

# Welcome Home, Mate

## Reflections on the Funeral for the Unknown Soldier

The Unknown Australian Soldier we inter today was one of those who by his deeds proved that real nobility and grandeur belong not to empires and nations but to the people on whom they, in the last resort, always depend.

– *Commemorative address by Prime Minister, Hon Paul Keating MP, at the funeral for the Unknown Soldier, 11 November 1993*

This November will mark 100 years since the end of the First World War and the 25th anniversary of the repatriation and interment at the Australian War Memorial of the Unknown Soldier. It was a moment in Australian history that would not have been possible without the AFDA and the keen support of our Members. We reflect upon this event: its intimate and moving details, and the messages it has left us with.

The weather in Canberra in November can be a “roll the dice” affair. Storm clouds can gather over the Brindabellas and heavy rain sweep-down in what seems like the blink of an eye. On 11 November 1993, we were lucky. A fine day, if a bit blowy, of around 20 degrees greeted the more than 20,000 people who lined ANZAC Parade and the War Memorial to be part of the funeral for the Unknown Soldier, a young man lost on the Western Front in World War I. They watched as white limousines with flags up front whisked very

important people toward the Memorial. More importantly, they stood in humbled respect and remembrance as the funeral procession made its way slowly toward its final and long-time-coming destination. Among the crowds, the standards of over 600 military unit associations could be seen from the top of Mt Ainslie above, where young troops from the Royal Military College would fire the “minute guns” in a 19-round salute. It was a day of pageantry on a grand scale for a cause absolutely deserving of it. In World War I, Australia had lost a large part of a whole generation of men on shores so distant that many of them would never come home. No ceremony can be too grand to recognise that sacrifice and the pain of those left to carry on without a grave or a body to grieve over; not just from World War I but from every Australian conflict.

But it was also a day of deeply intimate and personal moments that said as much





Rob Allison (AM) with the Unknown Soldier on arrival back in Australia

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about the reason for being there as any military pomp and spectacle.

Simon Berry was the AFDA President of the time and formed part of the Bearer Party for the funeral. The AFDA's involvement with the event had been borne of good timing and good fortune. At the National Convention only a few months earlier, time had been set aside for something most knew little about: a presentation from the then Director of the War Memorial, Brendon Kelson, seeking the Association's support to help bring home our Unknown Soldier from French soils and construct an appropriate resting place within the Memorial. The Council had unanimously agreed there and then to the request and Simon had suddenly found himself along with his fellow Council members in the middle of this historic occasion.

"The whole thing was incredibly rehearsed with military precision, but what sticks with me the most were the things that weren't planned," recalls Simon.

"During the Prime Minister's eulogy, someone in the car park had fired up a barbecue and the smell of cooking sausages just wafted across the parade ground. Then two crows started having a classic squawk in the top of one of the gum trees. It was just the most Australian thing you could imagine and reminded us of all the things we take for granted."

It was as if events were conspiring to reinforce to those present that much of what we love as "Australian" – our freedoms and our legends – was paid for by the blood of service men and women in far off shores. Indeed, in a strange coincidence, all this transpired as the Prime Minister uttered the very words:

"We might think this Unknown Soldier died in vain. But, in honouring our war dead, as we always have and as we do today, we declare that this is not true.

For out of the war came a lesson which transcended the horror and tragedy and the inexcusable folly."

For Prime Minister Keating that lesson was that nations are built on ordinary people who through their sacrifices are not-so-ordinary and

teach us "to endure hardship, to show courage, to be bold as well as resilient, to believe in ourselves, to stick together".

It was then, as the procession moved into the Hall of Memory within the Australian War Memorial and the newly prepared tomb for the Unknown Soldier, that the AFDA President would share a special moment with one of those not-so-ordinary Australians.

Bob Coomb was a 93 year-old World War I veteran, one of 14 present at the ceremony. He had been 15 when he lied about his age to enlist and would tell the story of being informed on the eve of his 16th birthday that his battalion would be "going over the top" the next day. Birthday luck somehow kept him alive that next day as many of his brothers-in-arms fell in the mud of the Western Front.

Bob had been given the job of sprinkling soil from Pozieres, the site of one of our bloodiest battles and the same theatre in which Bob had served, on to the coffin of the Unknown Soldier before it was entombed.

Now frail, he received the soil and was helped toward the grave, but some of that cheeky 15 year-old remained.

“It was all timed to the second. Bob had 30 seconds to perform his role – but you could see he didn’t care about that. He was rightly savouring the moment,” Simon Berry remembers.

“He stood there crushing the soil through his fingers. You can only imagine what memories that brought back. He then sprinkled out the soil in the shape of a cross and, as he did, he whispered something. Only those standing close by would have heard it. He simply said, “Welcome home, mate”. I remember that vividly even now.”

Rob Allison was another not-so-ordinary Australian. A World War II veteran, he was a partner in John Allison Monkhouse (now Allison Monkhouse) and a Past National

President and Life Councillor of the AFDA. Rob was instrumental in getting the Association involved in the funeral of the Unknown Soldier and travelled with the coffin from the Adelaide Cemetery near Villers-Bretonneux in France to the tomb in the Hall of Memory. Rob was later honoured with a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for his service to the funeral industry and the community, and his role in the return of the Unknown Soldier.

From the start, Rob was dedicated to making this funeral a “team effort” by the industry and it was his actions that allowed others to play their parts in this story. Beyond Simon Berry, there was Ballarat Funeral Director, Peter Tobin, whose personal initiative to video the ceremony became the only film record of it in existence. There was also Michael Dempsey, Managing Director of Amalgamated Casket Company – today known as ACC Higgins. After the AFDA had issued the

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Over 600 unit associations proudly displayed their standards during the funeral ceremony



specifications for the coffin to coffin-makers across Australia, ACC's Tasmanian Blackwood offering was selected to be the vehicle to bring home the Unknown Soldier.

The funeral of the Unknown Soldier had brought the industry together in the same way that we see funerals bring friends and family together every day.

On the day following the ceremony, the AFDA Councillors were able to take a private viewing of the tomb and pay their quiet respects. As he walked among the thousands of flowers splayed across the floor, Simon Berry noticed a hand-written note on a simple bunch of six red roses. It read, "To my dear son, David. Finally home for Christmas."

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It is not known what conflict the writer's son had died in. It is not known how long ago he had fallen. Clearly the note was not written by the parent of a World War I veteran. Yet, the writer had felt this funeral as if it were that of their son. The funeral of the Unknown Soldier was a funeral for all who had not had the chance to say goodbye to a loved one.

Looking back now, the words of this loving-parent remind us of both our vulnerability and our strength, because without loss there is no resilience or courage.

These words remind us that funerals are like mirrors, reflecting the value we as a community place on life, family, friendship and the contribution of those who go before us. These words remind us that we are the sum of a whole lot of not-so-ordinary people.

