2009

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Women and War:
Impacts of the Vietnam War — Narratives of Wives of Australian and South Vietnamese Veterans

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The impacts of the Vietnam War on many wives of Australian and South Vietnamese veterans are profound and permanent. Social histories have largely neglected these impacts on women, focussing instead on the impacts of the war on Australian male Vietnam veterans. This article argues that the impacts on wives of Australian and South Vietnamese veterans should be recognised as a cost of the war and that wives of veterans from both countries deserve a place in history. To support this argument, this article uses spoken and written narratives of wives of Australian and South Vietnamese veterans. The evidence from these narratives contributes to the existing body of knowledge about the impacts of the war and also gives a voice to wives of veterans from both countries. The article compares and contrasts the experiences described in the narratives of wives of Australian Vietnam veterans changed by war with the experiences of wives of South Vietnamese veterans affected by war and imprisonment.

When you are young you are looking out the door of life all the time, but memory is saving, saving the patches. Whatever you do don’t lose them. The patches of memory are the things that make history, and you can write or tell them as others cannot do …

Dame Mary Gilmore
Recorded for ‘Talking Books for the Blind’ by Hazel de Berg, 18 March 1957

Introduction
Joy Damousi identified a gap in existing Australian social histories of war — women’s experiences. Concerning the aftermath of war, she wrote: ‘In admitting to women’s experiences, we can come to a new understanding of the legacy of war beyond the public arena, and of women’s place — long neglected — within national narratives about war.’ It is an apt point for this paper that takes as its focus the impacts of the Vietnam War on wives of Australian veterans and also the wives of South Vietnamese veterans living in Australia. These have largely remained a hidden and unexplored cost of the war.

Although there is a considerable body of literature about the impacts of the Vietnam War on wives of American veterans and the experiences of South Vietnamese women who fled South Vietnam and settled in America (for example, Yung Krall’s autobiography A Thousand Tears Falling), little exists about the Australian experience for both groups. Much of the literature examining the impacts of the Vietnam War in Australia has concentrated on the male veterans that in turn has marginalised or simplified the experiences of women. Where the women are addressed, they are predominantly portrayed as victims. For example, it was the focus of Siobhan
McHugh’s *Minefields and Miniskirts* where one wife of a Vietnam veteran described how the family moved around, eventually settling on the north coast of New South Wales where she said ‘he kept me a prisoner in his world’. She was not allowed to have friends, and was stranded in the home all day while her husband had the car. And John Gatlin recently wrote in *Reveille*, quoting Dr Brian O’Toole:

“It’s a fair bet that we’re going to find veterans’ combat experience and PTSD is related to their wives’ mental health”, said O’Toole. “These women are subject to men who are cranky, because anger outbursts and periods of agitation are symptoms of PTSD. They live in an environment where, one woman said, we walk on eggshells all the time.”

There is also a growing body of literature devoted to the refugees who fled to Australia after the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975 that includes their experiences of war and their adaptation to living in Australia. Yet, again, there is little about the impacts of the war on the wives of South Vietnamese veterans living in Australia.

Based on interviews with Australian and South Vietnamese women this paper seeks to broaden understanding of women’s experiences by arguing that although many women could be seen as victims, this simple stereotyping hides a much more complex picture. Comparing and contrasting the narratives of women from both countries reveals that, although there are significant differences in the stories of these women, there are also surprising similarities.

**Methodology: Approaches and Difficulties**

The first contacts for conducting this research were two organisations — the Vietnam Veterans Association, Illawarra sub-branch in Wollongong, and the Vietnamese Community in Wollongong. Each organisation gave details of the research to relevant women who then became involved, and then involved others (the process of snowball sampling). The women either recorded their experiences on tape or submitted them in written form. The research encountered difficulties that included the reluctance of some women to be involved, perhaps because they were not confident or because their experiences have been too traumatic for them to relate to an outsider. The involvement of the South Vietnamese women presented different difficulties relating to language and culture. The following comment from one South Vietnamese woman proved significant: ‘in our culture, we normally deal with our own problems and issues within ourselves, we don’t normally bring it out.’ It partly explained their focus on the events that shaped their lives rather than on their personal feelings. In addition, ‘wife’ and ‘family’ were used synonymously, a cultural practice that authors have described as the ‘silent voice of women’ and which is acknowledged in this research as a limitation.

