

**ADDRESS TO THE AUSTRALIA DAY COUNCIL (VICTORIA)
Wreath Laying Ceremony, Shrine of Remembrance,
Sunday 29 January 2012**

CAPT Keith Wolahan

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Just over a week ago I was fortunate enough to attend the Australia Day council annual dinner. One of the nicest parts of the evening was the performance of a number of beautiful songs by two very talented classical singers. Although written after World War II and now heard in many stadiums around the world, the Rodgers and Hammerstein song: "you'll never walk alone" made me think of this place.

I have only given one address in memory of a fallen soldier and it will forever remain the most difficult task in my life. On a sunny Melbourne day in January 2009 we waited as a giant Air Force plane slowly filled the cinema-screen sized entrance of an isolated hanger in Tullamarine. We waited for a silver steel coffin draped with an Australian flag. We waited to start a process none of us wanted to happen. We waited for a Victorian; a Reservist; our friend: Private Greg Sher.

Only a few days earlier the Sher family had heard the most terrible news: their son and brother had been killed in action in Afghanistan. Very few of Greg's friends had met his family before, yet here we were, side by side with them in one of the most moving and solemn moments no family deserves. Trying to hold it together for them it was impossible not to look at his Mother and think: *How can we ask so much of you? How does life go on?*

When you walk in and out of the shadows of our country's war memorials, it is easy to get drawn into all of the names, the battles, the numbers: 61,520 Australians killed in World War I; 39,653 in World War II. It's easy to look at the relative population of this young country and reflect on the sacrifice and tragedy of 102,734 Australians killed in all wars. This is only the number of Australians killed: many many more have been, and continue to be, wounded.

Some say our current sacrifice in Afghanistan pales compared to the "great" wars: and they would be right if tragedy was only endured collectively and loss was only about numbers. But after the ceremonies are finished, the politicians have gone and the bugle stops, all that is left is someone's Mother holding a photo in her son's bedroom.

On that day in January 2009 I realised that behind every name on our war memorial is a tragedy no less meaningful than any other.

Behind every soldier are the people they loved and were loved by: families who somehow have to keep going.

These buildings are more than public architecture. And whilst we just deliberately celebrated the best of this nation on Australia day, ANZAC day is equally no accident. As a new nation we once saw the lonely aftermath of sacrifice everywhere. Very few families avoided the darkness that now filled what was once the best of their everything. We knew that we had to reach into the living rooms of each family, put our hand on their shoulder and say, if only just once a year:

You are not alone.

Like you do every day, we will remember this day.

As songs, smells and toys take you back to better times,

so too will our memory be triggered by a silence and a lone bugle as the sun comes up.

On this day and in this place we simply remember and say: "lest we forget."

Asked to speak here by Major General Tracey I thought about what this Australia Day service means. And I found myself asking, what is the link between the 26th of January and the 25th of April? Other than the anniversary of separate historical events, what have they now come to mean? How do both speak to who we are?

Last Monday night during that song I think I got it. For me the link is like the light and shade of what it is to be human: the light and shade of what it means to be Australian. It is a combined acknowledgment that we are a grateful country: grateful for both the beauty and the pain of what we have and what has been endured. But in both days I think we as a nation also say something to the Mothers and families of those who died far too young:

In that way, Anzac Day is partly about

Walking on through the wind, on through the rain,

Telling those who lost everything that they'll never walk alone, never walk alone.

But I think Australia Day equally says

*When you walk through a storm, keep your chin up high,
to not be afraid of the dark.*

Because at the end of the storm is a golden sky

As we reflect on the beauty and pain of what it has taken for Australia to be where it is, can I ask you to reflect on those families who today are trying to walk on through the dark.

Anzac day is one way. Another is in donating to a charity like Legacy or, one dear to my heart, the Commando Welfare Trust. Like we tried to do in that hanger in Melbourne airport, each does its small part to tell families and wounded soldiers a simple truth:

While the nights are long, around the corner is a golden sky.

Until we get there, you'll never walk alone.