

TRAVEL VIETNAM

Just kids in a war zone

Rachael Oakes-Ash joins veterans on a poignant return to the jungle where they fought 40 years ago.

Vietnam veteran Wilf Matusch is kneeling in the rubber plantation that was once his war home, pulling image after image from his folder. He shows us a picture of his mates bathing under a rigged-up bucket, not far from where he now kneels. Another shows men in camouflage taking a break in the jungle, another is of Wilf himself, a fresh-faced man-child in aviator glasses in the streets of Vung Tau, unaware of what lay ahead.

The war ended for Wilf in 1970 when a booby trap sent his platoon into disarray and him into intensive care. Forty years later, he is back in Vietnam as a tourist, still with the 27 solid silver staples in his head that have kept him alive all these years.

My 15-year-old niece, Ashleigh, and her fellow travellers – 20-year-old Sam, 18-year-old Josh and 15-year-old Melanie – weren't born when Wilf was fighting for his life.

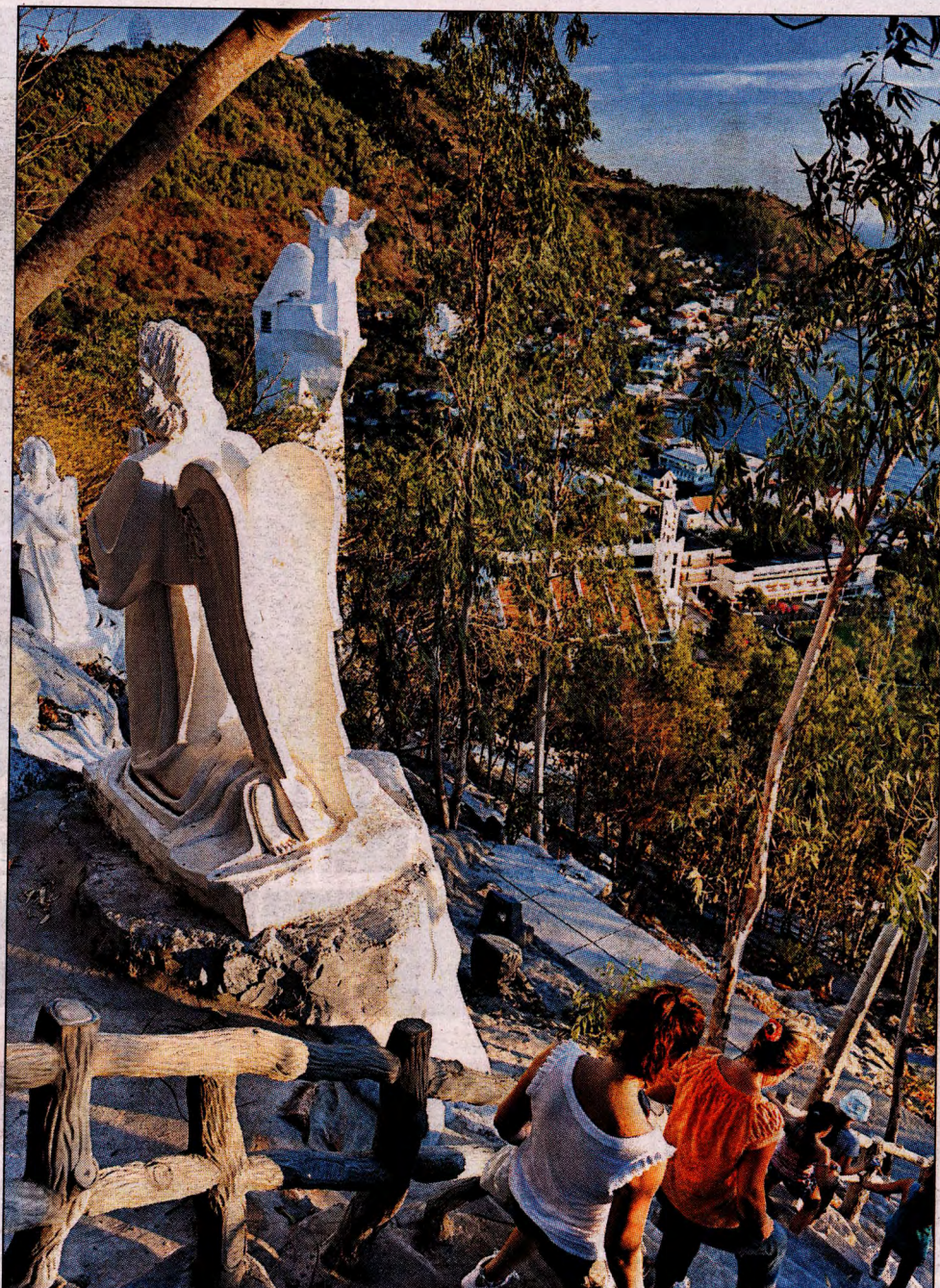
The closest thing to war these four have seen

found difficult, let alone get them to travel for it. The lure of backpacking Thailand's tropical beaches with cheap cocktails and full-moon parties wins out over trudging through mud-infested jungles in the footsteps of soldiers.

