

1-1991

Dismembering the Anzac Legend: Australian Popular Culture and the Vietnam War

Jeff Doyle

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Doyle, Jeff (1991) "Dismembering the Anzac Legend: Australian Popular Culture and the Vietnam War," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 3 :
No. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol3/iss2/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vietnam Generation by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

Dismembering the Anzac legend: Australian Popular Culture and the Vietnam War

Jeff Doyle

The longevity and continuity of a particular strand of its popular mythology mark a culture's deepest concerns, reflecting the repeated and continuing attempts to formulate that culture's responses to, and its interpretations and evaluations of, particular social and political crises. Development of new narratives, or substantial modifications to existing myths, signal areas of active ideological concern where crises or ruptures within the cultural structures and their valuation may be occurring. The representation of Australian involvement in Vietnam, and its often uneasy conflation with aspects of the Anzac legend and its surrounding myths, provide just such locations of rupture in Australian culture.

For both Australia and the US, the Vietnam war has challenged the dominating popular imagery of their fighting men. Considerable gestures towards recuperation, revaluation and rehabilitation of the military culture in the United States have been made, especially throughout the 1980s. In the 1990s it seems likely that in the light of the build up to, prosecution and, subsequent completion of the Gulf War, some will determine that these processes of cultural re-investment in the American military ethos have once again achieved for military standards the "highs" associated with the icons of pre-Vietnam soldiery. The same re-investment of the military ethos within the culture, or to put it another way with a similar effect, of the culture's re-investment in the military ethos, has not been true of Australia until the late 1980s and early 1990s. Precisely how the Gulf War manifests its imagery within the, albeit more constrained, perceived recuperation of Australia's militarism is as yet more difficult to determine than in the US example. In the American case, Vietnam has loomed large, as the negative example, the pattern which the Gulf War was not to simulate. This appeal to Vietnam, despite the initial stated determination to exclude it from any reference, has become almost as numerous a correlative appendage to the Gulf presentation as that other iconographic marker—the appeal to Saddam Hussein's Hitlerian likeness—an appeal harking back to memory of an enemy by his very evil nature, and one inviting a more straightforward justification of the noble cause. References to Vietnam may prove for the Australian case a more divisive aide memoir. Evidence of changing attitudes within Australia to the military ethos before the Gulf War began implies a perceived recuperation in Australia's military ethos, a

recuperation in which Australia's Vietnam involvement was drawn from its marginal status into the mainstream. Significant gestures towards a restructuring if not quite a rehabilitating of the Anzac mythology reached some kind of peak in the celebrations surrounding the 75th anniversary of Anzac Day in 1990 and in the following anniversaries of the fall of Saigon and the 1970 Australian Moratorium marches, which were celebrated in the following two weeks. All were marked by a swathe of print, radio and television programmes devoted to those events and their reassessment. On several occasions the Anzac myth was restructured to incorporate the Vietnam material.

Moreover, as this popular media rewriting of both Gallipoli and Vietnam at once created and enhanced the strongly evident sense of the newly all-embracing Anzac myth, it also served to construct within popular culture another location for a new nationalism. The Labor Government orchestrated a highly media-vaunted return to Gallipoli of fifty-eight original Anzacs. The speech given there by the Prime Minister, R.J. Hawke, exhorted Australians to remember their earlier wars and the sacrifices made on their behalf, and moreover urged Australians to follow the Anzac soldiers' model of sacrifice, courage and mateship. The speech refocussed these Anzac commonplaces as the means of carrying the nation through to the next century. Indeed Hawke urged the nation to face the new current enemy—Australia's version of the West's continuing economic adversity—with a spirit emulating that of the original Anzacs. More, he urged this economic warrior spirit as a means of refounding the nation as it neared its second federated century. The logic which appeared to be operating in Prime Minister Hawke's speech is well known: "National character" and hence the nation's cultural integrity was bequeathed to the future not so much by the founding of Australia as a federation of 6 States in 1901, but through, in military parlance, the "blooding" of the nation at Gallipoli in 1915. In appealing to the infusion of a newly invigorated Anzac spirit Hawke's speech seemed to argue that this would ensure the nation's economic integrity in the next century. In the weeks following Anzac celebrations, the media conflated the sentiments of that 75th Anzac Day with a celebratory reassessment of the Australian involvement in Vietnam, and rewrote that involvement into a revalued and "remembered" nationalist myth, praising the soldiers' courage, their sacrifices, their mateship. Simple acknowledgment of the effects of Vietnam upon the soldiery, let alone integration of their war into the myth, had not always been so straightforward.

At the cost of simplification, the Australian pattern of popular memory of Vietnam followed in the main the American pattern—although naturally the culture-specific myths demonstrate some variation.

Indian Country

Of the many bizarre euphemisms which the war produced, the US high command's "Indian country" came to refer both to the enemy territory in Vietnam and to the idyllic remembered time of the American frontiersman. Writing on Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) Robert B. Ray develops an argument which can be applied more widely to the US film industry's response to Vietnam. He points to the relevance of the basic American frontier myth of "regeneration through violence" and the pervasive tribal imagery of the film, and so links it back implicitly through a string of Vietnam westerns.¹ The driving narrative behind "regeneration through violence" lies in the "captivity narrative" which depicted the Puritan forefathers engaging in swift and violent action to retrieve the woman captured by the Indians. Rescue had to be swift to ensure that the weaker-virtued woman did not succumb to the libidinal temptations for which Indian ways stood. These narratives allegorized the sinful falls and saving restitutions located within the deep-set mental landscape of Puritan religious turmoil. "Indian country" represented and was depicted less as a forest or jungle and more as an infernal reflection of the Puritan mind in religious foment.

It is hardly surprising that as American representations of Vietnam demonstrated the amelioration of the US experience of the war, emphasis shifted from the fighting man as the site of disruption to the failure of the nation and specifically its Government to embody and protract its otherwise just political will.² Indeed in some Vietnam films individual soldiers win not only each engagement with the Vietnamese but, more significantly, victory over the forces of moral degeneracy within their own system.³ Vietnam becomes a mere site for the working out of the USA's own problems, moral and political, and in effect Vietnam as a real geographical place disappears as a reality for further American consideration. To this day the United States obfuscates any need for reparation to Vietnam on the grounds of the non-ratification of Nixon's Paris peace negotiations, coupled with moral indignation arising from the touchy issue of MIAs. And while this latter is a popular source for Vietnam films, few if any of the American popular images present or accept liability for any long-term effects of the war on Vietnam. For Americans the Vietnam war has found an internal resolution, which has facilitated a strong redefinition of the nation's own identity, largely at the cost of erasing the former enemy.

Diggers in Vietnam

Australian popular culture's representations of Vietnam have displayed a considerable appropriation of the American visual media's presentation of the war, consciously or otherwise. In certain areas, such as Australia's Welcome Home march in October 1987, this appropriation has extended to the returned servicemen themselves, for whom there seems to be an uneasy psychological conflation of fragments of the Anzac

tradition, often brought together with elements derived from the US military and media imagery.⁴ Here and elsewhere the pattern of conflating wars was repeated as often as the Anzac story was retold. And in that retelling there was an image developing—the image of the revived original Anzac conflated with the picture of a neo-patriotic and economically motivated digger. In the weeks surrounding the 75th Anzac celebrations there were many other confirmations that Australian society had reassessed the popular iconography of the military in general, and in this process had begun to restructure its responses to the Vietnam War in particular. But unlike the acceptable face of Vietnam now propagated by the American cultural industries, with Hollywood at the forefront, the Australian responses evident in those celebratory weeks in April and May 1990 did not find a resolution. Rather the various debates which ensued are suggestive of a continuing and politically active irresolute stance within Australian culture, seemingly to dismember Anzac.

Earlier patterns of recalling Vietnam were similar to the American evolution towards closure, but without the recuperation. Tracing that evolution may explain why the popular image of Anzac remains incompletely resolved.

As early as 1967-68 the Commonwealth Film Unit made a number of training films to aid in familiarising the troops with their duties and roles in Vietnam. Their imagery blends the traditional Anzac strands of the defence of a weak and defenceless ally and the necessary stand against the immoral enemy, with a resolute fighting spirit and intense comradeship. *Australian Task Force Vietnam*, and *Diggers in Vietnam* were made for the Directorate of Public Relations, in 1966 - 1967, while a third, *Action In Vietnam*, was made by the Commonwealth Film Unit in 1966. John Abbot made a fourth, *The Third Generation*, for Project '66' and the National Television Network. In narrative structure and style all are extremely similar; in each troops are shown engaged in the various tasks of Vietnam, the least time consuming apparently actual patrols.⁵ In contrast to the surreal nowhere/everywhere of the American frontier vision of Vietnam Australians, at least as far as these films are concerned, are consistently interested in the strict defining of the material conditions, locations, intentions of their war. Initially this searching for a definite locus of activities finds expression in images from the Anzac past. The jungle patrol scenes are nostalgic for the World War II New Guinea campaigns, as much as they are professionally located in the counter-insurgency techniques learned during Confrontation and Malaya. In the boldest terms of bodily icons, the soldiers upon whom the camera focusses are more often than not physically suggestive of the Anzac icon—the long angular-faced, tall and lean-bodied, sun-bronzed reticent, professing a preference for action; his humour is sardonic and often self-deprecating, his stare deliberate.

At the same time as they fix an Anzac icon, these films insinuate, in spite of themselves, the futility of the military activities being

undertaken. In the contacts, the searches, the interrogations, and the operations to search and destroy, the films demonstrate time and again that the NLF was rarely to be found, let alone engaged, and yet seemed to be everywhere. Time and again the voice-over of each film laments that "Charlie" just simply wasn't there, despite all the intelligence, despite the discovery of his food, his ammunition, his capture in large numbers and clearly in some encounters his overwhelming casualties by comparison with the allies. As the Australians return to base, these films observe that control returns to the invisible but ubiquitous enemy. This scenario is all too well known, but these films presented that dilemma in 1967 and 1968 and their audiences either evaded or could not read the message.

