

BATTLE OF LONG TAN 50TH ANNIVERSARY

Mr DAVID ELLIOTT (Baulkham Hills—Minister for Corrections, Minister for Emergency Services, and Minister for Veterans Affairs) (14:23): As the Minister for Veterans Affairs I am proud to acknowledge the presence in the gallery of a number of our very modern day heroes, heroes who were never given the acknowledgement that they deserved. This month, as we mark 50 years since the Battle of Long Tan, a highly significant and arguably the most iconic battle for Australians during the Vietnam War. Today I would like to formally recognise the service of all veterans of the Vietnam War and remember the 521 of our diggers who did not return.

In the early hours of 17 August 1966 the Australian base at Nui Dat was attacked by enemy mortar. There were fears that it could be the prelude to a greater attack—108 men from Delta Company, led by Major Harry Smith, went on patrol in a dense rubber plantation in search of what they thought was a relatively small Viet Cong group. To their surprise, the men of Delta Company were greatly outnumbered that day as they met a force of more than 2,000 enemy soldiers. They fought in conditions of heavy rain and mud. Through their discipline, training and team work the men of Delta Company prevailed that day. This battle exemplifies the dedication and spirit of those represented in the gallery whom I would like to recognise today.

Company Sergeant Major John Kirby, a Lewisham boy, known by his mates as "Big Jack", was one of the men in the thick of the battle. His courageous actions prevented the enemy from setting up a machine gun post near his company's position. While under continuous fire he distributed ammunition and helped evacuate the wounded. Sadly, less than a year after the battle Kirby lost his life in the war during Operation Tamborine when he was inadvertently hit in the chest by fire from the 161st New Zealand Field Battery. Kirby was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal in 1966 for his leadership during the Battle of Long Tan.

Yet while Kirby was recognised for his efforts, at the time many of his fellow soldiers from Delta Company in the 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, or 6 RAR, were not, and we are sorry. The independent Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal has recently reviewed the actions of 13 soldiers from 6 RAR, including those of Kirby. Although Kirby's honour was not upgraded I am pleased to say that 10 more soldiers from 6 RAR received military honours for their bravery at the Battle of Long Tan.

Among them were New South Welshmen Private Ronald Brett, Private Geoffrey Peters, Private William Roche and Second Lieutenant Gordon Sharp. I also recognise the work of Lieutenant Colonel Harry Smith (Retired), former Commanding Officer of the 6th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment, who has campaigned tirelessly to have the acts of soldiers from D Company appropriately recognised. Harry, at 83 years old, still lives in Hobart and is one of our national treasures.

As we commend their efforts and recognise their service, we should also reflect on the service of the 59,000 Australian men and women deployed to Vietnam

and the challenges they faced there and at home. The Vietnam War was very different from those that we had seen, particularly those that we commemorate in the centenary of Anzac. Australians witnessed the horrors of war through television like never before. As the war drew on into the late 1960s and early 1970s it increasingly became controversial to the detriment of those who were serving and who returned. Protests against conscription gained momentum over the course of the war and meant men came home embarrassed about their service.

For some, coming home was a difficult process that has left an impact for decades not only for the veterans but also for their families. Some veterans experienced public hostility when they returned home. This was an evil act. Some service men and women started to avoid wearing their uniforms in public, which is not in the tradition of Anzac. The sacrifices made in the service of our nation were great. Australia lost 521 lives and more than 3,000 people came away with physical wounds, while others suffered psychological wounds that have still not healed. Making sense of the legacy of the war has not been easy. We must remember the hardships Vietnam veterans faced.

We must recognise the service of the men and women who displayed bravery, dedication, talent and courage. This month marks a decade since Prime Minister John Howard apologised for our collective failure as a society to welcome those who served when they returned from Vietnam. Former Prime Minister Howard pledged some 25 years after the battles concluded that this nation will:

... pay proper regard to their bravery and their service, and their commitment. They did what their country lawfully asked them to do at the time, they did it with distinction, with honour, and with bravery.

Those words still resonate today and I pledge them again in this House. As we reflect on the 50 years that have passed since the Battle of Long Tan I take this opportunity to formally acknowledge the service of the veterans of the Vietnam War, which was overlooked until 1987. I acknowledge the service of not just those who served on the front line but also those who played support roles and those who served for shorter periods. I acknowledge the families of Vietnam veterans. So often the war touched the lives of mothers, fathers, partners and children of veterans. I recognise the service of our Vietnam veterans as equal to all Australian men and women who have served our nation in our defence forces. Lest we forget.

