

A Bayside Local History: Sydney Technical High School, Bexley Commemorates their Vietnam Veterans

Sydney Technical High School, an academically selective school in the Bayside Council suburb of Bexley commemorated the wartime experience of their Old Boys on Thursday 6 April 2023. Through an exploration of the history of the local Bayside area Marcus Camara, Marcus Young, Russell Liauw and Taha Chalak - Year 11 Modern History students presented their research to her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales, the Honourable Chris Minns MP, Premier of NSW, and members of the school community past and present. At this very special Anzac ceremony the school unveil our new Vietnam War Honour Board. These students research is presented below.

Student Projects

The Vietnam War began for Australia in 1962 when the first regular soldiers arrived

in Vietnam with what became the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam. According to the official figures approximately 60,000 Australians served in Vietnam. Tech students could be found in all parts of the armed forces, amongst the 13,000 naval personnel, and amongst the 41,957 army personnel. Of the army contingent, 15,381 were national servicemen, or Nashos. These “NASHOS” were selected to participate in the war by a birthdate-based conscription drawn by lottery (Yule, 2020). Some of our Techies here today were Nashos and experienced the moment of being selected for war. It was a controversial system, particularly among young people and was abolished in 1972, the same year Australian combat troops were withdrawn from Vietnam. Finally, Techies were also represented amongst the 5,925 Air Force personnel. (The Australian War Memorial, 2010)



Figure 1: Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales, Ken Stevenson, Taha Chalak, Marcus Camara, Marcus Young and Russell Liauw



Figure 2: Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales and Steven So, Principal



Figure 3: Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales, The Honourable Chris Minns MP, Premier of New South Wales, VIP Guests and School Senior Executive

Our research showed that for most Australians who participated in the Vietnam conflict their war took place in the jungles, rice paddies, villages and hills of the coastal Phuoc Tuy province. Air force members mainly served at Vung Tau, Phan Rang, Nui Dat or Ubon Air Base in Thailand. Most navy veterans served on HMAS Sydney, its

escorts, or the destroyers on the gun line off the coast of Vietnam (Yule, 2020). The Australian soldiers who served largely sustained high morale - remarkable given the contentious nature of the war, the problematic support for the war at home, the unreliability of their allies, the conviction of the enemies, the difficult climate, and the constant danger they faced. (Harpur, 1990) Australian participants on average received



Figure 4: Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales with Sydney Technical High School Old Boys/veterans and members of the RSL

one year of training with the men they would be posted with in Vietnam. Therefore, they were buoyed by a sense of professional pride and loyalty to their mates. Tech old boys fought in a range of diverse roles such as: sapper, radio operator, cinema operator, pilot, field engineer, engineer mechanic (to name a few).

To uncover the stories of these Techies, we visited the ANZAC Memorial in Hyde Park and were guided in our research by Senior Historian and curator Dr Brad Manera, and Major General Irving, who is with us here today, who showed us how to use the substantial archival holdings of the war memorial. We also took a trip down the road to the State Library of NSW to further delve into local newspapers. These stories we have constructed are done so from fragments: a service number, a rank, and a line between two dates. Precious little of a life. At the end of the research process, we each had a partial, subjective history: a single version of the countless stories that could have been told. But these were stories we created with care. As historians we were forced to make choices: what to write about, or what not to; and how to present our findings. In the end we will never be able to tell our alumni's complete stories, but we can present the stories we meticulously crafted.

Lest We Forget – Marcus Young, Year 11 Modern History Student 2023



Figure 5: Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales and The Honourable Chris Minns MP, Premier of New South Wales unveiling the new Vietnam War Honour Board

Navy - HMAS Sydney

Our stories today begin with three Old Boys who served in the Royal Australian Navy during the Vietnam War and in particular, on the aircraft carrier HMAS Sydney. These Old Boys are Peter Graham Leslie (The Journal, 1962), Phillip Richard Manning (The Journal, 1964), and Russell Anthony Rogers (The Journal, 1968). These Techies, like us in this hall today, came to our school from all over Sydney's suburbs, and like us, their families from all over the world. Between 1965 and 1972, these three Techies from different graduating years, found themselves serving together on The Sydney, which was informally referred to by service personnel as the Vuong Tau Ferry (DVA, 2019), as it made 25 journeys between South Vietnam and Sydney in the years our Techies served. It was also the largest troop and stores transport of the war for Australia (Anderson, et al., 2017).