The "tossed-up fucked-up never-come down land"

Australian popular cinema and television charted a course similar to but of a miniscule scale in comparison with Hollywood. Major Australian representations of Vietnam are relatively few in number. Where the US industries' original evasion of direct comment and confrontation with Vietnam found expression in the appropriation of other genres, notably in the western, the smaller but burgeoning Australian film industry, and its television counterparts, emphasised Australian society at the turn of the century, that is upon an Australian equivalent of the western and upon the originating myth of Anzac itself. Films such as *Breaker Morant* (1980), *Gallipoli* (1981), *The Man From Snowy River* (1981), and mini-series such as *A Town Like Alice*, (1981), *1915* (1983), *Against the Wind* (1978), and *ANZACS* (1985) explored the territory of the Anzac legend or its components, such as the alleged bush or outback (frontier) origin of the Australian national character. Embedded in the structure of many Hollywood westerns, the captivity narrative proved a seed bed for the development of Vietnam's restorative narratives on the contrary in Australia the reassessment of Anzac in the 1970s and 1980s offered no such pattern of redemption through enforced violence. The home grown product of Australian cinema became increasingly radicalised against the positive representations of military action.

Australia has so far produced three large-scale popular movie "texts" on Vietnam. The earliest, *The Odd Angry Shot* (1979), adapted from William Nagle's novel of the same name, belongs to the tradition of Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, focussing relentlessly on the ever decreasing squad or platoon, to the exclusion of the enemy, and typical of the latter novel and film drawing disturbing parallels between military power and sexual adequacy. Tom Jeffrey's *The Odd Angry Shot* is focussed relentlessly on the squad, a closeness of focus which it shares with most American films. The difference lies in the way Jeffrey's film, following Nagle's novel, introduces overt political comment—in a manner not found in most Hollywood "frontline" films. At the risk of over-simplification, Jeffrey's introduces political content directed neither at a simplistic denunciation of communist aggression, as in the most politically naive (or at best black-

vs-white) level of John Wayne's *The Green Berets* or some of the MIA genre, nor is his political attack directed at the supposedly immoral government agents or agencies which betray the combat soldier in a number of examples of the *Rambo II* genre. Instead Jeffrey's film gives to the senior member of the squad, Harry, a series of statements. These define the political locus of the fighting man as the sticky fingered politicians' playthings, as counters in the politicians' next election campaign. This comment is of a different order to the Hollywood denunciation of venal politicians or the CIA. In the US examples, political comment rarely strays into posing more than suggestions about the distributions of soldiers into ranks by class evident within the salaries, risk levels and social reimbursement of the officers and other ranks.

Certainly the inequitable distribution of race and educational levels within the US forces are implicit in a number of Hollywood films but these issues are rarely if ever *the* focus of the film.⁶ When internal rifts occur within the Hollywood films they present opposed and competing versions of the American dream—either an extreme version of the middle class pursuit of happiness and leisure, the fruits of imperialism paid for by the blood of colonised nations—or the barbaric distortion of individualism, in which extreme militarism stands not for reticent justice but as the all too willing executive arm of corporate greed. The happy resolution is a restoration of a middle class moderation in which the individual will stand for both his own and his nation's sovereignty. (The use of the masculine pronoun is purposive here). Such a political stance is, this article contends, relatively simple-minded. This is not so in *The Odd Angry Shot*, where the class system and its correlative exploitation of the lower orders is exposed not just as the symptom of the Vietnam War's wrongs, but almost as if it were the root cause of the war. Jeffrey's and Nagle's attack is not simply directed at the failures of political will, neither the USA's nor Australia's; it falls more strongly upon the whole political and social structure of Australia—a nation in which the egalitarian appeal of Anzac to the "fair go" holds sway. Harry's speeches expose the fact that the "fair go" is a myth observed more in the breach. When another younger soldier, Bung, poses this question: "Why are we here then?" Harry replies:

You're a soldier, the same as every other silly prick in this tossed-up fucked-up never-come down land, and that's why you're here, because there's no one else and everyone's gotta be somewhere and you're here, so get used to it.

If "Indian country" is the familiar though threatening environment of the US mythology of warfare, its resurgence in Vietnam "texts" marked a shift in experiencing the war—a move away from the surreally dehistoricised landscape that had characterised the early Vietnam "texts", such as *Dispatches* and *Apocalypse Now*, to a site of mythic re-empowerment, no less dehistoricised, no less decentred from the physical

site of combat, but recognisably American, and rational. *The Odd Angry Shot* is significant in marking the early phase of the Australian interpretation of the war as different to America's. Harry's reasons for Australian being in Vietnam pose the Australian version of the surreal no place, the "funny place"⁷—"the tossed-up fucked-up never-come down land"—which was Australia's Vietnam. The war is being fought by the lower classes: "not too many silvertails here".

