



## **VIETNAM VETERANS, PEACEKEEPERS & PEACEMAKERS ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA, (NSW BRANCH) Inc.**

*AFFILIATED WITH THE VIETNAM VETERANS FEDERATION OF AUSTRALIA Inc.*

***SUPPORTING ALL WHO SERVE AND HAVE SERVED***

### **THE STORY OF THE VIETNAM VETERANS FEDERATION of AUSTRALIA**

#### **Why the need for another ex-service organisation (circa 1980)**

The Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (VVAA), as we were then known, was established because of the lack of support for Vietnam veterans by those organisations already in place to help war veterans. It began when a handful of veterans saw reports in the press about the effects of herbicides on farmers and their unborn and recently born offspring. The Australian veterans noticed themselves and their families having the same symptoms.

This was reinforced by strong press and TV coverage on evidence coming out of the United States, of ill effects on their veterans of exposure to herbicide agents which were given the names, Agent Orange, Agent Blue etc., referring to a coloured band round their containers. Agent Orange was the best known both because it was most used and because it contained an impurity, Dioxin, a deadly poison. The term "Agent Orange" became a household name.

Momentum over the possible effects of exposure to Agent Orange increased, as more and more veterans came forward in Australia. In mid 1979 a major inquiry about the effects of herbicides on the wives of farmers was reported in Sydney and Melbourne newspapers. Thus, with their own symptoms matching those mentioned in the reports as well as those effects reported by American Vietnam Servicemen, Australian Vietnam Veterans began to discuss their problems more openly. Numbers began to grow, as more and more veterans felt compelled to add their own stories into the argument.

Scientists were also warning that the deluge of insecticides such as dieldrin, lindane, chlordane, malathion and DDT to which Vietnam veterans had been exposed could also be harmful.

During November and December 1979 meetings between veterans began to take place in Victoria, Sydney and Brisbane. In January 1980 organised meetings between Australian Vietnam Veterans took place in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth. By the end of January 1980, at a meeting held at ANZAC House in Melbourne it was decided that the veterans should link up nationally and the name Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (VVAA) was adopted.

Victoria, NSW, South Australia, and Qld became the founding member states and National Council of the VVAA, with WA, Tasmania, and the ACT following, so that by the end of 1982 it had become a truly national body. Momentum grew that saw the formation of lobby groups on several fronts, that included more than just the issues of the effects of herbicides and insecticides on veterans of the Vietnam War.

#### **Why the break-up and split within the VVAA**

##### ***The birth of the Federation...***

Between 1979 and 1995 the NSW Branch had been at the forefront of most of the VVAA National Councils research and investigations on behalf of Vietnam Veterans. The fight to prove 'Agent Orange' and other chemical agents affected not only those returning from Vietnam, but our offspring as well, is well documented in our case against Agent Orange on our website.

Separate campaigns that saw VVCS offices created and Operation Life Programs established, (supported by all ESOs), flourished in the 1980s and 1990s. NSW successfully mounted AAT Hearings and High Court cases that proved time and again that the DVA was deliberately rejecting veterans' compensation claims contrary to Repatriation law which required veterans be given the 'benefit of the doubt'.

The VVAA NSW Branch was at the forefront of the research and development of these successful campaigns, and was highly visible and respected as lobbyists to the scientific institutes and government. With less and less support from the National Council and Victorian Branch of the VVAA, but with NSW having the majority of members, NSW representation at the National Council appeared to fall on deaf ears. Several questions put to the National body remained unanswered for several meetings.

In February 1995 at a general meeting, the NSW Branch chose to disassociate itself from the National Council of the VVAA. At a further meeting in July of 1995 interstate organisations also agreed to join with NSW and form a new national body calling itself the Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia, (VVFA). South Australia, the ACT and Queensland, along with NSW became the founding member States. Between 1995 and 1999, with other States VVAA members becoming disenchanted, some of their number disaffiliated also and chose to join the Federation, so that by the end of 2002 we had increased State membership to include Victoria, Western Australia, and Tasmania. Time has all but blurred the cause of the split. However, both organisations still exist today. (c2019).

Amid the upheaval within our ranks, a split with The Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, and the unfortunate demise of prominent people within our ranks, we still manage to pull together, without faltering, or losing sight of our objectives. The story of what we needed to do, to force recognition, just compensation, and a justified application of our rights as should be applied to all service men and women. It is the true essence of the tenacity that made up the soldier of the day. The Vietnam Veteran.

The Vietnam veteran movement was not *only* campaigning on the issue of Agent Orange. Having set up its own counselling service at its Parramatta office with qualified volunteer counsellors, it lobbied hard for the government to establish shop-front counselling centres. This was the genesis of the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service (VVCS). It flourished and grew and was renamed the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service. Then in 2019 it evolved again into “Open Arms” – ‘Veterans & Family Counselling’. From its inception we have had to fight off Departmental attempts to completely consume this supposedly independent service. Its independence is essential.

The VVFA was also involved in important court cases. The Vietnam Veterans Federation, Branches and Sub-Branched round Australia help veterans of all wars apply for compensation and appeal unfair rejections.

### ***But that’s just the start of it.***

Our NSW State Branch, for instance, seeks out isolated veterans in country towns by sending Compensation Advocates on country tours. One particularly successful outreach tour helped 92 veterans in Tasmania to complete compensation claims. Another to Darwin base camps in 2015 has led to repeated visits to other outlying base camps such as Townsville, Cairns and Perth. We can’t stress enough the importance of communicating with the younger serving member of today, to make them aware and keep future governments from deteriorating the worth of the current service personnel.

Branches and Sub-Branched offer a range of services including club houses, wood and metal workshops, radio programs, education courses, choirs and many other social activities. More hidden are our continual efforts to combat threats to veterans’ welfare. This is not an easy fight as just as one obstacle is overcome another appears. We are continually fighting against the parsimony of Treasury and ignorance of some politicians and bureaucrats. It is a fight with no end.

Our strength to lobby government officials on matters relevant to the Veteran community, as well as those still serving, is considerable. In recent years we have succeeded in having a new official history written to replace the flawed and insulting original official version of the account of the Agent Orange controversy, We have taken a raft of matters to government, including the closure of VAN offices, the threat against the VVCS, the attack on veteran pensioners, and the reduction in soldiers’ superannuation, to name a few.

**The fight never ends.**