

ANZAC DAY 2013 ADDRESS
CANBERRA GRAMMAR SCHOOL
LCDR Desmond Woods, RAN
Monday 29 April 2013

On ANZAC Day 2013 Australian servicemen and women were serving in remote places on operations around the world. At Tarin Kowt, the base for Australian operations in Oruzgan province in Afghanistan, ADF personnel of all three services gathered in the cool of a Spring Anzac Day dawn to remember all our war dead and in particular the thirty nine Australian soldiers who have lost their lives in Afghanistan since 2002. These soldiers were killed in the line of duty every bit as much as those we remember from all the wars of the 20th century. Many more have been seriously injured in body and mind. Their mission and that of all the International Stabilization Force in Afghanistan is to ensure that violence, extortion and extremism does not prevail over reason, justice and respect for human rights. Their tasks have been unspectacular but essential. Village schools have been rebuilt, roads have been being repaired, Australian built clinics are now providing medical care to villagers, electricity supplies are being maintained. Women and children have been protected. These tasks are done with the assistance of non governmental organizations. It is difficult work and requires all the qualities of compassion and ingenuity which Australians are renowned for. It is also dangerous work which requires unremitting vigilance and constant patrolling.

When violence comes it is often in the form of improvised roadside bombs. In Robbie Poate's case, as you know, it was enemy fire which took his life and those of his two friends.

Robbie's football coach wrote of him while here at your school that he was: *"passionate, courageous, even-tempered and resourceful with an unwavering strength of character. He had a moral compass and was prepared to use it in making difficult decisions. He did not perform for accolades. These personal qualities earned him the respect and admiration of his team, players from opposing teams, his friends and the general school community."*

What a perceptive character report. No wonder Robbie made such a fine young soldier and rose to every challenge placed in front of him. Those qualities of leadership would have made him a distinguished and much admired commissioned army officer like his great grandfather. He was Colonel Sir Hugh Poate, a battlefield surgeon who enlisted as a Captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1914. In 1915 he was in charge of wounded soldiers being taken by sea from Gallipoli to Egypt. During these voyages he spent much of his time operating, earning the nickname 'Lightning' for his swift and deft surgical technique. Later in France, in March 1917 and during the heavy fighting at Ypres he often operated for sixteen hours a day, saving soldiers lives with his skill and dedication until his own health broke down. Later in life he was knighted for his services to St John Ambulance.

Let me take you back ninety nine years to a tell the story of another fine young Australian medical officer, Captain Brian Pockley. He was a quiet, doctor, whose cheerful character had endeared him to his sailors and soldiers. The landing party he was attached to in New Guinea in September 1914 stumbled upon Germans troops who were entrenched, on a ridge protecting their wireless station. Firing commenced and the first man badly wounded was a German with a shattered arm who came forward during a lull in the fighting seeking emergency surgery from the

Australian officer with the Red Cross on his arm. Brian Pockley amputated his arm and dressed the stump expertly in the field. Then an Able Seaman, Bill Williams, was severely wounded by German rifle fire from snipers in palm tree tops. To prevent him from bleeding to death Brian Pockley applied a field dressing and told a sailor, to care for him. He handed to him the Red Cross arm band he was wearing to show he was a medical officer and therefore protected under the laws of war. The sailor protested, but Brian replied that he would take the risk of no longer wearing his medical officer's Red Cross protection. After making Williams comfortable he said he would go forward to help any other wounded. Without his Red Cross arm band he was soon hit by a bullet and seriously wounded in the chest and lost consciousness. At this time Lieutenant Commander Charles Elwell, was also shot dead while attacking the German trench. He was the first RAN officer to be killed in action. He fell leading five soldiers who died in this short but fiercely fought battle. Brian Pockley was transferred to the hospital ship HMAS *Berrima*, where he regained consciousness. He realised that he was dying, spoke to his friends and passed away very gently. So did his patient Able Seaman Williams, the sailor he had so gallantly protected with his red cross armband. He was the first RAN sailor to die in war. Three years later in France, Lieutenant Jack Pockley, (Bryan's younger brother), was lying seriously wounded and under fire in 'no mans land.' He calmly ordered the four stretcher bearers who came to take him to a Regimental First Aid Post to leave him and take one of his soldiers, who he thought was more likely to die. They obeyed his order. When they came back for Jack it was too late - Jack had died of blood loss. Clearly both these brave brothers shared a deep concern for those under their care and command and protected them with their own lives. *Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for a friend.*

