

MELBOURNE MUSEUM  
VIETNAM VOICES FORUM  
FORUM BRIEF

13 January – 17 April, 2001

## PUBLIC PROGRAM BRIEF DRAFT

### **The Viet Nam War and the Next Generation (working title)**

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#### **A Museum Victoria Forum**

The forum will discuss contemporary issues of identity and way of life for young Australians, arising from the impact of the Viet Nam War. People from a range of backgrounds and experiences will be invited to discuss issues including cultural and geographical identities and family and community relationships for a new generation of Australians. The forum will also present artistic and literary representations of these issues. Presenters will be asked, where possible, to use their personal perspectives to reflect upon broader social and cultural contexts in contemporary Australia.

The two groups who will be particularly encouraged to participate in the forum will be:

1. Vietnamese Australians: the children of Vietnamese people who came to Australia as immigrants or refugees.
2. The children of Australian Vietnam veterans and other Australians who spent time in Vietnam during the war.

#### **Intended outcomes**

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1. To facilitate debate and discussion of contemporary issues affecting Australians as a consequence of the Viet Nam War.
2. To raise public awareness of those issues.
3. To raise the profile of Museum Victoria as a place for debate and discussion about contemporary issues in Australian society and to develop new audiences.

#### **Audience**

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The forum will host between 80 to 100 people. The audience will consist of a mixture of invited guests and the general public, who will be informed through targeted promotion. Attendees will be required to book.

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Targeted groups will include:

- Youth oriented Vietnamese communities
- Children of veterans of the Vietnam War
- Tertiary students of these issues/areas
- Youth with an interest in contemporary social issues
- Community leaders representing contemporary social issues

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Presenters

Four to six presenters will participate in the forum.

Together, the forum presenters will provide a varied and innovative range of viewpoints and presentations that raise important issues for Australian society. The majority of presenters will be young Australians whose lives have been affected by the Viet Nam War.

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Date

The tentative date is Saturday 7th April 2001. The forum will run for 3 hours, from 2pm to 5pm.

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Venue

The Education Activity Rooms at Melbourne Museum have been booked for Saturday 7th April 2001, and also Saturday 31st March 2001.

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Format

The forum will consist of two sessions, separated by afternoon tea. The forum will include an introduction and welcome by George MacDonald, CEO Museum Victoria or James Dexter, Assistant Director, Melbourne Museum. The following sessions may be a mixture of formal talks, panel discussion and performance.

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Media

We will be contacting a number of media organisations with the aim of securing a broadcast of the forum. The museum will hold copyright over the broadcast for future use as an educational resource. National broadcasters, such as ABC and SBS, as well as community broadcasters will be approached.

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Promotion

To audience and for broadcast if secured.

Media promotion should include programs which are known to reach the target audiences, for example, Triple J, RRR, SBS, ABC, Community Media.

# The Viet Nam War & the Next Generation A Forum

**Saturday March 31st 2001  
2pm to 5pm**

*Viet Nam Voices – Australians and the Viet Nam War* is a national touring exhibition which exhibits the art of friend and foe, compatriot and enemy alike...Australian Viet Nam War veterans and their families, Vietnamese War veterans and their families and Anti-war protestors and their families.

As part of the exhibition, Melbourne Museum is hosting a free forum: *The Viet Nam War and the Next Generation*.

The forum will focus on contemporary issues facing young Australians arising from the impact of the Viet Nam War. It will give a voice to young people dealing with issues regarding identity and way of life, as well as an opportunity to involve a diverse range of people in the discussion. Speakers include the children of Viet Nam war veterans and second generation Vietnamese living in Australia.

Numbers are very limited, so please register your interest early. Admission on the day will be ticketed. For those unable to attend, a broadcast of the forum will be aired live in InfoZone at Melbourne Museum, and transcripts and audio excerpts will be available on the Melbourne Museum website shortly after the forum.



Melbourne Museum  
Carlton Gardens  
Carlton  
Melway Ref. 2B J10

Register your interest in attending by Friday 23rd March to:  
Lyn Price  
email [lprice@museum.vic.gov.au](mailto:lprice@museum.vic.gov.au)  
Ph: 03 8341 7226

A confirmation of your attendance and your ticket will be posted.

■ Cover story

# Children of war

By ANNE CRAWFORD

**A**S A GIRL, Georgia Cheul would wait until there was no one home and pull out her father's slides of war-time Vietnam. Looking for answers. Some of the slides didn't tally with what she learnt at school about the Vietnam War, the moralisation, the protests about Australians fighting a "dirty war" didn't sit with her father's images of the soldiers helping out at an orphanage of smiling Vietnamese children. The photos of a landscape blackened and flattened after battle disturbed her.

