



HONOUR THE WARRIOR NOT THE WAR

WORDS KEN WRIGHT
PICS NATIONAL VIETNAM VETERANS MUSEUM

Phillip Island, south-east of Melbourne, is famous for its natural beauty and its penguins, and is a popular summer playground for Melbournians and is a major motorsport venue. It attracts around two-million tourists every year.

And a relatively new addition to its list of attractions is the National Vietnam Veterans Museum in Newhaven. The Vietnam War was one of the most divisive and disturbing issues in Australian history and was also our longest war. More than 50,000 Australian servicemen went to the Vietnam War between 1962 and 1972 where they struggled against the Communist regular North Vietnamese forces and the irregular Viet Cong.

Although the majority of Australians initially supported sending Australian troops to Vietnam, over time, public opinion changed. Thousands demonstrated against the war and conscription, with Melbourne the scene of the first and biggest anti-Vietnam war demonstration, in 1971.

Five-hundred-and-one Australians died in the war, with 2400 physically wounded and countless more suffering other affects.

Today, the veterans deal with their memories in many different ways. For

some, it becomes the defining element in their self image. Some achieve peace by helping other veterans, and a few by revisiting the battlefields in Phuoc Tuy. Many who return to the scene of old battles find themselves welcomed by their former enemies – understanding and mutual respect between fellow soldiers. For the majority, their experience of the war in Vietnam is simply not an issue. For most, however, their overall desire seems to be for the recognition that will place them alongside the veterans of other wars. They simply want to feel that their service was not pointless and that those who died did not do so in vain.

Preserving the memory of our soldiers who fought and died in Vietnam is the National Vietnam Veterans Museum, which ultimately aims to become a focus of unity for all Vietnam veterans. It also aims to create, for the general public, an historic display that will promote a deeper understanding of the conflict and its associated human costs; and, to record

Australian veterans' experiences of war and its enduring impact on their lives and on Australian society.

One of the museum's exhibits is a light and sound show that takes the visitor on an educational and emotional trip as an introduction to the war and prepares the visitor mentally to take in the extensive static displays.

Visitors can view the excellent selection of weapons in the armoury display or stand next to a fully armed Cobra helicopter gun ship, or the massive Centurion tank.

There are more than 25,000 items of memorabilia, photographs and artefacts to compliment the major exhibits as well as an interesting range of merchandise, which includes a large selection of books about the war.

For anyone wishing to delve further into the war and the combatants, there is a research library containing books, newspaper articles and clippings, with internet access also available.

These fine displays have been carefully selected to be representative of all Australian branches of the military services, with some reference to other participating countries such as New Zealand, America and South Vietnam.

A 'Garden of Reflection' area of hallowed ground has been established and dedicated to those who fell and those who remain



afflicted by the campaign. There is also a 'Remembrance Memorial' where a replica Long Tan Cross stands with a number of veterans indicating their desire to have their ashes scattered at this final resting place.

This will truly reinforce the museum as the 'spiritual home' of Vietnam Veterans.

Whatever ones view of the war, our soldiers, sailors and airmen did what the elected governments of the time requested them to do and they did it well. Museum staff and veterans would like to think that all who take the time to visit will leave with a better understanding of the Vietnam War and perhaps, in their own way, honour the warriors, not the war. They are owed at least that much