Mr GUY ZANGARI (Fairfield) (14:30): On behalf of the New South Wales Labor Opposition and the shadow Minister for Veterans Affairs in the other place, the Hon. Lynda Voltz, I commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan alongside Minister David Elliott and recognise and commend the service of our Vietnam veterans who bravely stepped up and answered the call of duty. Vietnam Veterans Day is commemorated each year on 18 August. Originally known as Long Tan Day, the date was selected to commemorate the valiant efforts of D Company, 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, who fought in the battle of Long Tan on 18 August 1966 when 108 Australian and New Zealand soldiers pitched in and fought against more than 2,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops in a rubber plantation not too far from the tiny village of Long Tan.

Supported by artillery, however heavily outnumbered, those brave men fought against the enemy through torrential weather, where they came close to being overrun. But they did not panic; they dug in and gave their all. A timely aerial ammunition resupply and the arrival of reinforcements by an armoured personnel carrier helped shift the momentum and pushed our boys to victory. Heralded as one of the greatest victories of the war, it did not come without a price. We suffered the loss of 18 brave soldiers and a further 24 men were wounded.

In 1969 a cross was erected at the site of the Battle in Long Tan. It is a solemn site that is visited each year to commemorate the fallen. I was pleased an agreement could be made this year for our veterans to visit the Long Tan Cross during the fiftieth anniversary ceremonies. Commemorations were held throughout Australia to honour the fallen, including at the Australian War Memorial, the Vietnam Forces National Memorial, the Cenotaph in Sydney, Anzac Square in Brisbane and the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne. A number of smaller commemorations were also organised by RSL clubs throughout Australia.

Since 2006 the Australian Defence Force has been awarding ADF Long Tan Youth Leadership and Teamwork Awards in high schools throughout Australia. The awards are presented to recognise students who demonstrate leadership and teamwork within the school and the broader local community while also recognising those who display strong values such as doing one's best, respect for others and mateship. The awards were named after Long Tan due to then Prime Minister John Howard's timely apology to Australia's 50,000 Vietnam veterans for the treatment they received since returning from war.

The Vietnam War was complicated. We are all aware of the controversies that emerged as a result of that war which led to more than two million deaths in conflict that heavily impacted both sides and everyone involved. For modern warfare, it was the first time that a media presence around the battlefield provided the world with images of battles and the effects of war. That raised many questions and a lot of concern and conflict about the matter both at home and abroad. Upon returning from Vietnam our veterans were not embraced with a hero's welcome, nor were they given any recognition for the immense sacrifices they had made and hardships they had endured. For a number of years following their return they were ridiculed, abused and dismissed. Eventually it was as though they were forgotten.

Since the Vietnam War much has been written in song, poetry and stories and shown on film about the events and how they impacted the soldiers, their mates and their families back home. With the indulgence of members I will refer to a special Australian song by Redgum entitled *I Was Only 19*. It eloquently paints a picture of what it was like for many young men who served in the Vietnam War, including during their experience abroad and upon returning home. The immortal lyrics include:

And can you tell me, doctor, why I still can't get to sleep?
And night time's just a jungle dark and a barking M16?
And what's this rash that comes and goes, can you tell me what it
means?
God help me, I was only nineteen.

Then someone yelled out "Contact", and the bloke behind me swore.
We hooked in there for hours, then a God almighty roar;
Frankie kicked a mine the day that mankind kicked the moon:
God help me, he was going home in June.
I can still see Frankie, drinking tinnies in the Grand Hotel on a thirty-six
hour rec. leave in Vung Tau.
And I can still hear Frankie lying screaming in the jungle.
'Till the morphine came and killed the bloody row.
And the Anzac legends didn't mention mud and blood and tears,
and stories that my father told me never seemed quite real ...

As a young Australian growing up that song really hit me, and I am sure other members, hard. I could only imagine the hardships and trials these young men faced for their mates and for our freedom. The men did not panic at the battle of Long Tan. The soldiers did what the Government asked them to do. They stepped up in the country's time of need, in the same stead as the Anzacs before them. On behalf of all members, I say thank you to every man and woman who has served our great nation. We will be eternally grateful for the sacrifices that have been made for our country and for our freedom. Lest we forget.