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‘In the matter of Agent Orange: Vietnam veterans versus the Australian War Memorial’, *Honest History*, 15 March 2016 *

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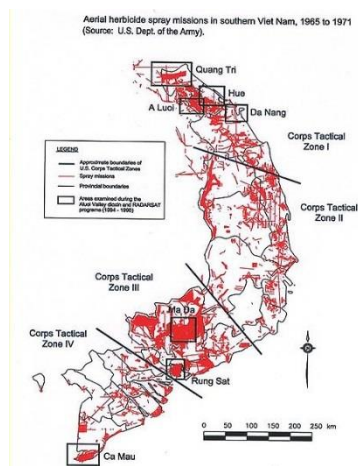
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US aerial herbicide spray missions 1965-71 ([Wikimedia Commons/US Army](#))

For many of Australia's Vietnam veterans, the term 'Agent Orange' prompts an emotional response, as they recall their lengthy battle to determine the true impact of their wartime exposure, both on their own health and that of their children.^[1] It would therefore seem reasonable to assume that any historical account of the Agent Orange controversy would provide some insight into this hard-fought campaign. Curiously, this has not been the approach of the Australian War Memorial, whose official histories have tended not to underscore the veterans' experience so much as to isolate and even malign those seeking the truth.

As is to be expected, this negative portrayal has been a source of consternation for the veterans, drawing some veterans into a war of words with the historians in a bid to have their story rewritten. What follows is an overview of this long-running dispute thus far, intended both to shed light on the veterans' case and to assess the validity of their call for a new history.^[2]

Opening comments

The dispute began in 1994 with the release of *Medicine at War* by Brendan O'Keefe, the third in the War Memorial's nine-part series on Australia's role in South-East Asian conflicts. In contention was a section of the book entitled 'Agent Orange: the Australian aftermath,' written by medical history expert, Professor FB Smith.^[3] While touching on the origins of the affair from the late 1970s, Smith's essay dealt mainly with the 1983 Royal Commission, set up by the Hawke Government and led by Justice Phillip Evatt. The Royal Commission's task was to establish whether the veterans' exposure to the herbicide could be linked to an array of serious ailments, including cancer, birth defects and toxic brain dysfunction. Following two strained years of enquiry, Evatt made public his main finding: Agent Orange was 'not guilty' on all three counts.

Initial reaction to FB Smith's work

Now, while it is normal for official histories to adopt a conservative approach, Smith's work seemed unashamedly one-sided, weaving an almost Manichean tale of 'good versus bad'; cast in the former role were Evatt and those who endorsed his main finding, and in the latter were those who opposed the finding, including scientists and, more notably, the veterans who had called for the Royal Commission (the men whose story Smith was thought to be telling).

Condemnation was predictably swift, with the *Bulletin* reporting on the 'bitter feud' erupting over Smith's work. According to a number of scientists, some of whom had testified before Evatt, Smith's essay was 'selective' and 'frozen in time', having failed to discuss research conducted *after* Evatt's inquiry, research linking herbicide exposure to cancer. Echoing this view was Tim McCombe, vice president of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (VVAA), the group which had formed in 1979 to deal with the veterans' concerns about Agent Orange and which led their push for a government inquiry. But, while McCombe argued that 'plenty of evidence' existed to confirm the damaging impact of the herbicide, Smith retained his faith in Evatt's report, now bolstering his case by citing 'the world's leading epidemiologist', Sir Richard Doll, who had offered the report a glowing endorsement. What Smith neglected to say, however, was that Doll had made this assessment in 1985, *prior* to the research to which Smith's critics alluded but which he had seemingly ignored.[\[4\]](#)

Along with this apparent omission of evidence, critics were upset by Smith's 'contentious and unsympathetic' approach towards the campaigning veterans. According to Graham Walker, an early member of the VVAA, the group had been 'looking forward' to what they believed would be an official account of their struggle. But not only had the historian tasked with writing that account failed to tell *their* story or even to speak with any of the campaign's leaders; he had actually used his public platform to 'attack' them.[\[5\]](#)

For his part, Smith seemed unconcerned by the claim that he had not explored the 'veterans' side of the story' since, to his mind, their case against Agent Orange was 'indefensible'. By contrast, he explained that *his* essay was based on 'unfettered access' to official records, and his conclusions were thus presumably sound. In short, Smith refused to concede any ground, either on his treatment of the veterans or his handling of the medical evidence, instead depicting the conflict his essay had ignited as a time-honoured Australian tradition. Musing that our official historians, including the great CEW Bean, had written things which did not 'please anybody', Smith expressed confidence that this was 'always a good sign'.[\[6\]](#) But this cavalier approach drew a sharp rebuke from academic, Peter McCullagh, who suggested that Bean 'would turn in his grave' at Smith's work, which he labelled 'interpretive history' and not befitting an official account.[\[7\]](#)



US helicopter spraying Agent Orange, Vietnam ([Wikimedia Commons/US Army](#))

The 2008 trigger at the War Memorial

Clearly, many veterans agreed with McCullagh's view, with some continuing passionately to voice their discontent[8], though, much to the veterans' chagrin, the historians remained unmoved and Smith's contentious account remained the official record. Then, in 2008, events at the War Memorial reopened old wounds for some of the veterans, precipitating a concerted campaign to have their story retold. Leading this campaign were Tim McCombe and Graham Walker, now former VVAA members but, since 1995, the president and research officer of the Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia (VVFA).

The trigger for this revived campaign was the opening of a new Vietnam War gallery at the Memorial. The offending item was a text panel pertaining to Agent Orange. In part, the panel read: 'The Evatt Royal Commission reported in 1985 that Agent Orange was not guilty; but veterans remained unconvinced, and continue to argue for just recognition and compensation'.

Writing to Memorial director, Major General Steve Gower, McCombe complained that the Memorial's panel was 'grossly misleading' since, like Smith's essay, it inferred that Evatt's ruling had been final, when it had actually been 'discredited' by later evidence; McCombe called for a prompt correction of this 'egregious error'. However, like Smith, Gower was initially 'dismissive' of McCombe's concerns, informing veteran Gary Conyers, who had lodged a separate complaint, that the text was 'factually correct'. Even so, Gower advised Conyers that the Memorial had 'amicably agreed' to add 'some concluding words' to the text so as to 'capture [the] veterans' attitudes'. He seemed hopeful that the matter would be easily resolved.[9]

But for McCombe, who was reputedly something of a 'bulldog', these minor changes were unlikely to suffice. First, as he informed Conyers, it was not the veterans' attitudes which were important but rather that of the scientific community, which supported a link between Agent Orange and cancer. Similarly, while the text may have been 'factually correct', it was also '23 years out of date' and clearly misleading in its intent. Indeed, in further correspondence with Gower, McCombe lamented the fact that 'thousands of visitors' to the Memorial had been 'led to believe the opposite of the truth'. He again called for the panel's prompt revision.[10]

To this end, a meeting was scheduled between Walker and Ashley Ekins, the Memorial's staff historian though, according to Walker, a dispute quickly arose over what to include in the text. Reportedly, Gower insisted that Evatt's 'not guilty' ruling had to remain, whereas Walker argued that 'the complexities' of Evatt's findings could not be explained in 120 words, to which the panel was limited. Walker thus proposed excluding the findings and stating simply that 'the issue was now settled', with numerous cancers being attributed to Agent Orange exposure. Eventually, a compromise was 'grudgingly' reached, with the text now reading:

The Evatt Royal Commission reported in 1985, absolving chemical agents from responsibility for veterans' health problems. Veterans strongly disagreed and continued to pursue the issue. Subsequent studies found links between exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam and some cancers and other diseases.

