

Memorial Box 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wartime Service

Corporal Don Beale



Corporal Don Beale, c. 1968

Don Beale was born in 1946 in Gunnedah, New South Wales, and grew up in nearby Keepit Dam alongside his eight brothers and sisters. He spent his childhood hunting and fishing, and his family was popular among the neighbours as it owned the only boat in the district.

After leaving school as a teenager, Beale worked on a pig farm to help his parents with household expenses. He later moved with his family to Wyangala Dam, near Cowra, and there he worked for the Water, Conservation and Irrigation Commission. Soon more and more reports were received about Australia's involvement in Vietnam, and many started thinking about volunteering for service.

Beale's father, Frederick, and his uncle, George, had both served in the 2/20th Battalion in the Second World War. The brothers had been captured when Singapore fell to the Japanese in early 1942, and were sent to Japan to work in a prisoner-of-war camp.

In May 1943 George Beale, suffering from exhaustion and malnutrition, slipped on a ladder in the steel mill and was dragged into a machine. He later died of his injuries.

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Frederick was devastated by his brother's death. The pair had been very close as children, and their wives were sisters. When Don Beale spoke to his family about joining the army his mother was horrified, but Frederick said nothing.

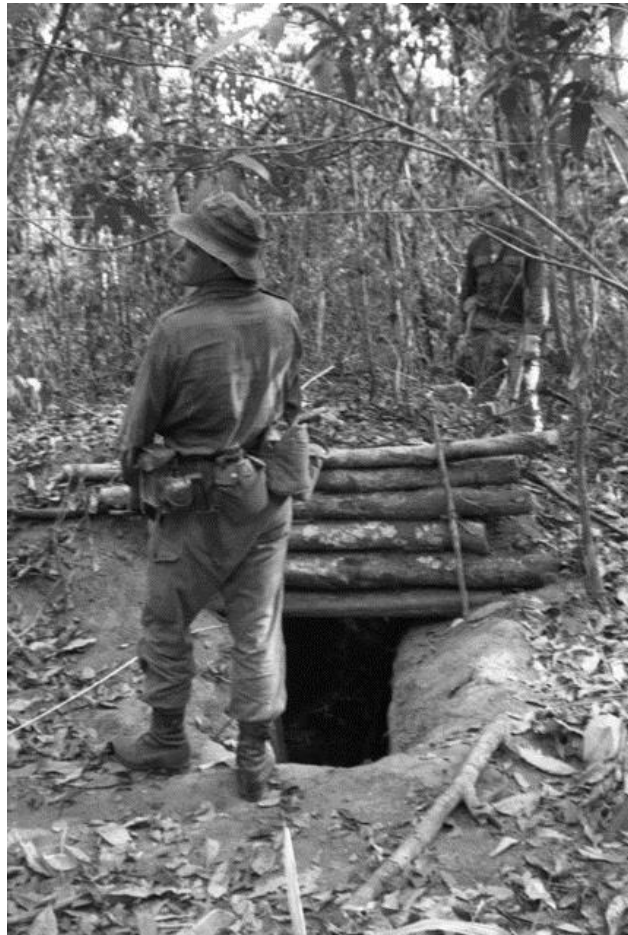
Beale trained with the Royal Australian Engineers for 18 months before his deployment to Vietnam, but little prepared him for the unbearable heat, which he described as feeling "like someone pressing down on top of you". Four months after arriving Beale was promoted to corporal. He worked as an engineer in the tunnels, clearing the enemy and setting explosives to destroy the complex system of caverns.

Known as a "tunnel rat", Beale described the experience as "a pretty hair-raising sort of thing". He and his fellow engineers would crawl along on their stomachs in the dark, all the while remaining alert for any booby traps that had been set. The Viet Cong often attached snakes by their tails to the tunnel rooves, where they "would strike anything they could reach".

Beale was badly wounded when an arrow from a crossbow entered his right ear. He was hospitalised for ten days before discharging himself to return to his unit. One year and three days after his departure, Beale returned to Australia. It took less than two days to travel from the battlefield to his home in Cowra, where his father, mother, and fiancée were eagerly awaiting his arrival. Beale remained close to his fellow veterans in the years after the war, describing his unit as being "like a football team".

Activities for research and classroom discussion

1. Listen to the following oral history recording:
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/S01683>. Why did Beale decide to enlist?
2. How do you think Beale's father may have felt about his son's decision to enlist?
3. Donald George Beale was named in honour of his uncle George, who died in the Second World War. What are some other ways to remember a loved one who has served?
4. Imagine serving as a "tunnel rat", and write a diary entry describing your experience.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Tunnel rats attached to 8th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment

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5. Helicopters played a pivotal role during the Vietnam War, particularly in the transportation of personnel and supplies. What sort of feeling has the artist attempted to capture in this painting? What techniques has he used to achieve this?



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART40738

Ken McFadyen, "Air lift", c. 1968, painting, 48.2 x 30.4 cm

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