

Return to Vietnam

Between 1981 and 2016, thousands of American and Australian Vietnam War veterans returned to Việt Nam. This comparative, transnational oral history offers the first historical study of these return journeys. It shows how veterans returned in search of resolution, or peace, manifesting in shifting nostalgic visions of “Vietnam.” Different national war narratives shaped their returns: Australians followed the “Anzac” pilgrimage tradition, whereas for Americans the return was an anti-war act. Veterans met former enemies, visited battlefields, mourned friends, found new relationships, and addressed enduring legacies of war. Many found their memories of war eased by witnessing Việt Nam at peace. Yet this peacetime reality also challenged veterans’ wartime connection to Vietnamese spaces. The place they were nostalgic for was Vietnam, a space in war memory, not Việt Nam, the country. Veterans drew from wartime narratives to negotiate this displacement, performing nostalgic practices to reclaim their sense of belonging.

Dr. Mia Martin Hobbs is an Honorary Fellow in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne. She has held fellowships and awards from the University of Melbourne, Australian Historical Association, Freilich Project, and Contemporary Histories Research Group Award, and has published prize-winning research on veterans and war memory.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-83266-3 — Return to Vietnam: An Oral History of American and Australian Veterans'
Journeys
Mia Martin Hobbs
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare

General Editor

Robert Gerwarth, *University College Dublin*

Jay Winter, *Yale University*

Advisory Editors

Heather Jones, *University College London*

Rana Mitter, *University of Oxford*

Michelle Moyd, *Indiana University Bloomington*

Martin Thomas, *University of Exeter*

In recent years the field of modern history has been enriched by the exploration of two parallel histories. These are the social and cultural history of armed conflict, and the impact of military events on social and cultural history.

Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare presents the fruits of this growing area of research, reflecting both the colonization of military history by cultural historians and the reciprocal interest of military historians in social and cultural history, to the benefit of both. The series offers the latest scholarship in European and non-European events from the 1850s to the present day.

A full list of titles in the series can be found at:
www.cambridge.org/modernwarfare

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-83266-3 — Return to Vietnam: An Oral History of American and Australian Veterans'
Journeys
Mia Martin Hobbs
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Return to Vietnam

*An Oral History of American and Australian
Veterans' Journeys*

Mia Martin Hobbs

University of Melbourne



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-83266-3 — Return to Vietnam: An Oral History of American and Australian Veterans'
Journeys
Mia Martin Hobbs
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108832663
DOI: 10.1017/9781108972987

© Mia Martin Hobbs 2021

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2021

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-83266-3 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-83266-3 — Return to Vietnam: An Oral History of American and Australian Veterans'
Journeys
Mia Martin Hobbs
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

For my parents

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page viii
<i>A Note on Spelling</i>	xi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiv
Introduction	1
Part I Return	25
1 Reconciliation, 1981–1994	27
2 Normalization, 1995–2005	50
3 Commemoration, 2006–2016	73
Part II Việt Nam	99
4 Relics and Remnants	101
5 Meeting the Enemy	127
6 Remembering the American War in Việt Nam	151
Part III Legacies	175
7 Revisiting Vietnam	177
8 Veteran Legacies in Việt Nam	203
Conclusion	229
<i>Appendix 1 Veteran Subjects</i>	237
<i>Appendix 2 Interview Questions</i>	245
<i>Bibliography</i>	247
<i>Index</i>	268

Acknowledgments

This book would not exist were it not for all the veterans who agreed to meet with me, shared their stories, and introduced me to others who, in turn, helped me. Thank you all for your generosity, your time, and your trust.

Seven years ago, this project began on a one-way ticket to Việt Nam. I had heard about veterans returning and was curious to find out more. That my curiosity evolved into a fully-fledged project is due to the guidance of my wonderful supervisor, Barbara (Ara) Keys. Ara helped me develop a PhD proposal from afar, encouraging me to think more broadly about my topic. Once back in Melbourne, she helped me find my feet in my PhD program and guided me toward becoming a more rigorous and thoughtful scholar. Ara's generous and constructive feedback helped me distill my ideas and find my voice. It was also through Ara that I discovered how much I love teaching history. I am indebted to Ara for her mentorship, and perhaps can only truly thank her by one day doing for others what she has done for me.

I am grateful to Julie Fedor, my PhD co-supervisor, for her invaluable feedback and for engaging me with new theories that sharpened my understanding of war memory.

I thank Stuart Macintyre, my Honors supervisor, for suggesting I undertake a PhD. I had never considered doctoral studies to be within my reach. Without Stuart's encouragement, I doubt I ever would.

I am grateful for the mentorship of Alistair Thomson, Noah Riseman, Kate McGregor, Carolyn Holbrook, and David Lowe, each of whom provided valuable guidance on research, writing, and working in academia. Thanks in particular to Al and Noah for their thoughtful feedback on drafts and for their advice on oral history problems. Scott Laderman advised me on recruiting veteran-participants and navigating fieldwork in Việt Nam, and supported numerous conference proposals from afar. Scott and Al were also my dissertation examiners, and their generous and encouraging reports helped me see my project in new ways and energized me in the shift from dissertation to book.

