

LAUNCH OF VIETNAM COMMEMORATIVE MEDALLIONS

SPEECH

29 Mar 2023

Prime Minister

Parliament House, Canberra;

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Thank you very much, Minister Keogh.

And I also acknowledge all of the special guests who are here, but I particularly want to acknowledge the veterans and the serving personnel of the Australian Defence Force who have joined us here as well this morning.

Welcome here to Parliament House.

We are here today to acknowledge courage.

We are here today to acknowledge sacrifice.

We are here to acknowledge the bonds of camaraderie forged under fire, and the cruel realities of loss.

Half a century after Australian guns fell silent in Vietnam, our nation has not repaid what we owe to the 60,000 Australians who served in that conflict.

And we cannot.

More than 3000 were wounded and, tragically, 523 were killed.

Futures were robbed, lives were changed irrevocably – for those who went, for those who loved them.

And yet for so long, we did not – as a nation – measure up to them.

It is a debt we can never repay, but for so long it was a debt that we failed to even acknowledge.

Let us stand in this place, in this Parliament, and speak – loudly, clearly – about those who were sent to war in our name, who did their duty in our name, but whose names we did not hold up as proudly as we should have.

This year, as we mark 50 years since the role of Australian troops in the hostilities in Vietnam came to a close, let us acknowledge your service and sacrifice.

Many of you returned to face new battles at home.

And not every one of those battles was won.

Some of them were fought so quietly they went unnoticed.

Indeed, for so many of our veterans, silence was a shield against the world – an outer stillness while within them, the cacophony of war raged on.

That has been the experience for so many, whether they raised arms against the enemy, or worked desperately to save the lives of the wounded and the dying.

Just as our veterans stepped up for us, we must step up for them.

We owe them a debt greater than mere gratitude.

And here, in the nation's Parliament, is the right place to begin.

So to each and every one of our Vietnam veterans, I say:

We honour you. We thank you. And we are so sorry it took us so long as a nation to do so. You deserve better.

Let us begin here with this formal acknowledgment in the national Parliament.

This medallion and certificate are a small but meaningful way to honour your service and to recognise the sacrifice of those who tragically never returned home.

It honours those who did return home, but have endured those scars of service, both seen and unseen.

It also serves to further acknowledge the families of Vietnam veterans for your sacrifice and support.

These medallions are available for every veteran.

They can be applied for by veterans, widows of veterans and other family members of veterans of the Vietnam War.

We are extremely grateful to be joined today by some of those fine Australians who donned our uniform to serve in our name in Vietnam.

As Prime Minister of Australia, I thank you.

Your presence here today honours the families of those we lost. It honours all those you served with. All you experienced together. All you endured together.

Your experiences during and after the war are a powerful reminder of the sacrifices made by those who have served our country and the debt of gratitude we owe each and every one of you.

It's important as Australians that we know the stories of your service in Vietnam, but also what you've achieved since.

In your advocacy for your mates, your local community and your continued involvement with ex-service organisations, we see some of the very best of the Australian spirit.

It is that spirit – backed by lived experience – that has seen so many veterans adding to and strengthening communities and businesses with their skills as leaders, planners, thinkers, and communicators.

And an ethos built on service, courage, respect, and integrity.

To every veteran here today, it's an honour to be here with you.

For those serving men and women, thank you for joining with your veterans and the Parliament here today, including the Chief of the Defence Force.

I say today, and every day: thank you for your service.

PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA