

FROM THE PATRON



Brigadier Colin Khan DSO AM (Retd)

Hanging on the walls of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, is a picture, that can be seen by all Australians, of two 5 RAR soldiers that I believe epitomises the suffering of all our wounded from Vietnam and the never ending comradeship shown by all who served with them.



The photograph on display at the Australian War Memorial

The picture is of PTE Joe Stawyskyj, A Company, being pushed in his wheelchair by Ziggy Jablonski at the head of the 5 RAR contingent, waving to the crowds, during one of the countless marches Joe attended. Joe had been very seriously wounded on mines in March 1969 and was confined to a wheelchair up to his death in December 2012.

In the 1970's, I had the privilege of visiting Joe several times in his home in Fairfield and meeting his devoted parents before their deaths. Joe spent his last years in a nursing home.

I write the above by way of an introduction to the eulogy given at Joe's funeral by another of his friends from A Company - CPL John Lloyd. I believe this eulogy is a moving and fit tribute to a good soldier and I commend it to all members of our Association.

Eulogy for Joseph Stawyskyj

National Serviceman,

Private, 2 Platoon, Alpha Company, 5th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment

Regimental Service Number: 27 87 617

Joe was a special soldier, as only fate could attest to. A proud member of 2 Platoon, A Company, 5 RAR, Joe was totally dedicated to the task at hand. Joe's fortitude and perseverance were to be the cornerstone of his life from 1969 till today. Joe was highly regarded by his platoon commander, Bob Brett and Platoon Sergeant 'Buck' Rogers. Never one to shirk a task; he was equally keen to contest any unfairness as he saw fit. Joe was never shy to voice his opinion. As Barry Greene, a classmate at Patrician Bros., Fairfield and fellow 5 RAR soldier said often:

“ Joe was an exceptional footballer, athlete and stubborn bloke. His presence on ANZAC Days was an inspiration to all and a credit to his spirit and his family. You could always see the ‘young Joe’ through the years. ”

Joe’s future was sealed on a fateful day on 27 March 1969, when a truck convoy carrying A Company, 5 RAR was blown up by land mines in Phuoc Tuy Province. Soldiers were blasted from trucks as three vehicles hit mines. An enemy attack was imminent. NCOs organised defence positions. The risk of further mines was high. Over 27 soldiers were wounded. As I tended the wounded, I saw Joe. He was different. He wasn’t moving. He couldn’t speak, just guttural sounds and a face of sheer terror. Joe had been catapulted backwards out of the truck we were in and landed on his head. Alpha Company Medic, Dave Christensen, diagnosed that Joe had suffered a spinal injury, possibly the brain stem. No amount of hugging and reassurances could calm him. We ‘Medivaced’ Joe by ‘Dustoff’ chopper to U.S. Long Bin hospital, the American Neurological 93rd Specialist Hospital, where we knew that a spinal and brain damage surgical team operated. Neither Dave nor myself were very hopeful that Joe would survive. We were wrong; Joe’s fortitude and perseverance would prevail. Joe was to spend the rest of his life in a wheel chair.

Time passed and we never did hear much what happened to Joe. One message said he had ‘died’ in theatre; but the surgical team had managed to revive him. He was eventually medivaced to Australia. Joe had spent 79 days in combat.

When we returned to Australia I was travelling on a train to Campsie and came across Ziggy Jablonski. We got to talking and the subject of Joe came up. We both wondered ‘What has happened?’ ‘Where is Joe?’

Ziggy located Joe at his family home at Fairfield where he was tended to by his adoring mother and father. This role was to prove very onerous and place a huge strain on Joe’s family; but a task they never recoiled from.

Joe’s participation in ANZAC Day was at Ziggy’s initiative and Joe was thrilled. ANZAC Day became ‘Joe’s Day’. He looked forward to every march. Over the 35 years plus we have taken Joe on the march he has become both an inspiration and a ‘personality’. March spectators have come to look for Joe and shout their greetings. They learnt his name and from year to year would call out: ‘Good on Ya Joe’, ‘You’re a hero’, ‘We love you Joe’. Year after year the crowd waited for Joe to pass by; we used to tell Joe he was a ‘Rock Star’, he loved it. Our kids grew up watching for Joe. Samantha, Nikki, and Gareth would join in the march with Joe and he loved it. Over the years a group of ‘Joe’s minders’ joined in (Jutta, Margaret, Barry, Paul, Jeanette, Adelaide, Mitch, Robyn, Ken, Jan, Colin Khan and the kids .) Joe loved the Day.

ANZAC Day, in some way, made up for the pain, isolation, frustration and demoralisation of life in an aged care nursing home when you’re only in your late 20s – early 30s. Not an environment for a bloke so young, beautiful, intelligent, thoughtful, incisive and cognitively sound.

In truth Joe had many bad days. He often confessed that he wished he was dead; but we would give him a hug and a kiss and tell him we love him just the way he is. Often ANZAC

day would become a 'Joe Day' for grog, dancing and gambling. Joe on the dance floor was a sight to behold; and God help the female Joe was 'dancing' with! Wheelchair moves included. Joe's romantic 'touch' was legendary. Joe loved his opportunity on the 'Pokies', with a Bourbon and Coke and 'ciggie' in hand.

The Welcome Home Parade was special for Joe. Battalion Commander Lt. Col. Colin Khan made special mention of Joe and his participation, with Ziggy's help, was special. As a soldier, Joe marches on. Ever proud. Never shirking his task. Never looking back. Professional, resolute to the end.

5 RAR 'The Tiger battalion' forever.
The true embodiment of the ANZAC Spirit.
God Bless you Digger.
'Stand Down Joe', your job is done.
We love you Joe.

To Joe's family and friends, we his fellow soldiers, offer you our sincere condolences and admiration. You have held a true soldier in your loving embrace.

On these occasions, when a soldier dies, it is customary to read the "Last Post", an extract from the famous poem by Laurence Binyon.

Please be upstanding for Joe.

"They went with songs to the Battle, they were Young,
Straight of Limb, True of Eye, Steady and Aglow,
They were Staunch to the End against Odds Uncounted,
They fell with their Faces to the Foe.
They Shall not Grow Old, as we that are left Grow Old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn
At the going down of the Sun and in the Morning
We Will Remember Them.

(One Minutes Silence)

"Lest We Forget".

Those laying poppies please proceed.

Thank you
John 'Doc' Lloyd
24 December 2012