On Memory, Affect and Atonement: The Long Tan Memorial Cross(es)

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Abstract
This article analyses the history of the Long Tan Memorial in Vietnam in order to open up a space for engaging with the memorialisation of war as something that can go beyond nationalistic sentimentality and create a space for more complex political and social engagements. In doing so it is concerned with exploring the value of an approach to heritage significance that prioritises relationships between places and peoples rather than authenticity and originality. It explores this question by making use of the fact that the Australian War Memorial has borrowed the original Long Tan Cross now in the custodianship of the Dong Nai Museum for a special exhibition to commemorate the Vietnam War. The Australian Vietnam Volunteers Reconstruction Group, who has official custodianship of the replica cross at the Long Tan Memorial site in Vietnam, has expressed disquiet over the loan. This article uses the Acting Director’s reply to the AVVRG’s Chairman to open up a discussion about the differences in meanings between these two crosses, what underlies these and how we might theorise them in order to open up an understanding of war heritage that recognises its potentials and its limitations.

Introduction
In August 2012, the Australian War Memorial hosted a special object as the centrepiece of a new exhibition commemorating the battle of Long Tan – the original Long Tan cross. Made in 1969 by members of the battalion that successfully held off a much larger group of Viet Cong and Northern Vietnamese soldiers trying to displace the Australian troops from their base at Nui Dat on 18 August 1966, the cross was raised on the site of the battle on the third anniversary in 1969 to commemorate the 18 young men who died there. It quickly became the centrepiece of commemorative practices in Vietnam until 1971 when the Australian forces left the area. The cross was then lost to Australian view until 1988 when it was located by officers from the Dong Nai Museum in Bien Hoa. It has since been on display at this Museum as a Vietnamese war trophy.

This article explores why news of this loan to the War Memorial was greeted with unanimous joy by those involved in looking after a replica cross on the battle site itself – the Australian Vietnam Volunteers Resource Group (AVVRG). This cross, built by the Vietnamese but looked after by the AVVRG, is at the centre of a long process of reconciliation that has involved deep cross-cultural experiences on the part of those involved as discussed below. It is in this context that the current Chairman of the AVVRG, Kevin Erwin, wrote to the Minister for Veterans Affairs, the Hon. Warren Snowdon MP, accusing those organising the loan of potentially destroying all the good work of the AVVRG. This group was appointed by the Long Dat District People’s Committee as the custodians of the replica cross at Long Tan itself in 2002. Their appointment in this role came after years of reconstruction and capacity building activities in the Nui Dat area as well as their central role in helping to co-ordinate a Long Tan Memorial Cross renovation project to ensure the long term conservation of the replica cross and better access to it. Answering Erwin’s letter on behalf of the Minister, Nola Anderson (then Acting Director of the AWM) tried to assuage his disquiet by suggesting that the loan is ‘designed to offer Australians an opportunity to acknowledge the service and sacrifice of all those who served in Vietnam’ and should be seen as part of the Australian government’s attempt to properly recognise those who fought and died in Vietnam (Anderson 2012). For the AWM, the original cross is the centrepiece of attempts to honour the fallen in Vietnam and ‘we should take advantage of the opportunity that has arisen to enable veterans and the public to contemplate it in Australia for the first time’. For the AVVRG however, the Long Tan cross has arguably come to mean the replica cross at the battlefield site rather than the cross at the Dong Nai Museum for reasons this paper will discern.

The tension expressed by the AVVRG at the news of the loan provides us with a glimpse of two very different forms of heritage production around the battle of Long Tan. In pointing to this tension, this paper makes two central arguments. The first is that the focus on originality displayed by the AWM is all too easily amenable to a narrow, nationalistic and uncritical narrative around the notion of the ANZAC tradition cloaked in a sentimentality that avoids any discussion of foreign policy. Secondly, while not claiming that this same narrative is not sometimes on display at the Long Tan Memorial site, particularly as the site becomes more closely embroiled within governmental contexts, this paper argues that a focus on the complex networks of meaning between the site, the replica cross, those who look after and use it and their relationships with Vietnamese people, opens up a much less nationalistic heritage landscape. Being alert to this possibility requires two things: firstly, recognising the significance of the objects’ different histories and secondly, acknowledging peoples’ embodied relationship to the objects or lack thereof. This is only possible by developing a more nuanced understanding of the ways people build relationships with objects and places. In this case, there are two factors discussed: the role of different kinds of memory in relating to the past and to the objects and places that represent that past, and the ways in which those very places and objects exert their own power on how people respond to them.

