



Australian veterans' health: Vietnam

60,000 Australian military personnel were sent to Vietnam to aid the United States between 1962 and 1972. The US had backed the South Vietnam Government against nationalists and communists who were fighting to re-unify Vietnam.

- National conscription was introduced specifically for this war and 15,381 of the serving soldiers were involuntary conscripts.
- A small number of Australian civilians also went, including 210 volunteer civilian nurses, medical staff and entertainers.

Deaths and injuries in Vietnam

The immediate death toll and the percentage of Australian troops injured were lower than in previous wars. In Vietnam most wounds resulted from ambushes in the jungle, booby traps, land mines and rocket propelled grenades. Mines were responsible for many limb dismemberments. Of the 500 Australian servicemen killed 426 died in battle; and 3,129 were severely injured in battle. Conscripts accounted for 40% of the Australian deaths although they were only 25% of the force sent.

The long-term health consequences

These have been enormous. Of the 60,000 troops who went to Vietnam, 74.7% are classified by the Department of Veterans Affairs as suffering from some form of health impact as a result. They may live with physical disability, health problems related to the chemical exposure and varying degrees of psychological trauma.

The 3,129 who were severely injured suffer the resulting long-term effects. Many more were subject to less severe but still debilitating injuries such as hearing loss, which affects around a third of all Vietnam Veterans today.

The use of chemicals during the Vietnam War has been linked to numerous health problems. Vietnam became the first conflict that saw the widespread use of herbicides such



Australians evacuating from Long Tan

as the defoliant Agent Orange. Exposure has been linked to cancers, fertility issues and birth defects. An extensive 2005 study by the Department of Veteran Affairs found that male Vietnam veterans have an increased cancer rate overall, including significantly higher rates of Hodgkin's disease – explicitly linked to herbicides – as well as prostate and various other cancers.

Serving in Vietnam has also been found to align with higher rates of skin and lung cancer, most likely related to higher rates of sun exposure and smoking.

Question marks remain over the long-term impact of non-combat chemicals such as the pesticide DDT, now completely banned in Australia due to its potentially carcinogenic properties; and also over the use of Dapsone as an anti-malarial drug, which has been linked to circulatory and digestive disorders.

One thousand Australian soldiers contracted malaria in Vietnam. Others became infected with serious diseases such as Hepatitis B. These may also have contributed to the long-term health problems.

Other physical problems afflicting Vietnam veterans include osteoarthritis, back pain, respiratory conditions, hypertension, and heart disease.

Editor's note: Impacts on the health of Vietnamese people, and their land, have been far greater, but are not covered in this fact sheet.

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Impact on Mental Health:

Service in Vietnam, in particular, predisposed troops to long-term psychological disorder. Two-year tours of duty put Australian soldiers at risk of contact with the enemy for longer periods of time than had been experienced since the Gallipoli campaign. The relentless threat of ambush or attack meant many soldiers were constantly in "battle mode", even during rest time.

In the Vietnam Veterans Health Study, 30-45% of veterans reported suffering from mental disorders. Mental health issues are 5 to 10 times higher than in the rest of the Australian population, and the rate of depression is still increasing as many veterans age. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the second most common medical condition affecting veterans, with 17,454 officially diagnosed – nearly 30% of all those who served. Other psychiatric diagnoses include depression, and addictions which are discussed in more detail below.

Whether Vietnam veterans have a high suicide rate is contentious. A recent study found this to be on par with the rest of the population. The Vietnam Veterans Association counterclaims that such studies are skewed by the fact that soldiers are chosen for their apparently resilient physical and psychological make-up to start with.

Addiction

Heroin abuse, commonly associated with US Vietnam veterans, is not a major issue for Australians. However the "beer culture" in the Australian Defence Force, together with psychological disturbance, has resulted in many cases of alcoholism. Australian Vietnam veterans consume alcohol at much higher levels than the general population, and almost 41% of them drink alcohol daily. Pathological gambling has also been linked to exposure to combat in Vietnam.

Wider health impacts:

Physical and mental health problems have not been restricted to veterans, with the negative health consequences of service in Vietnam flowing on through families to touch partners, children and even grandchildren. As a result, the detrimental health impacts of the Vietnam War resonate throughout the whole Australian community.

The children of veterans suffer higher rates of a variety of congenital birth conditions and health problems, which several researchers claim is the legacy of exposure to chemicals.

Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

PTSD results from intense negative experiences, including threatened and actual physical harm, major loss of personal freedom or infringement of personal principles. Long-term symptoms include avoidance of reminders of the event, and distressing unwanted recollections – vivid flashbacks or nightmares. Sufferers remain emotionally on edge, unable to enjoy normal social interaction. Their symptoms include sleeplessness, anxiety, irritability, depression and mood swings, as well as social withdrawal and alcoholism.

Cleft palate and lip, and spina bifida maxima are more common in the children of Vietnam veterans. Adrenal cancer and leukemia have also been found at higher rates. A number of parents claim that other cases of deformity and numerous other health issues are linked to the service of a father or grandfather in Vietnam. There are continuing calls for further research in this.

Other long-term studies have found that being the partner or child of a Vietnam veteran with PTSD predicts suffering from mental disorder, which can in turn affect grandchildren. The wives and partners of Vietnam veterans have been found to experience higher levels of PTSD themselves. Suicide levels among veterans' children are up to three times higher than the rest of the Australian population.

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