

ANZAC Day Dawn Service – Public Address, Will Martin, Retired Navy Captain

What Does Anzac Day mean to you?

When I was a little boy aged 8, my Dad encouraged me to join him at an event that even now remains etched in my childhood mind. It was Dawn Service at the Cenotaph in the City. I had no idea what Dawn Service was but Dad told me it was a very important event and that I was old enough to experience it.

So I went along. It was 1972 and a time when Australia still had a handful of troops in Vietnam, but I was oblivious to that. I was just a kid hanging out with his Dad. I can clearly recall it being a cool, clear morning and Mum had sent me off in one of those big coats with wooden toggles instead of buttons. We were standing near the spot where very old men with lots of gold braid and jangly medals were being dropped off and escorted away.

I was proudly holding Dad's hand. He was my hero, a dashing Navy officer who not long before had been captain of a very impressive warship. He was wearing a few medals and he'd been saluting various people as we settled into our spot. I seem to remember, everyone was smoking.

The service meandered and at times we quietly read some words and quietly sang some songs. Then it all went very quiet....someone started playing what I thought was a trumpet.....

“Will on the harmonica – first two notes of the Last Post”

....at that point something changed and Dad's grip on my hand tightened, just enough for me to look up and see tears running down his cheeks. The foundations in my young life...shifted. My invincible Dad, the fearless WarShip Captain, had been brought to tears by two notes on what I now know to be a bugle.

I was very confused and it took me several years to join the dots. I think I knew at the time that dad's Father had been killed in a war-time sea-battle but I hadn't realised that Dad had himself been a little boy of eight when his mother had received that awful telegram which read:

“With deep regret I have to inform you your husband Commander William Harold Martin RAN, is missing as a result of enemy action. Minister for the Navy and the Naval Board desire to express to you their sincere sympathy”.

It was March 1942 and Dad’s Father was officially Missing in Action.

For the remainder of the War Dad wrote letters to his missing father in the hope of one day hearing something... Late in the war he’d written...

“Dear Daddy, I hope you are quite well...We have been keeping the house and garden in order – both jobs are tedious! This brave little boy signed off by writing.. I’m itching to see you after these 3 and a half years. I’ve been looking after mummy for you. Love David.”

Sadly, after the war ended Dad’s mother received a further letter which told them, **“exhaustive investigations have been conducted and with deep regret I must inform you that no hope can now be held that your husband has survived the war.”**

That was it. As an 8 year-old Dad had lost his father, a zealous young Navy commander killed serving as Second-in-Command of HMAS PERTH, one of Australia’s most famous and courageous fighting ships. She’d been lost at the Battle of Sunda St in a fight against a Japanese Invasion Force.

As is the case for 322 of his ship mates who dies with him on the night...

He has no grave but the cruel sea,
no flowers lay at his head,
a rusting hulk is his tombstone,
a’fast the ocean bed.

Perhaps the Naval ode was on Dad’s mind as he was quietly weeping at the Cenotaph with me in 1972.

When I first had the opportunity to hold the hand of my young son at an Australian War Memorial on Anzac Day, I was in uniform having returned from Active Service as a Warship captain. I had cause to reflect on three generations of Australian Navy men, of service and of sacrifice. I was also quietly praying that my boy would never

have to face an enemy in action, the way his great grandfather did at the Battle of Sunda St in 1942.

It's my family story that has shaped what it is that Anzac Day means to me. I believe it's a day for people pause, reflect and grieve. People have been gathering at dawn on Anzac Day for over 100 years. The first Dawn Service was apparently held in Albany, Western Australia in 1918.

In the years following, one can imagine Cenotaphs popping up around this sad but proud young Nation from Weipa to Wilcannia, Bowral to Broome, where small groups of people, predominantly women initially, came together in silence to pause, reflect and grieve.

It my belief that there are 364 **other** days each year when we can joyously celebrate everything it is to be Australian, but this is the day we on which we should pause, reflect and find a way to personally honour the sacrifice of two different groups of Australians. First those brave and selfless people who have since before Federation, represented us, fought for us and in over 102 thousand instances, died for us.

The second group is all families who have watched a loved one head off to war and been left behind to deal with the consequences. People like my Dad's mother, left behind and trying to somehow remain positive in the face of an uncertain future, with a young son writing letters to his missing father.

This is as applicable now as ever, because so many families are still facing the consequences of war every day. Some of them are here with us now. And it would be wrong for us to neglect the servicemen and women affected by Peacekeeping, Humanitarian and Border Protection Operations. All of these people, and their families, deserve our full support.

My Dad is no longer with us. He died in 1990, three days after standing down as the 34th Governor of NSW due to illness. He'd seen active service in Korea, so as much as my story is about 3 generations of Navy men its equally about three women, wives, two of whom became war-widows, prematurely left behind to grieve the loss of their loved one. Thankfully Dad left behind an extraordinary legacy which makes the Martin family very proud every day. It's the Sir David Martin Foundation which has

been brilliantly helping young people in crisis for over 27 years. The values of “service and sacrifice” remain in his legacy even today.

If you’re able, I’d ask you now to stand. Every Anzac Day we’re asked repeat 7 words in two short statements of commitment. We often say them quietly and somewhat self-consciously but this morning I ask that together we make a personal commitment to all generations of service men and women, and their families, by repeating together....

I WILL REMEMBER THEM

LEST I FORGET.