

STUDYGUIDE  
SALLY CAMPBELL

# Vietnam NURSES



A CIRCE Films Production  
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[www.vietnam-nurses.com](http://www.vietnam-nurses.com)

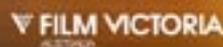
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## Synopsis

**S**ix Australian army nurses gather to share their experiences of the Vietnam War. Now in their fifties and sixties, they vividly describe the young soldiers they fought to keep alive, as well as the sights and smells of an intriguing culture where, despite the war, the cycle of life continued as it had for thousands of years. Based at the only Australian field hospital, in Vung Tau, South Vietnam, the nurses were not prepared for the intensity of nursing in a war zone or the horrific injuries with which they were confronted. From the thrill of riding in a chopper across the beautiful Vietnamese countryside, to the life and death situations they faced in theatre and intensive care, each woman shares her own unique wartime experience and the memories she will carry with her for the rest of her life.

This is a compelling film told from the less familiar perspective of Australian army nurses who served in Vietnam as part of Australia's military commitment. It is a celebration of oral history where the memories shared by each woman are told in their own voice and have a powerful and universal resonance that are deeply moving despite the passage of time.

There is also a supporting interactive website URL [www.vietnam-nurses.com](http://www.vietnam-nurses.com) offering a range of engaging interactive experiences to further explore aspects of the Vietnam War.

## Curriculum Links

This film and [www.vietnam-nurses.com](http://www.vietnam-nurses.com) will be of interest to teachers and students from senior secondary school in the following subject areas: History, Geography, Social and Cultural Studies, Studies of Society and the Environment, Health and Human Development, and Media Studies.

## Key Themes in the Film and Issues Arising from Them

### Australia in the Vietnam War

Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War began in 1962 and formally ended in January 1973. Australian forces were based at Nui Dat, in the southern province of Phuoc

Tuy. Throughout the period of intervention, 50,000 Australian troops, Air Force and Navy personnel served in Vietnam. A total of 520 personnel died and 2,400 were wounded.<sup>1</sup>

The rationale for American, Australian, and other allied involvement in the Vietnam War has long been questioned. The duration of the war, the reasons for intervention and the use of controversial tactics and weapons – including the use of napalm, for example – made it a particularly brutal war for soldiers and civilians alike. Anti-war protests, opposition to conscription, and conscientious objectors, were a source of significant social and political dissent at the time, raising important questions about conflict that continue to be a source of debate to this day.



## Activities

- Locate Vietnam on a map. Identify the geographic, political and economic factors that may have prompted Australian involvement in the Vietnam War.
- As a class, discuss Australia's involvement in armed conflict since the First World War. What are the various wars in which Australia has served and what was the political motivation for engaging in them? Where does Vietnam fit in this picture? Why did Australia become involved? What was the outcome? Do you think it was a just or an unjust war? Discuss.
- Invite a Vietnam veteran to your class to discuss his experiences, both while in Vietnam and upon returning home.
- One reason given for Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War was 'The Domino Theory' – the fear that if one South east Asian country became communist, many others would follow. Do you think this theory was valid? Why? Why not?
- Compare and contrast Australian involvement in Vietnam and Iraq. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

## Women in War

Women have played important roles in armed conflict throughout history, even though they have not typically been involved as armed combatants until recently. During the Vietnam War one of these important roles was as army nurses. Forty-three Australian army nurses served in Vietnam, working twelve-hour shifts in stifling heat, caring for hundreds of patients. Other women

also served outside of the army, including with the Royal Australian Air Force as part of the medical evacuation system (medivac), Red Cross, and also New Zealand service women. Australia's first four army nurses arrived in May 1967 and the last nurses were withdrawn in November 1971 when Australia's military commitment had dwindled to a handful of army advisors.

Women and girls have also been uniquely affected by armed conflict and are often victimized in ways that are gender specific, whether through sexual violence or other forms of trauma. The protection of women and girls living in conflict affected areas is a continuing issue of concern for the United Nations and on the international stage.

## Activities

- As a class, discuss the difference between women serving as part of Australia's military commitment compared to those serving with organizations such as the Red Cross or other non-governmental organizations. What particular responsibilities would be relevant to women serving in the army? What difficulties might they encounter in fulfilling their dual roles as nurses and officers?
- In small groups, prepare an interview of an Australian nurse about her experience in Vietnam. What questions would you ask? Role-play the interview with one group asking the questions and the others answering what they feel the Australian nurse would answer.
- Using the Australian War Memorial website, research the other roles played by Australian women in war.



In addition to nursing, what were some of the exceptional roles played by Australia's women in the various wars that Australia has been involved in? Put together a profile of one of these women and make a short presentation of her life and wartime involvement to the rest of the class.

