

Good afternoon distinguished guests,

I would like to begin my address today by paying tribute to all Australian men and women who have over the generations proudly served our country in times of war. I would also like to acknowledge those who continue today to protect us by participating in peacekeeping missions worldwide. Each and every one of these people have afforded us the greatest human privilege: freedom. Today, however I would like to pay special tribute to those men and women who were part of the Vietnam War and who, like all servicemen, deserve our utmost gratitude for their sacrifices.

When most people think of the Vietnam War the usual images come to mind: men wading through thick jungle, helicopters carrying wounded soldiers, black and white images of war broadcast on television screens and the venom of the anti war protest movement. It is, however other images which many in society have not been privy to; the bringing of our veterans home under the cover of darkness, the general lack of debriefing and counselling upon their return and the silence and the externally imposed shame of a society who were not ready to face up to the realities of this modern war.

So what made the Vietnam War so different from all others? In all wars, men and women selflessly lay down their lives for the right to be free and Vietnam was certainly no different. However unlike other wars, those who fought in Vietnam were embroiled in a war that divided a society like we had never seen before. They were not publicly, and in some cases, privately acknowledged for their bravery or deeds of sacrifice until many years later. Too many years later! Many were confronted with the most inconceivable view that Vietnam was not a “real war”; the belief that this was a war Australia should not have been involved in; a war that at its conclusion, was far easier to forget and sweep under the carpet than acknowledge. Young people like myself are often at a loss to think that a nation like Australia almost forgot those who simply wanted to protect what they believed to be so precious at the time: our nations freedom. Even as a young person who was not even born at the time of this conflict, I feel a sense of shame when I hear about the treatment of our veterans, especially on their home shores. Thankfully, all of my generation are taught in school about the events surrounding this dark decade in History, and unlike so many of our forebears, we promise you that we will take it upon ourselves to ensure future generations look favourably upon these brave veterans and will always be there to support them and their families.

We are glad that in 1987, there was an official Welcome Home. This event was a timely, although rather late expression of a nation’s gratitude to the sacrifices of the personnel who suffered so much and were given little recognition. But is that enough? I think not. My generation knows that no soldier fights because he hates what is in

front of him but rather, because he loves what is behind him. My generation and generations in the future will continue to recognise the fact both publicly and privately. Know that you are never alone. Don't feel like your battles both on and off the field are forgotten. My generation strongly believe that you are all heroes and will remain heroes in the annals of Australian history forever. We know that the physical war ended many years ago, but encourage you to begin each day in the knowledge that our generation will always be there to support you through your emotional wars. You have left us an amazing legacy and we have a debt to repay. Even though our generation is often accused of taking things for granted or we are too complacent, be assured that we are not that narrow-minded and certainly feel privileged to live in the path of the freedom that you paved for our nation.

Almost forty years after our final Vietnam Veterans returned home, I believe that we now live in a country that willingly acknowledges the bravery, the courage and the sacrifices our amazing veterans showed in this challenging and sometimes dark part of their lives. Additionally, and most importantly, many years after the conclusion of the Vietnam conflict we know that we still have much to do to ensure that veterans and their families get the support that they are entitled to. As a nation we must not forget that some Vietnam veterans and their families still suffer as a result of the circumstances they experienced during that conflict. As a nation it is our responsibility to do what ever it takes to ensure that these often tragic circumstances are treated and prevented.

To all Vietnam Veterans here today, I am so proud to say we honour both you and you families and will always show appreciation for your sacrifice, your loyalty and your enduring support to our nation. Anyone who has served this country is a hero in my eyes and always will be.

So in conclusion, let me leave you with these words from a mere teenager...

‘Hold your head high and walk proud,

You've borne your burdens well,

Walk peacefully from here on

And revel in the knowledge that

At last, it's time for you to be cared for.’

Composed and read by Guest Speaker: BRITTANY SMITH-Student Colo High