David Cook’s life story is compelling because of the many incidents of trauma he has experienced. He was a member of the Stolen Generations, growing up in both Kinchela Boys Home and in a foster home in Raymond Terrace outside of Newcastle. He enlisted in the Army at 17 and served two tours of duty in Vietnam, witnessing the horrors of war and suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. He also speaks extensively about the role of race in the Vietnam War, being treated as an equal within the Australian Army while witnessing discrimination in the American Army. After the war, Cook’s life spiralled downward through cycles of imprisonment and violence before he reconnected with his family in Raymond Terrace and turned his life around.

When I was in my early years, I lived with my mum and dad up in a place called Ebor where I was born [in 1945], second of five siblings. It’s right up on top of the Great Divide, north of here [Newcastle]. My father and my mother worked for different property owners around the place right up until I was around about seven or eight, probably a bit younger. Then we moved, my mum

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1  This interview was recorded in Raymond Terrace, New South Wales, on 20 January 2010.
and dad. I don’t know what happened between them, but we moved to Taree. And one day, the police just came and just took me and my sisters and put us in a home, which for me was called Kinchela Boys Home. I was probably eight, say. I was a bit younger when we left Ebor. The girls got sent along with my little brother to Cootamundra Girls Home. My brother couldn’t come with me because he was so young. So, the next four years I spent in Kinchela Boys Home. I didn’t know the Welfare treated the whole lot of the Aboriginals the way they treated us, ‘cos I was so young. I kept saying, ‘Why are they treating me like this all the time?’ I thought it was a personal thing with me.²

In Kinchela Boys Home we had no schooling. We worked – vegetable gardens; milking cows, baby cows, by hand, making their way to butter – everything was self-sufficient. The only time we ever went anywhere was to play football, and then it was against another Aboriginal team which were in the local area of Kempsey. If you played up in Kinchela Boys Home, if you did something that you shouldn’t have done, your punishment was bad. All the boys would be lined up, and the punishment used to happen when you go to lunch, or dinner, or tea. They all lined up, and you have to walk down the line, and they’ve got to hit you. They can’t hit you in the face; they punch you in the chest, in the belly, and if you didn’t hit hard enough, you’d go up the end of the line. So if it was your brother coming down and you didn’t hit him hard, you’d get the same thing. This is the sort of violence that they taught us in there. Other than that, I wasn’t a very violent lad.

Halfway through that four years, or getting around the end of the four years, they sent my little brother up to the boys’ home because he was big enough then. In the meantime, my sisters had been adopted by this family called Mrs Smith,³ and she lived in Allworth. She didn’t have a husband but she had a son. Eventually the reason she adopted us was the money – to get money for bringing us up, and because she had no other income. I was probably 11 – 10 or 11.

I started going to this school – St Bridget’s in Raymond Terrace. I was pretty good at school even though I had no training in my earlier schooling. I learned pretty quickly, and I stayed there until such time as I was old enough to go to Raymond Terrace High School. I went to Raymond Terrace High School and that’s where I decided I was going to join some sort of force – the Army, the Navy, whatever. In Raymond Terrace I was more or less classed in the same class as the foreigners – like the Germans and the Yugoslavs – and we were all hated. So we stuck together. It wasn’t until recently that things calmed down in this

² For a history of the Stolen Generations see Anna Haebich, Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000).
³ Name changed to protect identity.
town; it was a very racist town earlier in my years here. But I was good at sport, which was a big breaker – cricket, football – that helped a lot. People sort of like sports, and it sort of calmed the waters a bit. But I still wasn’t allowed in the hotels and stuff like that.

At home I was always last to do everything. Like, we didn’t have any electricity; we didn’t have all the mod cons. When I knocked off school, I had to go and get firewood, had to boil the pot with the big copper, fill the bath up so the girls could have their bath, and there was three of them. They all had to have their bath, and then I had to have a bath and I had to use their water. That’s how it was all the way through until we moved into Raymond Terrace where we had electricity. I spoiled them by doing all the work for them and stuff. I had to be the one who had to dig the garden and grow the vegetables. I’m the one that had to cut the whole lawn with the hand-push mower. I’m the one who had to do the firewood. If the mosquitoes came, I had to go get the cow dung and burn it. The girls’ go swimming in the summer. They’d clean the house; that was it.

In the meantime I got kicked out of Mrs Smith’s home. So then a couple by the name of the Thomases, who used to drive our bus to school, they took me in and his wife, I owe a lot to her. He told me that I wasn’t brainy enough to join the Army or the Navy or the Air Force. She taught me after school, a couple of hours after school each day – English, history, and maths – and it helped a lot. When I left school, I got a job in his brother-in-law’s sawmill.

Then came the time that I applied to join the Navy and they sent me the entrance forms. I had to go to HMAS Cerberus after I went to Rushcutters Bay and passed my exams. I had to go to HMAS Cerberus in Melbourne, and I stayed there for three months. But I just couldn’t handle the discipline, and I was told service was no longer required. I had a German officer, and I was the only Aboriginal in the outfit, and there weren’t many Aboriginals in the forces. It didn’t matter what I did, I just couldn’t do it right. He just didn’t want me in his outfit. I was a blot on his outfit, being black. I was even causing the other guys hassles as well because I wasn’t doing stuff right. They had to do the same punishments as I had to do, and they were supposed to get onto me to make me do it right. I remember saying to some of the guys, ‘I keep getting knocked to you by this lieutenant. I want you to do it for me’. Well, when they did do it right, some of them said, ‘No, mate, that’s deeper. That’s deeper than what you think it is. He just doesn’t want you here’. So, I had no option but to get out of there. But they wouldn’t let me out – they said we’ve spent too much money on you, so you either have to go try for the Air Force or the Army.

