

# ALL IN JESSICA CLARK

Curator

*VIETNAM – ONE IN, ALL IN* is an exhibition and contemporary framework through which to acknowledge and honour Aboriginal military service in the Vietnam War – before, during and after. Located within a larger three-year program<sup>1</sup> that has been devoted to sharing the untold stories of South Australia's Aboriginal veterans, the exhibition and final installment acts as a collective response to our current need to uncover and give voice to histories untold. With so many veterans of war remaining silent on their return, the absence of Indigenous voices in our military history, and the haze that still clouds Australia's involvement in, and acknowledgement of, the Vietnam War, this exhibition is more important than ever.

The exhibition at its very heart is multi-layered, bringing together ten selected Aboriginal artists – Allan Collins, Brad Darkson, Beaver Lennon, Hayley Millar-Baker, Clem Newchurch, Lavene Ngatokorua, Sandra Saunders, Damien Shen, James Tylor and Tony Wilson. Each artist was paired with an Aboriginal veteran from South Australia who had served during the Vietnam War, and asked to creatively respond to their recorded interviews. An additional two artists, Major Sumner AM and Raymond Zada, were commissioned to create work that would act as a contemporary monument, and acknowledge the service of all of South Australia's Aboriginal Vietnam veterans – both living and passed. Colleen Strangways was also commissioned to create a series of photographic portraits of the veterans whose stories feature here in *VIETNAM – ONE IN, ALL IN*.

With the aim to build greater recognition in the broader Australian community of our veterans' sacrifices, an integral aspect of this project has been community consultation. The project team worked closely with our Anzac brains trust – Frank Lampard OAM, Bill Hignett OAM, and Ian Smith – who have guided and supported the project, assisted with research and connected us with veterans. From this process, ten Aboriginal veterans from South Australia and their family members willingly offered their involvement in the project; they gave up their time to meet with Creative Producer Lee-Ann Tjunypa Buckskin and myself to capture their stories, memories and experiences in recorded interviews. The veterans we had the honour of meeting and interviewing were incredibly generous with their time and the stories they shared. Our road trip took us across the state – meeting with them all – and resulted in a powerful collection of interviews that are humble, revealing and honest.

Creating work in response to someone else's story has been an unfamiliar task for the selected artists whose individual practices are in their very nature a personal expression of self, of culture and of Country. This challenge was discussed at length with the artists throughout their concept development. Each artist was paired with a veteran, given access to their veteran's interview and/or source material, and attended a group meet-up where all of the artists and veterans met and connected with each other and the project team. They have all taken up the challenge to focus their practice outward, immersing themselves in the service and journey of the ten veterans whose



stories feature in the exhibition: Private Francis Howard Clarke, Corporal Gordon Joseph Franklin, Private Gilbert George Green, Corporal Leslie Brian Kropinyeri, Lance Corporal Kenneth Cleland Laughton, Seaman Ivan Clyde McKenzie, Lance Corporal John Anthony Parmenter, Craftsman Richard Edward Sansbury, who served in various roles in Vietnam; Stewardess Marjorie Tripp AO who served in the Navy during the lead-up to Australia's involvement in Vietnam; and Sergeant Jeffrey Phillip McCormack who served in Malaya on a peace-keeping mission during hostilities that were a direct result, and continuation, of the Vietnam War.

Our veterans' stories begin at a time of extreme social and political upheaval in Australia in the 1960s. It is a time often remembered for both national and international instability and uncertainty; of activism, social change, youth rebellion, and the Aboriginal civil rights movement; of the ramifications and continuation of the Stolen Generation; and at a time when Aboriginal people were not considered citizens in this country.<sup>2</sup> This context is directly referenced throughout the stories and experiences of our veterans in their interviews, and together reveal a distinct sense of pride and dedication to Country that doesn't discriminate "we accepted each for what we were, we had a job to do and that was it".<sup>3</sup>



Each had their own personal motivations to register, enlist or volunteer. For many Aboriginal veterans, the army offered skills, education and career opportunities that were otherwise unavailable. Others were looking for adventure, to fight for Country, or to prove something to themselves. Some were not given much of a choice. They remember the rigour of training and skills testing, the “new way of life”<sup>4</sup> that came with it, and the unbreakable bond of brotherhood that took form within the ranks. For each battalion, platoon, and section, it was one in, all in from the very beginning. They spoke highly of military life, recalling the happier times, often stopping and starting in efforts to recall the memories of horror and heartache that come with war. Their interviews are a recorded dance through memories of mateship, mischief and candour.