A starting point is to acknowledge that most memories are made and therefore require agents, or what Henri Rousso (1991) calls ‘carriers of memory’. In his book about the ways Vichy France is remembered, Rousso argues that collective memories are only possible when specific carriers of memory...
emerge to articulate them in the public sphere and argue for their importance. Carriers can operate at a number of levels—from the personal to the State and all levels in between, as well as through different media including fiction and non-fiction writing, exhibitions, memorials and film. Obviously, the motivations and the narrative contours of their ‘memories’ have the potential to be as numerous as the number of ‘carriers’. In the case of Long Tan, the different memory landscapes evoked by the original cross and the site of the battle with its replica cross are based in complex questions around the ideological value of the cross for the State versus the present day need of veterans to access the battle site as part of their own attempts to deal with trauma.

A further layer of complication on the latter point is the need for reconciliation both with the Australian State and the Vietnamese people. The perception that the War was unjust and that Australia should never have taken part, and the hurt generated by the Australian public’s treatment of Vietnam vets on their return to Australia forms part of the complex web of meanings associated with the Long Tan Memorial site—meanings largely missing from the way the AWM understands the significance of the original cross and the uses to which it is being put. While Anderson (2012) sought to get the AVVRG’s support for the loan by framing it as part of an ongoing effort on the part of the Australian government to atone for the Australian people’s past treatment of Vietnam vets, she did not recognise the inbuilt critique of the War itself in the ways in which this group of Veterans related to the Long Tan Memorial site and its replica cross. To understand this part of the story we need to delve deeper into the history of the replica cross.

We also need to understand a second layer of complexity to do with the agency of the site and the cross. This article contends that these ‘objects’ are not simply used by different ‘carriers of agency’ for intentional effects. That is, their meanings are not simply the result of a multitude of accretions given to them over time by these ‘carriers of agency’. These ‘objects’ also exert their own agency on those who use them. As a number of scholars have argued for some time now, objects, including places, have a social life (Appadurai 1986). This social life embeds objects within complex social networks that can be traced historically over the life of the object. What becomes important in the biography of an object’s life is not only how meanings have been attributed to them over time but also how these networks of meaning can themselves exert some level of agency on those who use the object. It is as if an unseen energy field holds meanings together so they stick to one another. Sara Ahmed (2010) suggests that the glue that holds these networks together is what we have come to call affect.

If we trace the social life of the replica cross through its history, what we realise is that this object both animates and is made alive by a complex network of ideas, values and practices in ways that make it a very powerful affective object. In comparison, the original cross, in losing its connection with the site of the battle, has lost connection to its social life and is, in a very real sense, dead. In borrowing it and making it a centrepiece of their exhibition the AWM is attempting to overcome this difficulty, but the narratives it is creating for it around national memories and identities are different from those of the AVVRG. For the AVVRG, what is important about their Long Tan cross is the way it both embodies and facilitates encounters between their personal memories and their need for both atonement and reconciliation. These uses of the replica cross are facilitated not only by the location of the memorial on the battlefield, and therefore by the material, spatial qualities of the space itself, but also by the ways it came into being through the veteran’s own agency. To begin our exploration of how all this might work we need to engage in a little history and undertake a cultural biography (Kopytoff 1986) of the replica cross.

**From Battle Site to Memorial Site**

One of the defining features of the Long Tan Memorial site is the importance of individual and grass-roots ‘carriers of memory’ who have, over time, enrolled different layers of government in their quest to make their memory part of a collective memory. The origins of this small-scale agency lie with 6 RAR Sergeant Major James (Jimmy) Cruickshank who conceived the idea of putting up a cross on the site of the Long Tan Battle, during his unit’s second tour of duty in 1969. With the cross they placed an engraved plaque in memory of the soldiers who died, making Long Tan a battle that was memorialised from within almost instantaneously.

This tradition of commemorating Long Tan could not be continued in Australia due to the lack of official recognition of Vietnam vets within the official narrative of the ANZACs until 1987, when Long Tan Day was designated the official day for remembering the Vietnam War by then Prime Minister Bob Hawke, following the success of the Welcome Home parade for Vietnam veterans in Sydney. It took until 1992 however, for Vietnam veterans to have their own official War Memorial on ANZAC Parade in Canberra and until 2006 for the Australian State to formally apologise for the way in which Vietnam veterans were treated upon their return. Consequently, the majority of the early attempts to memorialise Long Tan and the Vietnam War more generally were developed by the veterans, for themselves, Pre-eminent amongst these was the replica cross at Long Tan.

