

## REMEMBRANCE DAY

### *Statement*

**HON DR BRIAN WALKER (East Metropolitan)** [6.27 pm]: “They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old.” We were not sitting last week when the country and, indeed, the commonwealth observed Remembrance Day. I was travelling on that day, but in my heart I did remember. I have no doubt that most of us attended services and heard that ode being recited. “Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.” That sentiment has seeped into our psyche in Australia; it is a tangible part of who we are and who we see ourselves as being as Australians.

I want to take a moment, as close as I can to Remembrance Day, to acknowledge the Town of Victoria Park for the service it held honouring the sacrifice of Private Alec Ernest James Bell, who died on 29 January 1968 from wounds he received in action in Vietnam. I am sure that members will recall me speaking about my own parents taking me out of Australia, in no small part driven by the desire to make sure that I did not serve in Vietnam. For that reason, and for others that will become apparent, Private Bell’s story resonates with me quite strongly.

He was a son, a brother, an uncle and, we could say, a hero. He was the second-youngest of six children born to Robert and Florence Bell, and was born in 1946 in Welshpool. He had an ordinary Western Australian family. His father worked on the railway; his mother was a skilled seamstress. Alec’s sister Margaret described her parents, and by extension the whole family, as ordinary people living in extraordinary times, raising their family to be enterprising and resourceful and to enjoy life. Alec and his siblings went to St Francis Xavier College, which is now Ursula Frayne Catholic College. He graduated at the end of year 10, at 15 years and nine months old. He went to work in the Postmaster General’s Department as a telegraph boy and later as a postal officer at the General Post Office in Perth. When the Menzies government introduced selective national service in the mid-1960s, he found himself chosen by ballot and sent off to train at the second recruit training battalion in Puckapunyal in Victoria. From there, he went to the third infantry training battalion. Within six months, he was on his way to Vietnam as a rifleman. It is usually one year of training. I recall at that time standing before a ballot demanded of myself and my peers, from which one of us might have gone to Vietnam. Off he went; I could have gone.

At that time, medical support was very limited in the field. There were doctors at the regimental level, medics at the company level and stretcher bearers at the platoon level. They had the most basic first aid training. Such colleagues found themselves facing potentially devastating situations and conditions—treating friends with whom a short while before, they had had a drink or shared a meal with. They may have had horrible wounds or minor things, maybe mosquito bites. With the experiences I have in the emergency department and all the things I have done in my life, I think I would find such a situation more than harrowing. He found himself assigned as not only a rifleman, but also a stretcher bearer for 2 Platoon, A Company, 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment. As such, he disembarked from HMAS *Sydney* in Vũng Tàu, Vietnam, on 20 April 1967.

Ian Garthwaite, Alec’s platoon commander, remembered Alec in these terms —

Private Bell took this responsibility most seriously. The moment he donned his medical kit, he was ready to go forward in the middle of a fire fight to help a mate in trouble. When the cry of ‘Medic’ cut through the deafening noise of rifles, machine guns and the ear-splitting crash of artillery, Alec was the man you wanted to see, running or crawling towards you, lying beside you, bringing an end to pain, stopping the bleeding, reassuring you that you would be drinking beer in the soldier’s boozier in a few days time. His courage under fire was well known ...

Private Bell was killed on 29 January 1968 during Operation Coburg in Biên Hòa province, South Vietnam, when his platoon was ambushed by a much stronger enemy force. One of his surviving colleagues, Sergeant Bourke, recalled —

*In the first few moments the Platoon Commander, 2Lt O’Brien, and all the NCOs were wounded including Private Bell who had received a direct hit from a rocket. Even though shockingly wounded, Private Bell tried to get to the other wounded. When he could not move he gave orders to another soldier as to how to help them. Even when we finally got him on to the Dustoff stretcher, Private Bell was still giving advice as to the care of the other wounded. As he was lifted up through the trees the enemy opened fire again. The Dustoff was forced to leave the area with Private Bell and stretcher hanging underneath. We later learned that he was dead on arrival at hospital”.*

That day, 12 men from 2 Platoon were wounded, but only Private Bell died of those wounds, quite possibly as a result of his own courage and commitment to his fellow soldiers—struggling to offer medical assistance and advice, when he himself had been badly injured. Sir Phillip Lynch, Minister for the Army, when writing to Alec’s grieving parents back home in Perth noted —

I have read with feeling the report of his brave conduct before and after he received a mortal wound and I can assure you he died in a manner worthy of an Australian soldier”

The ode reminds us —

At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them

Yet Private Bell's remains rest in section KA of Karrakatta Cemetery. The grant status on his grave is listed by the Metropolitan Cemetery Board as "expired". That area is scheduled for imminent renewal. The years, it seems, have indeed condemned Private Bell, in spite of all our public protestations to the contrary. He was then a man close to my own age—just 21 years old when he died—fighting in a war that I narrowly avoided. He undertook the sorts of medical tasks that doctors and nurses might undertake on a daily basis, albeit in far more harrowing and dangerous circumstances. I cannot help but feel a connection to Private Alec Bell's story, as a result. To think of his grave being built over to provide modern mausolea, which could so easily be built elsewhere, fills me with sadness, members. I hope that the minister will involve himself in the case and do all that he can to ensure that Private Bell's grave remains undisturbed. Of course, what I would really like is for him to put an end to this renewal issue as a whole and leave all our beloved dead to rest in peace. They all deserve our remembrance, but given his actions on our behalf, perhaps Private Bell is first and foremost amongst them today.

Lest we forget.