

- I WAS ONLY 19 -

THE JOHN SCHUMANN STORY

1968. I was in Year 10 at Blackfriars Prior School in South Australia, grappling with Latin and the Periodic Table. The war in Vietnam was escalating and more and more young Australian men were being shipped off to Asia. Jumpy, black and white television reports of the war were broadcast nightly to an increasingly agitated nation and Mum took to looking at me anxiously when she thought I wasn't watching.

In truth, I hadn't really thought too much about being sent to Vietnam but, as a naïve 15 year old with a penchant for camping and bushwalking, the idea was not entirely unattractive. And, besides, there was a history of war service in my family. Grand-dad had been a marksman on minesweepers in World War One. Dad was in the RAAF stationed in the Northern Territory during World War Two and most of his mates had seen active service in one theatre or another.

My mother, on the other hand, was far from comfortable with the idea of her boy going to Vietnam. I was asthmatic from the time I was about nine years old but after 1965 she insisted on taking me to the doctor after every attack. It wasn't till much later that my mother told me she was laying a paper trail in the event my "marble came up".

St Therese's Catholic parish in Colonel Light Gardens was the sort of close-knit community that is, lamentably, a thing of the past. When Private Robert Caston was killed in Vietnam in the February of 1968, the war crashed out of our television sets and into our very lives. Robert's younger brother, Phillip, was in my class at St Therese's Primary School so this was close. The parish went into deep shock and our mothers, red-eyed and distracted for weeks, rallied around the Caston family with meals and deep sympathy. When my own brother died of leukaemia a couple of years later, Mrs Caston put her arms around Mum at the graveside. Of all Mum's friends, only Robert's mother really understood...

As we all did, I had a couple of mates, older boys, who did go to Vietnam. They left as wide-eyed, grinning Australian lads, pushing and shoving and joking at their embarkation leave parties. They were returned to us as damaged goods - sullen, disconnected and with the trade-mark "thousand yard stare". They were now in another, older, gang and I wasn't a member. Some drank with a desperation that those of us who stayed behind couldn't share. In the ensuing years I watched alcoholism set in and I watched friendships and relationships fracture. Unemployment, too, set in. One veteran mate explained this many years later:

"Just imagine," he said. "One day you're helping get your dying mate into a Huey, while your other mates are throwing out covering fire. Two weeks later, you're in a public service office somewhere being told by some pasty-faced, cardigan-wearing mincer not to put your lunch box on the middle shelf of the staff fridge because that's where Mrs

Brown likes to put her cat food. Is it any wonder we didn't slip back easily into civilian life? And lots of people were deeply suspicious of us anyway – as we were of them.”

One time a friend of a friend had signed up for a second tour of duty so he was granted some leave in Australia. For some reason the three of us went for a drive through the Adelaide Hills and the young soldier insisted on taking the wheel. I'd never been so scared in my entire life. Sitting in the back of the HK Holden while he thrashed up Upper Sturt Rd in second gear. I ventured that he was driving dangerously. He laughed, rather nastily, and told me I didn't know what danger was. All these things tend to stay with you. There but for the grace of God go I.

As the new decade warmed up, the popular movement against the Vietnam war gained traction. It wasn't too long before a clear majority of Australians, including me, opposed it. The Liberal Government started to wind back the military commitment and Australian soldiers came dribbling home. In the December of 1972 Gough Whitlam was elected and within days conscription was abolished and Australia's military commitment to the Vietnam war had been terminated. Vietnam became yesterday's issue and student activists cast around for other, more pressing causes.

In 1975, as part of my undergraduate degree in Philosophy and English at Flinders University, I enrolled in Politics and Art, a course that examined the nature of the relationship between art, politics and society. Taught by a man who was to become a lifelong friend, Professor Brian Medlin, this course germinated the seedling that grew into Redgum. I learned that I could write songs and, for a committed student of the Left, I also learned there was much to write about.

By the late 1970s, the war in Vietnam had slipped well into the background. However, in 1979 I began to read of a group called the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia. The VVAA was raising health issues on behalf of veterans, in the face of government intransigence and RSL antipathy. As the media coverage increased, so did my sympathy for these veterans. The songwriter in me could well imagine returning from an unpopular war, sick and confronting a government and a society that didn't want to know.

I entertained the idea of writing these blokes a song but, for me, there was one major stumbling block: Vietnam veterans were a notoriously closed circle. Approach a group of veterans having a drink and a yarn and they'd clam up as soon as you drew near. For my part, I was disinclined to write a song this important on the basis of my some media reports and my imagination.