Cheul knew her father, who served in the First Battalion, Australian infantry, in 1968-9, had seen things she couldn't even imagine, but she was always too frightened to ask.

There were occasional hints. She recalls overbearing snippets of conversation with other veterans about the fierce battle of Fire Base Coral, mid-1968. She remembers her mother telling her how her father crouched under a table in their suburban home when a helicopter flew overhead.

Once he talked about one of the slides. Taken from the top of a tank, it was a shot of some "elephant grass" an innocuous enough scene were it not for the memory. The grass was so tall, so dense, that you couldn't see or hear much beyond where you were, her father said. Traversing it was a lottery. You didn't know when you would come face-to-face with a Vietcong soldier, when you would walk into a child with a bomb strapped to its chest.

Beyond this, the Vietnam War was rarely spoken of within the family. But it was always there, an intangible barrier. Her father worked hard and wasn't around much, Cheul says. He had a short temper. "We tiptoe-owed around him," she says.

The silence and the tension took its toll. Cheul is one of a generation coming under increasing scrutiny in Australia. The children of Vietnam veterans have higher than average incidence of birth defects, cancers and deaths due to accident or illness. A Department of Veterans Affairs survey also found a rate of suicide three times that of the general population in that age bracket. They are the measurable effects — the underlying psychological and emotional damage is untold.

About 56,000 Australians served in the Vietnam War from May, 1962 to July, 1973. Like Holocaust survivors, Vietnam veterans suppress their pasts, either because they are unable to talk about them or to protect their children.

Cheul, 25, was born with a congenital condition deforming her teeth, caused by the dioxin Agent Orange and corneal clouding when she was young.

She has long, battled anger and anxiety. Soldiers in Vietnam were portrayed by the peace movement and the shabby treatment they received when they returned.

She fought with her classmates over the war. "The girls would treat me like crap because I was the daughter of a Vietnam

veteran who got the pension. I became aware he'd been through some pretty horrible stuff after the war."

The "horrible stuff" is called post-traumatic stress disorder, a label that helped Cheul make sense of some of her childhood memories.

Georgia Cheul will be among four speakers at a forum. "The Viet Nam War and the Next Generation" to be held at the Melbourne Museum tomorrow. The forum coincides with an exhibition about the war now showing at the museum.

Tri Nguyen, the 29-year-old son of a Vietnamese war veteran, will speak of his experiences.

Tri was unhappy growing up in Melbourne, hated what he was, hated where he'd come from. He was teased at school for being Vietnamese and like Cheul, taken to task by his classmates about the war. The negative images of his birthplace rubbed off on him. He turned his back on Vietnam and rebelled against his father, didn't want to know about his war experiences.

**L**ATER, he was afraid to ask. "You see so much horrible stuff and you wonder if your father was involved in that and it's a bit too scary asking those questions," he says. "He has gone through so much in his life — the war, escaping from Vietnam, so much loss and separation. A lot of it is still fragile."

Nguyen says his father, who has twice returned to Vietnam, seems calm. "But you can sense there's a lot of grief."

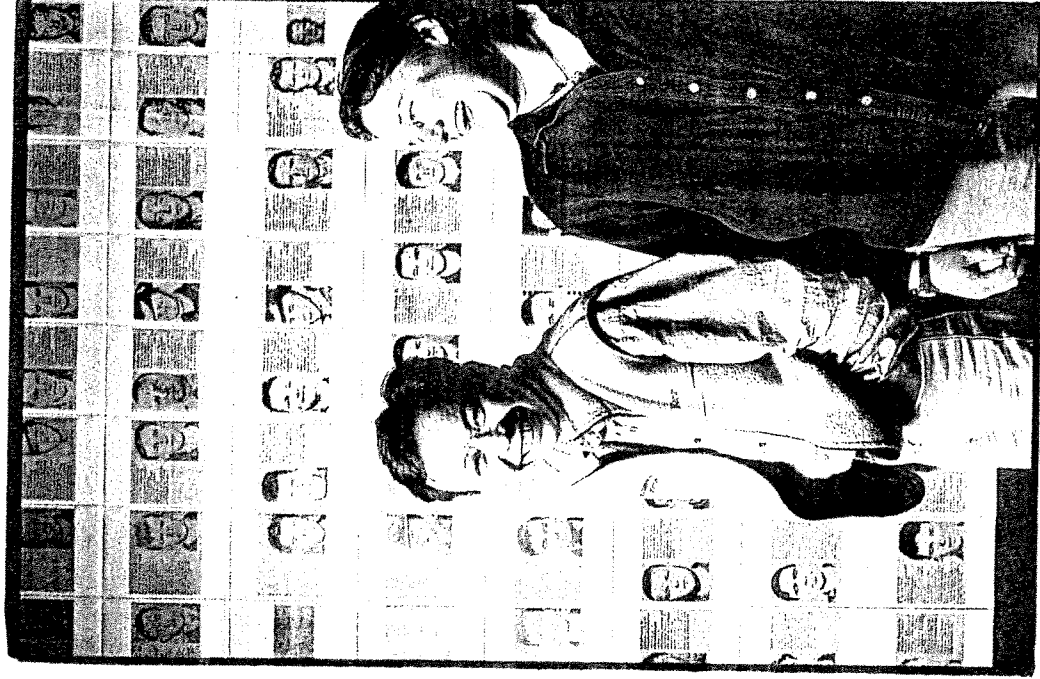
A young worker with the Scripture Union, he says he sees tension and a lack of communication between Vietnamese parents and children, due partly to the experiences of the fathers as soldiers.