The narratives collected captured the experiences of women affected by the Vietnam War over a forty year period. Although they relied mainly on memory and although memory can be untrustworthy, its strength was that it allowed women to write or speak about how they felt. At times, this was difficult territory to negotiate, especially with the Australian women. The impact of the war on them was constructed around the impact of the war on their husbands and their place as victims, a reflection of the prevailing views in the literature mentioned earlier. Indeed, this was often the departure point for the interviews. For example, in the interview with Margaret G., she became very upset when recalling the hurt of the emotional abuse she had suffered in the early years of her marriage: ‘I couldn’t cope any more. I couldn’t cope any more with the way that he was degrading and humiliating me, talking to me in front of the kids’.

Recorded interviews are a powerful way of capturing oral history through the nuances and emotions in the spoken word. But some women preferred to write about
their experiences. The written narratives are often more considered, structured and reflective and lack the spontaneity of an oral interview, and they give the writer greater control over what they choose to reveal. But they are an equally powerful way of capturing the past.

**Differences**

The main difference between the narratives of the women from the two countries related to the contrasting interpretations of the words, ‘the impact of the war’. For Australian women, the impact of the war meant living with a husband who had problems inherited from the war. Their narratives revealed the effect that this had on them. For example, Emily S. stated: ‘I have been married to a Vietnam veteran for twenty-seven years and I can say with honesty some of them have been the saddest years of my life.’ She also wrote of the chronic embarrassment she felt because of her husband’s outbursts and she stated that the family was unable to mix with the ‘normal’ stream of society because they found his behaviour unacceptable and far too emotional. In addition, the social isolation gradually extended to her husband’s family. The following comment about this was significant because it illustrated the depth and ongoing nature of the problem. She said: ‘His family all found him strange, moody and argumentative and gradually dropped all pretence of finding his company enjoyable and to this day some of his family are still uncomfortable in his company.’

Other women described the effect of living with a troubled husband in similar ways. One summed up her marriage of thirty-three years in these words: ‘We really didn’t have a very good life … I still have trouble remembering the good things.’ The other recalled an incident that typified her marriage. She was preparing dinner one night and almost lost control because her husband put the chopping board away when she slipped outside to pick some parsley. Her recollection of this incident was significant because it depicted a very frustrated woman driven almost to the point of committing a crime because of a very controlling husband. She said: ‘Nothing’s allowed to be out of its place. I picked up the knife and I had some really dark thoughts and I slammed that knife down and I went running outside. I was pushed to my limit. Do you know what it’s like being watched all the time?’

A number of women, however, presented different insights into the effect of living with a troubled husband. Their comments indicated guilt and even responsibility for their husband’s problems. Sylvia B., for example, blamed herself instead of the war for problems. On a number of occasions throughout her interview she made statements such as ‘I thought it was my fault’, and ‘I blamed myself’. Julie M. blamed herself for her husband losing his temper. In her interview, she made statements such as ‘Everything was always my fault … I must have worked him up’, and ‘why couldn’t I pick that he was going to explode?’

The comments of other women revealed compassion for husbands. Pam B. said she could not bring herself to leave her husband because she knew he would not cope. Although not stated, guilt may have been partly responsible for her decision. Margaret G. did not make her husband pay maintenance for the year they lived apart because she knew he could not afford it. Karel S. said the following about how she felt when she saw her husband become distressed during their interview. Her words evoked the image of a mother reaching out to a frightened child: ‘I felt helpless and numb … I then tried to imagine that I was “holding” Barry in a safe space, that I was there for him and certainly not judging him in any way.’

In contrast, for the South Vietnamese women, the impact of the war meant the communist takeover of the South and the consequences that followed. Their narratives
were constructed around events rather than their personal feelings. They described 30 April 1975 as the day the communists came. Soon after, their husbands were sent to Re-education Camps, usually referred to by the women as Forced Labour Camps. They reported being re-located to New Economic Zones (NEZs), and finally escaping Vietnam. They described their detention in refugee camps and their migration to Australia in the early 1980s.

There are a number of possible explanations for the two very different types of reflection on the impacts of the war. Perhaps the South Vietnamese women’s interpretations were an illustration of the ‘silent voice of women’ in Vietnamese history, or simply the inappropriateness for them of discussing personal problems with an outsider. Perhaps, however, the events that unfolded in South Vietnam post 30 April 1975 were so momentous that the women remembered them most vividly.

