malaya. Most underwent basic training at Kapooka before being sent to further corps training. There was not necessarily any corps that was more or less favourable to Aboriginal servicemen. Veterans describe Army life positively; they responded well to the discipline and regimentation of the Army, their previous work as labourers made them physically fit, they participated in sport and they easily made friends with other soldiers.

For Aboriginal veterans the issue of racism in the Army was quite straightforward: racism was almost non-existent in the Army. Bob Blair firmly declares: “I could not even think of one incident with racism in the Army, not one. I can’t even ever recall anything about being sort of called Black or whatever the case is.”²⁹ Ron Wenitong similarly affirms “No I didn’t find any at all. And, and your Drill Sergeants and everything they were straight down the line, yeah nothing.”³⁰ Frank Mallard makes it clear that Army norms and the nature of soldiery left no room for racism:

Everyone – and I think you’ll find that in, in uh the Australian Army anyway, there’s a professionalism of the soldiers is that it’s not your colour or your, of your skin or whatever that that makes you the person that you are but it’s the fact that we all trained together and we all rely upon one another to, for our safety and uh, for someone to watch our back. So everyone was uh, was sort of accepting that fact that it didn’t matter where you came from or whatever.³¹

Other testimonies suggest that racial discrimination was more present in some sectors of the Army than others. John Schnaars and George Bostock remember isolated incidents early in their training, such as officers using terms like “Black bastards”. They and other Aboriginal soldiers confronted these comments early on, and the taunting stopped. Bostock says, “[s]ee these blokes here we were all in, in, in the army together and we were on the same thing. So Blackfellas were, were there. We were in the football team and the boxing teams, ah, you know, so, ah, and so it wasn’t, you know, nipped it in the bud and then that was it.”³² Dick Bligh recalls racism being common during basic training at Kapooka, but that it disappeared shortly thereafter. He states:

It was [common], it was. Even the instructors that were at Kapooka would you know, you know race me abuse, but yeah, you got used to, you used to it. Well I wouldn’t say that you got use to it, you had to accept it because if you

didn't accept it, you would be you know, out on your head, you know. Because you couldn't punish people, you know, particularly if they were NCOs or officers (ha, ha). But I guess once I left Kapooka and went to a place called Ingleburn to do my corps training, ah it was totally different. You know, it was totally different. The people that were there were more professional than the instructors and ah you know, it was your corps training, you know, I was an infantry soldier and ah you had to concentrate on, well they had to concentrate on training people and you had to concentrate of you know, absorbing all that training, so yeah it was pretty tough.³³

Other examples of racism derive not from the Army, but the Navy. Dave Cook briefly served in the Navy before being discharged for failing his examination on completion of the Recruit Disciplinary course.³⁴ Cook alleges, though, that his short time in the Navy entailed regular confrontations with a racist officer. Cook joined the Army shortly thereafter, where he asserts “[t]here was absolutely none [racism].”³⁵ Testimony from an Aboriginal Korean War veteran suggests similar problems of racism prevented him from joining the Navy, and historian Jason Sears argues that “[f]or many years the navy was regarded as the most difficult of the three Australian services for non-Europeans to enter.”³⁶ This is not to say that the Navy was uniformly racist. Naval veteran Brian White states, “[n]o matter what walk of life you came from or what your background was you found brotherhood in the Navy.”³⁷ The overarching theme permeating the testimonies thus suggests that while certain sectors of the military may have been more prone to racial taunts, the structures on the whole promoted an egalitarian spirit where racism was not the norm. Moreover, many Aboriginal soldiers stood up for themselves, and early intervention succeeded in dissipating racial discrimination.

Comments about all soldiers needing each other's support rang true in Vietnam, where both Indigenous and non-Indigenous servicemen alike experienced the horrors of war.

