



Vietnam Veterans, Peacekeepers & Peacemakers Association of Australia (NSW Branch) Inc.

OUR STORY

Much 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

The VVAA National Council began to pressure the government of 1980 for an inquiry into the effects of Agent Orange on Vietnam veterans and their families. Each State Sub-Branch began its own lobbying of Federal and State ministers as well. The Federal Liberal Government of the day pleaded ignorance of any spraying of Agent Orange in the Australian area of operations when the Member for Melbourne Ports, Clyde Holding asked questions in Parliament. But the media was very active, especially with increasing evidence from overseas.

More and more the VVAA ran into resistance from the government and (surprisingly), the RSL. Even the department set up to assist veterans, the Department of Veterans Affairs, (DVA), refused to accept claims based on the effects of herbicides, despite Repatriation law requiring war veterans be given the benefit of any doubt. We thought this was a case of the Department flouting the law. More can be found about this subject in the *Federation History* article, on our website.

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. However, more recently government has seen fit to close down some of these centres in country areas. A move we will continue to fight.

In NSW we fostered and nourished a program of self-help for suicide awareness, eventually gaining support from all other ESOs to set up training courses, in what was to become Program ASIST. It grew to a point where the government saw fit to include proper funding because research was showing that the suicide rate of the children of Vietnam Veterans was 3 times higher than the national average of the civilian population. That program has now developed into *Operation Life* with workgroups organised through the VVCS and Lifeline in NSW.

For several years between 1981 and 1989 there was an ill wind between the NSW Branch, the Victorian Branch and the National Executive of the VVAA. This was to come to a head when, after several attempts of mediation, the VVAA National Council refused to respond to questions put to a National Meeting, by the NSW President. Several more attempts were made, but without a proper response from the VVAA National Executive to some vital questions, the NSW Branch had to consider its position. With NSW having around half of the association's membership, it being the source of most of the associations documented arguments and with its interests and objectives being ignored, there seemed no choice.

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. Since then, the Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia has gone from strength to strength now having six State Branches, including the ACT, representation in all States and some 26 sub-branches. We are an organisation strong enough to confront government when it fails in its duty to veterans and to challenge the bureaucracy when it lets down those it is its purpose to help.

Sub-Branches scattered throughout NSW continue to carry on the work we are renowned for. They offer a range of services including club houses, wood and metal workshops, radio programs, education courses, choirs and many other social activities. Importantly though, the advocacy for veterans and current serving members of the ADF, seeking assistance, and making claims or applying for Pensions from DVA remains our core enterprise.

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.

In 2009 the NSW Branch of '*The Federation*' took up the new challenge of servicing younger veterans and soldiers, choosing to opt for a name change in the hope that today's ADF member would avail themselves of our vast experience and expertise in dealing with the DVA. We became ***The Vietnam Veterans, Peacekeepers & Peacemakers Association of Australia, (NSW Branch) Inc. (VVPPAA NSW Branch)***. However, we are more commonly known in Sydney as Vietnam Vets Granville, or more simply, Granville Vets'.

As stated by our National President recently, and endorsed by all our members;

“When we came home from Vietnam there was much wrong with how we were treated by the Repatriation system, some ex-services organisations, the government, and the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

It is, I believe, our duty to ensure our more recent comrades, the soldiers, sailors and airmen of Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan, Peacekeepers & Peacemakers too, do not suffer in the same way. We can do this by helping our younger comrades with their compensation claims and appeals, ensuring we acknowledge their outstanding service given under extremely difficult and dangerous conditions and keep reminding the government of its obligation to properly compensate and care for those whose service has damaged them.

This will become even more important when most of our troops are pulled out of Afghanistan. A few years down the track we know that the psychological damage done by the trauma of these wars will really begin to blossom. By then, the media interest in our veterans will have waned. What is newsworthy while the war is being fought will fail the 'interest' test when the fighting is over. It is then that the really hard work begins of reminding governments of their continuing obligation”.

“The Vietnam Veterans Federation, [including NSW and its' Sub-Branches], will do what it can to ease the path for our worthy successors.” Jim Wain (2016)