

'Came Back – Didn't Come Home': Returning from a War Zone

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Introduction

This chapter describes long-term art therapy treatment with an Australian Vietnam war veteran, and demonstrates how engagement with art materials may facilitate the safe expression of anger. For this combat survivor, art expression provided a release for traumatic visual images and explicit memories. Central to this process was the internal and external expression of rage, hate, hostility and resentment, which were the debilitating effects of unresolved post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Art therapy also provided an expressive outlet for self-harm, such as suicide attempts, self-mutilation and binge drinking. Particular aspects of this case demonstrate how art therapy provides a means to communicate strong negative emotions for which verbal language is ineffective. The client, PD, gave permission for his artwork to be shared, so that the effects of PTSD and dissociation on war trauma survivors might be better understood.

The Vietnam War

Between 1964 and 1973, the USA committed troops to the Vietnam War. Australia's involvement began in 1965. Before the outbreak of war, the USA administration committed economic and military support to the resistance movement in the southern region of Vietnam, influenced by the 'Domino Theory'. This theory held that if South Vietnam fell to the Communist regime, this would be followed by the fall of Laos, then Cambodia, Burma,