Most of the interviewees did not feel comfortable discussing their combat experiences and the atrocities they witnessed, though they did dwell on incidents when friends died. They were more prone to discuss memories of friends, life in the base at Nui Dat or the trouble they got into in Vung Tau. The interpersonal relationships with other soldiers form a significant component of veterans' histories. One famous friendship was between Aboriginal soldier Billy Coolburra and non-Indigenous serviceman Snow Wilson. They were so close that they were nicknamed twins even though their appearances were strikingly different. At one stage Snow Wilson met the visiting Prime Minister, Harold Holt. Holt asked where his twin brother was, and did not realise that his "twin" was actually an Aboriginal man.³⁸ Every testimony recalls the striking of close friendships among Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous servicemen, highlighting the equal nature of life in Vietnam. Bob Blair encapsulates the spirit in his statement: "[b]ut I think the mateship was the thing that got you."³⁹

Notably, one area where many Aboriginal veterans did observe racial tensions in Vietnam was in the American Army. Even though the United States military had been officially desegregated since 1948, several Aboriginal testimonies describe Black-white tensions and segregation within the American Army. Dave Cook observed:

There, uh, in the 173rd Airborne they had Black lines and white lines. The whitefellas lived here, the Blackfellas lived here. The Blackfellas ate in this mess and the whitefellas ate in this mess. And here we are in our outfit, we had three Aboriginals: one Thursday Islander, me, and Billy Coolburra, who come from Arnhem Land. Even the Australians were shocked at the racism that it was because they've never seen it so blatant. And it became apparent that they - the 173rd - I believe comes from the South of, uh, USA, and they were shocking racists.⁴⁰

Frank Mallard, who served in the same Field Troop as Cook, similarly describes American racism:

But they did treat their uh Hispanics and their Negroes with uh, with contempt. They were always calling them by name and whatever, there was always some sort of a fight going on within their ranks and we found it difficult to understand that because we – as I said, we were professional soldiers who got on with the job and it didn't matter what your colour or creed was, you looked after one another cos that was what you were trained to do. We couldn't understand how the Americans sort of had a dislike for one another and they were all in the military.⁴¹

Ron Wenitong describes segregation practiced in several areas of the American Army:

I got malaria and they flew me out to the 36 Evacuation Hospital which was an American hospital in Vung Tau. And the one thing I noticed I was the only Black man in the, in the hospital so I said – because there were a lot of negroes - this is the thing that really stuck in my mind – “Where are all the negroes servicemen who are injured, wounded, sick?” And they didn't bring to that hospital, which I found, I mean it was really – I don't know what happened there. But I did notice when we did do operations with the Americans 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment, the tank crews, the ones I saw and the personnel, Armoured Personnel Carrier crews, they were either all Black or all white, they weren't, they were segregated – is that the right word?⁴²

Americans even segregated their morgues, which was a salient observation for Aboriginal servicemen.⁴³

The anecdotal testimonies above are supported in the historical literature about Black Americans in the Vietnam War. Historian James Westheider has described situations where

bigoted officers used their positions of authority to impose excessive discipline or obstruct promotions.⁴⁴ Westheider describes Confederate flags flying in Vietnam and graffiti on latrine walls and in enlisted men's clubs with sayings such as "I'd rather kill a nigger instead of gook."⁴⁵ Reports of verbal racial abuse were common, with terms such as "spear chucker," "boy," "spook" and "nigger" regularly reported among Black Vietnam veterans, though incidents of physical racial violence were rare in combat units.⁴⁶ From the period after approximately 1968, the rise of Black Power in the United States as a response to racism also infiltrated the armed forces. Racial tensions in Vietnam even erupted in race riots between white and Black Americans. It was not until new programs designed to stamp out racism in the armed forces emerged in the early 1970s that the racial tensions eased in the American military.⁴⁷

Despite witnessing racism against Black Americans, the Aboriginal servicemen did not experience it themselves at the hands of Americans. One reason is that most Australians had limited contact with American servicemen in Vietnam. But even those Indigenous men who served early in the war with the American 173rd Airborne were not targets of American racism. Dave Cook states, "[t]hey didn't treat me different. You know what I mean? Because, probably, because I was another country, uh, from another country, and that was ok I suppose. Cos they probably knew then that I couldn't take anything that belonged to them. You know what I mean?"⁴⁸ Graham Atkinson says that Americans did not understand what a Koorie person was, and suggests this was why they did not discriminate against Aboriginal people.⁴⁹ Frank Mallard speculates that American ignorance of Australian race relations led to their non-prejudicial attitudes.⁵⁰ Billy Coolburra sometimes found himself acting as a mediator between white and Black American soldiers. He remarks, "I told him [American soldier] I was a full blood Aboriginal and I said we should be making friends because we

never knew when we would have to depend on each other. The next night we all got together and sang songs together and started talking about our homes.”⁵¹