But with the wording agreed upon, another problem arose over Gower's reluctance to effect a prompt change to the text, though, as Walker explained, this issue was soon resolved with a 'deluge of e-mails' from irate veterans.[\[11\]](#)

Seizing the momentum, the veterans decided to broach the issue of Smith's essay, with another meeting scheduled between Walker and Memorial staff. However, as Walker became aware, a compromise over the text panel did not extend to a revised position on Smith's work, which Ekins 'staunchly defended'.[\[12\]](#) What had changed, though, was that the Memorial was prepared to open up a dialogue on the issue, with Walker invited to write an article for the Memorial's official magazine, *Wartime*.[\[13\]](#) This led to his invitation to present the veterans' case at a conference at the Memorial in September 2009.[\[14\]](#) Here he outlined three principal complaints about Smith's work.[\[15\]](#)

The case against Smith

Overt hostility towards VVAA and its leadership

Walker's first complaint pertained to Smith's overt hostility towards the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, whom Smith sought to marginalise from the broader veterans' community since, by his estimate, the group represented only a 'small minority' of Vietnam veterans; the 'overwhelming majority', he asserted (with great authority though little evidence) 'had merged back into the community' and had no interest in the Agent Orange campaign.[\[16\]](#) Smith further alleged that many of those joining the campaign were 'especially bitter about their [post-war] alienation' and, by aligning themselves with groups who had opposed the war, they 'seized on' Agent Orange as a way to explain 'their discontent', as well as 'a likely source of additional repatriation benefits'. In casting judgement on these veterans, Smith deemed their actions to have epitomised 'many of the worst aspects of Australian behaviour in the 1980s', at a time when 'private greed became, for some, a public good'.[\[17\]](#)



Phil Thompson VVAA (author)

Now, as a twenty-one year army veteran and former VVAA member, Walker was justly offended by Smith's remarks and intent on setting the record straight. First, on Smith's inference that the group advocated anti-war views, Walker replied bluntly that 'it did not', advising that a 'survey of the VVAA's journals' of the period would 'fail to find any such sentiment'. As for their aim in seeking a royal commission, Walker maintained that this was quite simple: they wished to establish whether the veterans' exposure to Agent Orange might have damaged their or their children's health and, if so, to seek 'acknowledgement and compensation' in the form of repatriation benefits. No *additional* benefits were sought, as Smith suggested.[\[18\]](#)

Perhaps, Smith would have viewed the VVAA differently had he read a 1987 article by Walker, in which Walker discussed the group's formation, claiming the group was formed only when the veterans were let down by the 'institutions from which they had a right to expect sympathy and support': the federal government, the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) and the Returned and Services League (RSL). As Walker recalled, the veterans were seen as a 'nuisance and a threat' by the Fraser Government, which met their requests for information about Agent Orange with 'platitudes or evasion', while the response of DVA and the RSL was one of 'unsympathetic disbelief' or even 'derision'. This was why the 'sick and worried veterans' turned to each other for support. Walker added that had the government 'acted quickly with more regard for humanity than power' and the others adapted 'to differences between wars and generations', the VVAA might never have formed and there would have been no royal commission.[\[19\]](#)

Of course, Smith's essay tended to skirt around this period leading up to Evatt's inquiry, with no critical eye cast over the actions of the government or DVA. Similarly, while Smith's 'unfettered access' to official records must have led him to the VVAA's submission to the Royal Commission, with a clear outline of the veterans' intentions[\[20\]](#), these were not discussed by Smith, who instead argued that disaffection and greed lay at the heart of the veterans' campaign.

Compounding Walker's feelings of antipathy towards Smith were the latter's personal slights against the VVAA leadership, including Tim McCombe, and especially the group's national leader, Phil Thompson (who, tragically, had taken his own life in 1986). Now attesting to the calibre of his colleagues, Walker noted that Thompson was a fourteen-year army veteran, who had served two tours in Vietnam, and who regarded his leadership of the veteran's campaign 'as a continuation of his service'. The same was true of McCombe, who, despite losing a leg in Vietnam, worked tirelessly for the veterans' community, through his roles in the VVAA and VVFA. Walker added that, in recognition of their service, both men received the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM), with Thompson receiving his award in 1985,

following his valiant effort at the Royal Commission. This act alone should have convinced Smith that Phil Thompson was a ‘man of integrity,’ rather than the miscreant Smith chose to portray in his essay.[\[21\]](#)

Evatt’s crucial second finding

Having defended his colleagues’ reputations, Walker turned to his second complaint: Smith’s incomplete coverage of Evatt’s findings (a matter which was also a point of contention in Walker’s ‘text panel’ meeting with Ekins). As Walker noted, Evatt actually delivered *two* separate findings, each at a different standard of proof. The first concerned the veterans’ case against the Monsanto chemical company (one of the manufacturers of Agent Orange) and demanded a *civil* standard of proof, with the veterans required to establish a definite causal link between their exposure and their ailments. In this matter, Evatt delivered his highly publicised ‘not guilty’ finding, which was readily endorsed by Smith (and included on the text panel inscription).



Justice Phillip Evatt ([NT Supreme Court](#))

However, there was a *second* finding buried in the body of Evatt’s report, which was completely bypassed by Smith but was of major significance to the veterans. As Walker explained, the veterans’ principal aim in seeking a Royal Commission was to overcome an impasse with the Repatriation Commission (DVA’s *alter ego*), which had refused to grant compensation to sick veterans based on their exposure to Agent Orange. This was despite the fact that the *Australian Soldiers’ Repatriation Act 1943* stated that returned soldiers seeking compensation should receive the ‘benefit of the doubt’ (as to the source of their ailments). Reportedly, problems had arisen due to the ambiguous wording of this ‘benefit of the doubt’ rule, even when a 1977 amendment had confirmed its ‘generous’ application. Some veterans had initially turned to the courts, where they had successfully challenged the Repatriation Commission’s decisions, though this had been a costly and traumatic process. Hence, with a royal commission, the VVAA hoped to have the issue resolved in the veterans’ favour, obviating the need for further litigation.[\[22\]](#)

Evatt’s second ruling, then, was made under *repatriation* law, which required a less onerous standard of proof than his main ruling. And, in this matter, he found that the veterans’ exposure to Agent Orange could be linked to two forms of cancer, soft tissue sarcoma and non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.[\[23\]](#) At the same time, Evatt reproached the Repatriation Commission for its earlier efforts to restrict compensation and, while accepting that it had done so for ‘budgetary reasons’, he stressed that a ‘benevolent’ interpretation of the law was ‘consistent with parliamentary intention’.[\[24\]](#)

The matter did not end there, however, with the Repatriation Commission now choosing to defer only to Evatt's *main* finding in order to reject the veterans' cancer claims, forcing the veterans into the appeals process. Walker admitted that this was disappointing, though it did not diminish the importance of the veterans' victory before Evatt, which stood as a clear vindication of the veterans' campaign.[\[25\]](#)

It is thus understandable that Walker found it 'startling' that Smith did not even mention Evatt's second ruling or his rebuke of the Repatriation Commission. Similarly, while Smith referred to a number of the veterans' successful appeals, Walker stated that this was only to 'dismiss their importance', with Smith complaining that the veterans' success 'depended on their being given the benefit of the doubt', as if it were undeserved rather than a legal entitlement. Walker queried Smith's 'personal disapproval of veterans being treated generously', concluding that he found it 'disappointing but irrelevant'.[\[26\]](#)

