Celebrations in Australia History: The Vietnam War

by Tahlia Hennessy

Hypothesis:
The controversial Vietnam War had a huge impact on Australian society in the 1960s and 1970s and in the long term has helped shape the Australian nation. However, my argument is that there has never been full recognition or a ‘celebration’ dedicated to the sacrifice, honour and bravery of the Australian soldiers of Vietnam and that it is too late for that ‘celebration’.

A celebration can be defined as a ‘positive acknowledgment of something good in life’ [1] and is a time for people to ‘rejoice and be happy’. [2] There has been many times in Australian history where people have celebrated life, an event, a movement or experience but what may be a celebration for one person or a group of people may not be for another. What defines something as a ‘celebration’ is completely up to that person or group. From 1962 to 1972 Australia was involved in the Vietnam War. A total of 47,000 Australians served in that time and suffered the prolonged and terrible consequences of the Vietnam slaughter. It was a war which proved to be completely different to all other wars preceding it. The outcomes of Vietnam had a huge impact on society in the sixties and seventies in many areas of life and in the long term has had lasting effects on the Australian nation. The interviews conducted with both Mr Peter Sheehan and Ms Tina Barnes for an oral investigation conducted in 2004, Perth WA, uncovered debateable points on the Vietnam War. Mr Sheehan, a Vietnam Veteran, revealed that the tragedy of Vietnam proved to evoke strikingly different responses from Australian society compared to previous wars. He clearly expressed his belief that the sacrifice, honour and bravery of the Vietnam soldiers was not, and still is not, fully recognised by society and not ‘celebrated’ as such. Ms Barnes, a university student living in England at the time of war, was most definitely ‘appalled by the circumstances of Vietnam like many of [her] generation’, [3] however she argued that no war should ever be a cause of ‘celebration’ amongst people.

In 1962 Australia’s Liberal Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, sent ‘thirty two Australian jungle warfare experts to South Vietnam’. [4] During the Second World War Australia had come to increasingly rely on America as its main defensive ally and a stronger relationship between the two countries emerged. Two outcomes of this stronger relationship were the ANZUS and SEATO treaties of 1951 and 1954 respectively. When America became involved in Vietnam the Australian government supposedly felt ‘duty bound’ to aid America and South Vietnam in the battle against Communism coming from the North. Mr Sheehan was the Sergeant of an SAS Squadron and in 1968 was sent to Vietnam. Mr Sheehan and the Squadron had the ‘main role of reconnaissance’. [5] They would ‘count numbers, identify camps and tracks’ [6] and ‘report information back for the task force’ [7] in case future battalions were needed in the area. At the time Mr Sheehan and many of his comrades felt that their true role in Vietnam was to fight and prevent the ‘Domino Theory’. The ‘Domino Theory’ was the ‘fear of successive Communist victories’ [8] in Asian countries, which would eventually lead to Communism ruling Australia. Mr Sheehan stated that ‘back in the years [he] felt it [communism] was a serious threat’ [9] but it was also ‘the thing at the time’. [10] Conscription was also a controversial issue of the Vietnam War and in 1964 the government implemented a National Service Scheme in Australia. The process of conscription, known as the ‘Lottery of Death’, [11] saw many young Australians being unwillingly sent to Vietnam and forced to fight and kill, even though they were not allowed to vote or...
drink alcohol at home. All of these issues surrounding Vietnam contributed to the growing protest movement on the home front and saw great unrest amongst many Australians. These issues can also be seen as some of the main reasons why Veterans were not 'celebrated' upon their return home.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were 'turbulent years' [12] and Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, the changing relations with America, emanate Communist ideologies and conscription heavily 'divided the community'. [13] Ms Barnes said that they were 'extraordinary days...days of hopefulness' [14] and that their 'generation really thought [they] could change the world'. [15] The generation she spoke of was the youth of society. Because many young people were being conscripted, and most of the time forcefully sent to Vietnam, an increasing number of youth started to oppose Australia's involvement by becoming conscientious objectors and starting anti-war organisations such as the 'Youth Campaign Against Conscription'. Many parents also supported this defiance and set up groups such as 'Save Our Sons'. The initial anti-Vietnam action was far from being a mass movement but the public's increasing awareness of the realities of war, bought to them by the horrid and gruesome television broadcasts, 'lifted the level of protest'. [16] The protest movement in Australia reached a peak on the 8th of May 1970 when the first Moratorium was organised by the Australian Labor Party. More than 120,000 people took part in the Moratorium and openly expressed their opposition against the Vietnam War. The 'Labor Party spoke out increasingly against the immorality' [17] of Vietnam and it seemed as though people were beginning to recognise that Vietnam was unjust, cruel and made out to be a 'bullies war'. [18] Slowly, the Australian and American forces in Vietnam were reduced, but the troops returned home without any celebrations. It can be said that the 'troops, who had done their duty, were the scapegoats of a war made by politicians' [19] and on their return home were characterised, not as heroes, but instead as criminals.