Several Aboriginal testimonies indicate that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian servicemen felt more comfortable with Black rather than white American soldiers. Darryl Wallace relays a story when he chose to play ping-pong with a Black American who used to spend his Rest and Recuperation time with the Australian Special Air Service Regiment (SAS). When they were in the same mess as the Americans, he and the other Australians used to sit in the Black wing of the mess instead of the white wing. White Americans questioned him and other Australian soldiers, and he responded, “I know I’m in the right mess, mate!... Because I’m a Blackfella.”⁵² George Bostock recalls a similar anecdote when drinking with some Americans in Vung Tau. He writes:

One of our blokes had noticed a black American sitting by himself and went over and asked him to join us. He was reluctant at first, but after some coaxing decided to join us. When the other Americans at the table saw him coming over they all stood up and left. You would have had to be living on the moon not to know anything about the racial problems that existed between black and white Americans, but that was the first time I had seen it close up.⁵³

Bostock also writes about another occasion when there was a brawl in Vung Tau involving Australians, New Zealanders and Americans in response to a racist remark white Americans made against Black Americans. He writes, “[t]he black American said they couldn’t believe what had happened. They never thought they would see the day when whiteboys [sic] would fight for them over racial remarks.”⁵⁴ Hewitt Whyman similarly commented on how Black Americans were confused by the fact that Australians tended to socialise more with them than the white Americans.⁵⁵ Though most Aboriginal testimonies sympathise with the discrimination suffered by Black Americans, Graham Atkinson expressed disdain for both

Black and white Americans. He considered all Americans to be arrogant, but what bothered him most was that “they sort of looked down- what used to piss me off- they used to look down on the Vietnamese, I mean the Blacks, and even more so than whites, and even the Australians. Jesus, so ethnocentric.”⁵⁶

These testimonies all highlight the racial complexities at play in Vietnam and serve as a vivid juxtaposition between the Americans and Australians. For Aboriginal Australians, who were treated as equals in the Army, witnessing American racism both heightened their awareness of racial discrimination while concurrently reinforcing their sentiments of equality in the Australian military. Yet the problematic racialisation of the enemy could cause unease among Aboriginal servicemen. Aboriginal veteran Geoff Shaw states:

We shouldn't have been there in the first instance because basically it was a civil war amongst people from Vietnam. I shouldn't have been there because they were Indigenous people such as myself – who belongs to the Aboriginal race. They were as poor as us, but they owned the land where us Aboriginal people owned the land but it was taken off us. Some of the things that I've seen over there makes me think that they're just as poor as us as far as building. Where we had to build humpies, I seen buildings over there made out of sheets of Colt 45 and Schlitz beer cans and all those American beers that were drunk over in Vietnam.⁵⁷

Life after Vietnam

If the Vietnam experience for Aboriginal people mirrored that of their non-Indigenous comrades, the post-war experience represented both a convergence and divergence of experiences. The common experiences are most clearly post-traumatic stress disorder, social dislocation and confronting the legacies of an unpopular war. Several interviewees

commented that they had to return to Australia at night and leave their transport in civilian clothes so that they would not be harassed by anti-war protesters. Vietnam veterans also received an ambivalent welcome from their local communities and rejection from the Returned Servicemen's League (RSL). Graham Atkinson states, "[w]hen I got back I found that no one wanted to talk about Vietnam. If you went into the pub people would say, 'Oh you're back,' and that'd be it. No one wanted to know about it."⁵⁸ Several veterans have spoken of psychological problems and the inadequacy of the Department of Veterans' Affairs to address their problems. Alcoholism and marriage breakdown – common also among non-Indigenous veterans – permeate several veterans' stories.⁵⁹

Unlike non-Indigenous veterans, though, Aboriginal people who left the Army had to confront racial discrimination. Geoff Shaw describes how he was turned away from entering the Alice Springs Memorial Club even though he was a veteran. He says, "[o]ne of the things that I found out when I left the Army – I thought that I'd be acceptable back in my hometown as a Vietnam veteran. But in fact that didn't happen."⁶⁰ Phil Prosser recalls a similar incident in Western Australia:

And we went down, went into town to have a few drinks. And we walked in, sat down in the lounge area of the Hotel Manly, as it was known in those days. And the steward came up to take orders. Of course he went around the table, and when he came to me, he said- he turned to me he, the guy said, "I'm sorry; I can't serve this gentleman because he's Aboriginal." And of course they became pretty upset, the guys. They said, "But he's in the Army. You've got to serve him." He said, "I'm sorry but we can't." So he refused to serve me.⁶¹

