

SPEECH BY PREMIER NATHAN REES

**RECEPTION IN HONOUR OF VIETNAM VETERANS
GOVERNMENT HOUSE, SYDNEY
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2009**

Distinguished veterans
Parliamentary and local government colleagues
Serving ADF personnel
Family members, guests and friends

On Monday, Flying Officer Michael Herbert was laid to rest in Adelaide.

A few days earlier, his comrade, Pilot Officer Robert Carver, was laid to rest in Queensland.

They were not just outstanding servants of our nation.

They were the last Australians to remain missing from the Vietnam War.

But they are missing no more.

They have come home.

And they will rest in Australian soil forever.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One veteran suggested last Monday that Michael Herbert's funeral brought Vietnam to an end.

And – in a profound sense – he was right.

Major combat may have concluded in 1972.

The last personnel flew out in 1975.

But for families like the Herberts and the Carvers, Vietnam could never be over as long as their loved ones remained lost in the jungles of a far-off land.

That sense of not knowing has now been repaired.

The last of our boys have come home.

And so to that extent, we can rightly regard Vietnam as finally over.

But in another equally profound sense, Vietnam will never be over.

It will live every day in the injuries, the illnesses, the nightmares, the memories that you and your mates brought home:

- the unwelcome legacy of a war you did not seek but a war from which you did not resile when the nation made its call.

I guess that's why we are here today.

Because Vietnam was a complex war – contested at every stage, not just on the battlefield, but in newspapers, rallies, protests and marches all around the world.

And because of that contention, a simple fact was overlooked:

- that the soldiers, sailors and airmen of Vietnam, and their supporters like the Skippy Squadron, did what was required.

They did the job:

Professionally.

Uncomplainingly.

Heroically.

In the same tradition as their fathers and grandfathers had done before them on Kokoda and Gallipoli.

So today we remember the lost.

We honour the living.

And we purge a stain from the Australian spirit:

- the rejection and indifference you faced on your return, and the fact that you paid a price for the decisions and actions of others.

It's a familiar theme at these receptions, but it is worth repeating because nations have a habit of sending their sons to wars, popular and unpopular alike.

Starting a war is an easy decision to make.

Perhaps too easy, as the past 100 years have shown.

It is far harder to pick up the pieces later on, especially when – as with Vietnam – the plan falls apart and the politicians and generals wash their hands and move on to something new.

Nearly fifty years since the start of Vietnam in 1962, memory now counts more than ever.

People like me who were infants when Vietnam was at its peak are now in our 40s which means – and I hope you won't be offended – most Vietnam vets are now approaching retirement.

That means it is time for our nation to make peace with its Vietnam heritage as best we can.

To settle the legacy.

Undo the wrongs.

Tell the story.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The lion's share of casualties in Vietnam came from the Army.

But as the loss of Michael Herbert and Robert Carver demonstrated, the RAAF played a distinguished role too, a role we should never overlook.

In recent years, the RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam and Number 35 Squadron have sought long overdue recognition.

They sought the award of the United States Air Medal that was denied by their Australian commanders at the time but granted by the US Air Force last year.

They wanted a Squadron plaque in the memorial walkway of the Australian War Memorial, now completed and dedicated.

And, thirdly, they sought to have copies of an honour roll created, listing the names of all those who served.

I'm delighted to say the NSW Government has enabled those honour rolls to be created – three copies – with a \$2,500 grant from our Community War Memorials Fund, plus assistance from design experts in the Department of Lands.

One copy was handed to the Squadron by Minister West last month.

A second copy went to Air Marshal Binskin, Chief of the Air Force, for keeping by the RAAF.

And third copy comes to the NSW Government today, a gift we accept with great humility and honour.

Like all the other memorials and statues and books and websites, it will tell a special story in the life of this nation.

The story of how – in the year 1962 – when most Australians were enjoying the easy prosperity of the Menzies era – a select few began a journey that would become Australia’s longest war and Australia’s most unforgiving peace.

It is both fitting and ironic that the very last (living) Australian personnel left Vietnam on April 25, 1975:

- ANZAC Day.

I think that symmetry nails it for us here today because what happened in Vietnam between 1962 and 1975 belongs squarely in the ANZAC tradition.

No ifs – No buts – No maybes.

And once you become part of the ANZAC legend, further words need not be said.

Those five letters speak eloquently for themselves.

ENDS