

TEACHERS RSL SUB-BRANCH, SEVENTIETH ANNIVERSARY
Parliament House, 22 August 2014

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It is a great honor to accept membership of the Teachers RSL Branch.

I do so with pride in having been able to contribute to the recognition of those teachers who served in war, and with humility at how little I have in fact done in comparison with the work of the Teachers RSL Branch itself, and men such as Geoff Falkenmire, John Dugdale, Tom Spencer, Phil Cross and Phil Bolte.

Without their leadership in the 1990s, the Anzac Service at Bridge Street would not be the event it has become.

Over the past two weeks, I have spent some time reading the digital version of Tom White's record of teachers who served in the world wars.

It is a remarkable document, and Paul Brock's work to make it a reality is also remarkable.

In telling us something of the war record and teaching record of each of the teachers on the honour boards, it makes each person unique and real, rather than simply a name in alphabetical order on a memorial.

Further, it reminds us of the extraordinary commitment of the whole public school system to the 1914-19 war effort

- the patriotic funds to which all schools contributed through fundraising activities, throughout the duration of the war;
- the travelling teachers and motor ambulances fund, which raised money for motor ambulances on the western front, each emblazoned that they were the gift of NSW public schools;
- and the fact that throughout the war, by order of the NSW Minister, every school day finished with the singing of God Save the King.

Sometimes, in quiet moments in the Bridge Street building I used to reflect on the meaning and magnitude of the thousands of names on these boards.

Every one of these people had two things in common, apart from the fact that they went to war.

First, they all knew the Bridge Street building. Most had on occasion reason to visit it, and for all it was the headquarters of their employing authority: a highly centralised - and in the early years of the building - still largely late Victorian bureaucracy.

You came through the front door in Bridge Street to apply for a job as a teacher. This was where you were interviewed. For many, it was where you had a medical examination. It was where you sent applications for vacancies or transfers. It was where you applied for promotion, or appealed against non-promotion.

For many women, it was where you admitted to matrimony, and quite outrageously lost permanency as a teacher.

For everyone of those names on the honour boards, there was a manilla folder or a box file somewhere in the building stuffed full of their personal details: name, qualifications, contact details, next of kin, school placements, inspectors' reports, salary details, leave records, place on the promotion list, and so on. You were paid from there and were sent documents and publications from there; the School Magazine was posted from there; when necessary, you went there to complain.

And for every person on the memorials, summary accounts of war service were passed on by the military; for many, details of wounds and repatriation, or missing in action; and for some, confirmation of death.

The second reflection was that every one was more than a name: each was an individual with a personal history, which we now know through Tom White and Paul Brock; but also with a family, a place called home, and a set of beliefs and values and aspirations that lie behind the name neatly printed in gold on oak or mahogany.

Everyone of them, distilled down on these boards to surnames in alphabetical order, was flesh and blood.

They were men who had taken up the profession of teaching, whose commitment was to creating the future of this country through the education of its young, but who found themselves in circumstances where they believed it was necessary to take up the profession of arms, to protect the very future itself.

I find the atrium and the honour boards on Level 2 of Bridge Street a very troublesome place of conflict and ambiguity.

I have often looked at the Memorial for the Great War, and pondered on why these teachers actually went to war.

It is astonishing that the assassination of an Austrian archduke by Serbian nationalists on 28 June 1914, led spontaneously to patriotic rallies throughout NSW, and the decision by hundreds of teachers to leave their schools and families and fight for King and empire.

They were very different times, and it was an Australia of a very different kind. We now know, from the post-war literature from writers such as Robert Graves and Frederic Manning, from poets such as Wilfred Owen, and from

the thousands of letters written home, that it was a heavily conflicted experience.

We also know that it was an entirely avoidable war among 'sleepwalkers', as the Cambridge-based Australian historian Christopher Clark, whose great-uncle joined the AIF from northern NSW in 1916, has recently called the participating nations. It solved nothing, and created the conditions for a second and even more widespread conflict.

Further, I used often to wonder, how teachers dealt with the extraordinary transition from being Socrates to Caesar and back again (if they survived) within a space of a few years.

What did they think? What did they feel? How could they settle back once they returned? How did one return from the horrors of Passchendaele to Rose Bay Primary School, or from Kokoda to Collarenebri?

