



'They can finally rest with dignity and honour'

Vietnam veteran **BOB SHEWRING**, 69, has made it his mission to repatriate 25 fallen soldiers to their families in Australia. *Paul Ewart reports*

Picture the scene: it's the mid-1960s and the Vietnam War is well underway. Your son is serving in the Australian Army and has been sent over to fight. One afternoon, unexpectedly, an officer arrives at your house to deliver some devastating news – your child has been killed in combat.

Reeling, you try to take in the heartbreaking reality that the young man you raised is dead. The officer interrupts your reverie to ask you if you'd like his body brought back home. A simple question, with a simple answer – yes, of course!

"If they had survived their tour

of duty, the army would have flown them home," says Northern Territory Vietnam Veterans Association vice-president Bob Shewring, 69.

However, nothing is as simple and straightforward as that. Yes, your child's body would be returned to Australia, but there's a price. Grieving parents had to pay £500 – which, for many back in 1965, was equivalent to about six-months' salary – to have the deceased returned home.

"Considering all of these soldiers made the same supreme sacrifice in doing their job for their country, it's a terrible shame," Bob says.

In January 1966, a policy was put

in place to ensure the body of any Australian serviceperson who lost their life while fighting overseas would be returned at public expense. However, this left the 25 Australian soldiers killed in Vietnam before the policy change buried at Terendak Military Cemetery in Malaysia and Kranji War Cemetery in Singapore, despite the wishes of their families.

As a veteran of the Vietnam War, Bob feels this is an injustice he's determined to set right. While he was shocked to discover that many of our fallen soldiers weren't brought home, it didn't really resonate with Bob until he discovered his childhood friend and fellow soldier Corporal Reg Hillier, who was killed in Vietnam, was buried at Terendak after his family were unable to afford the repatriation fee.

"I hadn't given much thought to the burial place of Reg until I started to do research into the reasons he was buried in Malaysia," Bob explains.

"I found his family, and others had made several attempts to bring his remains back to Darwin but to no avail. It was then I decided to do something, and Operation Bring Them Home was born."

An initiative of the NT branch of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, the Howard Springs local has worked tirelessly since launching his campaign four years ago, petitioning the federal government to bring home the bodies of the 25 Australians. Bob's rationale is simple.

"Because it's the right thing to do," he explains. "Bringing them home will bring closure – closure to the veterans' widows, their descendants and for the whole Vietnam vet community. Then they can finally rest back in their home country with dignity and honour."

Appearing alongside Corporal Hillier's nephew Neil Bond on

FOREIGN FIELDS
Reg Hillier was the only Territorian to die in the Vietnam War



Channel Nine's *A Current Affair* last year, Bob was able to bring much-needed public attention to the cause. After the episode aired, more than 40,000 people signed the Bring Them Home online petition.

Three months later, the issue reached parliament where then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced the government would overturn a 1966 Act of

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Parliament and the soldiers buried in Malaysia and Singapore would be repatriated to Australia with full military honours. It was an emotional and timely decision given that 2015 marked the 50th anniversary of the departure of the

first contingent of the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment to Vietnam.

Bob's efforts also earned him recognition earlier this year as a national finalist for Senior Australian of the Year – an accolade he modestly takes in his stride.

"While I am grateful and proud, just knowing that the last remaining 25 veterans killed in action during the Vietnam War will be returning home is recognition enough," Bob says.

It looks like his efforts may soon bear fruit, given that the soldiers could be repatriated later this year.

"To know that we're on the final leg of the journey is a very emotional process – knowing that relatives will be able to mourn and pay their respects in person, whenever they want.

"Unfortunately, for those widows, parents and siblings who have passed on, it's already too late," he says.

An elderly brother of one of the 25 soldiers recently told Bob he hoped to live long enough to see his sibling finally brought home. "I have a feeling that he'll get his final wish," Bob says.

And when those brave soldiers are finally laid to rest in home soil, Bob will be one happy man. ●



FAR FROM HOME
Neil and Bob visit Corporal Reg Hillier's resting place in Malaysia



WE WILL REMEMBER THEM
The Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, holds the names of virtually every Australian who has died in war since 1885

PICTURES: GETTY IMAGES; NEWSPIX