

# Presentation at RSL Scottsdale, Tasmania

By Dr Harley Stanton

Thanks to Bruce Scott for the invitation to this occasion. It's an honour for my wife Judith, Ron's sister, and me to be here and to speak for a few minutes about

**Vietnam, Pilot Officer Ronald William Betts (0118325), and the experiences people share at such times of loss.**

Since the beginning of time we have been combative, and humanity seems prone to expose the underbelly of human nature in war. Vietnam was no different. The Chinese and the French had sought to subdue the Vietnamese over long periods, but there is a striking and intense nationalism among the Vietnamese people.

The Vietnamese called it, "**The American War**".<sup>1</sup> The Americans called it the "**Vietnam War**" and Paul Ham wrote about "**Vietnam – The Australian War**". It highlights the perspective that we all bring in dealing with conflict.

But it should not diminish the struggle and courage that individuals gave on behalf of their country, **some conscripted, some volunteers**. The Australians who went gave distinguished service for their nation and **came home to a deeply hostile reception befitting that of traitors** with some even being spat upon as they disembarked or marched.

War always leaves its **debris**. According to the former director of the Australian Army Medical Services the stress levels in Vietnam were 200 times greater than the levels in World War II.<sup>2</sup> The infantry were **months in combat zones** - far longer than previous wars; they were fighting **an invisible enemy** in heavily mined areas and bunker systems; and **high incidence of accidental civilian deaths** resulted from the greater willingness to shoot to kill.

The **debris** from that time was evident when on two occasions we visited Canberra as part of Vietnam services. The first was for the opening of the National Vietnam Memorial on Anzac Avenue in 1992. I remember seeing those who had returned: they **were men in wheelchairs, men with walking sticks, and men with the slightly stiff gait** of those who were wearing prostheses. Some were transported in vehicles, unable to walk, and **all bore the scars of battle either in mind or body**.

At that time in 1992 the Australian Newspaper published a Weekend Special Edition that summarised the lives of the more than 500 Australians who gave all for

1. Lindsay Kiang, Johanna Branson, Huynh Phúông Đông – Visions of War and Peace, Saigon Cultural Publishing House, Vietnam. 2007.

2. Paul Ham, Vietnam – The Australian War, Harper Collins, Sydney, 2007, p 635

their country in Vietnam. For Ronald William Betts the newspaper insertion read:

***“Ronald W. Betts, 23, Launceston, Tasmania. Pilot Officer Betts was co-pilot of one of two Bushranger gunships called in to give support to Australians from 3RAR, who were pinned down by fire from enemy-held bunkers on March 20, 1971. The gunships flew low and close to the enemy who were only 30m from the Australian platoon's position. Two Australian soldiers were lying wounded between the bunkers. Betts was killed when 20 rounds of enemy fire struck the gunship, forcing it to land at a nearby support base. He was the first RAAF pilot killed in action in Vietnam.”***<sup>3</sup>



The role of the Iroquois helicopters in Vietnam was **very pivotal** and they flew roughly **50,000 hours** mostly for the air force but also some for the navy. There were about **25 crew** and **some 80 critical support staff** that maintained the fleet of Iroquois often with around 90 percent operational capability, **a quite incredible feat**. They were involved in Visual Reconnaissance (VR), in Patrol Insertion (PI) and Patrol Extraction (PE). They gave Logistic Support (LS) and as well had Special Tasks as a Sniffer (SPEC) which used sniffer mechanisms to detect the sweat and body odour of the Viet Cong at distances greater than rifle range.

Ron left Australia early July 1970 and had his first orientation in Vietnam on Iroquois UH-1H A2-711 on 25<sup>th</sup> July. On 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1970 there was an incident where crew were not willing to fly A2-110 due to a 5 ft 6 in snake that had parked on board. Ron flew as best I've been able to ascertain 194 flights in Vietnam, around 536.45 hours and just on 1500 sorties. He had qualified as Captain and spent 143 hours in that role. In early March 1971 Ron had been made a 'Unit Test Pilot'. On 20<sup>th</sup> March Bushranger 71 was attempting a smoke resupply to an area known as YS648786 to a platoon of 3<sup>rd</sup> RAR when the aircraft was hit by 50 calibre fire from close range.<sup>4</sup> Co-pilot Ron Betts was wounded and Medevaced to REDEARTH and then the 24<sup>th</sup> EVAC Hospital.<sup>5</sup> Details of the fire fight that took Ron's life have been vividly portrayed in the book Shockwave by Peter Haran.<sup>6</sup> During March 1971 six Iroquois were damaged by enemy fire and four required Chinook lift recovery.<sup>7</sup>

At the 1992 Vietnam Memorial Dedication in Canberra I attended the dawn service where Brigadier Colin Kahn,

3. The Weekend Australian Special Edition, October 3-4, 1992, p.4.

4 Royal Australian Airforce, 9<sup>th</sup> Squadron, Unit History Sheet, No 219-220, 16 – 23 March 1971.

5. Don Barnett; Jody Foss. Lest We Forget, Part II, The 24<sup>th</sup> Evacuation Hospital, 1946-1972. This was the US Forces Hospital at Long Binh.

