
SERGEANT PAUL WELLS

An ANZAC Hero



ANZAC Spirit 2014
Vietnam Conflict

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Sergeant Paul Wells

Across the table sits a man in his early 60s. Behind his kind brown eyes I can see a mixture of eagerness and hesitation – he's here to tell his story, but it isn't an easy one.

Open and friendly, former Sergeant Paul Wells tells of his involvement in the Australian military. He provides me with the chance to see war through his eyes; the eyes of a young Private aboard ex-aircraft-carrier HMAS Sydney, deployed to the war in Vietnam.

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A jade-green pocketbook sits beside Private Paul Wells as he stares out at the mass of ocean from the HMAS Sydney. Its last words are burned into his mind: 'CONSTANT VIGILANCE, ETERNAL SUSPICION'. He's no longer training; the Army barracks in Woodside, South Australia are faraway, and the coast of Vietnam draws nearer.

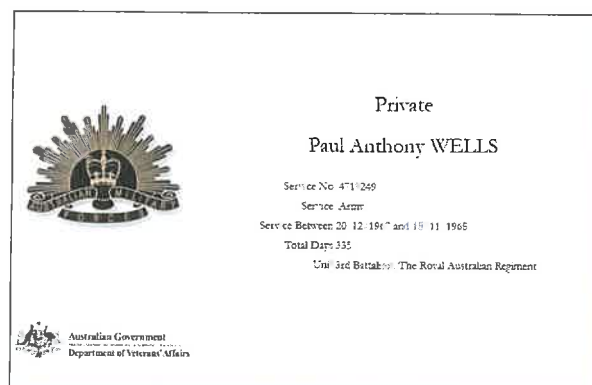
Born in Cootamundra, NSW, in 1948 into the family of a World War 2 veteran, Paul always knew that he wanted to become a soldier. In 1965, at just seventeen, eager Paul had already joined the Army-Reserves. Two years later he transferred to the regular army at the Woodside Barracks in SA. It was from the Woodside Barracks, as a member of 3rd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, that Private Wells, just 19, was deployed to fight in Vietnam from December 1967–November 1968.



1 Above, Private Wells in Saigon on Presidential Guard and below, his service certificate, as taken from the Department of Veteran Affairs

The Vietnam Conflict. A controversial battle dividing North from South. After the French loosen control of Vietnam in WW2, the vicious battle of Dien Bien Phu takes place, ending only in 1954 when the French back down. The North is ruled by deeply communist Ho Chi Minh, whose political views were inspired by his father and Karl Marx, and the South by Ngo Dinh Diem. Tension grows as war-stricken Vietnam became a pawn in the Cold War, a means for the US and USSR to challenge each other without nuclear warfare. The opposing states are supported respectively by these superpowers. However, it comes at the price of many lives and a country's unity. The world is watching.

Paul spent 11 months in Vietnam, during which he fought in Operations Balaklava, Bordertown, Pinnaroo, Merino, Windsor, Capital, and Operation Toan-Than phases 1 & 2. In these months, he fought bravely for the safety of himself and others, and the honour of Australia. He endured monsoons, humidity, hostility and danger – discomfort was a daily occurrence. Yet he managed to pull through. He reflects on his tour as 'a trying time. You couldn't relax – never knew when you would be attacked. There were a lot of good times and a lot of



bad', such as the death of his friend and fellow soldier Alan, killed in action. Sergeant Paul Wells is now a gentle veteran who holds the lessons he learnt close to his heart, and understands the true meaning and pride of an ANZAC.



2 The troops play volleyball during some spare time

Serving as a scout in infantry in the 3rd Battalion, A company, 1st Platoon Section 1, Paul and his mates would often joke that they 'Led the whole lot'. Bravery and optimism were values Paul kept for his entire tour. He was, "essentially in combat for 11 months. Unlike WW2, there wasn't planned combat, you didn't fight for two weeks then take a break. You could come in to base from an operation, have a rest, and the next minute be mortared by the enemy; you just never knew what would happen one day to the next; never knew if it was your last."

The tour of Vietnam did have some reprieve. The veteran recalls how he was 'the fittest' he'd ever been, and often, when sent to Saigon for presidential guarding, his time was spent sight-seeing, greeting the locals and visiting American hotels. He remembers the incredible mateship formed between the troops, the cultural experiences Vietnam had to offer and his 5-day holiday to Taiwan. It was here that Paul could escape the war, and the 19-year-old found himself in love with an enchanting Taiwanese girl who, he laughs, 'was not interested'.

Mateship was an important part of his experience. Paul made friends with Australian and allied troops. They were there for each other during the darkest times. When asked how he endured the war, the reply is simple: "Mateship. Gotta look after each other."

One of the most touching experiences Paul shares is a moment during Operation Windsor. The operation itself proved tough; many men, including Paul, caught malaria and nearly a third of the soldiers required hospital attention – leaving a mere seventy men. Entering an area infiltrated with Northern troops, these seventy needed to destroy a radio station sending messages to Vietnamese Cong. They destroyed the station, however the Vietnamese retaliated with such force that two Australian soldiers were killed and many wounded. The troops ran for half an hour to escape. When they reached the safety of a helicopter, the inexperienced 'youngster' troops were in hysterics – the experience proved to be too much for them mentally. These 'youngsters' were 22 years old - 3 years older than Paul.

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Paul scans the dense Vietnamese jungle enclosing him from either side– its thick canopy reaches high above him, the wide leaves and close-growing trunks highly suitable for the children's game of hide and seek – or that of soldiers. There is sweat falling from his brows- or is it the constant, humid rain beginning to fall once more? A fellow troop crouches by his side, artillery at the ready. The two are patrolling whilst their platoon is resting. The thick forest walls eliminate all outside noise. All is deathly quiet.