The sexuality of the Australians in *The Odd Angry Shot* is universally doomed as being more or less failures with women despite their own sense of prowess. Harry found that his wife just did not want to be with him, preferring the company, the inference is sexual, of other men. He is bewildered by the female response to him. The only normal relationship depicted in the film, between Bung and his girlfriend, ends when she and his mother are killed. Bill's girl writes only one letter—the proverbial Dear John—which sets a context for his R&R. Before conscription he urgently initiates sex with his girl lying down with her in the back garden—on R&R he refuses to lie down with the Saigon bar girl; his refusal manifests a damaged sexuality, a failure of trust. Throughout the film and the novel the soldiers' language is obsessively sexual, but it is all telling, all masculine joking about sex. There is no evidence that any of them have had successful sexual relations over a long time. Their most effective sexual expression is the construction and presentation of a "wanking" or masturbating machine for the padre. The obsessions and limitations are stereotypically patriarchal. In a macabre reversal which proves the rule of sexual dysfunction, the hideously wounded Scott is visited by the rest of the squad. The scene parallels that in *All Quiet on the Western Front* when the platoon visits the wounded Kamerik who has lost a leg. Scott writes a note to his visitors, a one word question: "Balls?" As senior man again it falls to Harry to explore the circumstances and he lifts Scott's bedclothes to inspect his body. Happily he reports that Scott has his due testicular quota. Here Nagle's novel is more specific about the loss of masculinity inherent it seems in the wounds of Vietnam. The film omits the novel's commentary about soldiers wounded in the genitals, and the unforgiving social consequences they will suffer when they have returned to the homeland. It may be that the technical nature of Vietnam wounds—a large number of Australian wounds were related directly to mine injury—is reflected in these fictional observations; there is as well memorial evidence to suggest that at least for Australians the most recalled wounds are those to soldierly masculinity. Stuart Rintoul's *Ashes of Vietnam* collects a large body of soldiers' reports, and comments on the war. Among the numerous clusters of images which can be seen to develop from the diversity of memories, injuries to genitals is one of the most dominant.⁸

In the late 1980s Australian culture had begun the processes of rewriting Vietnam as a more positive account of the experience of war, and even as a means of reconciliation of Australia within the southeast

Asian sphere. Two television mini-series appeared in 1987, Simpson-LeMesurier's *Sword of Honour* and Kennedy-Miller's *Vietnam*. Both presented a set of "representative" Australians, and both map a route of redemptive loss and reintegration via the varied experiences of the Vietnam war.

In *Vietnam*, the microcosm of Australian society is the Goddard family, their concerns reflecting precisely the pattern of divisive reactions to Australia's place within the larger contexts of southeast Asian and American politics and culture. In the figures of the family the historically divided sectors of Australian society are drawn almost allegorically. The father, Douglas, is a senior public servant for the Liberal Government. Initially in favour of the war, his development to a position of political opposition schematises the development of political awareness in Australian society throughout the war. The mother, Evelyn's, development from house bound and suppressed wife to liberated and mature femininity is suggestive of the pattern of social and political empowerment which some strands of the 1970s women's movement may have located in opposition to the Vietnam war. Megan, the daughter, "drops out of school, joins moratorium marches, experiments with sex and 'life-styles' and acts as the protector for her sometime boyfriend Serge—a draft dodger"; and lastly the son Phil, who is conscripted and is sent to Vietnam where he comes to believe in the necessity of the war. He also establishes romantic connections with a Vietnamese woman, who turns out to be a Vietcong and is subsequently killed by his platoon. On his return to Australia he is alienated from the newly "aware" and anti-war nation, and suffers from PTSD.

Where the "funny place" of *The Odd Angry Shot* finds its location at worst as the locus of non-sense and of political exploitation, *Vietnam* attempts mostly successfully to locate its action quite specifically in geographic and historical space. To some extent the certainty of locale is lost in the middle of the almost eight and a half hours of television viewing time (excluding advertisements) when the focus shifts to Phil's covert activities in a non-specific war zone—"Vietnam", but generally setting in time and place is detailed and precise. Precision is achieved in the first instance in the opening sequence, which consists of a montage of television images beginning with the then well known Australian Broadcasting Commission newsreader (in today's parlance he would be an anchor man), James Dibble, introducing a speech by the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies. Menzies' speech is well known in Australia, opening with the lines "You know me, for better or worse"; doubly ironic in the context: first, it announced the commitment of Australian support to Vietnam; secondly by appealing to recognition of the past's solid reality, *Vietnam* seeks to place the unfolding drama as a fiction true to life, with a real political message. Menzies is followed immediately by a series of "grabs" of American and Soviet politicians, various Australian and world celebrities, and increasingly intercutting snippets of film

reflecting aspects of recognisably Australian life in the 1960s. This montage fades into a shot of Parliament House, Canberra, dated November 1964.

Precise Australian social and political setting is thereby framed by the wider set of cultural values—easily recognised to Australians as their own, and this in turn is framed by wider social markers of international political and social events. This process of narrowing the focus from the world stage to the Australian is repeated in a number of ways throughout the series. In the first instance, in each of the ten separate “hours” of *Vietnam* there is another montage adding new contexts, events and people relevant to the unfolding history of the war. Additionally several of the “scenes” within episodes conclude with a special historic event “freeze-framed” for emphasis. A number of these internal montages are further “naturalised” within the story as they form part of a scene in which the family and associates watch television news reports about Vietnam as part of the dramatic action. Effectively the preliminary montages and these intrusions of “history” into the fiction validate both the news and the complete drama of the miniseries—teaching the 1987 television audience how to watch historic television, and how to watch the miniseries itself. The news, the “history”, is also validated in the process, and it needs validation, since the history it presents is highly selective and urges a particular reading of Australia’s Vietnam experience. This is not to argue that *Vietnam* is heavily biased in its treatment of the Australian experience of the war. More often than not *Vietnam* is even-handed in its assessments of the various and opposed sides to the war, at least those within Australia. The reading it provides is comfortable with a balanced view of the war, and moreover with the more accommodating climate of 1986-87 in which the participant soldiers, if not the war itself, had begun to be accepted more easily within the community. In its overall shape *Vietnam*’s message, beyond its appeal to entertainment, is anti-war, but not stridently so, and not without a large component of compassion for the serving men, like Phil, and the public servants and politicians, like Douglas, who became politically aware during and because of the war.

