

The contemporary Veteran

Anzac Day is a chance to reflect, to remember and to give thanks. We are reinforcing that we will not allow ourselves as a Nation to forget that our true identity was forged during a time of extreme hardship; where service before self, courage, discipline, self-reliance and mate-ship became woven in the fabric of our identity.

Anzac Day as we know it today was arguably first observed 95 years ago, in 1923, in Albany Western Australia by Reverend Arthur Ernest White, a Church of England clergyman and Padre in the 44th Battalion, First Australian Imperial Force. Like today's ceremony, it was not to glorify war, to celebrate victories or lament bloody defeats; it was simply to remember those ordinary, humble men and women who put freedom for others before their own needs. Charles Bean, a war historian who landed at Anzac Cove on the 25th of April, account of two diggers in the trenches before the Australian assault on Lone Pine typifies this ANZAC spirit we hold so dear.

'Is Jim here'? enquires a soldier from the rear ranks. A voice in the fire step answered 'right here Bill'. At which time Bill asked if the chaps either side would mind making room for him next to Jim. 'Him and me are mates' he said – 'and we're going over together'

Jim and Bill, along with over 100,000 other Australians and New Zealanders now lie as silent witnesses to the future they have bequeathed us.

As the numbers of our veterans' of conflicts past sadly continues to diminish, I would like to take the opportunity to narrow the aperture slightly to focus on the contemporary veteran. The contemporary veteran has been on continuous war like operations for 19 years now. The contemporary veteran, you see, looks very much like me, my team, your Mum, Dad, Uncle, Aunt, son or daughter.

I have completed seven operational deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. I have had the highest honour of Commanding women and men during my last three deployments in Afghanistan. The majority of my team at Officers' Training School have deployed on war like operations. Some of my students who have chosen to Commission from the ranks have also served their nation on recent deployments.

Whilst the contemporary veteran has not seen the indiscriminate and senseless slaughter of their mates through battles of sheer attrition, they do know the profound sadness that accompanies death and the oft futility of war. Personally, I have had tears streaming down my sunburnt face in Afghanistan whilst the women and men under my command slow marched a mate into a Royal Australian Air Force C-130J for his very last flight. He was in an aluminium casket draped in the finery of an Australian Flag; a flag that was stained with the tears of his mates.

That flag now resides with his parents in Melbourne with equal measures of resounding pride and deep sorrow. He deployed in 2011 and was killed within 3 weeks of arriving in Kandahar Province. He was farewelled from Kandahar by some 3000 soldiers from 28

different nations. Australia sent two heroes home that day in caskets. Whilst war and conflict today are not sheer battles of attrition as they have been in our history, they are still defined by the men and women who selflessly devote their life to the protection of this great nation and the values and traditions that we hold dear; and we see as an inherent right. However, you don't have to look beyond the evening news to realise that freedom from oppression and dictators is not an inherent right for all; it is right we have now because of the courage of our forefathers and the constant presence of the members of the Australian Defence Force and her allies who are willing to defend our values and beliefs at home and on distance shores.

These 19 years of continuous operations has taken its toll though. We literally have thousands of Australians out there who have returned from far away deserts and seas that are broken, disillusioned, lonely, deeply sad and often severely traumatised. You see, you cannot live in constant fear for your life; lie awake wondering if the host nation soldier you are mentoring will shoot you while you sleep; be involved in the act of taking another's life; see your mates being blown up by an Improvised Explosive Device; learn of a mates suicide post his or her deployment and have an expectation that this does not affect you. Quite simply, it does. It may not be readily apparent, but as the deployments increase, so does the risk. Moreover, it is not only the serving or returning member who suffer. It is his or her entire family. They are the ones whom we entrust to pick up the pieces, to put us back together, to support us through no matter what. So the issue is a compounding one. For me, it was my beautiful daughters Jazmine and Jade that got me through; a heavy burden for someone so young.

This year, I would ask you to keep these women and men and their families in your thoughts and prayers. It is these people who walk amongst us, some not that proudly, that need us as a Nation right now. They don't need or want pity, they need our strength and assistance rebuilding their resilience to the point where they can walk tall again and work proudly in our society. Whilst it is imperative to honour the fallen and remember their sacrifices on ANZAC day, I would ask that we now refocus on supporting our contemporary veterans and families so as they do not become another casualty of war. It starts with a simple R U OK.

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