The recovery of the cross by the veterans was only possible though, when Vietnam opened its borders to foreigners in the late 1980s. What they recovered, however, was not so much the cross as the site of the battle. As it turns out, the intervening years had not been kind to the cross. Almost as soon as Australia had withdrawn its troops, the Long Tan Cross and its plaque were removed from the battlefield site by local villagers. The plaque was later found being used as a barbecue plate while the cross found its way to the gravesite of a local Catholic farmer’s son. Efforts were made through the Australian Embassy in Hanoi to have the Long Tan cross returned to Australia (Parliament of Australia 1989: 3201), as part of the effort in the late 1980s to recognise Vietnam veterans and atone for the way in which they had been treated. The Vietnamese, however, decided to place the cross in the Dong Nai Museum for safe-keeping where it is still on display as a war trophy.2

However, as a sign of good will, the Long Dat District People’s Committee built a replica cross and installed it on the original site in early 1989, making the Long Tan battle site one of only two memorial sites to foreign forces allowed in Vietnam. The other is at Dien Bien Phu where the French lost their attempt to maintain Indochina as a colonial territory in 1954 (Logan & Nguyen 2012). The Long Dat District People’s Committee also...
built a smaller memorial to those Vietnamese who lost their lives at Long Tan, making it a shared memorial space. By ANZAC Day 1989 a small group of Australian veterans, led by former 7 RAR Veteran Sandy Sanders, re-dedicated the Long Tan site in a small and unofficial ceremony, continuing the original practice of commemoration. The site soon became the focus for Australian Vietnam vets who began to return to Vietnam once foreign tourism opened up after 1990.

Despite its growing popularity with visiting veterans, however, and the best efforts of the veterans returning to live in the area (said to be about 30 in 2012), the site fell into a state of disrepair over the next ten years or so as no-one had formal responsibility for its care. On the other hand, connections between the local Vietnamese and Australians were increasing in other spheres, particularly around economic investments and foreign aid. Of particular importance in building such bridges was the AVRG.

This organisation was established in 1990 under the name Australian Vietnam Veterans Reconstruction Group as a voluntary non-government organisation (NGO) incorporated in Queensland. It changed its name to Australian Vietnam Volunteers Resource Group in 2008. Its founders were a number of Vietnam veterans who ‘were concerned about their observations of the ongoing devastation of the social and physical infrastructure in Vietnam as a consequence of the prolonged war and the country’s 20 year isolation from the West’ (AVRG n.d.).

An important dimension of their activity was the idea that the Vietnam War was unjust and that there was a need to atone for what the Australians did in the area. As one Vietnam veteran and AVRG member now living in Vung Tau in Vietnam puts it, what the group is trying to do is ‘to give back a little bit of what we took away from them during the War’ (Meade 2007a: 7).

The AVRG for example have built an orphanage in Ba Ria, a kindergarten in Nui Dat where the Australians were based during the Vietnam War and a medical and dental centre.

The importance of children as recipients of their aid is interesting given the importance of children in their experience of wartime Vietnam. Kevin Erwin for example, recalled in a conversation with William Logan and myself, the importance of his rest time on Sundays. This he spent, not at the pub in Vung Tau, but in ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of the local population by engaging with the children of the area through the Catholic nuns. This work was undertaken as part of his relationship with the first Australian army’s Civil Affairs Unit in Vietnam (1966-71) and it was this experience that enabled him to recognise the Vietnamese as people rather than as the enemy. Pamphlets advertising tours organised by the Royal Australian Regiment Association of South Australia for Vietnam vets for the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan in 2006 featured comments from vets about their experience of returning to Vietnam. One comment reads: ‘I always thought the kids were great but I had forgotten how great’ (in Long Tan File, AVRG Archive). As part of his promotional pitch for an AVRG fundraising tour of the battlefields he was planning to lead, Dave Sabben, the commander of 12 Platoon, D Company 6 RAR, described AVRG’s mission as supporting the civil population just like they did 40 years ago (Sabben 2008). Returning to Vietnam then, and visiting Long Tan, is strongly linked with helping the Vietnamese recover from the War, an aim that speaks directly to the perception that Australia should not have been involved and needs to atone for it.

