**Speech for O’Connor Catholic College – Eleanor Mc Glade Memorial unveiling – 26 April 2017**

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the 14th of February 1942, 21 Nurses were turned to face the ocean and shot while they walked together towards the watery horizon in front of them. Before the machine guns were arched from left to right up the beach, Matron L.M Drummond called out -

“Keep your heads-up girls, I love you and I’m so proud of you”.

It was a remarkable act of leadership and her final act of compassion.

One of those Sisters was your very own, NX76275 Sister Mary Eleanor Mc Glade. From all accounts, Eleanor Mc Glade had a difficult upbringing, having been orphaned by both of her parents prior to turning 3. She was raised in the St Ursulas Convent and with the Ursuline nuns. Never missing an opportunity to show care for others even at a young age and always returning with a loyalty and commitment to the communities that had fostered her growth in the world.

In February 1942, as Singapore was on the brink of falling to the Japanese, Eleanor was given her orders along with other Nurses, patients, soldiers and sailors to board the Vyner Brooke and return to Australia. Two days later, the Vyner Brooke was bombed. Survivors made their way to the shore, which in itself was a large feat and survival at sea as mostly instinctive. They made camp on Radji Beach, Banka Island in Muntok Province, Indonesia. With wounded casualties and no means for self-sufficiency, the decision was made that they would surrender to the Japanese. The men were taken around the bay shot and bayonetted out of sight but the nurse’s fate was soon to follow.

 Unfortunately, war is often messy and decisions are made that are often beyond our grasp and comprehension.

It is an incredibly sad tragedy that 21 vibrant, dedicated and caring women lost their lives on Radji Beach that day. As I stood there a few months ago, it was incredibly moving to stand in the presence of 10 other Army Nursing Officers and consider how it must have been in that moment.

I have reflected upon the significance of that moment and this memorial to Sister Mc Glade.

The Corps Motto for the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps is “Pro Humanitate” - for Humanity. It is the values of compassion and selflessness that have seen the Corps serve alongside, amongst and with our soldiers through every campaign since the Boer War. By Geneva convention our nursing care and skills are not limited to ours and coalition soldiers, but encompass care delivery, clinical intervention, Maternal and child health, and education to persons of war torn regions, displaced persons due to war or natural disaster and yes, even our stated enemy.

We currently have nurses serving for Campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As I look at the faces of the Australian nurses in Muntok, I am reminded of our own Lieutenants who although recent to Military Nursing are filled with the promise of purposeful and meaningful employment and a sense of community or national contribution. No one can pre- determine the journey ahead for our brave and skilled youth. I pondered and wondered what is the difference between them then and us now?

How can you take something positive from such a horrendous event and turn it around with the grace of time so that we can relate and learn from it today?

Well this is what I’ve come up with –

It is the simple things as often is the case, have not changed and we always have a choice to show kindness.

Compassion still rests at the heart of what we are and what we do. We encourage you all to do the same, in a world that is increasingly insecure and confused about who selflessness serves really? The basics remain the same – and the human need for care is everywhere, it depends where your frontline is. For these women it was with their patients and in support of each other right through to the very end.

A friend once said to me “if you only get a few lines in a book at the end of your life, what are you going to make them? What will define your legacy? “.

I think Sister Eleanor McGlade could never have known that all of this time later, she would be written up for her strength and compassion in her final days, moments and hours. Who could know that a nurse from Armidale, with pre - deceased parents, no other family but the mentorship of the Ursuline nuns, would be having you all reflect here and now what your own core set of values are going to be moving forward in your own lives.

Grace, Selflessness, Compassion and Respect will never go out of style. I think back to Matron Drummonds last words and her strength in leadership. How important it was to all of the Sisters that they knew their Leader was so proud of them and had also grown to love them. It is so important that as your grow to become leaders that you remember what those words would have meant to Eleanor Mc Glade and how important it is to tell people that you appreciate them.

As a final act of grace, I think as they all put their chins up and walked towards the ocean, they knew that they were together and not alone at that defining moment.

What a wonderful bunch of women and men. I cannot for a moment think that should the same fate fall upon our nurses and soldiers today, that they would not act with the same grace and dignity. Some things never go out of fashion and style.

Sister Eleanor Mc Glade was 39 when she died, her dedication to the community of the St Ursulas Convent, community of Armidale, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and the service of nursing will not be forgotten.

 These are Ellies few lines – and they are beautiful, compassionate and graceful.