The large training centres our veterans were sent to at the beginning of their service brought together thousands of young men from the cities, the bush, the desert and the farms. They were all thrown in together under one common cause: to fight for Country. The strongest of bonds grew with the confines of the training centres out of a distinct sense of pride – conscripted or not – and a desire to do their very best in a ‘messy situation’. There was equality in the ranks and a ‘brothers in arms’ camaraderie from the very beginning. Gil Green reflects: “We were all part of the green machine. Some of us were light green and some of us were dark green”.<sup>5</sup>

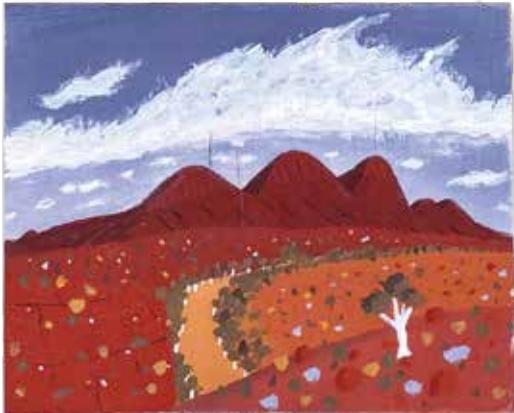
**“... WELL IS HIS  
BLOOD RED?...  
MY BLOOD IS  
RED TOO. IF HE  
IS GOING, I AM  
GOING. IT'S  
MY COUNTRY  
TOO”.**

Our conversations provoked memories of shock on their arrival in Vietnam. The veterans described their struggles with acclimatisation, the uncertainty of a foreign land, the challenging and difficult terrain, prickly heat, and the smothering darkness of a wild dense jungle. They travelled by air and sea, and arrived with little to no idea of what they were going into. The only thing for certain was that they had a 12-month tour ahead of them, it was, 365 days a-wakey – “the day that you arrive you jump off the plane and say, ‘it’s 365 days to go’, that was a common saying”.<sup>6</sup> Despite the rigour of training, our veterans’ interviews reflected a collective unknown. Frank Clarke recalls being told during his training that the Vietnamese were not trained soldiers: “they said he wasn’t trained properly... when we got over there, it was different... they didn’t tell us about the tunnels out in the jungle like Long Tan... they didn’t tell us a lot of stuff.” Told very little about what to expect upon arrival, they pulled together equally in their respective ranks and embraced a new way of life as brothers in arms – each of them with an important role to play – their central concern, to ensure that they, and whoever they were with “got out alright.”<sup>8</sup>

A clear sense of dedication and commitment, and a hard-working attitude, is a definite theme that runs through and connects the interviews and the works that have been created in response. At a time when they were not classified as citizens of Australia, our veterans reported being offered an out early, on the grounds of their Aboriginality, though they chose to stay and join the fight. Gil Green and Les Kropinyeri

both joined in response to the call-out for National Service and interviewed together. They both recalled the confusion they experienced during their medical examinations when they were told they could go back home on the grounds they were Aboriginal and therefore not required to register. In response, Les replied: “... the marble doesn’t differentiate, so I will keep going.”<sup>9</sup> Gil pointed to the young man standing beside him and said:... well is his blood red?... my blood is red too. If he is going, I am going. It’s my country too.”<sup>10</sup> Their recorded voices are a testament to the veteran’s strength, resilience and aptitude for quick-thinking.

Many of our veterans when describing their service used the word “lucky” – lucky they survived the harsh conditions of a jungle untamed, lucky they had each other’s backs, and lucky they made it home. All of them speak of the unbreakable bond, a one and all in attitude. They remember the happier times and the laughs, the hard work and the unknowns, and pushing the boundaries or ‘getting up to no good’. We heard stories filled with humour and fuelled by mateship – replacing flares with fireworks, tying body parts to mattresses, training monkeys, of units buying banana plantations, staying on at the pub in Vũng Tàu, and breaking curfews. Gil reflects: “I remember the happy times... and friendship because there’s a friendship... there’s a bond you can’t break, and brothers in arms sort of thing. I know it’s like a cliché but it’s true. You got friends you keep for life.”<sup>11</sup>



Coming home from the frontlines where they were censored from having any opinion, Gordon Franklin reflects, “you’re not allowed to even talk about it – that’s why we got into trouble... you’re not allowed to talk about anything politically... and I was on one of the top-secret levels... it was so secret I wasn’t even allowed to look at the equipment.”<sup>12</sup> With the Vietnam War being the first of its kind broadcasted into the homes of Australians – and readily available – everyone, it seemed, had an opinion except the veterans who had “no idea what was happening back home”<sup>13</sup> The ones who survived met a divisive reality on their return. Kenny Laughton shared with us his experience returning to Sydney after his first tour and being met with a large group of anti-war protesters in Hyde Park, after which he decided to escape the political pressure cooker and head back to Vietnam “to be back with his mates”<sup>14</sup>

