

Vietnam

By Lynda Carroll

Fifty years ago, Australia was in the thick of its involvement in the Vietnam War. On 18 August 1966, the battle of Long Tan took place, and its nature of survival despite overwhelming odds – 108 Australians and New Zealanders against around 2500 Viet Cong – is the reason for commemorating Vietnam Veterans' Day on 18 August each year.

One of the defining characteristics of the Vietnam War was its media content. This was the first 'television war', bringing images and a sense of the conflict home to Australians. Such communication abilities also meant that those serving had a chance to remain connected.

Listening to veterans today, it is obvious that one important link and means of relaxation was being able to keep in contact with sporting activities in Australia. Naval shipwright John Carroll, who served in HMAS *Sydney* and *Yarra* between 1967 and 1972, clearly recalls that 'daily orders had the football scores included. The ships were a bit isolated, but we'd keep in touch with what was going on.' On board HMAS *Parramatta*, the major forum was the ship's magazine – 'Matta Natta'. According to ship's mechanic John Sincock, this publication included 'footy scores from both VFL and rugby, as well as horse racing.'

On land, radio played a major role, with news beamed throughout Vietnam via the American Armed Forces Radio Station, its studio based at Australian Forces Vietnam. By 1971, the Radio Australia overseas service was being broadcast several times daily via Australian Forces Radio. This meant that even those in far flung situations could keep in touch with life back at home. David Peel, who was part of the thirteenth National Service intake - along with legendary umpire, Glenn James - and who worked with the Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RAEME) at Nui Dat, recalls that 'we didn't have access to footy all the time, although on occasion the instrument repair boys were able to set up access to Radio Australia to get footy scores.' Peel continued his involvement with football in post-war life, eventually becoming Marketing Manager and – later - a Life Member of the Melbourne Football Club.

From watching and listening, many of those serving also went on to play the game, both in Vietnam and at other bases throughout the Far East. Laurie Jones, a RAN radio operator attached to 121 Signals Squadron in Singapore, was part of a 'footy competition involving different units based in Singapore...Melbourne sent us a complete set of jumpers and socks to fit out our team.' Indeed, the 1967-1968 magazine from HMAS *Yarra* shows that three Australian Rules games were played in Singapore across the 1968 New Year period, accompanied by rugby, hockey, soccer, cricket, basketball, water polo and rifle shooting. Those who were originally Australian Rules players and who took up rugby in a hurry were informed that 'warrants are out for their arrest on return to Melbourne.'

On a slightly more compromised scale, the likes of Stephen Shortis, who was based mainly at Nui Dat, recalls playing a 'few scratch matches' from 1969 to 1970, and lining up on Wayne Closter, who ultimately played 191 games for Geelong. 'I lasted a couple of minutes on him, which was a pretty good effort!' Given that those serving came from all round Australia, playing or simply keeping in touch with sports of all sorts created great camaraderie, necessary in trying situations.

The legacy of Vietnam veterans and Australian Rules remains intertwined to this day. According to Army veteran Stan Middleton, 'It all started when a 'Nasho' called John Heaney was given the choice of organising a footy game or facing detention. So the first footy game was played in 1966!' This

expanded to a full fixture of nine seasons between 1967 and 1971. The games were played in Vung Tau, and the inaugural premiership was won by the RAAF. Football in Vietnam was resurrected in 1998, and continues to flourish under the banner of the Vietnam Swans, with Middleton the heart of the link between the wartime competition and football in Vietnam today.

There is no doubt that links to sport in general – and Australian Rules in particular for many – proved invaluable to all who experienced them while serving in the Vietnam War. Whether taking the chance to relax and play the game, or simply catching up on the scores from ‘home’, the ability to be connected still means much, even half a century later.

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