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Vietnam Remembrance Day 2013

Larry E. Davis

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, ldavis@csbsju.edu

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Vietnam Remembrance Day 2013

Perth, Western Australia



Larry Davis speaks at the Vietnam Remembrance Day commemoration in King's Park, Perth, Australia, August 18, 2013.

In Australia, Vietnam Remembrance Day is commemorated on August 18 each year. The day commemorates the more than 60,000 Australians who served in the Vietnam War and to honor the 531 Australians who gave their lives during the hostilities. Originally, the day was known as Long Tan Day to commemorate the “diggers” of D Company, 6th Royal Australian Regiment, who fought a significant battle against over 2,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops in a rubber plantation near the village of Long Tan. This year’s ceremony marks the 47th anniversary of the battle. Services

are held at Australian war memorials in the capital cities across the nation. This year's commemoration in Perth, Western Australia, was held at the Vietnam War Memorial in King's Park. As a U.S. Vietnam War veteran, Larry Davis was asked to speak at the service. Following is the text of his address.

Lest We Forget

Following General John Monash's success in 1918, at the Battles of Hamel and Amiens — during which American doughboys served under Australian command — Australia's Prime Minister William "Billy" Hughes stated Americans were strong on loyalty and "paying dues." He realized the U.S., not England, was Australia's insurance for survival as an independent nation of 4 million Europeans at the bottom of Asia. Some may find fault with Hughes' assessment, but he was correct about loyalty because Australia and the United States have been fast friends and allies for nearly 100 years.

It is a great honor to be gathered with Australian veterans at the Vietnam Memorial. My family's association with Australians during times of war is interesting. My grandfather was in the National Guard unit which served under General Monash at the Battle of Hamel. The Battle of Hamel represented the first time Australians and Americans stood together in battle. In 1944, my father refueled Australian P-40 Kittyhawks of the RAAF 78th Squadron at Hollandia, Dutch New Guinea.

Like many of you, I was a conscript during the Vietnam War, but I ended up serving on active duty for 12 years, with a number of years in the Army Reserve. I spent 20 months in Vietnam serving with several different units, but my last 10 months was as a light weapons advisor with MACV Team 75 at My Tho and Dong Tam with the 7th ARVN Infantry. Also at Dong Tam was a unit of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) who were training Vietnamese Popular Forces in night tactics. Their "team house" was just across the road from my hooch. Additionally, my advisory team and our Vietnamese allies were

by the 135th Assault Helicopter Company (the EMUs), which was the only joint U.S./Australian unit in Vietnam. The Australian aviators were Royal Australian Navy. Consequently, I feel a particular affinity to the servicemen and women of Australia and am proud to say members of my family have that same affinity.

As I stand before you, I think about the U.S. Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., which was dedicated on 13 November 1982. The Memorial honors U.S. service members who died or were listed as missing in action during the Vietnam War. As a Vietnam War veteran, I really wanted to attend the dedication, but, as a poor graduate student, couldn't afford the cost of a ticket from Seattle, WA to Washington, D.C. However, a few years later my wife, Johanna, and I had the opportunity to visit "The Moving Wall," a half-scale replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which tours the country. For me, the experience was quite moving, especially as I watched a mother trace her fingers over the name of her son etched into the aluminum panels. It occurred to me that the scene could have easily been my mother and father. I told Johanna, "I really need to see The Wall in D.C." She agreed, but I had to promise her I would not go without her. Over the following years, I made several trips to Washington, D.C., but remembered my promise to Johanna.

In 1995, Johanna and I were at a meeting in Philadelphia and decided to drive, with a close friend, to Washington, D.C., specifically to see "The Wall." We arrived in the late afternoon and I agreed to wait until the following morning to visit "The Wall." We did go for a walk on the National Mall, but, while standing near the Washington Monument, I felt an emotional tug and began walking along the Reflecting Pool toward the Lincoln Memorial. Our friend inquired, "Where's he going?" and Johanna replied, "To The Wall. Let's follow behind him." Although there had been a few people around the Washington Monument, I noticed the complete absence of people as I got closer to "The Wall." The light was rapidly fading and an eerie silence settled about me churning up long-buried memories of "standing to" in Vietnam, and my senses went on alert. Three events then occurred nearly simultaneously. In my peripheral vision I had my first glimpse of "The Wall"; however my focus was on the Vietnam Women's Memorial, while at that very moment I heard the distinctive "whomp, whomp, whomp" of a Huey.

The Vietnam Women's Memorial is dedicated to U.S. women who served in Vietnam and significant to me because it shows a nurse scanning the skies looking for the "dust off" as her mates tend to a wounded GI. I was transported back 25 years to another time and place; to an LZ near the edge of a paddy dike as several of us pulled security while waiting for a dust off to extract several comrades who had been severely wounded in a brief firefight about 20 minutes earlier. My knees and hands shook, sweat beaded on my forehead, and tears flooded my eyes, as successive waves of emotion swept through my body.

Shortly, Johanna and our friend Caroline had caught up with me, and asked if I was alright. I had wiped away the tears, but turned my head from them and nodded I was fine. Wouldn't do to have them see a grown man with tears, or so I thought. We proceeded over to "The Wall," a dark V-shaped gash in the landscape with over 58,000 names inscribed in the black stone. The panels are small with fewer names at the ends of the "V," but near the center of the "V" the panels are long with many names. I searched, in vain, for a few familiar names in the long panels. I was frustrated, not because I couldn't find the names, but because I couldn't remember most of the names. How could I forget? Why had I buried the memory of their names? I could see their faces, but I couldn't remember the names. To this day, I'm still haunted by my memory loss.

We returned to "The Wall" the following morning and I was able to find the names of the fallen mates that I did remember. I made rubbings of two of the names, and sent a rubbing to the sister of one. In the bright light of the morning, "The Wall" still stirred my emotions, but not to the intensity of the previous night.

I have returned to visit the wall twice since 1995, always with Johanna, and most recently with my daughter Nichol. Each time the emotional stirrings have been less, although I continue to be haunted by my memory loss of the names of fallen comrades. On my last visit, a large number of similar-looking wreaths had been laid at "The Wall" commemorating a reunion of an aviation unit and I wondered if my unit, a small advisory team, had ever held a reunion. Probably not. Sad in many respects, but understandable in others.

Later in the day, I did meet one of the members of the aviation unit and we chatted about our experience as our families walked several blocks toward the Capitol. Finally, we stopped at a corner, as he was headed in another direction, but before turning, he reached out his hand and said, “Welcome Home.” It had been nearly 35 years since I had returned from Vietnam and I don’t ever recall someone saying “welcome home.” I shook his hand and turned away from my family as tears gushed forth. I’ve discovered I’m really quite emotional with regard to remembering Vietnam and I have had similar emotional responses to ANZAC Day and when visiting various memorials in Australia, such as today.

To my Australian, New Zealand, Vietnamese, and U.S. comrades-in-arms, I salute you. Welcome home. Lest We Forget.

Larry Davis is Professor Emeritus of Geology.



Sgt. Larry Davis (standing, second from the left, wearing glasses) with three other American advisors and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers in August 1970 after returning from a patrol near Dong Tam, South Vietnam, two months before returning home after a 20-month tour of duty. (Photo provided by Larry Davis)