

The photograph shows an outdoor military museum. In the center, a green military jeep with a canvas top is parked on a gravel surface. Two men are standing next to it, one in a light-colored shirt and camouflage pants, the other in a white shirt and dark pants. To the right, a larger olive-green military truck is visible. The background features a large structure covered in camouflage netting. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

# morning tea at the museum

PHOTOGRAPHS TONY SHEFFIELD

An open-air military museum just off Bowral's main street is helping to improve the lives of Australian war veterans and children in Vietnam, writes SAM CHARLWOOD. He speaks to a group of Vietnam veterans who regularly meet at the site.



**I**N A QUIET POCKET of Bowral's main centre, behind The Mill complex and away from the boutiques and ubiquitous Range Rovers on Bong Bong Street, is an unexpected sight – a military museum that is helping war veterans and disadvantaged Vietnamese children. Called Nui Dat RnR, the museum was opened by Vietnamese-born Vinh Tran in 2020. Nui Dat was the location of the first Australian Task Force Base during the Vietnam War (the name translates to 'small hill'), while RnR indicates what the centre is partly devoted to today – rest and relaxation.

At first glance, the 550 square metre site presents like an army base camp, shaded by camouflage netting and lined by military vehicles and items from various warfares. There are 12 Jeeps and other army trucks, eight bicycles and motorbikes, two

rickshaws and one ex-US Army 1960s helicopter, which was converted into a simulator for CareFlight (CareFlight donated it in December). All are on show to the public, who can wander in at any time.

But a closer look reveals an emphasis on peace and healing, made apparent by Buddhist items and signs with positive slogans. The museum has become a meeting place and refuge for war veterans from all conflicts, some suffering the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. As well as Highlands veterans, veteran groups from Sydney, Canberra and Wollongong also visit, and a group of local adults with disabilities drops in regularly. Vinh says the centre also raises funds for Vietnamese charity Maison Chance, which helps disadvantaged children and people with disabilities (this is mostly via donations from

people using the vehicles for anything from weddings to wine tours).

Vinh says Nui Dat RnR is the result of his 15-year commitment to help others. “I was born in November 1971, during the peak of the Vietnam War,” he says. “You would hear helicopters and my mum was scared, always hiding and running. I don’t remember a lot but my eight older brothers and sisters remember it well.

“My eldest sister Trang escaped Vietnam as a refugee in 1978 and came to Australia in 1981. She sponsored the whole family to come here in 1989, which is when I first arrived.”

Vinh lived in Sydney, attended university and worked in finance. Eighteen years later, in July 2007, he took his first trip back to Vietnam. “It hit me so hard – the war, Agent Orange, orphans and deformities – it was all still there, all those years later. In the 18 years I lived in Sydney I was lost. When I went back to Vietnam, I just woke up.”

Around 60,000 Australians served in the Vietnam War between 1962 and 1973, as part of the country’s support of the United States and anti-communist allies. The conflict divided

“I was a national serviceman and when I came back from Vietnam we just got paid off and went back to our civilian jobs two weeks later. There was no one to talk to.”

Australia, causing social and political dissent particularly with the introduction of National Service in 1964. The resulting draft resisters, conscientious objectors and nationwide protests gave rise to a hostile reception for many returning soldiers.

At age 36, Vinh says he decided to step back from his business career and channel his energy into helping those affected by warfare. And it all started with a humble Jeep war vehicle.

“I imported the first Jeep from Vietnam to Sydney in 2012 and I registered it and started driving it regularly around the Sydney CBD. It had a sign in the back saying, ‘Help the orphans of Vietnam,’” he says. “Soon we had wedding car companies, movies and production companies and the Australian Army contact us asking to use the vehicle for displays or in Australia Day parades.

“People have been using the Jeep since 2012, and we send their donations back to Vietnam. Now we have registered as a not-for-profit museum, and we help Maison Chance. They’re based in Ho Chi Minh City but they help kids throughout Vietnam.”

Vinh has travelled to Vietnam 44 times since 2007. In 2017, he moved to Bowral and sowed the seeds for the museum’s eclectic mix of war items – many of them curated by veterans – which are dotted around the museum’s open space and two workshops. (Vinh runs the adjacent Ms Pho Canteen, which sells Vietnamese street food and funds the museum.)