- Write a letter in the voice of an Australian nurse to her parents in Australia. Describe the cultural and wartime experience, highlighting the differences to your life and nursing experiences in Australia.
- Research Australia's engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq. How many women are involved as army nurses? Now more than thirty years since the Vietnam War, how do you think the experience of Vietnam nurses compares with that of Australians serving in Afghanistan and Iraq? What are the similarities? What are the differences?
- In what ways are women and girls uniquely affected by conflict and what initiatives are in place to protect them? Research current conflicts and the ways in which women and girls are affected (see [www.women-warpeace.org](http://www.women-warpeace.org) to help you with your research). Discuss as a class.

## Making the Film and Interactive Website

Director Polly Watkins first became interested in the experiences of Australian army nurses who served in the Vietnam War while watching a segment about their contribution on ABC TV. She wanted to acknowledge the contribution of Australian army nurses and bring their unique experiences to prominence, with particular

interest in their dual roles as nurses and soldiers in the Australian army.

During initial interviews with the nurses, Watkins realized that most of them had taken colour slides of their Vietnam experiences. Most of the women had not actually looked at their slides in years. The idea of a 'slideshow reunion' with the women in attendance was designed to bring to the film spontaneity in remembering where each image would spark a whole story, not necessarily in a sequential format, but rather in an associative way related to the picture being projected. The slideshow structure allows transitions between stories that are unrelated in theme and time to be juxtaposed easily.

Watkins also sought for the film to have a 'home-movie' feel by using as much personal archival imagery as possible. She put out a notice calling for personal archives, specifically colour slides and super 8 films to Vietnam Veteran publications and conducted her own research through the Australian War Memorial database.

The interactive website [www.vietnam-nurses.com](http://www.vietnam-nurses.com) has been designed as a stand alone experience for the user, which also complements and extends the documentary. In the *Memory Gallery*, memories and anecdotes that are not in the documentary are developed around six distinctive interactive experiences including gameplay and puzzles. The user has a chance to engage directly with the material from taking up the challenge of flying a dustoff chopper to the field hospital in a limited amount of time to save a wounded soldier, to exploring a memory box of seemingly unrelated objects with clues to help pair them



up, and in so doing, unlock the story behind each memento. *Memory Snapshots* is designed as a slide show that may be accessed randomly to allow the user to explore the memories from a diverse range of people who experienced the war. They also have the opportunity to contribute memories of their own.

## Activities

### THE DOCUMENTARY

- In the film, the women tell their own stories rather than use an independent narrator. What are the advantages of oral history heard in their own words? What, if anything, might narration do to enhance the film?
- Up to that point, Vietnam was the most televised war. Research the role of the media in the Vietnam War. What was its impact on public perception? How has television and photography affected subsequent wars?
- Could *Vietnam Nurses* be made into a feature film? Discuss possible ways to adapt the documentary storyline into a more narrative one. Write a short scene using one of the nurses' interviews as your source. Act it out with classmates.
- Identify and discuss the editing (sound and vision) techniques used in the film. How do they work to enhance it?
- Identify and discuss the main costs involved in making a documentary like this one.
- Discuss the role of the interviewer in a film like this. What qualities would he/she need to possess?
- Is it important for an interviewer to remain dispassionate while making a film like this one? Or does

he/she need to empathize with the subject?

- Do you think the film is made for a broad audience? If so, what kind of considerations would have informed the director's creative decisions?
- Film and edit a short documentary film in a similar style to *Vietnam Nurses*, using interviews and still pictures.
- Vietnam was also one of the first wars photographed by the soldiers themselves. Discuss the use of these photos, as well as the other visual and sound effects used in the film. What resources did the filmmaker draw upon and what is the significance of each method used?
- The film is focused on the Australian perspective and interviews are conducted almost exclusively with the six nurses. What is gained and what is lost from not interviewing Vietnamese counterparts? What considerations might have affected the filmmaker's decision to focus only on the Australian perspective?

### THE INTERACTIVE WEBSITE

- Explore the interactive website [www.vietnam-nurses.com](http://www.vietnam-nurses.com). In what ways do the *Memory Gallery* interactive experiences complement and also extend the documentary?
- Choose one of the nurse's stories in the documentary and discuss ways it could be developed into an interactive. Draw up a design brief for the interactive idea you think would best suit the story. Include a content outline, visual ideas and/or storyboard and describe how the interactive would function.



- Draw a comic strip of the nurses interacting with their mama-sans. Include the pov of the mama-sans responding to such things as aspects of the nurses' habits and clothing that they may have found culturally interesting or different or strange!
- The website designers have chosen to develop the serious subject matter in the interactive entitled Dustoff! as gameplay. How effective is this as a way of engaging the user and also imparting information about one of the signature medical practices of the Vietnam War?
- Explore the *Memory Snapshot* section of the website. Choose one of the submitted memories and use it as the inspiration for a poem, drawing or piece of music.