4 Name changed to protect identity.
When I got discharged from the Navy, the Thomases didn’t want anything more to do with me. So, in the meantime, the Smiths had moved into Raymond Terrace. When I went home I went back to see my sisters, and Aunty said that I could come back there. When I went back, I told them that it wasn’t going to be for long because I was going to go back to the Army, and no one believed me. I just wanted to get away from home in Raymond Terrace, so I was willing to take anything. If I could take what I was getting at home, I could take anything. I finally did go back to the Army, and I passed the tests, and the rest is history with my war record. It turned out that I didn’t have to have too much worries — especially in the Army — and I went through to be a full corporal.

When I got into the Army and I left Kapooka after the recruit training, being in the top 10, I was told that I could go to whatever branch that I want to — Engineers, Infantry or whatever. I picked Engineers, and then I went to the School of Military Engineering in Sydney. After I finished that I got posted to 1 Field Squad, 17th Construction Squadron and they sent us to New Guinea. I was 18 years old when I hit New Guinea in 1963. I did 12 months in New Guinea as a field engineer building toll booths, roads, bridges, like construction mobs do in the Army. That was pretty exciting, and I was pretty happy and so was everybody back home because they knew I wasn’t coming back!

I really knew I was going to make something of myself when I got in the Army because I liked it. It was something that I liked doing. It was free; there was no prejudice. There was absolutely none. When we went overseas, New Guinea played rugby league all the way through the region, so I played rugby league with Wewak. It was virtually an Army team because there were hardly any Europeans in New Guinea at the time. I played in Wewak, Malolo, Mt Hagen, Port Moresby, all those areas. We would fly out a DC-3 for our whole football team, and we played. Then the local Papua New Guineans would have a get-together after the game because we couldn’t fly out that night because of the clouds and stuff. So we were stuck there overnight, so they put on a party for us and stuff like that. It was really good.

We had the locals cleaning in the canteen and all that sort of stuff. We used to do exercises with their soldiers once or twice a year. They were fantastic soldiers and better than us in the jungle. You could not see them at night-times and stuff, and they could be right on top of you. So they were pretty good at their jobs. No wonder the Second World War guys — the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels — no wonder they appreciated them so much. But we never had to go to war with them; we just had exercises.

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5 See Riseman, Defending Whose Country?, chapter three; Angels of War, produced and directed by Gavan Daws, Hank Nelson and Andrew Pike. 54 min., The Australian National University, Research School of Pacific Studies, 1981, videocassette.
After we did the 12 months there, we came back to the School of Military Engineering. Then they sent us to Borneo for six months to fight the Indonesians in Borneo with a British outfit called the Screaming Eagles. It was 60,000 British troops in Borneo, and there were about 200 to 300 Australians, which were us. We were building a road so the British could get their supplies through. We carried live ammunition and stuff like that, mainly for the animals, like the orangutans and all the fierce animals they have over there. But we never got into any contact with the Indonesians. We were more or less billeted next to the Ghurkhas, and they are good soldiers as well. But we never had much to do with them; our job was to build the road and to go home, so virtually that’s what we did.\(^6\) We were only there six months but it was in the winter in Australia, and the British Lions rugby league team were coming down to play Australia. They stopped off in Borneo to visit their troops and the Australians got a team together to play the British Lions in Borneo. It was a pretty close game because they couldn’t handle the heat, coming from England. It was a friendly but it was pretty hard. So I played against the British Lions. That’s one thing a lot of people can’t say.

When we came back to Australia, we were there back home and that was the end of ’64. At the end of ’65, they asked for volunteers to go to Vietnam. Well, no one knew what Vietnam was or where it was, and we were young, crazy, and full of adventure, so all of us young boys stepped forward. Even the brass didn’t know what we were going to do there.\(^7\) All we knew was that we going over with 1 Battalion, 1 Battalion Battle Group, and 105 Battery, and we were going to be attached to these guys. Nothing was concrete of what we were going to do, and we thought it was only going to be a picnic – a couple months here, there, and home. When we got there, it was shocking! It was the rainy season, and we went over on the HMAS Sydney. All our stuff was still on the Sydney and we only had nothing – just rifles and bullets. It was raining cats and dogs, so we had to borrow tents off the Yanks.

It’s the first time I ever saw prejudice so blatantly as when we had to have a shower with the Americans. There, in the US 173rd Airborne, they had black lines and white lines. The whitefellas lived here, the blackfellas lived here. The blackfellas ate in this mess and the whitefellas ate in this mess. Here we are in our outfit, we had three Aboriginals: one Thursday Islander [Bill Unmeopa], me, and Billy


Coolburra, who came from Arnhem Land. Even the Australians were shocked at the racism there because they’ve never seen it so blatant. It became apparent that they – the 173rd – come from the South of the USA, and they were shocking racists. But surprisingly, they treated us Aboriginals pretty much the same as they treated themselves. They didn’t treat me different because, probably, I was from another country, and that was okay I suppose. They probably knew that I couldn’t take anything that belonged to them. But the funniest thing about it was we first went out into the jungle with these guys. When they picked up dead soldiers and put them on the chopper, it didn’t matter whether he was black or white; they’d pick him up and put him on the chopper. When they got back to base, they had different morgues. The black man went in the black morgue; the white bloke went in the white morgue. Here we are – we’re fighting for democracy, for Christ sake, and equality between people and countries, and they’re carrying on like that. I just couldn’t believe it.

We ended up building our own canteen to keep away from these racist things because they carried guns into their canteens. What a volatile mix! Guns and beer and drugs; they were heavily involved in drugs. Our commanding officer said, ‘I’ve seen enough of this. We’ll build our own’. We were only with them for six months, but the amount of things that we saw and did in those six months is absolutely incredible. The racism sticks with me the most in that. After our six months there they said, ‘Rightyo. We’re moving. We’ve got the Australian taskforce coming over. We’ve got to move down to Vung Tau and clear the area so the majority of our taskforce can move in’.