Australian school students study the Vietnam War in depth in years 9 and 10, though it is one thing studying war in textbooks and another coming face-to-face with those who fought it. Our tour has three veterans, our leader Pete, Wilf, and Bruce, a Digger who drove trucks carrying ammunition. Listen to their accounts of various key war moments and you wonder if they were engaged in fighting in the same country.

Like any group trauma, each individual's perception of events becomes their reality.

The beachside resort town of Vung Tau was the centre of Australia's Vietnam War activities. The allied flags of Vung Tau, where soldiers met their mates for a night on the town, can't be



is a bitch-slap on *Gossip Girl*. Yet in another era, it could have been them donning the fatigues at 19 and heading into the jungle.

Instead, the teenage tourists are walking the rubber plantations of Vietnam's Phuoc Tuy province with Wilf by their side, retracing the steps of the Australian infantrymen who spent seven years in full military commitment, losing more than 500 men in what the Vietnamese call "The American War".

Author of four war books, Peter Haran is also a veteran, having completed two tours of Vietnam (in 1967 and 1971) as a dog-handler whose charge was trained to track down the enemy. Pete is hosting a week-long expedition into Vietnam's living history as a guide for Beyond Long Tan tours.

Not all veterans could do this; many have not returned and never will, after being mentally torn apart by a war that had 19,000 conscripts and 30,000 regular soldiers looking for the Viet Cong enemy, who all the while were watching them from underground tunnel systems within the thick jungle.

It is difficult to get a modern generation to connect with a war that the civilians of the time

Aussie soldiers roped themselves together to negotiate neck-deep mud.

found today and many of the bars have shut. The "hostess bars" remain, however, these days filled with Westerners who are working the rigs of the oil-rich waters.

For veterans who do return, the Etta Pub on the beachfront strip has a wall filled with signatures and comments made by Australian Diggers. Night markets and designer fakes keep the teens' shopping withdrawals from peaking.

From the top of Radar Hill, accessed by a cable car, guests can view the Vung Tau headland and the surrounding hills and jungle plains. This is where Australian soldiers roped themselves together to negotiate the neck-deep mud of the marshlands and fought in jungle so dense it was impossible to tell the Viet Cong from their own troops, which sometimes resulted in dire "friendly fire" consequences.



South-east Asia is riddled with foreign tourists picking their way through markets, tropical waters and neon lights but the Vung Tau region is refreshingly free of tour groups. The only Westerners we encounter are those from the rigs, a veteran called Breaker who owns the Offshore Bar, and Walter Pearson, a veteran of two tours, acclaimed journalist and documentary maker who considers Vung Tau his second home.

The Viet Cong won the war and rule with communist power today, so history in Vietnam is understandably told from the victor's perspective. The War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City refers to the "allied troops" as the "puppet forces" of the US and shows graphic images of the impact of chemical attacks using Agent Orange. Australian tourists

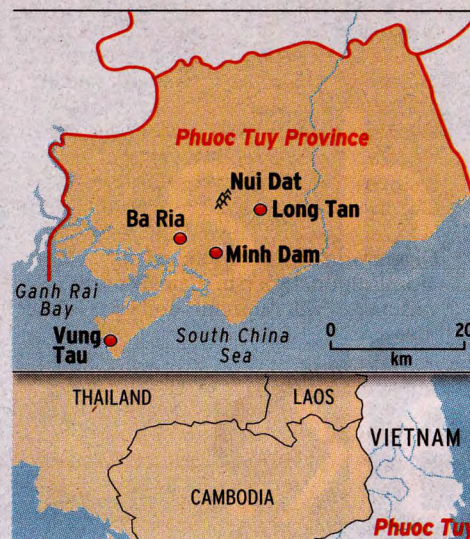
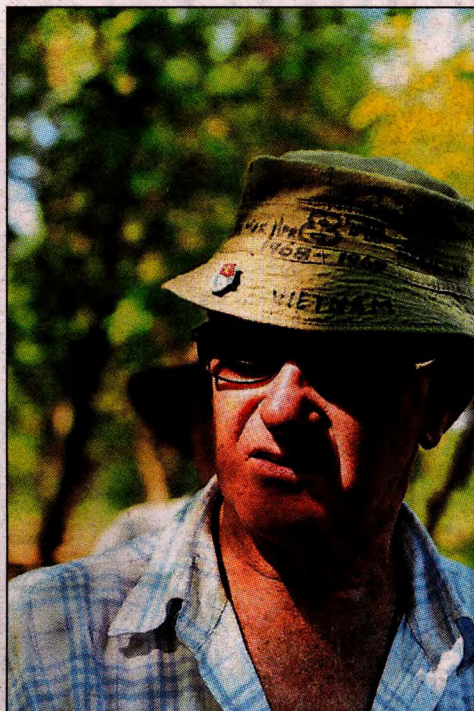
wishing to visit the battlefields must be sensitive to Vietnam's own loss of life and permission must be granted from local authorities.

The Long Phouc tunnel system in the region piques our teenage travellers' interest; first-hand experience gives a feel for conditions of war that school texts cannot.

