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Battle of Long Tan remembered at Vietnam Veterans Day services around Australia

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PHOTO: Bugler Corporal Ashley Thomson from the Australian Army Band, Tasmania, plays the Last Post at a Vietnam Veterans Day ceremony in Hobart. (ABC News: Jane Ryan)

The 49th anniversary of the bloody Battle of Long Tan has been marked at Vietnam Veterans Day commemorations around the country.

During the four-hour battle 120 Australian troops held off an attack from up to 2,500 enemy soldiers until reinforcements arrived.

The violent engagement saw 18 Australian troops killed and 24 wounded while hundreds of Vietnamese soldiers died.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott paid tribute to Long Tan veterans and all 60,000 Australian soldiers who served in the conflict at a remembrance ceremony in Canberra.

"Courage, determination, resourcefulness and unflinching loyalty to mates marked that battle and indeed the entire Australian experience in Vietnam," he said.

"Today we remember all who served in the Vietnam War, we remember those who died, we remember those who were scarred physically and mentally, we remember their families and their loved ones that suffered with them."

Queenslander Keith Payne, 81, one of Australia's most decorated soldiers, marked Vietnam Veterans Day at a ceremony in Darwin.

Mr Payne is Australia's last living Vietnam War

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“ I want to make sure that veterans that follow me are looked after better than what we were. ”

Tasmanian Vietnam Veterans Association secretary Brian McKenzie



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Victoria Cross recipient, the highest military decoration for gallantry "in the presence of the enemy".

He received the award for helping to find and save 40 wounded soldiers in one night during the war.

"It was my responsibility, I was the company commander, I couldn't tell anybody else to go and do a naughty job," he said.

"Of course I wasn't going to leave my soldiers in the field if I could get them out."

Mr Payne said attitudes towards Vietnam veterans had changed dramatically since the diggers first returned from war.

"It was a terrible time for the nation and the Vietnam veterans because they were booed," he said.

"We were doing the duty of the government of the day.

"They sent us there and why should we, as veterans, suffer the consequences of your not liking us go there.

"But I am happy to say, with the welcome home parade in Sydney [in 1987], it was not only bringing the Vietnam veterans home and giving [them] a welcome home by the Australian people, it was also a reunification of our nation."



PHOTO: Australia's last living Vietnam War Victoria Cross recipient, Keith Payne, at Darwin cenotaph on Vietnam Veterans Day. (ABC News: Sally Brooks)



PHOTO: Veterans Motorcycle Club members at the Vietnam Veterans Day service at Darwin cenotaph. (ABC News: Sally Brooks)

Veterans committed to 'looking after' returned soldiers

Tasmanian Vietnam Veterans Association secretary Brian McKenzie said there was a fierce commitment among veterans to care for returned soldiers of all generations and their families.

"Our motto is 'honour the dead, fight like hell for the living'," he said.

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"I want to make sure that veterans that follow me are looked after better than what we were."

Tasmanian Vietnam War veterans are backing calls to officially recognise the gallantry of the men who fought the Battle of Long Tan.

Retired Colonel Harry Smith said officers received gallantry awards, while the men he led still had not been recognised.

Mr McKenzie joined the call for greater recognition for the soldiers.

"I think there were a lot of things that were done incorrectly," he said.

"I don't think it's restricted to just that particular battle either, there were quite a number of significant battles that have really been un-recognised."

Tasmanian Retired Major John Opie fought in the Battle of Long Tan.

"I was there on the day," he said.

"Long Tan was a bad day for a lot of people.

"My unit was badly mortared the night before which in fact drew the company out and that's the genesis of the Battle of Long Tan."

He said he remembered some moments with perfect clarity.

"Most vividly [I remember] checking the outposts with no shirt on, in the dark," he said.

"[It was] to ensure that my people knew that I wasn't Vietnamese."

Major Opie now volunteers with Legacy Australia, a charity providing services to returned veterans and their families.

“My unit was badly mortared the night before which in fact drew the company out and that's the genesis of the Battle of Long Tan.”

Long Tan veteran Retired Major John Opie




PHOTO: Long Tan veteran John Opie now volunteers with Legacy Australia helping returned soldiers and their families. (ABC News: Jane Ryan)

"We look after the families of Vietnam veterans as well as World War I, World War II, Afghanistan, Iraq," he said.

"It doesn't matter where they are, if they're fallen or they're injured to a point where they can't look after their family; we step in and do what we can."

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