## Character Synopsis

The six army nurses featured in the film, Maggie Hopcraft, Colleen Thurgar, Terrie Ross, Jan McCarthy, Diane Badcock and Ann Healey, were young women with a passion for life, determined to leave their small country town existence and experience the world. When Vietnam was in the news they jumped at the opportunity to go so they could use their nursing skills to care for Australian soldiers. Although they served in Vietnam at different times in the period 1967 to 1970, their experience is shared because they were all based at the Australian field hospital in Vung Tau. The photos of slides they took themselves trigger memories, and each woman tells a unique story in her own words.

### Diane

The first minutes of the film are dedicated to the impressions of the nurses on arriving in Viet-

nam. Diane remembers feeling overwhelmed by the heat and humidity. She explains the contrasts of service in Vietnam compared to nursing in Australia. An interesting aspect, which is highlighted in the film, is the dual roles of being a nurse and being an officer. Diane's stories reflect how similar in age the nurses often were to their patients and how difficult this was especially when they knew the soldier who had been wounded.

- Discuss Vietnam's geographic location and social context during the war. What are key differences between Vietnam and Australia? How did the nurses respond to this new culture to which they were introduced? How, in turn, did the Vietnamese respond to the Australian nurses?
- What are some of the particular challenges of being a nurse and an officer in the army? How did the nurses cope with their dual roles? What did they find particularly challenging? How did they balance their 'nurturing' role with the army's command structure?
- Create a diary in the voice of an Australian nurse outlining how a week of service in Vietnam might have been.
- How did the young nurses deal with seeing men of a similar age wounded or killed? The nurses indicate that there was no 'debriefing' like there is now. In what ways did the nurses debrief at the time? What kinds of bonds between people exist after an intense shared experience like wartime?

### Maggie

Maggie's story as told in the film



highlights some of the contrasts between working in the field hospital and trying to create a sense of normalcy in everyday living. She discusses the importance for nurses to wear lipstick and perfume because it made the boys feel good, and how simple shared occasions like beach barbecues helped them to cope with the more traumatic wounds they had to deal with in the hospital. She emphasizes that nothing could have prepared her for what she did in Vietnam. Her moving account of the horrific injuries inflicted on one soldier killed by a landmine reveals how confronting their work could be. Maggie also describes the impact of war on her personal life and her struggle with post-traumatic stress syndrome after she returned to Australia.

- Maggie says she'll never forget the Tet Offensive of 1968. What was the Tet Offensive and why did it have such an impact on her? Research and discuss as a class. Why did the filmmaker choose to reveal the nurses' experiences during the Tet Offensive by focussing on Maggie's personal story of one soldier who died after stepping on a landmine? How does the story of one person exemplify the trauma of war for all those who experience it?
- The photo taken of Maggie with the Vietnamese child occurred when she was offering basic medical assistance to surrounding villages as part of Australia's civic aid program. What role does the army have in providing civic assistance as part of its military intervention? Why do you think the army provides such services? Do you think the Australian army should work more closely with humanitarian agencies like

the Red Cross or other non-governmental organizations? Write an essay discussing the advantages and disadvantages of civic-military relations. How might such relations benefit Australia's current military interventions?

- Maggie suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder when she returns from Vietnam to Australia. Discuss some of the symptoms she describes. Do you think the emotional and psychological wounds suffered by women from their experiences in the war would be similar or different to the men who served as soldiers? Why or why not?

### Colleen

Colleen tells a story of the practicality of nursing as well as the emotional and psychological impact of the experience on her life. She says that she felt for the boys who were injured and sick but she would not let it get to her. She even took photos of some of the more severe injuries to assist with teaching others on nursing in war. She also speaks about the pride she felt in her uniform and service in Vietnam and the difficulties she found in returning to Australia at a time when veterans were being blamed for participating in the war.

- Discuss the range of photos of injuries shown in the film. Do you think these photos would be helpful to a nurse preparing to serve in a war zone? In some instances, the filmmaker has chosen images that hint at the horror of the wounds Colleen describes (eg. multiple amputations caused by mine blasts) rather than using the most graphic medical images – why did



the filmmaker make this choice? Is it effective that some things are left to the viewer's imagination? What other things do you think might be important for preparing an Australian nurse for his/her first experience in war?