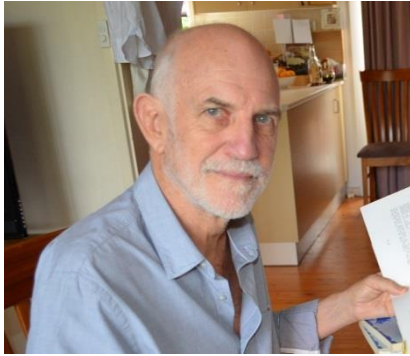
Also disappointing for Walker was Smith's unreserved support of Evatt's main finding, which was matched only by his vigorous castigation of those who opposed it. As Walker now conceded, the VVAA's case before Evatt was 'a chaotic episode', with the veterans' claims at times 'exaggerated and even hysterical'. Meanwhile, some of their scientific witnesses were 'unreliable and even dodgy', though others were 'world-renowned and reliable experts'.[\[27\]](#) Regrettably, in Smith's black and white depiction of events, he conflated the two sets of experts, thereby revealing the same biases Evatt himself was accused of displaying. Indeed, following the Royal Commission, complaints were made about Evatt's overtly favourable treatment of Monsanto's witnesses and, conversely, his denigration of the dissenting scientists. Not only that, but Evatt was actually accused of 'collusion' with Monsanto when it was found that sections of his own report were lifted directly from the latter's submission. For Smith, however, this was perfectly reasonable, given that the submission was the 'most authoritative' survey of the 'allegations pinned on Agent Orange' and, thus, a 'convenient resource' for Evatt to use.[\[28\]](#)

At the time, however, Evatt's behaviour was not so easily excused, with the government authorising a review of the Commission's proceedings. Prepared by senior Hawke advisor, Bob Hogg, the review was somewhat mixed though, predictably, Smith bypassed most of its harsher commentary, including Hogg's labelling of Evatt's report as 'flawed and lack[ing] credibility'. Also missing from Smith's essay was any reference to a 1989 conference attended by some of the scientists Evatt had earlier disparaged who in turn questioned the veracity of Evatt's main ruling. Rather, by Smith's account, Evatt's work remained virtually beyond reproach, with his report standing as 'the pre-eminently thorough, authoritative survey of the Agent Orange episode', while the herbicide itself was exonerated of all charges.[\[29\]](#)

Smith's ignoring of later research

Here was the basis of Walker's third complaint: that, in his unyielding adherence to Evatt's main finding, Smith ignored later research which 'effectively overturned' Evatt's conclusion that there was 'no reliable evidence' linking Agent Orange exposure to cancer. As Walker now explained, in the early 1990s, at the behest of the US Congress, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) reviewed all available research into the health effects of Agent Orange. In 1993, seven months before the release of Smith's essay, the NAS issued its findings, confirming that 'sufficient evidence' existed (at a civil standard of proof) to link the veterans' exposure to three forms of cancer: non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, soft tissue sarcoma and

Hodgkin's disease. Clearly, this was a major turning point in the veterans' campaign, and Smith's omission seemed remiss, to say the least.



Graham Walker (author)

Perhaps, as Walker suggested, it may have been too late in the publishing process of Smith's work to make any amendments, but this failed to explain why Smith did not subsequently mention the findings, such as in the 1994 *Bulletin* article. What Smith could not have mentioned, however, but which Walker now described, was the significance of the NAS study for Australia's veterans when scientists here confirmed its findings in late 1994, leading the Repatriation Commission to accept these cancers as 'war-caused' and dispensing with the need for the appeals process.[\[30\]](#)

Having argued his case against Smith, Walker summarised his position. He stated that Smith's essay was 'fatally flawed when it was written' and had since been 'further discredited and superseded'. Sadly for the veterans, it remained the official version of events. Walker called for the veterans' story to be rewritten.[\[31\]](#)

The right of reply

Peter Edwards 2009

Speaking at the 2009 conference on behalf of FB Smith was Peter Edwards, himself a distinguished professor and the editor of the series to which Smith had contributed. Not only that, but prior to the conference, in a *festschrift* honouring the now elderly Smith, Edwards had written in defence of Smith's contentious work while advancing his own views on the Agent Orange affair. At the conference, Edwards delivered a slightly modified version of this tribute essay.[\[32\]](#)

As with Smith's account, Edwards' narrative was limited in context, bypassing both the veterans' battle with the Repatriation Commission and Evatt's second ruling, thus failing to address one of Walker's complaints. Regarding his further complaint, that Smith accused the VVAA of expressing anti-war sentiments, Edwards offered a minor concession, stating that although the veterans were supported by anti-war groups, they 'varied widely' in their approach towards the war.[\[33\]](#)

As for the veterans' purpose in seeking a Royal Commission, Edwards followed Smith's lead by invoking the motive of personal gain, albeit not in the form of 'additional' repatriation benefits, as Smith had suggested. Rather, Edwards proposed that the veterans, in adopting an 'American approach' to the issue, sought to use the Royal Commission to win compensation from the suppliers of Agent Orange. However, while surmising that the 'deep pockets' of the

chemical companies had made them ‘attractive targets’, Edwards queried the wisdom of taking on such a powerful foe, with ‘access to the best legal and scientific expertise’. On top of this, the veterans faced the complex task of trying to prove a direct causal link between their illnesses and their exposure, but this task was fraught with ‘obstacles’: for one thing, Edwards observed, ‘too little time had passed for some long-latency diseases to have become evident’ and for a causal link to thus be confirmed.[\[34\]](#)

Now, to make his claim about the veterans’ intentions, Edwards again followed Smith’s lead in bypassing the VVAA’s submission to the Royal Commission, which explicitly stated that they *did not* seek ‘sums of money by way of compensation’, but rather ‘to have their war-caused illnesses recognised and treated as such’ (just like veterans of other wars).[\[35\]](#) As for their apparent naiveté in taking on Monsanto, it must be remembered that the veterans did not set the terms of reference of the Royal Commission, so their ‘adversarial contest’ was not one of their choosing[\[36\]](#); neither was their task of trying to prove a direct causal link between their illnesses and their exposure. Finally, regarding Edwards’ claim that this task was hampered by the long latency of some diseases, surely this should also have precluded Evatt from delivering (and Smith from condoning) an unambiguous ‘not guilty’ finding, a point which Edwards failed to make.[\[37\]](#)

On the contrary, having disparaged the VVAA’s case before Evatt, Edwards broadened his critique to encompass the VVAA’s whole campaign, which he accused of doing a ‘major disservice’ to the veterans’ community. In particular, he alleged that by focusing on a number of ‘relatively uncommon’ ailments, the group inadvertently diverted attention away from other ailments which were rife in the veterans’ ranks, including Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and alcohol and smoking-related illnesses. This in turn led to a delay in treatment and compensation for these ailments, which, to Edwards’ mind, was the ‘real tragedy’ of the Agent Orange affair.[\[38\]](#)

With this comment, Edwards drew a line between the campaigning veterans and the broader veterans’ community, with the latter (undeniably larger) group deserving of empathy while the former was largely dismissed. Moreover, by blaming the VVAA campaign for taking attention away from these other ailments, Edwards conveniently sidestepped the failings of the Australian authorities and the fact that there would have been no campaign had the veterans’ concerns been allayed and repatriation benefits duly granted. Finally, in accusing the VVAA of delaying support to veterans with PTSD, Edwards ignored the fact that, in the early 1980s, the group had played a key role in setting up a nationwide counselling service for veterans, helping to expedite both treatment and compensation.[\[39\]](#)

Turning to Walker’s third complaint, concerning Smith’s omission of the NAS findings, Edwards confirmed that Smith’s essay was with the publisher at the time of the study’s release and thus was unavailable for amendment. But, as Walker stated, this failed to explain why Smith did not later raise the findings, such as in the *Bulletin* article. Instead, Smith sought to dismiss his critics by deferring to the outdated assessment of Sir Richard Doll (which, recent evidence indicates, may also have been tainted by the fact that Doll had been a paid consultant of Monsanto at the time).[\[40\]](#)

