

Peter C Ryan OAM 1946 - 2017



Peter Charles Ryan OAM died 6 April 2017 from cancer, just shy of his 71st birthday. Peter was the inspirational leader of the team, which included his partner Robynne, that initiated the National Vietnam Veterans' Day commemorations at the National Memorial, first held in 2000 with 50 borrowed chairs and a "ghetto blaster" for a public address system. Attendees now number in the thousands and include governors-general, prime ministers, ministers and Defence Force chiefs.

At the completion of the Vietnam Veterans' Day commemoration at the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial in Canberra in 2016, two B-52H bombers flew down Anzac Parade, saluting the veterans gathered beneath. These large aircraft flew a 14.5hr, 11,000km return flight from Andersen AFB, Guam, to take part in the Vietnam Veterans National Commemoration and the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan. This remarkable tribute from the Americans had been coordinated at the highest level of defence and diplomatic circles. But it was Pete Ryan, together with Ian Thompson, president of the Vietnam Veterans and Veterans Federation of the ACT, who made it happen.

How did a lowly leading aircraftman with six years RAAF service come to achieve this level of influence and authority? Well, as his service mates told it at the thanksgiving service held at the ANZAC Memorial Chapel, Duntroon, Ryan had energy and gusto in spades, and was a great believer in having a go. It did not matter what the venture was or how many balls he already had in the air, he would take on almost any task and have a go. He had great self-belief and backed himself to achieve what might otherwise have seemed unattainable goals. It helped that Ryan was able to mix at all levels and did so frequently.

Born in Perth, Ryan's upbringing was far from settled and included some time in an orphanage. His teenage years were happy though, growing up beside the Swan River where swimming, fishing and billy carts were regular activities. After school he was working towards an accountancy qualification when the Air Force seemed like a more interesting life. Joining the RAAF in 1965, he trained as an airframe fitter at Wagga Wagga, NSW, and was posted to No 5 Squadron, based at Fairbairn in Canberra, which flew the relatively new Iroquois helicopter

These were happy days, with interesting and rewarding work, surrounded by good mates and getting up to the usual harmless mischief of young men in uniform in those days. Ryan owned an Austin Healy Sprite, a small, low-set sports car of the era. He opined that it would be possible to drive straight underneath the boom gate at the guarded entrance to the RAAF base, and proved it on a number of occasions.

Known as "Harry" in the Air Force (there were too many Peters in his intake), he was soon posted to No 9 Squadron, then flying the Iroquois UH-1B model on operations in Vietnam. These work horses carried out troop lifts, casualty evacuations, supply deliveries, fire support and more hazardous tasks such as inserting and extracting Australian SAS patrols, often under fire. Ryan endured the hot, wet six months and the hot, dry six months working on the aircraft in all conditions. One of the strengths of both Nos 5 and 9 squadrons that appealed to Ryan, and to a great many other ex-squadron

personnel, was the egalitarian ethos and relationship that existed between the aircrew and the technical ground crew.

On discharge, he married his long-term girlfriend Lynda Gregory in 1971 and they had two children, Laura and Greg.

Ryan worked in the media, principally print, but poor health led to his forced retirement in 2000. Despite coping with his debilitating illnesses, he undertook a Bachelor of Arts at ANU majoring in political science and history, indulging his passion for military history. He then attained a law degree from U of C, principally to assist in his advocacy work for veterans.

It was this tireless and entirely voluntary advocacy work for veterans, their widows and families that earned Ryan his OAM. He expended an extraordinary amount of time, effort and sometimes money in helping veterans from all services and all conflicts. He put his heart and soul into achieving the rightful outcomes for veterans, and he was deservedly proud of his effort. As well as providing volunteer veteran welfare and advocacy services for more than 20 years, he was the ACT president of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia from 2003 to 2013, national vice-president for two years and he was the major force behind the Vietnam Veterans Day commemorations in Canberra. He also served on nearly 20 committees and organisations devoted to helping veterans.

Just before Anzac Day last year, Ryan was told that the cancer he had stoically fought for so many years was so advanced that it was unlikely he would see Anzac Day 2017. Sadly, the prognosis was accurate and he died just a few weeks short of proving the prediction wrong. His comrades in the 9 Squadron Association honoured him by asking him to lead the contingent in the 2016 Anzac march, a privilege normally reserved for higher ranks.

Peter Charles Ryan represented the best of the Australian character, working hard to provide for his family and then, despite his own debilitating illnesses, working equally hard to assist his fellow servicemen who were doing it tough. Most of all he was the epitome of a good mate and brother-in-arms who never forgot his comrades and worked tirelessly to see that the scars of war they were carrying were properly looked after.

He is survived by partner Robynne, son Greg and daughter Laura and three grandchildren.

Dennis Mitchell