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Long Tan: the politics of forgetting

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The Politics of Forgetting

The 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan was a chance to forget in the name of remembering, writes Anthony Ashbolt

The 40th anniversary commemorations of the Battle of Long Tan have been both excessive and tendentious. The rehabilitation of Vietnam veterans now serves to reinforce amnesia about Vietnam itself. Such amnesia serves the interests of policy makers in Canberra.

Far from the immoral imperialist venture that it was, the American war in Vietnam now functions as a salutary reminder of Australian heroism. The noble warrior is recreated before our eyes: spurned and trashed by the anti-war movement and the Government, labelled a baby-killer by people in the street or the pub, thrown in the gutter to fester and die of chemical contamination, the Viet vet is a tragic figure deserving of endless apologies.

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Thanks to Bill Leak

As with all mythologies, there is some truth in this, but the factual elements are overwhelmed by the self-serving fabrications. Prime Minister John Howard apologised, but not for the sending of young men to kill and be killed in an immoral and unjust war. He did not apologise to the Vietnamese for Australia's participation in the slaughter of 3 million of their people. He did not even acknowledge mistakes of government. To do so might shine a brighter light on the current Government's policy errors (or, rather, crimes).

Since 1975, Vietnam has underpinned attempts by the Right to rewrite history and to recast the policy agenda. The saturation coverage of the anniversary of Long Tan partly reflects the triumphalist version of history proffered by the Right.

Here was a chance to 'remember' in a way that bolsters powerful ruling interests. Here, in other words, was a chance to forget in the name of remembering.

An article by Cameron Stewart in the Weekend Australian Magazine was typical of this phenomenon. It was the story of two veterans, Bob Buick and Dave Sabben, who had recently returned to Vietnam. Stewart writes in raw detail about the Battle of Long Tan, near the Australian base in the Nui Dat region:

More than 2500 Vietnamese had 108 Australians and New Zealanders most of them raw conscripts pinned down on a battlefield that offered almost no natural protection. The odds of annihilation were overwhelming. The Battle of Long Tan should have been to Australia what Little Big Horn was to the US Cavalry's General Custer. Instead, it became one of Australia's most extraordinary military victories.

Yet it emerges that the dastardly cunning Vietnamese refused to acknowledge it as an Australian victory 'despite the Australians killing more than 300 enemy, while losing only 18 soldiers themselves.' They even had the audacity to claim it as a victory. Vietnam veteran Dave Sabben complains:

For 40 years they have lied about what happened in Long Tan. They have never conceded that they had their arses licked. Instead they have lied to their own people about what happened there. I find it offensive.

Some of us find the presence of imperial invading forces in a land struggling for national self-determination more offensive, not to mention My Lai and the countless My Lais that did not receive publicity.

Stewart proceeds to tell the tale of the Battle in stirring fashion, evoking the sense of despair, isolation and impending doom. 'Timely help' came in the form of a monsoon that offered some shelter to the otherwise exposed Australian troops.

Here the reader might pause and look at those numbers again 2500 against 108 and ask if something has been omitted. But the story is too gripping for such doubts to intrude, so read on.

Rain offers only brief respite, and despair returns. The Australian troops faced death with steely courage, and then suddenly the Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) arrived: 'It was like the cavalry saving everyone from the Indians in a Western movie. I just yelled as soon as I saw them,' recalls Bob Buick without a hint of irony.

An opposing Vietnamese commander, Nguyen Duc Thu, remembers his despair when the APCs arrived: 'we knew we did not have the weapons to fight the tanks.' As Stewart notes, however, 'Thu's battle ended soon after, when a bullet passed through his left ear and exited just under his right ear, knocking him unconscious.'

The Vietnamese troops then 'melted back into the jungle' (Stewart's use of the word 'melted' in this context is highly appropriate, as we shall see). It was only at sunrise the next day that the Australians started counting the dead Vietnamese in the plantations. Sabben informs us that 245 became the official figure because the Government needed a final body count and the soldiers were told to stop counting. Some recent reports suggest that over 800 Vietnamese were killed.

On their return trip to Vietnam, Buick and Sabben meet with their former foes, two Vietnamese commanders at Long Tan. The decisive moment comes: who won the Battle? Of all the lies and distortions that came out of Vietnam, this is the one that angers Sabben and Buick the most. The fact that the Vetnamese in the Nui Dat region believe these lies about the Australians being defeated is nothing short of, well, 'offensive.'

Take Doan Thi Thu, who was 20 at the time and believes that the Viet Cong won. All she can actually recall are the sounds of heavy shelling and the sight of Australian helicopters.

The sight of what? This is the only mention of air power in Stewart's article. It must have slipped in accidentally. It truly is fascinating watching history being rewritten on the run.

On 20 August 1966, the Sydney Morning Herald reported the Battle of Long Tan in detail:

Artillery fire poured in from Australian, New Zealand and American batteries The Allied guns poured nearly 3000 shells into the area. Waves of US jet fighters flew low over the jungle pounding the Communists with high-explosive bombs and dropping napalm.

No wonder the Vietnamese melted into the jungle.

At the time 'Senior Australian officers described it as the heaviest air strike in support of Australians since World War II.' Indeed, 'At one stage Viet Cong mortars fell silent, put out of action by the tremendous weight of explosives hitting the area.' Waves of F100 Super Sabres and F4 Phantoms dropped napalm, as well as 100 and 500 pound bombs on Vietcong positions in total, 'at least 35 tons of high-explosives.'

The absurdity of that question who won the Battle of Long Tan? now becomes apparent. The answer depends upon which battle you are referring to. One of the Vietnamese commanders in

Stewart's article responds to the Australian question with an apparent concession: 'You won.' He adds, however: 'But we won also. Tactically and militarily you won but politically, we won.'

Politically, he suggests, it strengthened the anti-war movement in Australia, a movement which helped end the war.

But all that Buick and Sabben hear is the concession. Deaf to the real import of the Vietnamese commander's words, they leave Vietnam feeling victorious.

Cameron Stewart has no idea what a truly sad tale this is.

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