



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

DOCUMENTS

Terendak Cemetery

Consideration

SPEECH

Wednesday, 12 August 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Wednesday, 12 August 2015
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Questioner
Speaker Marino, Nola, MP

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Ms MARINO (Forrest—Government Whip) (17:56): I too add my condolences to the member for Canberra. It is very difficult to walk into this place and make the comments that you did.

The year 2015 marks 50 years since the arrival of combat troops and the escalation of Australia's involvement in Vietnam. There were 60,000 servicemen and women deployed between 1962 and 1973. It is very appropriate and it is right that we honour their service—specifically the 521 Australians whose names are listed on the Australian War Memorial roll of honour, 26 of whom are buried overseas and 24 at Terendak Cemetery in Malaysia. I thank the government and the minister for offering the families of Australian servicemen killed in Vietnam and buried overseas the opportunity to repatriate their remains, should the families wish to do so. This decision has been made in consultation with the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, the RSL, the Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia and, of course, the families of the Vietnam Veterans themselves.

On 21 January 1966 a decision provided for the repatriation of the remains of all Australians who died in the Vietnam War from that date, should the families wish to do so. The exhumation process may start from May 2016 with repatriation around the middle of next year. In his statement on this matter on 25 May, the Prime Minister announced that those who had died in the Vietnam War would be repatriated with full military honours. Ultimately, this decision to repatriate the remains of these Australians does lie with the individual families, as it should. The Australian government will respect the wishes of the families who choose to leave their loved ones resting where they currently lie. I understand that the Malaysian government has pledged its support and offered to assist with the repatriation wherever possible. The government is particularly pleased with that assistance.

Hundreds of young men from my part of the south-west of Western Australia were either conscripted or volunteered for service in the Australian Defence Force during those years in Vietnam. There were those who fought and those who supported them in what they did. There were volunteers, medical staff and a whole range of others.

The reason I want to speak on this particular issue is because I know very well what this will mean for the families who choose to have their loved ones repatriated to Australia. I have said previously in this House that I am the daughter of a World War II widow. I know what this would have meant to my mother, and I know what closure this will mean for the families who choose to take advantage of this particular offer by the government. My mother lived her whole life not actually knowing how her husband had spent his last days and hours. In 1943, when her husband, Jack, was killed in New Guinea, it was such a tough environment. His remains were apparently buried on the banks of the Busu River.

At the time my mother was living on a dairy farm in the little town of Brunswick in Western Australia—she was helping her family through the war years—and she simply got a telegram that said, 'Your husband is missing, presumed killed in action'. She had waved goodbye to her husband on a train; she had seen him go, and that was the last time she saw him. For her, and for the families of these young men, there was very little closure, because they simply said goodbye to them and they did not come home. The family do not get to have a funeral. For my mother, Anzac Day became the day that she felt most—every Anzac Day, for more than 60 years, her floral tribute was often the only one on the Anzac war memorial in Brunswick, even in those years when there were no Anzac services. I know that it was very hard for my mother because she never had a funeral for her husband, she never had the remains of her husband and she never had that sense of closure.

In speaking to this particular motion, on behalf of those families who are not here to speak I thank the minister and the government for this offer of repatriation. This will have an incredible impact on the families. This is something that I know my mother and my two older sisters, who lost their father, would have greatly appreciated had it been possible all those years ago. I really want to say to the minister that this is very, very important to the families. I am sure that he has already had that type of feedback. It is up to the families whether they take up this opportunity—the government is going to respect their wishes—but to have their loved ones back in Australia,

in an area that they choose, and to be able to have a physical and tangible memorial here in Australia will be profoundly important.

The sense of closure cannot be underestimated. When people go through the grieving process, it is very much part of it. For my mother, it was a burden she carried all her life. It was not until she was 70 that she met at a 2/28th reunion the man who, when he was 19 years old, spent the last two days of her husband's life with him. Her husband was 43, one of the oldest people to enlist, and this young man had spent those last days and hours with her husband; he had physically seen her husband's body and helped to take it back to have it buried. He was the same young man who, several years later, had been chosen to lay a wreath at the war memorial in Lae and it is on the gates of Lae where her husband's name is.

The member for Macquarie and I were recently in Bougainville as part of the USNS *Mercy*'s endeavours in delivering health outcomes with our Defence Force as part of the Defence Force program. One of the things that we felt so privileged to do was help clean up a war memorial that was erected by Lions of Australia to commemorate a local clan chief who had assisted the Australians during the war, and who was beheaded by the Japanese for doing so. I know the member for Macquarie and I physically did a great deal of work with our Defence Force on that day, but we were so privileged to be able to do so. In some small way for me, it was a profound experience; in a sense it was for my own mother. I was particularly grateful for the opportunity and very touched to be able to do so. As we look ahead to Vietnam Veterans Day, on 18 August, I think this is a profound moment for a lot of people at this time. I will be talking to Vietnam veterans when I go to their gathering on Sunday, and I acknowledge all those people, particularly the families of the fallen, for whom this will mean so much, and I thank you for your efforts on this.