In any case, whether or not Smith raised the NAS study was a moot point in Edwards’ view, since it did not represent a ‘dramatic overturning’ of Evatt’s ruling, simply because its findings were ‘as much political as scientific’. As Edwards explained, ‘the Agent Orange lobby’ in the US had been putting pressure on members of Congress, who in turn had pressed

the authorities to deal with the issue of compensation. Hence, when framing the NAS inquiry, the latter had done so in a way which would allow the scientists to ‘give a degree of support’ to the veterans’ claims, thereby opening the door to *a limited amount* of compensation. Similarly, when the NAS report reached Australia, the government here wished for a quick endorsement by this nation’s scientists, so it could also offer *some* compensation to the veterans. When seen in this light, Edwards concluded, it was clear that the scientists were offering not so much a definitive assessment as a politically expedient way to bring some closure to the affair.[\[41\]](#)



FB Smith 2009 ([ANU Press](#))

Now, while it is true that there was a political dimension to the NAS study, a more nuanced depiction of events leading up the study would have been more instructive. Moreover, it remains unclear why Edwards did not cast a similarly sceptical eye over the Royal Commission, which was arguably ‘as much political as scientific’. Certainly, this point had been made by other scholars in this country, who indicated that anything other than a ‘not guilty’ ruling would have been politically untenable. Domestically, there would have been the economic implications of large-scale compensation for the veterans while, geopolitically, it would have placed Australia onside with communist Vietnam, which was pursuing charges of chemical warfare against the United States. More broadly, it would have had serious (and unacceptable) repercussions for the chemical industry, both here and overseas.[\[42\]](#)

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this side of the story was bypassed by Edwards, who remained focused on reducing the import of the NAS study, now observing that the evidence assessed in the study did not pertain to veterans but civilians, who had probably had ‘far greater exposure’ to the herbicide. Accepting the NAS results thus also meant the ‘quiet acceptance’ of the assumption that the same outcome applied to both groups.

Edwards also queried the results of the US study by contrasting them with those of a 2005 Australian study into the incidence of cancer in Vietnam veterans. He noted, in particular, that while the former had recently added a fourth cancer (a form of leukemia) to its ‘sufficient evidence’ category, the latter upheld these results in *only two* cases. Adding to this was the fact that the most common form of cancer among Australia’s veterans was actually melanoma, which had ‘not been associated’ with herbicide use.[\[43\]](#)

Overall, then, Edwards stated that while the Australian study did reveal an increase in the rate of cancer among this country’s Vietnam veterans, this was also true of veterans from the Korean War, suggesting that ‘factors other than the herbicides ... were at fault’. Unlike Smith, however, Edwards did not exonerate Agent Orange, conceding that it ‘may have made some contribution’ to the veterans’ ailments. But ‘numerically’ these were ‘far outweighed’

by the illnesses caused by alcohol, smoking and stress; the Australian study ‘pointedly’ referred to this association.[\[44\]](#)

Thus judging from Edwards’ account, the Australian study bore out his portrayal of the Agent Orange campaign as a wasteful venture, with other factors largely to blame for the veterans’ poor health. In truth, however, the Australian study was not quite as dismissive of the herbicide as he implied. For instance, while Edwards noted that the Australian study confirmed only two of the four cancers in the NAS’s ‘sufficient evidence’ category, he skimmed over the fact that it also found ‘significantly elevated’ levels of three other cancers for which the NAS study found only ‘limited evidence’ – lung, larynx and prostate cancer. And, in the case of prostate cancer, the Australian study indicated that risk of the disease ‘was significantly associated with herbicide use’. Similarly, while Edwards claimed that melanoma had not been associated with herbicides, the Australian study cited research to the contrary, indicating that it could not rule out a link between this disease and an ‘arsenical agent’ found in (the herbicide) Agent Blue.[\[45\]](#)

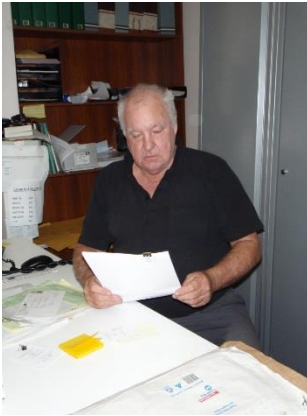
In brief, the Australian study stated that due to the ‘wide range of health effects associated with Vietnam service and Agent Orange exposure’, there was ‘a need for continued study’ of the veterans’ community. And, since 2005, research has continued, with two recent US studies offering further evidence of a link between herbicide use and prostate and skin cancer. Meanwhile, in its 2008 biennial review, the NAS concluded that having gained ‘a greater understanding of the trans-generational effects’ of the veterans’ exposure, it accepted a link between the herbicide and spina bifida in veterans’ children. Further research in this area was also recommended.[\[46\]](#)

McCombe and Walker step up the push for a new history

If the powers that be at the War Memorial thought that the 2009 conference would appease the veterans, they were sorely mistaken. Rather, by ignoring certain concerns while offering a fresh indictment of the VVAA, Edwards merely inflamed the issue further, as made evident by the correspondence he now received from McCombe and Walker.

Veterans’ response to Edwards

As McCombe informed Edwards, one of McCombe’s primary concerns with Edwards’ address was its focus. To his mind, an *official* account of the Agent Orange affair should focus on the veterans and how they dealt with the prospect ‘that their exposure might have caused damage to them and their children’. By contrast, the veterans were relatively minor characters in Edwards’ narrative, which centred on issues more ‘relevant to a wider scientific debate’ concerning the herbicide’s impact.[\[47\]](#)



Tim McCombe (author)

Of course, one of the reasons why Edwards had focused on the science of Agent Orange was presumably to weaken the import of the NAS study, by noting, for instance, that it had relied on civilian data. However, as Edwards knew, this reliance had been necessitated by the fact that there were insufficient data to determine the exposure of individual veterans, apart from those who had actually sprayed the herbicides. But, as Walker now instructed him, there was ‘good evidence to show that there had been the *potential* for troops to be sufficiently exposed’, and the NAS study was based on this assumption. And the study found that ‘on the balance of probabilities’ (that is, to a civil standard of proof) several cancers could be linked to Agent Orange, thus ‘clearly’ overturning Evatt’s main finding.[\[48\]](#)

This issue aside, Walker told Edwards that he was ‘astonished’ by his failure to discuss Evatt’s second finding given that it was his ‘most important finding’ in terms of the veterans’ case. In his response, however, Edwards was unwilling to concede this point, stating only that this second finding had to be viewed ‘in the context of [Evatt’s] overall finding’, though not explaining why this was the case. Rather, Edwards seemed more intent on keeping the discussion centred on *his* argument than on revisiting the veterans’ complaints. As he told McCombe, the problem was not that ‘the Agent Orange hypothesis was totally unfounded’ but, by focusing ‘time, resources and effort’ on their campaign, the veterans took attention away from PTSD, smoking and alcohol, whose impact was far more widespread; this was why *his* ‘central argument’ was that this was the ‘real tragedy’ of the Agent Orange affair.[\[49\]](#)

Now, again setting aside Edwards’ selective sympathy, there remained the issue of his equally selective presentation of events, to which Walker was compelled to respond. Surely, he asked, if the Agent Orange affair was the ‘great tragedy’ Edwards suggested, was not the source of that tragedy the ‘intransigence’ of the Repatriation Commission, which had precipitated the veterans’ campaign?[\[50\]](#) Of course, Edwards’ account did not delve into the failings of the government agency, instead attributing the lengthy nature of the affair solely to the misdirected efforts of the veterans.