Upon his return in 1969, Mr Sheehan said that he escaped the protestors, was bought back late at night and felt a 'great relief to come home'. [20] In an article a Vietnam Veteran said, 'we often felt betrayed by Australian society which questioned our sacrifice and actions. The lack of public welcome and recognition on our return added to this sense of betrayal'. [21] Mr Sheehan agreed with the Veteran’s statement and said that the Australian community 'did nothing for us at all'. [22] Other soldiers experienced severe hostility upon their return and had 'tomatoes and red paint thrown at them'. [23] When Australians had returned home from previous wars they were welcomed and paraded in the streets and their sacrifice and lives were ‘celebrated’ by many, and continue to be ‘celebrated’ today. However, the different circumstances of the Vietnam War influenced people’s reactions to the returning soldiers and a sense of 'national guilt' took its toll on Vietnam Veterans. The men’s war experiences were said to be 'so brutalising that many came home quite unstable, anti-social and given to fits of rage' [24] and some became 'drug addicts and prone to suicide'. [25] Mr Sheehan himself suffered from 'severe post traumatic stress' [26] and was not aware of it 'for something like twenty years' [27] after Vietnam. He simply stated that men 'came home and had to soldier on'. [28] Perhaps if Australians initially recognised and 'celebrated' the men involved in Vietnam upon their return, the psychological effects of war may not have been so agonising and extensive and help may have been offered to the Veterans at an earlier time.

It was not until many years after the soldiers returned home from Vietnam that the official ‘Welcome Home Parade’ was held in Sydney on October the 3rd 1987. Most Veterans felt that the 'parade was public acknowledgment for fighting one of Australia’s wars' [29] but at the same time felt it was an acknowledgment that should have been received many years before. Some people regard the parade as a ‘celebration’ for the Veterans sacrifice, bravery and honour in Vietnam. Although the parade can be likened to the ‘celebrations’ after the two World Wars, it still took a long and painful fifteen years for the Australian community to publicly recognise Vietnam Veterans. When Mr Sheehan was asked how he felt about the marches he said, 'at least there was something for us', [30] however he also stated that it was ‘a bit late’ [31] as ‘a lot of people had passed on or committed suicide or whatever by then’. [32] In 1992, definitely a long time, again, since the war, a Vietnam Memorial was constructed in Canberra on ANZAC Parade. ‘The memorial remembers those who suffered and died in the Vietnam War from 1962 to 1973'. [33] It seems that Australian society is gradually recognising and ‘celebrating' what the Veterans fought for many years ago. Mr Sheehan expressed that it is 'only now when people realise that the First and Second World War chaps are all almost gone' that Vietnam Veterans are being remembered. Nevertheless, perhaps through movements such as the ‘Welcome Home
Marches’, the Vietnam Memorial in Canberra and the increasing number of people honouring Veterans on ANZAC Day, that a ‘celebration’ can be linked with the Vietnam War.

The subject of ‘celebration’ associated with the Vietnam War, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, would have been viewed as a complete oxymoron. Although still a disputable issue in today’s society many people would agree that Australia is gradually starting to recognise, and to an extent even ‘celebrate’, what 47,000 Australians sacrificed in Vietnam. Although there are many definitions for a ‘celebration’, defining one for the Vietnam War is difficult. Ms Barnes argued that ‘there is nothing to celebrate about the Vietnam War’ [34] or any war fought on the basis of invading another country. She ‘recognises that the soldiers who went off to fight in the conflict are in a very hard place’ [35] and she feels sympathy for them, however sees no cause for celebration. The difference in opinion between a Vietnam Veteran, who saw the horrors of war first hand, to that of a young university student, aware of the war mainly through the media’s uncensored television coverage, is easily distinguishable. However, both interviewees agreed that the Vietnam War was different to all other wars. Both Mr Sheehan and Ms Barnes revealed that they shared the same views, in that the soldiers who served time at Vietnam did not get full recognition and respect for their sacrifice, bravery and honour. When Mr Sheehan was asked if feels he has been ‘patted on the back’ for his involvement in Vietnam, he simply answered ‘no’. [36] There has never been a ‘celebration’ dedicated to the Australian Vietnam Veterans on the same scale, compared to previous wars. Perhaps now, some thirty years on, it is too late for any ‘celebration’.

Endnotes

1. Direct quote taken from the interview conducted with Ms Tina Barnes
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
5. Direct quote taken from the interview conducted with Mr Peter Sheehan
6. Ibid
7. Ibid
9. Op Cit. Mr Peter Sheehan
10. Ibid
13. Ibid
14. Op Cit. Ms Tina Barnes
15. Ibid
16. Op Cit Now and Then
17. Op Cit. Australia at War Since 1945 p. 21
18. Op Cit. Ms Tina Barnes
19. Op Cit. Australia at War Since 1945 p. 21
20. Op Cit. Mr Peter Sheehan
21. Quote taken from an article off the internet, Vietnam Veterans Today (details on website unknown)
22. Op Cit. Mr Peter Sheehan
Bibliography

Primary sources

Interviews

1. Ms Tina Barnes (interview response on tape and attached sheet): Gave insightful information on the Vietnam War from a different point of view; Provided argument of, ‘Can any war be celebrated?’
2. Mr Peter Sheehan (interview response on tape and attached sheet): Excellent information on his first hand experience at the Vietnam War; Provided argument that, ‘Australian society has never fully recognised Vietnam Veterans’

Photographs

Scanned photos provided by Mr Peter Sheehan (his experiences during the Vietnam War)

1. Mr Sheehan and his Squadron at the Vietnam War 1968/1969 – being dropped off by helicopter support
2. Detailed map of Vietnam – Mr Sheehan and his Squadron used the map to succeed in operations
4. Propaganda pamphlet – frequently dropped from helicopters telling Australians/Americans about the Vietnamese people – often used to try and get North Vietnamese to surrender

Secondary sources

Books


**Internet sites**


2. Vietnam Veterans Today (details of Internet Site unknown): Interesting quote from a Vietnam Veteran – reveals how he felt when returning home to a hostile Australia