

**Subject:** The last Vietnam victim

Sad story.

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## The last Vietnam victim

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- From: *Herald Sun* <<http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/>>
- October 31, 2011 12:00AM



Mick Berrigan had served in Vietnam for seven months when he suffered a catastrophic head wound. *Source:* Herald Sun

**MICK Berrigan went to war in 1967 - a bright spark who loved a drink and the girls. The shell of a man who came back injured never recovered from his private hell.**

PRIVATE Mick Berrigan died from combat injuries last Sunday and was buried on Thursday.

There weren't any politicians there, or news cameras, because death didn't come swiftly.

It ate at him for 44 years, tore at his body and soul and drove his parents, Rosemary and Gerald, to an early grave.

The artillery shell shrapnel that hit him, so-called friendly fire, took the best part of his life in Vietnam, and then took its time with the rest.

When soldiers die on the battlefield, they are said to have made the ultimate sacrifice.

To live on in pain, anger and confusion as a brain injury progressively destroys you and everybody you love, is worse than that.

Comrades count Mick as an Australian combat casualty of the Vietnam War, as much as any of the official 500 fallen.

They think, dead at 66, he may be the last.

"We commemorate the dead but we forget about the wounded," unofficial 7th Battalion historian Mike O'Brien says bitterly.

And Mick's younger brother Chris, who has spent most of his life watching his brother's cruel decline, says there are worse things than a battlefield death.

"If you're killed outright, there's traumatic suffering and terrible sadness. But the terrible sadness goes away eventually, doesn't it?" Chris says.

"I think this was worse than what they usually call the ultimate sacrifice."

In 1967, while the rest of the world embraced flower power and the Beatles sang that love was all you need, Mick Berrigan, the fourth of eight kids, went to war.

He was smart, with a year of Melbourne University law under his belt, and headstrong.

He liked a beer a little too much, liked to chase girls at South Side Six in Moorabbin, and took a gap year from uni to build a bankroll for the rest of his course.

When the call-up came for national service, Mick was up for the pay and the adventure.

He landed in Vietnam in April 1967 and took a hit in November ahead of an attack on a Viet Cong camp 1km east of Nui Toc Tien.

Australian guns were called in to soften up the camp and five of the six shells hit.

The other exploded against a tree 50m from Pte Berrigan and shrapnel from it tore through his skull and his brain.

"We couldn't keep him quiet," a Digger mate of Mick's wrote in a diary.

"We gave him dose after dose of morphine. We believed we had no alternative. We were close to the enemy and had to keep him quiet."

But the story didn't stop there. Mick died and was resuscitated. His mother was flown to Vietnam to say her goodbyes to her comatose son, but he was strong and fit and lived.

"Operating on his skull, they had to remove fragments that were blown into his brain. Then they patched him up," Chris says.

"I remember him in bed at Heidelberg (Repatriation Hospital) and he looked remarkably fit and very, very tanned, brown as a berry.

"He was already paralysed, flat in bed and he couldn't turn to one side. His speech was slurred already, but he knew people."

With calipers and a four-pronged walking stick, somehow the hospital got Mick on his feet and home.

"There was a time when he was at home and we were living in East Malvern when he used to walk up to the front gate, walk 100m down the street," Chris says.

But it was a false dawn.

"There was a great hopefulness that he would improve. That changed into 'nothing's happening', and that changed into a feeling of hopelessness, awful for any family," Chris says.

Mick suffered seizures and each one took a part of him away. His short-term memory was shot and his useless limbs, once so strong, grew twisted.

"It's like he's been a 22-year-old soldier all his life. In that sense he was stuck in time," Chris says, but adds: "Whatever brain damage there was, he did have some episodes of clarity and deep insights. We wondered how much he knew."

In an earlier war, Mick would have died. A later one, and he would have caught medical advances and better treatment.

As it was, his life became a round of psychiatric hospitals, frustrated outbursts and harsh drugs to bomb him out.

The family's fight for the best for Mick was unending.

And also, so bittersweet, there were times when he touched his carers and family, connecting in small ways that meant everything to them.

"He was quite an assertive, macho guy, intensely independent," Chris says.

"It was very difficult for him to have that taken. Often he would lash out at people, try to hit people. He would get angry and this would lead to him being heavily tranquillised.

"It was just a gradual decline. It's hard to express. My mum was particularly devastated by it. It was a real heartbreak to go out and see him.

"He went through unpleasant repat hospitals for many years, and nursing homes and things like that."

Family priest Fr Peter Matheson spoke of the toll on Mick's parents at Thursday's service.

"They died before their time because of that weight," he said.

Mick's last 11 years were spent surrounded by kindness, helped by Yooralla at a home in Highett, but the brain injury was relentless and paralysis spread to his throat muscles.

"There was not much in his life. The only pleasures were a beer and a smoke and his food," Chris says. "In the end you'd give him food and instead of swallowing it, he was breathing it in."

On Sunday, his battle ended. The war was over for Mick and his family.

"The ultimate sacrifice? This is even more, isn't it, really? What a waste," Chris says.

"He died in his sleep. That's something, isn't it?"

And a comrade, John Johnston, one of the 30-odd Vietnam veterans in a guard of honour for the flag-draped coffin, spoke for all of them.

"There just couldn't be a greater sacrifice," he said. "There couldn't be."