

**Reserve Forces Day Launch
& Launch of the "Park of the Australian Soldier"
Raheen, Melbourne 20 May 2007**

**The Hon Bruce Billson MP
Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence; Minister for Veterans' Affairs**

Thank you Peter.

To our hosts today, particularly to our chairman of the Reserve Forces Day Council, Major General Greg Garde, Sir to you and Mrs Garde, thank you and thank you for your story. I must say that the story and the tribute we had prior – wasn't that just magnificent? Can we show our appreciation again?

I occasionally get asked a question about commemoration and for about the \$11 billion a year we spend taking care of those that have served our nation, we spend about \$45 million on commemoration. That is about \$1 for every \$100 we spend on health care for those men and women that have served our country and I think the explanation of the events, the connection they have with the circumstances of our nation, of our work internationally, and it's very direct link to the outstanding service of the men and women of today's Australian Defence Forces. What a vivid explanation Sir, I commend you for that.

I would also like to acknowledge and recognise and sincerely thank our hosts today, Richard and Jeanne Pratt. Remarkable Australians and again showing their commitment to our nation and things that are very important. To His Excellency, the Australian Ambassador, good to see you here. My friend and colleague, Michael Danby, good to see you looking well Sir. To Sir Zelman and Lady Cowan, great to see you joining us for this very important occasion. To our leadership of the Returned & Services League, and other Ex-Service Organisations, good to see you all here today.

I particularly like to congratulate Digger James and for your ongoing work, Sir, some of your batons may have been passed but your passion continues and I thank you for your many years of selfless service, not only during your service but beyond.

I would also like to acknowledge and recognise the outstanding men and women of the Australian Defence Forces. Our 'Regs' – our Regulars or our Reservists, you have heard a bit of a story about their work at the moment. We have 11 theatres of operation, and 3000 men and women frankly sharing the good fortune that we enjoy in this country standing up for those values and the prosperity and the peace that we enjoy and revel in every day. Our men and women are helping others also to secure that opportunity as well as defending our national interest. And I say to each and every one of you – you do us proud day in, day out and we admire your work and today's generation carry forward a remarkable tradition. Thank you all for your service.

I am thrilled to be here today. This is a very important double-header.

We've got a remarkable First World War victory that deserves to be told, the story of great achievement against adversity and it is very much a part of our character where as a nation we have not only survived in these harsh environments, we've prospered. And you see that skill set and perseverance and commitment carried through to that remarkable story of Beersheba.

It is also though an important opportunity to recognise a very significant component of today's Defence Forces, and that is our Reservists. I have been on the hull of an ANZAC frigate on the border of Iran and Iraq talking to medics that are Reservists. So whilst we heard about a complete Reserve unit going to bring stability to the Solomon Islands and working in other areas around the world, our Reservists as individuals and the skill set that they bring is making a remarkable contribution.

Both of those two occasions deserve the time to pause and reflect and frankly to celebrate and to convey our thanksgiving.

We are launching today the Park of the Australian Soldier – a remarkable project at Beersheba. A remarkably important place not only for our nation but for the people of Israel. An outstanding initiative and a wonderful project for the Pratt Foundation to drive and shape and I am delighted that the Pratt Foundation in partnership with the Beersheba Foundation, with the support of the Australian Government, including my department, have been able to bring together all that is needed to make sure that proper recognition for those dramatic events that are just short of 90 years away in their anniversary of the Australian 4th Light Horse Brigade, that all of that is captured and conveyed.

The Defence Force's Reserve Day and the lead up to this important day on the 1st of July is also something I will briefly touch on but first the Battle of Beersheba.

Many of you and in fact all of us here cannot help but know the background of the story and I again thank you for that but the importance of capturing Beersheba is remarkably significant. The daring and the action of the Australian Light Horsemen was vital in the supply of not only water for the Allied horses and troops but for turning around the whole Turkish flank in Palestine. That was the goal of our British partners – to drive the Turks North from Gaza. It was an inspirational victory. One that many have described as the last great cavalry charge. But it did set in train some remarkable events – the capturing of Gaza, and Jaffa, and the Ottoman Empire, the liberation of Jerusalem, all of Palestine, the Balfour Declaration, and ultimately the establishment of Israel in 1948 – what a remarkable series of events were activated by the extraordinary courage of the Australian Light Horsemen.

