

When the right words matter

Michael Fullilove

The Age

11 November 2006

P. 14

Remembrance Day will prompt the usual number of speeches. Many will be unremarkable - thick with clichés and cluttered with formalities. Speeches on November 11 are difficult to write and deliver, because so many words have been expended on the subject already.

But somewhere, whether at the Shrine of Remembrance or the Cenotaph in Sydney or one of the numberless memorials dotted across the continent, someone today will find exactly the right phrases for the occasion. Australia has a tradition of very accomplished speeches of remembrance: leaner than most, more direct - at their best, more honest.

The prime minister Paul Keating's Eulogy for the Unknown Australian Soldier, delivered on November 11, 1993, was one of the finest speeches in our history. On that day the remains of an unknown soldier, exhumed from the Adelaide Cemetery in Villers-Bretonneux in France, were interred in the Hall of Memory of the Australian War Memorial. It was also the day, it is said, when the practice began of entwining red poppies around the tiles on the memorial's roll of honour. Keating's eulogy, delivered during the funeral service at the Stone of Remembrance, was composed of good, plain words, elegantly arranged.

"We do not know this Australian's name and we never will," he began. "We do not know his rank or his battalion. We do not know where he was born, or precisely how and when he died. We do not know where in Australia he had made his home or when he left it for the battlefields of Europe. We do not know his age or his circumstances - whether he was from the city or the bush; what occupation he left to become a soldier; what religion, if he had a religion; if he was married or single. We do not know who loved him or whom he loved. If he had children we do not know who they are. His family is lost to us as he was lost to them. We will never know who this Australian was.

"Yet he has always been among those we have honoured. We know that he was one of the 45,000 Australians who died on the Western Front. One of the 416,000 Australians who volunteered for service in the First World War. One of the 324,000 Australians who served overseas in that war, and one of the 60,000 Australians who died on foreign soil. One of the 100,000 Australians who have died in wars this century.

"He is all of them. And he is one of us."

Later in his remarks Keating discerned a lesson among the horrors of the Great War. "It was a lesson about ordinary people - and the lesson was that they were not ordinary. On all sides they were the heroes of that war: not the generals and the politicians, but the soldiers and sailors and nurses - those who taught us to endure hardship, show courage, to be bold as well as resilient, to believe in ourselves, to stick together."

Every year, it seems, Australia's military past tightens its hold on the imaginations of our young. And why shouldn't it? In a pretty crook world, where "reality show drongo" is a sought-after career, veterans represent something much simpler and straighter. They didn't promote, they didn't emote; they served.

One man who served was Frank Bethune, a Tasmanian clergyman and Cambridge boxing champion who enlisted as a private soldier shortly after the commencement of the First World War. Largely forgotten now, Bethune was an eloquent speaker: the war correspondent and

official historian Charles Bean recorded a noteworthy sermon he preached on the troopship Transylvania in April 1916, to a crowd of slouch-hatted Australian soldiers of the First Anzac Corps bound for France.

Lieutenant Bethune's most powerful statement, however, was delivered in the form of his Special Orders of March 13, 1918, to the men of No. 1 Section, 3rd Machine Gun Company at Passchendaele on the Western Front, the site of a terrible battle the previous year. Ordered to defend an exposed position, Bethune issued the following orders (given that his section consisted of only seven souls, military historians think it likely that the orders were delivered verbally as well as in writing):

1. This position will be held, and the section will remain here until relieved.
2. The enemy cannot be allowed to interfere with this program.
3. If the section cannot remain here alive, it will remain here dead, but in any case it will remain here.
4. Should any man, through shell shock or other cause, attempt to surrender, he will remain here dead.
5. Should all guns be blown out, the section will use Mills grenades, and other novelties.
6. Finally, the position, as stated, will be held.

Although isolated, the section held the position for 18 days. Bethune's orders, described by The Times as "inspiring and famous", were circulated among the Allied armies in France. The Australian Dictionary of Biography records that after the fall of Dunkirk in 1940, the orders "were reproduced as posters under the caption 'The spirit which won the last war' and displayed throughout England".

It is not only military service we describe in our words of remembrance, however.

