

APOLOGY TO VIETNAM VETERANS

Amendments to Motion

Resumed from 13 December on the following motion moved by Hon Frank Hough -

That this House -

- (1) Records that Australia's military involvement in the Vietnam War is a matter of regret in regard to the treatment of Australian troops on their return home from duty in Vietnam.
- (2) Supports the continuation of policies and programs that assist Vietnam Veterans and their families to recover from trauma associated with service in Vietnam and its aftermath.
- (3) Acknowledges their hurt resulting from the negative treatment they received, or still receive, from all those opposed to Australian involvement in Vietnam.
- (4) As part of the process of healing and rehabilitation, extends its apology to Vietnam Veterans for the loss and hurt they have suffered and may still suffer as a result of the Vietnam War, to say we are truly sorry.

to which the following amendments were moved by Hon Kim Chance -

Paragraph (1) - To delete all words following the word "regret".

Paragraph (3) - To delete all words following "receive," and insert instead "as a result of their service during the Vietnam conflict".

The PRESIDENT: I remind members that I will be putting each aspect of the motion separately at the conclusion of the debate.

HON DERRICK TOMLINSON (East Metropolitan) [10.06 am]: Before this debate was interrupted by the effluxion of time, I had made the point that following the evacuation of the remaining American and some South Vietnamese personnel from the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon in 1975, Australia's military involvement in Vietnam became a matter of political embarrassment. By then, there were officially no Australian troops in Vietnam. The last of them had been withdrawn as a result of the decision made by the Whitlam Government, which was elected on 2 December 1972. In the time that Australians were deployed in Vietnam, their presence as part of our participation in that conflict was a divisive issue for Australians; as divisive as the conscription debate of 1915. Vietnam was one of the defining points in the development of the Australian national conscience. We look upon Gallipoli and the 1939-1945 war as defining points. Vietnam was a defining point of a different kind. The 1914-1918 war was Britain's war against Germany. However, we, as members of the Australian nation and as a member nation of the British Empire, were also involved in that war. Again, from 1939 to 1941 it was Britain's war and an assumption was made that because it was Britain's war, Australia was unavoidably involved. After 7 December 1941, it became very much Australia's war in the Pacific. Vietnam was not a conflict of those kinds. Vietnam was a contest of political ideology; of the defence of one political ideology against another. It was for that reason that a different divisiveness afflicted the Australian nation from that of the conscription campaign of 1915 and 1916. The Vietnam conflict was different also from the conflicts of 1914-18 and 1939-45 because those who served in the Australian military forces in those latter conflicts were honoured both while they were serving and when they returned. The Australian troops who served in Vietnam, some as volunteers and many as conscripts, were dishonoured by the Australian nation when they served and when they returned from service.

I was particularly interested to hear Hon Paddy Embry talking about his mother's attitude to the so-called enemy and the fact that she could never bring herself to forgive. Many people feel that way about the Japanese from the 1939-45 conflict. Some of that generation who lost their sons and husbands or who served, and who are now in their eighties, have that enduring hostility and inability to forgive. I suggested to Hon Paddy Embry that were he to read the dedication to the Australian troops from Atatürk on the Anzac memorial, his mother might perhaps soften her attitude. Every time I read these words, I cannot but be moved by them. The tribute to the Anzacs by Mustafa Kemal, the President of the Turkish republic who is frequently referred to as Atatürk, states -

‘THOSE HEROES THAT SHED THEIR BLOOD
AND LOST THEIR LIVES . . .
YOU ARE NOW LYING IN THE SOIL OF A FRIENDLY COUNTRY.
THEREFORE REST IN PEACE.
THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE JOHNNIES
AND THE MEHMETS TO US WHERE THEY LIE SIDE BY SIDE
HERE IN THIS COUNTRY OF OURS . . .
YOU, THE MOTHERS,
WHO SENT THEIR SONS FROM FAR AWAY COUNTRIES

WIPE AWAY YOUR TEARS;
YOUR SONS ARE NOW LYING IN OUR BOSOM
AND ARE IN PEACE.
AFTER HAVING LOST THEIR LIVES ON THIS LAND THEY HAVE
BECOME OUR SONS AS WELL.'

