

ANZAC Day in East Gippsland - Lest We Forget



PAYNESVILLE: The commemoration march in Paynesville was led by the Bairnsdale Citizens' Band to the cenotaph, closely followed by community members and groups who followed the marchers to the RSL Hall. K315-6685x



PAYNESVILLE: RAAF Officer Cadet Adam Johnston during the official proceedings. K315-6692x

Aussie Rules rules the day in Vietnam

With such a large contingent of Vietnam veterans residing in the area and given the region has its own Viet Vets retreat 'Cockatoo Rise', at Sarsfield, the story below will no doubt be of interest to one and all.

Most Vietnam Vets will be aware of the annual footy match that is played at Vung Tau, the base for the Australian Logistics during the Vietnam War, the coastal location also used as a rest and recuperation centre for our diggers serving at Nui Dat.

In its third year, the Aussie Rules competition is reputedly a fiercely fought contest between the Vietnam Swans and whichever Asian team takes up the challenge, this year (last Saturday) the home side victorious against the China Reds, a team consisting of players from the Shanghai Tigers and the Beijing Bombers, the teams part of the growing interest in Aussie rules in Asia.

The formation of the Vietnam Aussie rules game is an interesting tale in itself.

One Pte John Heaney, a Nasho with the first Transport Platoon RAASC, was given two choices by the CO as a punishment for a misdemeanour. One was to organise a game of Aussie Rules, and the other was detention; no prizes for guessing which one he chose. From this, a full-scale competition was soon ongoing between the various Australian units and continued between 1967-1971.

Played on what was formerly known as the Lord Mayors Oval, now called the Vung Tau Greyhound Track, the beautiful sandhills of the Back Beach look very different today from how it was during the war. 'Vungers' as it is affectionately known is just a 90-minute ferry ride from the chaos of Saigon.

Making their inaugural appearance at the Asian Championships in 2007, the Vietnam Swans have since been victorious in taking out the last two years premierships. The Swannies (originally named the Hanoi Swan), do not wear the traditional all red and white, their guernseys being adorned with a black swan.

Not only do they enjoy playing footy, the Vietnam Swans also raise considerable funds for local charities beside making a noteworthy contribution to the Queensland flood appeal and the Christchurch earthquake over the past couple of years.

The ANZAC Friendship match proceeds go to Swim Vietnam, teaching young children to swim, a very needy cause with more children dying from drowning than road accidents in Vietnam, plus the Protection of Children in

Vung Tau and Long Hai.

Phil Jones, president of the Vietnam Swans was happy to answer a few questions, his dedication, not only to his beloved Vietnam Swans but to promoting Aussie rules in Asia in general. "While most of our team members are Aussies there are lots of other nationalities playing. In our team we have Kiwis, Italians and Americans, but the Vietnam Swans is a national club with players coming from Hanoi, Hoi An, Saigon and Vung Tau," Phil said.

"Saturday's match was just great, really tough game but we came out on top by 23 points. Prior to this game we play a Legends and All Stars match which has Swannies, sponsors and friends playing. On Saturday we had nearly 600 spectators, much the same as last year, no doubt when ANZAC Day falls on or close to a weekend there will be a much larger crowd."

Phil explained the difficulties in conducting a competition in a country such as Vietnam.

"Unlike back in Australia, we can't just jump in a car and drive to the next town to play a footy match. Here we play international footy; we pack the passport, board a plane and fly to a nearby country to compete against its finest. National teams include China, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Bali and Macau. This happens every five weeks or so and apart from the friendlies we have tournaments that include the Asian Championships with 11 teams competing, plus the Indochina Cup in November."

Following the match, a dinner is held with guest speakers, often returned soldiers from the Vietnam conflict.

Many veterans include this match in a tour that also encompasses a very moving ANZAC Day dawn service at Long Tan, the scene of the largest and bloodiest battle for Australian forces in Vietnam, as well as visits to battlefields and orphanages. Following the customary breakfast, everyone heads for Tommy's Bar in Vung Tau to enjoy the remainder of the day reliving their war experiences and catching up with old mates, just as it is in every suburb and town throughout Australia.

Understandably, many Vets cannot face a return to the place where their carefree boyhood quickly vanished under fire but from the reports received by the organisers of these footy matches, the diggers, now in advancing years, who do return for this annual event, have been uplifted and often able to come to peace with those disturbing memories.

Thanks to Phil Johns, president of the Vietnam Swans, for the information and Mark Stennett for the photographs.



Two black armbands adorn both sides lining up for a minute's silence at the ANZAC Aussie rules match in Vung Tau, Vietnam. (PS)



Looking no different to a match played anywhere in Australia, but with a notably different team monogram on the red jumper. (PS)