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Permission to speak, sir - official history, whose reality?

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Abstract
Veterans need to have permission to talk about what they saw on the battlefield. Often the official histories and the popular memory, along with their Army training, deny them this permission.

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Introduction

The issue of soldiers’ recollections differing from what has become the ‘official history’ of war is an issue which keeps surfacing within the veteran community. When Paul Ham’s book *Vietnam the Australian War* appeared in the bookshops, one of my platoon rang me saying that the author had the story of one of our platoon members wrong. My informant’s recollections, oral histories from his mates, and other documents disagreed with Ham’s account. This soldier wanted the error corrected - he wanted the record set straight.

Are the differences between soldiers’ stories of their Vietnam service and what is written in the official histories significant?

I am collecting the oral histories of a platoon of soldiers with whom I served in the war in Vietnam in 1967. A number of issues for oral historians have presented themselves during the course of my research. They are;

- the role and reliability of memory
- potential barriers to remembering and discussing traumatic events
- the part played by the participant interviewer

Most nations weave myths and legends around their warriors. It is my thesis that many events and experiences, which do not support the legend, are ignored or sanitised in the official military histories because they are written through this heroic lens. In Australia, war veterans see themselves as part of the ANZAC tradition. ANZAC stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. Australia and New Zealand have close defence ties and have frequently fought together in wars throughout the last century. The ANZAC legend portrays patriotic soldiers marching off to war, fighting heroically (whether the battle is won or lost), then returning to a hero’s welcome, and living happily every afterwards, unscarred by their battlefield experiences.
1. Memory

As one of my interviewees has put it: Audio: “37 years. All of that should be fading, you know. I can’t remember what bars I drank in in Australia 37 years ago but I remember what I’d done in November 1967 and other times because that’s why probably we’re on TPI, because all of those memories keep coming back.” A TPI is a military pension for totally and permanently incapacitated veterans. Audio “They’re not allowed to fade, like a lot of the other memories. The pictures keep coming back, maybe in some people maybe once a week; some people maybe once a month. But quite regularly, so they don’t fade. They don’t get dim. But after 37 years – I aah... I still remember the pit, the shape of that track, the contour of it. It went round like that, like a kind of a question mark, and to there, there was another little entry there too. There was two entries into that track. Just minute things.”

1A. Memory for history. Does it work?

Memory is the foundation stone of oral history - without memory there is no oral history. Theories about memory open up debate among historians, many of whom are wary of it and prefer the primacy of archival research and documentary sources. As Alessandro Portelli has put it, they accept the dominant prejudice which sees factual credibility as the monopoly of written documents, refusing to even countenance that documents, like oral histories, are ‘sometimes incomplete, inaccurate and deceiving’.

Medical experts claim that memory deteriorates very quickly, and in a very short timeframe, we have only thirty percent of memory left. None the less, research shows that after age 30 while we struggle to manage the storage of short-term memory, it seems as though long-term memory is enhanced. The soldier whose voice we have just heard claims that he can remember some events from over 40 years ago very clearly. Other eyewitnesses to the same events corroborate his narrative. There have been papers written about how traumatic memory is ‘special’, and oral historians talk about memory being ‘composed’. Memory involves viewing past events with today’s prejudices, beliefs and knowledge and the human need to justify one’s place in history. Veterans tend to use the following filters;

- rules and regulations,
- rituals,
• traditions, and
• story telling

When taking oral histories, the interviewer has to be alert to the possibility of the interviewee reconstructing events with the benefit of hindsight, as it could involve them in explaining events rather describing them. In this case, it would mean interviewees reconstructing their personal history to justify their opinion of the Vietnam war, either now or in the past.

Alistair Thomson, in his work on memory, suggests that veterans’ memories are composed and that they vary for different audiences. He believes that the construction of memory revolves around the interaction of interviewer and interviewee, public legend and individual memories, past and present, and memory and identity.

When veterans describe their experiences on the battlefield, they are dealing with traumatic memories. I believe that traumatic memories are etched rather than composed. I say this because the words of their narratives are authentic, simple, descriptive and not embellished. It is as if the adrenalin around the event has etched the details on the soul rather than it being composed of remembered events that have been rummaged through to fit a current worldview or audience.

As one of my soldiers commented: “But there’s other things you remember, and they can be minute detail where no one else would remember, but to you they’re actually in your memory and you’ll take them to the grave with you. Then there might be something else that someone else thinks is quite important and you’ve completely forgotten about it. That can happen. It’s unpredictable.”