Dave Cook experienced some extreme examples of racial discrimination in the form of police harassment. Cook was both a Stolen Generations survivor and a Vietnam veteran, and much

of his life trajectory reflects the findings of both the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* and the *Bringing Them Home* report.⁶²

Another area where Aboriginal veterans went on diverging paths from non-Indigenous veterans was in their pursuit of Aboriginal causes. This was by no means a universal path, and many interviewees indicated that they had no interest in Indigenous affairs upon their return to Australia. Even so, several Aboriginal veterans did find employment in Indigenous affairs and have attributed their Army experience as preparing them for such a career path. Gerry Bostock and Hewitt Whyman both became involved in the land rights movements of the 1970s. Whyman then became a field officer working for the New South Wales Aboriginal Legal Service.⁶³ After a stint working as a prison officer, Darryl Wallace worked for various Indigenous organisations: Aboriginal housing in Queensland, Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre in Sydney and Aboriginal medical services in Sydney.⁶⁴ Graham Atkinson took advantage of ABSTUDY to complete a social work and arts degree. Subsequently, he worked in the Victorian Department of Aboriginal Affairs, as a social worker for the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), then as a program director for VACCA, then as regional director of Aboriginal Development Commission for Victoria and Tasmania. After many years, Atkinson left the public service and started his own consultancy. Atkinson says, “I’d like to highlight my involvement in Aboriginal affairs because I think it all started through my experience in the army. It was Vietnam which forced me to become more aware of the social and political issues facing Aboriginal people.”⁶⁵ Geoff Shaw explained in 1988 how military service prepared him – and by extension other Aboriginal veterans – for work in Indigenous community advancement:

One of the things that my years in the Army have assisted me was giving me the ability to negotiate with white people, especially the bureaucracy. In fact, I came back and at that time we were living in car bodies and lean-tos. And I

thought, look – I’m going to have to do something, not only for my people, I’m going to have to try and better myself. I’ve got some skills that I can offer to my people, so I decided to join the Aboriginal movement. I’ve been- been working for my people now for the last 14 years [at Tangentyere Council]. That was the beginning of me being spokesperson on other Aboriginal organisations such as ones that relate to health and welfare, land acquisition, and dealing with mining companies and so on. We’ve fought hard, we’ve built so many houses so far, and we’ve still got a long way to go to build more houses for Aboriginal people, especially on Aboriginal town leases.⁶⁶

While the abovementioned veterans pursued causes for Aboriginal advancement, other veterans pursued alternative career paths. Max Gardner had difficulty finding work, but ultimately found a position working in a milk factory in Shepparton.⁶⁷ Ron Wenitong worked in construction all over Queensland for thirty-five years.⁶⁸ John Schnaars also worked in construction in Perth until a residual knee injury forced him onto a disability pension. He then became a stay-at-home dad, raising his four children.⁶⁹ Other veterans like Lionel Duroux, George Bostock and Frank Mallard remained in the Army until the 1980s. Mallard subsequently joined the Army Reserves and in 1993 responded to a call for retired Army engineers to join United Nations peacekeeping forces in Croatia and Bosnia.⁷⁰ Dick Bligh stayed in the Army until 1975, then joined the Army Reserves while working for the Defence Department.⁷¹ Bob Blair remained in the Army until 1982 and then drove a taxi for three years.⁷² One of the more high profile veterans was Glen James, who became a VFL umpire and the first Aboriginal person to umpire an AFL-VFL Grand Final in 1984.⁷³

Yet even for these abovementioned veterans initially not interested in Indigenous affairs, later in life several have become respected Aboriginal Elders involved in Aboriginal communities in various capacities. George Bostock has become a playwright, with his first

play *It Seems Like Yesterday* performed by the Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Theatre Company in 2001. He also now sits as an Elder on the Murri Courts in Queensland.⁷⁴ Dick Bligh became employed by Aboriginal Hostels from 1987-96 and then worked as an Aboriginal Community Development Officer in the Pilbara for five years.⁷⁵ In 2003 John Schnaars founded the organisation Honouring Indigenous War Graves (HIWG). John Schnaars describes the work of HIWG:

We look at working with the families of Indigenous veterans to put a war grave – or a headstone on their grave if they haven't got one – and also to do a ceremony and that if somebody has got a headstone on, we'll still do a ceremony to get some closure for the families – healing. And it brings the family together, and it also brings different communities together and race, colour doesn't really matter. It just brings everybody in as one – as one Australia.⁷⁶

Bob Blair has done remarkable work for the Indigenous business community since he gave up taxi-driving in 1985. First he worked for the Central Queensland Aboriginal Corporation for Training and Resources, providing training to several Aboriginal organisations in Central Queensland. In 1987 Blair was approached to put in an application for the position of CEO of the Dreamtime Cultural Centre in Rockhampton. Since opening in 1988, The Dreamtime Cultural Centre has been a major tourist attraction in Rockhampton that has employed Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, worked with Indigenous contracting services such as catering and has expanded to include a conference centre and hotel. Blair has also been the Deputy Chairperson of Indigenous Business Australia and has worked with the ADF to assist in Indigenous recruitment. Bob Blair says that he runs the Centre with military precision and attributes his own management skills to his Army training. Blair effectively encapsulates the links between military service and the post-war success stories of many Aboriginal Vietnam

veterans: “[b]ut I think without my ... there’s no doubt in my mind, whatsoever, without my Army background, this place wouldn’t be where it is today.”⁷⁷

Conclusion

The histories presented in this article are only a snapshot of the experiences of the hundreds of Aboriginal men who served in Vietnam. Their experiences both complement and confront the wider histories of Australia’s role in Vietnam. Despite the efforts of military and social historians, much of the popular memory of Australia’s Vietnam War continues to be clouded in myth based on the United States experience.⁷⁸ Among the casualties of such misunderstandings of Australia’s Vietnam War are the forgotten histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen. Furthermore, the historiographical trends among Australian Indigenous histories of the twentieth century tend to focus on the impact of colonialism and assimilation, with Aboriginal people inevitably forced to accommodate and/or resist discriminatory and devastating policies and practices such as child removal.⁷⁹ Histories of Aboriginal participation in the armed forces during the First and Second World Wars offer tales of reconciliation and Indigenous people joining the armed forces hoping for equal citizenship rights through military service. Yet Aboriginal military service in Vietnam does not sit well with this narrative. It was an unpopular war which did not entail a mass mobilisation of all Australian citizenry. Veterans of Vietnam did not receive fanfare or significant benefits upon their return to Australia. Fights for Aboriginal civil rights, Black Power and land rights were occurring at the same time as Vietnam, with little indication that there were links between Vietnam service and these social movements. For such reasons, the histories of Aboriginal veterans of Vietnam have been subsumed among the histories of all Vietnam veterans and have been forgotten by the majority of Australians. This article is one

attempt at rectifying the Vietnam chapter in what W.E.H. Stanner called “The Great Silence” of Aboriginal people in Australian history.⁸⁰

Individually and collectively the experiences in this article demonstrate the hardships, accomplishments and legacies of military service and the Vietnam War for Aboriginal veterans. Many of the issues confronting Aboriginal Vietnam veterans are indeed indistinguishable from non-Indigenous veterans, such as the horrors of war, the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder and the difficult readjustment to Australian life. But it is clear also that being Aboriginal meant diverging pathways both before and after Vietnam. While some themes permeate many of the interviews – difficult childhoods during the assimilation era, racial equality in the armed forces, witnessing American racism – each veteran has his own personal reflections and experiences. Despite some hardships along the way, even today all of the Vietnam veterans interviewed remember their time in the Army fondly because of the friendships they made, the skills they learned and the opportunities the military provided. Perhaps it is fitting to give veteran Frank Mallard the final word: “[o]h I love the armed forces, if I could be back in the military uniform tomorrow I would be but my age is against me.”⁸¹

Notes

¹ See Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett, *Seizures of Youth: “The Sixties” and Australia* (South Yarra, VIC: Hyland House, 1991); Donald Horne, *Time of Hope: Australia 1966-72* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1980).

