

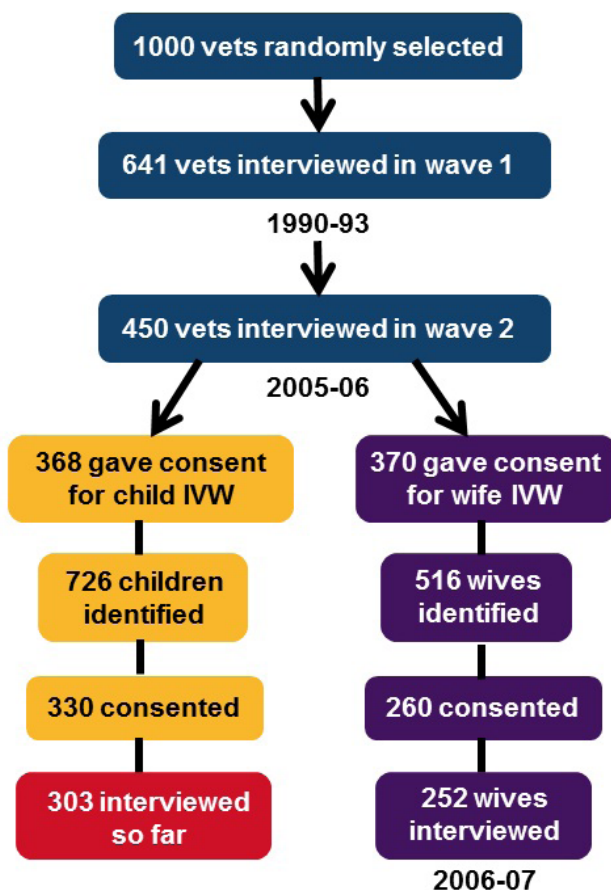
Welcome to the first newsletter from the Vietnam Veterans Family Health Study. We want to keep in touch and let you know how the study is progressing.

In the last 18 months we have been all around Australia to hear the stories of the children of veterans from our ongoing studies.

From Bendigo to Broome, Mandurah to Mount Isa and everywhere in between, it has been a big year of travel! To date we have interviewed more than 300 people from the families of veterans.

We have spoken to a varied cross-section of the community with a broad age range from 18 to 55 years. Veterans' children come from all walks of life; from teachers and students, surgeons and paramedics, musicians and actors to stay-at-home mums, miners and manicurists, pilots and ship captains.

STUDY PHASES



LEADERSHIP



Professor Stan Catts, Chief Investigator; and Dr Brian O'Toole, Study Director.

YOUR VOICE IS IMPORTANT

THE CHILDREN OF THOSE VIETNAM VETERANS SELECTED FOR THIS STUDY ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF THEIR WHOLE GENERATION, AND A VOICE FOR OTHERS WHO DON'T GET TO HAVE THEIR SAY.

We have heard from 56% of veterans' families, but there are still 140 families yet to make contact with us... could you be one of them?

MY STORY

Sally from Victoria shares why she chose to participate in the study and what it means to her and her family.



“A young farm boy and fully fledged mechanic, in the prime of his life; he went off to serve in Vietnam after his number came up. Little did he know, what he was about to witness would impact his life forever.”

I'm the eldest of three daughters of a wonderful Vietnam veteran. Our dad was in the RAEME 102 Field Workshop 1965–1968 during the Vietnam War.

A young farm boy and fully fledged mechanic in the prime of his life; he went off to serve in Vietnam after his number came up. Little did he know, what he was about to witness would impact his life forever.

To watch someone you love suffer through anxiety, frustration, PTSD, depression and all the horrid flash backs that were a regular occurrence in his life was a heart breaking thing to witness growing up. To watch on helplessly as he continued to smile and put up a

front to all his friends, then behind closed doors in the dark the tears and pain would flow freely.

So when dad asked my two younger sisters and me to participate in this study of family members, we jumped at the chance to help. You see I've always felt that the family members suffered along with the veterans, but they had to do so in silence.

When I was contacted by the team to participate in the study, I wasn't sure what to expect, but when I met Alice she was incredibly kind and empathetic. Although some of the questions certainly hit raw nerves I knew they were pertinent to the continued learning of the plight of the Vietnam veterans and

their families and they were asked with such care and consideration, with a true understanding of our pain.

It's comforting to know that there are people like Alice and her research group who are prepared to travel long distances to learn more about dad and others in the years that followed their return from Vietnam.

The study will ensure they will no longer be the forgotten soldiers of a messy war and their families too are comforted with the knowledge that their loved ones are important enough to continue caring about.

Sally's father in uniform.

