

# Our History

As AVCAT celebrates its 20-year anniversary we look back at two decades of growth, and our origins as the Australian Vietnam War Veterans' Trust, established in 1985.



From 1962-1973 more than 60,000 Australians served in the Vietnam War as part of an allied force led by the United States.

Australians fought alongside South Vietnamese Government troops against the Vietcong, a force supported by the North Vietnamese Army.<sup>1</sup> One of the tactics employed by the US military against the Vietcong was Agent Orange, a herbicide that was sprayed by aircraft over areas of conflict to destroy foliage Vietcong troops were using as cover and also deprive them of crops. It became known as 'Agent Orange' because of the orange stripe on the 55-gallon drums in which it was transported to Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>



After the war, veterans contended that exposure to Agent Orange had caused cancer and other illnesses and a class action against chemical companies responsible for its supply was filed in the US in 1979. In 1984 the Agent Orange Product Liability Class Action was settled out of court and the chemical companies agreed to pay \$US180 million (\$A222 million). Four years later, in July 1988, after a lengthy appeals process, diplomats from Australia and New Zealand travelled to New York to accept cheques totalling \$US5 million (\$A 6.17 million) earmarked for Australian and New Zealand military personnel exposed to Agent Orange in the course of the Vietnam War.

Days later, on July 28, former supreme court judge the Hon Leycester Meares AC CMG

*Hon Leycester Meares AC CMG QC*

QC, the first chairman of the Australian Vietnam War Veterans' Trust (AVWVT), accepted a cheque on behalf of the trust and invested the money while final arrangements were made for disbursement. Meares quickly appointed Brigadier Pat Gowans OAM (Retd) to establish regional committees to receive and consider applications for assistance, and asked for patience from veterans as this process took place.<sup>3</sup> Committees were to be established in each state capital, Canberra, Darwin and Townsville, and were made up of Vietnam Veterans nominated by ex-service organisations. 'It will take a little time to set them up,' Meares explained, 'but it is important that we do the job properly so that the





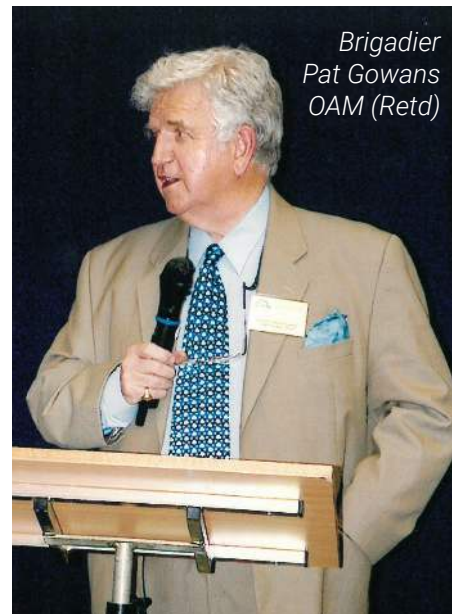
Left: Brigadier Pat Gowans OAM (Retd)

heavy responsibility of distributing the fund can be managed fairly, efficiently and with complete accountability.<sup>4</sup>

About six months later, in April 1989, Brigadier Gowans, now officially AVWVT's Executive Director, was finally able to call for applications for assistance. In an oral history held at the Australian War Memorial Brig Gowans explains, the trust 'was administered for Vietnam Veterans or their families and their dependants in necessitous or deserving circumstances. And that was in two chunks, a fund A and a fund B. One was for cash assistance and the other one was a futures program.<sup>5</sup> Applicants had to have served in or near Vietnam between 1961 and 1972 (or be a dependent of such a veteran). And they had to be prepared to affirm to the best of their knowledge that they were exposed to Agent Orange.<sup>6</sup>

The trust quickly commenced distributing cash payments to applicants. Applications covered a diverse range of requests. 'For most,' Brig Gowans said,

