

Appendix 2

History of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia

The beginning The Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (VVAA) had its advent in the Vietnam Veterans Action Association formed in the late 1979 as a result of the perceptions of Vietnam veterans that exposure to chemicals was causing problems with their health and the health of their children. The chemicals, known by the generic name of Agent Orange included 2,4,5,T and 2,4,D, a by-product of which is the extremely poisonous substance TCDD or dioxin. The problems ranged from minor irritation to lethal, with symptoms such as skin blisters, itching, flushes, nasal problems, blurred vision, respiratory, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, gastro-urinary muscular and nervous system disorders, cancers and tumours. This was often exacerbated by psychological disorders caused by what was later diagnosed as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Government indifference The Association fought an uphill battle against government indifference, including the bitter disappointment of the now discredited 1983 *Evatt Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam*. At the same time there was a very real feeling that the RSL had not accepted the Vietnam veterans, and nor would it pursue the concerns of this group with the vigour they believed that those concerns warranted. This feeling was never stronger than during this period, when the VVAA and the RSL were absolutely opposed.

Successes, hard work and lobbying The gradual successes of the VVAA in the following years came as a result of much hard work and lobbying. The Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service was established as a direct result of the action of the VVAA, and it is now an integral part of treatment regimes, not only for all veterans, but also for the survivors of traumatic events such as the Port Arthur Massacre.

This was followed by the establishment of the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Heidelberg, which now extended its treatment to St John of God Hospital in Sydney, together with visiting services to various rural locations. Lifestyle courses permit veterans to contribute to their own well being, learning how to cope with problems and adapt their lifestyle to best suit themselves.

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Bitterness overcome, contributions follow

The bitterness engendered by the political response to veterans' concerns about their health and the health of their children coloured the attitude of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia for many years. It is only since the mid nineties that positive action by both the Department of Veterans Affairs' and the VVAA has resulted in a relationship where the concerns of veterans are being addressed. The VVAA is represented on a large number of Government committees as a respected part of the Ex-Service community and is a major contributor to debate, legislation and administration involving veterans.

Health, mortality and other studies

Past issues involving the Association include the Vietnam Veterans' Mortality Study, (commissioned by the Department of Veterans Affairs) and the self-reported issues revealed in the long-delayed Vietnam Veterans Health Study, including spouses and children. The Mortality Study revealed that Vietnam veterans have a death rate 7% higher than the general male population, with deaths from cancer 21% higher, prostate cancer 53% higher, lung cancer 29%, ischaemic heart disease 10% and suicides 21% above the general male population. This is a cause for grave concern, and work continues to ensure that the results of this study are reflected in Repatriation Medical Authority and Departmental documents.

The nominal roll of Vietnam veterans was released in 1997, although it should be noted that the value of this work is in its contribution towards the Mortality and Health Studies. In addition to this, the End of War List for this war was compiled, and this resulted in a review of awards which were recommended at the time but which were not awarded due to the imposition of medal quotas. All recipients have now been presented with long overdue Bravery awards.

All of these things contribute to addressing the issues of concern to veterans. The results of the Health Study were released in April 1998, and sadly, confirmed the worst fears of veterans in relation their health, and the health of their children. Many of these issue identified in the studies continue to be addressed. The VVAA has adopted a partnership approach with the DVA and the government and continues to insure that the outcomes of the health Studies are completely addressed.

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National Congress

The National Congress is the governing body of the VVAA. The Congress comprises the National Executive, Presidents and one other representative from each State, and Seconded Members. The members of the National Executive and the Seconded Members are non-voting member.

The role of the National Congress – the VVAA AGM - is to consider items of business which are proposed by the State Councils through their links to Sub Branches and individual members, and which set the direction for the organisation over the next twelve months, make such changes to the National Constitution which are considered necessary, and to elect the National Executive.

National Council

The National Council consists of the National Executive, the State Presidents and Seconded Members. The Executive and Seconded Members are not voting members.

The role of the National Council is to give direction to the National Executive of Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, in accordance with the wishes of the members of the Association delivered through Sub Branch and State Branch and expressed at the annual National Congress. The Council prepares items for discussion at the Congress, and deals with important issues, which may arise from time to time throughout the year. It is important in ensuring the VVAA maintains a consistent outlook and direction.

