

## I was only 19 re-recorded by John Schumann from Redgum and The Waifs after 40 years

[ABC Sunshine Coast](#)

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John Schumann (centre) with The Waifs, (from left) Donna Simpson, Josh Cunningham, and Vikki Thom. (Supplied: Glenn Morgan)

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The iconic song I was only 19 by John Schumann, the lead singer/songwriter of Redgum, has been re-recorded 40 years after it was first released in 1983.

### Key points:

- I was only 19 has been re-released with The Waifs
- The new version highlights the pain felt by the mums, wives, and sisters of Vietnam servicemen
- Royalties from the song will go to an advocacy group to help the families of servicemen

The song, described by The Australian War Memorial as "the quintessential song of the Australian Vietnam War veteran", was released at a time when public opinion on the Vietnam War was still profoundly divided.

The new version of the song sees the original singer/songwriter John Schumann team up with West Australian folk rock band The Waifs with help from one of the country's most in-demand producers Shane Nicholson.

I was only 19 was based on the experiences of Schumann's brother-in-law, Mick Storen, who had served with The Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR) in Vietnam in 1969.

"I was only 19 made us stop and realise: 'These blokes, they did it so tough' — they deserved more," Schumann said.

The project to re-create the song will help the children of Australian Defence Force families that have served in our most recent conflicts, Schumann said, with all artist royalties being donated to the Commando Welfare Trust (CWT).

"The kids' footy trip away, the music lessons ... the services that the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) don't pick up," he said.

"It just makes sure that those kids are not disadvantaged because Dad's not there."

YOUTUBE I was only 19 remains a powerful anthem for Australian soldiers as it turns 40.

### **Spine-tingling performance**

Schumann said The Waifs moulded a new perspective of the war experience into the song.

"I remember when I first heard them 20 years ago thinking ... 'Ah, so that's where the Redgum baton went'," Schumann said.

"They just had a nice sensibility, the way they told stories, the Aussie accent ... so I jumped at that."

During the recording, Vikki Thom of The Waifs agreed that her sister Donna Simpson was the perfect voice for opening the track.

"When you hear Donna's voice you can't really prepare for the depth of it and the sensitivity with which she sings," Thom said.



John Schumann and Donna Simpson collaborate on the new version of I Was Only 19. (Supplied: Glen Morgan)

Schumann agrees that it was right that this version had a female influence.

"You can just feel the pain of the mums, the wives, sisters and girlfriends," he said.

"You got to imagine them and what it was like to watch their men just march away."

He said with the addition of multiple instruments, a different and unique sound was created.

"Shane played the dobro, Josh Cunningham (The Waifs) played some slide guitar, and I played harmonica, which brings such a great, mournful sound," Thom said.



## Producer's childhood memories

Moved by the song as a kid, Nicholson said he immediately knew the 40th anniversary of the song should be acknowledged in a significant way.

"The first time I performed that song in public was at one of Dad's Air Force reunions," Nicholson recalled.

"There was power in that song ... it meant something to all those people."



Shane Nicholson and John Schumann in the recording studio. (Supplied: John Schumann)

Nicholson said he was reminded of the song's influence when Schumann joined him on stage recently.

"You can just feel the reverence that the song still has — the air in the room changed," Nicholson said.

"I could just feel the power ... we haven't marred the memory of that song in any way, only built on it."

For Nicholson, one of the most memorable moments of producing the new version was listening to Schumann's take on it.

"John said: 'There are 40 more years of gigs in my voice now and having the female perspective is something incredible,'" he said.

## No welcome home

CWT ambassador, Retired Major Steve Pilmore OAM RFD was a serving officer when the song was first released.

"At the time, we were quite careful to not make any references to military service because when the guys came back from Vietnam they were treated abominably," Major Pilmore said.

"(They'd) call you baby killers and throw paint on you in the streets in Queensland."



Retired Major Steve Pilmore performing a static line parachute jump out of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter in 1981. *(Supplied: Retired Major Steve Pilmore)*

Major Pilmore said that few people were as "informed about and dedicated" to our veterans as John Schumann.

"For a bloke who hasn't served in the military, he has a deep understanding of it," Major Pilmore said.

"The CWT is not about deciding whether we go to war. It's making sure the support structure is around those affected by war.

"I've had guys saying: 'I'm really so grateful for what you've done', and I say: 'Well mate, you've already earned this by a factor of ten, so don't be bashful.'"