'payments are made to help with common problems like being unable, all of a sudden, to cope with essential expenses because of a loss of job or any combination of circumstances which has meant things can't be managed. Or with items such as medical expenses, food, clothing,



Brigadier Pat Gowans OAM (Retd)

accommodation or similar needs. Others receive money to help with the education of their children, or their own retraining for a better

chance in the workforce. For some, it's the sudden expense of a funeral. Basically, there is flexibility and no reasonable needs are excluded. The trust is about one-time help and can only give hundreds, not thousands of dollars.<sup>7</sup>

And, key to our current organisation, according to Brig Gowans, 'early in the program we realised the education of veterans' children was going to be a requirement, particularly tertiary education.' As a result, in 1991, the trust introduced the Vietnam Veterans' Trust Education Assistance Scheme (VVTEAS). As the name suggests its goal was to help with the cost of post-secondary education. In its first year, VVTEAS offered 10 grants of \$3500 a year to eligible applicants. The financial assistance would continue for the duration of the student's course.<sup>8</sup> The scheme sought to encourage students to take part in courses 'that will help veterans' children to gain satisfying employment or enter rewarding careers.<sup>9</sup> And financial need was taken into account when

choosing recipients.

The distribution plan approved by the court at the time of the Agent Orange class action settlement was for 90 percent of the Australian share of the settlement to be paid out by the end of 1996, when Fund A (the cash payments program that started with \$5 million) would finish.<sup>10</sup> And true to that commitment, the 1996 annual report announced that the major distribution phase (Fund A) had 'wound down ops.' About 5400 veterans or dependants had been assisted by the program and more than \$7.1 million was distributed.<sup>11</sup>

This was the point at which the trust moved to Fund B and, said Brig Gowans, 'we decided to continue the education scheme and concentrate our resources on that.' This meant that payments would continue until 2002 for educational assistance to veterans' children through the VVTEAS scheme.<sup>12</sup>

Once both parts of the Australian share of the Agent Orange funds were distributed, AVWVT would be terminated, and that was planned to take place in June 2003.<sup>13</sup> But, explains Brig Gowans, 'It was decided that there should be a legacy from the Agent Orange money in Australia, and that legacy was to be an organisation to continue to run scholarships, and that's how AVCAT came about. So AVCAT's doing the same job, differently funded, but for veterans of all wars.' AVCAT's current chair, Major General Bill Crews AO, recalls, 'the Vietnam Veterans at the time wanted to use the funds for an enduring purpose. It was already becoming evident at



# Vietnam Veterans

Upon their return to Australia, Vietnam Veterans faced a complex set of circumstances. The Department of Veterans' Affairs Anzac portal describes some of the challenges faced, including that 'for a long time after the war large numbers of Vietnam Veterans felt that many in Australia blamed them, rather than politicians for the war and the way it had been conducted.

**Veterans who had lost friends in combat, who had seen death and who had killed, as is the lot of soldiers in war, were appalled at the way in which their having done the job asked of them by their government was, in some cases, used against them.**

Remarks by returned soldiers from earlier conflicts suggesting that Vietnam was not a real war hurt men seeking the comradeship and understanding of fellow veterans.<sup>19</sup> Veteran families are also affected by the service of their loved one: long absences, frequent moves, the effect of conflict on their family member, whether physical, psychological or emotional can lead to harm for veteran families. Some of the consequences can include financial difficulties, mental health issues, family breakdown and the need for family members to become carers, which in turn means that the children and grandchildren of veterans can greatly benefit from support, including support to engage in further education.

This is where AVCAT, in partnership with the Department of Veterans' Affairs and other scholarship sponsors and donors, steps in.