Television generally, and the soap-opera and mini-series genres in particular, tend to “normalise” middle-class values and lifestyles, and at the same time heighten the events of middle-class life into melodramatic tragedies. Running emotions at this high stress simultaneously evades the confrontation of serious and detailed dilemmas. Results or resolutions are achieved through catastrophic switches of circumstance, not through exploration and analysis. As miniseries go, *Vietnam* is exceptional since it does not opt in general for this style of drama nor for the all too glib and comfortable (and comforting) happy ending, neither for the family nor for the nation. Douglas has learned the need for political rigour and honesty but it may cost him his job, Evelyn’s maturity seems likely to depend on withdrawal from the family. Phil’s return to Australia and eventually to

the family is rent by the lasting effects of traumatic stress. On this level the drama is touched however with the light glow of optimism.

Nevertheless *Vietnam's* urgent fixing of the specific location marks in spite of itself a sense of lost certainty within Australian culture. Arguably perhaps, the sweep of world events framing the Australian material, together with the political events traversed by the action, demonstrate again and again just how marginal Australia was both in Vietnam and to the USA's concerns generally in the southeast Asian-Pacific region. And this marginalisation finally isolates the abiding political attack of *Vietnam*. Its strongest anti-war message is most firmly, though often in insidious fashion, levelled against US imperialism. Douglas' education in political subtlety begins when the Australian diplomat Montgomery tells him the truth about the disastrous effects of US materialism upon Vietnamese culture. Later, in one telling montage sequence, President Johnson speaks of the strategic bombing of North Vietnam's "concrete and steel" as a means of combatting aggression and defending the weak South Vietnamese from the spread of communism. Immediately undercutting these words are file footage images of the bombing of villages. In the fictional story which follows the Vietnamese girl Le, who is friendly with the Australians, is raped and her grandfather murdered by a platoon of American soldiers. Le is taking her grandfather to hospital with the aid both of money and foodstuffs given her by Phil and his comrade Laurie. In this incident motivation or more exactly the "excuse" is provided by the discovery of the Australian aid—specifically a tin of pears, and its wilful misinterpretation as loot, by the Americans. After her gang rape, one of the American soldiers is ordered to kill Le and take a "souvenir"—her ear. In a string of densely packed combat film clichés the soldier, who had not participated in the rape, is deemed a "cherry" and must redeem his manhood by the act of murder and mutilation. Still within the bounds of cliché the American "wimp" only pretends to shoot Le but takes the souvenir. This tragic event is one of the more obvious elements of making Australia's Vietnam comfortable for the television audience, by exculpating Australian soldiers from such acts while labouring the point of American imperialism's atrocities within Vietnam. For Australians there is the added irony, which redoubles the point, that it is their aid, their WHAM (Winning-the-hearts-and-minds) which effectively sanctions the atrocity. As a microcosm then, the aid of Phil and Laurie mirrors the complicity of Australian support within the larger theatre of war.

In this fashion the specific montage and juxtaposition of "world events" with local familial history destabilises Australia's role in Vietnam. Anti-Americanism is present everywhere in Australian writing, not only about Vietnam, but seems endemic within 1980s Australian culture. For Vietnam anti-American sentiment also touches upon the too easy appropriation of the well known betrayal myth underlying Gallipoli's adduction as the founding myth of the nation. Where the British high

command's bungling imperialism had cost Australian youth its life at Gallipoli, the nation found its origins. Vietnam as myth tended to replace the British flag with the American. Certainly as Australian political allegiances swung from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region, the US replaced Britain as the major ally and not surprisingly as the major focus of the fascination-repulsion with the harbinger of cultural dominance which characterises much that is Australian.⁹ But where Gallipoli provided a focus for fledgling nationalism, Vietnam had until 1990 provided only layers of dislocation. In *Vietnam* the underlying structure of anti-Americanism betrays the insecurity of Australia's movement from an inward looking, conservative and comfortable nation aspiring to an Anglo-European culture long since passed, to a player of whatever calibre on the world stage and in particular on the stage of Asia-Pacific matters. That move had been and remains troubling and problematic. *Vietnam* traces much of the deep concerns within Australian culture.

Vietnam also explores all of the familiar Hollywood tropes. Phil's alienation from his family manifests a mild form of PTSD and mirrors the larger disaffection of many of his veteran colleagues from the whole society. His subsequent return to the fold plays a significant variation on the captivity narrative, as it is through the agency of women that the revenant soldiery is healed in this Vietnam narrative. Phil's mental damage is reflected in the physical damage of his mate Laurie, whose sexual dysfunction again touches upon the failure of the masculine image to find a complete resolution. The mini-series ends with a tentative reconciliation, in which the lost son Phil arrives at his mother's flat. His plaintive greeting, "It's me—sort of" sums up the dual impetus of the series towards a hopeful reunification of the family and by inference of the nation. The hesitancy suggests the residual trauma, refracting the hope that Australia had reached a point at which the healing process might begin in earnest.

