Chief of Army address to the 20th anniversary of the Black Hawk accident memorial service

Lieutenant General Angus Campbell, DSC, AM, address to the 20th anniversary of the Black Hawk accident memorial service in Townsville, Sunday, 12 June 2016

Check against delivery

Mr Mark Ryan, MP, Assistant Minister of State, representing the Premier of Queensland; Mr Dale Last, MP, representing the State Opposition Leader; Mr Ewen Jones, MP, Federal Member for Herbert, Councillor Jenny Hill - Mayor of the City of Townsville; families of the fallen and survivors of the June 1996 Black Hawk accident; general officers, distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen - good afternoon.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today, the Bindal and Wulgarukaba people, and pay my respects to their elders, both past and present. Thank you also to their elders for such a moving welcome to country today.

20 years ago today, on a dark Wednesday evening, highly skilled soldiers of the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) and the 5th Aviation Regiment were conducting a counter-terrorism exercise in the High Range Training Area, adjacent to Townsville.

In a terrible accident two Blackhawks collided. An incident that the-then Governor General, Sir William Deane, rightly described as ‘a national tragedy of great dimensions’.

Eighteen men died that night. Fifteen from the SASR, three from 5 Aviation.

A further 12 were physically injured, some seriously, with long term and enduring consequences.

All those present that night, both at the scene and subsequently during the life saving efforts at Townsville General Hospital, were also indelibly affected. And all who heard the tragic news, as it spread from both regiments to the wider army and community remember a great sense of sadness and loss.

I had only recently left SASR, having handed over command of 1 SAS Squadron in December 1995 – the squadron whose soldiers were airborne that night. As for many, this was a very personal sense of shock and loss for me.

Friends and colleagues I had served with since our selection into the Regiment were gone – but not forgotten, never forgotten. Sons, brothers, partners, fathers, taken before their time, aircrew and operators both. An empty locker at work, an empty seat at the dinner table at home, empty nights for those left to carry on.
I cannot know the anguish and grief of everyone affected but I know that such is a mother’s love for the child she brought into this world that this pain never goes away, and I suspect this is true, each in their own way, for the whole family.

To the children of that time, many now grown to the age of their father on that terrible night, the absence of shared memories; a life together and the warm sense of love in a father’s pride at a first game of football, school concerts, graduations, weddings and births; was an immense and life affecting loss. Never doubt your father’s pride in you.

I knew many of these men and know they all epitomised the first verse of the Ode of Remembrance, now not so often recited on Anzac days. That verse commences, and so aptly describes these good men, “They went with songs to the battle, they were young, straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow”.

They were confident, capable and dedicated young men, aviator and operator alike, each with the calm manner and easy humour of a professional. They were friends and colleagues, many of whom I was proud and very privileged to lead. Most importantly they were good Australians; the very best of us. And I hope that it is this that you most cherish in remembering them.

Two thousand years ago, the Roman general, emperor and philosopher, Marcus Aurelius, wrote that “men exist for the sake of one another”. A theme that has echoed through the history of soldiering to this day, as service and sacrifice.

We see example of this, ‘for the sake of others’, when a citizen chooses to join the Australian Defence Force.

We see it in the mutual commitment to excellence, in training and operations that exists among our soldiers. And we recognise and treasure the strong, shared bonds that develop in the process. The special forces and aviation soldiers working together that night lived the ideal of existing for others.

It was already evident in their commitment to excellence in one of the most demanding military training endeavours and it was manifest in their immediate reactions. Selflessly running into burning aircraft wrecks with exploding munitions to rescue comrades - and in some cases – running back into burning aircraft while severely wounded in order to try and save their mates.

A total of 14 people were subsequently recognised for their acts of bravery. But all would carry the scars of that night.

Two decades on we still mourn and remember the 18 men we lost – and acknowledge their gift of service and commitment to excellence, for the sake of others.

We also remember the selflessness and heroism of the survivors and the first responders, as well as the extraordinary efforts of Townsville’s emergency services and medical professionals. Your skill, dedication and quick thinking saved many, in a setting more akin to a conflict zone than a base hospital. I, and the Army, are deeply grateful for your work then and since, in our combined efforts to serve others.
And as a community, we acknowledge and reaffirm our support to those for whom the impact of 12 June 1996 remains a daily part of their life, the families and friends of the fallen.

The Australian Army’s commitment to the lessons learned from this tragedy is undiminished. The accident focused special operations and aviation training and reinforced the fundamental importance of relationships in building cohesive teams.

Today’s special operations aviation capability, and Army aviation more generally, is undoubtedly more mature – a practical, tangible realisation of the commitment of the generations of soldiers who have striven to develop it.

It is some very small comfort to know the effort that continues today to avoid such loss happening again.

I also wish to recognise more broadly the people of the cities of Townsville and Perth, whom I know were deeply touched by the tragedy. Your support on that evening during the immediate aftermath, and in the years since is greatly appreciated. The provision and maintenance of this memorial by the city of Townsville is yet another manifestation of the deep and enduring ties that exist between the Army and Townsville.

On this anniversary we pause in remembrance of those we lost, those who suffered and those who may still be suffering as result of the Blackhawk accident 20 years ago. And in our reflection, we take the time to commit ourselves, like those we lost and those who were with them on that tragic evening, to serve for, ‘the sake of one another’.

This is perhaps the most fitting and enduring tribute to their sacrifice.

Thank you.