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Kick a goal for Viet vets

Vietnam is becoming one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world.

I have visited the famous Cu Chi tunnels, an immense network of underground structures preserved by the Vietnamese government, and gasped in awe at the complexity of it.

Turn back the clock to the 60s and the 70s, and these same tunnels and firearms were the instruments of a war fought by the Viet Cong guerrillas and our brave fighting lads.

Today, of course, it is a different story ... the Vietnamese people are kind, warm and friendly, but during the war, this was a place where hundreds of young Aussies died, in a futile and unwinnable conflict.

Being a Vietnam Vet was a bit like winning the lottery you didn't want to win.

During conscription, if your number came out of the barrel, you were put in a uniform, given a gun, and sent off to war. No questions asked.

I was lucky. My number didn't come up, and while men exactly my age, and younger, were running around in uncompromising jungles dodging bullets, the toughest thing I had to do was to face Mal Atwell on a bad mood day.

For many years, the Vietnam



Austin Robertson with Vietnam Swans president Phil Johns during his last trip to Vietnam.

Vets were ignored - they simply did not get the recognition they deserved.

Now the Vietnam Swans Football Club has formally approached AFL chairman Mike Fitzpatrick to consider dedicating an AFL game at the MCG or the SCG to those young Australians killed in the Vietnam War.

I discussed this idea with Vietnam Swans president Phil Johns on my last visit to Vietnam, and who knows, it may

actually happen.

There are many expats living in Vietnam, where AFL games are televised each week, and there is a growing interest in the game.

Mike has undertaken to put the proposition to the AFL administration and hopefully the decision will be positive. Certainly, it is deserved.

Anyone remotely interested in our national game will tell you how special the blockbuster Anzac Day match is

between Collingwood and Essendon at the MCG, commemorating our soldiers who contributed so much in both world wars.

What I am suggesting to Mike, and the AFL, is that a Vietnam Vets blockbuster match be held in Melbourne or Sydney on August 19 next year to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the end of the conflict.

Former South Australian football star Graham Cornes, who was inducted into the AFL Hall of Fame last season, thinks it is a good idea.

Most people would not know Graham was a Vietnam vet.

"The Battle of Long Tan was one of the most heroic actions in Australia's military history," Graham said.

For a time, Graham pitched his tent 50km down a dusty road from the now picturesque seaside town of Vung Tau, at a place you didn't want to be, called Nui Dat.

"They [the AFL]," he continued, "have for so long reflected many of Australia's social issues.

"This is a great idea that will be widely appreciated by all Vietnam veterans, the majority of whom have suffered severely and have largely felt unappreciated since their war service."

Hear, hear.
Go get 'em.

Lady Luck can be the decider

Luck plays an important part in most people's lives and can determine the degree of comfort one achieves on life's unpredictable journey.

This is surely true in sport.

In cricket, how often do you see the perfect century without blemish? Rarely, if ever.

Give a batsman like Viv Richards or Sachin Tendulkar a couple of lives through dropped chances and the opposition will end up wearing out a pair of shoes chasing leather for two days.

What would a St Kilda supporter have given for a slice of luck in the epic grand final against Collingwood? If the ball had bounced one way instead of the other, Stephen Milne would

have run into an open goal and delivered the Saints their second ever premiership.

Lady Luck was no more than a two-bit floozy that night.

One of the sports where, it seems to me, luck seems to play more than a hand is golf.

This was thoroughly reinforced at the WA Open at Karrinyup last weekend.

Now, I am not a golfer, but the old saying, drive for show, putt for dough, was clearly evident for four consecutive days.

At the top level, most players are capable of hitting greens regularly.

So how does the winner emerge?

I believe it comes down to putting.

Message from Phil Johns

While we don't have the scale of the AFL, the Vietnam Swans do have a level of substance with respect to special games.

For example, we do host an annual Anzac Friendship Match here in Vietnam - in Vung Tau, where the Diggers used to run a Vietnam Football League competition from 1966 to 1972.

And we do play the Royal Australian Navy for the Phoenix Perpetual Cup when one of its ships makes an annual visit to Saigon.

This match will be played next weekend, and our players do live and work in Vietnam, often in quite senior positions in government, business and non-government organisations.

The Vietnam Swans have used Australia's signature sport as a vehicle to be Australia's unofficial sporting-cultural ambassadors.

With the proposed Vietnam Vet game, the AFL has an opportunity to create a match of national significance.

The inspiration for the event is the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Australia and Vietnam.

The glue that holds it all together would be Australia's signature sport.

The signature at the moment that would catch the breath of the crowds would be the minute's silence at the Long Tan Cross, beamed live to the stadium's scoreboard during the pre-match formalities.

The Vietnam Veterans' Day twilight match would be inclusive, dedicated to all veterans irrespective of war or peace-keeping operations in which they served.

By being inclusive, we would avoid making the same mistake that caused so much pain for some veterans on their return.

The women and men returning from Afghanistan, Rwanda, Iraq and too many other theatres must also be recognised by the event which is Australia's signature sport.

Phil Johns, president, Vietnam Swans