

NORTHAM RSL — VIETNAM VETERANS' DAY

Statement

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural — Parliamentary Secretary) [6.35 pm]: Tonight I have some guests in the President's gallery, and I thank the President for her permission to bring my guests in from Northam RSL sub-branch. We have Denette Bernard, the president; Donna Prytulak, OAM, former RSL state vice-president and past president of the Northam branch; Stephen Dyer, secretary; and Michael Prytulak, also a former president of the branch. They are people the President can relate to! We also have Geoff Scarterfield, Jill Scarterfield and Mary Dyer. I thank members of Northam RSL for coming to Parliament tonight and participating. It was obviously a significant day; we have had a tour around Parliament House and we are going to go and have dinner.

I invited the members of Northam RSL because, as many members will know, 18 August is Vietnam Veterans' Day. This year marks 50 years since Australia withdrew its troops from Vietnam. I listened to the address given by Mr Geoff Scarterfield and felt compelled to read it to Parliament; I thought it was a really great capture of that time. With the President's concurrence, I will read this speech to Parliament so it can be captured in *Hansard*. The address states —

Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War began in 1962 when 30 military advisors landed in South Vietnam's capital, Saigon. South Vietnam was facing a communist insurgency waged by the Viet Cong, a guerrilla force backed by the North Vietnamese. As the situation in South Vietnam deteriorated, its ally, the United States (US), increased its military commitment. In March 1965, Australia did the same, sending an infantry battalion and supporting arms to serve under US command.

Over the years to come, Australia's involvement in Vietnam deepened. After serving alongside US troops, senior Australian military leaders concluded that Australian forces could be more effective in their own area of operations, employing their own tactics against an elusive, determined enemy. To do so meant an increased commitment. In 1966, Australia deployed a task force, based at Nui Dat in the centre of Phuoc Tuy Province, which formed the main area of Australian operations.

Each of Australia's 3 services took part in the Vietnam War. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) carried out transport, bombing and ground support operations. Its most visible presence was in the form of the Iroquois helicopters that played such an important role in infantry operations.

The Royal Australian Navy operated offshore, providing naval gunfire to land-based targets, patrolling waters, and transporting men and equipment to and from South Vietnam. Naval clearance divers worked in coastal waterways, removing explosive devices and other hazards, as well as protecting shipping off the port of Vung Tau from enemy mines.

Several dozen Australian military nurses also served in Vietnam. RAAF nurses tended the wounded and ill on medical evacuation flights, while Army nurses served 12-month tours in the country.

The Australian Army played the dominant role in Australia's war. Australian soldiers performed various tasks, from combat infantrymen, engineers and armoured personnel to those who served in supporting and staff roles. The Australians aimed to drive the Viet Cong from Phuoc Tuy Province, denying them the support of the villages, their bases and assembly areas.

Nowhere in South Vietnam, including Phuoc Tuy, was this aim achieved. Australian forces met with some success, but the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese Army allies remained a dangerous foe until Australia's combat forces withdrew at the end of 1972.

In Australia, opposition to the war grew until, by the early 1970s, thousands were marching in protest. By then, Australia's military commitment was winding down. On 11 January 1973, the Governor-General signed a proclamation formally ending Australia's involvement in Vietnam.

RAAF personnel returned to Vietnam to carry out evacuation and humanitarian operations in 1975 during the war's final days. South Vietnam surrendered to the North on 30 April that year, ending a conflict that had lasted more than 10 years.

Members, 61 000 Australians served in Vietnam, 3 000 were wounded and 521 died. On Vietnam Veterans' Day we pause and reflect on the bravery, teamwork and endurance that the Australians displayed throughout the war. We honour those veterans who lost their lives during the war, who returned home wounded, ill or injured, who lost their lives in the years since they returned or who still carry the physical and emotional scars of their service. We also pause to reflect on the impact of service on veterans' families. Members, lest we forget all those who served in Vietnam.