

TOWNSVILLE ADDRESS—LONG TAN 07

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Among us today are those who marched off to war in Vietnam from these very streets of Townsville to the beat of drums and cheering crowds. It was a war they did not plan and did not seek. They were young, proud, determined, and confident. They had been imbued with wonderful qualities and values taught to them by a previous generation who also had seen war. These were values which were considered the norm of our nation at that time and included that a promise was a promise and to believe a man's word was his honour and a handshake sealed it.

As youngsters they lived in a time when for most Australians, draft dodging was a dirty word, and the domino theory was a constant theme, and service of country was never questioned.

Today we honour the fallen and those who have since left our ranks. It is also appropriate that such an epic battle as Long Tan is the focal point, but it is not just this historic battle we remember, but all of those forgotten patrols and ambushes as well as other battles now recorded as military history, and some of which are now etched as battle honours on regimental colours and guideons, which I might add are now carried with pride by a new generation of military serving in operational areas such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Timor.

Like those before them there was the same duty, dedication, humour, mateship, suffering, boredom, the unknown, and the same love of nation, and why not? It was just the third generation since ANZAC, and after all, the genes were strong, the pride in those before them evident, the traditions and standards of the Australian armed forces firmly embraced.

Like those before them they sometimes questioned orders but got on with the job. They argued about Aussie rules and rugby, bet on the Melbourne cup and called the cook a bastard. Home was where ever they hung their hats or dropped their packs. For many their kitchen was a battered dixie and a well used mug. Their bedroom was often a leaking tent and their mattress a wet sodden jungle floor or a rocky ridge line. Like those before them they dreamed of going home, and wondered if they would. They shared the dangers, the work loads, the sentry duty, even their mail, and at night in the smothering darkness they would share the dreams of their tomorrow. On occasions there was the need to share the last tin of food or water. Is there any wonder as to why there are such indestructible bonds within the ranks of veterans???

The men and women I speak of were the magnificent warriors of that time, they were never found wanting. No matter what the dangers, no matter what the hostile environment, no matter what the uncertainty of tomorrow, all of them, each and everyone did their duty. There was never, never a time that these men and women did not do what was asked of them, and often did more.

Thus today is a time for all Australians to reflect on the past and remind ourselves of the lessons we should have learnt from our venture into Vietnam. There will come a time when all these veterans will be gone, and future generations will rely on the written history to understand who and what they were. To read that the Vietnam expedition, regulars, and young conscripts who represented all walks of life had rallied from

bush, the big and little smokes to become one of the most disciplined and effective forces to leave our shores. It should record that this force despite betrayal at home, despite political blundering, despite a stupid birthday lottery to determine who would be conscripted, met the challenge with sound professionalism.

It is also a time to remind all in this great nation that the military has continued to pass on the ANZAC torch to each subsequent generations and it continues to burn brightly today. By comparison, the torch of commitment that was lit by politicians so long ago to honour the service of veterans has become rather rusty and spluttering with frequent injections of political hype and propaganda. Let me make it clear that I embrace all political parties with such criticism. .

It is a time to also remember that many who did return suddenly found themselves scattered throughout a society which they no longer understood. For some of these veterans alone with their personal traumas, there was no more the bark of a sergeant to discipline them, no more the sound of a military band to stir pride, no more a comrade to talk with, no more the brilliant warped humor where they could laugh at each other and mock the military system they served with total loyalty. They were alone with the past. Some decided it was enough and few noticed their passing. Sadly such trauma had not stopped and now embraces a new generation of veterans. The question we must ask is why such suffering treated with such indifference. . Why such neglect? Have we not learned anything?

In recent times there was yet another mate who passed away. He had suffered for some time. Like most from his generation he never complained but shrugged his shoulders and got on with life. I can recall him saying despite his pain “this country was worth fighting for, and still is” and who among us could argue with such sentiment? However, his death finally convinced me that enough is enough in regards THAT false handshake, that spluttering political torch and those broken promises.

It is time to once more remind our community that there has been betrayal of veterans from all campaigns. The root causes are apathy, ignorance and hypocrisy by a current generation of politicians representing all parties and a questionable policy within the national RSL. Despite political hype and excuses the undeniable reality is that veteran entitlements have been consistently eroded by various governments in recent years. The examples are numerous but often clouded with propaganda by spin doctors and clever smoke screens.

The truth is that our mates suffering from mental and physical disabilities do not need beggar bowls but simply to seek what is their right. It is incomprehensible for them to beg... Their life has been one of pride, mateship, respect, sharing, of sacrifice, and love of country, and serving to protect it and their families, regardless of the unknown consequences of that time, but now having survived their military duty there is uncertainty of tomorrow and beyond because of questionable policy.

It is a time for political parties to replace arrogance and benevolence with honour and recognition.

Today our ranks grow thinner and that in itself is a reason to bond even closer. Now is the time to stand fast.

- To demand a better deal for our disabled mates.
- To ensure those men and women currently serving on operations and those to follow are not politicised nor ignored by indifferent and self indulging politicians.
- It is also a time yet again to remind our national RSL leaders that they must be seen to be in the vanguard, and we must hear of their arguments to pursue and maintain the rights of veterans.

No matter what the anger, the frustrations, we must continue to be a vibrant element of the community and not isolate ourselves from it.

We must never lower our standards. We must attack relentlessly with energy and sound argument to pursue our cause but never to the point of personal abuse. These were the techniques of those who demonstrated against us when we were once young, and we detested all of them for it. As veterans we are above that and abuse should not be part of our armoury. You are veterans who still stand tall and can look anyone one in the eye and say with pride.....I am a Vietnam Veteran and fought with the best mates this Country could offer.

Until that next gathering, take bloody good care