There was only one major personal issue that I had with the Yanks. We had a day off. We went into the local town in Bien Hoa. There was a bar there called the Cherry Bar where we used to drink. It was getting around six o’clock in the afternoon, and these MPs came in and told us that we had to drink up and get out. Well, we weren’t American soldiers; we were Australian soldiers, so we told them, ‘Piss off! Got nothing to do with us. We’re only here helping you fight the war’. He didn’t take too kindly to being told to piss off. He just walked up with his nightstick and knocked all of our drinks off the table. I stood up and I punched him straight in the chest and hit him just above the heart and

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8 Billy Coolburra actually came from Palm Island. There was a fourth Aboriginal man in the outfit – Frank Mallard. Cook did not realise that Frank Mallard was Aboriginal until, a year after this interview, I told Cook that I had subsequently interviewed Mallard. Mallard’s Aboriginality was also unknown to the commanding officer Sandy MacGregor, who published a narrative about their unit in Vietnam. See Sandy MacGregor, as told to Jimmy Thomson, No Need for Heroes (Lindfield, NSW: CALM Pty Limited, 1993), especially pp. 81–90. This opens up other questions about racial passing among some Indigenous service personnel.

dropped him straight to his knees. After that, MPs came from everywhere out of the woodwork. I don’t know where they were but they came from everywhere. It was on – a bar fight. They locked us up; they handcuffed us all together and marched us down the street, about seven or eight of us. You had MPs both sides of us, walking us down to the police station. They locked us up, and they let everybody go – bar me and Danny Ayoub. I don’t know why they kept us, but they did. On the way back, they’ve got us handcuffed in the back of their little jeep and they were talking on their two-way, so I unscrewed all of the buttons on their two-way and threw them out the back and pulled all the wires off. They couldn’t hear their two-way and thought it wasn’t working. So they stopped, stood us up, and they handcuffed us to the roll bar and that’s the way they brought us into camp. We were pretty bruised up where they punched us out. My captain said, ‘How dare you put those handcuffs on that tight?! I have highly trained men here! We haven’t got that many of them over here! If they have to stay out of the jungle, I haven’t got men to put there in their place. How dare you?! Just keep away from my men!’ So we really gave it to the American brass. My captain, Sandy MacGregor, wrote a letter to General Westmoreland [commander of US operations in Vietnam 1964–68] saying ‘I’d be a bit more gentle when you’re arresting my soldiers – be a bit more discreet’. Westmoreland said, ‘I’d like your soldiers to be a bit more discreet when they’re getting arrested’. So that was my closest call to seeing General Westmoreland!

We always fought on the fringes of the Americans because we moved together as a group and the Americans moved together as a group. When we got into a contact, they’d be probably 100 yards away and we’d be over here. It’s only when the battle had finished that we had mingled, to go over and see what happened and to see the enemy, which were probably in the middle. As to being attached to the Americans – oh, I’m glad we weren’t. The 173rd were a paratrooping mob but they were pretty good, the majority of them. But there were some elements in them that you wouldn’t want to be caught in a gunfight with because they’d probably shoot you.

After about six months we were sent off to Vung Tau. That’s the rice bowl of South Vietnam at the time. We were south of Saigon. When we cleared all the area, we had Australian headquarters come over, plus two more battalions – a total of about 5,000 men. When we got all of them settled and put a water point in, which took us about three months, they moved us up the front to Nui Dat. We had to set up Nui Dat as well so that the other battalions could come up. Virtually that’s all we did – set up camp, move, clear the area, set up camp, move, set up camp, clear the area. That was for the rest of the Australian forces coming through.
The Battle of Long Tan took place on the 18th of August, ’66. Two days before the Battle of Long Tan, we were out doing a clearing and we stopped to have a smoke. As I was cleaning my pistol, it discharged and I shot myself. It went in my leg and came out the other side, and I had to get Medivacked back to camp. Then they put me in a hospital in Vung Tau, which was an American hospital with American nurses. Two days later, I heard of the Battle of Long Tan. The same guys that I was out with were the guys that got caught up in the Battle of Long Tan. They had all the speakers open reporting the battle from the helicopters and the staff. The Viet Cong were trying to overrun our camp at Nui Dat. If I hadn’t gotten shot, or shot myself, I’d have been in the Battle of Long Tan.

I came home, and then they sent me back over. They wanted me to join back up. I was pretty high up in my Army career at the time. And when I went back home they said, ‘Cookie, we’re going to send you to Malaya for two years’. I said, ‘No way! I’m not going to Malaya! I’m due out in another 13 or 14 months. You’ve got to have two years to go over there’. Snowy Wilson – Billy Coolburra’s brother as he called him – he was on the trip going back to Vietnam. So they said, ‘All right, we’ll sort this out. Snow, you’re going to Malaya. Cookie, you’re going to Vietnam again’. I said, ‘I’ll cop that’. I wanted to square the books because I had missed the Battle of Long Tan in August; we came home in September anyway. So it wasn’t a sense of I wanted to get home early or I was scared of doing anything. That’s why I went back [in 1968].

Somebody’s looking after me. I don’t know if there’s a God or anything, but the same thing happened to me on my second tour. It was a scorpion. Before the Battle of Coral [in May 1968] I was supposed to take my section out on a listening post, an ambush. I was leaning on the sandbags and a scorpion crawled up my arm, and it bit me. I pressed it, and it bit me all the way up. I crushed it, and then they had to put me in the hospital bunker. That was around the Tet Offensive on my second tour, when they hit us with everything. They wiped my section out – wounded and killed all bar Murray Walker, my second-in-command. When I came out of the bunker the next morning, and I walked, the gun-smoke in the air was like a deep fog. You could smell the cordite and you could tell something really bad had happened. They wouldn’t even let me go back to see the boys, because I didn’t know what had happened to them. They threw me on a chopper and sent me back to camp. That’s where I found out that my section had just about been wiped out. So it was two things: that with the Battle of Long Tan, and then Coral – a bloody scorpion saved me. I went over the hill; I went troppo. They sent me back to Australia. I ended up in Concord for about six months; that’s the Army rat house in Sydney. They filled me up full with bloody tablets and Christ knows what. Yeah – it’s not a very good feeling.
Not once was my race an issue. In my section, Bobby Bowtell was our corporal and our lance corporal was Ross Thorburn. Then Bob got killed in the V.C. [Viet Cong] tunnels and they made Ross up to full corporal, and they made me his lance corporal. So, I took precedence over all these other guys. They could have come from any other section as well, because they were more senior than I was. But because I knew my job, and I knew the guys, I got made up to lance corporal. Never did I have any prejudice pinned on me in the Australian Army. Not once; not from anywhere. That’s why it runs so smoothly.

