

AUSTRALIAN VETERANS

Statement

HON MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM (South West) [9.48 pm]: Over the past three weeks, both as a South West Region member of the Legislative Council and a member of the Albany Returned and Services League sub-branch, I have been honoured to attend functions commemorating Australians who served in Vietnam, particularly at Long Tan, and in the battle for Australia during World War II. Both ceremonies were very moving, and I felt compelled to inform the house of the contributions of Australians in the Pacific, particularly in 1942, and in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s. However, it came to my attention a week or more ago that a speech delivered on 17 August in the House of Representatives by the federal Leader of the Opposition was far more appropriate and meaningful than anything I could deliver about the significance of Australians at war. The speech was penned by a former member of this house, Hon Graham Edwards, the current federal member for Cowan, who will retire at the next election. He nearly paid the ultimate price while serving his country in Vietnam. He has suffered greatly, both physically and emotionally, from his military service. I seek the indulgence of the house in quoting the letter from Hon Graham Edwards as he reflects on the horror of war, the lasting trauma of those involved and the suffering of many innocent civilians in the devastation of war. The honourable member's letter comes at a time when we can now say how proud we are of our Vietnam veterans and indeed all who have served and continue to serve this great country of ours. The letter reads -

Dear Kim,

Vietnam Veterans' Day.

I have just been advised that the Prime Minister will only allow one speaker on this important statement before the house today.

I thank you for the opportunity to be our speaker but I believe that our recognition of the service, sacrifice and suffering of Vietnam veterans should rightly come from you, as our Leader.

I would however be pleased if you could perhaps consider just a couple of things.

I noted that at the Launch of the book *Vietnam Our War - Our Peace* the Minister for Veterans Affairs offered an apology to Vietnam Veterans for the actions of all who opposed the war.

Kim, many good Australians opposed that war and not all who opposed the war took it out on the troops. My father for instance strongly opposed the war. I remember too that Senator John Wheeldon, a former Labor Minister for Repatriation, was a bitter opponent of the war but he was incredibly compassionate toward the individual veterans and strongly supportive of their needs.

Equally it should be said that not all who supported the war supported the troops, and even to this day many Vietnam Veterans refuse to join the RSL because of the treatment they received on their return home.

Had I the opportunity to speak today I would have taken the time to publicly forgive the person from my mother's church in Scarborough who wrote an anonymous letter to my mother saying she hoped I died as a result of my wounds, as I was a killer.

I could not have found it in my heart to say those words a few years ago but it is time to move on.

Kim today is not a day to enter into the divisive issues surrounding Australia's involvement in that war.

Today is a day when our Federal Parliament should honour our Vietnam Veterans, recognise their service and say to them that they did a good job in the best tradition of the Anzacs.

It is also a time when we should remember the sacrifice of those who did not come home at all.

It is a day when we should remember the Regulars and the National Service men who confronted their enemy on his home ground and who never took a backward step.

To say to them, our veterans, that we understand the difficulties of those who suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and that we recognise and respect the love and loyalty of the families of veterans, particularly the wives, the partners and the children.

Today is a day when we should say we are proud of our Vietnam veterans. A day when we honour and recognise their sacrifice, their service and their suffering.

I think it is also a time to reflect on the horror of war, the lasting trauma of those involved and the terror and suffering of innocent civilians caught in the devastation of war.

I just also want to thank you for your support in Government of the Welcome Home Parade. I know there are many veterans in Australia who would not have made it to that incredibly warm and emotional parade if you had not pitched in to ensure the support of defence and other government agencies to get them there and home again.

Kim, can I just say those who served in Vietnam either on the ground, in the air or on the waters served as a team.

We would enhance our support today if once again we could become a team and work together to support each other.

Kim I said earlier that it is time to move on.

Last night I had dinner with the Vietnamese Ambassador. As we left the table he said to me that both of our countries must look to the future.

I agree. I would wish him and his children, indeed all children of the world that which was most elusive during the last century - peace.

In closing Kim I want to say I am proud to have served my nation and proud of all who served with me.

I am proud of my mates and the contribution they made to Australia.

I take pride in their mateship.

I don't need anyone's apology for that.

Yours sincerely,

Graham Edwards,

Federal Member for Cowan.

House adjourned at 9.55 pm
