

**ADDRESS AT A SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE FOR
VIETNAM VETERANS' DAY 2022
BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE BARBARA BAKER AC,
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
HOBART CENOTAPH, 18 AUGUST 2022**

I begin by acknowledging each and all veterans of the Vietnam War.

We gather to commemorate Vietnam Veterans' Day, as we have done every year since 1987. On this day we take time to remember and honour all of the men and women who served in Vietnam¹. I also pay my respects to all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have contributed to the defence of Australia in times of peace and war.

In addition, I acknowledge the following:

- The Honourable Jane Howlett, representing the Premier
- Councillor Anna Reynolds, The Right Honourable the Lord Mayor of Hobart
- Senator Carol Brown, representing the Honourable Linda Burney, Minister for Indigenous Australians
- Senators Claire Chandler and Tammy Tyrell
- Senior representatives of the Australian Defence Force, Tasmania Police and Ex-Service Organisations
- Aunty Brenda Hodge
- Mr Tony Clifford, a Tasmanian Aboriginal veteran of the War, who has laid a wreath on behalf of all Aboriginal soldiers

This Vietnam Veterans' Day began as a commemoration of the men of Delta Company, 6th Battalion, the Royal Australia Regiment, who fought in 1966 at the Battle of Long Tan. Since then, it has become a wider and more inclusive commemoration for our communities, recognising the service and sacrifice of all the men and women who served in Vietnam²; a war that was the second longest military conflict in which our Nation has been involved.³

¹ <http://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2008/08/15/vietnam-veterans-day/> accessed 10 August 2022

² <https://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2008/08/15/vietnam-veterans-day/> accessed 10 August 2022

³ <https://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2008/08/15/vietnam-veterans-day/> accessed 10 August 2022

From the time of the arrival of the first members of Australian Army Training Team Vietnam, in 1962, almost 60,000 Australians, including ground troops and air force and navy personnel, served in Vietnam. 521 died as a result of the war and over 3,000 were wounded.⁴

Amongst the 60,000 Australians were over 2,000 Tasmanians. They served on the ground and in the air and in the waters of Vietnam. Seventeen Tasmanians including conscripts were killed.⁵

In recent years, it has become a tradition on Vietnam Veterans' Day to commemorate the 50th anniversary of a significant engagement during that war.

This year we concentrate our remembrance on all our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans, who served as volunteers or were conscripts.

It was not until 1949 that Indigenous Australians were permitted to serve in our nation's armed forces. That is not to say that they did not. The numbers are unclear, as many were forced to deny their heritage and culture in order to enlist. The *Defence Act 1903* excluded anyone from service who was not substantially of European origin or descent. There is evidence that many succeeded in circumventing the formal legislative barriers,⁶ and more than 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders enlisted in World War One, including 21 Aboriginal men from Cape Barron Island. They enlisted and served in Gallipoli, in Flanders and on the Somme. Six of these men were killed. Australian Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders enlisted in World War II and about 23 fought overseas.⁷

After the legislative barriers were lifted in 1949, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have served in all conflicts in which Australia has participated. The Australian War Memorial has identified more than 300 Aboriginal and

⁴ <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/event/vietnam> accessed 10 August 2022

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[https://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/V/Vietman%20war.htm#:~:text=Apart%20from%20the%20suffering%20inflicted,servicemen\)%20who%20served%20in%20Vietnam](https://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/V/Vietman%20war.htm#:~:text=Apart%20from%20the%20suffering%20inflicted,servicemen)%20who%20served%20in%20Vietnam) accessed 29 July 22

⁶ <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/docs/indigenous-service-secondary-2013>, accessed 15/08/2022.

⁷ https://www.centenaryofanzac.tas.gov.au/history/tasmanian_aboriginalsoldiers accessed 18/08/2022.

Torres Strait Islander veterans of Vietnam. At least ten were killed and three were known to have been wounded.⁸

Why did Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people enlist to fight in Vietnam? Some were of the Stolen Generation, having faced childhood hardships including institutionalisation in boys' homes, physical and mental abuse and emotionless foster relationships. Even many men who were not removed from their families have memories of hiding from Welfare as children, fearing removal.⁹ Racism had been experienced in their youth, such as taunts at school, police harassment and segregation in public places.