Serving alongside each other as equals was an isolated experience for many of the veterans after their service in Vietnam. They returned to exclusion, carrying with them the hardships they had endured, and the horrors they had witnessed. Some even reported seeing angry protest groups throwing red paint over their army mates, or finally arriving home only to be met by an angry crowd hurling rotten tomatoes at them as they passed through the airport – “I’ll never forget it,” Bart said, “that was my welcome home”<sup>15</sup>. Those experiences did not end there. The lack of acknowledgement of their service and the avoidance of any engagement in conversation only contributed further to the post-traumatic stress disorder they brought home with them. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous veterans were not allowed to march in Anzac parades until 25-years on; the pubs and Returned and Services League’s (RSLs) turned them away; and their communities turned their backs on them. No-one wanted to talk. The veterans were left alone to somehow manage their nightmares and triggers, along with a heightened sense of awareness they say will not ever leave them.

Looking back on their service, their general consensus is that it was not a good time but they learned a lot, and they lived. Ivan McKenzie says, “I wouldn’t want to, but if I had to do it again, I would”<sup>16</sup>. There are those who have been back, some who would like to go back, and others who will never go back, each for their own reasons. We acknowledge that the interviews undertaken were a challenge for the veterans, and we



thank them for their generosity, bravery and honesty. It is only through their involvement that *VIETNAM – ONE IN, ALL IN* has been made possible. The works that have been created in direct response to a veteran's story – together with the two commissions and portraits created in collective acknowledgement – invite us all to pause and reflect, to pay tribute, to acknowledge and to honour South Australian Aboriginal Veterans' and their service.

The importance of an exhibition such as this lies within its open dialogue of a history that even today continues to be clouded. Through process and outcome, the interviews that were captured and the diverse works that have been created in response, the exhibition contributes to a greater acknowledgement of the service and sacrifice of our Aboriginal veterans. The exhibition offers audiences the opportunity to engage with a history untold and know more of what life was like for our South Australian Aboriginal

veterans – before, during and after the Vietnam War. We can learn a lot from their stories, taking a lead from the Australian Army and Navy where it was and still is, one in all in.

The experiences, memories and stories the veterans and their families so generously shared are a testament to their collective strength, resilience, and dedication to Country, culture, and community, and the inextricable link that binds the three together as one. *VIETNAM – ONE IN, ALL IN*, through the artworks it features and the veterans it honours, speaks to the importance of an open dialogue, of talking and healing from trauma, of reflection and release.

It has been an absolute privilege to sit with and listen to our veterans, their powerful journeys and insightful stories. For Country, for culture, for the ones that survived, and the ones who didn't make it home, we acknowledge, we honour and we remember them.

- 1 The Aboriginal Diggers Program is a significant 3-year project capturing the stories and experiences of Aboriginal servicemen and women who have served in Australia's Military from the Boer War to the present day through film, theatre and visual arts. The first project was a film residency in Raukkan with Aboriginal filmmaker Allan Collins and film mentees that resulted in the short film *Coming Home*, and the second, Aboriginal playwright Glenn Shea undertook a residency in Raukkan to write the original play *Mi-Wi 3027*.
- 2 Section 18 of the National Service Act excluded 'aboriginal natives of Australia' and as such Aboriginal people were the only civilian British subjects not required to register. This did not deter many Indigenous men who chose to enlist in the Australian Armed Services and join in the fight for Country.
- 3 Francis Clarke, 2018, Interview with author.
- 4 Leslie Kropinyeri, 2018, Interview with author.

- 5 Gilbert Green, 2018, Interview with author.
- 6 John Parmenter, 2018, Interview with author.
- 7 Francis Clarke, 2018, Interview with author.
- 8 John Parmenter, 2018, Interview with author.
- 9 Leslie Kropinyeri, 2018, Interview with author.
- 10 Gilbert Green, 2018, Interview with author.
- 11 Gilbert Green, 2018, Interview with author.
- 12 Gordon Franklin, 2018, Interview with author.
- 13 Richard Sansbury, 2018, Interview with author.
- 14 Kenneth Laughton, 2019, Interview with author.
- 15 Richard Sansbury, 2018, Interview with author.
- 16 Ivan McKenzie, 2018, Interview with author.