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OPINION

The Aussie military history your kids aren't learning

Dr Tom Lewis¹

If you, or one of your family, served in the Vietnam, Korean War, or Boer wars, then the national history curriculum is airbrushing that service out of history. In fact the military story of our country is minimized in our schools.

In the course of writing our new book *Carrier Attack*, co-author Peter Ingman and I surveyed 392 people about their education. No matter when they went to school, the vast majority – about 90 per cent – had not learnt that Darwin was attacked on 19 February 1942, killing 235 people. We also found the fact that Australia was raided for two years by Japanese forces in World War II still is not part of your children's education today.

We were concerned, in researching the myths and legends of the first Darwin raid, to dispel many spurious stories of that attack. One of them was the government of the day had covered up the story of the raid. We found that was not true. While it was certainly the case that the initial reporting was minimal, eyewitness accounts were appearing with remarkable detail only a few weeks later. So why, we wondered, had this story persisted?

It was because the Australian people had not been told in the years after the war, that their own country was raided from Exmouth in Western Australia across to Townsville in Queensland; rather, youngsters in schools were learning about William the Conqueror.

Instead of learning that the aircraft of the enemy raided 300 kilometres inland to the town of Katherine in the Northern Territory, Aussie kids were being taught about the First Fleet.

Instead of finding out about the spirited northern defence put up with massive American help from early 1942 onwards, children were memorizing lists of the kings and queens of Britain.

All important facts, but why the lack of learning about our own country's military struggles? And why is it persisting today?

Go to (www.australiancurriculum.edu.au) for a list of subjects in the National Curriculum. Enter 'Korean' and you'll get three hits, two of them about mathematics and the other about Chinese involvement in the Cold War. 'Gallipoli' brings up an enormous number of hits but high school students we asked say they became "sick of studying it every Anzac Day" by the time they finished primary school.

The term 'Boer' brings up for year 9 students the unexciting possibility they could "place key events in sequence (for example the Boer War, 1899-1902; World War I, 1914-1918), and identify parts of the world that were involved in, or affected by, those events". Supposedly, a teacher might be able to contrive a lesson about Australia's involvement in this conflict, which killed 606 of our soldiers. But it is hardly enough.

Similarly for the Vietnam experience: Year 6 students are asked to "identify and develop a timeline of world unrest that contributed to migration in the 1900s (for example the World Wars, the Vietnam War, the war in the former Yugoslavia, the Tiananmen Square massacre, the war in Sudan)". That's it! No detailed study is available until Year 10 – by which time some students will have left school – and even then the only possibility is "describing the impact of the Vietnam war on Vietnam and how the communist victory in Vietnam (1975) resulted in the arrival of refugees into Australia".

What about the actions and difficulties experienced by our people there? What about the bravery shown? In fact, a search for the term 'Victoria Cross' produces no hits at all. So a student can leave school with no understanding of what the bravest of the brave of our society have done – in wars that were part of our country's narrative even as they were gaining their education. Is this right?

Essential World War II stories, such the sinking of HMAS *Sydney*, with the loss of 645 lives; the fact that outside Darwin today is a Japanese submarine with 80 sailors dead inside, or that HMAS

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Armidale fought heroically to her end, are not mentioned anywhere. It is probably not surprising. The people who wrote the curriculum embracing our nation's story probably never heard of them in their education either.

Students can study one of these Mediterranean societies in depth: Egypt or Greece or Rome. Students can study the transformation of the Roman world and the spread of Christianity and Islam. These are all well and good, but are they more important than the loss of our most famous warship in World War II? The sinking of HMAS *Sydney* touched almost every town and village across Australia. If students do not hear about it in their history education, I presume they will never hear of it. Is it not worth hearing about in the opinion of these curriculum writers?

It is not just the sacrifice made by people in our past, although sometimes that sacrifice was of the ultimate sort. It is a fundamental of protecting our future. The philosopher George Santayana summed this up when he said: "Those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it".

From the start of our involvement in 1962 in Vietnam around 60,000 Australians served in that theatre – 521 died and over 3000 were wounded. To quote the War Memorial: "The war was the cause of the greatest social and political dissent in Australia since the conscription referendums of the First World War. Many draft resisters, conscientious objectors, and protesters were fined or gaoled. Many armed forces personnel met a hostile reception on their return home." But how can we learn from the Vietnam situation unless we study our involvement?

It is, therefore, not just Vietnam that needs to take its place in our school students' studies. It is Darwin, Broome, Townsville – indeed, the entire Top End of Australia. It is the Boer and Korean wars. It is what our people did in conflicts past and present – not just the causes and effects of the most traumatising national collective action there is. If we really say, "We will remember them", we need as a nation to live up to it in deed not just words; in everyday situations and not just conveniently on anniversaries which are too often decorated with platitudes rather than perception.