² For Vietnam see Peter Edwards, *A Nation at War: Australian Politics, Society and Diplomacy during the Vietnam War 1965-1975* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1997); John Murphy, *Harvest of Fear: A History of Australia’s Vietnam War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994). For Aboriginal civil rights movements see Jennifer Clark, *Aborigines & Activism: Race, Aborigines and the Coming of the Sixties to Australia* (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2008); Sue Taffe, *Black and White Together: FCAATSI: The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders 1958-1973* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2005); *Vote Yes for Aborigines*, written and directed by Frances Peters-Little, produced by Ronin Films, 2007, DVD.

³ For overview histories of Indigenous service, see Hugh Smith, “Minorities and the Australian Army: Overlooked and Underrepresented?” in *A Century of Service: 100 Years of the Australian Army. The 2001 Chief of Army’s Military History Conference*, eds Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (Canberra: Army History Unit, Department of Defence, 2001), 129-149; *The Forgotten*, directed by Glen Stasiuk, originally aired as an episode of *Message Stick* on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 27 April 2003, videocassette. For World War II, see Robert Hall, *The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War*, 2d ed. (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1997); *No Bugles, No Drums*, written and directed by John Burnett and Debra Beattie-Burnett, produced by Seven Emus Productions in association with Australian Television

Network, 1990, videocassette. For World War I see Timothy Winegard, "A Case Study of Indigenous Brothers in Arms during the First World War," *Australian Army Journal* 6, no. 1, (Autumn 2009): 191-206; David Huggonson, "Aboriginal Diggers of the 9th Brigade. First AIF-Australia. Army. Australian Imperial Force, (1914/ 1921 -)," *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 79, no. 3-4 (December 1993): 214-225; Rod Pratt, "By cripes! I'll fight for white Australia!" *Queensland Aborigines in the First A.I.F.*, thesis for Master of Literary Studies, University of Queensland, 1990.

⁴ See Narelle Biedermann, *Tears on My Pillow: Australian Nurses in Vietnam* (Milsons Point, NSW: Random House Australia, 2004).

⁵ Colonel O.M. (Max) Carroll (RL), "'They were foremost Australian soldiers': An oral account of Aboriginal and Thursday Island soldiers who served in Malaya and Vietnam: 1957 to 1967," *Aboriginal History* 16, part 1 (1992): 99.

⁶ For white privilege, see *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg, 2d. ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2005).

⁷ This is reflected in the Australian War Memorial's records of identified Aboriginal Vietnam veterans.

⁸ See Alistair Thomson, "Anzac Stories: Using Personal Testimony in War History," *War & Society* 25, no. 2 (October 2006): 1-21. See also Alistair Thomson, *Memories Living with the Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁹ See National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Australia), *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997); Anna Haebich, *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia, 1950-1970* (North Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Dave Cook, interview with Noah Riseman, Raymond Terrace, NSW, 20 January 2010; Gordon Briscoe, *Racial Folly: A Twentieth Century Aboriginal Family* (Canberra: ANU E Press and Aboriginal History Incorporated, 2010), 58; Pat Owen, in *Forgotten Heroes: Aborigines at War from the Somme to Vietnam*, eds Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell (South Melbourne, VIC: Victoria Press, 1993), 74-75.

¹¹ John Schnaars, interview with Noah Riseman, Perth, 23 November 2010, available from National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA), ORAL TRC 6260/1; Frank Mallard, interview with Noah Riseman, Perth, 24 November 2010, available from NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/2; Bob Blair, interview with Noah Riseman, Rockhampton, QLD, 22 June 2010; Dianne Gage, interview with Noah Riseman, Brisbane, 1 June 2011.

¹² See Noah Riseman, "The Stolen Veteran: Institutionalisation, Military Service, and the Stolen Generations," *Aboriginal History* 35 (2011):57-77. See also Australia Senate, Community Affairs Reference Committee, *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children* (2004), p. 161. Available online from

http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/inst_care/report/, accessed 22 August 2011; Stuart Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam* (Richmond, VIC: William Heinemann, 1987), 6; 8; 23.

¹³ See Peter Read, *Charles Perkins: A Biography*, 2d ed. (Ringwood, VIC: Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 2001), 52; Charles Perkins, *A Bastard Like Me* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1975), 41; John Moriarty, with Evan McHugh, *Saltwater Fella* (Ringwood, VIC: Viking, 2000), 125.

¹⁴ Dick Bligh, interview with Noah Riseman, Perth, 25 November 2010, available from NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/4.

¹⁵ Ron Wenitong, interview with Noah Riseman, Cairns, 23 June 2010.