- Imagine that you are an army nurse being sent to Iraq. As part of your preparations you decide to write an email to army nurses already stationed there. What questions would you ask to help you be prepared? Exchange letters with one of your classmates and respond to each other's questions.
- Colleen talks about a visit by General Westmoreland to the field hospital. Who was General Westmoreland and why was he such an important figure in the Vietnam War? Research his involvement in the Vietnam War and thereafter on behalf of Vietnam veterans. General Westmoreland died in July 2005, at ninety-one years of age. Write a short obituary detailing his involvement in the Vietnam War for publication in *The Australian*.
- A formative moment for Colleen occurred when she heard the song *Only 19*, by John Schumann, played during the 1987 Welcome Home Parade. Find a copy of the song's lyrics using the Internet. What is the significance of this song to Australian Vietnam veterans? What role did this song and the Welcome Home Parade play in healing the emotional and psychological wounds suffered by Vietnam veterans?
- Prepare an interview of John Schumann. What was his motivation for writing *Only 19*? Did he intend for it to have such an impact with veterans? What was his inspiration for the song? Interview a classmate who has prepared answers to your questions using internet research as a guide.

## Terrie

Terrie's stories reveal insights about caring for patients – whether the Australian soldiers or POWs – nursing is a humanitarian role. She also talks about

their experiences and interaction with the local people, particularly their *mama-sans* – the local Vietnamese women who came into the compound to care for them.

- Discuss the differences between being a nurse in Australia compared with being an army nurse in Vietnam. What differences does the film highlight? What aspects of army life would be the most difficult? What would be the most rewarding aspects?
- At the end of the film Terrie says about her nursing experience that she hopes that she was courageous and that her sense of humour came to the fore when it was needed. Why do you think she highlights humour as an important quality in nursing? Prepare a job description to hire an army nurse. What specific characteristics and job experiences would you seek in hiring someone for this position?
- Discuss the role of *mama-sans* in the lives of the Australian nurses. What special relationships developed between the local people and Australians stationed in Vietnam? How did they manage to communicate? Discuss the different ways that the Australian nurses interacted with the local people and how this affected their experience in Vietnam.
- Why do you think creating a sense of normalcy was so important to each of the women during their tour in Vietnam? Discuss some of the ways they tried to live normal lives despite being in a war zone.
- Write a newspaper article describing the Christmas celebration of Australians in Vietnam. As part of your article, create an imaginary interview with one or two of the nurses. What messages would they send to their families at home? How might they describe their experience of war to the public at home?

## Jan

Jan vividly recalls an outbreak of malaria that filled the hospital beyond its

capacity, saying that it was 'like having your own little war within the hospital'. In a moving account of a young soldier who died in the operating theatre, Jan explains that some memories are so strong that they continue to affect her even though many years have passed since they occurred. She shares the view that the return from war back to 'reality' was difficult, particularly in terms of reconnecting with friends in Australia.

- Jan mentions the possibility that the soap she gave one Vietnamese woman to bathe her son might have ended up on the Black Market. What is the Black Market and why does it play such a prominent role during wars? What sorts of things, including soap, might have been especially popular on the Black Market during the Vietnam War? Create a stock list of items you would seek to sell on the Black Market to Australian officers serving in Vietnam. What sorts of items might be in high demand but short supply on the market?
- Why do you think that some memories are more powerful than others and stay with you across many years?
- After serving in a war, what kind of things about everyday life do you think would be difficult to deal with when you came home?
- Each of the nurses describes a process of personal change as a result of the war. Discuss the ways that the worldviews of the nurses changed as a result of their war experience. Can the lessons they have learned be applied to our lives today?

## Ann

Ann presents insights into why the helicopter evacuation system to get wounded to the field hospital, known as 'dustoff', and the triage system of wound assessment and treatment priority was revolutionary medical practice at the time. She also talks about her politicization as a result of her experiences as an army nurse in the war. Ann is described in the film

by one of her patients as a 'typical Australian larrikin' because of her remarkable presence in the ward and her determination in nursing.

- Why does Ann consider the dustoff system and practise of triage used in the Vietnam War to be revolutionary? Compare the medical techniques used in Vietnam with those used in the Second World War. What are the key differences? What new pressures existed in terms of injuries and illnesses common in Vietnam as compared

to those in Second World War? What part did the climate play with some of these?

- Discuss the homecoming stories of each of the nurses. What were the particular challenges they faced? How might this compare to the experiences of Australians returning from Iraq? In your opinion, has society become more or less supportive of the idea of military service and those who serve in the forces since the Vietnam War?
- Research the international humanitarian laws protecting soldiers in

armed conflict. Discuss the treatment of prisoners of war (POWs) as described in the film in relation to these laws. What were Ann's fears for the POWs she nursed once they were well enough to leave the field hospital?

Endnote:

- <sup>1</sup> Australian War Memorial, [www.awm.gov.au/atwar/vietnam.htm](http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/vietnam.htm)

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