The Jeep has since spawned a fleet of ex-military vehicles, including Hummers and Land Rovers. Each has had its artillery removed to reinforce the peacefulness of the display. Southern Highlands volunteers and veterans can frequently be found repairing and restoring the vehicles in the workshops. They also build toys and model aircraft. “It’s like a men’s shed,” says Vinh. Most recently, Vinh fashioned a bunker bed inside a truck refrigerator body, giving veterans an opportunity to stay overnight if they’re seeking respite.



**FROM TOP** JOHN O’CONNOR WORKING ONE OF 12 JEEPS IN THE COLLECTION; VINH TRAN DRIVING NSW GOVERNOR DAVID HURLEY AND LINDA HURLEY IN THE 2018 TULIP TIME PARADE (PHOTOGRAPH SUPPLIED).

Occupying a special new corner of the Nui Dat RnR museum is a black military helmet. It belongs to Mittagong resident Ian Humby, a corporal who served for the Australian Army in the Vietnam War for 11 months. The helmet was used by Ian during his role as a helicopter door gunner in Vietnam. Ian is a regular at the museum and wishes similar venues had been available upon first returning from warfare.

“What I found weird was coming back to my old job in Australia [in the police force], where I had to attend Vietnam War protests and demonstrations as a copper, having just served in it,” he says. “When we came home, many of us were separated into our home states and territories and you didn’t have camaraderie with the people that you served with.”

Seated at a table on the day of our interview are seven men who served in Vietnam including Ian; four were conscripted for National Service based on a ballot.

Norm Austin of Moss Vale served one year in Vietnam as a corporal and is now the secretary of the Southern Highlands Vietnam Veterans’ Association. He says the museum gives



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** VINH TRAN; WRITER SAM CHARLWOOD WITH (CLOCKWISE) VIETNAM VETERANS RAY McCANN, DAVE BABBAGE, IAN HUMBY AND NORM AUSTIN; AN EX-US ARMY 1960S HELICOPTER CONVERTED INTO A SIMULATOR FOR CAREFLIGHT; BUDDHIST ITEMS ARE FOUND THROUGHOUT THE MUSEUM; THE HELMET IAN HUMBY USED AS A HELICOPTER DOOR GUNNER IN VIETNAM.

veterans an environment to safely reflect on their memories and shared experiences.

“I think it’s healing,” he says. “It brings back memories but they aren’t bad memories, it’s just cathartic in that sense and we get to express our thoughts and feelings to people who know what we’re talking about.”

“I was a national serviceman and when I came back from Vietnam we just got paid off and went back to our civilian jobs two weeks later. There was no one to talk to.”

“You didn’t mention the Vietnam War in normal life back then. When we come here, we can talk about it in a safe environment where the walls don’t have ears. It makes a lot of difference.”

Bowral’s Ray McCann finished as a brigadier in the Australian Army, following 34 years of service. His tenure included a 12-month posting in Vietnam in 1968 as an Engineer Troop Commander. “Probably half of my troop were national servicemen. For years afterwards you’d run into these fellas and they’d never forget you,” he says, adding, “Being an officer it’s a

little bit different. People either want to punch you or kiss you.

“The thing with an ex-service organisation or what Vinh is doing, is that ranks are dispensed with. The last thing you try to do is to retain your previous status – everyone is the same. This is an opportunity for veterans – who range from 100 down to their 20s – to meet outside the established ex-service organisation structure. It serves a good purpose.”

Ray is among a group of Vietnam veterans who regularly meet at Nui Dat RnR for morning tea. The conversation on the day is light in nature, and gives a fascinating insight into Australian life 50 years ago. “It’s healing, but it’s all about mateship,” Ray says. “Particularly our group – we’re all in our 70s now and our oldest member is actually 90.”

“It’s about mateship, comradeship and camaraderie – and our particular group comes here for morning tea once a month. It’s a different environment. We’re here to support Vinh, just like he is here to support us. It’s a symbiotic relationship.”

“Often you hear the same story over and over again,” Ray jokes. “But it usually improves with the number of tellings.” **HL**