National Executive

The National Executive consists of the National President, National Secretary, and two Vice Presidents. Their role is to conduct the day-to-day business of the Association in accordance with the directions and guidance of the National Congress and the National Council. Members seek advice from experts in various fields, including members of the VVAA, and particularly the Seconded Members.

From time to time issues arise which have not been discussed at Congress or Council, and in these cases the guiding principles are that the Executive is to attempt to deliver, on behalf of the Association, outcomes which are not inconsistent with our Constitution and Policy Handbook and which are to the greater good of the Vietnam veteran community in particular and the veteran/ex-service communities in general.

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Co-opted members

From time to time members may be co-opted to assist the National Council, particularly when that individual has knowledge or skills, which relate to specific issues being addressed at that time by the Council. In creating co-opted positions the Council is ensuring that important issues remain clearly in the forefront of its deliberations. Creating an Advocates' Network is one example of this. The role of co-opted members has been to some extent overtaken by the Research Officer(s) who undertake research and produce discussion papers for the National Executive and Council

Sub Branches

In looking at the role of the National Executive and the National Council, it is necessary to consider the roles and responsibilities of all the parts of the VVAA.

Sub-Branches are the life-blood of the VVAA. They provide local welfare, pensions and advocacy help. Through formal and informal meetings as well as social activities, they identify issues that are important to Vietnam veterans, and pass these on to State Branches. At the same time they can request assistance from the State Branch in solving problems, dealing with issues or simply getting information that means that they don't have to reinvent the wheel. Individuals have the opportunity to raise issues of concern through Sub Branches to State Council or National Congress.

State Branches

State Branches co-ordinate the flow of information from Sub-Branches to National, ensuring that issues which concern members are identified and dealt with or passed on to National. They receive and pass on information from National to Sub-Branches. State Committee members will liaise with the State Office of the DVA and other state government departments, and represent the VVAA on committees and at meetings with DVA and Ex-Service Organisations in regard to State issues.

Coordination and representation

The National Council is responsible for representing the members of the VVAA on National issues. This includes representation on Government and Ex-service Organisation committees and meetings. The advice and guidance of members, through their State Presidents provides policies and guidance for the National Executive in dealing with issues that arise. The Council co-ordinates media responses to ensure that the entire organisation is seen to be acting with one voice.

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VVAA achievements

The success of this structure is evident to those who look at the notable achievements of the VVAA. The VVAA has been able to ensure the:

- establishment of the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service (VVCS);
- successful outcome for the Military Medal nominees under the Vietnam End of War List Review;
- successful completion of the Vietnam Veterans' Mortality Study;
- successful completion of the Vietnam Veterans' Health Study;
- creation of the protocol for the validation of the Health Study;
- discussion with DVA on responses to the Health study outcomes;
- review of service-related use of alcohol and tobacco;
- commencement of the continuing scientific study into the genetic effects of Agent White;
- long-delayed review of the Repatriation Medical Authority was undertaken;
- proper consideration of the proposed Second Opinion diagnostic protocols for psychiatric disorders;
- institution of the VVAA Web Site and electronic mail exchange;
- contribution of the VVAA to policy on veterans' issues including DVA's Mental Health policy, Men's Health Peer Education Program and promotion of healthy lifestyles;
- contribution to and an ongoing commitment to the Training and Information Program (TIP);
- initiated numerous Younger Veterans Programs via the VVCS;
- funding of support groups under DVA's grants programs;
- \$32.3m to support the extension of benefits for veterans, partners and children;
- founding member of the Veterans' Indemnity and Training Association;
- assistance to government in shaping policy on veterans issues via participation on 14 separate National and State committees; and
- continuous recognition of the VVAA as the representative of the Vietnam veterans' community.

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Summary

Over the years there has been a persistent media presentation of Vietnam veterans as 'victims'. The Association believes that this is counter-productive. This is not an image that the VVAA wishes to perpetuate either for itself or for its members. Rather, it sees Vietnam veterans as achievers. Vietnam veterans have reached the highest level of business, professional and political ranks within Australia, and every one of them who has overcome psychological or health problems in order to raise a family and live a relatively normal life has overcome adversity in order to achieve. Vietnam veterans aren't victims, they are achievers.