Moves for a new account

With Edwards thus failing to redress the situation, the veterans turned their attention to a remark made during Edwards’ address which seemed to offer them a compromise of sorts. In particular, while stating that he saw ‘no merit in withdrawing or rewriting Smith’s essay’, which ‘[stood] up well in the light of later evidence’, Edwards also indicated that he would welcome a new, ‘independent’ account of events, ostensibly because there was now ‘much more to write about’.[\[51\]](#) Confusion arose, however, as the veterans took Edwards to mean a

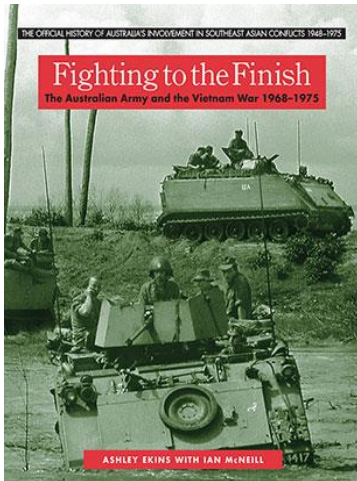
new *official* account, though this notion was quickly dispelled – by Edwards, Ekins and Gower. [\[52\]](#)

In any case, as Gower told McCombe, such a proposal was not even feasible as the War Memorial's Official History Unit had disbanded: Edwards had left in 1996 and only Ekins remained. But when Gower then mooted an alternative proposal – for DVA to take on the project – McCombe took exception, quipping that this would be like asking 'the Fox to supervise a report on missing Chickens'. Instead, McCombe sought to go over Gower's head by writing directly to the then Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Warren Snowdon, both to press the case for a new history, prepared by the Military History Section of the Memorial, and to request financial support. In doing so, McCombe impressed upon Snowdon just how strongly the veterans felt about the issue of Agent Orange, which remained 'one of the unhealed wounds' of the Vietnam War. [\[53\]](#)

Unfortunately, despite the clear intensity of McCombe's feelings, his letter to Snowdon yielded no results and the veterans' push for a new history again stalled. That is, until April 2011, when the veterans' row with the historians was suddenly cast into the public spotlight, following the release of the proceedings from the 2009 conference. Taking up the veterans' case, the *Canberra Times* reported how 'senior figures' at the War Memorial were 'resisting any move' to have the Agent Orange story retold, with the veterans' concerns now compounded by the fact that Smith's 'fatally flawed' account was being 'accepted by a new wave of historians'. [\[54\]](#) With Ekins left to defend the Memorial's stand, he explained that revising an official history would end 'a tradition of independence' dating back to 'the work of Charles Bean'. He conceded, however, that 'in light of more recent developments,' a 'fresh review' of the story was warranted, just not as part of the *official* history. [\[55\]](#)

Ekins' 2012 book on the Vietnam War

But, having reiterated the Memorial's compromise proposal, Ekins then went on to prolong the conflict with the veterans with his 2012 release, *Fighting to the Finish*, the final volume in the Memorial's nine-part series on South-East Asian conflicts. Speaking again to the *Canberra Times*, Ekins was clear that the intention of his book was not to end the 'acrimonious' debate over Agent Orange, but rather to bring 'all the available facts to life', a curious comment given that a mere three pages were devoted to the issue. And, as with Smith and Edwards, Ekins did not even mention Evatt's second ruling, referring only to his main 'not guilty' finding. That said, Ekins did state that doubts persisted after the Royal Commission 'among veterans and others' as to the damaging impact of Agent Orange, with reference made both to the NAS study and its significance to Australian veterans. [\[56\]](#)



Overall, however, Ekins had again let the veterans down, with McCombe informing him that they ‘had hoped for better’ than a mere repetition of Smith’s ‘insulting account’. Meanwhile, to his colleagues, the veteran vented his frustration over the Memorial’s intransigence, querying whether it was ‘more interested in seeking the truth or maintaining the status quo’. Certainly, McCombe had good reason to believe that the latter was the case, with this view further confirmed by the news that Peter Edwards had been commissioned to write a summary volume of the Memorial’s recently completed series. Of course, from the Memorial’s perspective, Edwards was the logical choice as he had served as the series editor. But, to the veterans, Edwards’ selection represented yet another slight, due to his ‘continuing support’ of Smith’s controversial work. Accordingly, McCombe appealed to Edwards to decline the commission and, when that failed, to at least correct his earlier, erroneous claim that the VVAA campaign had delayed assistance to veterans with PTSD.

[\[57\]](#)

Sensing that the veterans were growing increasingly impatient, Edwards wrote to McCombe and Walker to assure them that his book would ‘not necessarily be bound’ by the contents of Smith’s account and that ‘different points of view’ would be canvassed. Subsequently, however, he sent the pair an ominous sign that they would again be let down. In particular, while Edwards stated that he understood their concerns over Smith’s essay, he considered it important to now ‘get beyond the arguments of the 1980s and early 1990s’ and to place the Royal Commission in the context of the long debate over Agent Orange.[\[58\]](#) In short, it was time to move beyond Smith’s flawed account.

Surely, Edwards must have known that this would not be acceptable to the veterans, with McCombe now making their feelings abundantly clear. He wrote that:

Whatever the reason for FB Smith failing to include all the evidence in his account and for his wild attack on the campaigning veterans, [his] account so angered and distressed veterans [that] it became not only a record of a legacy of the Vietnam [W]ar but also became a legacy itself.

For this reason, McCombe held, it was insufficient simply to correct Smith’s errors; the substantial toll his essay had taken on the veterans also had to be acknowledged.[\[59\]](#)

The veterans’ campaign gains momentum

With that said, the VVFA was no longer willing to leave the matter in the hands of the historians; and, in late 2012, the group began a concerted and well-targeted campaign for a

new history. It started with the production of a magazine with Phil Thompson's image on the front cover, bearing the inscription 'Phil Thompson vilified,' a copy of which was sent to all members of the Australian War Memorial Council (the body responsible for the 'conduct and control' of the Memorial's affairs and which would need to give its approval for a new history).[\[60\]](#)

Despite these efforts, however, the initial response was lukewarm, with Council chairman, Rear Admiral Ken Doolan (Ret'd), trying simply to allay the veterans' concerns by promising that the 'points raised' by the VVFA would be raised in Edwards' upcoming book. But, as McCombe explained to Doolan, this was unlikely to suffice, since Edwards' work would be a summary of all nine volumes and any discussion of the Agent Orange affair would thus 'be limited to a paragraph or two'. He therefore reiterated the need for 'a separate full-scale study', whose conclusions 'could not but differ markedly' from those of Edwards and Smith.[\[61\]](#)

With McCombe working behind the scenes, Walker again went public with the veterans' concerns, speaking out on Canberra radio against 'the War Memorial's inaction'. Then, in a bid to broaden their campaign by gaining the support of the Australian public, the VVFA launched a petition on the website *change.org*. In a reworking of Walker's 2009 address, the petition offered a brief overview of the dispute over Smith's essay, before outlining the group's demands: first, for a new history, which would reflect the truth about Evatt's findings and the possible harm caused by the veterans' exposure to Agent Orange and, secondly, for recognition that the VVAA campaign had been conducted in 'the best ANZAC tradition'. As Walker remarked to his colleagues, this petition would show the Memorial that they were 'not just a few isolated dilatatants [sic] whinging about something' that no one else really cared about.[\[62\]](#)



RAAF crop defoliation operation, Vietnam, c. 1968

[\(AWM P01733.005\)](#)

Certainly this was the case, with the petition receiving thousands of signatures and garnering the support of other veterans' groups, including the VVAA and the Australian Families of the Military Research Foundation, with the latter reposting the text of the petition on their own website.[\[63\]](#) Meanwhile, a support group for younger veterans known as 'The Warrior's Return' used its Facebook page to urge members to support their 'older Veteran family' by signing the VVFA petition. These veterans were also asked to consider how the 'biased historians and public servants' might one day interpret *their* history, clear evidence of the damage inflicted on the War Memorial's standing. [\[64\]](#)