Major General Bill Crews AO (Retd), Brigadier Pat Gowans OAM (Retd), Joan Hughes

the time that the children of Vietnam Veterans, several of whom had died or were suffering physical or psychological wounds from their service, would need some additional assistance to complete their education and make their way in the world.' On a practical level, the national infrastructure established by the Trust to establish, promote, process applications, select and make payments for scholarships had become a valuable asset to the ex-service community.<sup>14</sup>

During this period, as discussions of the future of the Trust were taking place, on 18 August 2000 – Vietnam Veteran's Day – the Australian Federal Government officially launched the Long Tan Bursary to be administered through the AVWVT. The bursary was created in response to the Vietnam Veterans' Health Study, which highlighted the need to strengthen the support available to veterans and their families. There were originally 14 bursaries, two for each state and one for each territory, available each year to support the children of Vietnam Veterans in reaching their education goals.<sup>15</sup> In June 2002, the number of bursaries was increased

to 30, to offset the loss of tertiary education support that would potentially accompany the 'winding up of the Vietnam Veterans' Trust Education Assistance Scheme at the end of 2002.'<sup>16</sup>

And in July 2003, the AVWVT was renamed the Australian Veterans' Children Assistance Trust. AVCAT was to continue to administer the Long Tan Bursary while widening its focus in order to administer and establish other scholarships (by seeking out sponsors) to assist with the tertiary education costs for children and grandchildren of veterans of all conflicts in which Australia has participated. Brig Gowans, Executive Director of the trust since its formation, continued in his role, leading the Trust into the future that we are celebrating this year.

After 23 years leading first AVWVT and then AVCAT, Brig Gowans retired in 2007. His impact was enormous, and he received an Order of Australia medal in that year for service to veterans and their families through AVCAT. 'He was dedicated to the cause from the outset,' recalls AVCAT chair Bill Crews, 'and the very existence of

the Trust owes much to him.' Brig Gowans handed over the reins to Commodore Nick Helyer MBE (Retd), who was committed to continuing, and indeed expanding, education support for the children of veterans. One of the first expansions saw the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) further increase Long Tan bursaries from 30 to 50.

Over his five years as CEO, Commodore Helyer worked with the small team at AVCAT to encourage more ex-service organisations to sponsor students. The response was substantial with RSL Australia and sub-branches, TPI, Legacy Australia, Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, Brisbane Water Legacy, Vietnam Veterans Peacekeepers & Peacemakers Association of Australia and Australian War Widows all becoming involved.



Commodore Nick Helyer MBE (Retd)

In his outgoing CEO message, published in the 2012 Annual Report, Commodore Helyer

emphasised the importance of breaking the cycle of disadvantage for service families in order to ensure that the children and grandchildren of veterans can have the same opportunities as their peers. 'AVCAT has a strong legacy and an important message. Without AVCAT, many of the recipients would not be able to further their careers and lives through tertiary education ... Research clearly shows that education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world, so every donation we receive is appreciated and well-utilised.'

AVCAT's next CEO was Karen Blackwell, who was well-versed with our organisation having volunteered as an expert in education for many years before her appointment. Over her time as CEO, there was a focus on ensuring potential recipients knew how to access the support available through AVCAT. Our website, first established in 2010, made information more widely accessible and application numbers grew, leading to a record number of applications (374) in 2014 for scholarships and bursaries awarded in 2015.

In 2015, AVCAT commemorated thirty years since the formation of the original AVWVT in anticipation of the Agent Orange class action. Throughout the commemoration year, AVCAT further developed our profile within, and beyond the veteran community. Through improved marketing, with an increased emphasis on social media, our goal was to ensure that all eligible students were aware of the availability of scholarships.

We also worked hard to increase awareness amongst potential donors so that the number of bursaries and scholarships available for those studying at university, TAFE or college, could be increased. This led to 34 sponsored scholarships being provided through the generosity of new and continuing sponsors. Along with 56 Long Tan Bursaries funded through DVA, this meant a total of 90 young men and women joined the AVCAT family in 2015. In two years, the number of sponsors more than doubled: 2013: 9 sponsors, 2015: 20 sponsors.

