



Address by
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Chief of Defence Force

TRIBUTE08

Governor-General, Vietnam veterans and your families – including Vietnam veterans of Australia and the United States, veterans of other conflicts and invited guests [Australian Minister of Veterans Affairs, US Ambassador, Australian High Commissioner], welcome to this commemoration and celebration paying Tribute to our Vietnam veterans and their families.

Our defence involvement in the Vietnam War spanned eight years. This was the longest commitment of our combat forces to a single conflict in New Zealand's military history. Our involvement in the War has had an impact on our nation, those who served there, and their families, that continues to this day.

The controversy connected with the Vietnam war was corrosive; it was damning; and for many of the men and women of the New Zealand Defence Force who served there it became noxious.

Nearly 4000 New Zealanders served in Vietnam; 37 of them made the ultimate sacrifice, and nearly 200 personnel were wounded.

Since the War, others who served have died prematurely, and many Vietnam veterans and their families continue to suffer the after-effects of that service.

And that is why we are here this weekend. Tribute 08 is an official and visible show of recognition for the considerable contribution and sacrifice of the men and women of New Zealand Defence Force who served in Vietnam. But today it is the turn of the New Zealand Defence Force to acknowledge your service. I say that you served loyally, you served with honour, and I pledge my determination to correct the failings of the past.

Today, the Defence Force emphasizes the principle that 'we', those currently serving in our armed forces and veterans alike, are a family bound together by the ethic of service to our country, a common set of values, and a professional military culture that reflects our national heritage and character – a heritage and character you helped create.

It is clear that many Vietnam veterans believe that the NZDF has not lived up to these ideals. I want to start to make amends by personally welcoming all of our Vietnam veterans back into the New Zealand Defence Force family.

I would understand any hesitation on your part to accept such an embrace. There can be little doubt that you were let down after you returned from the war, and across subsequent decades.

Unreservedly I say that the Defence Force did not do enough to assist you, our returning veterans – especially those of you who left the Army, Navy or Air Force soon after returning to New Zealand. Having been placed in harms way, you arrived back to unwarranted derision. From the security of comradeship and service, you went out into an ungrateful and unwelcoming world. Most people cannot start to imagine how you must have felt.

The New Zealand Defence Force could, and should have done more to stand by you, to provide you and your families with refuge from the storm of negative public opinion you had to weather. NZDF should not have allowed public concerns about the war to shape how returning veterans were treated.

I have also heard you when you have talked about the other issues that have caused you and your loved ones deep hurt and pain.

I acknowledge here your concern about the maintenance of your personal and medical records. I believe your expectations around the integrity and completeness of your files were both fair and reasonable. NZDF let you down. Fortunately, your entitlements are protected under the 'reverse onus of proof' provisions of the War Pensions Act.

The issue of your exposure to the defoliant Agent Orange has been a long and open wound. It is difficult to understand how the critical information about chemical spraying in the areas where you operated lay dormant until the Health Select Committee Inquiry in 2003.

As a Defence Force we were too slow in readjusting our position in the face of growing scientific evidence, as well as statistical and anecdotal information.

It was probably inescapable that veterans would interpret this inertia as a deliberate rebuff – though certainly the Defence Force's simple inability to grapple with such a complex issue deserves a good portion of the blame.

I believe that various provisions of the Memorandum of Understanding, and in particular the Expert Medical Panel which is about to be established, will help us address this more effectively, both for Vietnam veterans, and for veterans of future deployments as well.

I also want to note the hurt you have told me about the NZDF attitude that was evident around Parade '98. From my point of view this was certainly a lost opportunity to rebuild the bonds between the Defence Force and veterans.

Here at Tribute08 I am sure you have noticed that the serving veterans gathered among us today are in uniform. You will note that they wear the uniform with pride, just as you did.

This is a pride founded on your earlier service and the service of all veterans past and present. Unlike the decades immediately following the Vietnam War, the NZDF of today has reclaimed its rightful place, standing proudly amongst the New Zealanders we serve, publicly wearing our uniforms wherever we go.

Vietnam veterans have made a valuable contribution to the nation building of New Zealand in many ways. In particular you can be proud of the legacy you provided for the generations of Service men and women who followed you. Your knowledge and fighting skills helped forge the next generation, and lifted considerably the abilities of the New Zealand Defence Force.