The truth is that it is always ordinary men and women who perform extraordinary deeds both in peace and war. Police and emergency services workers who rescue those in danger and protect us are always ordinary modest men and women who consider that they were just doing their job when they put their lives on the line for strangers. We rightly honour and recognise them for their selfless courage.

Honour, recognition and remembrance is what ANZAC Day is dedicated to. Each year you see elderly men and women marching in our cities and towns wearing medals from wars fought last century before you, or even your parents were born. Those old people move slowly now and they often need help to walk down the street. Their faces are lined with the years. But once, long ago, like you, like Robbie, they were young. They ran easily and loved playing sport. Like you they wanted to get a good education and then choose a job that they enjoyed so they could settle down to a peaceful and long life with friends and have a family of their own. But that easy life is not what happened to them. They had a long war to fight instead.

Faced with immense challenges this generation of young men had to give up their dreams of a peaceful life and train to fight as sailors, soldiers and airmen. Young women served as naval and military nurses and in the women's land army and replaced men in all the essential services. Women performed their duties with exemplary courage and fortitude at home and overseas. That generation did their duty with no false hope that it would "all be over by Christmas." They had no idea how long the war would last – they knew it would be for years. They knew that terrible new weapons were available and could be used by their enemies. They brought all that to mind and they still volunteered to train to take the fight

to the worst tyrannies that the world has seen in modern times. That is why we still honour them. These old men and women, now frail, stood up to a ruthless enemy. They became “the heroic generation” not because they sought war, but because they hoped we could all live in freedom and were prepared to pay for that hope with their lives. Every one of them was frightened as they prepared for battle; but they mastered their fear before they went into action and did their duty anyway. They stood firm and they fought, often to the death, for the true and decent things in life. They were ordinary men and women who were called upon to do extraordinary things because they knew that the free world depended on them for its future. We owe them more than we can ever repay.

These elderly people still carry in their memories images of young people, their friends, who were, like them, full of life and fun. Those young people were killed in action, or died of wounds or disease, or because they were treated with brutality when they were prisoners of war. It is the faces of their lost young friends that the old ones still see whenever they think of those terrible war years. They know war is brutal, it is not glorious and is not to be undertaken unless and until all other peaceful avenues of persuasion and diplomacy have been tried. The twentieth century saw too much war and Australia is still paying dearly for the loss of over 100,000 of its talented young men and women who, were denied their opportunity to make their contribution and to live their lives as parents and grandparents, mates and fellow citizens. Nevertheless, compassion and courage can shine out from the darkness and carnage that characterises conflict and can inspire us to be the best we can be.

The least we can do every year is to read the names on our war memorial, remember them by buying a poppy and attend an Anzac Day march. That is all the last members of the heroic generation, now passing, ask of us - not to forget the enduring values they and their mates defended and died for. You are privileged to see the last of these veterans as they march into history.

In April 2013 as we near the end of a long and difficult conflict, all of us can extend that same respect to all of our current veterans, and all others, including police and civilians, who are now in harm's way trying to protect the vulnerable and defend the defenceless. These young men and women, exemplify all our ANZAC traditions - as Robbie did. We owe them our respect, both while they serve abroad in our name and on their return to us. They carry *Australia* on their shoulder and all Australians young and old, should carry them in their thoughts and prayers, until they are safely home again in this land, which a century ago the first ANZACs loved, defended and died for.

LEST WE FORGET