Director Nelson arrives

With the petition gathering support, an event was also taking place at the War Memorial, which, according to Walker, was vital to the success of their campaign: the appointment of Brendan Nelson as its new director. In fact, even before Nelson took up the position in December 2012, the VVFA had sent him a copy of Walker's 2009 paper. And, to their delight, Nelson had 'actually read it', inviting Walker and McCombe to meet with him after he assumed the role. As Walker explained, this invitation was significant as it allowed the veterans finally to 'break through the Wall of Silence' to speak directly to the War Memorial Council, with Walker invited to discuss the issue at a Council meeting on 14 August 2013. Here, the veteran again outlined the case against Smith that he had repeatedly made over the past five years although, on this occasion, the outcome was gratifyingly different. To Walker's understanding, the Council reached 'a unanimous decision' that a new historical account was warranted.[\[65\]](#)

Edwards' new book summarising the *Official History*

Of course, even with momentum building for a new account, the historians retained the power of the pen. And, judging by Edwards' new summary volume, *Australia and the Vietnam War*, they were not yet willing to concede too much ground. To begin, by Edwards' own admission, his work was merely an 'impressionistic summary of a long and complex subject', with only five pages devoted to the Agent Orange affair. Thus, as anticipated, his coverage of any specific matter was brief, including a vague reference to Smith's work as 'an essay of one aspect of the story which itself became part of an ongoing controversy'. That said, Edwards did compensate to some extent for his earlier, unfavourable depiction of the VVAA, both by recognising its role in establishing a counselling service for veterans with PTSD and by acknowledging that the group had formed only because the veterans had been 'profoundly disappointed' with the way in which the authorities had met their concerns about Agent Orange.[\[66\]](#)

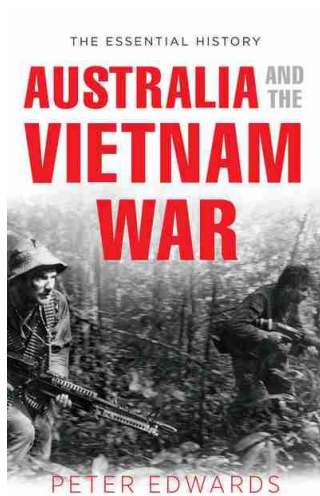
Also significant was that, for the first time in an official history, Edwards referred to Evatt's second finding, that 'there did appear to be a link between [Agent Orange] and some cancers'. Unfortunately, Edwards offered no context for this finding, mentioning neither the 'benefit of the doubt' legislation nor the veterans' battle with the Repatriation Commission. Rather, he merely stated that '[a]mid the continuing conflict over the standard of proof and the continuing arguments over toxic chemicals' many veterans made successful compensation claims. McCombe also noted that this omission of information, while causing confusion for the reader, allowed Edwards to avoid the 'inevitable conclusion' that the second Evatt ruling had vindicated the veterans' campaign.[\[67\]](#)

Hence, while conceding that Edwards' book contained some relevant points, McCombe considered that Edwards' own errors and the brevity of his account made it 'no substitute for a full, independent study'. Apart from this, the veteran took umbrage at an offhand remark Edwards made concerning the 'confrontational attitude' of the VVFA (clearly directed at McCombe and Walker). As McCombe retorted, it was this 'confrontational attitude' which had enabled them to make 'important improvements' in veterans' welfare.[\[68\]](#) Certainly, while the two veterans may have been a thorn in the side of the historians, elsewhere they were being lauded for their contribution to their community, as evidenced by McCombe's 2001 receipt of an OAM. Now, in early 2014, it was Walker's turn to receive recognition, as he became the Senior Australian of the Year for the Australian Capital Territory. While the award acknowledged that Walker had 'assisted thousands of veterans to receive their

entitlements', tellingly, it also recognised his key role in the campaign for a new history of the Agent Orange affair.[\[69\]](#)

Scoping study announced for a new history

Clearly, the tide had turned in the veterans' favour. And, in early April 2014, some twenty years after the dispute began, Brendan Nelson wrote to Tim McCombe to inform him that approval had been given 'to initiate a scoping study' in preparation for an 'independent, single-volume' history, which would focus on 'the post-war medical and health issues affecting Vietnam veterans'. Special attention, he noted, would be paid to 'the impact on veterans' health of [their] exposure to herbicides'. It was to be understood, however, that this account did not constitute a revision of Smith's history; rather, it was necessitated by 'the knowledge gained' in the ensuing decades. [\[70\]](#)



Now in declining health, Professor Smith was unavailable for comment – he died on 3 March 2015 – while Edwards was publicly diplomatic, proposing that the '[m]atters previously raised by ... the VVFA should be assessed' as part of any new work. As for the veterans, McCombe stated that they were 'delighted and grateful' to receive the news, though he chose not to reflect on the scale of their achievement, which was left to historian Greg Pemberton, himself a former War Memorial contributor. Pemberton noted that, while a successful challenge to the official record was not without precedent, this was the first time it had been mounted from the 'trenches'.[\[71\]](#)

Certainly, the veterans had won a formidable victory, achieved in no small part through the dogged determination of McCombe and Walker. And with their victory came vindication, following the completion of the scoping study for the project. Prepared by Dr Peter Yule of the University of Melbourne, the study delivered a blunt appraisal of Smith's work, which Yule considered to be 'too narrow and tendentious for an official history'. Yule also admitted to being taken aback by its 'strident and condemnatory tone' and 'direct attacks' on the VVAA leadership and held that Smith's failure to interview the veterans had been a serious mistake. Summing up his view, Yule noted that

[u]niquely for a contribution to an official history, Smith's approach and conclusions have led his work becoming [sic] part of the continuing controversy over Agent Orange rather than simply an analysis of it. It could even be argued that it has fuelled the controversy. [\[72\]](#)

Finally, after two decades, it seemed that the voice of the veterans had been heard.

But in a final twist to their saga, the veterans' triumph was tempered with great sadness, as news arrived on 31 January 2015 that Tim McCombe had died suddenly. McCombe's death, clearly an enormous loss to the veterans' community, also meant that he was never able to read Yule's study, which was only received by the War Memorial Council in March. Nor was he there to congratulate Graham Walker when, in June, Walker was made a Member of the Order of Australia, for his work on behalf of the veterans' community, including his successful lobbying for a new history.^[73] Finally, and of greatest poignancy, is that McCombe will never read the history (described in the asterisked Note below) for which he campaigned so vigorously. And, with the task of preparing that history now in the hands of Peter Yule and a completion date of around 2019, Graham Walker still has a long wait ahead of him.

Closing remarks

If there were any doubts as to whether the veterans were right to take on the War Memorial over Smith's essay, these have surely been dispelled by Yule's study, not to mention the numerous accolades recently bestowed on Walker. If this still seems insufficient, however, it may be worth considering how Smith's contentious account accords with the Memorial's own description of its official histories.

What is an official history?

According to the War Memorial's website, its 'histories are "official" in that they are commissioned by the government' but they 'contain the authors' own interpretations and judgements' rather than following 'any official or government line'. Apart from this, they are said to provide 'a comprehensive, authoritative and accessible account of the Australian experience of war'. In essence, they offer an independent and thorough coverage of events.^[74]

So how does Smith's work measure up against this description? In terms of the second point, it does very well, at least *officially*, as indicated by Edwards' 2009 paper as well as a recent remark made by Brendan Nelson, that 'Smith was commended by his peers for the comprehensive and balanced nature of his study'.^[75] Of course, behind the scenes, the assessment has been less favourable, with Yule's study labelling the essay 'narrow and tendentious.'