In its tenth and concluding episode *Vietnam* drew to a close several strands of narrative. The images of physical dismemberment in the last episode are both literal and metaphoric, and become the focus of two scenes in which Phil is able to recover some of his mental stability. Phil's comrade Laurie has returned to Australia and married the rape victim Le. Laurie is confined to a wheelchair, the victim of an ambush which Phil believes was engineered by Le's cousin and his one time romantic interest, Lien. Phil's stressed condition manifests itself strongly in Le's presence as a distrust of all things Asian. If Lien was VC, Phil maintains the belief that Le is VC too, and that far from loving Laurie she is using her sexual favours as a means of staying in Australia. Le is constantly placed in physically threatening positions by Phil; camera angles and confined spaces argue that the rape may be repeated. As well Phil's mental shattering is mirrored in the physical shattering of Laurie's body. Both men bear the marks of their legacy of Vietnam. So too does Le; she is finally drawn to display her mutilation to Phil as a means of

proving her bona fides as Laurie's wife, and of circumventing Phil's sexual threat to her. Moreover she explains to Phil the family ties and cultural necessity of Lien's actions, the reasons why she was forced to join the VC and why she seemed to use her sexuality duplicitously upon Phil. The audience knew much of the detail which Le relates, but the effect of her telling the story again of Lien's VC connections empowers Phil's understanding of Vietnamese culture, makes him see the damage necessarily enforced by the Vietnamese upon themselves in opposing Western actions. The long cultural history of family ties becomes the focus as Le explains that Lien had to join the VC when her brother was killed. Put simply it is difficult to conceive of the power of this scene as acted. Structurally it is an essential scene, much like the resolution in mutual mercy and pity of King Lear and Cordelia in Act 4 scene 7 of *King Lear*. Nor is the comparison with the highest literary standard odious or completely detrimental to the quality of *Vietnam's* script, direction or acting. Finally, however, the resolution of the Laurie-Phil-Le triangle is an uneasy one as none of the participants is made whole. Rather in the marriage of Laurie and Le is allegorised a possible resolution of Australia and Asian cultures, uneasily and uncomfortably resolved. Other examples will be more melodramatic, more oriented to the happy ending, and less true to the prevailing conditions within Australian culture.¹⁰

Turning to his family, Phil's traumatic alienation from them and Australia stands for the way large sections of the veteran community perceived themselves to have been treated upon their return to Australia and subsequently. In the fictional version Phil has returned from Vietnam but has not contacted his family at all. Indeed he steadfastly refuses to contact them, seeing his sister's anti-war stance as a betrayal. But released by the confrontation with Le from the guilt and anger of his Vietnam experience he now turns to effect a resolution within the family. Both this turn and the preceding one have focussed on issues of loyalty within families. Where Lien's act marks the Vietnamese people's history of unswerving loyalty to their state (as *Vietnam* comprehends it), Phil attempts to locate the root of loyalty and hence love within his own family. This is effected by a confrontation by telephone with his sister. An activist in the peace movement, Megan is giving an interview and talk-back on local radio when Phil calls her to ask how she would offer comfort to Laurie and the other veterans who have given the integrity of their bodies to defence of the nation, and have now been seemingly discarded. Once again the focus is on the bilateral mirroring of shattered minds and bodies. Phil asks Megan what she offers the shattered body of Laurie, her reply offers comfort to the shattered mind of her brother, wishing him back into the family's heart. The war is condemned but the soldiers exonerated, the nation at last wishing to absolve them from guilt and return them to the fold. The last episode concludes with a restored though largely damaged Goddard family, as Phil finally returns. The restoration is incomplete as his telling "It's me—sort of" last line makes clear.

In 1987 when the series was first shown that hesitant resolution looked like a position to be desired; a desire partly fulfilled in the latter part of 1987 when the Australian version of the Vietnam Welcome Home March was held in October. By early 1990, considerable distance had been travelled by the community and much of the, at least surface level, adjustment had been completed and a good deal of healing achieved. Curiously both *Vietnam* and *Sword of Honour* were subject to repeat broadcasts in early 1990, tapping or anticipating not only the society's more ready level of acceptance of Vietnam and an obviously high reappraisal of the soldiers, together with the accepting context of the events surrounding the 75th anniversary of Anzac day in 1990. The three events, re-broadcasts and 75th anniversary, are perhaps apiece in charting the newly accepted militarism within Australian culture.¹¹ If this inference can be drawn then the second screenings of *Vietnam* and *Sword of Honour* might well measure less the community's valuation of the message they contain and more the all too easy accommodation of Vietnam as a piece of televised history relevant only as negative example of how to conduct a war, as it threatened to become for the United States during the 1980s and so blatantly did become in the early 1990s. Worse, these events may have been reduced to commercial opportunities wherein history and its fictional representations are alike mere entertainments: Vietnam as a war of the long distant past, with little to tell us save the universal truths of suffering, courage and the like. *Vietnam* is a worthy vehicle for the more complex cultural context which produced it, than this latter treatment would allow, but the ease with which the militarism has again arisen within Australia and the popularity of *Vietnam*, among other vehicles which exploit Vietnam-as-subject for ratings winning melodrama (*Tour of Duty*, and *China Beach* for example) argue for the worst case. It is too early to be definitive. Together with the long term outcome of the Gulf war such cultural indicators may effect different outcomes in Australia, than they appear to be doing in the United States.

