

# The Battle of Long Tan is on the big screen

By [Defence Health](#) • Sep 10, 2019



New movie *Danger Close* recounts the Battle of Long Tan. Robin Wesley, sister of the last Australian killed, describes how it reawakened 53-year-old memories.

Going to the movies is usually fun, but for Robin Wesley, a recent cinema trip was “quite daunting.”

“I was very worried that we would be affected badly,” says the 76-year-old. And with good reason—*Danger Close* is about the infamous Battle of Long Tan, in which Robin’s brother, Private Paul Large, was killed.

In June, Robin, along with several of Paul’s nieces, nephews and family friends, attended a preview as guests of the writer and director. Robin says they were well-prepared for the emotional roller-coaster of revisiting the bloody Vietnam War battle. “Paul was the last Australian to be killed [at Long Tan] so we knew to expect it then,” she says.

## Receiving horrendous news

This experience contrasts starkly with the day she learned about Paul’s death. “He was killed on a Thursday, but we didn’t find out until the Saturday,” explains Robin, who lives in Coolah (in central-western New South Wales) where she grew up with Paul and four sisters.

“The headlines in the paper that my husband had bought said about a skirmish and 18 young men had been killed. I said, ‘I think Paul’s in one of those battalions.’ Probably half an hour later, the policeman and our mayor came up to tell us the horrendous news. My husband and I then had to go and tell Mum and Dad, which was terrible.”

Paul was their only son. “He was a wonderful brother. He adored all of his sisters,” Robin recalls. “He was a little bit spoilt because he was our little brother. He was a happy young kid, always playing jokes on people.

“When he grew up a bit, my dad taught him how to use a gun. He and his mates used to go shooting in the hills around Coolah—get some bunnies for dinner or knock over a couple of roos,” Robin says. “They were all good shots.”

### **A conscript committed to doing his duty**

Memories of Paul’s conscription are “still very much etched in my mind,” Robin says. “We found out about it by letter and were devastated. A local man suggested Paul might be exempt because of his shearing work, but Paul would have none of it,” she says. “He said to us, ‘my number’s come up. I’m one of thousands of other young men from Australia. I’ve been called on to do my duty and I’ll go.’ He left Australia on his 21st birthday.”

In one of many letters, Paul wrote about his farewell march through the streets of Brisbane: “He heard a man with a big, loud voice in the crowd sing out, ‘good on ya dig’,” Robin reminisces. “He said that was one of his proudest moments.”

Thanks to his bush background and shooting prowess, Paul was made a forward scout and used a different gun to other soldiers. “It was a bit heavier and more efficient,” explains Robin.

### **The incredible battle**

The notorious three-hour battle occurred just 10 weeks after Paul arrived in Vietnam. The 108-strong D company were attacked by 2,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. The Australians received ammunition resupplies from RAAF helicopters, artillery assistance and final reinforcement from another rifle company.

Paul was the last of 17 Australians to lose their lives that day—the highest number of Australian casualties from a single engagement of the Vietnam War. A further 25 were wounded, one of whom later died.

His funeral was held in Coolah on 7 September 1966, at the church where he was christened 21 years earlier. “There were probably 2000 people at the church and outside,” Robin says. “There was a gun salute at the grave site when he was lowered down. People were saying it was beautiful.”

### **Paul’s legacy lives on**

Paul's story has continued to impact generations of recruits. Robin describes a letter from a Catholic army chaplain, in which he talks about the impact of Paul's story during a two-day character guidance course at Puckapunyal.

At the end of the course, Paul's identity is revealed. Robin reads from the letter: "The recruits always listen in electric silence and the expression on their faces reveals a sense of awe and great feeling and even solidarity with their newfound brother.

"Recruits over the past couple of years have written in their end-of-course validation comments like 'the picture and story of private Large got to me the most'.... After the recruits are gone [and] I'm alone packing up the room, I look at the picture of Paul and often say 'thanks for your help Private Large'."

His legacy lives on in the family, too. "The grandchildren, and even the great-grandchildren, know Paul's story. They grew up with it," says Robin. "Whenever they come to visit here at home, they never miss going to the cemetery to say hello to Uncle Paul."

Robin's granddaughter, Melissa Greenhill, is an employee of Defence Health.