

Speech by Mayor Logan K Howlett, JP
City of Cockburn RSL Sub-Branch
Remembrance Day 2021
Hamilton Hill Memorial

Good morning Veterans, one and all.

Before moving to my speech proper, today is the 80th anniversary of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

The then Governor – General Lord Gowrie opened the memorial to honour those who died in World War 1.

It was a rainy day with 5000 people in attendance, including the then Prime Minister John Curtin.

I understand that 18 Victoria Cross recipients were also in attendance.

Today, in stark contrast just 500 people were present given the COVID-19 restrictions in place.

Now to my speech.

Several years ago I contacted Jeff Cook, a prolific writer of wartime poems who lived in country South Australia.

We had a wonderful telephone conversation at that time as I gained his approval to recite one or more of his poems at a forthcoming ANZAC Day Service or other commemorative service in the future.

He wholeheartedly agreed not even seeking an acknowledgement of his work- he was a true gentlemen full of pride and enthusiasm.

As it turned out he was a long standing local government councillor and mayor serving his community for 37 consecutive years before passing away in May 2020.

His colleagues remembered him as a fierce friend, a loyal servant to his community, a farmer, a singer, a poet, and a gentleman.

Jeff Cook's poems hold special sentimental meanings for so many who endured wartime service.

This poem in so many ways personifies those who endured the war or a military conflict and is titled:

Grandpa, What Did You Do In The War?

I'd been mowing the lawn and pulling some weeds, and slipped inside for a breather

I picked up the paper and turned on the news, not paying attention to either

When my grandson came in with a look on his face and a question that hit me full bore

An innocent question, no intention to hurt, "Grandpa, what did you do in the war"?

My skin went all creepy, I had sweat on my brow, my mind shot back fifty years

To bullets that thudded and whined all around, to terror, to nightmares, to tears

I was crawling through mud, I was shooting at men, tried to kill them before they killed me

Men who had wives and children at home, just like mine, just like my family.

"What did you do in the war?" he had asked, a question not meant to cause pain

But it brought back the horrors I'd left far behind in a deep dark recess of my brain

I remembered the bombs being dropped from the planes, the explosions, the screams, and the loss of a friend - or an enemy - but a life just the same, replaced by a small wooden cross.

The visions attacked me of tramping through jungles, hot and stinking, with leeches and flies

Of orders that seemed to make no sense at all - of distrust, of

suspicious, of lies

I lived once again all those terrible storms, the dysentery, fever, the snakes,

The blisters that lived with me month after month, all those blunders, and costly mistakes.

But how could I tell the boy all about that, 'Twould be better if he didn't know

It's a part of my life that I don't talk about from a good half a century ago

So I gulped, took a breath and tried to sound calm, and bid him to sit at my side

Then opened my mouth to say a few words, but the tears welled up and I cried.

He cuddled to me with a look of concern, and I mumbled of feeling unwell

Then took hold of myself, blew hard on my nose, while I thought of some tales I could tell

"What did I do in the war," I began, then the stories began tumbling out

And they flowed with such ease I felt better again, and got over my pain and my doubt.

I told him of how I had made many friends, how I'd trained and had gone overseas

Made a joke of how seasick I'd been on the way, almost dirtied myself when I'd sneezed

I told of the joy of the letters from home, of the hand-knitted socks and the cake

That I got for my birthday but three weeks too late 'cause it went somewhere else by mistake.

*We talked about mateship and what it had meant to trust someone else
with your life*

*And of when I came home to my family again, to my kids, Mum and Dad,
and my wife*

*Of the crowd on the wharf, the bands, and the pomp, and the pride I felt
in the parade*

*But I'm not ashamed that I hood-winked the boy, a decision I'm glad that
I made.*

*He can grow up without seeing fear in my eyes, or know of the terror I
knew*

*For he'd not understand - and neither he should - all those memories
that hit me anew*

*But maybe someday when he's older than now, I will tell him what war
did to me*

*But with luck he won't ask me ever again, about wars that never should
be.*

Lest We Forget!