Two metres below the surface, this tunnel system stretches for more than a kilometre; it was built in one month and housed mini-cities hidden from Australian eyes. Pete takes us on a mock land patrol where we are all "maimed in the lower legs" from the bunker slits in the tunnels below that none of us detected.

A trek to the top of the Australian base, Nui Dat, reveals the rich red dust and the exhausting heat in which the Diggers fought. Wilf points

VIETNAM TRAVEL



TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

- ▶ Singapore Airlines flies daily from Sydney to Ho Chi Minh City via Singapore, priced from \$1367. See singaporeair.com.
- ▶ Thai Airways flies daily from Sydney to Ho Chi Minh City via Bangkok, priced from \$1097. See www.thaiairways.com.
- ▶ Vietnam Airlines flies direct from Sydney to Ho Chi Minh City, priced from \$855. See vietnamairlines.com.

TOURING THERE

- ▶ Beyond Long Tan tours has the exclusive licence for the 50th anniversary in 2012 of Australia's first involvement in the Vietnam War and currently runs small group tours looking at war history. Two nights in Ho Chi Minh City, three nights in Vung Tau and one night in Long Hai, most meals and return flights from Sydney costs \$2800 a person, twin share. See beyondlongtan.com.au.

WHERE TO STAY

Ho Chi Minh City

- ▶ Hotel Majestic is on the riverfront, with a roof terrace for sunset cocktails. From \$US150 (\$163) for a colonial room. See majesticsaigon.com.vn.

- ▶ The historic Rex Hotel's central location made it the perfect home for war correspondents. From \$US110 a night for a single room. See rexhotelvietnam.com.

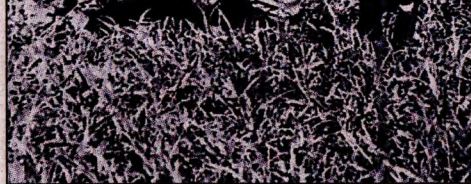
Vung Tau

- ▶ The brand new Hotel Petro has spacious rooms, two restaurants and a pool. From \$US120 a night. See petrohotel.vn.

- ▶ The Grand Hotel on the waterfront was the preferred hotel of officers during the war. From \$US75 for a single room, see grandhotelvungtau.com.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- ▶ Vietnam Tourist Office, see vietnamtourism.com.



Close to the action ... (clockwise from far left) in the hills above Vung Tau; veteran Bruce; Josh, Melanie and Ashleigh at the Long Tan memorial; an unofficial Anzac memorial in Nui Dat; a tracker dog and his handler, members of Wilf's platoon. Photos: Rachael Oakes-Ash; photolibrary

out that soldiers with sunburn were fined the equivalent of \$300 today for "self-inflicted wounds", as who can carry a 60-kilogram pack on blistered skin? Better to keep the long-sleeved shirts on and sweat it out.

Heat could kill as effectively as any AK-47 rifle. Cassius, one of the 11 tracker dogs that served for Australia, died of heat exhaustion. The other 10 on the front line, including Pete's beloved Caesar, were left behind when the Australian troops withdrew.

They were finally recognised posthumously in 2009 for their contribution.

It's titbits of information such as this, told by those who experienced it, that keep these memories alive for young and old. Our local interpreter has stories of his own experience translating for the US forces before attempting

an escape to the Mekong Delta, where he was captured by the Viet Cong and sentenced to a year's hard labour.

Pete commands a "mission" through the rubber plantations to replicate conditions of one platoon, which travelled in the pitch black of night, connected by a cord. We close our eyes and keep our hands on the shoulder of the person in front; it is hard work and little wonder one soldier fell down a 30-metre well, creating pandemonium and, in effect, bringing the night missions to an end.

The rubber plantations today are clear of scrub and filled with fresh new plants but the trees are still spaced apart in the formation of yesteryear. It is in one of these plantations that the battle of Long Tan took place on August 18, 1966. Considered one of the bloodiest battles of

the Vietnam War, 17 Australians were killed and 27 wounded.

We walk the two-hour trek from Nui Dat to Long Tan, as the soldiers did on patrol, to a memorial where our Diggers pay their respects and wipe away tears. The teenagers offer flowers at the Buddhist shrine that also commemorates the Vietnamese who lost their lives in the same military engagement.

That night we stay in a military base guest house in the town of Long Hai. The hard-packed single beds and hand-held showers are a world away from the four-star Vung Tau resort where we stayed the night before but gives an insight into a time when groundsheets and dry spells were a luxury – though secretly my back regrets not paying the \$65 for an upgrade to the five-star beach resort down the road.

It is easy to politicise, sentimentalise or polarise when it comes to war. I have, until now, had little thought for a war that was over before I was potty-trained. Yet spending time with these men, who were Sam's age when they did their "tour"; meeting the Vietnamese who fought in opposition; climbing into the caves of the Viet Cong at Minh Dam; and spending time in the minefields where Pete and his dog fought, has more than humanised history for me.

Gallipoli is overrun with Australians each Anzac Day; however, Vietnam may be the one remaining war destination where it's still possible for all ages to get up close with veterans where the action took place.

The writer was a guest of Beyond Long Tan tours.