Times have changed. Today we are dear friends, enduring friends with our Turkish colleagues. Once foes, now enduring friends we see our citizens and many from New Zealand welcomed to the shores of Gallipoli each year for Anzac Day. But for many in our community the story of Beersheba has been told in part through popular cinema. We remember the 1941 Chauvel film 'Forty Thousand Horsemen' with Chips Rafferty or the 1987 award winning film 'The Lighthorsemen'. Whether you have learnt the story through those popular images or a dedicated study of history, the courage and the daring, the determination of those who served in the battle deserves enduring commemoration. But also Beersheba, not only for these events but also its ongoing tribute to those that lost their lives. It is very important this project and it brings together so many significant threads.

Beersheba is not the largest of the Commonwealth war cemeteries in the region. Beersheba war cemetery, just 2km away from the site of this outstanding tribute we are launching today is the final resting place for the greatest number of Australians who gave their lives as part of General Allenby's liberational push so it is very important for our nation.

I want to congratulate the Pratt Foundation, the Beersheba Foundation for their foresight, their daring. The project is remarkable but their generosity in bringing it to

a point where it can be achieved also is incredibly significant and deserving of recognition.

The funding of the Park of the Australian Soldier project in Beersheba, Israel is a remarkable feat of philanthropy, of storytelling, of connecting peoples in our journeys.

I also want to pay tribute to the city of Beersheba for setting aside the land for the park and offering to maintain its infrastructure on such an important boulevard in that bustling city. The landscape memorial will provide not only a place of commemoration, for reflection, for telling that remarkable story, but a recreation area, a children's playground with equipment suitable for children with disabilities or without disabilities. Again those links of opportunity and the chance to enjoy what life has to offer is bought forward through this park. And could they have chosen better than the renowned Victorian sculptor, Peter Corlett? I don't think so Sir, and congratulations on this commission. Peter has done some remarkable work in different places around the world and it is fitting that he will be producing the enduring tribute. Your skills and your artisan talents are remarkable and I am delighted that can now be a part of more people's experiences as they travel through this important part of our world.

I look forward to the dedication of the park next April and invite you all to stay engaged and supportive of that project. It reflects an important part of our history. But I ask you all to do something that is equally important today. Many people stop me and say 'Bruce, what can we do to support our men and women of the Defence Forces?'. Well Reserve Forces Day is one of those opportunities.

With the 90th Anniversary of Beersheba coming up, its focus is a part of Reserve Forces Day for 2007, as that day recognises the characteristics of determination and loyalty displayed by the Light Horsemen. It also is a character set in qualities that we see in members of Australia's Reserve Forces.

Sunday, July 1 at the Shrine of Remembrance, the annual march and a ceremony will be held to acknowledge the dedication of current and former Reservists. These are men and women of our nation who have full lives and in addition choose to contribute to the defence of our nation and its national interest. We say to employers out there 'you want some good talent? - recruit a Reservist.' We say to organisations wanting to know how they can support the work of our men and women 'think about Reservists. Their skill set, their commitment, I invite you to play your part to recruit and support that work'.

Reservists have and continue to serve willingly in times of war and times of conflict and times of peacetime. Reserve Forces Day is a timely reminder of the importance of Reservist in the security of our nation and our national interest. I encourage you all to participate wholeheartedly and fully recognising Reservists and their commitment to train and serve alongside our Regular serving personnel. The work they are doing is valued, it is important, it is meaningful, we see it places such as Rwanda, Malaysia, Indonesia, Solomon Islands, and deployments right around the globe today. Australian Reservists feel proud of what you have achieved already. Feel proud of what we know you will continue to achieve for this nation. You uphold a long tradition of courage and sacrifice and mateship. We admire and salute you and encourage the wider Australian public to recognise that commitment by supporting Reserve Forces Day.

I thank you for a few minutes of your time.