Individuals exposed to the same traumatic event do not necessarily assign the same meanings to it. This soldier acknowledges that what is important to him may not have been important to others. I have taken thirty oral histories and the one thing of which I am sure is that traumatic memory causes pain. I have sat through the long silences where I could see the narrator struggling with his memory. The crux of the matter is that there are too many facts to deal with and the individual veteran sheds information which is not necessary to him.
This is why there are variations between oral histories and why there is a difference between veterans’ stories and the official histories.

1b. Traumatic Memory Markers

My studies suggest that there are several major reasons why events such as the five, which take up a large part of my oral histories, are imprinted on the soldiers’ memories:

- They were in danger of dying
- Their good comrade died
- Their actions offended a principle they had been taught at home or school or in Army training
- They did something that offended their belief system
- An injustice occurred

All of these factors may have affected the soldier’s memory; a number of them may have worked in concert, or one in isolation.

1c Traumatic Events

The five incidents which resonated with my interviewees were:

An ambush of some bamboo pickers, resulting in the wounding and the death of civilians
Suicide attempt by a platoon member
Mine incident resulting in the death of two soldiers
The claymore ambush death of two soldiers and wounding of seven soldiers
The shooting of a friendly sentry
Unfortunately, in the time available I cannot discuss all the incidents. I will examine one incident that presents a flavour of the issues that arose.

1d. Relating Memory Markers to a Traumatic Event

An ambush of some Bamboo Pickers

On the 23 October 1967, a number of civilians going about their daily business walked into an ambush\textsuperscript{26}. This incident played havoc with those who were in the group which fired on and killed the unfortunate civilians when they entered the target area\textsuperscript{27}. Analysing the oral histories of the soldiers involved in this incident, there are elements of the three of the Traumatic Memory Markers mentioned above. Their Army training did not help their actions; it failed them at this point. This incident offended their belief system that you do not kill children and you do not kill civilians.

One soldier is certain that he killed two young girls that day, as he claims their wounds were consistent with the ballistics of his weapon\textsuperscript{28}. He did not need a pathologist’s report, he said, he was so sure of the results.

The man who triggered the ambush and opened fire on the civilians had died before I could interview him. I was able to speak to his widow who gave details of this incident. When I asked her if her husband had told her about it, she replied that she had learned about what happened by listening to him talking in his sleep. Her knowledge of the incident was accurate and quite detailed.

One veteran told me that after the incident the scene had been tidied up - that our Air Force had dumped the bodies in the South China Sea\textsuperscript{29}. Whilst I cannot now disprove this story, it is contrary to what I believed had happened. It may have been the start of a myth, which I think this soldier needed to believe to put a tidy end to a nasty part of his life on the battlefield.

One soldier who was not present at the ambush talked at length about why the civilians should not have entered the area, and suggested that their presence meant they were obviously enemy\textsuperscript{30}. The platoon had done the right thing, he declared, and it was merely an unfortunate
accident. His belief that the platoon had done the right thing has not, however, removed from this veteran’s memory the whimpering of the women and children who were caught in the ambush.

This incident does not appear in the official history or the battalion history, but is mentioned in two books, which talked about the enormous disruption to the economy and lives of the local people, by the Australian Army’s presence in the area. Whilst these books do not identify the platoon involved, the author of these books has made contact with one of the platoon and suggested to him that this incident was a war crime, which might be part of the reason members of the platoon have agreed to give their version of events – to set the record straight.

2. Barriers to remembering and discussing traumatic events

To the soldier who made the comments above and many like him, his memories take him to real places, where he re-experiences real events, emotions and sensations from his past, in the present day. During my research, I have come to believe that under certain circumstances permission needs to be granted for the narrator to access these memories – particularly memories that do not accord with the popular memory of the war. These events generate terrible pain and guilt and are suppressed until permission is granted for them to be explored. Military institutions by their nature groom soldiers not to discuss their feelings or negative experiences, so when it comes to talking about ‘family secrets’ that may damage the legends built around the country’s warriors, veterans need to grant or be granted permission to bypass this grooming.

