

Going Back: Australian Veterans Return to Viet Nam

Gary McKay

Reviewed by Dr Michael McKernan

Is there any point in reviewing this book? It is written specifically for those Australian Vietnam veterans who may be contemplating a trip to the battlefields of their earlier lives. In the introduction Gary McKay describes *Going Back* as a 'niche book' and thanks his publishers for having the interest to publish for a limited audience.

Strangely I think the author is underselling his book. When planning commenced for the remarkable 1990 return of Gallipoli veterans to Anzac for the 75th anniversary of the Landing, the word 'pilgrimage' began to be bandied about by the organisers. It struck me then as an odd use of an ancient word. By the time today's Special Minister of State, but then Minister for Veterans' Affairs, John Faulkner, was to lead a visit by Western Front veterans to their battlefields, pilgrimage was the settled description used to describe the event.

A dear and ageing friend, slimming down his library, recently passed on to me the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* that he had bought in the early 1950s. To some extent its definitions are in a time warp and 'pilgrimage' is explained simply as 'a journey made by a pilgrim'. 'Pilgrim' is described as 'one who travels from place to place; a wanderer' and, secondly, 'one who journeys to some sacred place'. Were the ancient veterans of the 1990s wanderers or journeying to 'a sacred place'?

Gary McKay's book uses 'pilgrimage' quite comfortably and quite consistently in writing about the visits of Australian veterans to Vietnam. The veterans, he realised, were approaching retirement age, with their kids off their hands. They were taking to the roads, he surmised, as 'grey nomads' and might be thinking of putting Vietnam on their travel itineraries. Should they do that or perhaps better 'stay at home and buy the Winnebago instead'? This book was written to help them to decide.

The trouble is, in what sense is Vietnam, for Australian veterans, a sacred place? Those who accompanied our veterans to Gallipoli, to France, overwhelmingly to Crete, were astonished by the warmth of the welcome from the local people. The veterans were honoured by the reception and deeply moved to be among the graves of men alongside whom they had fought. I will remember forever, I suspect, the agony of an Australian survivor of the Greek campaign coming to the grave of his closest mate at Phaleron war cemetery in Athens. It was the main, perhaps the only, point of the pilgrimage for him.

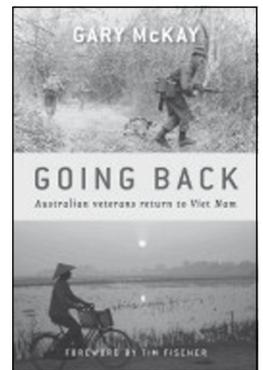
Vietnam veterans have no graves to honour in the country where their mates fell, the overwhelming majority of whom were returned to Australia for burial (with some earlier deaths buried in the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Malaysia). Nor can they be confident of the mood of the people among whom they will wander, for many of whom the 'American war' is 'ancient history', but for a large minority who lived

through it, the horror of the war is still deeply painful. A plaque explaining the Long Tan Cross to the Vietnamese people, which has only recently been removed, described the Australian soldiers the Cross commemorates as 'Imperialist puppets'.

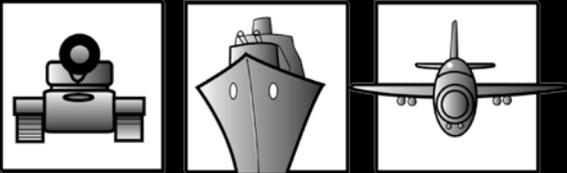
The general reader with an interest in military history will find, therefore, much to think about in comparing and contrasting the various 'pilgrimages' to the places where Australians have fought. Readers might also learn something about the traumas our Vietnam veterans still experience, and the impact the war, in its enduring way, has had on the families of the veterans. So perhaps this is not just a 'niche book' as its author thinks.

Though as a book for its primary audience I am sure that it would work very well. It is a gentle book, caring and sensible, arising from the multiple visits that Gary McKay has made to Vietnam. Too often when we think of war or go on battlefield tours we want to know 'what it must have been like'. We cannot know that. It is good, though, that the veterans themselves can be well prepared to revisit their past in such a sensitive way. ♦

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