In late 1981 I met Denny, the woman who was to become my wife, at a dinner party in Adelaide. As our relationship unfolded, we swapped family histories and stories. I discovered that her brother, Mick, had been in Vietnam. Further, he'd been involved in a serious mine incident in 1969 in which a couple of his mates were killed and a number seriously injured. In time I met Denny's family, including Mick. He and I seemed to get along pretty well but I avoided the issue of his Vietnam service until one night after a

Redgum concert at the Oxford Theatre in suburban Unley. This was shortly before Christmas 1981. After the gig we all went out for a drink and Mick and I were discussing songs and songwriting. I confided in him my desire to write a song about Vietnam veterans and, on a whim, I asked Mick if he'd be prepared to talk to me and help with some of the detail. Given that Denny had told me several times that Mick didn't ever talk about Vietnam, I was quite surprised when he agreed. There were, however, two conditions. The first was that I didn't denigrate his mates. Easy. It was never my intention. Secondly, Mick insisted that I played any song I wrote to him first. If he didn't approve, the song was not to see the light of day. I agreed.

In the January of 1982 Redgum went on tour. By this time we'd moved camp to Melbourne, however after two months or more on the road I was in need of some Adelaide respite. I went back home and hid at Denny's place at Cherry Gardens in the Adelaide Hills for a couple of weeks. It was during this little sabbatical that I invited Mick up to Denny's place to see if we could have the yarn he'd promised me.

It was a long night. Mick brought with him a carton of beer and a small cardboard box containing his Vietnam memorabilia - photographs, slides a couple of badges, a map and a few bits and pieces. We watched the slides, looked at the photos, drank the beer and talked: rather, I interviewed him. Mick's story was graphic enough, all right, but I pushed him for detail - sights, sounds, smells, feelings. Denny had set up her cassette recorder for me and I filled around nine 60-minute cassettes.

I had no idea what I was going to do with these tapes but I listened to them over and over for weeks and weeks on end - in cars, planes, hotel rooms and dressing rooms. Months later, one November Sunday morning, I took a cup of coffee, my guitar, a pad and a biro into the tiny backyard of the house in Carlton I shared with my friend, David Sier.

Sometimes songs take months to write. Sometimes they just tumble out. I reckon I wrote "I Was Only 19" in 15 minutes. It was like it'd already been written. As proud as I am of "19", that morning I felt as if I was little more than a conduit.

As agreed, I played the song to Mick first at a pre-Christmas meal at his other sister's place in Belair. He didn't say much, just "You'd better go and see Frankie". I had to ask Mick several times if this meant I could present it to the band and start including it in the set list.

The rest is well-documented history. On the coastal tour of January 1983, I sought Frankie Hunt out in Bega. I played him the song over and over until my fingers were so sore that I begged to be allowed to sing it into his cassette player. About a week later, in Sydney, I met a very intimidating Phil Thompson, VVAA President, along with Tim McCombe, Terry Loftus and Graham Walker. Sadly Phil is dead but the rest of the blokes are still good mates.

The next day I played "19" to the then CEO of CBS Records, an American called Bob Jamieson. He and his executive team threw immense support and resources behind the

project and facilitated my wish that the artist's royalties be funnelled through to the VVAA. And after I recorded the song in Melbourne, Frank Hunt joined me in Sydney and he and I did endless media interviews together.

In the months before its release in March 1983, many, many other people swung in behind the project, veterans and non-veterans alike.

For the hundreds of thousands of Australians who bought the record, I suspect it was a way of saying sorry: - "...sorry we didn't think how us marching down city streets protesting must have looked to you from the paddy-fields of Vietnam: sorry we didn't stop to ask you how you were feeling when you came home: sorry we didn't understand that this was a different war from the one our fathers fought: sorry we didn't pay attention when you tried to tell us you were crook: sorry we let the government work you over. Sorry."

The Hawke Government was elected in March 1983, and promised a Royal Commission into the effects of herbicides and insecticides on Vietnam veterans. In October 1987. Australia finally threw our Vietnam veterans a Welcome Home Parade.

Any number of people will tell you that "I Was Only 19" was instrumental in these things. Maybe. Maybe not. It's not for me to say. What the song did, in my view though, was demonstrate to Australians that you can oppose a war vigorously but still be supportive and respectful of the men and women the government sends to fight it. In this, I think, Australia has changed quite dramatically.

Over the years Frankie Hunt, has assumed a prominence with regard to "I Was Only 19" that is understandable, if not entirely justified. The fact is that it's Mick Storen's story. Over 20 years later, it's easy to forget just what sort of courage and trust Mick Storen displayed when he told his story, outside the closed circle, to a songwriter in a politically outspoken band.

For me, "I Was Only 19" has been an amazing gift. You can't imagine what a pleasure it is to be recognised out of the blue by a veteran or a veteran's family member and be thanked so warmly and genuinely. You can't imagine what it's like to be an honorary part of the veteran community, knowing you have a bunch of mates who'll be there for you when the wind's blowing in the wrong direction. There's no amount of money or success that even comes close.

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