

Headmaster, teachers and Students, I'm honored to be speaking to you today about the importance of ANZAC day, and how war has impacted several generations of my family.

I am sure you understand, ANZAC day is not a day of celebration, rather it is a day of reflection and acknowledgement of the sacrifices made by many Australians, New Zealanders including our First Nations people. They fought for causes, that with the benefit of history and hind-site, may now seem questionable, but at the time many were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice. Indeed, the experiences of most soldiers changed their view of conflict.

Despite appearances, I'm not that old. When I was your age, the Vietnam War was still raging, we were in the middle of the Cold War. WWII had finished only 15 years before I was borne. I know many of you are studying these conflicts in your history curriculum.

Some of you may have grandparents who served in the World Wars, and some of you may have family who served in Vietnam, or more recently in Afghanistan.

Today I will bring you the perspective of a son, and a son-in law of active servicemen, plus I would like to tell you of a Great Uncle who served at Gallipoli. In doing so I hope to reinforce to you why ANZAC day remains important to us, despite so many other emerging issues in modern Australia.

Philip Gifford - Father in Law

Phil was called up to serve in Vietnam in 1971 when we had nation subscription. Numbers corresponding to days of the month were literally pulled from a barrel and if it corresponded to your birthday, you had to sign up.

Phil is the son of a farmer and grew up mustering sheep and growing crops on the family farm near Bridgetown in the south west of W.A. He is tall and athletic and represented his school in football and rowing. Being a farmer's son he was a handy with a rifle and like most recruits he completed his basic training here in Victoria at Puckapunyal before being flown into Nui Dat in Southern Vietnam.

He became a radio operator for his platoon which meant carrying a heavy backpack two-way radio around in the field. As such he couldn't always wear the hearing protection that other soldiers used, and this resulted in permanent damage to his hearing and a lifetime of tinnitus (ringing in his ears).

Like many soldiers in Vietnam, he was also exposed to Agent Orange, a toxic herbicide sprayed from aircraft used by the US Forces to defoliate the Vietnamese jungle. Cancer was a common outcome, and Phil has had his share, including prostate cancer.

Back home, Australia's Vietnam soldiers were not considered heroes due to the strong anti-war sentiment of the time, and this did not help the returning soldiers to recover from their experiences. Many succumbed to depression and alcoholism and some took their own lives. Many also died younger than they should have.

Phil grew up in a religious family and upon returning from Vietnam, he left the farm and, with his wife and growing family, joined a Christian Pentecostal Church. I'm not a particularly religious person, but I think the strict adherence to the teachings of the bible, and the emphasis on family that was provided by his church community helped Phil manage his war experiences and move into a very productive life. Today, in his late 70's, he lives with his wife near the beach in Busselton W.A. and has four children and eight grandchildren.

Jack Throssell - My father

My father grew up in the W.A. wheatbelt town of Northam, the son of a successful businessman and one-time Town Mayor. He graduated as a dentist from the University of Western Australia and after working for a few years, joined the Australian Army as a medical officer, just as WWII was expanding in southeast Asia and the Pacific. After completing training, he and thousands of Australian troops sailed for Singapore in 1939. Within weeks they were all prisoners of war, having not fired a single shot.

After initially being held in Changi Jail in Singapore they were redistributed to labor camps throughout SE Asia, most notably Burma and Borneo. Jack was initially sent to the notorious Sandakan camp but was then moved on to Kuching. By the end of the war of the thousands of prisoners there were only a handful of survivors at Sandakan, and the survival rate at Kuching was only about 30%.

Some of you here completed World Challenge in Borneo in 2019, and would remember the oppressively hot conditions in the jungle at the Sunbear Conservation Centre. Imagine four years in that environment, deprived of adequate food and medical support, and regular beatings from prison guards while undertaking arduous labor tasks. When the survivors were finally liberated at the end of the war, Jack had lost half his body weight and was afflicted with tropical ulcers and malaria.

Fortunately he recovered, and went to London for a year to complete post graduate studies. He returned to Perth, married a beautiful Italian lady, had two sons, and was still working as a dentist when he passed suddenly in 1978.

He died younger than he should have, I was only 18.

He rarely talked about his experiences in Borneo and to my knowledge, held no longstanding grudge against his former captors.

Hugo Throssell - Great Uncle

There is a lot written about Hugo. In short, he was awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest military honor, for his bravery in the horrific WWI battles of Gallipoli. But it is the gradual downward spiral of his life when he returned home, that provides a salient tale of the futility of war and its lasting effects.

A farmer and son of W.A.'s second premier he was a skilled horseman and along with many men from the wheatbelt, he joined the 10th Light Horse regiment in 1914. He was badly wounded at Gallipoli and was repatriated to hospital in London to recover.

*To paraphrase John Hamilton's biography of Hugo
In London he met his future wife, Kathrine Susannah Prichard, journalist, novelist and committed socialist. It was a relationship that was to change his life, and although he was to return to fight in Palestine, his view of the conflict had changed. This was compounded by the death of his brother Rick in Palestine.*

By 1919, Hugo - once hailed as an Australian hero - was ready to publicly denounce the war. His stance was to forever alienate him from former comrades, and the political establishment.

The war affected him in other ways too, as he found himself unable to hold down a job and increasingly prone to episodes of depression. In 1933 he took his own life, leaving behind his beloved wife and only child.

In the 1970s his family sold Hugo's Victoria Cross to raise funds for the Nuclear Disarmament Party. The medal is now on display at the National War Memorial in Canberra

Finally in 1994 a small memorial, the size of a BBQ, honoring Hugo, was constructed in the main street of Northam. In 2018, a fine statue of Hugo, a much more fitting tribute, was unveiled in Northam as part of the WWI centenary commemorations.

For you, as the emerging generation in Australia in 2021, there are other causes that are likely to be more important to you, in shaping who we are as a society and a nation. Invasion Day, Women's Rights, Climate Action, Black Lives Matter are prime examples, and these are all of great importance. These important issues demand our attention on almost a daily basis, but on one day each year we are asked to pause and reflect on those who served us in times of conflict.

Lest we forget

John Throssell