

Ann Kidney

Wife of Bruce Kidney, 86 Transport Platoon, RAASC, 1968-69

Bruce and Ann Kidney with children Samantha and Jeffrey



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In January 1968 I married the man that I loved. After only three months of marriage, I stood at Mascot Airport saying goodbye to my husband. I was 18 and he was 21. It was the start of a very lonely year.

Bruce was a fun-loving young man who enjoyed life and all it had to offer. We had been together for three years and during that time he had been conscripted for National Service. It was shortly after our honeymoon that we heard he was going to Vietnam. While holding Bruce tightly at the airport I told him how much I loved him and would miss him and assured him that I would be waiting for him when he returned home. I did not want to let go of him, I did not want him to walk to that plane; I was sick with fear, as indeed he was, that he may not return. But like other National Service conscripts, Bruce felt proud to be serving his country.

We wrote to each other almost every day and if a few days went by without a letter I feared the worst: a knock at the door from someone in uniform, or an urgent telegram with bad news. Our soldiers in Vietnam felt likewise - they feared a Dear John letter from a wife or girlfriend to say that they had found someone else. I knew that I would never do that to Bruce but I found it difficult to convince him of that. It was one of their biggest worries. All they had to look forward to, as they crossed each day off the calendar, was coming home to loved ones. All of us, family and friends, tried to maintain contact and reassure him.

I was living with my parents and often visited Bruce's mother, father, two brothers and six sisters who also worried about him. We all wrote to him so that he could feel close to everyone. As well as letters, I made audio tapes so that he could hear all of the voices from home. I also made music tapes to keep him up to date with the latest record releases.

Bruce wrote of things he saw in Vietnam. Although he could not say too much, I could always read between the lines. Things were worse than he was telling me. Every day in Vietnam there was fear, stress, anxiety, fatigue and loneliness. I felt afraid for my husband and the other boys over there - and they were only boys! I watched programs about Vietnam but although it was the first 'television war' anti-war protesters seemed to be the biggest story. This made me angry because our soldiers were putting their lives on the line doing their job. Protesters were calling them baby killers. I remember thinking, 'My husband would not kill babies! My husband would not kill anyone unless it was to save his own life.'

Ann and Bruce Kidney, wedding day, 29 January 1968



Bruce came home on R & R leave once during his tour. It was wonderful. I remember that he and everyone else cried at Essendon airport. We were happy to have him home and fearful of his return to Vietnam. A few months later, his tour over, Bruce did return safely and I was waiting for him. This time true tears of happiness: he was home to stay! We all thought thank goodness he survived. My father, who had been very ill, waited to see Bruce come home and passed away shortly after - another traumatic event.

Bruce attended Watsonia Barracks for his discharge papers and was asked, 'Do you wish to join the Regular Army?' There was no offer of counselling or any other help to reassociate him back into everyday life. Not even a word of thanks for serving his country! One day in Vietnam, the next back in Melbourne and looking for work. In the city one day we passed some university students handing out anti-war leaflets. Bruce said to a student, 'I just came home from Vietnam.' She spat at him and called him a baby killer. He wanted to retaliate and I had to calm him down. I felt sad and angry for him and for all of the veterans. The Government and people turned their backs on our boys and there was no help at all.

Bruce came home a very different person, withdrawn, would not leave the house willingly and rarely talked about Vietnam. This was not the man that I married; it took me a long time to realise I would never have that man back. Things would never be the same again. But we survived. Bruce and I have been married for 38 years and there have been some very difficult times; however, I would not change a single minute because I love him even more now than I did the day that I married him. I need him, and I need to be there for him.