A second difference in the narratives of the Australian and South Vietnamese women relates to the ways in which they discussed their children. Although Australian women acknowledged their children’s achievements, most focussed on the problems that their children had, problems that sometimes carried over into adulthood. The main problems they identified were physical deformities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and behavioural problems at school and beyond, Bipolar Disorder, emotional problems (especially anger), panic attacks and lifelong dependency on medication. The unexpected focus of the women on such problems could be ‘living proof’ of the difficulty of having a Vietnam veteran for a father. The women believed that such was the case. However, it may have been the result of how the women took the word ‘impact’ in the question to mean negative consequences of the war on children and that became the focus of their reflections. Or it may have been the result of their exposure to literature and documentaries about the effect of the war on children.

In contrast, the South Vietnamese women focussed on their children’s achievements, especially since settling in Australia. They related their children’s success in school, university and work and their achievements in married life. The focus on achievement and the surprising omission of problems may have been a result of their children not living with a father in the years following the war. Their children faced other trauma, but they did not have the experience of living with a father affected by war. However, they may not have discussed their children’s problems because it was not culturally appropriate.

A third difference related to comments about the financial difficulties of raising families. Most wives of Australian veterans stated that their financial situation had not been a problem. Michelle C., for example, summed up her situation in the following way: ‘It wasn’t a problem that we couldn’t cope with, no not really. Apart from street people and indigenous Australians that are not as well served, the great majority of us really are lucky … it has not been a problem.’ This comment was significant because it reflected comments made by most other women on this aspect of raising a family. Most women reported that they and their husband had employment while some said that their husbands received a Disability Pension.

However, all wives of South Vietnamese veterans recalled the severe financial hardship of raising a family in Vietnam, especially in the years following the war when their husbands were imprisoned and there was no income. Phuong L. described the hardship of raising eight children on her own, for many years surviving mainly by breeding pigs and chickens and selling them when they matured. Quan T. recalled the South Vietnamese currency being rendered worthless after the communists took
control. The entries in her diary were significant as they depicted the hopelessness of her situation. She wrote that she needed money to live, to buy food and medicine, and she could not sleep because of the worry. ‘In desperation, I went out … to borrow money, the first time in my life I borrowed money.’

**Similarities**

The narratives of the women involved in this research showed similarities in the experiences of women from both countries. Living with a husband changed by war was an experience common to a number of women. Two women said they did not recognise their husbands upon their return home. Surprisingly, one was the wife of an Australian veteran who said ‘I did not even recognise my husband’ when she saw him after serving only four months in Vietnam. She said: ‘You have no idea what he looked like when he came home … he was like one of those prisoners you see in films about Concentration Camps — skin and bone.’ A South Vietnamese woman, Phuong L., also described her husband as ‘unrecognisable’, when he returned home after eighteen years of imprisonment.

Most women, however, described living with husbands whose personality had changed as a result of the war. Emily S. used the words ‘it was like he had undergone a personality change. He was that different’ to describe the change in her husband. Others related changes in their husband’s behaviour, such as Sylvia B., who said that her husband patrolled the backyard with a rake handle in his hand when dances were held at the community hall immediately behind their home. Marie L. reported that her husband kept a loaded gun under his pillow for five years after he returned from Vietnam. A number of women spoke of ‘his changing moods’, distancing, depression and other mental health issues, communication problems, husbands on medication — all linked to the effect that they believed the war had on their husband.

South Vietnamese women made similar comments about the physical and personality changes that they noticed in their husbands after returning home. Their comments were significant because it was one of two times when they discussed the Vietnam experience at a personal level. Loan D. said that her husband was very angry and scared. At times, he got drunk and hit her and their children. He had to take medication for depression. Quan T. used the words ‘really hard’ to describe beginning married life again with a husband changed by the experience of war, then imprisonment. For some time she had the added responsibility of caring for him, as he was weak, needed medication and was on a walking stick. She said that he was scared to talk about his time in the Camp or to voice opinions about the communist regime.

Gai T. described her husband as ‘withdrawn’ when they were reunited in 1978 after his return from three years in a forced labour camp. A second similarity in the narratives of some of the women from both countries was the inability to sleep at night, symptomatic of secondary traumatisation that some historians have identified as a hidden cost of war. The following story shows in an objective and graphic way a hideous consequence of this. Bronwyn F. wrote that her skin broke out in dermatitis from lack of sleep and she said that there was a time towards the end of her marriage when ‘I would have to sleep with cotton gloves on, and a cotton scarf around my neck, to prevent myself from scratching my neck to pieces. The rash was even through my hair, and I have ground my teeth badly.’

