

Norm's 50-year battle ends

TOBI LOFTUS
tobi.loftus@thechronicle.com.au

ONE man's 50-year battle for recognition of the heroics made by four soldiers he commanded in the Vietnam War has finally come to an end.

On June 25, 1971, during Operation Hermit Park in the Phuoc Tuy province of Vietnam, the crew of an Australian Centurion tank were wounded when their vehicle was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade, launched by Viet Cong soldiers.

Lieutenant Corporal John Adams and Private William Papuni, from New Zealand's Victor Six Company, under heavy enemy fire jumped to the rescue of the injured Australians.

Platoon medics Private Mike Williams and Private John Galley then withstood the enemy fire as they prepared the Australians for evacuation.

Retired Lieutenant Colonel Norman Fry was the New Zealand soldiers' commanding officer at the time.

"Immediately after we got out of the operation I nominated the four guys for awards," Mr Fry said.

Only LCpl Adams received recognition for the operation.

"I felt I had let the other guys down," Mr Fry said.

"What these guys did was outstanding bravery, nobody told them to do it, nobody asked

them to do it, it was something they just did."

Over the next 50 years Mr Fry, who later joined the Australian Defence Force and now lives in Hodgson Vale with his wife, lobbied the New Zealand government for recognition for the men.

He hit hurdle after hurdle in that time, with New Zealand not budging on its policy to not offer gallantry medals five years after the incident.

That's when Norm, who was Toowoomba's disaster management co-ordinator during the 2011 floods, went to Groom MP John McVeigh to see whether there was anything the Australian Government could do to help.

In March this year Mr Fry received what he had been waiting for all these years, recognition of Private Papuni, Private Williams and Private Galley's actions.

It came in the form of a letter from Australian Veteran Affairs Minister Darren Chester.

"I would to take this opportunity to acknowledge the courage of these soldiers and express my gratitude for your service," Mr Chester wrote.

"I know they showed great courage."

Mr Fry and Dr McVeigh then set about creating commemorative frames of the letter, for the families of the three privates, two of whom have died.

Mr Fry hoped to travel back to New Zealand to give the frames to the soldier's families, but COVID-19 has stopped him from doing so. He will post the frames to the families instead.

"I think the families actually felt more receiving this letter signed by Mr Chester than receiving a medal, because this is something they can hang on their wall," he said.

For Dr McVeigh being a part of Norm's fight for recognition was something he said he was proud of.

"I've known Norm for over 10 years ... and he has been a leader in our community in his own right," Dr McVeigh said.

"It just seemed to me these four young New Zealand men, three who hadn't received recognition, were true heroes in that they saved two Australians.

"It's a true Anzac story."

While Vietnam Veterans Day is on August 18 every year, Toowoomba's Vietnam veterans will commemorate the day today.



RECOGNISED: Dr John McVeigh and Norman Fry with the display made for the families of three New Zealand soldiers who risked their lives for Australians and (inset) a helicopter in action during Operation Hermit Park, part of the Vietnam War.

Picture: Neville Madsen/Norman Fry