Throughout the period in which the AVRG was establishing itself as an NGO in Vietnam, there was mounting concern over the condition of the replica cross and the difficulties in gaining access to the site. In June 2000, the Long Tan Cross Memorial Fund was founded ‘to gain official status for and bring a greater degree of permanence to the Long Tan Cross’ (ANZAC Day Commemoration Committee n.d.). Behind this Fund was a group that consisted of veterans from 6 RAR, the Long Tan Veterans Association, the Australian Returned Servicemen’s League (RSL) and the AVRG as well as the Navy and Air Force. They commenced raising funds to renovate the replica cross as well as to provide a tarred local road to access it.

The standing of the AVRG with the Long Dat District People’s Committee and the Vietnamese Union of Friendship appears to have been crucial in gaining support for the aims of the Group as was the diplomatic support offered by the Australian Consulate. By March 2002, the Long Dat District People’s Committee called a meeting attended by members from adjoining districts, police departments, Vietnamese Foreign Affairs and the AVRG at which the chairman announced they were all in agreement and work could commence. After an exchange of contracts and the payment of a deposit, the work was quickly completed. Representatives of the AVRG and the Australian Consulate were invited to a ceremony at the site on 15 April 2002 by the Long Dat District People’s Committee during which the official handover was conducted. The AVRG, rather than the Consulate, was made keepers of the cross. This occurred with the assent of the Vietnam Veterans Association, the Veterans of the Long Tan Battle Association.
This was seen as a temporary measure in terms of the long-term sustainability of the site. Sensitivity of the Vietnamese government to formal memorials in Vietnam for former enemies was too great to have been otherwise (Ryan 2002), as an internal diplomatic communication from Hanoi to Canberra (DFAT April 2002) reveals:

The Long Tan site remains a particularly sensitive matter for Vietnam, and Australia's handling of the issues will continue to require a deft touch for some time to come. The Vietnamese side appears happy to continue permitting Australian access to the site as long we (sic) maintain a low-key, largely unofficial, and above all respectful approach.

It is for this reason that until 2006, formal official ANZAC Day ceremonies were always conducted either at the Australian Embassy or the New Zealand Embassy in Hanoi, while those held at the cross were conducted by the AV/VRG. Since 2006 however, the Australian consulate in Ho Chi Min City has been allowed to conduct small ceremonies on ANZAC Day and Long Tan Day. 3

As a memorial site, the intention of the Long Dat People's Committee was that Long Tan would always remain small, informal and tightly controlled by the Vietnamese. Moreover, it was also seen as a joint memorial. Thus, while the original plaque put up in 1989 honouring the Vietnamese dead is no longer there, there is an urn with sand for the burning of incense – a traditional way of honouring the dead in Vietnam performed in commemorative ceremonies and by private individuals. This joint nature of the Memorial is important to the Vietnamese veterans who go there, who understand their participation in commemoration as also honouring the Vietnamese side. There is a sense in which lighting incense for the Vietnamese dead is also part of the process of atoning for having been there in the first place, making this a cross-cultural rather than purely nationalistic event. For example, Paul Murphy, the local representative of the AV/VRG in Vietnam until recently, handed out joss sticks at the 2007 ANZAC Day ceremony with many veterans lighting them in memory of the Vietnamese who fell at Long Tan (Meade 2007b).

One of the first occasions in which the Australian Government sought to play a direct role in an official act of reconciliation with the Vietnamese was during the Australia Remembers Vietnam 1962–1973 commemorative program in 1996. In this year the Australian Government randomly selected 27 Australian veterans, two widows and one descendant of soldiers who had died at Long Tan to go on a commemorative tour of Vietnam. In part, this was a gesture of reconciliation towards the veterans themselves. In a statement to Parliament, Bruce Scott, the Minister for Veteran's Affairs who had taken them to Vietnam, argued this tour enabled the veterans to confront and understand many of the memories that have been with them and their families for the last thirty years. It was an opportunity for them to see the beauty of the country and the warmth of the people, when mostly they could only remember the ugliness and the horror of war. And now those who were part of the delegation have the opportunity to share that experience – a profoundly healing one – with their families, friends and fellow veterans. (Parliament of Australia 1996: 3282)

