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## Book review: Dasher Wheatly and Australia in Vietnam

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# Book Reviews

Editor: Martin Hirst

**WALTERS, Ian (1998)**

**Dasher Wheatly and Australia in Vietnam,**  
Northern Territory University Press, Darwin.  
ISBN 1876248106 rrp: \$19.95.

**Review Essay by Peter McGregor**

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Ian Walters, an anthropologist, presents an analysis of the significance of the death of an Australian soldier during the American War in Viet Nam. In order to interpret Dasher (Kevin) Wheatley's death, Walters provides two dimensions of context: (a) a concise, accurate and astute analysis of the political history of the war, and of the USA and Australian interventions; and (b) the theoretical tools he uses - namely cultural studies, deriving, Walters claims, from an anthropological understanding of culture, and specifically the techniques of semiotic and content analysis of pertinent newspaper coverage. The strength of his book is the rigorous empirical measurement of the levels and nature of news coverage. However, Walters' general assumption that news reports can be taken as the measure of significance, as the key index for the public reception of particular happenings, is questionable.

My analysis will draw attention to the use of terminology: even descriptive terms can be expressive of otherwise covert points-of-view. For instance, Walters, like most western researchers, has yet to acknowledge that Viet Nam is two words (surname Viet, given name Nam as Trinh T. Minh-ha's film puts it). One of the few academic journals to acknowledge this 'reality' is the USA-based Viet Nam Generation (editor Kali Tal). This is despite the regular use, by Walters and most researchers, of acronyms that reveal the Vietnamese linguistic structure. For example, the government in South Viet Nam was known as the RVN (Republic of Viet Nam), and the government in the North was known as the DRVN (Democratic Republic of Viet Nam); similarly Hanoi should be Ha Noi, Saigon -- Sai Gon, Danang -- Da Nang, etc.

The initial military commitments of both the USA and Australia were of 'advisers'/'instructors'. While Walters

acknowledges that "their assignment theoretically prohibited their engagement in battle" (p.11; my emphasis, cited in 1983), he doesn't follow through on his exposure of the failure - in practice - of this prohibition. Australia's first contingent of military advisers was deployed in (South) Viet Nam in mid-1962. It wasn't until mid-1965 that USA and Australian combat troops - who were meant to engage in battle - were also deployed in (South) Viet Nam. The use of Orwellian doublespeak and euphemisms during the War was apparent in such official terminologies. The Australian military advisers/instructors were called the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) - the euphemistic term being 'training'. Whereas the USA advisory effort (some 12,000 advisers by the end of 1963), was called the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam (USMACV) - 'assistance' being the euphemistic term here.

In his third chapter, entitled *Death of a Legend*, Walters depicts the circumstances surrounding the death of two Australian advisers: Dasher Wheatley and his 'mate', Butch Swanton. In February 1965 Wheatley had been both promoted to Warrant Officer 2nd Class, and posted to Viet Nam for 'service' with the AATTV. By November 1965 Wheatley, Swanton and five other Australian Warrant Officers were a 'team' attached to a USA Army Special Forces camp in Tra Bong, in I Corps, the USA's northern organisational sector of South Viet Nam. The camp also included a Vietnamese Special Forces team, a company of Vietnamese and another company of Montagnards; the commander of the whole outpost was an Australian, Captain Felix Fazekas. All the Australians were from the AATTV. The camp, according to Australia journalist Denis Warner, was a "wonderful success" (p.44), destabilising the previously strong Viet Cong area through their vigorous patrolling attacks. Wheatley had acquired a reputation as an outstanding soldier, for bravery but also for compassion.

