ST Leo's Anzac Day Address

My thanks to Stephen Foley, the head of St Leo's College, for the invitation to give an address to mark your remembrance on ANZAC Day. I, too, would like to acknowledge our Nation's first people and pay my respect to their elders, past present and emerging, and on this day to extend my acknowledgement to all of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters who have served Australia, in the uniform of the ADF, through peace and war since 1901. For many, up until 1966, they did so as soldiers, sailors and airmen and women but not as recognised citizens of this Country. It makes their sacrifice particularly significant and worthy of mention.

I would like to give this address in two parts. First, I will give a personal perspective about military service, based in no small part on my almost four decades as a soldier in Australia's Army. I do so to make several points that hopefully will provide a context to the second part of this speech which provides a more specific focus on Anzac Day and its place in the great Australian narrative.

I am the son of a soldier. My father, Alan Morrison, joined the Army in 1945 while the Second World War was still being fought. He graduated from Duntroon in 1947 and saw service as a young officer in the Korean War and

as battalion commander in Vietnam. His father, Jack, had seen service with the 49th Battalion, a Queensland unit, in the First World War.

Dad's service and mine briefly overlapped and so between us, from his enlistment in 1945 and my retirement in 2015, we share 70 year's unbroken service to this great Nation. Words cannot properly express my pride in that family achievement. My whole life has been shaped by the Army, one of Australia's finest institutions.

And so there I was, aged thirteen, standing proudly by the saluting dais in the main street of Adelaide in 1969, watching my father march with his soldiers, the men of the 9th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, at the end of a brutal year in South Vietnam where 35 of their mates had been killed and 150 wounded that from that one unit alone.

Most of my audience will not be old enough to remember what Australia was like in that year when amongst so much else, humankind first put foot on the moon. But the war, in that year of 1969, was a divisive societal issue. There had been several years of growing community opposition to the war, and to the national conscription campaign that supported Australia's military commitment. To my great consternation, I watched and heard sections of the crowd boo and jeer my father and his men as they marched past.

I was furious, albeit with a rather impotent adolescent rage at the insult to this wonderful group of soldiers and I sought my father out at the end of the march and told him how upset I was.

And this wonderful man, the greatest male role model in my life answered saying “Son, people must be allowed to express their views. That is what we have fought for. Democracy is never tidy, never soulless, but it is how we choose to live and that is to be defended and above all cherished.”

This personal story serves to make my first observation - military service is inextricably linked to the society from which its soldiers, sailors and airmen and women are drawn. This makes the decision by a Federal Government to commit its citizens to military operations and war one of the most significant and grave that it can make. And in a democracy, no such commitment should be ever be without continued constant scrutiny as to the on-going appropriateness of such an endeavour and to how military operations are conducted. To do otherwise is to abrogate our responsibility to those who come after us - those who will serve in their time to protect Australia and its interests into the future.

In remembering military service of the past, I think it serves us well to also remember the great societal issues that encompassed such national

commitments. While community support for Australia's involvement in what became known as the First World War remained high throughout the war years, the very bitter debate and referendums as to whether the Nation should introduce conscription, fractured society and exacerbated sectarian divides already present in pre war Australia between rich and poor, Protestant and Catholic.

The bitterness that was engendered shaped Australian society in the years leading to the Second World War. In that war, the decision to withdraw troops from the British area of operations in the Middle East in order to meet the threat posed by Japan's entry into the war in 1941, allied to the commitment to join the US led Pacific and Asian campaigns has formed the bedrock of 70 years of foreign policy and was a major contributor to decisions to commit to military involvement first in Korea, in 1950 and then in Vietnam in 1966.

All of which contributed to the opposition to conscription, and indeed more broadly, to military service by growing numbers of Australians in the late 1960s and which led to the jeering and booing of returned soldiers in the streets of Adelaide in 1969.