I only had one person writing me letters – that was my older sister Dianne. She was not able to upset me after I was over there shooting people and stuff like that. She didn’t want to put any more worries on me. In the meantime, I had two kids with a woman. I wasn’t married to her but I had these two kids. She was pregnant before I left, and she used to write me letters and stuff like that. But she was only young, too. While I was back home on leave six months in 1966–67, she got pregnant again. I went back over and she said, ‘I’m pregnant again; you know that? You’ve got to get out of the Australian Army’. I was thinking about my childhood and stuff. I had a bit of money plus I was going to get DFRP [Defence Fuel Remediation Program] and stuff like that. I said, ‘Yeah, I’ve got to get out of the Army’. So I said, ‘All right. When my time’s up, I’ll get out’. It was the worst mistake of my life. I am devastated now that I got out. When I came home the second time from Vietnam, it felt like I had been in the bush looking for anything you can shoot and 24 hours later I was sitting in my lounge in Green Valley with two screaming kids and a missus that I didn’t know whether I was in love with or not. And it was the kids that I couldn’t handle. The change was so horrific; I just couldn’t handle it.

When I got out of the Army, that’s when the real trouble really started. And it wasn’t with any people or civilians – it was with the police. The racism really hit me. I was always aggressive; when I got out of the Army, I was a very aggressive man. I had run-ins with police and stuff. They used to call me black bastard. ‘What the fuck are you doing with this black bastard?’ they’d say to my wife. I hated authority then. I was authority in the Army. Then, I could give the word; I’d shoot that bastard, and they’d do it. I came home and was treated like something not even human. I had fights with the police. If they couldn’t charge me with anything, they’d make sure that they’d get the main charge and put the others on schedule. What I mean by that is that they’ll make one big charge, and then other charges that they can’t solve or anything, like armed robbery, bloody assaults, murder and stuff like that. I was a wild boy, but I never killed anybody. I hit people a lot. Don’t get me wrong – I was no angel. Everything just sort of went haywire from the organised life I had in the Army to the disorganised life
that I had out in civilian street. My wife never helped much because she wasn’t ready for it. I wasn’t ready for it. But we stayed around each other and ended up having five kids.

I got into a fight. I was probably arguing with my missus and stuff like that. I’m not quite sure how it all started. The coppers came around again to see, and this is when they started throwing the racism stuff around – ‘What are you doing with the bloke anyway?’ and all this sort of stuff. Then they’d take me down the police station and lock me up. Then I started being an arsehole, virtually, against the authorities. Because the first time in my life, the only person that hurt me were the coppers when they came to the primary school in Taree and took me out of the Aboriginal Taree Primary School and put me in Kinchela Boys Home. They took me to court and that, I suppose, stuck in my mind as well. These people are not to be trusted. I never trusted coppers and not even till this day. So, one thing led to another. They said that I’m a thief; I’ve never been a thief. They said that I was always violent.

There was some violence with my wife. I back-handed her, but nothing really killing or anything like that. I have slapped her around, and that’s why the coppers kind of got involved first. I tried to get a job; I tried to get back in the Army. I even drove from here – I had a little Mini Cooper S – and I spent all my money. So, rather than drive down with my plates, I put these other plates on the Mini Cooper S, and on Broadway in Sydney I got picked up. I just came from the Army Recruiting Office, and just went in and said that I’d like to join back up, and filled out all the papers and stuff like that. These police pulled me over. They threw me up against the wall and everything, and said that I was in a car racket and everything, and said that I stole it. I showed them the papers that I owned it; it’s just that I put different plates on it and I was getting it through finance. So, they said, ‘Oh, you’re two payments behind’. They said, ‘We’ll keep that car and give it back to the finance company’. They were the police in Newtown. My brother-in-law came down and he bailed me out. And he said, ‘What’s going on, Cookie?’ I said, ‘Oh, mate, I’m just falling to pieces. I just can’t seem to get things working right’. Then I got a letter back from the Army saying you’re medically unfit, we don’t want you. All the wars were over after ’72. Well, they were all over so they didn’t need any NCOs or people that had experiences in many wars. So they didn’t want me. So, I came home here to Raymond Terrace.

There’s a big part of a lot in there that has to do with the authorities – like the police, and workers, bosses – that didn’t want to hire Aboriginals. I was a builder’s labourer because in the Army Engineers Corps you learn how to do all these sort of works, even know how to lay bricks. You become a demolition expert and that’s what we were classed as – demolitions and mine warfare. I could blow up anything. But employers couldn’t take you on because you had
no certificate. The Army never gave out any certificates for what you learned. That means that you go in and learn this trade and then you piss off and do it as a civilian and get more money. So they never really gave you any certificates to say what you were. You either stayed in the Army and did it, or you didn’t do it for anyone. I could drive a bulldozer, I could drive a grader, rotovator – you name it – because being in engineers, you have to learn all this stuff in case somebody gets shot.

