

compare and camera and paintbrush contrast:

PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES PLAYED a major role in shaping perceptions of the Vietnam War for Australians. These images were recorded by military as well as civilian photographers. The Australian Army, Royal Australian Navy and Royal Australian Air Force each had their own photographers. These people produced Public Relations (PR) photographs of Australia's involvement in the war and their work was subject to strict control.

Small portable cameras were more widely available during the Vietnam War than for any previous war. As well as the PR photographers, the Australian forces in Vietnam included many amateur photographers among the ranks. These people preserved a personal record of images of themselves and the things they saw in Vietnam. See if you can spot differences in content, style and ability among the photographs in this exhibition.

A photograph is a frozen second in time, but a painting takes longer to compose and create. A painting usually offers more scope for expressing mood and emotion than a photograph.

As well as Defence Public Relations photographers, Australian official war artists were sent to Vietnam. The Australian War Memorial chose the artists for their ability to make quick and accurate sketches of the action as it happened. They could turn these sketches into paintings when time and conditions allowed. During the Battle of Long Tan the heavily outnumbered Australians were too busy fighting for their lives to take photographs, and the monsoonal rain that fell for most of the battle would have spoiled photographs anyway. As a result, there are no known photographs of Australians fighting that battle. Almost four years later, one of the Australian official war artists, Bruce Fletcher, did a painting of the action. Some of the details in the painting are incorrect, but many of the veterans agree that it captures the atmosphere of the battle very well.



Bruce Fletcher

Long Tan Action 1970
oil on canvas, 152 x 175 cm
AWM (40758)

This painting currently hangs in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra and is not part of the *Impressions: Australians in Vietnam* exhibition.

Reference:

McNeill, Ian, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950-1966*, Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 1993, 'especially page 339'.

compare and contrast:

suggested questions

camera and paintbrush

PRIMARY LEVEL

- Can you think of other reasons for sending both photographers and artists to a war?
- Which appear more realistic, the paintings or the photographs? Which tells you more about what life was like for those involved in the Vietnam War?
- Would you understand what is happening in some of the photographs or paintings if the caption was not there ?

SECONDARY LEVEL

- How can art reflect the relationship between humans and machines and humans and their physical environment? Discuss this with reference to the work of the official war artists in Vietnam.
- Compare and contrast the photographs taken by the Army Public Relations photographers and those taken by military personnel serving in Vietnam. How does each group treat the following:
 - **military equipment, armoured fighting vehicles and aircraft;**
 - **the casualties of war, dead and wounded allied and enemy soldiers or civilians;**
 - **scenes of daily life in an army at war (digging trenches, queuing for food or waiting for transport).**
- Imagine that you are a war photographer responsible for collecting images of the war for the Australian public at home. What sort of images would you be trying to capture on film and have published in newspapers, magazines or on television? Is there anything you would definitely not photograph? Justify your answers to your classmates.
- Would the sort of photographs you took be influenced by your attitude to the war?

EXTENSION QUESTIONS

- Research the work of official war photographers from the First World War (1914-18), like Frank Hurley, and the Second World War (1939-45), like Damien Parer. Compare and contrast their photographs with those by the Army Public Relations photographers from the Vietnam War.

References:

- Bean, C. E. W. and Gullett, H. S., *The official history of Australia in the war of 1914-1918 Volume XII, Photographic record of the war*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1923
- Photographs from the war 1939-1945*, AWM, Canberra, 1947
- Bowden, Tim, *One crowded hour: Neil Davis, combat cameraman 1934-1985*, Collins, Sydney, 1987
- Gray, Anne, 'Artists' visions of Vietnam', in Pierce, Peter, Doyle, Jeff and Grey, Jeffrey (eds.), *Vietnam days: Australia and the impact of Vietnam*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1991
- Fry, Gavin and Gray, Anne, *Masterpieces of the Australian War Memorial*, Rigby, Australia, 1982