¹⁶ Frank Mallard, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/2.

¹⁷ Phil Prosser, in *The Forgotten*, directed by Glen Stasiuk.

¹⁸ Dick Bligh, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/4. Geoff Shaw also responded to an advertisement in the Post. See Geoff Shaw, in *I hope the war will be over soon*, directed by John Ruane, produced by Juniper Films, 1988, DVD.

¹⁹ George Bostock, interview with Noah Riseman, Brisbane, 18 June 2010.

²⁰ Bob Blair.

²¹ "Notes on National Service", 18 November 1964, in National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA) Canberra, series A463, item 1964/5143 Part 1; H.A. Bland, Secretary, Department of Labour and National Service, to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 28 November 1966, in NAA Canberra, series A463, item 1964/5143 Part 2. For the applicability of foreign nationals, see also NAA Canberra, series A463, item 1962/3685 Part 1. For history of national service during the Vietnam era, see Edwards, *A Nation at War*, 20-25; Christina Twomey, "The National Service Scheme: Citizenship and the Tradition of Compulsory Military Service in 1960s Australia," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 58, no. 1 (March 2012): 67-81. For the experiences of national servicemen in Vietnam, see Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War* (Pymble, NSW, 2010), 165-177; Noel Wallis and Hugh Williams, *Australia's Forgotten Forces – The Nashos* (published and printed by Noel Wallis and Hugh Williams, 1996); Noel W. Wallis, *Those Nashos! A brief account of National Service in Australia* (published and printed by Noel W. Wallis, 1994).

- ²² Australia, *National Service Act* 1964, section 18(e). For more on Aboriginal people and National Service, see Ann-Mari Jordens, "An Administrative Nightmare: Aboriginal Conscription 1965-72," *Aboriginal History* 13, part 2 (1989): 124-134.
- ²³ Glen James, in *Forgotten Heroes*, 67.
- ²⁴ Graham Atkinson, interview with George Bostock, April 1991, available from Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), BOSTOCK_G01-016549. For other Aboriginal men conscripted, see Charles Tilmouth, in *Aboriginal Ex-Servicemen of Central Australia*, eds George Bray, Kenny Laughton and Pat Forster (Alice Springs, NT: IAD Press, 1995), 14; Hewitt Whyman, interview with George Bostock, 26 April 1991, available from AIATSIS, BOSTOCK_G01-016548; Leo Maxwell Muir, in *Forgotten Heroes*, 66. George Bostock and Frank Mallard each reference relatives conscripted through national service.
- ²⁵ John Schnaars, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/1. See also John Schnaars, in "The Last Post," *Message Stick*, directed by Adrian Wells, produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 2006, DVD.
- ²⁶ Frank Mallard, ORAL TRC 6260/2.
- ²⁷ See Jan "Kabarli" James, *Forever Warriors* (Perth: Scott Print, 2010), 223-230.
- ²⁸ Di Gage.
- ²⁹ Bob Blair.
- ³⁰ Ron Wenitong.
- ³¹ Frank Mallard, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/2.
- ³² George Bostock. See also John Schnaars, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/1.
- ³³ Dick Bligh, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/4.
- ³⁴ Lieutenant D.G. Bowen, R.A.N., to H.J. Green, Aborigines Welfare Board, 6 September 1962, in Dave Cook Welfare File, provided to author courtesy of Dave Cook.
- ³⁵ Dave Cook.
- ³⁶ Jason Sears, "1919-1929: An Imperial Service," in *The Royal Australian Navy: The Australian Centenary History of Defence Volume III*, ed. David Stevens (South Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 71; Private Cedric 'Ned' Egglestone and Don McLeod, Royal Australian Infantry Corps, interviewed by Bill Bunbury, RSL Reservoir, 3 September 1998, available from Australian War Memorial (hereafter AWM) S01907.
- ³⁷ Brian White, in *Aboriginal Ex-servicemen of Central Australia*, 17.
- ³⁸ Sandy MacGregor, as told to Jimmy Thomson, *No Need for Heroes* (Lindfield, NSW: CALM Pty Limited, 1993), 89-90.
- ³⁹ Bob Blair.
- ⁴⁰ Dave Cook. See also MacGregor, *No Need for Heroes*, 85.
- ⁴¹ Frank Mallard, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/2.
- ⁴² Ron Wenitong.
- ⁴³ Dave Cook.
- ⁴⁴ James E. Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 39-40.
- ⁴⁵ James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), 5.
- ⁴⁶ Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 83; 93; Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 113.
- ⁴⁷ Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 81-103; Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 94-168.
- ⁴⁸ Dave Cook.
- ⁴⁹ Graham Atkinson, in AIATSIS, BOSTOCK_G01-016549.
- ⁵⁰ Frank Mallard, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/2.
- ⁵¹ Billy Coolburra, in MacGregor, *No Need for Heroes*, 82-83.
- ⁵² Darryl "Rocky Wallace" Wallace, interviewed by George Bostock, 11 April 1991, in AIATSIS, BOSTOCK_G01-016549-50.
- ⁵³ George Bostock, *Black Veterans of Vietnam*, unpublished manuscript, 11-12, in AIATSIS, MS 3012.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ⁵⁵ Hewitt Whyman, AIATSIS, BOSTOCK_G01-016548.
- ⁵⁶ Graham Atkinson, in AIATSIS, BOSTOCK_G01-016549. See also Graham Atkinson, in *Forgotten Heroes*, 72.
- ⁵⁷ Geoff Shaw, in *I hope the war will be over soon*, directed by John Ruane.
- ⁵⁸ Graham Atkinson, in *Forgotten Heroes*, 71-72. For non-Indigenous stories of ambivalent returns, see Rintoul, *Ashes of Vietnam*.
- ⁵⁹ See Australia, *Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans: A Study of the Health of Australia's Vietnam Veteran Community: Volume 1 - Male Vietnam Veterans* (Canberra: Department of Veterans' Affairs, 1998-1999),

