

## ***THE STORY OF US***

### ***In the beginning.....* (THE) VIETNAM VETERANS ASSOCIATION of AUSTRALIA**

**M**uch has been written about the Vietnam veteran movement, and why we felt the need to band together when other agencies already existed. Our own National Researcher, Graham Walker AM, published a historical account in our newsletters between March 1994 and September 1996, and this research was referred to by Ambrose Crowe in writing his book *The Battle After The War – The story of Australia's Vietnam Veterans*. published by Allen & Unwin in 1999. Graham also contributed a chapter titled, 'The Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia' in the book *War: Australia and Vietnam* published by Harper and Rowin 1987. Graham Walker's latest contribution to the understanding of the Vietnam veteran movement is his chapter titled 'The Official History's Agent Orange Account: The Veterans' Perspective' in the book, *War Wounds, Medicine and the Trauma of Conflict* published by Exisle in 2011 Much of the story below comes from these sources.

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.

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.

## *On other fronts.....*

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 government participation. 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. From its inception we have had to fight off Departmental attempts to completely consume this supposedly independent service. Its independence is essential.

Today the VVCS is known as “**OPEN ARMS**” –‘**Veterans & Families Counselling**’. It’s efforts still championing the mental welfare of todays soldiers, the veteran, and their families. Open Arms provides counselling and support services to Australia's military community. If you have served one day of continuous full-time service in the ADF you can call us for support. We also support families, reservists and some peacekeepers. It proudly bears the banner “**A service founded by Vietnam Veterans, now for all veterans**”.

The VVAA was also involved in important court cases both at the High Court of Australia and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT). Many of the cases involved proving our issues with DVA applying the incorrect standards of proof when referring to matters in relation to a veterans claim. We were vindicated in nearly every case fought. We recently proved our case against the DVA on behalf of a War Widow, so the fight continues to ensure that the rights of veterans and their families are met by government.

The VVAA evolved into an organisation that began to ensure our counsellors were trained by qualified advocates to prepare them for increased quality in preparation of claims and applications made to DVA on behalf of a growing community of veterans seeking assistance. So well trained and skilled, our Advocates, Pension Officers, and Welfare assistants, became, that many RSL Sub-branches began sending their members to us for help. Where other ex-service organisations failed, we welcomed those overseas veterans who were and are Australia’s Allies during war time.

Our strength to lobby government grew as can be attested to in other historical essays about the VVAA and its split into two separate Vietnam Veterans organisations, in the midst of the Agent Orange battles. And, the birth and history of the **Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia**. Both items available for readers on our websites; [www.vvfagranville.org](http://www.vvfagranville.org) and [www.vvfa.org.au](http://www.vvfa.org.au) .

**That we continue today, more than 40 years later, speaks volumes of our worth and endeavor.**