On 13 November 1965, on a 'search and destroy' patrol of a local Viet Cong hamlet, Wheatley and Swanton's platoon was pinned down under heavy fire. Swanton, going to the aid of a wounded Vietnamese soldier, was himself severely wounded. Wheatley in turn went to the aid of Swanton, got him to partial cover, and in desperation radioed for assistance. Their Vietnamese medic, having dressed Swanton's wounds retired, and the last Vietnamese soldier, having pleaded with Wheatley to run, saying there was nothing that could be done for Swanton, also left. Wheatley and Swanton were found the next morning lying next to each other, killed by shots to the head. The AATTV was known for its code of mateship - a 'buddy relationship' to the Americans - especially in battle situations they worked in pairs. Walters

proceeds to analyse Wheatley's death as a hero, within the Anzac tradition of Australians as good soldiers, and explicitly invoking the ethos of 'mateship'. The immediate Australian news media coverage of the two Australians was quite small - in terms merely of their deaths. As their mateship and heroism quickly became known, the coverage became more extensive. It included the prompt awarding of medals - and of the same level to both Wheatley and Swanton - by the South Vietnamese authorities. However, Walters suggests the overall swamping of this story by other current stories indicates how "the war was not of high concern" (p.62), at that time for Australia.

Subsequent speculation that Wheatley may be awarded a Victoria Cross (VC) led to a further increase in media attention, culminating eventually in the peak of the incident's coverage in December 1966, when Wheatley was awarded the VC. For Walters, the deaths finally achieved "genuine newsworthiness" (p.77), with the awarding of the VC, despite the lack of any new information ('news') about the deaths. Rather, Walters argues, it was the awarding of the VC that generated this increased newsworthiness. Walters goes on to eventually place almost metaphysical powers on the VC as 'material culture', as if it is a fetish object. A report of the awarding of the medal in *The Age* newspaper is revealing: no mention is made of Swanton's heroism/mateship in trying to rescue his Vietnamese 'mate'; Swanton and Wheatley merely "accompanied" the search and destroy operation, while no mention is made of that other Australian 'adviser', Captain Fazekas, being the commander of the operation (p.77-79)

Yet Walters' next chapter, *Two Other Tragedies*, would appear to undermine his own argument about the crucial role the VC played in the newsworthiness of the deaths. The death of the first Australian conscript, Private Errol Noack, towards the end of May 1966, scored headlines and the most extensive Australian coverage of the war up till then. While the sending of (Australian) troops to Viet Nam in mid 1962 had been uncontroversial, generating very little coverage (p.18 and 21), from the introduction of conscription (for overseas service), in November 1964, conscription had been "a big political issue" (p.98). Despite the quantity of the coverage of Noack's death, Walters notes that his killing by Australian fire went unreported. Then in mid-August 1966 came the battle of Long Tan. While 18 Australian soldiers were killed (11 of them being conscripts), and 26 were wounded, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese lost over 200 dead (estimates vary). As Walters says: "Long Tan was such a shock, such a big issue for the Australian media, that the fervour of reporting continued for days" (p.101). After Noack's death and the battle at Long Tan, the war was now on the media's - and hence the public's

- agenda in Australia. Also a Federal election was looming, where the war came to be a prominent part of the Coalition government's campaign.

Unfortunately Walters doesn't address the bona fides of the Australian (and USA) 'commitments' to Viet Nam. Until the Gulf of Tonkin 'incident' in August 1964, the USA government had no legal rationale/pre-text to wage what was to continue as an undeclared war in Viet Nam. Similarly for the Australian government war was never declared, and officially the Australian intervention was a 'police action'. (Hence some of the difficulties Viet Nam Veterans had in joining the RSL, and being acknowledged - eg, for medical treatment, pensions, etc. - as returned soldiers, from overseas 'service', in a war...) Could it be that at the time of Wheatley and Swanton's deaths the Australian government (with its compliant media as "mirror" (p.18)), had a vested interest in minimising the 'incident'? Could this perhaps be more the reason for the 'incident's' initially quite minimal newsworthiness? Whereas, on the other hand, the "two other tragedies" just couldn't be so easily contained and minimised? And that yes, as Walters and others argue, 1965-1966 was a "turning point" from "the cold war paralysis of public debate" (p.4) and dissent, to the social changes and "public contestation" (p.25) of the so-called sixties generation? My own memory - for what it's worth, as someone who both lived through the war, and has recently done research about the war - is of having heard of Noack, but not of Wheatley...until Walters' book. Walters then examines the November 1966 election, where, with the war and conscription as two of the big issues, the Coalition romped back into power.