Think of governor-general Sir William Deane's poignant address to the 1999 memorial service in Interlaken, Switzerland, for the young Australians swept away by a flash flood in the Saxetenbach Gorge. Deane revealed that he and his wife had brought 14 sprigs of wattle with them from Government House in Canberra and, in memory of the 14 Australians lost, cast them into the Saxeten River. "Somehow," he said, "we felt that was bringing a little of Australia to them. It was also, in a symbolic way, helping to bring them home to our country. That is not to suggest that their spirit and their memory will not linger forever here in Switzerland, at the place where they died. Rather, it is to suggest that a little part of Switzerland has become, and will always be, to some extent, part of Australia.

"It is still winter at home. But the golden wattles are coming into bloom. Just as these young men and women were in the flower of their youth. And when we are back in Australia we will remember how the flowers and the perfume and the pollen of their and our homeland were carried down the river where they died to Lake Brienz in this beautiful country on the far side of the world. May they all rest with God."

When Don Bradman was farewelled at a memorial service in Adelaide on a rainy, blowy day in 2001, the eulogist was Richie Benaud, a marvellous cricketer and captain himself, and the rarest of cricket commentators for his understanding that less is more (except in the matter of cream jackets).

"It's not quite perfect outside, I guess," Benaud noted. "Rain coming down. A bit of a dodgy pitch. Wind blowing. But I reckon he would have handled it with all his consummate skill, no matter what

it might provide out there."

Benaud went on to describe the cricket matches that are played in the minds of Australian kids. "When I was six years old Bradman was captain of Australia in the concrete storeroom at Jugiong where I played Test matches.

"When I was 10 he was still captain on the back veranda at Parramatta where he led and won and was absolutely brilliant in all those Test matches I used to play against England. I wasn't alone, in that thousands and thousands of other youngsters around Australia played their Test matches like that - Bradman and McCabe made all the runs and then O'Reilly and Grimmett bowled out England every time. Wondrous days."

The first Bali bombings in October 2002, which killed 202 people including 88 Australians, produced a speech-a-thon.

One of the few politicians to get the tone exactly right was NSW Premier Bob Carr, in an address at Coogee Oval, the home ground of the Coogee Dolphins rugby league club, which lost six of its players.

"I come here as one born and raised and resident 53 years in these streets and beaches - a local member, a neighbour, a friend - to say how greatly we have lost, and how forever we will mourn these good people so savagely and so pointlessly torn from this community, from these clubs, from these friendships, this beautiful part of the world.

"We remember their laughter and their vigour and their hope, and we know that they are gone. We celebrate the joy they gave us. We know we will come to live with their absence, but not yet. There is still grief, and anger, and a rage against the dark and random shattering of so many lives.

"We trust the arm of justice will be long and reach across latitudes and oceans to find and punish the guilty: we trust that will be soon. But for now, we pray in our different ways for those who are gone. We pray and remember, we celebrate their lives and mourn."

Of course, most remembrance speeches are not bound up with politics and international affairs. They are words at the graveside of a loved one. Peter Rose's beautiful speech at the 2003 funeral of his father, Collingwood hero Bob Rose, was a moving example: "My old man would have loved today. That may seem like an odd sentiment on an occasion like this, but Dad would have relished the warmth and connection in this room. I think the world could do with some more Bob Roses. Football certainly could. It always needs and welcomes athletes with his gifts and flair. But I think society could do with some more Bob Roses. For many people, he seemed to demonstrate old-fashioned values and beliefs that perhaps we miss a little and regret having superseded in a brasher age."

Peter read out a letter sent to his father by a young relative: "People say that you were so tough and brave, and every Saturday when I run out on the field there isn't a moment when I stop thinking, 'Play brave, play tough, play like Bobby.' Let's all remember those words . . . They're not a bad epitaph for the life of Bob Rose."

Speeches change people's lives; they also mark them. Perhaps one day Remembrance Day speeches and eulogies will be delivered by PowerPoint, with a screen erected above the catafalque and a laptop beside the lectern. But not soon, one hopes, not soon.

Michael Fullilove is editor of *Men and Women of Australia! Our Greatest Modern Speeches*, Vintage.