



## **Why is it so important that a new official account of the Agent Orange controversy be commissioned.**

Was Phill Thompson greedy and dishonest?

Those who knew him would probably describe him in terms opposite to these; terms like generous, honest, a man of integrity.

But greedy and dishonest is how the Official History describes Phill.

Phill Thompson was the national leader of the campaign to have Vietnam veterans' exposure to Agent Orange acknowledged as potentially harmful.

The author of the Official History's account of the Agent Orange controversy, Professor FB Smith, believed the 1980s was a time 'when ... private greed became, for some, a public good'. He zero'd in on this campaigning group of veterans and without having interviewed any of the national leadership, he lumped them into that category. In intemperate outbursts, he declared: 'A small minority of disgruntled Vietnam veterans seized on the issue both as an explanation of their discontent and a likely source of [undeserved] additional repatriation benefits.' He declared that, '[the] clash epitomizes many of the worst aspects of Australian behaviour in the 1980s.'

It was an extraordinary outburst. Phill and many of his colleagues in the national leadership of the Agent Orange campaign had already proven beyond any doubt they had admirable values and were worthy of Australian society's respect.

Phill Thompson had served two tours with 1RAR in Vietnam and been Wounded-in-Action. He gave 14 years service to the army and was devastated when he was medically discharged because of a heredity cancer. He saw his leadership of the Agent Orange campaign as a continuation of his service. He was later appointed to the Order of Australia.

And what about Terry Loftus. He also served two tours in Vietnam with 1RAR where he was Wounded-in-Action and Mentioned in Despatches. He served the army for 22 years.

Then there was Tim McCombe. He served in Vietnam with 2RAR where he trod on a mine and lost a leg. He was later appointed to the Order of Australia.

And there were many more of their ilk involved in the campaign leadership.

These people were neither greedy nor dishonest as the Official History would have us believe. And neither did the 'clash' epitomize the 'worst aspects of Australian behaviour'. Rather the 'clash' displayed some remarkably fine behaviour by a group of veterans dedicated to remedying an injustice being visited on their fellow veterans and their families. It was behaviour in the best ANZAC tradition.

And there's another consideration that is not inconsequential; the campaigning veterans were proven right. Now a long list of cancers suffered by Vietnam veterans is accepted as having been caused by their exposure to Agent Orange. In the US, Spina bifida suffered by the children of

Vietnam veterans is accepted as having been caused by their fathers' exposure. And an Australian government study has identified increased rates of spina bifida manifesta, cleft lip, cleft palate, adrenal gland cancer and acute myeloid leukemia in veterans' children. This study was not specifically designed to find a link between the children's ill health and Agent Orange but it did establish a firm relationship with 'service in Vietnam'.

And not only, according to the Official History, was the campaign leadership greedy and dishonest but their claims that exposure to Agent Orange might be harmful had no merit whatsoever.

FB Smith based his account mainly round the findings of the Agent Orange Royal Commission. But to be able to make this 'no merit' claim FB Smith had to misrepresent the Royal Commission's findings.

That's quite an accusation, but it's easily demonstrated.

The Royal Commission made two findings supporting the Vietnam veterans' case. Indeed these were the only finding that had any relevance to the case the veterans had been making. Yet, FB Smith omitted these findings from his account.

It's hard to believe isn't it; a professional historian failing to mention the two most important findings of the Royal Commission that effected Vietnam veterans.

So what were these two findings?

The campaigning veterans had been accusing the Department of not giving Vietnam veterans the benefit-of-the-doubt as Repatriation law demanded. The Department was deaf to this accusation. But the Royal Commission was not. It noted that the Department had 'for a number of years, refused to concede that benevolent judicial interpretations of the application of ... [the law] were consistent with parliamentary intention'. And that the Department was guilty of 'finding a method whereby the Repatriation Commission may restrict benefits which have flowed from a generous – though proper – interpretation of the legislation'. The Royal Commission went so far as to accuse the Department of training departmental officers 'to find ways around Court statements of what the law was' and of emphasising 'ways in which a claim could be "knocked-out"'.

Pretty strong stuff. A government department training its officers to evade the law. Not the sort of stuff a professional historian would normally overlook.

But FB Smith omitted the finding from his account.

FB Smith's second omission was even more extraordinary.

The Royal Commission found that a repatriation determining authority might well attribute a Vietnam veteran's soft tissue sarcoma or non-Hodgkins lymphoma (two kinds of cancer) to his exposure to Agent Orange while on war service in Vietnam.

How could a professional historian omit such an obviously important finding from his account of the Agent Orange controversy?

Having omitted these two critical findings, FB Smith went on to ridicule the veterans as having no case.

It was both unjust and unprofessional and we have been campaigning for the past twenty years for a new study to be commissioned.

As a result of a number of our representation in the past few years, the War Memorial Council has now decided a new history must be written. That is wonderful news and we have offered our heart-felt thanks.

But there is a long way to go yet. The Terms of Reference have to be written and a historian selected. And with a rear-guard action still going on in an effort to downplay the importance of the project and perhaps even to derail it, we must remain on guard.

We must particularly guard against the obviously false claim that FB Smith's account was correct using the information available at the time and that is it only new evidence that has made FB Smith's account obsolete.