As for Smith's autonomy, both Smith and Ekins referred pointedly to Charles Bean and the official historians' long tradition of independence; Nelson was equally pointed when he affirmed that Smith's essay was *not* 'an officially sanctioned interpretation' of events.^[76] Yet it seems implausible to the outsider that the War Memorial has no oversight over the works released under its imprimatur or that its more contentious works are not subject to any official vetting.

Indeed, even if we do not accept the cynic's depiction of official histories as 'mere propaganda', there remains the perception that they are approved by the government of the day, which has an interest in shaping the 'collective memory'.^[77] Certainly, Smith's work has the appearance of being government-sanctioned, with the overall purpose of endorsing Evatt's main 'not guilty' finding. This would explain why his narrative was framed in such a narrow context, omitting details which would have shown the Royal Commission in a less than favourable light, when in truth both Evatt and his report had been severely criticised.

Still, simply to dismiss Smith's essay as an apologia for Evatt's inquiry does not explain his antipathy towards the VVAA, over which opinions remain divided. Yule offers a diplomatic explanation, attributing Smith's approach to his being a writer of nineteenth century history, with an obvious reliance on written rather than oral records. Also, since the protagonists in Smith's earlier works were dead, Yule states that it was 'impossible to offend them' so Smith was able to take 'a crusading approach ... and criticise the[ir] actions and motives'.

Now, while Yule's second point may also have some merit, it does seem plausible that Smith's reliance on the Royal Commission transcripts contributed to his own immoderate position. As British historian Rodney Lowe notes when discussing the issues inherent in official histories, they 'are liable to be "captured" by the powerful assumptions underlying official records' in turn 'constructing an unbalanced "first draft of history"' which will invariably 'prejudice later interpretations'. This certainly seems to be the case with Smith's essay.[\[78\]](#)

Agent Orange victims, Ho Chi Minh City, 2004 ([Wikimedia Commons/Alexis Duclos](#))



How do official attitudes affect official histories?

Yet, to put Smith's tendentious account down to incomplete research and a 'crusading approach' does not seem an adequate explanation. This prompts a revisiting of Smith's claims of autonomy, claims which Graham Walker has clearly rejected. In advancing his view – which he admitted is based on 'supposition' – Walker looked at the institutions best served by a negative portrayal of the veterans. Starting with the War Memorial itself, Walker stated that it 'was probably not attracted to stories that gave the war a bad name' and perhaps felt that the veterans stood 'outside the ANZAC tradition' in failing simply 'to "shut up and take it"'. Adding to this was the fact that the VVAA was off side with both DVA and the RSL, with which the Memorial maintains close connections. (For example, Rear Admiral Doolan has been since 2009 both a member of the Memorial's Council, including a term as Chairman from 2012 to 2015, and National President of the RSL.) Finally, Walker believed that there may have been 'a class aspect' to Smith's approach in that the VVAA involved no former senior officers, consisting mainly of former non-commissioned officers and former national servicemen, who may have been 'seen by the elites as ... a scruffy nuisance'. Hence, with Smith's own conservative 'predisposition and a little encouragement', he may have seen the VVAA in a similarly negative light.[\[79\]](#)

As for Edwards and Ekins, Walker was unsure of their motivation, suggesting that perhaps they were just 'reluctant to be seen to be wrong'. It is also likely that a collegial spirit and a desire to preserve the War Memorial's standing influenced Edwards' and Ekins' efforts to

uphold Smith's flawed account.^[80] Whatever Edwards' and Ekins' purpose, it is clear that, to date, the Memorial has failed to provide a thorough, independent account of the Agent Orange affair, thereby doing a great disservice to the reading public, the history profession and the Vietnam veterans. Smith, by offering such a narrow and skewed presentation of this complex episode, robbed his essay of credibility, with any legitimate points invariably lost amid the accusations and invective. While Edwards' subsequent effort lacked the virulence of his predecessor's work, it failed to correct Smith's main misconceptions or to present a broader, more even-handed account of the controversy.

Perhaps most disconcerting of all has been the perpetuation of the idea that the motives of the VVAA were dishonourable and that the group's leaders were driven by a desire for personal gain. The veterans have tried their best to counter these claims, as made evident by Walker's 2009 paper. Similarly, in a 2012 posting on the VVFA website, McCombe wrote of the 'remarkably fine behaviour' of these men, who were 'dedicated to remedying an injustice' being visited on the veterans and their families.^[81] Of course, this sense of injustice was noticeably absent from the accounts of both Smith and Edwards, which, in turn, meant that their narratives were largely devoid of the frustration, isolation and desperation the veterans experienced in their lengthy campaign for the truth. In short, by failing to present the veterans' side of the Agent Orange story, the historians stripped away the emotion from what was, for many, an intensely emotional time.

To conclude, it is worth reflecting on a remark made by Peter Edwards at the 2009 conference, referring to his and Graham Walker's papers as 'a tale of competing narratives'. Surely, it is not the role of the official historian to compete with those whose history they are writing, but rather to incorporate their personal recollections into the official historian's own comprehensive account. By failing to do this, these official historians led the Vietnam veterans into a bitter and protracted controversy and, in the process, stepped out of their role as chroniclers of history to become part of history itself.^[82]

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Agent Orange victim Ke Van Bec, 14, and mother, Vietnam, 2004 ([Wikimedia Commons/Alexis Duclos](#))

Notes

* The term 'official history' is used differently by the protagonists in this essay. For the Vietnam veterans, it indicates any of the historical works produced under the auspices of the Australian War Memorial while at the Memorial the term has a more restrictive meaning, referring to a series of historical works 'commissioned by government'. ('Official histories', Australian War Memorial, accessed 1 June 2014; <https://www.awm.gov.au/histories/>).

Honest History asked the War Memorial whether the Yule volume was to be 'official' or 'independent'. The following reply was received and is reproduced unamended: 'The project is to produce an independent history that will document and analyse the medical legacies of the Vietnam War. It is not part of the official history series.' The Memorial also referred to [further information on its website](#) regarding the Yule volume. The work is described on the webpage as 'an independent history that will document and analyse the medical legacies of the Vietnam War This history will examine the development of various medical issues experienced by Australian veterans, with a particular focus on the health effects of exposure to herbicides, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).'

However, in Senate testimony late last year, Memorial director Brendan Nelson made reference to the aforementioned volume as 'an official history', thus applying the broader definition of the term understood by the veterans (and likely the reading public). Parliament of Australia. Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, 21 October 2015, Estimates, Defence Portfolio, Australian War Memorial, accessed 11 March 2016

<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22committees%2Festimate%2F6662254f-7408-419c-b81e-4a2e7981ccea%2F0003%22>.

Director Nelson said:

The reason we are doing this is not to rewrite the history of the Vietnam War at all, but when those men and women returned from Vietnam they came back to a society that carried certain prejudices in relation to the war. There was a royal commission into the use of herbicides in Vietnam and there was some pejorative language that was used in relation to these veterans and their advocates in the context of the impact of herbicides, and we now, more than 30 years later, have more information and understanding of this and we think it is appropriate to have **an official history** that looks at the medical legacies of the Vietnam War and to do so dispassionately and have it informed by what we now know. (Emphasis added.)

[1] While Agent Orange was one of a range of chemical mixtures used in Vietnam, the term is typically used to refer to these chemicals collectively.

[2] Sincere thanks to Graham Walker for providing me with correspondence between himself and fellow veteran, Tim McCombe, and historians and staff at the Australian War Memorial.