I have been fortunate to discuss my research with a broad community of scholars. Catherine Hall and Samia Khatun taught a brilliant class on “Race, Gender, Empire” early in my PhD, which led me to think about the Vietnam War in new ways. Conversations with participants at the 2017 “War and Memory” workshop at the University of Melbourne helped sharpen my early ideas. The panels, group discussions, and one-on-one conversations at the 2019 “Vietnam War in the Pacific World” conference at Macquarie University sparked new ideas about the war and its legacies. Emily Fitzgerald and Daniel Russo-Batterham at the Melbourne Data Analytics Platform helped me develop a digital map of my doctoral project, which allowed me to see new relationships between time and space in veterans’ return journeys. Thanks also to the oral history group at Monash, whose thoughtful discussions often led to new ways of thinking about problems I had felt stuck on.

Many friends and colleagues contributed to the evolution of this book in more indirect ways. The postgraduate community at the University of Melbourne provided understanding, solidarity, and humor throughout my PhD. Amy Hodgson and Nayree Mardirian were a dream to teach with when I juggled new preps and my own research for the first time. In Việt Nam, thank you to Hà Giang, Hà Phước Hậu, Lê Hoàng Huy, and Lê Hạ Uyên for all your help, knowledge, advice, and most of all your friendship.

This work was made possible through the support of various funding bodies and organizations. A Melbourne Research Training Scheme scholarship gave me the luxury of focusing almost solely on my research for the duration of my degree. The Alma Hansen Scholarship, Norman Macgeorge Bequest, and Graduate Research Arts Travel Scheme supported my fieldwork in Việt Nam and the United States. The Gilbert Postdoctoral Career Development Fellowship, an honorary fellowship in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, and a residency in the Digital Studio at the University of Melbourne supported the development of dissertation into book proposal and then manuscript. I thank these organizations for their support.

At Cambridge University Press, I am grateful to my editor, Jay Winter, for seeing the potential in this project, and to Michael Watson, for shepherding the manuscript through the publishing process. My deepest thanks to Emily Sharp in the Cambridge Office for answering my many questions along the way, and to Angela Valente for her meticulous copy-editing of the final manuscript. I thank the two anonymous reviewers who provided thoughtful and encouraging feedback on my manuscript.

An enormous thanks to the Baillieu Library and in particular to Richard Serle. Richard reached out to me when Melbourne first went into

x Acknowledgments

lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, letting me know he could order books I needed for teaching or research and mail them to me. Library mail was an absolute highlight of lockdown life, and I could not have completed this manuscript without the many, many books that arrived on my doorstep. Thank you.

The writing of this book was also helped by many wonderful artists, whose music energized me through writing blocks, and by my office companion, Miso, who tolerated my tendency to turn up the volume to get through a draft.

Finally, I am grateful for the close friends and family who supported me in so many ways. I thank Eleanor Lang, Bella Modlmayr, and Celie Martin Hobbs, each of whom possess a singular sense of humor (black, droll, and totally absurd, respectively) that kept me grounded. Tessa Cavanna is a lifeline from across the world, my biggest cheerleader and oldest friend. With enormous gratitude to Ben Martin Hobbs, for being badgered into reading everything I was too anxious to show anyone else. I thank my amazing partner, Tim Pierce, for his encouragement, his patience, for helping me muddle through so many ideas, for knowing when to tell me to stop and take a break. He lived this project with me, and this book would not have been completed without his love and support.

My parents, Jenny Martin and Jeremy Hobbs, are the reason this book exists. They instilled in me the values that underpin my research, always encouraged me to ask questions, and inspired me to try to understand more about the world. Thank you for everything you have done for me. This book is for you.

A Note on Spelling

This book explores the experiences of individuals from two English-speaking nations, in three countries, over three decades. These individuals, and the historians and journalists who discuss them, use a range of terms and spellings for groups, places, and ideas. In this book, American spelling is used for English-language words, except for quotations from Australian writers. Interviews that were transcribed by me are also in American spelling. Vietnamese words are ambiguous without diacritics, so I use Vietnamese spelling of Vietnamese words: “Việt Nam,” “Hà Nội,” “Long Tân,” etcetera.¹ This spelling choice clarifies the difference between, for instance, Long Tân the place and Long Tan the battle, and indicates whether a place was named by Vietnamese inhabitants or its Western occupiers (such as Nui Dat, a base built and named by the Australian Task Force (ATF) – *núi đất* simply meaning “dirt hill”).

