

## **Indigenous Veterans Ceremony: Hyde Park War Memorial**

**May 30 2008**

### **Speaking Notes**

**Address by Norman Laing (LLB), Secretary of NSW Reconciliation Council, Infantry Combat Badge, Australian Active Service Medal, INTERFET Medal and Australian Defence Medal**

- § Your Excellency, Sir Nicholas, Distinguished guests, honourable Minister, officers and Members of the RSL. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to today.
- § I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands upon which we meet today; I would also like to acknowledge our Indigenous Elders of the past and those with us today.
- § I would especially like to acknowledge all of the Servicemen and women whom have served their nation - and to those whom have paid the ultimate sacrifice, and of course those men and women of the ADF serving today, thank you.
- § It is a tremendous honour for me to be here today, to share with you a part of my background and my experiences that has lead to becoming an Indigenous veteran myself.
- § As mentioned earlier, I am a Dhunghutti man from Kempsey on the mid north coast of NSW. At the time of me living in Kempsey, the town, like so many others throughout rural and regional Australia, had, and in some cases still does have, the sad demographic and statistical data that epitomised the reality of the lives of many Indigenous Australians – that is, disadvantage, poverty and social exclusion.
- § During my early age and teenage life in Kempsey, I witnessed a town that historically had a low tolerance for Indigenous people, low unemployment, high crime rates, teenage pregnancy and youth suicide. Personally, I lived the statistics first-hand on the home front, growing up in an environment of drugs, alcohol and violence. It was a situation that provided me with an insight of what is wrong, and continues to be wrong, within many of our Aboriginal communities.
- § For me, as a young person, I had aspirations to lead and live a better existence. I had aspirations of further study, to leave the environment that I knew was wrong and ensure that my future was not that of continuing on the cycle of disadvantage. I also had the aspiration of becoming a soldier and for me, it was a calling – something instinctively told me that the defence force, regardless of the service, was a means by which I could break that cycle.
- § Enlisting in the ADF provided me with the opportunity to leave that environment - I enlisted because I knew that in my service, there would be a benefit for me as well as to society. I could undertake a socially responsible role whilst improving my own life chances.

- § The Army provided me, like many other Indigenous people throughout history, with an opportunity break away from the welfare and victim mentality – the mentality of so many of the teenagers of my time, teenagers both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. When I had made the decision to enlist, I knew it was a turning point - my life would never be the same. When I was a young Aboriginal person with no where to go or without a stable family or home, it was the military gave me a life and family –something I will never forget.
- § For many Indigenous people, including me, signing on to becoming a member of the ADF family was a way out of social exclusion and disadvantage – with the life of a service man or woman, the responsibility, commitment and camaraderie leaves little or no room racism.
- § Despite prejudicial and discriminatory government policies throughout Australia's social and political history, for many of our Indigenous service personnel, the racism stopped when they joined the armed forces.
- § As it often said by many Indigenous people whom have served, there was no racism – it wasn't needed and it wasn't tolerated. Racism in a peacetime military did not set a good foundation for things heated up on active service. I, like many of our service men and women, believe that there is only one skin that matters when you serve – the uniform of your service.
- § It true, however, that racism still occur – it is in my mind it is one of those ugly stains in our society that will never go away. It will always happen, thankfully for ADF; it is much more isolated and certainly not tolerated or accepted. In fact, any instances that I have encountered from a personal and professional perspective, I have used as one of the drivers to achieve.
- § After I completed recruit training at Kapooka in 1995 (of which I am proud to say as, as my platoons most outstanding soldier), I was posted to 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment – Australia's parachute battalion, "old faithful".
- § My service with 3RAR saw the significant changes come to fruition as I anticipated that day in the office of the recruiter. The eight years I served were, without a doubt, the years that provided me with the foundation for my life's journey to date – it provided me with great mateship, discipline and a pride that I still carry with me today. It also provided me with the opportunity to study and open other doors of opportunity such as graduating from law, becoming a barrister as well as the current role I am in.
- § My service in the ADF also had it pitfalls, but when they occurred, generally, as a result of the trust and mateship that develops, we all went through those obstacles together. It is the common thread that binds us all, regardless of race, the thread of not wanting to let your mates down.
- § But it is these obstacles that bring the ADF family closer together, long deployments, overseas and active service and illnesses and personal hardships are often shared amongst colleagues and provide the counselling and understanding that only those going through it with truly understand.
- § I have been fortunate enough to have seen many places, more that a kid from Kempsey would ever have dreamt of – being fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to travel places such as Malaysia, Singapore, Germany

and East Timor to name a few – all opportunities that I would not have had, had I not been with the Army.

- § I feel quite honoured to have served and it is days like this, that highlights the point is to show how we need to recognise, respect and honour the Aboriginal people who made the ultimate sacrifice for this country, particularly when we realise that history has not been a good one at times.
- § Days like this do not take away or diminish the service of all those men and women before us, indigenous and non-indigenous, but it is events like these that give us that gentle reminder of the extra burden many of Indigenous veterans had to carry with them during and after their service.
- § For many Indigenous people, they did not receive the same benefits of returned service men. Some didn't get their names on the RSL rolls of honour, land grants, many were not even allowed in the same pubs where their comrades in arms were drinking.
- § We should not ignore the truth of the way Indigenous people were treated. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women who served, fought and died for their country despite the social reality that they were not classed or treated as citizens. It is extraordinary to think that Indigenous men and women went to war for our country that at the time did not accord them the rights and opportunities that come with citizenship.
- § Service within the military and service in times of conflict in particular, presented the opportunity for Indigenous men and women to enjoy equality between black and white that was not available to Indigenous people at home.
- § These are facts that are part of our social and military history that we cannot change – but it is part of our role today when remembering those before us in the service of Australia to forgive those injustices and ensure that we never to forget, not out of malicious intent, rather to ensure that those men and women, indigenous and non-indigenous, receive the same benefits, recognition and honour – honour that as a nation, we are indebted to.
- § We must recognise and honour those because they were the ones that were ready when the call to arms came; they gave us the courageous service needed to continue to protect the freedoms we enjoy today.
- § Throughout the National Reconciliation process, it is important to publicly acknowledge the contributions of Indigenous veterans and is also a fitting time to honour the Aboriginal men and women who fought for their country as well as those who continue to serve, our nation proudly in times of war, conflict and peace.