

*Address by Dave Sabben (introduced as having fought at Long Tan)
Frankston RSL Sub-Branch and Frankston & District Viet Vets Sub-Branch
Remembrance Ceremony for Long Tan Day, Sunday 14 August 2005, Frankston
Cenotaph.*

I see the Viet Nam Veteran community in Australia as a pool - of people, if you will. Most of the year, the pool is calm. Okay, there might be churning and thrashing under the surface, but outwardly, they're calm, at rest, normal people all going about their normal business.

Then, once a year, a pebble is thrown into the pool. There's a small splash in the centre, and ripples radiate out to the far edges. And the nation – or a part of it at least – stops to remember the Viet Vets,

The Viet Vets themselves chose the Battle of Long Tan to be the centre-piece of their day. To be the focal point of their own remembrance of all matters Viet Nam. Long Tan wasn't the biggest battle the Australians experienced. It didn't last the longest. Nor did it involve the most troops. But it was perhaps the most desperate; the most critical to the Australian mission, and certainly it was the most decisive in terms of results.

So I stand here today to represent to you the people of the Long Tan story.

In the centre, the splash if you like, was 105 Australian Infantry soldiers and 3 NZ Artillery men. 108 Anzacs walked into that rubber plantation at Long Tan on 18 August 1966.

Within minutes of the first shot, we called for artillery support. 161 Battery, NZ Artillery, were on call – 6 gun crews became the first ripple in the pond. A few dozen men swung into action to support the blokes out there under fire. Along with their HQ men, the gun plotters, the communications men, all their own support crews.

Within an hour we called the first Regimental fire mission. Three more Batteries joined in. We now had 24 guns firing for us – 24 gun crews, 4 Battery HQs – the ripples radiating.

At Task Force HQ and in the Fire Control Centre, dozens more men swung into action. Command and Control with liaison among units. What's to be done to help Delta Company?

Halfway through the battle, with ammo running low, we called for a re-supply. Two RAAF choppers – four-man crews in each – flew to 6RAR to collect the ammo. A dozen men delivered it, loaded it onto the choppers. Four 6RAR men climbed in. The choppers then flew through impossible weather to hover above us, under fire, and kicked the ammo out right into the middle of our position. And we can include the blokes who service and supply the choppers and keep them in the air. The ripples around the battle now include a couple of hundred more soldiers.

At about the same time, 10 APCs were sent to collect Alpha Company, 6RAR. Ten APCs with two crew each – one of whom would be killed in the battle. Plus all the men who kept the APCs serviced and operational then add the 100-plus men of Alpha Company, now aboard the APCs, and racing to our help. The ripples now reach out to include maybe 500 men?

At the Task Force base, scores of soldiers hear the guns firing continuously. They rush to the Artillery lines to help wherever they can – they carry ammo to the guns, Clear ammo boxes from the gun positions, and the spent shells. Others made sandwiches and hot chocolate for the gun crews – all just helping – all in support.

And the ripples extend beyond Australian forces. I've already mentioned the New Zealanders. One of the artillery batteries was an American 155mm gun battery. There were, Americans in jets overhead, above the storm, looking for a break in the clouds so they could drop their bombs. There was no break, so they unloaded further away. Other

Americans looked to the re-supply and transport of artillery ammo to the guns. And there were women in support too!

At Long Tan we lost 17 dead and 23 wounded.

We sent the 23 wounded to the hospitals – some with horrific wounds. The doctors, nurses, nursing aids, Red Cross workers, they all did a magnificent job. They didn't lose one man of the wounded we sent them. The hospital staff returned to us or to Australia all 23 – all alive. No one died in their care.

So you can see that the ripples radiating out from Long Tan included many, many hundreds. And I speak for all of them when I say to you:

THANKS FOR REMEMBERING US

But that's not all. Long Tan was only one afternoon's work.

More ripples. More battles. Thousands of Infantry soldiers served in Viet Nam. Thousands walked the weeds, patrolled, and stood sentry duty, laid awake overnight on ambushes. They might not all have had a Long Tan, but they all knew another Long Tan was possible. They all had the strain of training for and expecting another Long Tan, and beside and behind them, tens of thousands supporting them. The ripples reach out to the very edge of the Viet Vet pool.

Men in ships offshore in planes above, in choppers, men in tanks and trucks and jeeps men who went down the tunnels, men who cleared the mines and booby traps, men on radios and behind the big guns, men in Q-stores, and kitchens and offices. Every unsung hero who heard the call, said "I'll go", went, did his job, and then returned.

I speak for them all – more than 50,000 of them, every ripple in the pond. And I say to you here:

THANK YOU FOR REMEMBERING US ALL

Thanks for foregoing whatever you might have otherwise been doing right now. Thanks for coming out of your warm homes. Thanks for publicly acknowledging our experience.

I should sit down now, but there is one more thing that I know they would all like me to add:

PLEASE REMEMBER US WITH TRUTH, HONESTY, ACCURACY

Please don't believe the lies, the half-truths, the deliberate slurs or the ignorant accusations. We weren't superheroes. But nor were we scoundrels. (Well, most of us weren't, anyway!) We were just men who did our job.

And please don't believe that we didn't do our job!

We did not go to Viet Nam to invade the North. We didn't go to topple their government.

We didn't go to remove Ho Chi Minh from power. We went **to stop the fighting in the South.**

We achieved this in January 1973. The Allies forced the North to sign the Paris Peace Accord.

The Accord agreed to a halt to all hostilities, the withdrawal of all non-Vietnamese forces, the exchange of POWs and, importantly, that the North would honour their border with the South.

It was over. We had achieved our aim. The fighting in the South was stopped. We came home.

In January 1973, our Governor General, Sir Paul Hasluck told the parliament and people of Australia:

HOSTILITIES IN VIET NAM HAVE CEASED

How can it be said that we “lost the war” – that we had been “defeated” – that we “didn’t do the job”?

More than **two years** later – **TWO YEARS!** – in March 1975 – the North broke the peace treaty. They invaded the South in a deliberate act of a new war. They started the Third Indochina War. In two months they swept down a weak and recovering South Viet Nam to Saigon and took the city.

We were not at war with North Viet Nam. We had had no troops in Viet Nam for **two years**. In fact, **we had an embassy in Hanoi** at the time and had **diplomatic relations** with North Viet Nam!

It is an act of **cowardly deceit** to mark the fall of Saigon as the end of Australia’s war in Viet Nam.

And it is another act of **cowardly deceit** to connect Viet Vets with the fall of Saigon.

PLEASE REMEMBER US WITH TRUTH, HONESTY, ACCURACY

Thank you.