But I found civilian life when I got out pretty hard. It had a lot to do with post-traumatic stress disorder. You go killing people over a two-year period – men, women and children – you get a bit of a complex about yourself. It’s not very nice some of the thoughts that you have in your mind and stuff like that, and they can never go. They’re there forever. Mate, they’d take you to the hospital – Concord Repat Hospital. They’d keep you there for about three or four months and give a bit of shock treatment. They’d shove tablets in you – lithium and Valium – that was it. Someone has a bit of a talk to you: ‘Oh, you’re all right now. You can go home’. I was probably in and out of there from the early ’70s to mid-’80s, probably twice a year, or something like that, trying to get help. There was no one around that knew to put their finger on what was wrong with us. At least now they’ve learned through their mistakes with us. The only thing that they could do was say, ‘Oh, give him a pension and shut him up’. So they gave us all a TPI [Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Veteran] and just wanted us to walk off into the darkness and not say any more about anything. To get my war pension I had to be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. I’ve been and seen specialists; I’ve even seen all types of people, and it all comes back to the war. I still have pretty bad nightmares. At times, I could be watching something on television – like see a movie – that night it will all start over again as flashbacks. I wouldn’t be able to get it [the war] out of my mind, and then it [the war trauma] goes to sleep; it’s in your subconscious. It just takes you back to where everything happened.

For instance, with Agent Orange, this is in my blood, and it’s never going to leave it. I fathered five kids to my first wife, and I’ve got twins in this town. I had twins at 50 in this town. One of my sons – the one that I said was born second – he’s got Albright’s disease. If he hits his arm, it’ll break because he’s got chalky bones. I never wore glasses until I got old, but all of my kids used to wear glasses because there was something wrong with their eyes and stuff. I was putting it down to this Agent Orange, and they kept telling us, ‘No. Agent Orange doesn’t do things like that’. Mate, I saw what it did to the people in Vietnam and to their fields. The jungle would be nice and green, and about 12 C-130s would fly over, and it’d be coming down like light mist. It’d go all over you, and within three days the jungle was dead. They came in with napalm and set the whole lot on fire. When I put pressure on my arm, a bruise line comes
up like I’ve been hit with a cat-o’-nine-tails, and that’s all in my blood from the Agent Orange. I’ve told these people that, and they said, ‘Oh, no, you’ve had that when you joined up’. I said, ‘When I joined up in this Army, I was classed medically L1. If I had something like that, you wouldn’t have taken me’.

I’d like to get back to this other part with the police and stuff. I’ve been locked up through violence like iron-barring people – hitting them with iron bars. They were other people, and you just can’t do that sort of thing; I know that now. I was just scattered – just gone. I was never a big drinker. It was my head. I wasn’t violent before I was in the Army. I couldn’t be violent because I was no one’s kid. I had to watch my p’s and q’s. Being in the Army sort of unlocked all that. I started saying, ‘Shit, I’m as good as anybody else. I’ve led white men into battle. I’m over all this crap. It’s all gone’. But it wasn’t. The first fight I had, he said to me, ‘They said, “Oh, there’s Cookie. He’s just come back from that Vietnam”’. He said, ‘Oh, yes, probably a black coward’. You don’t let things lie like that, so I went and knocked him clean out and showed him what sort of a violent man I was. And that sort of put a scare right through them.

When I got into trouble with the police and that, my older sister would fly down. She would come to court with me, and stuff like that, and sort of fix up money. The coppers were pretty big in those days, and if you wanted to pay them some money, maybe they’d forget about the charges and stuff like that. In the Army, if you said something, which I was used to, there was no corruption – and it worked. In the police force, they’d say, ‘Ah, well’. They said, ‘We’re going to charge him with malicious wounding causing grievous bodily harm. But if you’ve got a couple grand, we can drop the charges down to malicious wounding only – give the grievous bodily harm a big miss and it could mean only a fine’. My sister said, ‘Where’s your boss? I want to talk to your superior’. They thought she was a dummy, and the police didn’t think that I had any support. My sister, when she said that, also went and told my solicitor. My solicitor came down, and he said to me, ‘You’re going to walk out of this today; the charges are going to be dropped’. So, those coppers, rather than making a deal and charging me and having to bring up that they offered me a bribe, they dropped the charges. That’s the sort of thing that’s stuck in my craw with the police force.

I was always working when I was not in prison. I worked with a company with the name of Muse and Richards. They were a couple of young carpenters, and they used to do work all over Sydney. My brother Harry and I, we worked with them. One of the jobs we did, we built the new office blocks and that for Channel Two at Gore Hill in Sydney. But their main job was putting in bank vaults. I was never an armed robber and that, but these coppers in the earlier times tried to say that I was a murderer. They had no proof; they just strung it on me and tried to get a confession about something. And what they normally
did is they got you for the violence, like in bashing somebody, and they’d say ‘You’ve done all these’ – like breaking and entering or speeding and all this sort of stuff, and they haven’t got a clue who did it. They put it on your rap sheet and said that they’re putting it on schedule. Now, that means that they don’t have to read it out in court, but the judge looks at it and says, ‘Oh, he’s also getting charged with all these’. They couldn’t put any more than four on there because it’d get a bit worrying, but some of the judges I reckon were just as corrupt as some of the coppers.

On some occasions, I was charged and convicted. This was in the ’70s. In prison, there’s a lot of Aboriginals. They’re like weightlifters; they had muscles, because you had nothing else to do – just do weights and stuff like that. It was the cream of the Australian Aboriginal youth back then that was locked up – a whole generation of them, and it was sickening to see. Some were there for good reasons – for murder and stuff like that – but some of them were there for paltry bloody things like stealing a car, and stuff like that. It should be only a fine or something. I didn’t know the biggest majority of what they were there for. I’ve forgotten the biggest majority anyway. They’re all in their mid-20s, early 20s. I said, ‘Why can’t they just grab these guys and put them in the Army? They can do it with white guys in the National Service. Why can’t they do it with these blokes?’ But it doesn’t work that way.\(^{10}\)

Prison was run by Aboriginals until the Lebanese came along. Between the Aboriginals and Lebanese, they run prisons, and the triads now as well. Up until the time that I got there, it was in the early ’80s when I got out, the triads were there and the Lebanese. I was running the show because I had a lot of brains compared to the biggest majority of them. I could talk to other people, and I knew how to talk with authority. I was running them, which means you can get their buy ups, so you can get cigarettes. The prison officers back in those days were corrupt as well. If you wanted drugs brought in, you could get them brought in through the prison officers. And the bookmakers – it was like being at Randwick – they’d have a big bowl of prices and horse races up. Even the screws used to bet against the crim that was running it. Taking the bets, that money would be sent out with the police to buy stuff to bring in for certain prisoners, and I was one of them. I’ve always tried to climb to the top of the tree; it didn’t matter what I was in. So I worked that out pretty well.

