

Vietnam Veterans Memorial Day Service 2012

Address

by

Logan K Howlett, JP

Mayor

City of Cockburn

at

RSL Park, Spearwood

on

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Distinguished guests, Vietnam Veterans and other Veterans here today, serving men and women of the Australian Defence Force, ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys.

I acknowledge the Noongar people who are the traditional custodians of the land that we are gathered on this morning and I pay respect to their elders both past and present. I extend that respect to other Indigenous Australians who may be present.

As we gather here today to commemorate Vietnam Veterans Memorial Day Service we see for the first time at this location a poignant reminder of the red poppies that have long been a part of Remembrance Day, ANZAC Day and increasingly, other observances.

The 'Field of Poppies' stand tall and serve as a reminder of the blood shed on battlefields throughout the world.

Blood that flowed from the bodies of young men in the prime of their lives.

Blood that stained the earth.

And blood that has, and continues to leave, an indelible mark on our conscious as a nation and those of other nations.

I grew up in the era of conscription. It is a word that arouses the emotions whenever it is mentioned, even today.

Many of us may not know it, but Australia has had some form of conscription dating back to 1905 when the government of then Prime Minister Alfred Deakin introduced conscription for boys from 12 to 14 years of age and for youths from 18 to 20 years of age between 1905 and 1909.

A system of compulsory military training for all males aged between 12 and 26 was introduced from 1 January 1911.

Full conscription was attempted during WWI through two referenda.

Both were defeated.

The conscription issue deeply divided Australia and has done so for over a century, including the II World War, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

It has seen the downfall of Prime Ministers and governments and in many cases overshadowed the events of war taking place overseas where Australia participated.

One could say that while 'Our Boys' were away fighting there was a war of a different type taking place back on home soil.

Public rallies, street parades and overflowing public halls around the nation bore testament to the battle to win the hearts, minds and importantly for those involved in politics, the vote of those who had taken a position 'for or against' conscription.

Governments of the day continued to amend the Defence Act of the time to meet the ever changing security threats to the Commonwealth.

The Australian community's support ebbed and waned accordingly, based on the passion of the orators of the day and their ability to garner support for their stated position –

governments continued to fall and those defending Australia continued to be left in no man's land.

Today Australia does not have conscription.

For my generation, the Vietnam War was one that had a direct affect when in 1964 compulsory National Service for 20-year-old males was introduced under the National Service Act (1964).

The selection of conscripts was made by a sortition or lottery draw based on date of birth, and conscripts were obligated to give two years' continuous full-time service, followed by a further three years on the active reserve list. The full-time service requirement was reduced to eighteen months in 1971.

At the first ballot, on 10 March 1965, 96 marbles were drawn.

Thereafter the number decreased.

Only 30 marbles were drawn in September 1969 and March 1970.

All sixteen National Service ballots took place at the Melbourne headquarters of Tattersalls, a place many of us know well.

The first eleven National Service ballots were conducted in secret.

The media were allowed to photograph the drawing of the first marble and then they were ushered from the room. The actual birth-dates chosen were only made public in 1973.

The government representative who presided at the early ballots, Don Chipp, justified the policy by saying it was 'a personal matter between the Government and the lads.

I can well remember a mate of mine who I was crayfishing with at the time.

His notification papers arrived on what we called the 'bait' truck and created a huge amount of excitement in our somewhat remote community of 30 people.

So it was that a scruffy looking, long haired (salt encrusted) and somewhat undisciplined 20 year old left our small community for military training. He went on to serve in Vietnam.

We were amazed that what seemed like a relatively short time that our mate arrived back in our community to start work as a 'deckie' once again.

Almost unrecognisable with a neat appearance and short hair he worked just two weeks before he, along with his skipper tragically lost their lives at sea. The result of a tangled cray pot rope around the boat's prop.

His body was never found. His skipper's body, or what remained of it, found washed up on the shore weeks later.

He survived Vietnam only to be taken by the sea that washed against the shores of his homeland that he had been prepared to protect with his life.

The Vietnam and other Veterans before us today and those who have since passed on were also prepared to sacrifice their life for their country.

They, together with hundreds of Australians in the Vietnam War who lost their lives leave us a legacy of mateship, courage, sacrifice and gallantry that we should all aspire too in our daily lives, our contribution to the community and to building our national pride and spirit.

In soldiers' folklore, the vivid red of the poppy came from the blood of their mates soaking the ground.

To our Vietnam Veterans we owe each and everyone of you and your families a depth of gratitude that we could never hope to repay – let it be known that our presence here today is a mark of respect to you for the service you have given to Australia and its people.

That is why the ANZAC spirit is alive and well and burns within all that serve our great country in both war and peace keeping zones.

Lest we Forget