But the tour was also an act of reconciliation between the two governments requiring the highest level of dialogue to enable it to happen. The success of the event in doing so is captured by Scott's description of the tone of the tour:

As we arrived in Vietnam and throughout the duration of the visit, we were greeted with genuine warmth and friendship. From the Vice-Minister for Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs, Mr Nguyen Van Quang to the Vice President of the Ho Chi Minh City War Veterans Association, Major General Nguyen Van Si, right through to the humblest of the village folk, the welcome was always the same – warm and friendly. (Parliament of Australia 1996: 3282)

At a more formal level, the aim of the visit was embodied in the first official commemorative ceremony conducted by the Australian Government on Vietnamese soil. While held on August 18 August, Vietnam Veterans Day, the ceremony was held at Nui Dat, where the former Australian base had been rather than at the cross. Diplomatic relations did not yet allow for the cross to be used officially in this way. The then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, the Honourable Tim Fischer, highlighted the cost to both sides in the War. ‘Inevitably’, he said,

we remember the heroism of our friends and comrades. But we also acknowledge the courage of those Vietnamese against whom we fought. In the years since the war, many of us have come to know our former opponents as friends and so it is natural that, at a service such as this, we honour the Vietnamese fallen. (Parliament of Australia 1996: 3282)

There are a number of complex narratives going on in this short history of the Long Tan Memorial site and those involved in making it a carrier of memory, from individuals to collectives and the State. First of all there is the idea of pilgrimage – that the site is a focus for Vietnam veterans and their families and that somehow their return to the site and Vietnam more generally is a therapeutic process, an act of reconciliation as well as a form of atonement. The narratives around reconciliation operate at a personal and a collective level. They are both informal and formal, involving individuals as well as governments. 4 Returning to the site on the part of veterans and using it as part of a memorialising process is integral to the process of rebuilding a relationship with Vietnam itself. How can we understand the power of the site to affect these processes?

Understanding Memory

One way of approaching this is to explore how both the original cross and the battlefield site, now a memorial site, embody different forms of memory, which produce, as a consequence, different affective responses in the viewer. Particularly useful here is the distinction between narrative, sensory and vicarious forms of memory. In narrative forms of memory people tell stories about particular people, places and experiences from their past. In doing so they use the past tense, placing these memories within a temporal framework in which the past is clearly differentiated from the present. This kind of memory is most commonly used in formal or institutionalised collective
narratives. The agents of memory who use this type of narrative are likely to be governmental institutions such as museums and heritage agencies for whom these narratives have a clear and unambiguous role in national historiographies and can be clearly associated with nation making. The original cross is used in this way by both the Australian and Vietnamese governments through their Museums. For the Australian government the original cross is a way to narrate the Vietnam veterans into the ANZAC tradition and work towards undoing the perception that these veterans are not worthy inheritors of the ANZAC mantle built up during the Vietnam War itself and its immediate aftermath. For the State, as Anderson’s (2012) response to Erwin makes clear, there is an element of providing historical justice for those who were wronged. This is clear in official memorialisation practices at the site, especially since 2006 when Australia’s ambassador to Vietnam, Bill Tweddell, gave the address at the first official ceremony at the site commemorating the 40th anniversary of the battle of Long Tan. He was careful to express his hope that, ‘our gathering here, on the land of former foes, will help in the healing and reconciliation process for veterans of this battle’ (Tweddell 2006). Beyond these official narratives however, the Long Tan site offers the opportunity for other kinds of memory also to manifest.

In a phenomenon that poet Charlotte Delbo (in Bennett 2002, 2005), a member of the French resistance and survivor of Auschwitz calls ‘sense’ memory, for those who suffered deep trauma, the physical imprint of the original traumatic experience lingers on, casting aside any understanding of memory as based on a temporal division between past and present. Furthermore, these physical imprints are remembered not through narrative but viscerally, through what Delbo refers to as a ‘impervious skin of memory’ which forms itself in the body of the survivor (in Bennett 2005: 25). While this ‘skin’ is dormant most of the time, it nevertheless erupts into a survivor’s present day consciousness in a process in which victims re-live the physical and emotional pain of the initial trauma. For example, Tony Templeton, a Vietnam veteran on a return trip to Vietnam explains his symptoms at the recurrence of a particularly traumatic image from his experience of the War in which he distinctly remembers seeing ‘a trail of red ants going into a Vietcong’s ear and coming out of his nose, taking his brains with them’:

I don’t know what it is. I feel uptight, my stomach’s knotted, it’s like fear. And don’t let anybody tell you that fear doesn’t hurt — it does. It’s a pain right in your stomach. For the last three days I’ve had this constant headache, I don’t know whether it’s lack of water, I don’t know whether it’s tension, I don’t know whether it’s heat, I don’t know what it is. I think this is half the problem with us blokes is we break down, we cry, and it’s not accepted behaviour. But we don’t know why and nobody can tell us why. (Brill 2005)

Experiencing such ‘sense’ memories is literally to relive the past in the present by feeling it in the deepest recesses of one’s body.