Paul hears a rustling and squelching. He glances fleetingly at his companion; surely it was him. But the man is as still as a rock, a mirror to Paul's fear. As quietly as possible, Paul readies his Self-Loading-Rifle, trying to stay calm. Surely the intruders' footsteps will be masked by his own deafening heartbeat.

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Suddenly, he finds himself in combat against three Vietnamese Communists, seemingly sprung from nowhere. There are two men and a younger boy. Paul turns to his companion, but he has fled. Paul must fight alone, and he must fight to survive.

He shoots at one of the men, then turns his attention to the youth advancing towards him. A shot rings out, as clear as bells on a Sunday, and the child-soldier falls. Immediately, the injured man and the other flee.

When a party is sent out to clear the scene, two New Zealand Maori scavenge the boy's body, leaving nothing but his belt. They chuck it at Paul, but he doesn't keep it. At just 19 he's troubled by the lack of dignity and respect. It hurts that enemy bodies are robbed and dragged through the bush in pieces. Beside him stands his patrol-mate. Paul looks him in the eye.

"Why?" He asks, but the man just looks away, mumbling. Paul never receives a clear answer. A soldier carries many burdens.

The boy-soldier Paul shot was just fifteen years old.

A memory that has haunted Paul for many years. Paul kept the boy's wallet as a small memorial; to respect and remember a fallen soldier. It contains a photo of him; youthful grin smiling at the camera. Paul confesses that he yearns to return to the family this small memento of a lost son.

The troops trek through the dense underbrush. A troop treks only metres in front of Paul, checking for mines replanted against their creators by the Viet Cong. The intensity is as suffocating as the humidity; one misjudgment...

A blast reverberates through the air and Paul is staring at the sky, pain piercing him from all angles. Blood covers his body, splattered on his face, and the man in front of him is screaming. Chilled to the bone, Paul sees the man's legs which are a pile of disfigured flesh scattered around him. He can hardly think, the pain swallows him.

Paul ended his tour early when shrapnel entered his body from the mine explosion. Whilst most shrapnel pieces were removed, there are still some in his upper body. Their presence on x-rays today serves as another harsh reminder of the war.

That was not the end of Private Wells' military career. He served in the Army Reserve Unit 10RSAR (Royal South Australian Regiment) at the Woodside Barracks. Promoted in 1971, Sergeant Wells served in 10RSAR until 1972 when, at 24 years of age, didn't feel he was suited to reserve work anymore and left the military. In 1984 however, he returned to help out with cadet units at Warradale.

Paul left the battlefields of Vietnam, but his battle with the memories continues. "It just shows how ongoing war is," the veteran shares, "Even though I came home in 1968, it never goes away." Paul became depressed, suffering anxiety attacks, horrendous flashbacks and nightmares. "They would come out of the blue. One moment I would be in my backyard enjoying the sunshine, the next, back in the jungle; back to the war. It never really leaves you."

The wind is blowing, the trees responding with violent, impulsive swaying and shifting. It's a blustery Australian winter's day as Paul, now a returned veteran, meanders through the paddock. He glances around at the Eucalyptus trees. The sly movement of their leaves causes him to be uneasy, reminding him of... of things he'd rather forget. He catches a movement out of the corner of his eye.

Suddenly, Paul is in the jungle. He can sense something isn't right. A small movement, caught by his peripheral vision, is all it takes and the young soldier has spun around, aiming his gun. Adrenalin is pumping through his veins and suddenly it doesn't matter that he has been living off rations the last two days, that the 20kg pack on his bag is dragging him down, and that he hasn't slept for 15 hours – he is wide awake now. His gun is aimed at an enemy soldier who has appeared from the maze of vegetation...

A cry escapes his lips, and Paul is back in Australia, alone, no longer fighting. The shower of bullets fades into the sound of pelting rain. Winter proves to be the worst time for relapses.

Despite haunting memories, vivid flashbacks and the disruption caused to his life, both then and now, Paul has begun to find peace with his past. The memories are still there, they always will be, but the pain is numbing. Just a little bit.

With Vietnam's poor popularity, there were mixed reactions from the public when he returned. Paul found that when trying to join the RSL, he was disregarded by WW2 veterans who felt that Vietnam Veterans weren't in a 'real' war – ironically something they were subject to by WW1 veterans. A milestone in his recovery was the Welcome Home Parade held in Sydney 3rd October 1987 to commemorate the Vietnam Veterans' contribution. Paul marched alongside 25,000 of his comrades. It was, as he says, 'a big part of the healing process. It felt really, really good'.



3 Paul Proudly shows his medals

The ANZAC Spirit is as much a part of Australian soldiers as a hand or eye. It is born in the heart; a heart that encompasses mateship, courage and humour. When Paul speaks of his experience, I hear the heart and voice of an ANZAC.

The Adelaide-Hills resident has an array of medals for his military service. He received medals for Active Service, Vietnamese Campaign, Defense, National Service and South Vietnamese Medals, as well as an Infantry Combat Badge.

I know that Sergeant Paul Wells is a true example of the ANZAC Spirit. His respect and dignity whilst fighting and toward his enemy, his modesty and ultimately, his pride in being an Australian soldier have become an important part of him. His raw truthfulness and integrity whilst upholding his morals during the war radiate. I'm privileged to have had the chance to tell his story. Sergeant Paul Wells is a dignified soldier of Australia, and he is an ANZAC.



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