I only ever met one other Vietnam veteran in prison. He was a white, but he was a lot worse than me. He used to run around doing armed holdups. In prison I saw some very distressing things. If you showed any weakness, you were in

trouble yourself. My Army training prepared me, though. I often said it’s like
doing another six years in the Army. I was used to the solitary life – living in a
cell on your own and stuff like that – I could cop that. What sort of strung me
out a bit was there was no future locked behind walls. I wasn’t sitting on my
laurels, getting around the end of my time.

In my first time I was in there I got sent to Wilson’s Island. It’s a low security
prison; for the last 18 months of my time I was sent there. I played two seasons
of football against the Central Coast Rugby League. And I played cricket – in the
summer we had a cricket team. So it was like a massive big holiday. It’s on an
island in the middle of the Hawkesbury River, and it was like a holiday. People
used to come up past us fishing. We had no fence on the island, and it was about
two miles long. We used to run around it keeping training for rugby league.
I ended up there probably because I was an ex-soldier and stuff like that, and
I wasn’t a real pain in the arse even in the big gaol.

I went back in prison for when I iron-barred those people for robbing my house.
I got five years each for the three people, but they ran it concurrently and then
gave me two and a half years as a parole thing. They sent me to Silverwater; that
was a minimum security prison then. The last six months of my time, I applied
for a university course – Associate Diploma in Social Welfare. I got accepted,
so I used to leave the prison every morning and go to the McCarthy University
at Liverpool in Sydney. I’d catch a train, go the university, and then catch a train
home back to the prison. I reckon it was because I was well-behaved, so that’s
the reason they let me out. Getting around the end of my time, I had to have
some sort of an experience to get back out into civilian life. So I decided I’d do
this course. The only reason I did it, I mean, is because I was getting two days a
week taken off my time in prison. I did two more semesters after that, and then
I just didn’t go anymore. I should’ve. It would’ve been good.

I was already reformed. I knew what discipline was. I knew what it was all
about before I went in. I think that’s what made my time much easier in prison
compared to some others. It’s just the isolation of it, but then again, I was
isolated in Vietnam, I was isolated in Borneo. All you saw was jungle; all you
were looking at here was walls. I’m pretty self-disciplined in a lot of ways. That
came with a lot of hard work, but I can take it. I often thought if I’d got captured
in the war, would I be able to shut up or would I spill my guts? I think I’d have
been able to shut up.

I was living in Sydney then, and it happened right up until about mid to late
’80s. I was haywire back then. I came out of the Army and I wasn’t trained in
any sort of skills. So I was just in no man’s land really. I didn’t have a place to
call home; home was here. I pulled myself together and I decided to come home.
I rang my sister and she said, ‘Yeah, come home and stay with us’. Everything
panned out. Then I came home here, and got with my brother-in-law and sister. And everything just worked out. See my sister, in this town, has the biggest hardware shop north of Newcastle – Home Hardware, H & D Home Hardware. My sister and her husband own that. They employ about 20 to 30 people, and people look up to them now. Even I do because of the work that she’s put into it. But people have got to the stage where the racism doesn’t mean anything, because the biggest majority of the people in this town have backgrounds that are Pommies, or new Australians like Yugoslavs. So they have nothing to be racist about. They’ve all come from another country. So how can they be racist against the person who comes from here? That’s the way they look at it now.

I’ve had a few fights with racist blokes around this town. This happened about 10 year ago. He said to me, ‘Cookie, what’s the definition of Irish cheese?’ I said, ‘I don’t know’. He said, ‘It’s got a coon on top’. I said, ‘Are you calling me a coon?’ And he said, ‘Yes’. So I head-butted him, and I split him right down the head. Three hits later I knocked him clean out. To this day, that same man won’t talk to me. Yet most of the people I know associate with either one of us. Other than that, that was probably the last blue I had was 10 year ago. So, from there to this day – nothing. Before joining the Army, I never had the guts to challenge racism. Nor could I do anything about it and I had no one to turn to. When I grew up, I didn’t have to worry about turning to anybody because I was it. Outside of me, I’d do the same for my sisters if they received any sort of racism and stuff like that – not a problem.

So, we five siblings all got back together because we’re the only people we have in our lives. We know what it is to have family – having it taken away so early – and that’s why we stick to each other so badly, even though we have the biggest arguments about things and stuff. My older sisters reckon I spend too much bleeding time in the pub when I should be working more often, and stuff like that. But, other than that, we all love each other. My brother-in-law had a mill next door to the hardware store where he used to mill all his own timber. I used to work in the mill section – me and his younger brother. Then, when he bought the farm, I went and lived on the farm. I renovated the house along with a good carpenter mate of mine, and I put in all the posts on a 50-acre block. I used to drench their cattle, send them to market. I was a real farmer. I loved it. I did it for 11 years, and then he sold it to his son. So, yeah that’s all I’ve done. I work around Raymond Terrace; I’ve got some good friends, go fishing every now and again. I’ve got no worries, not a worry in the world. I get a TPI pension now, and they give me pretty good money. But if I ever need any, I’ve always got work. I’ll go over the farm, do a bit of work, or do a bit of work at his business out here in Heatherbrae.
The relationship with me and my five kids from my ex-wife has been volatile. They’re all young men and women now. One son lives in Sydney; my daughter lives in Brisbane. One disabled son with chalky veins lives in Newcastle and works for Spotlight. They only gave him until he was 15 to live and he’s well into his 40s now. The youngest one, he’s in the Army. And my other son was in the Army in 3 Battalion – the two youngest ones in the Army. He ended up having a motorbike accident, so he got out and he’s been a prison officer now for nearly 25 years. But I don’t have much to do with all of them. I’ve got grandkids to them, but they don’t come home and see dad anymore. I’ve also got twins in this town and they’re 14 – a boy and a girl. I have a lot to do with them, but they don’t live with me. I, like I said, I couldn’t look after kids, so they stay with their grandparents. They bring the twins up, but if they find they want anything – any money for uniforms or whatever they want – I see them every now and again, and I give it to them. I tried to have relationships with them all. When my wife and I split up, she had two of the kids and gave the others to her sister. I had them at times come and live with me, but I just couldn’t handle kids. I just couldn’t.
I was just never meant to have kids because of my upbringing. They all understand that kids couldn’t live with me. It is a bit because of both my childhood and my Vietnam trauma. Everything is thrown in together, but it’s mainly because I’ve got no love in my body. I can’t love anybody; I’ve got no feelings for anybody. I might like some people. But, even when I get a girlfriend and that, it usually only lasts a week. And then the love that they’re craving for and want is just not there. So, it’s damaged me in a lot of ways. It’s pretty hard; I know I’d like to experience it, but I’m a little too old for it now.

