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TRACKING THE FOOTY

To commemorate lives lost in war, Aussie Rules team The Vietnam Swans put on a game of footy at the dog track in Vung Tau. **Beth Young** speaks to a veteran who once played the game on the same field.

Down at Lord Mayor's Oval in Vung Tau the greyhound racing has been put on hold for the day. Instead, a game of footy—of the Australian variety—is underway.

Expatriate players from the Vietnam Swans and the Hong Kong Dragons have converged for the friendly match. It's an annual event that began last year to celebrate ANZAC Day (a public holiday in Australia and New Zealand held on April 25 that commemorates lives lost in war).

Several special guests have made the journey from Australia to participate. Former Aussie Rules star Richard Osborne and Vietnam veteran Ron Vernon are among the VIPS.

While Richard took to the

field, representing the Swans in the first half and the Dragons in the second, 67-year-old Ron says he was keen to have a kick, too. "I wanted to put my boots on and go out there!"

Seeing the young blokes toss the footy on this particular ground brings back many memories for Ron. During the American War, he also played footy on the Lord Mayor's Oval.

Ron served as a communications specialist for the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). His job mostly entailed coding and decoding messages. Most Sunday mornings were reserved for playing footy, though.

Between 1967 and 1971, a full-scale competition ran between the Australian units

based in Vung Tau. It was called the Vietnam Football League and comprised of twice-yearly premierships.

With the padre (military chaplain) as their coach, the RAAF team Ron was on took out the very first Services Premiership in 1967. The win was made even sweeter considering their opponents: the army.

On the field, Ron says anything went. "We laid into each other, but what happened out there stayed there. Afterwards we'd go to Back Beach and have a barbeque and a couple cold beers."

Mad on footy growing up, Ron says these games provided servicemen with a much-needed break from their work. The footy

field also became an arena where military men of all ranks were equal.

Ron began making an annual trip to Vietnam five years ago. That first trip marked four decades since he'd been back. Since then, he and his wife Ailsa have set up a kindergarten in Vung Tau. "It's been really healing for him," Ailsa says.

Back at the Lord Mayor's Oval, the Swans have beaten the Dragons 89 to 47. On the sidelines, Richard Osborne gushes about how proud he is to play on the field the vets did.

"Aussie Rules stars are seen as heroes in Australia, but the real heroes are the diggers who were here during the war."

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