Before starting my interviews, interviewees often asked what I wanted to know, so some pre-interview time was spent clarifying the fact that I wanted their version of events, not what they thought would correlate with mine. Here I had to make it clear that they had permission to tell their story warts and all, that I was conducting research, not a witch-hunt of past events. It was though we had dropped back into our relationship on the battlefield where I was the boss and a representative of the Army’s authority. I had to get past the grooming that the Army did in its training, with its implicit sanction around talking about certain issues, feelings and personal observations. I also had to revisit the consent form and its purpose to be sure that interviewees understood that it gave the Australian War Memorial and interested
researchers access to their taped interviews. Again, as a participant interviewer I have to ask how much of their story became mine, or mine theirs.

Before each interview, I alerted the interviewee to the fact that the interview might give rise to feelings that could require professional help\(^3^8\). There was also a need to reassure wives and partners; because they each knew the angst, that talking about Vietnam sometimes caused their partners.

The chronological approach was used to work through the veteran’s memory of his Army service\(^3^9\). This allowed him to walk slowly through the events of the past rather than going straight to his time in Vietnam. This approach gives the interviewer and the narrator time to accept each other before discussing traumatic events. It created a safe environment for the men once they realized that I was no longer a representative of the Army, but someone interested in their story and that of the platoon.

3. Participant Interviewer

My dual role as participant in the events and taker of the oral histories has to be acknowledged and questions asked as to whether my position vis-à-vis the interviewees, both in Vietnam (where I was an officer, a non-drinker, and their boss) and now (where I am closer to some of them than to my siblings) has affected the process\(^4^0\). This dual role suggests that I may not be an unbiased investigator. As Alessandro Portelli says, “oral history is not just a collection of stories, but also their interpretation and representation\(^4^1\)”. On the other hand, perhaps a narrative recorded by a participant in the events may produce a more accurate interpretation than the official, battalion, or a popular history of those times because of their knowledge of the events. The participant interviewer can also signify to a veteran that he has permission to talk about the events of the battlefield because of his previous position, his questions and his demeanour. His questions signify that a particular subject is on the table for discussion. This relationship, which still exists between me and each of the men I have interviewed, may influence their remembering\(^4^2\). Some of them thought I saw things which I did not or that I had certain knowledge which I did not. It is useful to understand that in my platoon I was expected to know what my men were doing and was punished if I did not, so I created the illusion that I was on top of everything that was occurring. These men had ideas about me, I had opinions about them, and possibly, about both the collection process and
other interviewees’ participation. In collecting data the relationship, perceived attitude, bearing and questions I asked have, I am sure, affected the final result.

In my research, I have found that the differences between the official history and the veterans’ oral histories are not errors in memory or deceptions\textsuperscript{43}. Rather, they are the result of the historian’s starting point. By starting with the official history and triangulating back to the commander's diary and the war archives, one story emerges; whilst starting with the veterans' oral histories and comparing them with the commander's diary and the war archives, reveals a different account of the same events.

**Conclusion**

These oral histories, whilst in the most part agreeing with the facts recorded in the documents on which the official history of this war are based, provide a ‘flesh and blood’ recollection of life in a war zone, and recount a number of incidents which have been left out completely, incompletely recorded, or wrongly recorded in the official history. They have led me to surmise that the official version of events may have omitted soldiers’ experience that could be seen as tarnishing the image of the glorious warriors of our national myths.

Veterans need to have permission to talk about what they saw on the battlefield. Often the official histories and the popular memory, along with their Army training, deny them this permission.

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(Official History) accurately portrays their service, see Alistair Thomson *ANZAC Memories Living with the Legend* Oxford University Press 1994 Oxford p 233 also ‘on the record’ and ‘off the record’ ibid p 231.
3Ibid pp 7-8 describes how the First World War veterans saw themselves part of the legend.
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33 Refers to audio above see endnotes 4, 5, 6 & 13
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35 ibid
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37 Alistair Thomson *ANZAC Memories Living with the Legend* p 236 see also Alessandro Portelli *The Battle of Valle Guillia oral history and the art of dialogue* p.9
38 Ibid p.237 the therapeutic nature of veterans’ oral histories is discussed. My research has required ethics clearance before commencement. Consent and medical support was discussed with each interviewee.
39 Ibid p 239
40 Alessandro Portelli *The Battle of Valle Guillia oral history and the art of dialogue* p.9
41 Alessandro Portelli *The order has been carried out* History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome Palgrave MacMillan 2007 Hampshire England RG21 6XS page 19
42 Alistair Thomson *ANZAC Memories Living with the Legend* Appendix 1 goes into oral relationship in some depth. Pages 229-234