

Vietnam



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by *Chris Noonan & John Duigan*. Produced by *George Miller, Doug Mitchell and Terry Hayes*. Screenplay by *Terry Hayes Chris Noonan & John Duigan*. Production Design by *Owen Williams*. Cinematography by *Geoff Burton*. Art Department: *Kate Highfield*. Original Music by *William Motzing*. Edited by *Robert Gibson & Neil Thumston*. Key Costumer: *Kristian Frederikson*. Special Effects: *Chris Murray*

Series total length: 437 minutes. Distributed by Roadshow Entertainment. Companies: Network Ten. A Kennedy Miller Production. First shown on television: February to April 1987. DVD release 2009. Rated M. Rating 90%.

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Cast

- *Nicole Kidman* as Megan Goddard
- *Barry Otto* as Douglas Goddard
- *Nicholas Eadie* as Phil Goddard
- *Veronica Lang* as Evelyn Goddard
- *John Polson* as Serge
- *Mark Lee* as Laurie Fellows
- *Pauline Chan* as Lien
- *Grace Parr* as Le
- *Alyssa-Jane Cook* as Deb
- *John Allen* as a T.V journalist
- *Brett Climo* as Ritchie
- *Mick Conway* as Knifethrower
- *Celia De Burgh* as Monica Montgomery
- *Virginia Hey* as Journalist
- *Jim Holt* as Lt Smart
- *Noel Ferrier* as Prime Minister Robert Menzies
- *Henri Szeps* as Prime Minister Harold Holt
- *Alan Cassell* as Prime Minister John Gorton
- *Kevin Manser* as Prime Minister William McMahon
- *Leo 'Lucky' Grills* as Senator Shane Paltridge
- *John De Ville* as Malcom Fraser
- *Tim Robertson* as Pascoe, the operations chief
- *Grahame Blundell* as Miles
- *Ray Meagher* as Colonel Reid
- *Francesca Raft* as Ros
- *James Dibble* as a journalist (himself)

Review

In the 1986 Australian television miniseries *Vietnam* scenes usually alternate between the home front and Vietnam until the last scenes when the focus stays on the home front. This is unusual in the Vietnam War film genre, as the home front usually only appears in the opening and concluding sections. The home front being Australia and the central character being a female teenager and the story's timespan of eight years are also unique aspects.

Not everything in the film is unusual. Two characters, Phil Goddard (Nicholas Eadie) and his friend Laurie Fellows, (Mark Lee) do fit the stereotype of the traumatised veteran unable to adjust exactly. However they are only one part of the story: many aspects of this production are unusual in the genre. Most representations in the genre last for a tour of duty or a brief time: *Vietnam* lasts 437 minutes. The story begins in November 1964 with the advent of conscription in Australia and concludes with conscription's abolition after the Whitlam government's election in December 1972. This timespan allows for an unfolding of the common mid-sixties viewpoint about the war. We see the initial self-confident idealism about western society, the optimism about victory once America became heavily involved and the fear of a Communist invasion spreading southward. From there we see the experiences that lead to disillusionment, the mass radicalisation on the home front and the ultimate failure of the war effort. *Vietnam* shows how the war and opposition to it merged with massive social changes; the unfolding youth rebellion, hippiedom, the sexual revolution, the rise of Women's Liberation. The Australia that has emerged by the last of the ten episodes is very very different to that depicted at the start. No other work in the film genre is as comprehensive; no other fiction about this war has this scope.

The film does not begin with the first steps leading to the war. Menzies encouraged the Americans to take over the French role in the 1950s and although it was kept rather quiet at the time the first thirty Australian military advisors were sent to South Vietnam in 1962. The first scenes are set during the start of the build-up unfolding at Parliament House in Canberra, when Douglas Goddard (Barry Otto) a senior adviser about Vietnam to prime ministers, has to tell Menzies that their plans for conscription are leaked. The next scenes at the Goddard's home show the beginnings of the 1960s youth rebellion unfolding. Phil defies his father's orders concerning his future and defiantly argues back, which was still rare in parent-child relationships then. Megan's decorates her room with posters of the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, also a bit daring for the time, and she talks favourably about the relaxation of censorship. These alternating scenes between concerns about Vietnam and the Australian home front set the pattern for the series. Both settings depict a world going into conflict and emerging exhausted, but transformed.

Douglas Goddard's work preoccupies him, while her brother Phil appears at the film's start as a restless, directionless, underemployed photographer who has just dropped out of university. Their mother (Veronica Lang) holds the family together by smoothing over tensions. The Goddards seem a microcosm of Australian society and what happened to it during this time.