The conclusions that Walters reluctantly reaches about the impact of the Wheatley/Swanton deaths upon Australian culture are (a) that they were not very significant at the time - especially when compared to both other Viet Nam War events, and also non-Viet Nam War events; and (b) not very significant - apart from the attention now given by Walters' own study - since. For Walters, and for the Australian military, those two deaths were highly significant. Again, Walters isn't alone in depicting 'standing by your mates' as the key attribute of being a (worthy) Australian. Yet his case study of the Viet Nam war fails to confirm the continuance of this hitherto accepted archetype of Australian identity. For people like Wheatley, Swanton, Walters, myself and others of the Viet Nam generation, the heroic mateship of Australian soldiers in the First and Second World Wars was part of our cultural inheritance as Australians. I grew up knowing of Simpson and his donkey at Gallipoli, of the rats of Tobruk, of the Kokoda Trail. While the battle of Long Tan has been quite aptly incorporated into the Australian/Anzac legend, the overall

Australian experience in Viet Nam is not one that can be so easily incorporated. Walters would appear to acknowledge this in his analysis of the macrocosm of the Australian (and American) experience in Viet Nam. Yet it is as if he wants to attach kudos to an exception that belies that macrocosm. This inconsistency in his analysis is paralleled somewhat in his methodology: namely, his assumption that the (public) significance of events lies in their news coverage. This assumption ignores the separation between the directly lived and its representation, between the war and its reporting. This distinction was outlined, around the time of the deaths Walters analyses, in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Yet Walters has readily acknowledged - and documented - the limits of media presentations, particularly, as he puts it, concerning the close links with conservatism and officialdom. The issues he doesn't take up are often more revealing than the ones he does.

Walters concludes with a critique of the values of the (news) media, and hence of Australian society's priorities. And it's true, Wheatley - and Swanton - were heroes, demonstrating solidarity and mateship with their colleagues. Wheatley for Swanton, but also Swanton for his (unknown) Vietnamese 'mate'. Remember how the South Vietnamese authorities treated Wheatley and Swanton equally with their prompt awarding of the same medals. Walters begins to explore the racism implicit in the awarding of hero status and a VC only to Wheatley... Here Walters cites Ian McNeill as if in explanation: that Swanton was just doing his job (p.160), whereas Wheatley's behaviour was extraordinary, "something else" (p.98). McNeill is one of the leading (Australian) military historians of the war (with for instance, a book on the AATTV). Now, while it may not be completely fair and/or apt to equate the news media's values (ie., the calculus of newsworthiness), with broader social/community values, they are connected, if not necessarily in the direct and transparent - and naive - manner that Walters suggests. For instance, in December 1965, while speculation about Wheatley getting a VC gained coverage, Australian cricketer Doug Walters, and Sonia Hopkins' forthcoming marriage to Billy McMahan each generated considerably more coverage. Walters decries this contrast as a "contradiction" (p.140), and gets lost in his moral outrage at the inadequacies of the coverage of war heroism.

Politicians of the Viet Nam war era, like Paul Hasluck and Malcolm Fraser, and of course Menzies, should be held accountable for the consequences of the racist arrogance of their 'forward defence' foreign policy - "fight the communist threat on a distant (ie.someone else's!) shore" (p.14-16). A similar accountability should be accorded to those responsible for the military 'assistance' policy, that concealed western aggression

within the rhetoric of benevolent neo-colonialism. And then there's the military brass who designed the strategy to carry out those policies. This is where, for instance, there needs to be more critical investigation of the role of the AITV than Walters and others have given (p.153). While Wheatley's - and Swanton's - bravery and compassion for "sticking up for your mates" (p.155), was undoubtedly exceptional, it was the strategy and goals of Australian intervention in Viet Nam that was both questionable at the time, and is increasingly so in contemporary analyses of the war. ■

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