"A lot (of veterans) suffer from severe depression but may not see it that way because over there, in Vietnam, they don't talk about depression. The war affected them to a great extent because they were fighting for their country, then, having failed that, left the country."

"A lot of times when a parent beats a child it's not because of something the child has done but it's just anger that comes out because of all this release of tension. The children are not able to talk to their parents or communicate."

It was only when he visited Vietnam in 1994 that he saw the beauty of the country and its people, he saw too, photos of his father in naval uniform — something that made the war experiences tangible. Nguyen has been back to Vietnam twice since then. He hopes to talk to his father about the war, one day. "I'm just waiting for the right moment."

● *The Viet Nam War and the Next Generation, a forum hosted by ABC radio broadcaster, Ian Faime, will be held tomorrow from 2-5pm. Seating is strictly limited. Bookings: phone Lyn Price on 8341 2226. Viet Nam Voices: Australians and the Viet Nam War is on display at the Australia Gallery, Melbourne Museum, until April 17.*



Common ground: Tri Nguyen and Georgia Cheul.

veteran — even though he'd been conscripted." Her father was 19 and newly arrived from Britain when he was forced to serve in the Australian Army.

Her brother copied it too. Asked to write an essay at school, he nominated a story about a hero, his father, and was told by the teacher to choose another topic.

"I have a lot of anxiety about what dad experienced and did. I want to know what it was like for him. I want to know if anything terrible happened to him. I want him to know that I would understand."

## "The children of Vietnam veterans have higher than average incidence of birth defects, cancers and deaths due to accident or illness."

Most of my awareness about the war came from secondary school, the media, films and novels that said it was an absolutely horrific war, a dirty war where American and Australian soldiers committed some horrific deeds," says Cheul. "I was frightened by the thought that my dad could have done something like that. I

In 1992, her father, a heavy smoker who took up the habit after being given cigarettes by United States soldiers, had two heart attacks. He had a stroke the following year, leaving him unable to walk or work. The stroke forced the family to face some of the repercussions of the war.

"Mum had to go through a huge amount

My father is a Vietnam Veteran. He was conscripted in 1967, aged 20 and was an Infantryman with the First Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment. He was in Vietnam for a year and fought in the Battle of Coral in 1968.

Today I will try to present **my** experience of what it's like being the child of a Vietnam Veteran.

The children of Vietnam Veterans are a diverse group, which covers an age range from young children still in primary school, to adults who have children of their own. I hope that my paper can touch on at least some of the issues affecting us.

In 1996 when I was studying for a Media Arts degree, I made a video entitled "Conscripted for life". I would like to show this to you now. Producing this video was made possible because my father generously allowed me to use the photos he took during his time in Vietnam. Sadly some of the photographs include men who died during the war and have died since.

**<SCREEN "Conscripted for Life">** *(3 mins excluding credits)*

Before I continue, I need to apologise to Dad and all Veterans for some of the references I made on that video. Especially about "rape, murder, torture and pillage". They were the naive comments of a young student, I was using poetic licence and trying to impress my lecturers, I don't want anybody to be hurt by those comments.

Dad wasn't able to be here today. He has trouble controlling his emotions since he suffered a stroke 8 years ago. He feels he would be overwhelmed seeing public exposure to the fact that his children are also seen to be carrying the burden of his involvement in the war, along with the scars of society's attitudes towards Vietnam Veterans and their families.

I am sad and angry that it should be this way, as I am proud that my father is a Vietnam Veteran.