A second observation is also warranted. Our servicemen and women are first and foremost just that - men and women: sometimes called on to do the most extraordinary and courageous acts in our name, but also still humans who love, doubt, succeed and fail just like all of us in every walk of life. I grow concerned as to the commodification of military service in our age of constant media attention. We run a risk, in my view, if we create a faux aura of casual but unquestioned bravery, of cheery larrikin indifference to suffering and death, of the myth of the natural soldier. Such themes, too often played out in our modern narrative of Australia's military history, can de-personalise the individuals who chose to enlist and serve the Nation.

And this leads me to a particular perspective of Anzac Day, and to those who fought in the war to end all wars.

We see them now, our servicemen and women of the 1914-18 conflict, through a photographic lens that is tinged in sepia; faces seen stern, or laughing with mates, in black and white; shown moving in the film of the day in somewhat stilted motion.

It shapes our thinking.

Their letters and their diary entries, in copperplate handwriting and more formal in expression than our modern idiom, adds a layer to the sense that they were somehow different; that their world, their hopes, their aspirations and fears are removed from ours by more than just the passage of 100 years. They are a generation seemingly set apart.

And at one level they are.

When the fighting finally stopped and they returned from France, from Palestine, from service abroad back to Australia, the land of their birth or where they now called home, so much had changed - family, friends, community but most of all themselves. Our New Zealand brothers and sisters in arms experienced the same.

The certainties and adventure of 1914 had been washed away in waves of loss and failed hope, now replaced by the strangeness of a world if not at peace, then one, at least, no longer at war.

Children met for the first time; partners and parents rediscovered; mates mourned over and remembered, and so much had changed. They were, through fate and bloody circumstance ANZACs by name but more essentially men and women changed forever by war.

And for those who had crossed a foreign shore one hundred and eight years ago this morning - under fire, amidst the terrible new sounds and sights of battle, of dying, of calls for courage and for duty done, who had improbably survived to see their world made new, what must they have felt on their return?

The long journey from Gallipoli to the breaking of the German line in November 1918, marked by failure and success, loss and life long mateship had left its indelible mark on them and their country.

If war is a sin against humanity, as some would hold, then war itself is punishment for that sin, compounded by its endless repetition and its hold on those who have experienced its terrors. Such was the mark many brought home to their families who continued, as so many families have and still do, to live daily with the indelible memories of those who had fought and who cannot let go.

But at another level there is little that separates them from we who gather to remember. Like us, they were men and women of their time - responding to their events in their world in the context of the society and families in which they lived. Like us, they dreamed of something better; they loved and were

loved in return; were prepared to fight for their beliefs; were, like us, prey to fears and human despair.

It makes their sacrifice, and their capacity to endure, real despite the passage of time. It gives colour to those shades of black and white.

As a retired soldier there is a long line of servicemen and women that connects me to those who stormed ashore 108 years ago. That line is formed by names such as Villers-Bretonneux, Tobruk, El Alamein, Kokoda, Kapyong, Long Tan, Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. It is made whole by the names on the roll of honour of our War Memorial - over 100 000 of our fellow citizens who in the ultimate act put service before self in our Nation's name.

And there is a line, too, that connects all of us to those who lived in this Country just over 100 years ago. It is formed by the lives and hopes of millions of Australians who have lived since then. It is given physical substance in the architecture of our cities and the agricultural endeavours of our pioneers. It is a line made more whole by our recognition of the first people of this land and our sorrow for their treatment. It is a line given colour and vibrancy by our cultural richness and diversity, drawn as it is from migrants from all corners of our world. It is a line rooted in our freedom of expression and of belief, and the affirmation of our democratic nation state.

For me, that is why we remember them - the first ANZACs and all of those who have followed. They left us that legacy and we, in turn, commemorate their sacrifice when we ask what legacy we shall leave for those who follow us.

We have not forgotten and we are defined, at least in part, by that act of remembrance. It makes us who we are and reminds us, in the face of an unknown future, who we can be – courageous and compassionate, resolute and resilient, - a people of our own time, reaching back one hundred years with pride and solemnity, looking forward with a sense of purpose to a better world.