Everyone had their own personal reasons to join. There are common threads among their accounts. Their motivations included a job with payment, adventure seeking and not only an opportunity to defend the nation, but also their ancestral lands.¹⁰

One soldier said the military gave him a chance to serve, protect and defend the country like his ancestors. I quote; "Our traditional people, they protected their boundary, so the military gave me the chance to serve, protect and defend, the same as my traditional mob. It was born into me."¹¹

During the War, Aboriginal soldiers were integrated with other troops and served alongside them. Vietnam veterans reported that they were treated as equals. Wiradjuri man, Victor Bartel, said that his time in the Army showed him what life could be like without racism. There was no colour. It was the first time that he had experienced equality. "It wasn't black and white. There was only one colour in the army-green... I'm proud to say those I served with treated me just as I treated them. It gave me the knowledge that people can be different."¹²

Aboriginal man John Burns was there during the Battle of Long Tan. Mr Burns was a bombardier with 103rd Artillery Battery, providing covering fire for Australian troops engaged in a fierce gunfight.

⁸ <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/indigenous-service/report-executive>, accessed 16/08/2022.

⁹ <https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/item/8v1v0/equality-in-the-ranks-the-lives-of-aboriginal-vietnam-veterans> accessed 16/08/2022.

¹⁰ <https://blog.militaryshop.com.au/stories-of-indigenous-service>, accessed 15/08/2022

¹¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-10/indigenous-veterans-military-experience-overcoming-racism/101138202> accessed 29 July 22

¹² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-19/aboriginal-soldiers-experience>, accessed 16/08/2022.

“As we were firing, we got hit with a downpour, and it really pelted down,” he said. “The gun pit was absolutely full of steam and smoke and spent cartridges.”

But, while firing quickly, his ammunition started to run dangerously low.

“Then, out of the rubber trees, came all these soldiers. They ran straight to the ammo dump and started collecting ammunition and bringing it to the guns,” he said. “That’s when I felt so proud, this was the Australian spirit that we all know.”¹³

Acceptance by the group was based, not on colour, class or education, but rather by working hard and being good at the job. Another Aboriginal soldier said, “The first thing that hit me was, I’m as good as anyone. And that same feeling has carried me nearly all my life...”¹⁴

Many Aboriginal veterans remember their time in the Army fondly because of friendships they made, the skills they learned and the opportunities the military provided.¹⁵

Unfortunately, Vietnam Veterans’ difficulties of reintegrating on their return also carried through to the experiences of our Aboriginal soldiers. For some, they knew where they fitted into the Army, but it was not like that on their return home.

Common experiences to all were post-traumatic stress disorder, social dislocation and confronting anti-war protesters and the legacies of an unpopular war.¹⁶ Aboriginal soldiers who left the Army also had to confront racial discrimination on their return, such as refusal of entry to hotels and police harassment.¹⁷

¹³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-17/war-memorial-list-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-soldiers-vietnam/101339566> accessed 17 August 22

¹⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-10/indigenous-veterans-military-experience-overcoming-racism/101138202> accessed 29 July22.

¹⁵ <https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/item/8v1v0/equality-in-the-ranks-the-lives-of-aboriginal-vietnam-veterans> accessed 16/08/2022. N. Riseman page 21.

¹⁶ Op cit N. Riseman page 15

¹⁷ Op cit N. Riseman page 16

Today, Aboriginal soldiers continue to serve with distinction in our Australian Defence Force. One example is Warrant Officer Col Watego, who rose through the ranks to finish his service as a Warrant Officer Class One, the highest non-commissioned rank, with the Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery, as Corps Regimental Sergeant Major and Regimental Master Gunner.

In recognition of his lifetime of service, Warrant Officer Watego was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia, prior to his retirement in 2016.¹⁸ He has demonstrated that, like our soldiers deployed to Vietnam, hard work and diligence are keys to success in our modern Defence Forces.

Today, let us thank you all who served in Vietnam for your service and for your sacrifice. We thank all those who supported you while deployed and at home, for your service and for your sacrifice. You should be proud of what you have achieved, not only while deployed but also dealing with the challenges of your return. We should not forget the problems of post-traumatic stress and the effect this has on families. Our community is the better for your examples of courage and resilience in the face of adversity.

Lest we forget.

¹⁸ <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/medals-month-july-2019-warrant-officer-class-one-colin-watego-oam>
accessed 29 July 22