

The Hon Charlie Lynn MLC	Our Patron and Host tonight
Col Joye AM & Carol Gilchrist	Guests of Honour
Patricia Amphlett OAM	Guest of Honour
Mr. Tran Phong Dang	Consul General for Viet Nam
Don Rowe OAM	State President RSL NSW
John Haines OAM	Vice President RSL NSW
Rod White AM	Honorary Treasurer RSL NSW
The Hon Alan Griffin MP	Minister for Veterans' Affairs
Pru Goward MP	My son's MP coz he lives in Moss Vale
Kevin Erwin	AVVRG President

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The AVVRG thanks you for doing them the honour of being here tonight.
And I thank the AVVRG for the honour of being invited here myself.

Well, [*after the long list of acknowledgements*] that's all the time I have so....

43 years ago – LESS four days – takes us to 18 Aug 1966 – The Battle of Long Tan

Our iconic battle of the Viet Nam war

Known about. Talked about. Written about. Soon to be filmed about.

A classic example of success in Australia's presence in Viet Nam – broadcast afar.

43 years ago – PLUS four days – takes us to 10 Aug 1966 – An operation at Binh Ba

Unknown. Forgotten. Uncelebrated.

A classic example of success in Australia's presence in Viet Nam – yet totally ignored.

Why? Simply because it had no profile with the public back home. Let me tell you about it.....

Last weekend 43 years ago I was involved in a 5 Battalion operation.

The Company in which I served – D Coy, 6RAR – was attached to 5RAR.

Their 4 Companies plus D/6 = over 500 soldiers.

We patrolled out around the Binh Ba rubber plantation and awaited nightfall.

Binh Ba was a strategic hamlet – centre of the French Gallia rubber plantation operation.

Some 3000 people – vital to both the South VN govt and to the VC/NVA

Both sides taxed the village and both sides recruited from it.

After sunset – curfew - we moved in and surrounded the village.

Once in place, we formed a cordon and sealed off the village from the outside.

No one could enter it or leave it without passing thru our cordon.

We had orders to arrest anyone trying and if they resisted arrest, to shoot to kill.

The cordon stayed in place for 2 full days.

In that time we – the soldiers – took turns 2-hours on, 2-hours off on sentry duty.

We ate, slept and stood guard in the heat of the day, under the monsoon and overnight.

No one moved more than a few yards from their position for two days.

No one tried to force the cordon, so there were no arrests and no firefights.

No one was killed, or wounded or even arrested.

Because nothing happened, there was no report in Australia about the operation.

Why?

Because nothing happened.

Or did it? In fact, TWO very significant things were happening in the village over those two days.

The SVN govt came in and – protected by us – conducted a thorough census.
They renewed Id Cards, issued new ones, withdrew old ones, arrested those without Id's.
They reviewed the community infrastructure – noted buildings, roads, bridge repairs, etc
They re-assessed the numbers of teachers and police and administrators needed
They probably installed their own agents.
But overall, what they did was to see to the safety and security of the community.

But I said TWO things were happening.
Within the Australian Task Force, there existed a CIVIL AFFAIRS UNIT.
They ran a program named WHAM, an acronym for “Win Hearts And Minds”
Their Land Rovers drove around the place with WHAM written on the sides.
(Indeed – the veterans from this unit are sponsors today of the AVVRG.)

Well, the WHAM people came in to Binh Ba and – protected by us – did their job too:
Each villager was given a medical and dental exam by the Australians.
Medicines, walking sticks, glasses, utensils, food – much was given and distributed.
Engineers came in too - inspected the wells, water supply, drainage, sanitation etc.
They then scheduled work tasks to improve or extend the villagers' facilities.
Overall, what the WHAM Team did was to issue humanitarian aid to the community.

The Australians were responsible for what was then known as Phuoc Tuy Province.
This process was replicated thru all the main villages in the Province over 3 or 4 years.
Each main village was cordoned, inspected and re-secured by the SVN govt.
So each village and each villager also received humanitarian aid from the Australians.

But because “nothing happened” there was little news of this process in Australia.
The pro-war people didn't want to know because it wasn't winning battles.
The anti-war people didn't want to know because it wasn't abusing human rights.

**The sad thing is that the people who do the same work today
are just as invisible as those who did the same job 45 years ago.**

Tonight is about raising some of that awareness.

It is true - we have not been there for 43 years continuously doing this humanitarian work.

It is a matter of history that Australia started to withdraw its forces in 69 and 70.
We pulled out our last Battalion in 1971 and our last combat forces in 72.
With them went the WHAM Teams and therefore the humanitarian aid.
The last remaining ANZAC soldiers left Viet Nam before mid 1973.
The Second IndoChina War was over.

It is also a matter of history that the NVA took Saigon in 1975.
Thus ending the Third IndoChina War.
Viet Nam then had the task of securing itself as well as fighting external wars.
They fought with Cambodia in 78 and had a brief war with China in 79.

But their main task was to consolidate their country and reform it.
They took a leap in this direction in 1986 when they undertook their “Doi Moi” initiative.
That's roughly translated “Renovation” and it implemented political and economic reforms.
The door into Viet Nam was about to open.
We were made aware of these events because Australia had an embassy in Hanoi.

It'd been set up in 1973 and was the first Western embassy in Hanoi – before Saigon fell.

Once we saw these events in Viet Nam, certain among us started to prepare themselves.
The AVVRG was formed in 1990 – raised by Viet Vets wanting to assist Viet Nam.

In 1992 the Viet Nam government reformed its 1975 model – the door was swinging open.
In 1994, the AVVRG was incorporated and started to step into the opening doorway.

By the end of the 90s, Viet Nam had opened several embassies internationally...
...and had joined several of the international organizations including the UN.
By the end of the 90s, the AVVRG had already completed projects inside Viet Nam...
...and were planning more.

Today, Viet Nam has diplomatic relations with most foreign countries...
...and belongs to most of the appropriate major international organizations.
Today, the AVVRG has many ongoing and proposed projects in Viet Nam...
...Kindy, Orphanage, primary school, sanitation, finance, education & training,...
...medical, dental, construction, livestock...

It is also custodian for the Long Tan Cross battlefield memorial.
This is not an insignificant thing.

The Vietnamese permit only two foreign memorials on their soil.
One is at Dien Bien Phu as a memorial to the battle that defeated the French in 1954.

The other is ours at Long Tan.

We do not take lightly the honour they bestow upon us with this permission.
The Long Tan memorial stands as a monument to the dead of both sides and to the past.
Neither do we take lightly their permission to enter Viet Nam for current projects.
They, like us, see that projects like the Nui Dat Kindergarten...
...can be seen as beacons to the living and to the future.

We are coming full circle.
We were assisting the villagers 43 years ago with humanitarian projects.
We are doing the same today.

Sure – we no longer have soldiers on the perimeter.
We no longer need them.

But the villagers still need our help.

I commend the AVVRG to you for your support and for your sponsorship.

Thank you.

(If time permits, take questions)