Having been trained in warfare, having killed, and having spent long periods of campaigning at grave risk of being killed, or as a prisoner of war, how did a member of the noblest of professions return to teaching a class-room of eight year olds?

The honour board I most understand is that for the Second World War, which is a function of my age and generation. The names of one in every four of the teachers employed in public schools in 1939-45 are on that board.

Australia was then very different from 1914, and totally different from 2014. Further, in the Pacific theatre it was directly under threat. Although historians have since told us

- that the Japanese had neither the supply lines nor the strategic necessity to take and hold Australia;
- that the bombing of Darwin and the raid on Sydney were not a prelude to invasion;
- that the Brisbane Line was an unnecessary panic reaction;
- and that Australia would have survived even without the battle of the Coral Sea, my father spent five years in New Guinea and the Pacific islands in the absolute conviction that he was defending his home and family.

And I understand that, and believe I would have done the same as he did, had those been the circumstances. But again, at what dreadful cost.

The memorial I am most conflicted by is the one I am proudest to have been associated with, and that is the Roll of Honour for the Vietnam War 1962-73 and other overseas service.

Australia at the time of the Vietnam War was immensely different from twenty years before:

- there had been massive immigration and related economic growth;
- we were approaching universal secondary education;
- we were increasingly affluent;
- we were increasingly asserting our place as an independent nation in international affairs;
- and the last non-Australian Governor-General was about to be quietly sent home to retirement in Kent.

Instead of building on those strengths, we went all the way with LBJ, and then Nixon.

The proposal for the Vietnam Memorial came from Phil Cross, then President of the NSWTF, who had been actively opposed to the Vietnam War throughout its duration.

Yet Phil recognized that many teachers had made the decision to fight in that war, and that like all other teachers in previous wars that decision had been arrived at through anguish and conflict.

Neither he nor I would have fought in Vietnam, yet we both felt that the decision that individual teachers had made should be respected and indeed honoured.

The purpose of a memorial is not to legitimate a war, but to honour those who believed that it was fought in the service of a principle so fundamental that they were prepared to give their life for that cause.

We were told at the time that it was the first memorial to Vietnam soldiers to be erected in Australia. I have never verified that, but I hope it is true. It is tragic that the rest of the country failed for so long to recognize and honour the service of Vietnam veterans.

As in the 1990s, the Bridge Street building is again on the market, and I feel I must say something publicly, as I have said to government privately, on behalf of the thousands of teachers and other staff whose names are listed on the memorials.

I do not object in principle to the sale of the building. We have seen in Sydney and many other places how heritage buildings can be developed as high-rise buildings for other purposes, while maintaining much of their classical integrity and sense of history.

The lifetime of the Bridge Street building covers almost the entire span of the war memorials.

The building was first occupied by Peter Board and his staff in 1915. There will have been some teachers who enlisted in 1914, when the Colonial Secretary's Building was still the head office of the department, but from 1915 on - with only a brief hiatus in the early 1990s – it has been the headquarters of public education.

Uniquely, we have there gathered in one place, and recorded for all time, the names of virtually all of our colleagues who went to war for the defence of our children, our future and our country.

It is a shrine. Like all shrines, it is a troublesome place that raises questions and ambiguities, but it must be preserved.

On scores of occasions when I was in the job I came across visitors, sometimes individuals and sometimes parents of grandparents and children – particularly in school holidays – who had come in for the purpose of seeing their father's or grandfather's name on a roll of honour.

And they would talk to you about who he was and where he taught, and ask if you would mind taking a photograph. These were often country people who would never get to the Anzac Service, yet some of them came in, year after year, on some special anniversary.

We owe it to the thousands of teachers who went to war for their country

- to ensure that the Department's Memorials, the Anzac Cabinet and the Book of Remembrance are not disturbed again;
- that they remain prominently grouped in public space in a heritage part of the building;
- that they remain open to the public;
- and that provision is made for the Teachers RSL Branch to hold an Anzac Day Service in the presence of the memorials, with the necessary seating capacity, musical accompaniment, audio facilities and morning tea.

I am prepared to stand with the Teachers RSL Sub-Branch and the NSWTF to make that a reality.

I thank you again for the privilege of honorary membership, and I congratulate you on your 70th anniversary.