This spelling distinguishes “Việt Nam” from “the Vietnam War.” “Vietnam veterans” and “the Vietnam War” are used to describe the Australian and American experience in Việt Nam, while I use “the American War,” as it is called in Việt Nam, to describe the Vietnamese experience. These spellings also reflect the intonations and implied connotations of returnees’ speech in interviews. After returning to Việt Nam, many veterans tried to emulate the accent when using Vietnamese words. For example, “Việt Nam” was often pronounced with stress on the first word and deliberate separation between the words. This accent was not applied to “Vietnam,” the war. One returnee explained that he found it useful to think of the war and the place as distinct through spelling, because “if you have a new spelling for a new word that is very emotional, or controversial for you, what if you were to respell it? Would that give you a new memory? . . . Spelling something in a new way, to have a new idea about an old problem, that made therapeutic sense to me.”² Thus, in the

¹ Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), xi.

² Interview with Ted, Skype, February 19, 2016.

xii A Note on Spelling

quotations from returnees' interviews with me, I use the Westernized spelling of Vietnamese words for wartime references and Vietnamese spelling to refer to contemporary places and people.

Decisions about the use of Western and Vietnamese nomenclature for the Vietnam or American War have deep political implications. The common Western division of belligerents by territory misrepresents the nature of the conflict, inaccurately framing the war as divided between fixed geographical groups and implying, as historian Scott Laderman notes, an "invasion of a country called 'South Vietnam' by a country called 'North Vietnam.'"³ Hence in this book the names of the governing authorities – the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV) and the Republic of Việt Nam (RVN) – are used instead. Because the civilian experience of war was determined by geography, civilians are described as northerners and southerners, as living in the DRV or RVN, or as living in northern, central, or southern provinces. I avoid politically charged names for events such as the "Fall of Saigon," "Black April," and "Liberation Day," referring to April 30, 1975 as "the end of the war."

Many returnees used the term "Viet Cong" (Vietnamese communist) to refer to the guerrilla forces of the National Liberation Front (NLF). The terms "North Vietnamese" and "NVA" refer to the conventional army of the DRV, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). While official histories of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam have retroactively grouped both the guerrilla and conventional forces as PAVN, in this book I maintain distinctions for the sake of specificity. Where both forces are referred to together, they are "revolutionary forces." Australian and US returnees used the acronym "ARVN" and the terms "South Vietnamese" or "local army" to describe the Republic of Việt Nam Armed Forces (RVNAF). Except when my sources use the terms "Viet Cong," "VC," "NVA," "ARVN," and "South Vietnamese," I use the terms NFL, PAVN, and RVNAF to describe Vietnamese fighting forces. It is worth noting that although many of these names originated as derogatory terms in colonial contexts (*Việt gian cộng sản* – communist traitor to Việt Nam) the terms "VC," "Viet Cong," and "ARVN" have been widely (and proudly) accepted by the Vietnamese and are not considered offensive in Việt Nam. Most returnees I interviewed had no idea that these are colloquial or incorrect terms and did not use them pejoratively.

Finally, there is ongoing debate regarding the proper descriptors for trauma-related mental health issues. Some veterans' groups oppose the inclusion of "disorder" in "post-traumatic stress disorder," arguing that it

³ Scott Laderman, *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), xi.

A Note on Spelling

xiii

is stigmatizing or insulting. Some prefer “post-traumatic stress,” others suggest changing “disorder” to “injury” could allow trauma to be included in the criteria for military awards. These arguments are entwined with debates around the social meanings and values of military service, as well as contemporary developments around mental health terminology. The US and Australian Departments of Veterans’ Affairs (VA and DVA) and the American and Australian Psychological Associations use “PTSD,” noting that “disorder” accurately describes the recovery period, healing methods, and variable susceptibility of individuals to long-term, maladaptive trauma issues. Except where returnees describe their own diagnosis differently, post-combat trauma stress is referred to as “PTSD.”

Abbreviations

ANZAC/Anzac	Australia and New Zealand Army Corps
APC	Armoured personnel carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (often used to refer to all RVNAF)
ATF	Australian Task Force
DMZ	Demilitarized zone
DRV	Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (often referred to as North Vietnam)
DVA	Department for Veterans' Affairs (Australia)
FUV	Fulbright University Việt Nam
MIA	Missing in Action
MONGO	My own nongovernmental organization
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
NLF	National Liberation Front (often referred to as Viet Cong)
NVA	North Vietnamese Army (People's Army of Việt Nam)
PAVN	People's Army Việt Nam (often referred to as North Vietnamese or NVA)
POW	Prisoner of War
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
R&R	Rest and Relaxation
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment
RSL	Royal Services League
RVN	Republic of Việt Nam (often referred to as South Vietnam)
RVNAF	Republic of Việt Nam Armed Forces (often referred to as South Vietnamese)
SASR	Special Air Service Regiment
SEAL	US Navy Sea, Air, and Land teams
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-83266-3 — Return to Vietnam: An Oral History of American and Australian Veterans'
Journeys
Mia Martin Hobbs
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

List of Abbreviations

xv

SRV	Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (postwar government of Việt Nam)
UXO	Unexploded ordnance
VFP	Veterans for Peace
VFW	Veterans of Foreign Wars
VA	Veterans' Affairs (US)
VC	Viet Cong (National Liberation Front)
VVA	Vietnam Veterans of America
VVRP	Veterans Viet Nam Restoration Project