My battalions have a reunion every four years. The last one I went to was in Perth for my second tour. If you’re in any sort of trouble, these people will help you out. I just didn’t want to tell them earlier in the piece that I was in the trouble that I was in with the police and stuff like that because they wouldn’t have been all that helpful at that time anyway. After I got back I was never in touch with any of them then. It’s only since we’ve gotten older, and I’ve got a stable life, that we started to get back in contact with each other. A lot of them didn’t even know that I’d been in prison. They’re up me about not telling them, and they could’ve helped and all this sort of stuff. What I didn’t know at the time is that there was a network of help through the outfit guys. It was a network that I could’ve tapped into. But I was so proud and did not want anybody to know what happened to me, because I was their corporal of all people. I just let it wash. But maybe I should’ve swallowed my pride and rung one or two of them. They all had mothers and fathers that they could fall back on. I had no one, and it was vastly different. Even today some of them can probably still go and see their mother and father. I can’t; my only ones are my sisters and brother. So, that’s the difference of support between them and me. And they know a bit about the Stolen Generations and where we all come from and stuff, and this is why I think they are reaching out for me now. It makes it a bit touching. At the time they didn’t know anything about my removal. They just thought I was just an out and about family man. They didn’t even worry that I was black; they didn’t even question it.

With doing the two tours in Vietnam, it’s pretty hard for me to manage both battalions’ reunions. I did one lot with the all-regulars and one lot with the National Service boys. All of my outfit – bar me – were National Service in my second tour. The first tour we were all regulars. It showed – the difference in training – with losing all of those guys in my second tour, compared to only losing one in my first tour. It means a lot to be trained properly, and National Service is no answer for wars because they’re just not well-trained enough. But as far as reunion goes and that now, I’m going to one this Anzac Day [2010] in Tamworth. This is for the National Service boys; they’re coming from all over Australia, and I’ve had about 10 of them ring me already to make sure that I’m going. I’ve got my second-in-command Murray Walker flying in from Perth and
coming up here to make sure that I go to this reunion. He says, ‘You come in our car or you follow us in yours. But you gotta be there because the guys are not getting any younger, and they want you to be there’. So I’ve gotta go.

For one reunion in Perth I went around Australia, and I got stuck in Broome because my car broke down in Katherine and I had to get it fixed. When it got fixed, I was way behind schedule and I could only make it to Broome. Well, there’s a lot of Vietnam vets that travel a lot. We met up at the RSL and then we went to the cenotaph and then after that we went back to the RSL. The funniest part about it is that I had taken my books and everything with me to show the guys at the Perth reunion. When I got to Broome, and we were all in the RSL drinking, they were talking about the Battle of Long Tan and all these people and were saying, ‘Yeah, well it … ’ And I said, ‘I was there’. They said, ‘What?!’ I said, ‘I was in Vietnam at Nui Dat at the Battle of Long Tan’. The stories that they were telling shut up because they were nowhere near Vietnam when the Battle of Long Tan took place. You can tell that from their service on their medals. I had mine on and it’s got ’65 see, and I can sort of tell on the medals. And you can see ’72, ’68.

Eventually at the Perth reunion I realised that when some of the men finally got out of the Army after doing 20-odd years, two of them turned out to be racists. Well I didn’t expect any of them to be sort of racist, but I found then those two to be racist. One was a cop who worked near a remote Aboriginal station up the top of Perth. He talked about them as if they were a piece of furniture or something. And I’m sitting there listening to him, and I pulled him up over it. This was the last time I went to the reunion in Perth. When I pulled in at his house, we went down to his local to have a few beers and stuff. And the way he talked to me about people that he used to be in charge of – like, ‘I was posted here, and I was expecting it to be something like our Army posting’. But he was the boss there, and some of the things he said and did sort of struck me as being racist. It was never so prevalent – here I am, I’m dressed up with all my medals, and I’m with my second outfit in Perth, and three guys walked up and they wanted me to march with them because I served with them in the first tour. I said, ‘No. I’m marching here’. But one said, ‘Ah, you black c***!’ No one’s ever said that to me – no one! So, out of all the guys I met in the Army, there was nothing like that said in Vietnam, maybe because I had a gun. They would never say that. I said, ‘Fuck off! What’s this business? I’m here with my second outfit; this is where I’m staying’. I haven’t talked to those men about any of this other stuff, but maybe it’s about time I did. That’s about the only racist thing or people that I ever found out of the 68 of us.