That was a tribute from the enemy of 1915. We will not find the same tribute from the enemy of the Vietnam conflict, because the enemy in the Vietnam conflict was ourselves. We dishonoured those troops who served in Vietnam, while they served and when they returned. When I say "we", Mr President, I mean the collective "we". It is not a question of blaming those who opposed our involvement at the time or those who were active in the moratorium campaign. It is not a question of blaming those who supported our involvement in Vietnam or those who made a decision to deploy Australian servicemen in Vietnam. No blame belongs to a single person, body or section of the Australian community; it is a collective responsibility. Those of us who stood by and allowed the dishonouring of the Australian troops are just as guilty as those who spat on them when they returned from duty overseas. Evil is done because decent people stand by and let it happen. The troops whom we have heard described as "slinking back into the country in civilian clothes because they were told not to wear their uniforms" had to slink back because Australia allowed it to happen. We have continued to dishonour them in many ways - some of which have been described by various speakers in this debate - by refusing to acknowledge their enduring emotional and physical injuries, by refusing to give them the assistance, counselling and advice that they may have needed and by refusing to acknowledge to their wives, mothers or lovers who might have grieved that they were entitled to compensation. They received none of the repatriation benefits that were so willingly given to those who served in the wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45. When they were finally given, they were given grudgingly by an ungrateful nation - by us.

For that reason I support the motion moved by Hon Frank Hough and I support an apology from this House. I do not support the amendment, which in effect says Australia's military involvement is a matter of regret. For some it is, but for some it is not. For some it is a matter of great indifference. However, we have a collective responsibility to say we are sorry for the dishonour heaped upon those people. Some of the people we dishonoured were volunteers; some were full-time military servicemen who expected to be called on to serve this country at home and abroad; and some of them were conscripts, chosen in the most unfair, random way: by a marble falling out of a barrel. I was too old to be chosen, for which I am grateful. However, when I was a schoolteacher some of my colleagues were selected by a marble falling out of a barrel. Unwillingly or otherwise, they accepted their lot and served their country in military service. Those who were unwilling - I admire those who did - stood up for their principles and said no. A former member of the other place, who I grew to admire in my time working with him, said no and served time in Fremantle Prison as a conscientious objector. At least he had the courage of his convictions, not like the silent majority who stood by and allowed it to happen. However, the conscripts - who may have gone unwillingly to war and who were not political ideologues pursuing some half-baked political philosophy - were simply young men who responded to a government direction to go and kill or be killed, performing what we would call the responsibility of Australian citizenship. We collectively dishonoured them. We dishonoured them because they did what they were instructed to do. Mr President, I do not accept the amendment to delete the words following the word "regret". I wholeheartedly support and endorse the motion put by Hon Frank Hough.

HON LOUISE PRATT (East Metropolitan) [10.21 am]: This is quite an emotional debate. As someone born in 1972, I grew up in a period when the veil of silence around this issue was well established. Young people - not that I am all that young any more - of my generation grew up under that veil of silence. This affected many of my peers, in that many of them have grown up with fathers who participated in the Vietnam War, and that veil of secrecy and shame surrounding this issue has had a great impact on their families. Therefore, I want to speak to the part of this motion relating to the ability of families to recover from the trauma associated with the Vietnam War.

Debating this motion publicly is quite significant, because it is a way of removing that veil of secrecy and having the issue acknowledged in much the same way as we did with our apology to the Aboriginal stolen generation. This debate acknowledges the impact that this secrecy and shame have on future generations and how they pass on a legacy to future generations of families that can have difficulties with mental health issues and social dislocation. Therefore, it is very important that we talk openly about these issues. I want that view placed on the record; it is the view of someone from my generation who has grown up since the Vietnam War.

