# CAMDEN RSL

I feel very privileged to be here this morning.

When you emigrate to another country, as my wife and I did 22 years ago from the UK, it’s a big deal. It’s a true commitment because it’s a conscious choice and not an arbitrary accident of birth.

We wanted to live among Australians and so we had so many things to learn.

The first of our lessons was “We originated in England, we must never start a conversation about cricket, because that’s going to lead to an argument, and it’s an argument we’re going to lose”.

The second thing we learned was that nobody tells a 45-year-old the things they tell their two year old, but, when you go walking in long grass with only your shorts on, there will always be 50 Aussies who are keen and ready to quietly and politely explain the error of your ways.

And so it was that we began to understand what it meant to be an Aussie. But the big thing we needed to learn about was about the meaning of Gallipoli.

Those of you who were brought up here will have known the words ANZAC and Gallipoli from almost as early as you could talk, but we had to set about doing research.

Certainly it was the first major action in Word War 1 and the vast majority of Australian and New Zealand soldiers had been civilians less than a year earlier.

Certainly the stories that came back featured innumerable acts of bravery, ingenuity and endurance. But this is the case in many other battles by many other nations.

What really stands out from Gallipoli are tales of comradeship or, as it’s known here, Mateship.

Good grief, here were men from six colonies that had only become a nation fourteen years earlier. Suddenly they had been thrown together in abject hardship in a foreign land. and instead of each simply looking out for himself, they learned to live for each other and by each other.

This was a national trait that had first drawn my wife and me to the nation of Australia in the first place, 87 years after the battle of Gallipoli.

At about the time that we were first beginning to understand this, I was becoming obsessed with understanding the relative scale of very big numbers. For example, when asked the difference between a million dollars and a billion dollars I could tell you that at one dollar a second it would take you eleven days to spend a million dollars, but to spend a billion dollars at the same rate would take 32 and a half years

So, let’s try out a few numbers from the morning of 25th April 1915.

16,000 soldiers landed on what became known as ANZAC Beach. What do 16,000 people look like?

I was contemplating that as I flew here yesterday on a Boeing 737 from Melbourne - which took around 150 people.

So, if they’d had that luxury, it would have taken 106 Boeing’s to get them all there, just on that first day.

To put it another way, I’m told there are 5,000 chairs here this morning, so it would have been just over three times this gathering who landed that morning.

Let’s continue with the airport analogy when I tell you that the whole of ANZAC Beach is about half the length of the main runway at Sydney airport. So imagine trying to empty 106 planes in a couple of hours. Even with only hand baggage (which was all they had) it would be chaos.

Now add to that - being shot at from an entrenched enemy only 900 metres away. That’s about as far as being shot at from the main terminal while you’re standing on the runway at Sydney.

By the end of the day 2,000 of those first 16,000 were either dead or injured.

Before coming to Australia I couldn’t have put a pin in Gallipoli on a globe. Nor did I have any sense of the size of the battlefield. So in order to understand the scale of the field of battle at Gallipoli I continued the comparison with the airport, which covers an area of eight sq Kms. The whole of the ANZAC battlefield covers only 11 sq kms

A total of 60,000 Australians served during the eight months of battle, within that very small area, during which 8,141 were killed (that’s 54 Boeing loads) and nearly 20,000 were injured. So only around half of those who went there came back physically in one piece.

But, however much we try to boil down the numbers into terms that we can grasp, the truth of the matter is that each of the men who went there was an individual.

Each had a history of his own, a family of his own, and hopes and aspirations regarding what his future life might become. But each left all of that behind for a searing hot hillside, in a far-off land. It was before the days of refrigeration. Flies settled on everything, and the only way to rid their clothes of lice was to jump into the sea in full view, and range, of enemy machine guns.

Australia has become particularly good at preserving the records of all the men and women who served in wartime, and the Australian War Memorial has an incredible archive of photographs. So I moved on to research about trenches.

A trench was typically 2m deep by 2m wide. Imagine going out tomorrow morning with your ten strongest mates and beginning to dig a hole that deep using shovels. How long do you think your trench would be by sunset? Well, there were over 20 kms of trenches dug at Gallipoli.

It’s said that on the Western Front in Europe soldiers never saw the enemy. By contrast the trenches at Gallipoli were within grenade throwing distance. The fuse on a grenade was set to explode after 10 seconds and it took about five seconds to fly from the Turkish side to ours. So the diggers (and here we are back at the cricket again!) were in the habit of catching the grenades and chucking them back, so that the fuse went off just as the explosive arrived back in the trench of the enemy.

I have been in tense and stressed situations, I’ve lost comrades, and I’ve lost people I was trying to save. But the difference is that I wasn’t being shot at, and at the end of the day I got to go home to a warm bed or, in the worst case, a warm cabin deep in the bowels of an aircraft carrier.

These guys certainly had no pillows and, only if they had scraped a shallow hole in the hillside did they have anything at all to protect them from the elements and from the enemy gunfire.

Of those who survived, not one of them returned as the same person who had left.

I particularly want to pause here and note the First Nations people who fought. These were not pressed men they were volunteers. If and when they returned it would not be to the same accolades that their mates received. Often their service wasn’t recognized at all. So to them I want to say a special thank you today.

To those who did not return, and to those who did, we give thanks for their sacrifice, as we do to all of those here today who have served their country, in many theatres of war, and without thought for themselves.

To witness this sea of faces is remarkable, especially when I learned that it used to be only around 300 people who would attend the dawn service in Camden, and now look at us. Many have brought their quite young children and it gives me hope that we are carrying forward not just the tradition but all of the values that the service of the troops at Gallipoli showed to us.

From me personally, thank you to all of you here today who carry forward the torch of remembrance into the future.