For some of those re-visiting Vietnam as part of a process of coming to terms with their past, it is the inner landscape of memory that they are often confronting, albeit layered with a strong dose of the Australian collective narrative memory around the ANZAC legend within which Long Tan is increasingly embedded. This is particularly evident in narratives of pilgrimages to Vietnam and the Long Tan site, embedded as they are in a narrative of therapy aimed at facing personal ghosts. As an example, one needs only to turn to media accounts of Vietnam veterans returning to Vietnam. Descriptions of individuals experiencing sensory forms of memory abound, such as this one, again about Tony Templeton’s trip, this time in a newspaper article:

Understandably, Tony, on his first visit to Vietnam after the War, experienced a whole range of memories and emotions then and afterwards when the group visited the Mekong Delta. He found himself in a home sleeping in a row of camp stretchers just as he had done during the war. Snoring from one of the party was enough to set off a series of flashbacks, which left him still shaken the next day. (Moline 2005: 10)

If Tony was experiencing sensory memories as he travelled through the landscape of Vietnam, others were particularly affected by the power of the landscape at the site of Long Tan itself. In the same article, Moline (2005: 10), in describing an ANZAC Day ceremony at the Long Tan site, points to the way in which ‘Many of the veterans went a little way off to be alone with their memories and face their personal demons from that time so long ago. Although the rubber is a new generation, the whole area must be similar to back then’.

Even those who have not suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, such as Buick and Sabben, two Australian commanders at the battle of Long Tan, can be affected by the power of the landscape hinted at by Moline. In an article describing Buick and Sabben’s return to Vietnam in 2006, as part of the 40th anniversary commemorations, Cameron Stewart (2006) describes how, despite the pair’s photographic memory of the battle and their ability to recount it in situ, both men cannot help but be affected by the site:

But for both men, the defining moment in their lives was what took place among the rubber trees of Long Tan on that August afternoon. Forty years on, as they walk across the battlefield again, they retain a photographic memory of that day. They walk among the trees, pointing out the spot where the first shots were fired, where their men fell and where they made the crucial life-and-death decisions that helped to turn the battle. Mostly they are composed, but at times when they see the place where a mate was shot or where the carnage was at its worst, they pause and fall silent. They are alone with their thoughts.

‘The atmosphere is exactly the same,’ says Sabben, as he stands in the half-light of the plantation. ‘The land, the trees, the feel, the heat, the quiet. It is eerie, as if something terrible has happened here. Like we are walking on hallowed ground’. (Cameron 2006)

This concentration on the power of the landscape itself to evoke sensory memories can be framed through Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) understanding of monuments, which, he argues, provide an anchor for what he calls a textured social fabric. This social fabric is produced by particular modalities of spatial production. Thus there is a space produced by everyday routines; there is space produced through abstract conceptual mappings and there is a lived space of embodied encounters. The kind of affective, embodied connection
pointed to in these last two quotations lies in lived space. It has to be experienced, felt. The sparseness and the thinness of the rubber trees, their neat rows making it impossible to confuse the enemy as to your location or to seek total cover, the red soil that descriptions of the battle and memoirs of veterans constantly allude to, soil which when wet from the tropical downpour that saved many lives during the battle itself was, according to Breaker Cusak (Beaumont, Logan and Witcomb 2011) who returned the day after to collect the bodies, inseparable from rivers of blood. I still remember Cusak shaking as recalled that every time he came to the site it was painful. The experience of the site, the memories it invokes in those who were there is part of how the site works on those who visit it. The experience is sensorial and affective at a deep and intense level.