HON FRANK HOUGH (Agricultural Region) [10.23 am]: I totally oppose the amendment to delete all words following the word "regret", because that would remove the following -

... in regard to the treatment of Australian troops on their return home from duty in Vietnam.

The whole crux of the motion is not so much about the war but the people returning home. My concern is for the people who returned home, and the deletion of those words would totally and utterly wipe out my point. I

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wholeheartedly agree with Hon Dee Margetts' reference to families, but deleting all words after "regret" would water down the motion into something with which I am not in agreement.

Hon Dee Margetts interjected.

Hon FRANK HOUGH: I said it was about the soldiers. I admit I did not read the proposed amendment until the horse had bolted, so that was my fault, as the mover of the motion, in not reading it and just making an assumption; and, as we know, to assume is to make an ass out of you and me! I do not have a problem with the proposed amendment to paragraph (3) to delete the words "from all those opposed to Australian involvement in Vietnam". However, I do have a problem with the deletion of the words in paragraph (1).

I wholeheartedly agree with the comments of Hon Louise Pratt. In debating this motion, it is amazing how much I have been able to learn, in incremental stages, that I did not know before. People have brought out things that are very important. As Hon Louise Pratt said, these families have kept many things a secret and have only now brought them out of the closet. If this motion does nothing more than increase people's awareness, it will be a tremendous success. The fellows and girls to whom I have spoken since I moved this motion have said that they felt ashamed about this matter and had put it in the closet in the hope that it would disappear, and they are thrilled that the Legislative Council is now debating this matter because they feel encouraged that we care and want to know what really took place.

I have been reading what I have said in *Hansard*. I have talked about our young soldiers in Vietnam and about the battle of Long Tan. Some of the things that happened in Vietnam were petty, but they showed that those young kids seemed to get the raw end of the stick no matter what. When these young soldiers sat alongside the Americans to have their meal, they would pull out their package with a bit of beef, a bread roll and a piece of cheese, and they would look at the Americans, who would have a smorgasbord. They said it was an absolute joke because the Americans would bring out a large three-course meal that was more than the Australians would get for two days rations. It was no wonder the Americans enjoyed their time in Vietnam. I think they even managed to smoke a bit of dope and to have a few beers. The only thing they missed out on was wine. The Australian soldiers always felt they were the poor kids on the block. The Australians also ran out of equipment, and sometimes they did not even have helmets. They were always borrowing from the Americans, who were always fully equipped for every situation. I guess if we have a big problem, we will deal with it and get it out of our system, but if we have a series of small problems, we will let them build up. These are the little problems that happened in Vietnam and it used to get up the nose of the blokes when they thought about how poorly they were treated.

We can say there should never be wars, and I would love to stand here and say there will never be another war, and God help us if there is. However, if we read the Bible and go back even further to before the Bible, we can see that wars are part of our nature and history and part of what happens. No matter what we do, it will be impossible to rid the world of war. Even if we all joined the same team we would have factions. Even if we had one large world order we would have factions fighting factions. We can never ever get rid of war. The Australian soldiers in Afghanistan are professional soldiers; they want to be soldiers. We can say it is sad that they have gone to Afghanistan, but if we interviewed those people they would say that is what they trained for and hoped to be. They did not hope to be professional soldiers fiddling around Swanbourne, jumping out of helicopters and hiding in the sand hills from one another; they wanted to go to war. The kids who went to Vietnam did not sign up. There were regular soldiers in Vietnam, but the bulk of soldiers sent to Vietnam and the bulk of the 497 killed in Vietnam were 20-year-old kids. These guys were entered into a lottery system. In fact, Hon George Cash was successful in having his lottery ticket drawn out. I do not know whether Hon George Cash thought he was successful. Hon George Cash and, I think, Hon Peter Foss went through the whole process. Hon George Cash was given a card, which he had to keep in his pocket for 12 months. I do not know whether Hon George Cash was looking forward to going to Vietnam, but for 12 months he had to carry a card in his pocket that said he was subject to direction by the Army if he reached the second stage of the process. We could probably find half a dozen other members of Parliament who were in the same position. Paragraph (1) of the motion reads -

