

Surviving Vietnam – My Father’s Account

As I sit down with my father to dissect the experiences that shaped his life, I recall many years of stoic, unrelenting distance. In my early years, I was never able to find the validation I sought, nor was he able to connect with me emotionally. My mother endured years of the same before he collected his belongings and hit the road. I still do not know whether to blame his lack of empathy on the war, or accept it as a character flaw. I remember a time when I used to beat myself up over our capitulating relationship – I needed to make more of an effort, be more of a man. Now I understand that it was a defect all of his own; an emotional defect, many of our interactions simply went over his head. Today marks one of the rare occasions where my father opens up to me. I’d heard the words uttered by others before, but self-admission always bears greater weight. “When I returned”, he says, “I was a completely different person.” Through his story I begin to understand how.

Gavin Perkins was conscripted in 1968 but his services were deferred until the completion of a carpentry apprenticeship and technician’s certificate. A part of him was hoping that the war would be over 18 months later, but alas, it was very much alive. He arrived with the first intake of 1970 in Saigon to the menacing stench of humidity and death. He served for “20 months, three weeks, two hours and six minutes”, just shy of the standard 2 year term owing to a change in government. Gavin was initially attached to a field squadron, but this proved to be short-lived at only one day. He views it as a lucky development – tunnels were not the place to be. But as I soon discover, neither were the military camps, nor surrounding villages. Many of the South Vietnamese were Viet Cong associates ready to bite the feeding hands of the national servicemen. Gavin recalls one child whom his platoon had provided meals for suddenly turning malevolent and hurling a grenade in the direction of the unsuspecting soldiers. Thinking fast, two of the men dived through an open doorway, leaving another to bear the greater damage of the explosion. Such events were commonplace. Of the South Vietnamese children, Gavin says, “They were your friends during the day, and they’d be shooting at you and planting mines during the night.” A daily sweep of the military parameter usually resulted in the discovery of three to five South Vietnamese bodies. Out of respect to their religious values, the cadavers were gathered by the Australian forces and laid out on the concrete for familial collection and a proper burial. Seeing the deceased’s involvement in guerrilla warfare brought much shame to their families.

Unlike the lauded heroes of WWII, the Vietnam Veterans have fought for basic dignity and respect, much less public reverence. Deemed “Child Killers” by the Australian media, the national servicemen were condemned by the average citizen, ostracised by the RSL and at times abandoned by the DVA. This abandonment includes a relentless ignorance in regards to the devastating effects of exposure to the toxic defoliant, Agent Orange. No more than two weeks after spraying foliage with Agent Orange in Vung Tau, Gavin began to vomit blood profusely. Initially misdiagnosed with a peptic ulcer, he was sent to the American Force’s hospital for an examination where it was concluded he was simply a hypochondriac. A referral to a shrink ensued and the psychological torment began. He was punished for his ‘antics’ and exported to the much more hostile warzone of Nui Dat. It would be another 30 years before the true effects of first degree dioxin exposure would manifest in the most venomous manner imaginable.

Returning from the war, soldiers were greeted at air terminals not by the welcome-home festivities afforded by-gone heroes, but by the harsh words of protestors. “How many women did you rape? How many children did you murder?” were some of their jibes. The veterans soon learnt to avoid pubs and bars where scuffles were likely to occur. Their closely shaved heads were enough of an indicator to provoke conflict in most situations. Gavin notes that the public disdain was known to soldiers during their service and consequently, Vietnam was a war fought with little pride. I can’t help but feel that this is a huge factor when my father answers my question, “Would you do it over if you had the choice?” with an emphatic “No!” He elaborates, “And I don’t know anyone who would, because of the way we were treated when we got back here.” Indeed, the Vietnam Veterans still have their detractors to date. Gavin brings to my attention a recent ANZAC day incident which made local headlines where an RSL member openly and aggressively questioned the right of Vietnam Veterans to march alongside the veterans of ‘honest wars’.

Diagnosed with oesophageal cancer at the age of 50, surgeons offered Gavin an optimistic one in three chance of survival. He is “100% certain” that the carcinogenic toxin found in Agent Orange, known as dioxin, was responsible for his ailment. Contrary to all medical evidence suggesting this was the case, support from the *Australian Federation of Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Ex Servicemen and Women* was hard to garner. Indeed, fellow veteran and then TPI employee AJ Brown all but sacrificed his position to secure government

support for Gavin in a timely manner. A letter formally acknowledging Gavin's successful application for TPI assistance simultaneously denied all responsibility for his war-related incapacitation. But was there ever any doubt? In 2008, an independent researcher identified a tenfold increase in cancer rates in the town of Innisfail, Queensland, where Agent Orange testing was secretly conducted during the Vietnam War. The Queensland Health department saw red and swiftly denied the allegations. Negative health implications from Agent Orange exposure continue to surface in the children and grandchildren of Veterans today.

As time passes by and the veterans grow increasingly weary, more guarded truths will inevitably find their way out from under the rug. Gavin believes that in 20 years' time, greater responsibility will be taken on the government's part regarding the health of the waning veterans. But the financial burden is great; so great that it will most likely be another 50 years before the government bows to medical science and acknowledges the damage dealt to other generations too. As a sufferer of the chronic inflammatory bowel disease, Ulcerative Colitis, the issue is particularly close to heart. But the effects are more devastating for some still. Miscarriage was all too common among returned veterans' wives. Photographs depict severely disfigured and still-born babies – the result of prenatal dioxin exposure. One wonders how the more subtle effects can be denied.

As any soldier will tell you, the perils of war continue long after the gunfire has ceased. Some never made it back. 521 Australian soldiers were killed in action. One of these was Gavin's close friend Johnny Niblet, who suffered a fatal headshot just 3 weeks before homecoming. As an infantryman, Niblet was undertaking a routine clearing task when he encountered a bunker system and came off second best. Gavin is saddened by the circumstances surrounding Niblet's death. "They didn't have to be there, but they didn't want them sitting around camp for three weeks," he says. The official cause of death disclosed to Niblet's family was less traumatic. Gavin watched many of his surviving comrades succumb to alcoholism in the years following the war. "For a lot of the blokes, alcohol was their forget-me-not – to help them forget about it. They didn't conquer their demons," he deduces. I ask him if he conquered his; "99.99 percent," he smiles.

My father does not speak of the war often, but when he does, I see an unmistakable glimmer in his eye, a transparent ghost of a tear yearning to reveal itself, and I hear that telling dip in his voice. I see a young man - just my age - thrown into the deep and left to fend for himself, to see sights that no man should ever see, acquaint himself with a fear that no man should

ever know and desensitise himself to the loss of not one life, but thousands of lives. The fond stories he tells of mateship, drinking, the rebellious diggers at basic training, the joyous flight home; they're like diamonds in dust, somehow filtered through the chapped hands of a boy made stern, serious, a completely different person by the incomparable terrors of war. I admire his strength, I understand that I will never truly comprehend his ways, but I now know why he is the way he is, and this is enough.

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