Figure 6: Antonio Dias play the Last Post to the Assembly

Leslie, Manning, and Rogers, like many of us here at Tech, had a strong interest in engineering. This interest led all three to the HMAS Sydney with Peter Leslie an Engineering Mechanic, Phillip Manning, an Electrical Mechanic, and Russell Rogers, the Leading Engineering Mechanic on board ship. They were tasked with maintaining weapons, communications, and combat systems; work that required rigorous attention to detail, something they would have learnt, in part at Tech, as Engineering students. Details were important because the cost of error was human life (Dwyer, 2006-2023). When entering the war zone all crew members were given tasks either protecting the ship or unloading and loading the troops and equipment (DVA, 2019). Men stood readily prepared to react to chemical attacks, and endured heavy depth charges to ensure no enemy combatants made it close to the ship.

Even in quiet conditions, life on the ship was difficult. It was an old vessel, commissioned into the navy in 1947, built in 1944, and truly a relic of the Second World War. It was not built for tropical conditions; having no air conditioning making it blistering hot both day and night, described by veterans as “hot as hell, full of asbestos, as well as cockroaches that no amount of fumigation could eradicate”. (Dwyer, 2006-2023). However, like Techies everywhere these men were flexible, and strong. Even though conditions were harsh, their resilience allowed them in quieter moments to reflect, to enjoy soccer on deck, and jokes with friends.

It is important to note that the largest group of Australian Vietnam veterans whose war service has been marginalised are navy veterans. Those who served on the HMAS Sydney and other logistical support vessels were not recognised as Vietnam Veterans until 1993. Today we recognise the service of these three engineers - Old Boys of Tech and comrades in war service.

Lest we forget. Russell Liauw, Year 11 Modern History Student 2023

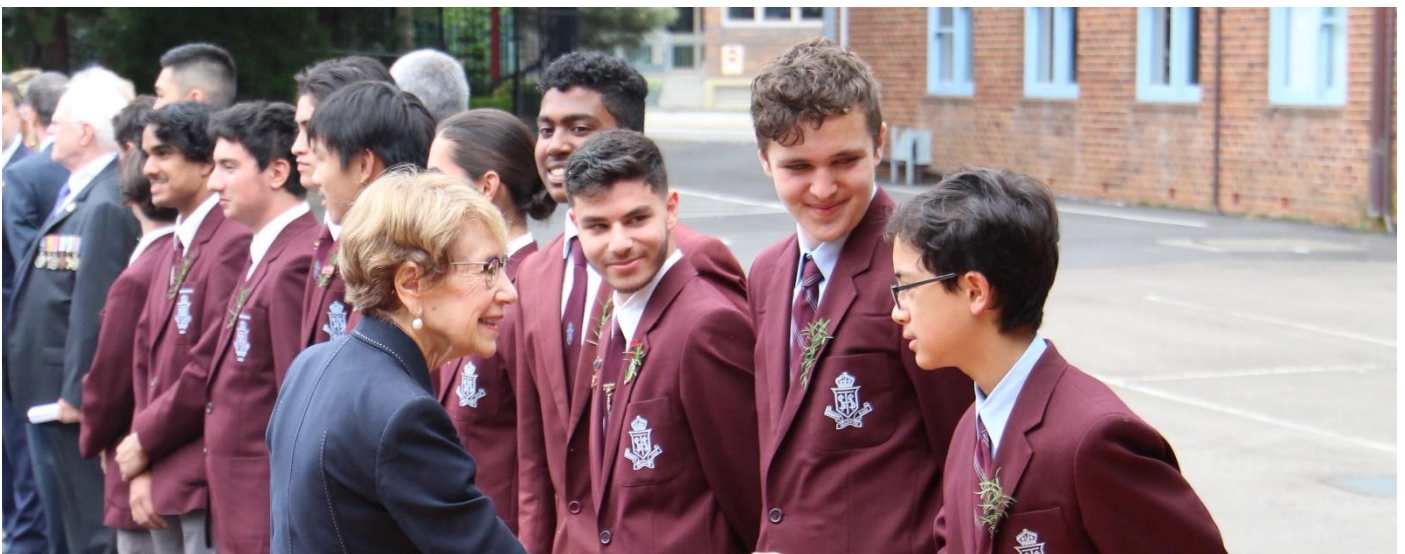


Figure 7: Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales meeting Sydney Tech Students

Army - 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment

Today, I will focus on Army service, particularly on the Fifth Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment (5RAR), where three Tech Old Boys had the privilege to serve. To set the stage, I'd like to begin with a quote from Australian Military Historian Robert J O'Neill, who served as Infantry Captain with this Battalion. He once said, “Every man sees the war in which he fights from two points of view. The one is his personal

life in relation to the harsh environment of battle, the other is the outlook of his unit, which makes him share closely a corporate experience and gives that unit an individual entity and character with its peculiar difficulties and joys, its own failures, and successes". (O'Neill, 1968.) This quote sheds light on the story of the three Old Boys who served in this Battalion: Private Robert James Smith (The Journal, 1964), Private William Robert Murdoch (The Journal, 1963), and Lance Corporal Ian William Balen Smith (The Journal, 1963).

The 5RAR Battalion was established during a time of Australian military expansion, with barracks located at Holsworthy. It was the first Battalion to be composed of both regular soldiers and 'Nashos', or National Servicemen, as Marcus mentioned earlier. This diverse unit was deployed to Vietnam and established its base at Nui Dat. The Battalion's composition highlights Robert O'Neill's quote about the individual and collective identities that we all come to wear, as it brought together soldiers with different experiences and perspectives in relation to war, including regular soldiers and conscripts, who may not have anticipated or planned a life that included war time service.

The 5th's service spanned two tours: 1966-1967 and 1969-1970. Like most Australian army units, they trained together for approximately a year growing to know each other, trust each other, and work together - all of which helped to forge this collective group identity that was such a successful part of Australian Army organisation. The 5th became the first Australian Task Force assigned to the role of keeping the Viet Cong, or the Communists who fought against the Australian forces and South Vietnamese Government, out



Figure 8: Ray James, President of the NSW RSL and Ian Hui laying a wreath on behalf of the Returned Soldiers' League

of the Phuoc Tuy province, an area which the communists had exploited since 1945. During such a challenging period, the collective identity and spirit of the unit was fostered. This engendered the idea of becoming the 'Tiger

Battalion', which once introduced, spread rapidly and spontaneously amongst these very different individuals creating a bond for life. It was hereon in that the 5th Battalion were the Tiger Battalion, from the gold of their lanyards to the tiger tails tied onto their kit bags, when they left Vietnam (O'Neill, 1968).

The Tiger Battalion's first tour was highly successful in dispersing the power base of the communists and increasing the number of villagers under South Vietnamese Government protection. By April 1967, 98,408 villagers were under Government protection in 105 hamlets, up from only 24,775 before the arrival of the Tiger Battalion (O'Neill, 1968) (Commanders Diaries, 1966-1970). Our three Techies were part of this collective group and participated in Operation Quintus Thrust I and II, a reconnaissance mission that aimed to prevent the movement of communist forces towards Baria from the west and denied penetration into the major population centres of Phuoc Tuy Province.

These three Tech Old Boys' activities and operations on a day to day basis can be pieced together from the Australian Army Commanders' Diaries (Commanders' Diaries, 1966-1970) which provide insights into the day-to-day activities of the Tiger Battalion, which included securing helicopter landing zones under heavy enemy fire, conducting search operations and sweeps, and repositioning troops. According to the diaries, the constant threat of booby traps, mines, and snipers made their operations exhausting and dangerous. However, their trust in each other and the collective identity of the Battalion kept them safe and alive. Their experiences fostered belonging, support systems, and they accepted each other's differences - their experience is a lesson to us today.

Lest We Forget – Taha Chalak, Year 11 Modern History Student 2023



Figure 9: The Honourable Chris Minns MP, Premier of New South Wales meeting Sydney Tech students and teachers

Royal Australian Air Force

As well as ground and sea operations, our Tech alumni also contributed to the Vietnam War effort from the sky. The airmen provided crucial support, gathering intelligence, flying in supplies, and assisting with assault and defence operations. Today, I will share the story of one such Old Boy, Terrence John Michael Hayes, who was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam and also share the stories of the skippy squadron pilots who were tasked with flying Australian servicemen to and from the war.



Figure 10: Catalfalque Party and Flag Party dismounting

Firstly, Terrence John Hayes attended Tech from 1957 to 1961 (The Journal, 1962) and excelled academically. In his final year at Tech he received multiple awards including first place in English and second place in Modern History and gained a Commonwealth scholarship for university studies. After graduating from the Officer Training Unit on 22 December 1967, Hayes qualified as an Army helicopter pilot at the 1st Aviation Regiment. His unit was deployed in Vietnam with four aircraft in 1965 and later became the 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight, which Hayes joined as a pilot on 10 September 1970. As the unit grew larger and its responsibilities expanded, Hayes and the rest of his crew would operate missions out of Vung Tau and Nui Dat until the unit's withdrawal at the end of 1971 (Hoare, 1991).