Sword of Honour is less complex, but its choice of characters is similarly schematic. From a background of rural selection Tony Lawrence is the recipient of the "Sword of Honour" as the number one cadet in his year at the officers' military training college, Duntroon, with a brilliant military career awaiting him. Both his career and personal life are blighted by Vietnam. His girlfriend, Esse Rogers, is enlisted in the peace movement at university and their relationship falls apart, signalled by her letter telling Tony that she has aborted their child. Unable to face the changed attitudes in Australia Tony flees to Thailand, with a Vietnamese refugee, Tam, from Phuoc Tuy. They have a child, Kim. Reversing the American captivity scheme, Esse searches for Tony, to discover that Tam has, one might unkindly say, conveniently died of TB, leaving Tony and Kim ripe for the return. Their reconciliation at the Lawrence's farm is a far less equivocal version of the Hollywood captivity narrative than that

of the Goddard's, and confirms a hopeful reconciliation of the disputing factions within Australian society, here allegorically welded by the presence of the Asian son. Both however suggest that the reshaping of the national identity has been forged via an incursion into an Asian setting at the behest of the American ally.

Conclusions

Other exemplary "texts" of the popular Vietnam imagery have largely followed the fictional desire for closure, and have also maintained the apparent inability of the nation to effect a reintegration of the myth. The large and well attended march of the veterans community on 4 October 1987 was for many held to be the Welcome Home march, the moment from which this re-integration could begin. And indeed it initiated a public process of recognition and healing of the psychological wounds. But the march itself and its subsequent recorded versions, particularly the Martyn Goddard documentary, demonstrate that the incorporation of Vietnam into Anzac was still lacking complete recuperation. On the contrary, the continued exclusion of Vietnam veterans from the full tradition of Anzac is enforced very noticeably in the Goddard documentary and in the numerous photographs reproduced in the media by the very corporeal intrusion of the veterans. Again and again the camera lingered on the disabled, literally dismembered, veterans to the near exclusion of the able-bodied marchers. The concentration on those whose bodies bear explicit evidence of wounds denied the all too easy incorporation of Vietnam within Anzac. The documentary presents an extremely moving, even excessively moving, lingering on the grief of the nurses and former patients, most especially the veteran Graham Edwards, a double amputee. In this lingering on excessive bouts of shared grief, the documentary is at odds with the stoic tradition of Anzac's "Lest We Forget", and is consequently very disturbing in its, until recently un-Australian, focus on emotional release. The strongest image of this grief was provided by several men who, as the popular song by political folk-rock band Redgum says, "kicked mines" and consequently lost limbs. Two such amputees are interviewed throughout the 30 minute programme. The last scene of the documentary shows Redgum leader John Schuman singing "I Was Only 19", while to his right on the stage is the veteran—Frankie—who is the subject of the song. An amputee, he sits in his wheel chair surrounded by family and, as the song continues, by more and more friends. At the song's conclusion Schuman shouts out "Welcome Home".

Where the US imagery of the welcome home march proposed utopian redress, the Australian image is ambiguous, an uneasy acceptance of the futility and the mutilation. The continued focus on the dismembered bodies of the soldiers makes impossible an appeal to the dehistoricised myth/memory of Vietnam which characterises the US, Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* notwithstanding, since that film turns

the dismembered body into a pieta, if not pietistic image of the veteran. Disability becomes the ticket of entry to Hollywood fame. The American myth of regeneration through violence is fulfilled. Nor is Stone's film unique, for despite the elegance of the Washington Vietnam monument, and its oft noted refusal to soar inspirationally above ground which ensures a lack of glorification, its non-figurative nature and the brilliant metaphor of its reflective surface upon which the names of the fallen are inscribed, it evades the continuing legacy of the war, suggesting a disembodied loss. Those who survived physically in part or whole, whose lives and/or minds have been rent by the war, and those "members" of their families whose lives have been irreparably rent by the genetic legacy of the war, may be reflected in its surfaces but they are not intrinsically part of it.

The Australian Welcome Home march did not avert its gaze from those implications, but in 1990 the 75th Anzac Day celebrations presented the largest recent exfoliation upon the national myth, and here dismemberment was averted. Central focus in the media orchestra which accompanied the journey back to Turkey came to rest on the last group of original Anzacs ever likely to visit Gallipoli and return safely once again, for all of these men were in their late eighties or nineties. If the Anzac myth, however modified, is speaking to a new militarism, a new spirit of national identity, then its appeal lay in their faces and bodies which although age had withered, the myth had remembered, transmogrifying them once again into the bronzed Anzacs. True they were old men, their faces were thin and withered, they walked slowly and often with assistance, but the promise of the Anzac myth lived in them, for they had survived and they were remembered. Will the dismembered Vietnam veterans be treated with the same fame? Unless they too can be turned to effect a political necessity the chances are slim. This finally is the message of the dismembering of the Anzac myth—its true political focus supporting *The Odd Angry Shot's* contention that soldiers are the playthings of the sticky fingered politicians.