In 2017, Joan Hughes brought her not-for-profit background to bear on AVCAT's work when she became CEO. And that year AVCAT benefited from a generous commitment from RSL Queensland to support 35 new scholarships (and subsequently 20 each year). RSL Queensland CEO Luke Traini said the scholarships would 'ensure the children of former service men and women would have an equal chance to excel in life [and] extend the welfare support we can provide to the ADF community.'<sup>17</sup>

In 2019, DVA announced the extension of The Long Tan Bursary, originally for the children of Vietnam Veterans, to include the grandchildren of Vietnam Veterans, and AVCAT chair Bill Crews expressed AVCAT's gratitude for the continued support of the DVA over many years. Crews also expressed a desire to see scholarships available to students from all parts of Australia. 'One of the key goals of AVCAT is to support veteran families Australia-wide. We are



now seeking to identify donors to ensure that there is an equitable access to these scholarships across Australia, noting that most scholarships are confined to the geographic area of the sponsor.'

Presciently, 2019 was also the year Joan Hughes implemented a new online application process and digitised AVCAT's office procedures which proved fortunate in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The pandemic with its lockdowns and border closures, brought with it a lot of uncertainty and adjustments for our organisation and scholars alike. One of the main adjustments was the shift to working from home and studying online which had many flow-on effects. Many had to deal with mental health issues and an increase in caring responsibilities. Tessa Lucas, who was awarded a TPI NSW scholarship in 2019, explained how the scholarship was 'a massive financial help during COVID-19. With national institutions closed, including [her employer] the Australian War





Joan Hughes

## AVCAT now assists approximately 250 young people with the cost of their tertiary education each year.

We launched our AVCAT Alumni Network (AAN) in November 2020 for recipients who have completed their scholarships with us, or who have graduated. And we look forward to remaining connected with our past scholars in the years ahead. As the Hon Darren Chester MP expressed at the AAN launch, 'The financial support [of a scholarship] is important, but that network of support, that moral support, that shared lived experience is crucial.' AVCAT has since launched a mentorship program that pairs past and current scholars to assist with navigating both personal and academic landscapes over the course of their studies.

AVCAT now assists approximately 250 young people with the cost of their tertiary education each year. And our support of scholars has been working tremendously well, with more than 80 percent of our scholarship holders completing their tertiary studies or continuing their education. (A much higher rate than the national average of around 65 percent.<sup>18</sup>)

We are extremely proud to have awarded 3027 scholarships to date. This is to be celebrated, but there is still more to do. Over the past four years, AVCAT has

consistently received more than 200 applications for 90 available scholarships, leaving 60 percent of deserving applicants without support.

The scholarships can be life-changing, explains our current CEO Len Russell. 'Many people in the community are not aware of the ongoing effects of defence service on veterans and their families,' he says. 'Studies show that compared with the general population, the dependants of veterans have more health and other issues. These issues, experienced by some dependants can create a cycle of disadvantage. Completing tertiary education helps to break this cycle by improving employment opportunities, health and well-being and overall quality of life.'

As we look to the future, our desire at AVCAT is to see the reach and range of our scholarships, in partnership with DVA, ex-service organisations, sponsors, donors and others, continue to grow so that the children and grandchildren of veterans all across Australia have the opportunity to benefit from support for their education.

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# The Australian Vietnam War Veterans' Trust

was established in 1985 by the Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia (VVAA), the Australian Defence Services Council (AVADS), Legacy and the RSL at a meeting chaired by the then minister for Veterans Affairs. It was agreed at this meeting that the Chairman of the Trust would be nominated by the Minister for Veterans' Affairs and the other directors would be nominated by the sponsoring organisations listed above.



## The Long Tan Bursary

was named to commemorate the Battle of Long Tan. The battle was one of the fiercest actions seen by Australian soldiers during the Vietnam War, and took place in the Long Tan rubber plantation on 18 August 1966. That day, 108 Australian and New Zealand soldiers fought a pitched battle against over 2000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops. The date for Vietnam Veterans' Day was selected to recognise D Company, 6RAR, who fought in the Battle of Long Tan. Applications for scholarships open on Vietnam Veterans' Day, 18 August, each year.

# Timeline