There are a number of issues for me as a child of a Veteran but the most substantial is the effects of the anti war protests. I am very angry about the outcomes of the Moratorium. I don't believe in conscription, I understand what many protestors were **trying** to achieve, but there is a lot to be answered for.

Dad said that when he came back from Vietnam, he had to bury his emotions and train himself to ignore society's angry and damning attitude towards Vietnam Vets. He got on with the "business of life".

Getting on with the business of life wasn't a foolproof way of escaping anti war sentiment though.

In 1996, twenty-one years after the Vietnam War had ended my brother was 13 years old. He had seen his father suffer two heart attacks, open-heart surgery and a major stroke.

My brother was also trying very hard to "get on with the business of life". At school his class was asked to write about a hero of importance to them. My brother put his hand up and said, "My father is a hero". When asked "why?" by the teacher, my brother explained that Dad had been a soldier in the Vietnam War. The teacher's response was curt and dismissive, he was told to "find something else to write about".

The Anti war movement conditioned some of our most educated people, (ie teachers), into believing that the soldiers were at fault for the war.

During the war money and blood donations were collected by university students and sent to North Vietnam as part of the anti war movement. These same people wouldn't hesitate to scream abuse at Veterans. Their propaganda saw Veterans being shunned from the RSL clubs if they revealed their Vietnam War involvement.

So over the years the Veterans and their families were forced to hide their heritage.

Some Veterans comments on the anti war movement I have seen are:-

- "They were responsible for 1000's of Veteran deaths" after the war, through suicide.
- "Nobody should have to go through the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder for their entire life because they did their job."
- "Forgive them? No way! To forgive them is to say I have done wrong, and I haven't I served my country. What have they done?"
- "They were helping to kill us."
- "What a wonderful job they did killing their own."

As one of the "Next Generation" I am angry that Veterans and their families can still be affected by the propaganda of those mostly ill informed protestors.

In recent years a morbidity study was conducted of Veterans and their children. The statistics for the next generation are particularly disturbing. Birth deformities and the rates for suicide in Veteran's children are a great deal higher than the rest of the population. As far as I am aware, no action has been taken on that late 1990's study.

<http://www.dva.gov.au/health/HLthStdy/study.htm>

It's time that Vietnam Veterans, their partners and children are recognised, for the service they gave and the horrific things they have experienced.

There are many Veterans and their families doing wonderful things for our communities here and in Vietnam. My mother has a friend who is a Vietnam Veteran, he now lives with his partner in Vietnam. He is a volunteer with the Australian Veterans Reconstruction Group and is helping to raise funds for an orphanage in Baria.

Perhaps there is an opening here for the anti war protestors. As some of the most educated and articulate members of our society, they are well situated to help raise awareness of the work being done in Vietnam by Veterans and their families.

The Vietnam Voices exhibition is the most poignant and realistic representation of the War I have experienced. As I absorbed its contents I was overwhelmed by the sense of devastation, fear, anger and pain. I feel that was what the war was like, and that this is the first opportunity Veterans have been given to speak out.

Like Tri, I know little about Dad's personal experience of the war. Most of what I know about The Vietnam War has come from books, films and print. At best these can be unreliable sources and some are pure fiction. I would like to know exactly what happened to Dad but I don't think this will ever happen.

Society needs to be made aware of the facts, to understand that watching "Full metal jacket" or "Apocalypse Now" is not a true representation of what occurred there. That information can be gained only from those who were there.

If Vietnam Veterans are treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve by society, and the government, then there is a chance some healing may begin.

As a part of that healing process I would like this Forum to be the foundation for a bridge between the Vietnamese and Veteran communities, both here in Australia and in Vietnam. As "The Next Generation" I hope we can all continue to build on these foundations.

I read a very moving poem on a website devoted to the Australian Involvement in Vietnam.

Compiled by Ern Marshall.  
<http://users/mildura.net.au/users/marshall/>

I would like to read it to you

*I was that which others did not want to be.  
I went where others feared to go,  
And did what others failed to do.  
I asked nothing from those who gave nothing,  
And reluctantly accepted the thought of  
Eternal loneliness.....should I fail.  
I have seen the face of terror;  
Felt the stinging cold of fear;  
And enjoyed the sweet taste of a moments love.  
I have cried, pained, and hoped.....but most of all.  
I have lived times others would say were best forgotten.  
At least someday I will be able to say that I was proud of  
what I was.....*

**A soldier.**

(US Reg TM & Copyright George L. Skypeck 1978)

War creates a silence and our fathers are still silenced.

Dad is a hero.