Throughout his year of service, Hayes was an outstanding pilot who consistently obtained valuable information on enemy movement and installations, often putting himself in harm's way. He also flew Australian troops out of Vietnam at the end of the war. One of his close calls with death occurred during a visual reconnaissance mission when his helicopter was engaged by at least three automatic weapons, causing the engine to stop. Hayes managed to crash land the aircraft without further injuries to his passengers, demonstrating his exceptional airmanship (Hoare, 1991).

For his service, Hayes was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the highest award for extraordinary aerial achievement. He and the 161 reconnaissance flights made significant contributions to assisting ground forces during the Vietnam War. We also recognise the work of James William Cuthel (The Journal, 1960) and Anthony Ronald Hatch (The Journal, 1962) who were part of the pilots who ferried Australian troops between Sydney and Saigon during the Vietnam War. Between 1965 and 1972, Qantas flew more than 600 military flights with its Boeing 707s. Each flight carried approximately 130 soldiers (Digger History, 2002). Qantas flew them into service and was there in a year's time to pick them up and bring them home. Old Boy Ken Stevenson reported that seeing the faces of these fellow Old Boys would bring feelings of jubilation to servicemen who realised it was now time to return home. Thank you for your service.

Lest we forget - Marcus Camara, Year 11 Modern History Student 2023



Figure 11: Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales and Cadets

Conclusion:

Today we have presented vignettes, small histories, created from our research into the Sydney Tech Alumni who served in the Navy, Army and Airforce as a part of the Australian Vietnam war effort. These stories are so layered, remember also, hidden amongst them are the service of many other service men and women. We have shared some experiences from the names featured on our Vietnam Honour Board but there are many more. This research has allowed us to grow, change, and encounter other places and worlds. We wish the same for you. We thank you all for listening to our research. Thank you, our Vietnam Alumni, for both your service and the glimpse into your lived experience.

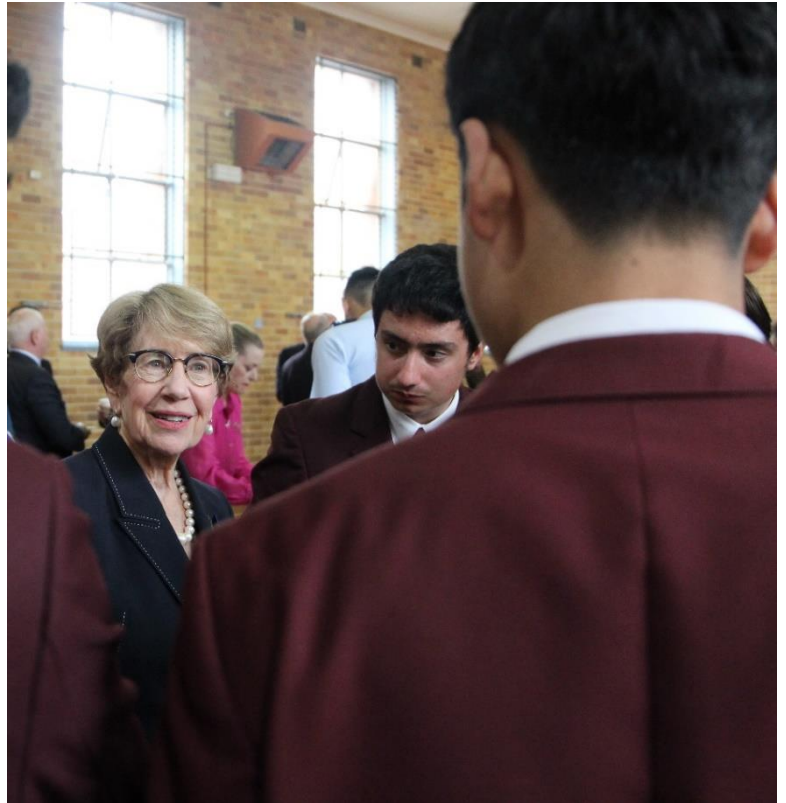


Figure 12: Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales talking to Sydney Tech students after the ANZAC Assembly

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Figure 13: Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales talking at the ANZAC Assembly



Figure 14: STHS Anzac Day Assembly Video



Figure 1: STHS community page at the Virtual War Memorial Australia