MEET THE TEAM



Left: Melanie Burton, Interviewer and Clinical Psychologist; Lareena Brown, Administration Assistant and Psychology Graduate (Hons); Alice Rothwell, Interviewer and BSc(Neuro). Right: Dr Brian O'Toole and summer student Alissa Oakes, working on a paper on marital satisfaction in Vietnam veterans and their wives.

SOME STUDY FINDINGS TO DATE

More than one-third of veterans are still having sleep difficulties and nightmares on a monthly basis more than 35 years after the war.

More than three-quarters of Vietnam veterans are taking medication for mental health, mainly antidepressants.

More than 25% of the veterans have had full PTSD in their lifetime, for 18% it was currently active. If you include partial PTSD, the lifetime figure rises to 40%, currently active in 25%. So one-quarter of the veterans we assessed still had a post-Vietnam stress disorder 30-35 years after the war.

PTSD is not the veterans' biggest problem – alcohol misuse and dependence were diagnosed in 42% of veterans in wave 1. But by wave 2, this had fallen to 27%. Many veterans had reduced their alcohol as they aged, which can only be good for their health.

More than half of the veterans had a lifetime diagnosis of depression; 11% was at the severe end, and was recurrent depression; 28% were currently on antidepressants.

More than half of the veterans' wives have had depression in their lifetime; 11% have suffered severe recurrent depression, like the veterans.



IN YOUR WORDS...

Feedback from anonymous participants in the study.

“Being a veteran’s child made it very hard and stressful to make long term friends. Having friends come over was like playing Russian Roulette because we never knew if dad was going to have a bad day. Having no support from anywhere was hard as well.”

“The young men like my dad who went to Vietnam are all brave heroes in my opinion. My dad suffered silently for 40 years to help shield us from his personal pain from the war. It did eventually catch up with him and it has been tough to watch. He is my hero. Thank you for taking the time to worry about our diggers. I hope something great comes from this study to help all of our soldiers”.

“I feel that my dad was very much affected by his service in the Vietnam War, but managed to hide it well from his wife and three children. He was not an angry, violent or withdrawn father (the exact opposite) but I feel that he tried hard not to let his problems/issues impact on others. He also didn’t talk about his army service much.”

“The Vietnam War totally changed my father. I feel I was robbed of a father who could show emotion and give love due to his PTSD. Although physically he never hurt me, his inability to connect or show me any love, understanding or emotion will always affect me and leave scars. I truly hope returned soldiers of the future get the support they need, so their children don’t have to go through the pain that myself and a thousand other children have gone through.”

PICKING BRIAN'S BRAINS



BY ALICE ROTHWELL

The background to the study stretches back to the 1980s, when Dr Brian O'Toole first approached the NHMRC independently for research funding to look at the health of Vietnam veterans. This followed the conclusion of the 'agent orange' Royal Commission and the government's decision not to continue with this work.

"It was important to look at the health of the veterans, because there was more to their service in Vietnam than agent orange".

While Dr O'Toole had assistants in the major capital cities, he took on the task of assessing those veterans in non-capital locations. To interview the veterans he drove more than 120,000kms to some of the most remote regions of the country, where many of the veterans now live.

From more than 50,000 veterans only 1000 were selected, completely at random. We can only speak to the families of the men who participated so this really narrows the pool. As Brian points out, "the people who have been selected for this study are representative of the whole group and a voice for others who don't get to have their say." Even within the same family, individual experiences can vary tremendously.

Sadly, it seems that the children of dads with

PTSD are less likely to respond and to agree to be interviewed. "This is yet another casualty of the war", says Brian. Also, if the relationship between the veteran and his son or daughter is difficult, then his children seem less likely to participate. Some other feedback has been that "my dad hasn't told me anything about Vietnam, I can't tell you about that". But as Brian says, "We've already spoken to the mums and dads, now we want to hear the perspective of the next generation and learn what it has been like for them".

The whole point of the study is to try to understand the long-term effects of going to war on the families, as well as the men themselves. So far we have included a representative child from 56% of veterans' families, but there are still 140 families out there from whom we have not received a single reply, consent form, or formal refusal. Many of these may have moved house or are busy with family or work commitments but this year our focus is to reach as many of those adult children as we can, so they can have their say. As Brian concludes, "we'd be delighted to hear from vets' sons and daughters and anyone that may have slipped through the net".

Dr Brian O'Toole interviewing the daughter of a Vietnam veteran.

BRAIN & MIND
RESEARCH
INSTITUTE



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

EDITED BY ALICE ROTHWELL

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

Australian Vietnam Veterans Family Health Study

T +61 2 9114 4222

F +61 2 9114 4223

E vietvets@sydney.edu.au

sydney.edu.au/bmri