online, available from

http://www.dva.gov.au/aboutDVA/publications/health_research/morbidity/males/Pages/v_oneindex.aspx, accessed 16 July 2010.

⁶⁰ Geoff Shaw, in *I hope the war will be over soon*, directed by John Ruane.

⁶¹ Phil Prosser, in *The Forgotten*, directed by Glen Stasiuk.

⁶² Dave Cook; Riseman, "The Stolen Veteran," 66-72.

⁶³ George Bostock; Hewitt Whyman, AIATSIS, BOSTOCK_G01-016548.

⁶⁴ Darryl "Rocky Wallace" Wallace, AIATSIS, BOSTOCK_G01-016549-50.

⁶⁵ Graham Atkinson, in *Forgotten Heroes*, 72. See also Graham Atkinson, AIATSIS, BOSTOCK_G01-016549.

⁶⁶ Geoff Shaw, in *I hope the war will be over soon*, directed by John Ruane.

⁶⁷ Max Gardner, interview with George Bostock, 28 April 1991, AIATSIS, BOSTOCK_G01-016546.

⁶⁸ Ron Wenitong.

⁶⁹ John Schnaars, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/1.

⁷⁰ Frank Mallard, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/2. See also Di Gage and George Bostock.

⁷¹ Dick Bligh, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/4.

⁷² Bob Blair.

⁷³ Glen James, in *Forgotten Heroes*, 69.

⁷⁴ George Bostock.

⁷⁵ Dick Bligh, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/4.

⁷⁶ John Schnaars, in "The Last Post," directed by Adrian Wells.

⁷⁷ Bob Blair.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Jeffrey Grey, "In every war but one? Myth, history and Vietnam," in *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History*, ed. Craig Stockings (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd, 2010), 190-212; Jeffrey Grey and Jeff Doyle, *Vietnam: War, Myth and Memory: Comparative Perspectives on Australia's War in Vietnam*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992); *Vietnam Days: Australia and the Impact of Vietnam*, Peter Pierce, Jeff Doyle and Jeffrey Grey (eds) (Ringwood, VIC: Penguin, 1991).

⁷⁹ Most general histories of Indigenous Australians trace the history in the following manner: pre-colonialism, frontiers, missions, assimilation and the Stolen Generations, fights for civil rights, post-1967 self-determination. See, for instance, Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: A History since 1788*, 4th ed. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010); historical content in *The Little Red Yellow Black Book: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia*, eds. AIATSIS and Bruce Pascoe (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2008).

⁸⁰ W.E.H. Stanner, *After The Dreaming: Black and White Australians—An Anthropologist's View* (Sydney: The Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969).

⁸¹ Frank Mallard, NLA, ORAL TRC 6260/2.