Where’s the Chest Hair?

Peter Pierce

Paul Anderson
Allen & Unwin, $49.95hb, 318pp, 1 86508 743 2

Gary McKay and Elizabeth Stewart
Vietnam Shots:
A Photographic Account of Australians at War
Allen & Unwin, $45hb, 221pp, 1 86508 541 3

A LLEN & UNWIN continues in its role as the most important publisher of Australia’s part in the war in Vietnam. The late Paul Anderson’s When the Scorpion Stings and Gary McKay and Elizabeth Stewart’s Vietnam Shots are disparate offerings in the terrain that they seek to cover, but each is a solid contribution to an understanding of ‘Australia’s longest war’. Represented for a short period as a shameful interlude in the nation’s history, one better forgotten, the Vietnam War was enfolded within the Anzac legend within fifteen years of the withdrawal of Australian troops. It became a matter of national pride, highlighted by the unveiling of the Vietnam War Memorial in Canberra on 3 October 1992. Thousands marched that day. On an individual level, the laconic digger of earlier wars gave place to the loquacious veteran of Vietnam, his and her contributions of one element of the Australian armed forces to redress what he considers to be the neglect of the wartime experiences of the men who fought … will be forever at the forefront of Australian military history’.

Gary McKay was a conscript who became a platoon commander during the war and an historian after it. Elizabeth Stewart worked on the Official History of Australia’s Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts. The photographs in Vietnam Shots have been selected from the extensive collection at the Australian War Memorial and supplemented from other sources. Many of the ‘shots’ are routine but indispensable images of war, if rarely of battle. Some were for publicity purposes: a hamlet chief smiles at Australian army advisers; village children help a soldier lay bricks for a school; Australian doctors work among Vietnamese civilians. (Which prompts one to ask, where is that ubiquitous figure of so many army propaganda films: the dentist? And where is chest hair, an always perplexing question?) Other photographs are staged. The cover shot of a bare-chested soldier about to throw a grenade was actually taken in a practice range. Other images seem designed to give nostalgic reassurance. Sergeant Peter Buckney, laden with a 35-kilogram pack, looks back alertly at the photographer as he heads down a jungle track. It could be Kokoda, rather than Vietnam.

In Vietnam Shots we find much that might have been expected: infantry patrolling in flooded rice paddies and rubber plantations; a chaplain giving the last rites; Johnny O’Keefe and Lorrae Desmond entertaining the troops; General Westmoreland striding away from a helicopter on a
visit to 1RAR; photographs of the four VC winners, all members of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam; Australians and New Zealanders playing cricket at Nui Dat; Prime Minister Holt smiling boyishly as he dons a helmet before visiting soldiers at the front. Supplementing these standard images is a serviceable text, that shows some signs of fatigue: torture allegations were ‘blown out of all proportion’, ‘the use of booby traps and mines kept the Diggers on their toes’. Interpolations from the ‘illegal’ diary of Lieutenant Neville ‘Nobby’ Clark give the insights of an idealistic young officer, as vivid in their way as the photographs around them.

What chiefly sets *Vietnam Shots* apart are those images that challenge the complacency that is inevitably a part of historical distance. These are some of them: a dapper Lindsay Hassett drawing the first marble for the second National Service intake of 1966; Nadine Jensen protesting in red paint at the welcome home march for 1RAR; the dolls and cigarette cases that were all the survivors of Long Tan were allowed to accept from a grateful South Vietnamese government. There are harrowing images of Viet Cong killed in a night ambush, of naked enemy suspects, hands tied behind their backs, on *HMAS Perth* (no torture here, presumably). The Tasmanian photographer Neil Davis, later killed in an abortive coup in Bangkok, is represented by the famous image of the end of it all: the North Vietnamese tank breaking through the gates of the Presidential Palace when Saigon ‘fell’ in 1975.

Two last, contrasting images are perhaps the most arresting of all. One is an exercise in pastoral: fishing boats silhouetted by the rising sun in Phuoc Tuy in 1971, with the Long Hai Hills in the background. The authors’ gloss is sentimental — ‘most South Vietnamese wanted to live simply and in peace’. Perhaps, but they had to go fishing in wartime as well. The other picture is shocking. The photographer has captured a group of horrified children from Xuyen Moc. We cannot see what has disturbed them, but learn they are looking at the bodies of dead Viet Cong being dragged behind APCs to afford a crude dissuasion to potential sympathisers. Nothing else in *Vietnam Shots* gives so sour and memorable a taste of war.