

Address to Reserve Forces Day Media Launch

Sunday 5 June, Victoria Barracks

Good morning. Distinguished guests, Reservists, ladies and gentlemen and Captain Hume. May I commence by congratulating the guard and the band who are mostly comprised by Reservists.

It is a great privilege to be asked to speak at the Media Launch for Reserve Forces Day.

As you are aware, after the great success of the first Reserve Forces Day in 1998 which was to recognise the value of part-time service to the nation, it was decided to run the day annually to be conducted generally under the Veteran Affairs' Program "*Their Service is Our Heritage*". Each year a special event or concept is commemorated. In 2000 the bicentenary of the commencement of part-time soldiering in Australia was remembered. It was also 100 years since part-time members of the Naval Brigade left for the Boxer Rebellion in China and also 75 years since the Citizen Air Force was raised with No 1 and No 3 Squadrons in 1925.

The Queensland theme for 2005 is *Women and the Reserves*, to which I shall return.

The history of reserve service in Australia is a very long one – continuously since 1854 for Army when men went to fight in the Crimea; since 1863 for Navy with the formation of the NSW Naval Brigade; and 1925 for Air Force – only held back by want of finance from commencing in 1921.

After Federation a Commonwealth Department of Defence was created absorbing the many colonial military forces. This is not the place for a talk on the history of the reserves but the Reserve Forces Day website is an informative starting point should you be interested.

The Depression between the two world wars saw expenditure on military training greatly reduced and the numbers of reservists dwindle away but a critical core of volunteers continued with their training. They constituted a significant number of personnel in uniform at the commencement of WWII and were significant in command roles in all three services.

Women had such an important role during WWII occupying positions in the public sector, once the sole province of men, doing well running farms and small businesses and also raising their families. The nursing sisters had, of course, seen active service and in Australia women reservists occupied important positions in the three Services.

After all of this, nothing would ever be the same again.

The Reserves were reformed in the late 1940s having been disbanded at the end of the war. It is then that my own, and probably many of your memories of the Reserves began. My father was in the RAAF during the war and rejoined 24 Squadron when it was reformed in 1951. No doubt the extra money helped him and other returned service men undertaking mature age study, but they clearly loved going back. I know my mother thought my father had much too much fun. As did the children. How we loved the air displays at RAAF Mallala where we had special

viewing places. The Christmas parties at the beautiful old house on Barton Terrace then 24 Squadron's Headquarters with Father Christmas arriving with his bag of presents by helicopter persuaded me, at 10, that being a fighter pilot would be a splendid career!

But women then, as during the war, largely supported their Reservist and Service men folk.

Women entered the armed services in small numbers after the war, mostly in non-commissioned ranks. It was not until 1968 that the WRANSR was reformed and then in, it might be thought, a quite casual way. Navy decided the cadets at the Naval College should be taught something of international law and, in particular, the provisions of the UN Charter, the Law of the Sea (recently codified in 1958) and the obligations of Australia under the four Red Cross Conventions.

I was invited to give some of those lectures but the then Director of Naval Legal Services, the late Captain Larry Winch, who thought that lawyers were on the expensive side and, accordingly, the WRANSR might be reinstated. What did I think! It sounded like and was fun and I think, without being too assertive, that I had the honour to be the first WRANSR member after the war – on a Second Officer's daily rate of pay of \$6.40, which certainly justified the exercise.

The latest Defence Report 2003-4 reveals that of the approximately 52,000 total permanent forces 793 are Reservists in full-time ADF work. Almost 20,500 other Reservists engaged, in that year, in paid ADF work. The last Defence White Paper – 2000 said

“The contribution of the Reserves will be essential to the maintenance of the ADF's operational capabilities ... the strategic role of the Reserves has changed from mobilisation to meet remote threats to that of supporting and sustaining the types of contemporary military operations in which the ADF may be engaged.”

These days Reservists provide most of the defence lawyers, specialist surgeons and naval control of shipping capability and many regional surveillance units. Defence draws on the specialist skill of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reserve members in the Northern Territory and the Torres Strait. Reservists provide many of the splendid musicians who entertain us and lift our spirits on so many occasions.

Thirty-five per cent of full-time personnel across all services in the ADF are women and under the Gender Diversity Strategy developed by Defence there is a focus on recruitment, retention and encouraging re-entry of women into the ADF. The outcomes of the ADF Physical Employment Standards project will inform decisions about occupational health and safety and identify in a new way the roles for women in the ADF. A vigorous debate is underway in the United States about women in the front line. The nature of warfare as practised in recent times and today in Afghanistan and Iraq suggests that the concept of front line fighting as we have understood it has changed. Reservists, including women, have been active in both places.

The most recent figures for female/male Reservists available to me are for 2000. Across the three Services, the percentages are 82.4 per cent men and 17.6 per cent women. This is a significant under representation of women. Those statistics reveal this interesting fact –

“The Reserves have a generally older age structure than the permanent force and one that is progressively ageing. This is

especially the case for males in the Navy and Air Force. Females on the other hand are considerably younger than their male counterparts with very few in the older age groups.”

Does this last observation explain the first?

So, perhaps a few of our more mature women might like to consider redressing the balance and not just by supporting their male partners in the Reserves but by joining them. After all, the Navy recommissioned me in 2003!

The value of the civilian experience and perspective within the armed services, whilst at the same time being part of them is inestimable. This was demonstrated in high degree in WWII. It encourages ordinary men and women to participate in the defence of our country and to undertake the considerable humanitarian aid work which is now seen as a proper role for our Defence Forces both here and abroad.

Can I conclude by addressing some thoughts to the media – this is your briefing day – you have both power, and, contrary to Stanley Baldwin’s assertion, responsibility. Our community needs a counter balance to the seemingly endless tales of violence, deceit and fraud that are daily conveyed. Can I suggest that amongst us today are many with uplifting stories of service and loyalty – so many unsung heroes and heroines whose song needs to be heard.

Margaret White