

The Hon Justice Rear Admiral Slattery AM AM (Mil) RAN

10 November 2023

Mr Casey, Staff, students, and distinguished guests of St Pius X College.

May I commence by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands upon which we now gather, for this ceremony today, the Cameraygal people and I acknowledge their leaders past present and emerging.

It is very great honour for me to be asked back here to speak to you at my old school at this Remembrance Day ceremony. I was last a student here in fifth grade primary in 1964. I remember and cherish my time here almost 60 years ago. So much has changed since then but some things have not. I lived across the road in Kirk Street. It was my mother Margaret who planted those very tall trees you see in Kirk Street that still stand outside B wing. She planted Iron Barks because they would be tall, strong and would last. She gave me, then aged only 9, the important job of watering those young Iron Bark saplings. She told me that unless they were watered for two years they might not survive. I am pleased to see they have thrived.

Why do I share my memories of how those trees came to be in Kirk Street? It is because their welcome shade shows us that the world we work to make is the world in which we will all later live. For example, everything you study now here at school will make you who you are, long into the future.

Today we are invited to share far deeper memories. We are asked to look back into the past and remember and commemorate the many young Australian men and women who willingly endured the hazards and risks of war to give us the secure and prosperous Australia in which we now live. It is their service and sacrifice that has given us the safe Australia in which we now live, free from the dreadful and

violent conflicts we now see elsewhere in our world. We commemorate their service for us today.

Service inspired by faith (*Fide et Labore*) is at the heart of what this College stands for. So let me first recall the service and the deaths in battle of two former students of this College in the Second World War: Jacob de Sisto, who was killed in action in December 1944 attacking entrenched machine gun positions on Bougainville. Only a few months later, a classmate of his, Anthony Gillespie, was shot down over Germany while returning from a bombing raid in 1945. They were both fine young men, graduating only a few years before from this College, where just like you, they had studied English, history, science, or mathematics. They were full of promise and their loss left a legacy of grief for their families that continues.

You know well the Honour Board in the foyer of the College. Each former student mentioned on that board has his own story. Let me tell you a story of just a few of them. Next to me is a display of the medals of Gregory Aleckson. His medals were bequeathed to the College because he greatly valued coming to these ceremonies. The medals were awarded for his time in Vietnam. Among them is his award of Mention in Despatches. He received this honour for his actions as a medic in the Air Force recovering men from areas under threat of enemy attack.

At the same time as Greg Aleckson was in Vietnam, Brian Howard a classmate of his from the College was also serving in that conflict. Brian Howard was a Captain in the infantry. He was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery under fire during the infamous Tet Offensive of 1968. Later he fought in another major battle at a location known as "Fire Support Base Coral". Brian Howard later rose to the rank of Major General. Quite unbeknown to him another former student of this College was in the same battle at Fire Support Base Coral. Sergeant Kenneth Travers, a first day student at the College at its opening in 1937 also saw action at FSB Coral. Amazingly

by then Kenneth Travers was in his fourth conflict, having already served in the Second World War, the Korean War, the Malayan Emergency and then Vietnam.

We remember them, as we remember all those who have suffered in war. Our ceremony today is a fulfilment of the promise made to these people and their families, and to all who have fought and sacrificed their lives, or their way of life, in war, that they will never be forgotten.

Many students from this school have enlisted in the armed forces over the years – they have served in Europe, the Pacific, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. Many veterans carry mental and physical scars of their experiences. There are ex-students of this College currently on deployment in the Middle East. Our thoughts and our prayers are also with them and their loved ones today. They will always remain a part of our school community.

In conclusion may I say that today we both remember, and we look forward. Military service for Australia can be given in many ways that are open to you. My own role has been as a reservist in the legal service of the Australian Defence Force, whilst I have been a barrister and later a judge, most recently holding the office of Judge Advocate General of the ADF. That role which is a combination of military officer and judge, made me responsible to ensure that all men and women in the ADF are treated fairly, and tried fairly according to law, that they follow the demanding rules of war, and that they respect the rights of all on the battlefield whether they be enemy soldiers or innocent civilians. Our Australian Defence Force declares that we will follow fundamental rules of fairness that apply equally to all, whether enemy, friend or civilian. It is a very hard standard to maintain. But it defines who we are as Australians, recognising that to be a country worthy of self-respect that we must judge criminal actions to have legal consequences, whether in the armed forces on operations or in civilian life. There are many different roles such as

this in military service for Australia. They are rewarding and I commend them to you for your consideration when you leave school.

I want to thank you all for your sincere acknowledgement of the service of men and women and their families in time of war through this ceremony. They are an important part of our lives. Shortly you will hear the last post played. It is the sound that Jacob de Sisto, Anthony Gillespie, Brian Howard, Gregory Aleckson, and Kenneth Travers would all have heard at 10 PM, when they were on operations. It would remind them that the day's work and struggles were done, and they could rest. We will listen to it now as they once did, while we remember them.

Lest we forget