To add a further layer of complexity, these pilgrimages also take on an ethical if not a sacred dimension as veterans seek some kind of atonement for their belief that the War was a mistake, and that they should not have been sent there in the first place. Many of them go to Vietnam seeking some kind of reassurance from the Vietnamese that they can be forgiven for their past actions. Thus Bruce Burrow for example, towards the end of his pilgrimage to Vietnam, takes to the microphone at an official reception to mark the end of the War for Friends of Vietnam. As Brill (2005: 7) describes it, Burrow is not a listed speaker but he is ‘determined to publicly make amends over his role in the war’. He says:

Please forgive me for my involvement in the war. The tragedy to your people is beyond my comprehension. And to meet here with you, your wonderful, friendly, warm Vietnamese people is a major healing factor for the rest of my life. I thank you. (Brill 2005: 8)

A short while afterwards he strikes up a conversation with a Vietnamese veteran which Brills documents as follows:

Vietnamese veteran: it is important to have a good heart, if you have a good heart there is no problem. I believe so. The past is past and we must look to the future. Yeah?

Bruce Burrow: That’s wonderful. I have found so much warmth. It is so wonderful to receive such a message from you. It’s wonderful. Thank you very much. (Brill 2005: 8)

The other form of memory associated with trauma is what Jacob Clino (1995), discussing the experiences of children of survivors of the Holocaust calls ‘vicarious memory’. This term refers to the ways in which the second generation, or those who were not there, remember the Holocaust through a cultural repertoire of images and embodied behaviours in what has become a collective memory. Clino emphasises the embodied nature of these memories, discussing their physical manifestation in a range of behaviours. Marianne Hirsch (2001), in her discussion of ‘post-memory’ refers to a more generalised form of collective memory between survivors and their children as ‘experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right’ (2001: 9). To have this kind of post-memory, for Hirsch, is to translate a retrospective adoption of trauma suffered by others into one’s own life story.

Going back to battlefield sites as a family offers the opportunity for this kind of post-memory. This is particularly so for battlefields like Long Tan which have a Memorial embedded in the landscape. It is striking for example, how often newspaper accounts of going back to Long Tan involve descriptions by veterans of the emotional experience of going there with their wives and/or children as a means to get them to understand what their experiences involved. It is as if the recounting of the story, in situ, allows it not only to become real but facilitates understanding or empathy for the trauma of those who did experience it directly. Once again, the landscape itself gives life to the stories in ways that are well beyond the power of narrative memory. Traces of this particular form of post-memory can be registered in accounts by both veterans and members of their family describing their experiences of returning to Vietnam and the Long Tan site in particular. For example, Bruce Frazer’s wife described their decision to join a return trip to Vietnam,
immediately after the group had their own small memorial service for the dead at the Long Tan cross site, as the ‘best decision we could have made’. As well as bringing them closer together, Mrs Frazer recognised and admitted to her own emotional engagement with the experience, suggesting that the trip was therapeutic for both of them. Likewise, Tony Templeton’s wife talked about her own emotional exhaustion, clearly indicating her own traumatic experience:

Reporter: Do you think you’ll understand Tony’s concerns after being here?

Tony Templeton’s wife: Oh, I’ve always understood them, but I keep it in here. I think once I start to cry, you’ll never stop me. Because it will be going back for Dad. My grandfather was killed in the First World War. You know, when is it going to stop? I really feel for him. I just hope this does it, because I couldn’t do it again. I couldn’t do it again. I think that’s why I am so tired. Keep going.

For Mrs Templeton though, it is possible to see how her experience of post-memory is cross generational and more likely than not inseparable from narrative forms of memory informed by the ANZAC legend as well. In practice, these two forms of memory are probably not completely inseparable.

Memorial functions in Australia thus can be a shadow of those held at the site itself for those who have experienced the War first hand or vicariously through their family. While post-memories can be constructed through memorial services in Australia which rely on the language of Memorial landscapes and the emotive power of the ANZAC legend to create emotional landscapes, these are not as immediate or as powerful, as those at Long Tan itself while the generation who lived through the Vietnam War is still alive. The point here is that narrative forms of memory, such as those of the ANZAC legend do not carry the rawness of experience. They have become abstracted and in this case, nationalised and used to serve present day governmental interests. Sensory memories however, carry the power of testimony and personal experience. They are particular and resist universalisation into narrative forms of memory production. This was powerfully impressed on me when, in conversation with the current keeper of the cross, Graeme Cusack (or Breaker as he is known by his fellow veterans; see Beaumont, Logan & Witcomb 2011), he pointed out that the Long Tan Memorial was the site for Vietnam veterans, holding more personal meaning for them than any Memorial on ANZAC Parade constructed by the Australian government. For those who do not have this connection with the experience itself however, the communication of such experiences becomes part of an emotional landscape in which both narrative and sensory forms of memory collapse into another, forming a powerful web of connections in which they can imagine themselves in an empathetic relationship with the victim – in this case the Vietnam veteran but also the Vietnamese themselves. While this could be reduced to sentimentality, I would argue that the inbuilt criticism of Australia’s role in the War tempers this and opens up a more critical relationship to our war heritage.

