

SPEECH NOTES FOR PREMIER KRISTINA KENEALLY, MP
VIETNAM WAR VETERANS' RECEPTION
SUNDAY, 12 SEPTEMBER 2010

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

We gather today to honour and remember the sacrifices of all those who served in the war in Vietnam ...

A war that engaged Australians for 10 troubled and anxious years ... the longest conflict in Australia's military history.

A war that cost 521 brave Australian lives ... and another 2,400 wounded.

A war that left lasting physical and mental scars on a generation of young Australians and their families ...

A war that divided a nation ... while revealing the very best in our fighting forces ... their gallantry, their professionalism.

It was a war that drew unstinting praise for Australian servicemen from our allies in arms,

... including this tribute from General Westmoreland, the commander of US forces in Vietnam, who said of Australian troops at an Anzac Day service ...

I have never seen a finer group of men. I have never fought with a finer group of soldiers.

Yes, they were years of trial and political upheaval ... but there is no doubting the debt we owe to those who fought ... to those who returned and those who did not return ... and to every one of you here today.

For me, as a former citizen of the United States, this occasion has a special resonance and poignancy.

Australian and Americans fought side by side.

And this is my first opportunity as Premier to host this annual gathering of remembrance, here in these historic surroundings.

Recently I had the privilege of standing with many of you at the Cenotaph in Martin Place to commemorate Vietnam Veterans Day on the anniversary of the battle of Long Tan ... perhaps the most heroic chapter in Australia's Vietnam engagement.

In that four-hour pitched battle in torrential rain against overwhelming North Vietnamese forces, 18 young Australians lost their lives and 24 were wounded.

Of course they were not alone. They joined a long roll-call of Australian heroes.

From the first Australians killed in the South African wars in the last years of the nineteenth century ... to the tragic recent death of the last Australian soldier to die in Afghanistan ... more than 102,000 Australians have lost their lives in defence of the freedoms we enjoy today.

The stories of bravery and fortitude in Vietnam take their honoured place in the chronicles of Australia's military history.

The line that runs from Gallipoli through Kokoda and Kapyong reaches also to Long Tan and Tarin Kowt.

All are synonymous in our nation's collective memory with the values of courage and endurance, of valour and comradeship.

Vietnam is also a story of Australia's National Servicemen.

From 1965 to 1972, more than 15,000 of those called up under the National Service scheme were sent to Vietnam.

With the unveiling this week of the National Service memorial in Canberra, a dignified closure is now possible for all those who were conscripted to the Vietnam War.

Their memory is gratefully and proudly enshrined in our nation's heart.

And if, for many of you, it seemed that your fellow Australians were slow to acknowledge your efforts and your sacrifice ... no longer is this true.

We know now the full extent, the true meaning, of what you and your comrades achieved.

And if, for too long, the nation's gratitude was stinted or withheld, it is all the more heartfelt and generous now.

Today, with my fellow Australians, we make one small repayment of the debt that is due to you ...

... and pledge that the lessons and the legacy of Vietnam will never be forgotten.

I thank you for the honour and the privilege of speaking to you today.

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