[3] Smith was a professor at the Australian National University in Canberra. FB Smith, 'Agent Orange: the Australian aftermath', Part IV of Brendan O'Keefe, *Medicine at War: Medical Aspects of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asia 1950-1972* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin/Australian War Memorial, 1994).

[4] Robin Hill, 'Old wounds reopened', *Bulletin*, 15 March 1994, 40-41.

[5] Ibid, 41; Graham Walker, Notes on the Official History Account of the Agent Orange Controversy (Unpublished, August 2014).

[6] Hill, 'Old wounds reopened', 41.

[7] McCullagh, a senior fellow at the John Curtin School of Medical Research in Canberra, had testified at the Royal Commission.

[8] For instance, see a 2002 paper written by founding VVAA member, Lachlan Irvine: 'Lies, damned lies and history: a response to F. B. Smith's 'Agent Orange: the Australian aftermath', accessed 20 May 2014, <http://lachlanirvine.tripod.com/history/id6.html>.

[9] 'The Aussie Digger forum', accessed May 4, 2014, <http://theaussiedigger.com/TheAussieDiggerForum/index.php?topic=5.40:wap2>.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Walker, e-mail messages to author, 26, 28 August, 17 November 2015.

[12] Walker, Notes on the Official History.

[13] Graham Walker, 'The Agent Orange story is not over', *Wartime* 47 (2009): 44.

[14] The conference was entitled *War Wounds: Medicine and the Trauma of Conflict*.

[15] While Walker's address was first published in 2011, it was updated numerous times; this study relies primarily on the 2013 update. Graham Walker, 'The Official History's Agent Orange account: the veterans' perspective', in Ashley Ekins et al., ed., *War Wounds: Medicine and the Trauma of Conflict* (Wollombi, NSW: Exisle Publishing, 2011), 148-161; Walker, 'Veterans' perspective', 2013 Update, accessed 11 May 2014, <http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/AO-VETERANS-PERSPECTIVE-2013-UPDATE-with-INSULTS-Annex.pdf>.

[16] Smith, 'Agent Orange', 293, 303. This view is contradicted by author, Paul Ham, who notes that in 1983, 4000 Australian veterans joined a class action lawsuit in the US against the manufacturers of Agent Orange. Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War* (Pymble, NSW: Harper Collins, 2007), 622.

[17] Smith, 'Agent Orange', 293, 304, 362.

[18] Walker, 'Veterans' perspective', 2013 Update, 14-15.

[19] Graham Walker, 'The Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia', in Kenneth Maddock et al., ed., *War: Australia and Vietnam* (Artarmon, NSW: Harper and Row, 1987), 207, 210, 228.

[20] Submission to 'Agent Orange' Royal Commission, of Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, [AWM PR84/204](#), Australian War Memorial.

[21] For instance, in an apparent bid to highlight Thompson's avarice, Smith noted that prior to the Royal Commission, he 'was receiving irregularly augmented repatriation benefits'. According to Lachlan Irvine, however, these payments actually came from a contributory superannuation scheme; Thompson never claimed nor received repatriation benefits: Smith, 'Agent Orange', 296; Walker, 'Veterans' perspective', 2013 Update, 9; VVFA, 'President's message, 2012', accessed 28 March 2014; Irvine, 'Lies, damned lies and history'.

[22] Walker, 'Veterans' perspective', 2013 Update, 4-6; VVAA, Submission to Royal Commission.

[23] This ruling was made despite the government's passing of a second amendment in the closing stages of the inquiry, rendering the 'benefit of doubt' rule more restrictive. Walker, 'Veterans' perspective', 2013 Update, 6.

[24] *Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam: Final Report, July 1985, Volume 7: Benefits and Treatment* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1985), Chapter XIV, 363-365.

[25] Walker, 'Veterans' perspective', 2013 Update, 5-6.

[26] *Ibid*, 8, 13.

[27] *Ibid*, 7, 12; Walker, Notes on the Official History.

[28] Ambrose Crowe, *The Battle after the War: The Story of Australia's Vietnam Veterans* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 118; Smith, 'Agent Orange', 362.

[29] Bob Hogg, cited in Crowe, *The Battle after the War*, 130; E. J. Steele et al., ed., *Evatt Revisited: Interpretation of Scientific Evidence* (Sydney: Centre for Human Aspects of Science and Technology, 1989); Smith, 'Agent Orange', 361, 363.

[30] Walker, 'Veteran's perspective', 2013 Update, 10-11. See: Institute of Medicine, *Veterans and Agent Orange* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 1994).

[31] Walker, 'Veteran's perspective', 2013 Update, 8, 10.

[32] Peter Edwards, 'A tangle of decency and folly, courage and chicanery, but above all, waste: the case of Agent Orange and Australia's Vietnam veterans' in Graeme Davison et al., ed., *Body and Mind: Historical Essays in Honour of F.B. Smith* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2009), 216-231; Peter Edwards, 'The Official History's Agent Orange account: a historian's perspective', in *War Wounds*, 162-182.

[33] Edwards, 'Historian's perspective', 163.

[34] *Ibid*, 164-166; Edwards, 'A tangle of decency', 220.

[35] VVAA, Submission to Royal Commission.

[36] According to Irvine, the veterans had hoped for a scientific inquiry to assess the evidence and make recommendations to the federal government. They learned only on the

first day of the Royal Commission that it would be a legal battle against Monsanto: Irvine, 'Lies, damned lies and history.'

[37] While not making this point himself, Edwards did refer to a remark made by Professor John Matthews, scientific advisor to the Royal Commission, that the evidence linking Agent Orange to cancer 'was still not good enough to be sure, nor good enough to exclude the possibility'. Edwards, 'Historian's perspective', 169-170; Hill, 'Old wounds reopened', 41.

[38] Edwards, 'A tangle of decency', 229-230; Edwards, 'Historian's perspective', 179.

[39] McCombe to Edwards, 14 March 2012.

[40] Edwards, 'A tangle of decency and folly', 224; Sarah Boseley, 'Renowned cancer scientist was paid by chemical firm for 20 years,' *Guardian*, 8 December 2006.

[41] Edwards, 'Historian's perspective', 172-75; Edwards, 'A tangle of decency', 224-29.

[42] See: Jock McCulloch, *The Politics of Agent Orange: The Australian Experience* (Richmond, Vic.: Heinemann, 1984) and Brian Martin, 'Agent Orange: the new controversy', *Australian Society*, 5, 11, (November 1986): 25-26. For a recent discussion of the politics behind both the NAS study and the Royal Commission, see Edward Martini, *Agent Orange: History, Science and the Politics of Uncertainty* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

[43] Edwards, 'Historian's perspective', 172-73, 177-78.

[44] Ibid, 177-79.

[45] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Cancer Incidence in Australian Vietnam Veterans* (2005), 119, 174, accessed 20 June 2014, http://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/consultation%20and%20grants/healthstudiesma/mortcanvietvet/cancer_incidence.pdf.

[46] Ibid, 182; N. Ansbaugh et al., 'Agent Orange as a risk factor for high-grade prostate cancer,' *Cancer*, 119 (1 July 2013): 2399-2404; 'Agent Orange exposure increases skin cancer risk in Vietnam veterans', *Medical News Today*, 2 February 2014, accessed 7 September 2015, <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/272046.php> ; Institute of Medicine, *Veterans and Agent Orange* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2008).

[47] McCombe to Edwards, 11 October 2009.

[48] Walker to Edwards, 13 October 2009.

[49] Ibid; Edwards to McCombe, 30 October 2009.

[50] Walker to Edwards, 5 November 2009.

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[52] Walker to Ekins, 19 October 2009; Edwards to McCombe, 30 October 2009; Ekins to Walker, 21 October 2009; Gower to McCombe, 9 November 2009.

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