¹ Robert B. Ray. *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985, pp. 357-8. Ray's thesis depends on the analysis of frontier captivity narratives developed by Richard Slotkin. *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*, New York, 1985, especially ch. 2.

² For seminal studies of the American cinematic representations of Vietnam, studies which underlie much of this paper see Albert Auster and Leonard Quart. *How the War Was Remembered*, New York, 1988; Gilbert Adair. *Vietnam on Film*, New York, 1981; Rick Berg. "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology", *Cultural Critique*, 3, 1986, pp. 92-125; Julian Smith. *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam*, New York, 1975; and, Richard Slotkin. "Gunfighters and Green Berets: *The Magnificent Seven* and the Myth of Counter-Insurgency", *Radical History Review*, 44, Spring 1989, p. 67.

³ This is most easily evident in John Rambo's frustrated shooting of the array of CIA computers at the conclusion of *Rambo: First Blood II*, but *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* also manifestly remove moral responsibility, and more tellingly failure from the soldier, placing it upon the system.

⁴ Jane Ross has written extensively on the contestatory nature of the "image" of the Vietnam veteran. See her essay, "Veterans in Australia: the Search for Integration", in this volume, pp. 50-73 and others referred to in the Select Bibliography.

⁵ Section 1. d of the Select Bibliography lists a number of these films.

⁶ It might be argued that the training films meant to demonstrate a certain verisimilitude towards Australian military practice, in part the expectation that Vietnam like most wars was mostly spent waiting and preparing for action and not "in combat". One of the differences that most reports of Vietnam seek to make, is that "in country" meant "in combat" all of the time, since the enemy was everywhere, combat stress was universal. This point is implicit in Lex McAulay's *The Battle of Long Tan: The Legend of Anzac Upheld*, Hutchinson, Melbourne, 1986, and he attempts to make it explicit in his day-by-day account of a "typical" battalion tour in *Contact. Australians in Vietnam*, Hutchinson, Melbourne, 1989. However, it should be noted that the amount of time the training films infer that Australians would spend on "non-combat" duties, in varieties of logistic and perimeter maintenance, and on the Winning-the Hearts and-Minds tasks, finds uneasy in-practice confirmation in Terry Burstall. "Policy Contradictions of the Australian Task Force, Vietnam, 1966", in this volume, pp. 35-49. Burstall argues the evidence for what the films prophetically imagine, that the Australian combat operations would be seriously attenuated as a result of military and political contradictions between Australian politicians and their military leadership, and more dramatically between American combat expectations and Australian performance.

⁷ See Chris Flaherty and Michael Roberts. "The Reproduction of Anzac Symbolism", *Journal of Australian Studies*, 24, May 1989, pp. 52-69.

⁸ While some films appear to touch on these issues—the separation of the "two cultures" in *Platoon*; or, the often clear demarcation of skills and education arrogated to the nominal protagonists of many films such as *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, or *Casualties of War*, skills, which the films suggest, but do not pursue, enable them to "write" their way out of the war—the detailed political ramifications of race, education and economic back-ground seem hardly to rise beyond passing observations.

⁹ Analysis of the language of the political speeches made by both sides in the Gulf War will when they are written note the overlap of moral, legal, military and economic motivations. Commentaries unkindly disposed to the "Coalition" may well note also the conflation of the languages of corporate strategies and military intervention, and subsequently draw the veils shielding the links between certain kinds of imperialism and their self-justifying calls to defend individual and national sovereignties, when neither of these issues are the root of the military action.

¹⁰ For another discussion of the dis-location of Australia in Vietnam which makes specific points about the "funny place", see Peter Pierce. "'The Funny Place': Australian Literature and the War in Vietnam", in this volume, pp. 98-108.

¹¹ See Stuart Rintoul (ed). *Ashes of Vietnam*, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1987. Peter Pierce discusses in more detail Nagle's novelistic comments about

sexually damaged soldiers in "The Funny Place": Australian Literature and the War in Vietnam".

¹² See Tom O'Regan. "The Enchantment with Cinema: Film in the 1980s", in Albert Moran & Tom O'Regan (eds). *The Australian Screen*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1989, pp. 118-145.

¹³ For a more detailed corroboration of the swings in political allegiance see the two opening papers in this volume, Peter Edwards. "The Australian Government and Involvement in the Vietnam War", pp.16-25; and Jeffrey Grey. "Vietnam as History: the Australian Case", pp. 26-34.

¹⁴ It is worth noting the colateral evidence of Australian reaction to Vietnamese and other Asian refugees as detailed by James Coughlan's essay, "International Factors Influencing Australian Governments' Responses To The Indochinese Refugee Problem", in this volume, pp. 84-97.

¹⁵ For one such early perception of this tendency see Graeme Cheeseman and St John Kettle (eds). *The New Australian Militarism: Undermining our Future Security*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1990.