South Vietnamese women also recalled the experience of not being able to sleep. They seemed comfortable disclosing this personal detail, perhaps because it was not a feeling. Loan D. said that she had not been able to sleep properly because she was continually disturbed by her husband having nightmares. Quan T. reported waking up
because her husband continued to call out in his sleep, ‘Vietcong! Vietcong!’ Phuong L. stated that she has been unable to sleep properly over the past forty years because of the bad memories of the years she lived without her husband.28

Arguably, the most significant similarity to emerge from the narratives of the women from both countries was their strength. Australian women coped in the world of a troubled husband so aptly described by Dr Brian O’Toole earlier in this article. For example, Pam B. avoided a controlling husband by finding a job. She said that she ‘would have gone crazy being at home with him. I needed to work to keep my sanity.’ In addition, against her husband’s wishes, Pam did volunteer work with the Vietnam Veterans Association, being on call at night to counsel veterans and wives of veterans.29 Some women reported that they were the breadwinners and ended up being responsible for the financial side of their marriages. Bev D. stated that she took most of the responsibility for their financial affairs and Bronwyn F. stated that she studied to gain qualifications and resumed full time work because her husband was no longer able to work and they had children at school and university.

Some women exercised considerable control within their marriages. Michelle C., for example, described the control she exercised in marriage on a number of occasions during her interview. The following story illustrates the control she had over her husband, in addition to simply putting up with him, coping with him or getting around him. A psychiatrist had told her husband that he was to take anti-depressants for the rest of his life. She believed that this was bad advice stating, ‘I mean Kev may completely disagree with me but that is by-the-by; I’ve got very strong feelings. Maybe if I hadn’t, he wouldn’t have got off them.’30

The strength of women was graphically manifested in the narratives of the South Vietnamese women when recalling their experiences of escaping South Vietnam. Quan T. was one of the thousands who risked her life and the lives of her family to escape communist rule.31 She kept a diary in which she described the fear and uncertainty of the first night when ‘the sea and sky were dark like Chinese black ink.’ She recorded her husband’s threat to drown himself rather than being taken back to prison should their escape be unsuccessful. She also described the terror of being shot at, and her ability to exercise control over a woman who became hysterical, suggesting a strength that was replicated in the stories of thousands of women who fled their homeland, because of fear of persecution and oppression.32

**Conclusion**

The impacts of the Vietnam War on women have largely remained a hidden cost of the war because the literature in the field has reduced women to a marginal role. This paper, however, has focused on the impacts of the war on women through an analysis of the narratives of wives of Australian and South Vietnamese veterans. Indeed, the paper has brought another dimension to the research in this area by comparing and contrasting the experiences of women from two very different cultures who had vastly different experiences post Vietnam. Finally, the paper has underlined the argument that women’s experiences should be recognised as a cost of the war.

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3 Wives of veterans have been depicted as victims of war in social histories such as Damousi, Living with the Aftermath; Siobhan McHugh, Minefields and Miniskirts: Australian Women and the Vietnam War, Griffin Press, South Melbourne, 2005, and Noel Giblett, ed., Homecomings: Stories from Australian Vietnam Veterans and their Wives, AGPS, Canberra, 1990, and documented in clinical studies such as that conducted by F. Deane, et al., ‘New Zealand Vietnam Veterans’ Family Programme, Nga Whanau a Tu (Families of War): Development and Outcome’, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy, Vol.19, 1, 1998, pp. 1-10.

4 McHugh, Minefields and Miniskirts, p. 196.


7 Letter from Teresa T., 5 October 2006.


11 Interview with Pam B. on 18 October 2006.

12 Interview with Sylvia B. on 10 November 2006.

13 Ibid.

14 Interview with Juli M. on 18 June 2007.

15 Interview with Karel and Barry S. on 10 January 2008.

16 Interview with Michelle C. on 29 October 2007.

17 Document submitted in interview with Quan T.on 13 June 2007.

18 Interview with Margaret G.
Interview with Phuong L. on 9 November 2006.
Interview with Emily S. on 18 November 2006.
Interview with Sylvia B.
Interview with Marie L. on 21 June 2007.
Interview with Loan D. on 13 June 2007.
Interview with Quan T. on 13 June 2007.
Interview with Gai T. on 13 June 2007.
Correspondence from Bronwyn F., 30 September 2007.
Interviews with Loan D., Quan T., and Phuong L.
Interview with Pam B.
Interview with Michelle C.
Document submitted in interview with Quan T. on 13 June 2007.