The depiction of the Goddard family leads to my first reservation about this series. They are totally believable as an average upper class 1960s Australian family, but they are supposed to be an average upper class *Canberra* family. Douglas Goddard despite being a senior Canberra

bureaucrat creates an impression of a decent, caring, selfless person full of common sense and clarity in his judgements. Find the antonyms for all those recent adjectives and you have what most Canberra people, particularly misnamed public servants, are actually like. Widely hated and held in contempt by most of the rest of Australia, the adjectives and phrases most Australians use for Canberra residents are ‘arrogant,’ ‘cliquey,’ ‘sly,’ ‘trendy,’ ‘manipulators,’ ‘claustrophobically unreal,’ ‘like totally out for themselves,’ ‘sadistic,’ ‘conceited,’ ‘snobby,’ ‘ambitious intriguers,’ “bored rich kids out to cause trouble,” “full of themselves,” and possessing ‘more money than sense.’ I have lost track of how many Australians refer to Canberra in ways like this. The three exceptions were all recent, as Canberra’s demographics are changing, but the Goddard family appear in the sixties and seventies. Okay, let us assume an unlikely possibility: that somehow a decent man gets to the top of the Canberra bureaucracy. It is one of the few falls from reality.

This criticism does not apply to the depiction of the changing social values and the virtually revolutionary transformation from obedient housewives and children to the all-out radicals. John Duigan could capture the staid life of small town 1962 Australia with extraordinary exactitude in *The Year My Voice Broke* and then the sense of being on the edge of great social change just three years later in the sequel *Flirting*. In this series he does it again. He or other people involved in the series must have been there. If they weren’t researchers have done a first class recreation. However there must be a caveat and one similar to that applied to Canberra. He has recreated the peculiar mood and attitudes which mixed shrewd cynicism, idealism and naiveté at the time. The background settings, costumes, and music of those times in the antiwar movement are also exactly right. However he has left out the opportunist bastards of assorted kinds. Megalomaniac Maoists and Trotskyists, academic communists who avoided the word communist like the plague, defenders of Stalin’s purges wearing peace badges, drug dealers and careerists, outright con-artists and Labor Party opportunists who only came to the edges of the movement for votes after the majority of the public opposed the war.

The filmmakers wisely depict Australia’s role as *Vietnam* also differs from other Vietnam War films because the focus, viewpoint most characters and many settings are Australian, not American: The Americans rarely appear and only once, in the horrific pack rape scene, do they appear without Australians present. Two groups almost always underrepresented in the Vietnam War genre are the Vietnamese, particularly women. Most representations of Vietnamese go little beyond being extras and even when present they are usually brief and they are rarely given personalities. They serve to develop the plot, or act as sex objects or embody the menace the heroes must overcome. In contrast the two Vietnamese women in *Vietnam* have more prosaic lives, believable motivations and are realistically depicted. This series gives them a voice to express their opinions and therefore a point of view. While both are peasants in the same village Lien (Pauline Chan) resentful at the enforced relocation of her village and loyal to her Vietcong brother, becomes a Vietcong. Le marries Laurie, an incapacitated Australian veteran who was kind to her. It is nothing unusual for fiction about fighting the Vietnam War to not have a single Viet Cong depicted, let alone characterised. Even the one exception can hardly be described as a typical Vietcong. Le Hy Hayslip, a peasant woman in Oliver Stone’s *Heaven and Earth* (1993) tells an exceptional story. She starts out as a teenage Vietcong, but after being raped by a comrade deserts. She soon works for the Americans, including briefly as a prostitute. She

marries a serviceman, divorces and ends up wealthy, residing in a Californian mansion. *Vietnam* also presents Vietnamese women including a Vietcong and treats Vietnamese women with depictions that go beyond the clichés concerning bar girls. The Vietcong are also depicted in ways that go beyond the clichés of sudden machine gun fire from forests or sly, smug faces peering out of jungle leaves while organising mayhem. This is not to say that the Vietcong are presented as heroes. In this series their commander runs a virtual extortion/blackmail racket to get food from sullen fearful villagers who are battling to stay on a subsistence level. He rules by intimidation, has suspected traitors summarily executed and is a doctrinaire fanatic.



Nicole Kidman 1987

Also different to the usual Vietnam War movie is the way no single character dominates *Vietnam*. The usual way a male soldier hero dominates and succeeds in so many American films about Vietnam reverses here: Phil Goddard and Laurie Fellows earnestly try to be wartime heroes, fail dismally and survive in crippled conditions, one mentally, one physically. They do not return as hailed conquering heroes, but in a state of dismal dreary survival. Others find different fates. Evelyn Goddard does not put up with husband Douglas always being buried in his work and then having an affair with a journalist. She leaves for Sydney, doing what she wants, studying Italian culture and language. As he comes to oppose the war Douglas finds his lifestyle changing and he is no longer the straight arrow team member within the government.