6. Peter Haran, Shockwave – An Australian Combat Helicopter Crew in Vietnam, New Holland, Sydney, 2004.

7. National Archives of Australia, Report the Month of March 1971 of the Activities of the RAAF in Vietnam, 12 April 1971.

# Vietnam Veterans' Day 18 August 2017

DSO spoke of Vietnam in these words:

"It was a time when nurses, after a night time of tending the wounded **waited in anticipation of the wail of the siren warning of the arrival of dust-offs, or casualty helicopters bringing wounded diggers to the pad at VUNG TAU.** A time to be ready to cut through more boot laces to get to the wounds, the time to listen again to the call of the wounded – **"don't worry about me, look after my mate"**."

"We learnt that... it was a war that was predictably the same as most other wars, in the contrasts that the War seemed to throw up in the starkest of relief. For we experienced **cruelty**, but the same time **unbounded compassion and love; fear, yet unequalled courage;** the realisation of the **fragility and impermanence of life**, at the same time the **desire to preserve one's own life.** We learnt **aggression**, but **unashamed tenderness**, particularly towards each other. We saw the comparisons of other ways of life with our own, and the realisation that despite our imperfections, Australia really was God's own country."<sup>8</sup>

"We learnt that it was **not a sign of weakness to show kindness and love;** that selfishness had to be transcended at all times by team work, a team work that has been aptly described as the, **"barbed wire bonding of men under fire:"** and **we learnt that when we called for help, we knew it would come."**

**That help often came** in the form of an Iroquois helicopter. We listened to the words of those who were there and experienced **the most momentous event in their lives** – that of surviving the Australian War in Vietnam. Out of the debris of the years some significant steps of healing have come, though some scars will remain.

The second moment of meaning and understanding for us in Canberra came when in 2010 Tony Cox from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Royal Australian Regiment (3<sup>rd</sup> RAR) invited us to attend their 40<sup>th</sup> year Anniversary Battalion Reunion at the Vietnam Memorial. On this occasion 3<sup>rd</sup> RAR honoured those who gave so much in support of the Battalion in 1971. In particular Pilot Officer Ronald Betts was honoured and remembered by the Battalion. Tony has been the Reunion organiser for 3<sup>rd</sup> RAR and was a member of the platoon involved in the contact when Ron was killed. The platoon commanding Officer 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant David Paterson was severely wounded in this contact but continued to provide encouragement and direction to two other wounded who lay near him in the killing zone. David died shortly after on the battlefield.

Their courage and selflessness is difficult for us to empathise with today.

Tony came to Launceston in 2016 and spent time with us for Remembrance Day at Kings Park. Tony suggested that Ron lost his life seeking to save the platoon of which

he was a part on 20 March 1971. Tony indicated that the platoon missions would not return to Nui Dat base for several weeks after this event and there was no time to grieve on the day. He spoke of his own struggle since those days in 1971 and the resulting PTSD from those past events. He found he wasn't alone. Many veterans suffered the same fate. While 521 died in Vietnam, many more came home to live with the trauma of their experience.

Tony has always felt the cause was honourable in helping a democratic country struggling to survive. Australian Servicemen and Women were called upon to risk all that those who live in other lands might enjoy similar freedoms to those we enjoy today.

In 1997 when I was reflecting on the meaning of ANZAC for me I wrote down three words or phrases:

- Scarring and pain – we have spoken of that
- Loyalty – we have reflected on the bonding that occurred and still occurs
- Sacrifice – that supreme gift often without any reticence as a gift to us who remain.

So 47 years on from that fateful day I am reminded of the lines:

**"They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old,  
Age shall not weary them or the years condemn,  
From the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them."**

We thank you for remembering Pilot Officer Ronald William Betts, **not as he would be, but as he was**, an easy going yet caring person, in the full life of youth, **a joyful and fun-loving young man** who would tinkle the ivories of a piano if one was around. His picture on the pilot's seat of the UH-1H A2 – 295 Iroquois in Scottsdale is a reminder to us of his gift of loyalty and sacrifice and for that we thank you. **Ronald William Betts – RIP**

**Dr Harley Stanton**

*In 1987 Harley Stanton graduated with a Doctor of Public Health from Loma Linda University in California and set a goal of "enabling the children of Asia Pacific to grow up in a healthier smoke-free environment".*

*He has spent much of the last 30 years working in tobacco control, particularly with the World Health Organisation.*

*He was particularly challenged by the problems of tobacco use in Asia-Pacific and worked to enable all countries of the Western Pacific Region to sign and ratify the global treaty known as the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. He and his wife, Judith, Ron Betts' sister, live in Grindelwald, on the Tamar River near Launceston in Tasmania. They pictured on the north west coast of Tasmania in early March.*



8. Address by Brigadier Colin Kahn, DSO, Dawn Service, Dedication of the Australian Vietnam Veterans National Memorial, Canberra, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1992 pp.2-3.