Records that Australia's military involvement in the Vietnam War is a matter of regret -

This is the crux of the matter, which says -

in regard to the treatment of the Australian troops on their return home from duty in Vietnam;

I would include their families. The most important issue is the treatment they received on their return home. That is what the motion is all about. Sometimes it is better not to open old wounds, but many Vietnam veterans are still subject to problems and many have sicknesses today, which are increasing. I have another mate, who I did not realise had been in Vietnam, who is an outstanding businessman. I mentioned this motion, but he was

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already aware of it. He said that he did two tours of duty in Vietnam. He said it did not really affect him, but every nine or 10 months he has a down period. He said this goes in cycles, during which he loses confidence and he cannot concentrate. I have known this fellow all my life. He is an authoritative, forthright, hard-selling type of businessperson and I was surprised when he said that he gets this down feeling about every nine or 10 months and cannot pinpoint the reason for it. He has sought medical advice. The doctor concurs that it is related to his tours of Vietnam. He has all the confidence in the world; he is a great speaker and a successful businessman but all of a sudden he loses all confidence. He does not know why, but he cannot face up to the day. He is lucky that he has a strong wife who continues with the business. She said that it is sad because he cannot get out of bed and he cannot make decisions. It is as if he has had, I suppose, a nervous breakdown. It first occurred within five years of his return from Vietnam and he knows when it is coming on. I have spoken to him at great length about it. It is not that his business is part of the pressure. It can be a quiet time in business and all of a sudden he cannot do things or make decisions. He said that he procrastinates about silly little decisions and does not know why he does that. His wife knows that the condition runs for about six to seven weeks and he said that he drinks excessively in that period, probably to build himself up. However, the psychiatrist has said that it is related to his tours of duty in Vietnam. These are the sorts of matters that are not talked about. Vietnam might have triggered something in his metabolism, his nervous system or his brain. The same condition could have occurred if he had had a car accident. The point is that the condition is, according to his doctor, directly related to Vietnam. There are many cases like his. It is sad to see big, strong fellows who have a great future ahead of them with conditions like that. The reason I am standing here today is that some of these people have not been able to cope in the long term.

I have more horrible stories from another fellow who was with the Australian troops who was interrogated; however, it is better that I not bring up his story because it might be offensive to some members.

The PRESIDENT: I remind the member that this is a limited debate. Having spoken before, he must speak to the proposed amendments. He will have an opportunity for a further speech in response to the principal motion.

Hon FRANK HOUGH: I thank you, Mr President, for correcting me. I will regroup. I would like the first part of my motion to remain as is with, as Hon Dee Margetts suggested, "and their families" added to it. I have no problems with the amendment to paragraph (3) to delete all the words following "receive".

The PRESIDENT: The question is that in paragraph (1) all words following the word "regret" be deleted.

Amendment put and negatived.

The PRESIDENT: The second proposed amendment is that in paragraph (3) all words following the word "receive" be deleted and the words "as a result of their service during the Vietnam conflict" inserted. The question is that that proposed amendment be agreed to.

Amendment put and passed.

Amendment to Motion, as Amended

HON GIZ WATSON (North Metropolitan) [10.39 am]: I move -

In paragraph (4) - To insert after "Vietnam Veterans" the words "and their families".

HON DEE MARGETTS (Agricultural) [10.40 am]: I thank the Chamber for its indication of support for this amendment. As Hon Louise Pratt said, it is clear that the effects of the war extend much further than the individuals involved. The effects of things such as Agent Orange have manifested both psychologically and physically through associated birth defects and the like. Given the trauma that has been experienced by many people, it is appropriate that we include them in this consideration. I thank the Chamber for its indication of support for this issue.

HON FRANK HOUGH (Agricultural Region) [10.40 am]: I have no problem with the amendment.

Amendment put and passed.

Motion, as Further Amended

Question put and passed.