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## Robert S Kearney OAM South Australian Historian of the Year

The History Council of SA honours the “Kid from Kilburn”

Robert “Dogs” Kearney OAM has been named the South Australian Historian of the Year

This honour recognises outstanding achievements in one or more areas; history teaching, historical research and scholarship, writing or presentation on historical topics, raising community awareness of history and heritage, and strengthening the community profile of history.



Bob, at the graveside of his 2I/C  
“Tich” Tomas

‘Dogs’ is always proud to say that he grew up in Kilburn (quite some time ago!). He did not complete his high school education which was not that unusual for the time and at the age of 17 he joined the Army and completed 2 tours of duty in Vietnam. He was awarded an Order of Australia Medal in 2016 for services to military history preservation and the community.

Bob’s early exit from school seems not to have impeded his thirst for knowledge or his ability to learn. He has a natural curiosity and desire to learn and he never stopped reading. His love of history, especially military history, lead him to develop an encyclopedic knowledge of the Great War in particular and the conflicts that followed. His knowledge of the Vietnam War is given extra dimension by his own experience of it. He is a self-trained, naturally analytical and meticulous researcher and has a true gift for storytelling. Notwithstanding that he only retired in late 2014, he has made a major contribution to the knowledge and understanding of the nation’s role in major conflicts and most particularly the impacts of those conflicts on the individuals who were the principal participants. This is best exemplified in his most recent work commissioned by the SA Government – Valour and Violets (2018). Produced in just under 2 years it pays tribute to the South Australians who enlisted for service overseas during the Great War, especially those who never returned, all set against the backdrop of the South Australian home front. A herculean effort that produced an outstanding work.

Notwithstanding the success of Valour and Violets mention must be made of Raid on Celtic Wood (2017) as it is Kearney at his finest. His understanding of how battlefield administration works and the role of field returns, discovering the timing issue of reports (ie midday to midday at that time) and his dogged persistent determination to set the record straight where many an academic and author who preceded him just relied on what had been written before is testament to the self

imposed rigour he applied to an incident that had been mis-reported for 100 years. Most importantly it has given closure to an event that affected the families of the men involved and cast a shadow over the reputation of the 10th Battalion's CO Maurice Wilder-Nelligan and the unit. A mystery no longer.

The Team at Virtual War Memorial Australia (VWMA) has been honoured to have had “Dogs” as its (Volunteer) Research Associate since he retired in late 2014 and a more generous contributor and mentor you will not find. He has generously shared content from his seminal publications and brought to our team exceptional research skills and discipline. He is a gifted story teller who ensures that truth and accuracy are never lost or obscured no matter whose feathers he ruffles. He has displayed considerable humility in the face of the commentary of some in the broader history community who have sought to undermine the value of his work which has been a salutary lesson for us all. And, his talent is not confined to fact based military history as his authorship extends to poetry of extraordinary beauty.

For those of us who work with him, every day delivers moments to treasure. Despite his considerable achievements he is incredibly humble and generous. His life experiences underpin his wisdom and warmth. His enthusiasm to make a difference is infectious and we are all the better for the time we spend with him. The VWMA team and all who have the privilege of interacting with him (and this extends well beyond the confines of the VWMA office), are all direct recipients of his many generous gifts. He is without doubt a national treasure.

We thank the History Council of SA and Wakefield Press for their continued support of this important award.

We congratulate ‘Dogs’ (his adored and adoring wife Liz and Oscar & Izzy) on his award, recognising as it does, an outstanding contribution to the understanding of the history of South Australia and well beyond.

We salute Robert S Kearney OAM, South Australia’s 2019 Historian of the Year. Not bad for a “war buff”!

## Summary of Works

Crossfire - An Australian Reconnaissance Unit in Vietnam (2001) Co-author with Peter Haran  
In October 1966, 28 soldiers were chosen to form Australia’s first specialist Reconnaissance Platoon in the Vietnam War. One of this platoon’s section commanders was a 20-year old regular soldier called Bob Kearney, who led a series of deadly patrols, operating in isolation and extreme danger ahead of the main Australian forces.

Flashback (2003) Co-author with Peter Haran

Seven young Australian soldiers find themselves caught up in the madness and brutality of the Vietnam War, one dies, six survive after being wounded - only to find there are worse things than dying on the battlefield. Covering the events during their tours of duty between 1966 and 1972, Flashback vividly portrays the ordeals these men encountered while each man’s story is also a journey through the effects of post-traumatic stress and the dislocation of post-war service.

Silent Voices (2005) R S Kearney

Explores the lives of the men of 10th Infantry Battalion, from its formation in September 1914 at Morphettville in South Australia, through its role in the first landing at Gallipoli and to its disbanding after the Great War in 1919.

### Fallen Saints (2015) R S Kearney

'Fallen Saints' tells the story of the almost two hundred former students of St Peter's College, Adelaide, who fell during the Great War. It tracks the story of the fallen in a chronological way via the progress of the war and, as the conflict becomes ever more consuming and lethal, the word pictures of the fallen, telling their individual stories and circumstances of death, come thick and fast with increasing poignancy and impact.

### Raid on Celtic Wood (2017) R S Kearney

This book holds the answer to what really happened to Australia's 'lost company' at Celtic Wood on the 9th October, 1917. Many historians and battle-field tour guides have made comment on this operation, basing their views on pure conjecture, not analytical facts, suggesting mysterious or sinister outcomes. The analysis of the writings and opinions of others is both incisive and surgical. The real facts now uncovered have brought important closure to the families of many.

### Valour and Violets (2018) R S Kearney principal author; co-author Sharon Cleary

Close to 35,000 South Australians enlisted for service overseas during the Great War. Around 5500 never came back. Countless more returned with physical and psychological injuries that would affect them for the rest of their lives. Valour and Violets brings together for the first time the stories of the campaigns and battles in which South Australians served, set against the backdrop of the South Australian home front. Valour and Violets provides a wholly South Australian perspective on the impact of the Great War on individuals, on families and on our state's coastal, regional, and outback communities.