Barry Otto, several years after the series was made



The Vietnam Moratorium in Melbourne September 1970. Note the Maoistic slogan

Two views showing Australians and Americans working together in the war Australian scouts lead a G.I. patrol and American helicopters remove Australian troops



The series resembles a mural in which many figures are depicted almost equally in developing an unfolding situation, but one serves as at the centre, linked to many others. Although the story lacks a military hero, the single character at the film's centre has the hero's characteristic of courage and defending what is right. Amazingly this central character is the least likely person to apparently play such a prominent role given the topic matter: as the story starts she is a fifteen year old Canberra schoolgirl, Megan Goddard (Nicole Kidman).

While the film focuses on the Goddard family, several other rounded characters are presented as part of the mosaic; Prime Ministers Menzies, Holt and Gorton, other politicians and their advisors, officers and infantrymen, two embassy workers in Saigon, a draft resister and other radicals, two Vietnamese women and the two who are the closest to traditional villains. Pascoe, the Australian commander of a secret mission group and his Vietcong counterpart. Although both of these men are cruel and murderously ruthless, their actions appear not so much as signs of villainous sadism or self-aggrandisement, but as methods they use to contribute to victory for their side.

This series successfully gets away from traditional representations of heroes and villains, heroines and donors, to represent the people who went through that decade from the middle of the 1960s when the war began for Australians until Whitlam's election. They are contrary, weak and puzzled in some situations and strong and certain in others, but the rapid, extreme and erratic pattern of the times certainly changes most. The Goddard family are splintered and in different ways are altered by the war. After the army focuses the once unambitious, directionless Phil, he becomes a professional killer in a secretive special mission group. After returning to Australia he ends up a cynical, embittered creepy derelict. Douglas Goddard finds his support for the war ultimately untenable. Indicative of the feminist movement emerging at the time, Mrs Goddard leaves her role as a supportive housewife for the disintegrating family to develop her own life and interests in Italian culture and language. Megan does develop from an assertive schoolgirl with strong if inchoate opinions into a more mature radical, and yet she has only matured her essential personality. Towards the end Megan and her parents meet, trying to reform the shattered family and as they are about to leave Phil appears saying that he is back, "sort of." Indeed. The boy has gone but the man is even more unsettled and directionless than he was as a teenager and no longer has the energy and humour that he had then.

Others have also developed or changed. Serge the draft resister has also focused his inchoate teenage discontent into a more focused radical vision which he shares with Megan. Initially cheery, optimistic Laurie ends up a traumatised, sullen paraplegic. His wife Le, once a part of Vietnamese village life, finds herself in a totally different world in Sydney. Ironically Laurie who intended to help the Vietnamese villagers adjust to Western ways, is now helped by Le to adjusting to being incapacitated. Her existence in the suburbs of Western Sydney adumbrates the great Asian migration to Australia that began with the fall of Saigon in 1975.

The film ends with Megan greeting Serge as he is released from prison. This long scene has Joni Mitchell's 'Woodstock' as the soundtrack, no dialogue. Considering how much has already been said about the changing times and relationships this is wise. While the music soothes, adumbrating the calming time of the middle seventies, Mitchell's lyrics says it all about their

idealistic hopes - and more widely, the new world which emerged in the seventies after the chaotic, confrontationist sixties. Ultimately the series seems not so much about an Asian war: but feels more about social change in Australia, which the Vietnam War played so important part in initiating.

Many scenes give a didactic feel, but not unsubtly or overbearingly so. The writer/ director duo of Chris Noonan and John Duigan, with producer/writer Terry Hayes and producers George Miller and Doug Mitchell have created a team effort which recreated aspects of the era so real that it feels like being in a time warp. Audiences will get an excellent idea of what it was like for different types of Australians and Vietnamese villagers to be embroiled in the conflict. If the film feels didactic it is also fair-minded and realistic. The realistic feel for the era accurately shows how the war developed against massive social changes in Australia.

The series was well received by both the public and the critics and within a year was shown on English television, but despite the popularity of the Vietnam War genre in the USA in the 1980s and Nicole Kidman's rapid rise to superstardom, at that time apparently American distributors did not take to *Vietnam*.

The filmmakers seem to have avoided permeating their effort with the 1980s values. By being true to the era it depicts rather than when it was made it remains undated and therefore great.

