

ANZAC Service Address 2012

By

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Mayor

City of Cockburn

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

We are privileged too be gathered here today at this Service, one of hundreds held in Australia and around the World to pay tribute to our ANZACS and to all who have followed in their footsteps.

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

Today I want to take you to a place not far from here – along Cockburn Road and down O’Kane Court that leads to Woodman Point, the location of the former quarantine station.

There nestled in the bush is a small cemetery containing several gravesites.

On days like today you can stand there with your eyes closed, feel the light breeze on your face, the warmth of the sun and hear the birds singing in the trees.

You’ll see amongst the bush, the gravesites identifying the last resting place of Sister O’Kane and Nurse Williams.

Who were these members of our nursing fraternity and why do they lay at rest in this somewhat isolated location, a location that was formerly known as Clarence?

What relationship do they have with keeping the ANZAC spirit alive and well?

Sister O' Kane and Nurse Williams were in a party of 45 Australian Army Nursing Service nurses travelling to the battlefields on the SS Wyreema in 1918.

They had not proceeded further than South Africa when peace was declared.

However their peace was to be short-lived.

While they saw no action in the battlefields their names are immortalised for their contribution to the war effort.

Returning to Australia the SS Wyreema arrived at Fremantle in December 1918 by which time the effects of the worldwide influenza epidemic were being felt.

20 nurse volunteers from the SS Wyreema and elsewhere were called for to work at the Quarantine Station Hospital to care for the returning soldiers.

Amongst the volunteers were Sister O' Kane, Sister Thompson and Nurse Williams.

These three were to die from influenza in a relatively short time together with another, Sister Ridgeway.

They were buried with full military honours in the cemetery adjoining the Quarantine Station Hospital, as were some twenty plus soldiers who also died in the epidemic.

In 1958 the War Graves Commission re-interred all military personnel buried there at the Perth War Cemetery with the exception of Sister O'Kane and Nurse Williams.

Sister O'Kane's grave was not moved because her relatives would not agree unless the memorial obelisk marking her grave was re-erected in the War Cemetery.

As this was against the War Graves Commission policy in that all grave markers were to be of a uniform size and appearance Sister

O'Kane remains buried in what I consider to be a place of tranquillity and great natural beauty – a part of the Australian bush landscape..

In the case of Nurse Williams it is not, at this time, known why her grave still remains there – marked by a simple weathered wooden cross.

The Memorial on Sister O'Kane's grave stands about 3 metres tall and reads:

*For Valour
In Honoured and Revered
Memory of
Sister Rosa O'Kane
A.A.N. Service. Late of
Charters Towers, Queensland
Died here 21st December 1918
of Pneumonic - Influenza
Only Daughter of Mrs J.C. O'Kane
R.I.P.
Erected by the Patriotic Committee
Charters Towers Comrade Nurses
and Queensland Friends*

These members of the nursing fraternity could well have returned to their former places of work and put behind them the call to duty when the SS Wyreema birthed in Fremantle.

Instead, they chose to use their nursing experience to help those returning service men to recover from illnesses that were life threatening and that eventually would take their lives as well.

As volunteers who stepped forward in our hour of need, Sister O' Kane, Sister Thompson, Sister Ridgeway and Nurse Williams personified the ANZAC spirit.

Is it any wonder that red poppies adorn those grave sites today and their memories live on through family members, friends and on occasions like this, when we can all share in a moment of reflection.

We are privileged to be gathered at this war memorial today and to be able to appreciate the sacrifices made by those we have lost to war and those who returned.

Take a moment to look around us today – the service men and women who have served Australia and its allies with pride are before you.

I urge you to think of the brave and gallant efforts of the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice and for those who brought back the wounds of war; some visible and some not so visible.

Even today, there are thousands of young men and women, serving in theatres of war and carrying out peace keeping duties in far distant lands, away from family and friends, away from home, fighting for our freedom and that of others, most of whom we will never know or meet.

That is why the ANZAC spirit is alive and well.

We must never forget the sacrifice that they are making and the fact that we live in Australia in relative safety, largely because of their efforts.

In closing, as we commemorate the brave acts of our Aussies and those of our Kiwi neighbours that led to the ANZAC tradition know in your own heart that the young men and women and children we see here today will continue to carry the Australian flag with pride in honour of our ANZAC's and all that will follow in their footsteps.

I leave you with a quote from the historian of the ANZAC legend, the renowned Charles Bean, he said:

“Their story will stand ... it rises,
as it will always rise,
above the mist of ages,
a monument to great hearted men, and,
for their nation, a possession forever.”

Lest we forget!