

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.

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

Mia Martin Hobbs

University of Melbourne



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For my parents

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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.

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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.

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

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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