

Albury's Vietnam Vets

Howard Jones

A Vietnam Veterans' memorial outside the Albury SS&A Club records the names of 14 Border district young men who lost their lives in the war.

The war's impact locally went well beyond those deaths.

An estimated 2000 Border men were among 60,000 Australians who served in Vietnam between 1965 and 1972, 520 never to return.



Vietnam veterans gather at Anzac House on Anzac Day in 1986.

Rear: Bob Gordon, Bob Bogg, Wayne Boyd, John Hinchey, Bill Godde, Tom Moss, Peter Hartung, Gary Nicklin, Herb Moschetti, Colin Golding, Roger Tilley.

Front: Gill Scolyer, Colin Darts, Noel Balsarini, Pat Dwyer, Bill Russell.

Most were conscripted by a ballot system based on birthdays.

Wives, mothers and fathers, girlfriends and children lived anxiously as they watched the war "live" on television.

Bandiana Army workshops provided much logistical support to the war.

Albury-Wodonga, like Australia (and the US), was divided over the war, especially after casualties in an unwinnable war mounted in the late 1960s.

At first, most Australians supported Australia's entry into the war, and the Returned Services League and its Albury sub-branch were enthusiastic about it.

But soldiers returning exhausted from Vietnam often got the cold shoulder from Albury sub-branch, some old veterans claiming it was "just a conflict, not a war".

In 2014, Nance Fraser recalled her dismay that Albury sub-branch had shunned soldiers returning from Vietnam but her protests met stony silence.

It's true Albury RSL women's auxiliary sent postal orders to local lads to spend in the jungle canteens, and the Albury men helped the RSL send clothing and footwear to civilians in South Vietnam.

Fed up with RSL negativity, the Murray Vietnam Veterans Association was formed in 1980. Wodonga RSL sub-branch had been much more supportive of Vietnam veterans and many joined both the RSL and association.

Attitudes changed and 1987 saw Vietnam veterans lead Albury's Anzac march for the first time, Colonel John Hartley becoming the first Vietnam veteran to take the salute in Dean Street.

Albury named a new park in Thurgoona for Ernest Grant, 21, a local conscript killed at Long Tan in 1966, the Vietnam Veterans Club opened in Wodonga and nationally there was a Welcome Home Parade in Sydney

Murray Border Association began to work in harmony with the RSL and survived to 2016.

Meanwhile, the Vietnam veterans can claim credit for securing a Veterans Counselling Service, a Department of Veterans Affairs office in Wodonga and the volunteer-run Hume Veterans' information centre, also in Wodonga.

Had there been Anzac Day marches across Australia this year, the Vietnam contingent would still have been the largest from any single war to march. Maybe next year...