

Australia and the Vietnam War, The Hypocrisies of Commemoration: Dispute at Long Tan

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Global Research, August 18, 2016

Region: [Asia](#), [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [History](#)

One of the stranger sights in international relations is that of a defeated State seeking to commemorate its fallen in a country whose affairs it sought to disrupt. Australia is particularly adept at this, having obtained near exclusive entitlements to commemorate the landings at Gallipoli in Turkey on an annual basis, thereby inculcating successive generations with the notion that the wasteful engagement in April 1915 was in the name of "freedom."

The singular nature of the treatment granted Australian families, veterans and officials by successive Turkish governments has had a spoiling effect. (It would be inconceivable for similar privileges to be afforded German and Japanese war veterans.) Australian politicians have come to expect authorities in another country, even the victorious ones, to be sweet on the survivors and veterans of the defeated. When that welcome carpet is taken away, much fuss ensues.

This was what unfolded over the course of Tuesday and Wednesday regarding planned commemorations to be held at Long Tan, where 18 Australians lost their lives in an engagement in August 1966.

The battle has had a peculiar resonance in the Australian tale of valour – a small contingent of David-like warriors battling an insidious communist Goliath; a formidable ratio, by some estimates, of one to ten. (A Fairfax journalist chose the term "crushing defeat" to describe the fate of the Viet Cong-North Vietnamese force in the Long Tan battle.)[1]

In the broader context of Australia's role specifically on Vietnamese soil, that particular tale loses its lustre, specifically in the invasive presence of Australian soldiers. The official tale about fighting godless communism as it threatened to make its winding way down Indochina to Australia is not one that has entirely vanished from the school books.

In what was a mixture of bureaucracy, administration, and last minute politicking, the Vietnamese authorities decided that cancelling scheduled 50th anniversary commemorations at Long Tan was in order.

The far from irrelevant matter of "local sensitivities" was cited, though some of the Australians had reason to be miffed by the sudden gesture, given that this had been ongoing for eighteen months. Money had also changed hands. What subsequently transpired was that the initial cancellation was prompted by sheer numbers. Previous contingents travelling to the Long Tan Cross site have numbered 30 to 40.

The Veteran Affairs' Minister, Dan Tehan, spoke of his disappointment, telling reporters that

a thousand Australians had made the journey, and families would be left aggrieved. "For us to be given such short notice of the cancellation is to put it, in frank terms, a kick in the guts." [2]

What Tehan then decided to do was employ the friendship line, one so dangled and haggard in these situations it should be scrapped. "I do not think this is the way that you should treat a friend." Countries having, not so much friendships but interests, evidently did not spring to mind.

Mental fragility, with its psychologically wearing prospects of not attending such a ceremony, was also cited. Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia president Ken Foster spoke of scenes of emotional devastation, those family members and veterans "told at the last minute to sit in their hotel or to sit in a bar because they can't go where they want to go".

Ken Aspinall of Tamworth, New South Wales, was less inclined to be mournful. War remained in the blood, and it was boiling indignantly. "I should have brought my bloody gun over... Bugger them. We came all this way." [3]

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull also joined in the diplomatic melee. On Wednesday, he held talks with Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, urging "empathy and compassion towards our veterans". [4] None, evidently, for the Vietnamese veterans.

What ensued were overnight negotiations, with Vietnamese authorities giving some ground. On Thursday, Finance Minister Mathias Cormann informed ABC radio about the change of heart. "As I understand there has been some arrangement put in place where there will be a wreath laying at the site where groups of up to 100 are able to visit the site and pay their respects." [5]

Australian veterans have also been told that the ceremonial garb will be restricted: no medals or uniforms will be permitted when visiting the site. There were also injunctions against a media presence, speeches and music. Such striking sensibility is bound to rile the medal wearing obsessives, though it emulates precedent.

Little heed at these Long Tan services has been paid to the catastrophic, impairing nature of the wars that shook Vietnam from the Second World War to the 1970s. Aspinall's comment about ignoring any Vietnamese ban on travelling to the site is typical. "We'll see what happens tomorrow... maybe we'll walk right over them."

For centuries the country has endured and beaten back invasions by larger powers, never itself being particularly interested in vast imperial enterprises. Causes have tended to be local affairs. When it came to colonial powers, the Vietnamese weren't particular good in being walked over, preferring to fight to the point of existential desperation.

An entire population, strafed, torched, incessantly bombed and poisoned by Agent Orange, could have done with some post-war counselling about *their* trauma. But the Vietnamese response to such matters remains strikingly phlegmatic. Their understanding is sagacious: old bullies will always stick to tradition.

While Australian forces did play a smaller part in the degenerate slaughter, sometimes

expressing concern at the techniques employed by their US partners, they were complicit. Crude as it can be, all remains fair in love and war.

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