

The Hon. Alan Griffin MP

Minister for Veterans' Affairs

**Transcript of Address at Ramp Ceremony for LCPL John
Gillespie**

Hanoi, Vietnam - 17 December 2007

Members of the family of Lance Corporal John Francis Gillespie;

Australian Ambassador to Vietnam, Bill Tweddell;

Major General Wilson;

Brigadier Bill Rolfe, Repatriation Commissioner;

Representatives of the Vietnamese Government and embassy officials;

Jim Bourke and his Operation Aussies Home colleagues;

Veterans,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

This final journey that Lance Corporal John Gillespie is about to embark upon is a sorrowful yet welcome journey.

The grieving that started 36 years ago, has begun again as a necessary part of bringing this fine soldier and family man home.

Today a grateful nation proudly bears its special duty and obligation to its fallen. Never is that obligation higher than to those who have done all that Australia has asked, and in doing so paid the ultimate price.

Lance Corporal Gillespie enlisted in 1969.

He was only 24 when he served and died here in Vietnam in 1971, and his body has been here since.

We Australians hurt when we have to leave a mate behind, and at this time of sorrow and solace the efforts of Peter Aylett and Jim Bourke of operation Aussies Home is recognised.

The story of the passing and recovery of Lance Corporal Gillespie is one of the spirit of Australian mateship at its finest.

They were in the Long Hai Hills, now the Minh Dam Mountains, to recover a wounded Vietnamese soldier when the medical evacuation helicopter was shot down, trapping Lance Corporal Gillespie beneath the wreckage, which burst into flames.

The RAAF crew fought to save their mate, but were unsuccessful.

Intense military activity in the area prevented recovery of Lance Corporal Gillespie's remains before the Australian forces' withdrawal from Vietnam.

Many years on, a group of Vietnam veterans – Operation Aussies Home – has worked selflessly to find and seek identification of the remains of Australian soldiers listed as Killed in Action, body not recovered.

Lance Corporal Richard Parker and Private Peter Gillson are already home thanks to their efforts.

They persisted with their inquiries, research and cajoling, to help us to where we are today.

The Australian Army recovery team has run a most careful and dignified operation to complete the mission so that we may start the process now to lay Lance Corporal Gillespie to rest.

It would not have been possible without the efforts of others, particularly the Australian Ambassador to Vietnam, Bill Tweddell, and the wonderful cooperation of the Vietnamese Government.

To the Government of Vietnam, Australia recognises and appreciates your generosity and helpful cooperation in the effort to find and identify John Gillespie.

We are here today with the family of Lance Corporal Gillespie and representatives of the Governments of Australia and Vietnam, the Australian Defence Forces and Vietnam veterans.

We hope this journey that is about to begin is one of healing, however painful it may be.

He has gone and soon he will return, carried by today's generation of servicemen and women, who like the rest of our grateful nation honour and remember the service and sacrifice of Lance Corporal Gillespie.

He will always be remembered.

[ENDS]