I’m a member of the RSL here in Raymond Terrace; I joined probably when I first came home. The thing is – they wouldn’t let me into the RSL clubs. I could be a member of their club, but they wouldn’t let me into their RSL. We had
no RSL here. We would all drink in the bowling club affiliated with our RSL. But, I went from here to Karuah – that’s only about a half-hour run down the road. They wouldn’t let me into their RSL because I was Aboriginal. This was in the early ’70s. And they said, ‘No way! You can’t come in here!’ I said, ‘Mate, I’m a fucking returned serviceman!’ I was with a policeman, as a matter of fact. Still they said, ‘You can come in; he can’t’. So, we just all went up to the local hotel and drank there and came back home. But the RSL here has put all our names on the war memorial – the Vietnam vets – we’re all on that war memorial down there. When they first put the names on, mine wasn’t on there. I went and saw them and asked them why it wasn’t there and people told me that they didn’t know that I ever went to Vietnam. I told them that I was the first one to go to Vietnam from this town – twice before any of the others got sent. So they ended up putting my name there, but it’s under the Second World War guys. Now I just go to the Anzac marches, through Raymond Terrace down to the cenotaph. Every four years I go to my reunion, if it’s close. I am also a member of the Vietnam Veterans’ Association of Australia.

Through the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, when I told them that I was Indigenous, I felt that things were lacking a little bit behind the others. No one’s come out and said it. I was out of the Army long before these other guys. Some of them did 20 years and stuff like that. They got out, and they got their TPIs long before I did. And yet I was fighting for it ever since I got out. Now, you ring up Veterans’ Affairs and you’ll have a Chinese or a Lebanese or some sort of ‘nese answer the phone. So, you don’t have any hassles there anymore.

I don’t class myself as Indigenous. See, it was all washed out of me through the adoption; I grew up with white people. If somebody started putting shit on me about blacks, I’d take that personal with me and that’s when I became violent. And I wouldn’t let that happen. You don’t talk to me about crap black and white. I’m as good as you, if not better. And that was my idea to prove all the way through. I didn’t have to go on any movements; I was a movement on my own. Kevin Rudd’s apology [to the Stolen Generations in 2008] was a bag of wind. If they were any way fair dinkum about the apology – I’m glad that it’s happened because it did – but didn’t Paul Keating say, ‘We were the ones that stole the land. We were the ones that raped the women. We were the ones’.11 That was only a carbon copy of that, worded differently. It means nothing; raped I was for the land that they stole. They owe us for the damage that they caused. I still don’t believe that I’m a full-blooded Aboriginal. I reckon some farmer up in Ebor had their way with my mum, and my dad couldn’t say a thing about it. I look so different from my brother and sisters. My name’s not necessarily really

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Dave Cook – it’s Dave Ritchie. But then again, Ritchie isn’t my only dad; he was my dad’s name. Cook was my mother’s name. On my birth certificate it says father: unknown, mother: Norma Cook. So that’s why I always maintained if my dad had been my father, they’d have put him on my birth certificate because we were living together. The whole family was. I believe there’s something astray there. I’m going out real hard to find if that’s true. I’ve been up there once to Ebor, and there’s a couple of old ladies there that I got talking to that I wanna go back and find out. If anybody’s going to know, these people sound like they do because they sound like they know everything. I can drive through Taree, I can drive through Kempsey, I can go through Nambucca Heads, and they say, ‘What’s your name?’ I’ll tell them and I’ll have people falling all over me and telling me, ‘Oh! I’m your relative!’ and all this. And here I am; I don’t know them from a bar of soap. Now, usually, you know your family. It doesn’t matter how distant or how far away they are, and I’ve lost all that.

The Stolen Generations need to be compensated so they can get on, and start bringing their family lives back together again. They’re gonna need money to do it. That was the Bringing Them Home report, right? I never heard anything much about it, but I remember sitting in a hospital in Newcastle, and that Bringing Them Home report was there and I was flipping through it and reading it. As far as Kevin Rudd’s apology – it’s all wind, sounds like he’s all wind anyway. It really doesn’t matter to me whether Liberal or Labor gets in. I don’t think I’ll see any change as far as compensation and that goes. That’s the reason why I went and saw my solicitor. Regardless, I’m 65 this year [2010]. Regardless of any decision that they make, he said, ‘We’ll let it go for 12 months. If nothing happens in the 12 months, we’ll go for it’. So, from 12 months after I seen him, if nothing happens, we’re going to go to the Supreme Court or wherever.

I only ever saw my mother again twice. There was nothing. It was like meeting a stranger. This was while I was in the Army. I went up once when I was in the Army and once when I was a civilian. She’s gone now; so is my dad. I never saw my dad again. We brought him here, and he died here. To tell you the truth, he didn’t look like me at all. But I call him dad. I’d call anybody dad then because I was reaching out for everything.

12 The Bringing Them Home report was the national inquiry that brought the Stolen Generations to national public attention. See National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Australia), Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).
Figure 2. David Cook and Captain Vissell, Cambodia
Source: Courtesy David Cook
Thinking about it all, I'd like people to think that I was a good soldier. From the reactions that I got from my second tour to Vietnam – which were all National Service boys; they only did the two years, so we can virtually call them civilians with a uniform. From their reactions, I think I did pretty well, and I think they accepted me pretty well. I don't think I want non-Indigenous Australians to treat us Aboriginal veterans much differently, but I'd like them to give us what's due to us. If they were in the same position, how would we want them to treat us? I'd like them to be not so backward when somebody wants a bit of money to try and get their life together because they've had it stolen from under them. I reckon they should be pretty supportive of that. Indigenous Australians, on the other hand, have never really had an Army. I mean, even if you asked the guys in the Top End from around Broome and all them areas where they have the Indigenous soldiers looking after the Top End of Australia, I reckon that's a good thing. You couldn't ask for a better people to look after it because it's their homeland. That's what I'd like them to do. I think the Army is the best thing in the world. I reckon National Service should be bought back and made three years – 12 months training and two years serving the arms for everyone – black, white and blue, men and women. There's nothing so beautiful than a bit of discipline. Even with all the hassles that I had with the coppers and stuff, they couldn't believe that I was so disciplined. This is what gets me – most of the statements that were read out by the coppers were written by themselves. They thought that I was an uneducated black and they wrote it that way. I've got people back in those times and they'd say, 'You got the wrong guy. He wouldn't say stuff like that! He's more educated than that'.