The importance of the replica cross in this is apparent by the constant repetition of photographs of it in the media rather than photos of the original cross in its museum context or even of the original 1969 raising of the cross. The Long Tan cross, as a Google search or a scan of media articles on ANZAC and Long Tan day indicates, has come to mean the replica cross at the site, not the original cross. The original cross does not have this kind of affective power because it is no longer the cross at the site. Nor is it the cross that veterans go to Vietnam to see. In fact, it is remarkable that in all the advertisements for tours of Vietnam for veterans, many of which are advertised through the AVRG, there is barely a mention of the Dong Nai Museum which houses the original cross. The experience of visiting it, by comparison with the replica cross, is underwhelming. It simply does not have the same power to evoke sensory memory or stand for reconciliation. It is not the cross that veteran organisations, including the AVRG, fought so hard to preserve and gain access to. In is not what led to contact with the Vietnamese People and real engagement in helping build their future. Placing that cross on display in Australia therefore, might support the continued attempt to place the Vietnam War and its veterans within the ANZAC Legend in Australia but it will never provide the same kind of emotional engagement. The loan is, primarily, a nationalistic project set within a conventional narrative memory. While the story of the original making of the cross is told, this is done within a conventional and even militaristic context, suffering the kinds of problems that critics of the ANZAC legend, such as Mark McKenna (2008) are always at pains to point out. Bringing the original cross to Australia, then, cannot reflect the complexity of the veterans’ own commemorative and memorialising practices or their own relationship to Vietnam.

Another way of putting the difference is that narrative memories find it far harder to deal with emotional landscapes and cross-cultural issues. The original cross cannot carry the emotional weight of the last 40 years of memorialising practices in Vietnam nor the efforts that have been made to achieve reconciliation at the level of people rather than the level of governments. As a diplomatic event the loan is of course very important. But it cannot capture the complexity of on the ground reconciliation efforts, efforts that go beyond the narrow uses of the ANZAC legend in sustaining both contemporary foreign policy as well as particular understandings of Australian national identity (Lake, Reynolds, Damousi & McKenna 2010). While the State might couch it as part of the process of honouring the Vietnam veterans and providing an opportunity for all Australians to do so in a location that is seen by all as the centre of our commemorative activities around Australia’s involvement in war, the original cross does not speak to the themes of atonement, reconciliation and pilgrimage. Embedded within a nationalistic narrative, the original cross does not carry any sensory and perhaps even vicarious forms of memory. It cannot do the work that the veterans want to do in Vietnam. In comparison to the replica cross at Long Tan itself, its power to drawn empathy, understanding and reconciliation is weak. Its power to highlight a more nationalistic and even jingoistic narrative is, however, much greater.

It is perhaps as well to stop and think about what it is that the Long Tan Memorial site does do and why it might be so important to the veteran community. As we all know, the display of objects can, and frequently does, make major political statements. Perhaps what the AVRG was worried about was that their form of political action, one informed by atonement, reconciliation and the therapeutic power of returning to Vietnam would be undermined by the display of the original cross at the Australian War Memorial.
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Endnotes

1 This battle is generally depicted within Vietnamese historiography as a victory for Vietnam (see, for example, H6 Som Dai 1995).

2 In the catalogue record for the cross, its significance is described as ‘evidence to the crime and the utter defeat of the American Empire and its allies involved in the war in Vietnam’ (Dong Nai Museum 1989).

3 The Australian Government does, however, support the Long Tan Cross through an annual stipend of $800 to the AVRG for assistance in maintaining the cross and its surrounds.

4 Logan and Witcomb (2012) describe the diplomatic relations between the Australian and Vietnamese governments. These helped to create in an environment in which NGOs such as the AVRG could operate. An important aspect of Australia’s foreign policy towards Vietnam in the late 1980s was a sense of the need to help Vietnam overcome the scars of war.