



## **Operation Vietnam: a New Zealand Surgical First**

Michael Shackleton. Published by [University of Otago Press](http://www.otago.ac.nz/press/) 2004. ISBN 187727691X. Contains 176 pages. Price \$34.95

In this 176-page paperback tome, Michael Shackleton, a respected Dunedin-based general surgeon, relates his experiences (in the early 1960s in Vietnam) providing medical aid as part of an extension of the then existing Colombo Plan.

His story is of a dedicated surgeon eager to establish a useful, credible non-partisan medical presence in Vietnam, frustrated by governmental promises that far exceeded reality. A concurrent theme is the role of his family (present in Vietnam after many delays) in the difficult times whilst Michael tried to establish the surgical service.

The book offers two perspectives: that elucidated by Michael himself, and that elucidated by his wife, Annabel, in her cheerful and optimistic letters which are produced verbatim. These two points of view are juxtaposed in the book to provide an interesting plurality to the narrative. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the entire book is the time in which the events unfold, a time marked by the inclusion of meetings with such politicians as Robert Muldoon, Roy Jack, and Keith Holyoake.

Michael Shackleton, through his experiences, is able to give an insight into New Zealand's position with regards to the Vietnam War, particularly the uneasiness the nation felt with its commitment to the war and its relationship to its major ally, the United States.

New Zealand's struggle with the Mighty US is mirrored in Michael's own struggles to establish a surgical service that was distinct from the American presence. The author has been able to give us a snapshot of New Zealand and its relationship to the World at that time, reflected in the particular difficult circumstances he and his family found themselves in.

Throughout the sagas of unmet expectations and frustrations, Michael Shackleton and his family maintain a commendable sense of purpose and fortitude, which ultimately makes the tale uplifting. Overall, a worthwhile read for those interested in New Zealand's involvement in the Vietnam War and in particular those who have had experience working for, or with, international aid organisations.

A commendable, factual, personal tale, well supported with photographs. Read and enjoy.

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