What has been missing from the balance is acknowledgement that what you left behind has ensured that the New Zealand Defence Force is a valued partner around the world, helping to build and keep the peace.

Today we have nearly 700 personnel actively serving in three major theatres around the globe. We are in countries such as Timor Leste, the Sinai, Afghanistan and the Solomon Islands. The contribution of our Defence Force people is helping maintain stable working and living conditions for thousands of people. You helped build the foundation of today's New Zealand Defence Force capability. We thank you for that.

On a more personal note, I was a young soldier in the Army during the years immediately following the end of the Vietnam War. My first platoon commander was a Vietnam veteran: then WO2 Baldy Merito. In fact, every commander I have had up until my appointment as the CDF has been a Vietnam veteran. So from a personal perspective I have every respect for our Vietnam veterans.

Many veterans I have spoken to consider that they were inadequately equipped for the task they were given in Vietnam. Your record shows you were at least as good as the best troops New Zealand has ever deployed. You also made good advantage of New Zealand's earlier experience in the jungles of Malaya and Borneo.

But while our military doctrine and training were proper, some of our kit was not. In spite of this, and in keeping with tradition and with true Kiwi ingenuity, you exploited the military supermarkets of our Allies in-country!

At home, the protest and public debate that arose as a result of the unprecedented scale of media coverage of the war and a general belief that our involvement in the Vietnam War was wrong, helped fuel the anti-war sentiment and mass street protests.

There were no home-coming parades; you were told not to wear your uniform in public; and compared to other returning veterans there was inadequate support for rehabilitation.

In sharp contrast to other veterans of earlier conflicts, our returning Vietnam veterans in effect became casualties in our own country.

Perhaps most painfully of all, some sections of the New Zealand public made it clear that they did not approve of those who had served in Vietnam. But the decision to be involved in the war in Vietnam was not made by those who fought there, but by the Government of the day.

You had volunteered to serve in the New Zealand Armed Forces and you went to do your duty to the best of your abilities when and where required. You served alongside Australian troops in the best of ANZAC traditions in an even more integrated way than other ANZACs before you. This has forged a very special ANZAC bond between New Zealand and Australian Vietnam veterans. You also developed a similar rapport with those whom you served from the United States.

The Memorandum of Understanding signed with Vietnam veterans in 2006 goes some way towards addressing the wrongs of the past and provides a solid foundation for putting things right.

The Crown's public statement in Parliament apologising for the harm done to Vietnam veterans and thanking you for your immense contribution to New Zealand is another tangible piece of the reconciliation process.

The Memorandum of Understanding package, although I acknowledge too late for some, will serve the current and following generations of the Vietnam veteran community. It will also serve other New Zealand veterans both current and future.

I would like to make special mention of the tenacious few Vietnam veterans who at various stages over decades have kept the issues alive. You must be applauded for your determination and perseverance against the odds to get the wrongs of the past put right. Your efforts culminated in a Parliamentary Select Committee which confirmed what you had been saying for so long – that New Zealand personnel were exposed to a toxic environment in Vietnam.

The NZDF will ensure that no other group of New Zealand veterans is treated the way you were. And one important way we can honour you, is to act upon the lessons you have helped us learn.

In conclusion, on behalf of the New Zealand Defence Force, I would simply ask for your forgiveness for our shortcomings in the past, and I apologise for the impact these shortcomings have had on you and on your families.

Thank you for your service.

Thank you for your sacrifices.

Thank you for your contribution to New Zealand.

I know it is long overdue, but to our New Zealand Vietnam veterans - welcome home, nau mai haere mai pike mai kake mai.

As another tangible demonstration of our intentions to put things right, the NZDF wishes to mount a special ceremony. A ceremony that we believe is unique in the history of not only the NZDF but of the Armed Forces of the Commonwealth.

The Regimental Colour of 1 RNZIR will be rededicated and re-presented.

This ceremony is necessary because the dates of the original Theatre Honour for South Vietnam did not include the operational service of all rifle companies that served in Vietnam.

Until now all of the tour by Victor 1, part of the tours of Victor 2 and Victor 5, and all of the tour of Victor 6 have not been acknowledged in the Theatre Honour.

Earlier this year, Her Majesty The Queen gave Royal Assent for the Theatre Honour to be amended to cover the period from May 1967 to December 1971 so as to include all of the service of these companies.

The embroidery on the Regimental Colour has since been amended accordingly and this change will now be publicly acknowledged.

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