

RSL City of Cockburn Sub-Branch

Dawn Service Address 2020

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Mayor, City of Cockburn

Good morning one and all.

I would normally have delivered this address at the Dawn Service organised by the RSL City of Cockburn Sub-Branch at the Hamilton Hill Memorial. Each year thousands of people find their way through the darkness to this sombre location; a place of reflection and the sharing of a story or two.

Given the impact of the COVID – 19 Pandemic we are all at home. Many of us have taken the opportunity to stand in our driveways, torches in hand, to pay tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country, to acknowledge those who returned home from those wars, many carrying physical and mental scars, and to acknowledge the serving men and women of the Australian Defence Force.

This morning I want to take you on a journey back to a Commonwealth War Grave site in Europe where red poppies dominated the landscape.

They swayed gracefully in the soft summer breeze that drifted in from the nearby coast.

Crops grew in the fields and low grasses stretched off into the distance.

Old wooden fences and gateways helped define the fields while narrow roadways and white chalky paths weaved their way through them – pointing out the way to travellers.

It is a landscape that forever holds memories of times past.

My wife Patricia and I stood silently at a gateway, the soft summer breeze cooling our faces as we took in the fullness of the surrounding sounds.

Birds chirping and the squeak of a bicycle that had seen better days caught our attention.

The sounds of children playing at a school in the distance sent a smile through our hearts, their carefree laughing and energetic excitement a symbol of the freedom we enjoy today.

We swung the old wooden gate open and stepped onto the chalky path that wound its way through the brilliant white headstones standing before us.

The manicured lawns and flowers formed a protective arm around the inside of the cemetery's stonewalls and seemed to reach out to each and every headstone, like mates reaching out for each other.

In military parlance, each headstone seemed to be standing at 'attention', proud and strong in perfect formation.

Row-by-row they stood, their names, ranks, battalions and dates of birth and death emblazoned for all to see.

Australians, British, Canadians and New Zealanders stood as one.

We walked each row, stopping to look at the name of each fallen hero – someone's family member buried in a land that consumed young men and held them in its grasp forever.

We said a silent prayer for each of them.

Our thoughts were suddenly broken by the sounds of muffled footsteps and that squeak, squeak that we had heard earlier.

We looked up to see a man wheeling his bicycle, laden with working implements, towards a small shed on the far side of the cemetery.

He waved and smiled as he passed by on the chalky path.

He was a relatively short man with a dark tweed coat, long-sleeved blue check shirt, dark cotton trousers and black leather work boots.

He was stooped over, with both hands on the handlebars as he steered his bicycle through the pathways to his shed.

A beret adorned his head, and a bushy moustache and rough beard completed the picture.

Later, he talked to us in broken English and we learnt that he was the caretaker.

We conveyed through a warm handshake our heartfelt thanks for the high standard to which the cemetery had been maintained.

We knew that every family would be proud to know that their 'boys' were in such good hands.

And so it was that we left that cemetery with cherished memories of those who gave their life for King and country.

Whether it be a pristine white headstone, a simple wooden cross as in the case of Nurse Williams buried at Woodman Point, a stone obelisk such as that marking the grave of Sister O'Kane, also at Woodman Point or an unmarked or unknown gravesite we know that the ANZAC spirit remains as strong as, if not stronger, than that created by those ANZACS who landed on the beaches of Gallipoli so long ago.

As you reflect on what ANZAC Day means to 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.

I urge you to think of the young men and women serving in theatres of war and peace keeping efforts in far distant lands, away from home, away from family and friends, fighting for our freedom and that of others, most of whom we will never know or meet.

Think of those red poppies swaying in the soft breeze, of the children playing in the field, of the freedom we enjoy today – that is what our ANZAC'S laid down their lives for.

Lest we forget!