

True Meaning of ANZAC Day

Michael McKernan

Those who make sacrifices to serve their country do not always wear a uniform.



Illustration: Matt Davidson

Jaroslav (Joe) Stawyskyj was born in a displaced person's camp in Aschaffenburg, Germany, on January 17, 1947. His parents were Michael and Anna Stawyskyj, each taken from their Ukrainian villages by German soldiers early in the war, employed by the Germans, as unpaid conscripted workers, throughout the war. Neither was to see their parents and most of their family again. Michael and Anna met in a camp after the war and married. Joe was their first child.

Accepting an offer of a place in Australia, the family arrived in Sydney on July 31, 1949. Joe first attended Our Lady of the Rosary School, Fairfield, and then Patrician Brothers College, Fairfield.

Schooling must have been hard for a boy who had only ever spoken Ukrainian at home and where class numbers in primary school might have been as high as 60 children. Yet Joe did well at school and might have gone to university, but he saw it as his duty to pay his way and help his parents. At school Joe had also done well at sport, particularly rugby league and athletics, and continued to play rugby league after school.

Joe's number came up in the national service ballot in early 1967 and he joined the 5th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment, on July 12, 1967. Saying goodbye to his family and girlfriend, Joe arrived in Vietnam on February 18, 1969, volunteering for a short exposure to the war towards the end of his two-year national service obligation. He might have stayed at home. A company of the 5th Battalion was deployed into a suspected enemy approach route to Long Binh in Phuoc Tuy province on March 27, 1969.

Joe was a forward scout and proud of his role but the company on this occasion was being conveyed on US Army trucks because of the amount of equipment it was carrying. Joe was standing on the second truck when a mine was detonated right beneath his feet and he was thrown clear of the truck, landing on the roadside on his head.

He arrived at hospital suffering severe head injuries. His feet were also very badly damaged, which medical staff at first failed to notice so intense was their concentration on his head wounds. Moved to Butterworth, Malaysia, in April, he returned to the Repatriation General Hospital, Concord, in May where he remained for about two years, for much of this time in a coma.

Released to the care of his parents in 1971 Joe would live at home in Fairfield for almost the next 30 years. Wheelchair bound, able to walk only a few steps for "exercise" along a walking frame, and with no short-term memory capacity, his speech affected by his injuries, Joe's future seemed bleak. His mother devoted her life to her son, leaving work to care for him full-time.

Anna died in 1987; "I think I killed my mother" Joe once uncharacteristically said before being hushed. Michael then took over as Joe's full-time carer, leaving work on his wife's death.

Joe spent most of his days in the family's front room, watching television, smoking and drinking coffee. He learned to play computer chess and was exultant if he ever prevailed. Despite his loss of short-term memory Joe had a wonderful capacity to remember the names of people who visited him or cared for him.

He was remarkably cheerful and interested in people but inevitably his world constricted as there was not much he could offer. Unable to read books, the newspapers, or even to participate in much of a conversation, nevertheless he was a remarkable presence in the family. He welcomed into the family his brother-in-law, sister-in-law, and his four nieces all of whom developed close ties with him.

Most of Joe's mates from Vietnam thought he had died but when Siggy (Sigmund Jablonski) heard he was living at home in Fairfield he called to see for himself. Joe and Siggy reconnected and with Anzac Day coming up Siggy suggested that Joe might like to go. Joe knocked him back but agreed the next year. Siggy arranged everything, pushing Joe's wheelchair at the back of 5RAR's assembly and taking him to the subsequent reunion.

This went on year after year and Joe became better known to people lining the route. Indeed he became a bit of a celebrity. People would call out to him and Joe would play up a bit to the crowd. Soon he was moved to the front of 5RAR's march, directly behind the banner, beside their Vietnam commander, Brigadier Colin Khan. Joe took part in every Anzac Day for more than 40 years, without fail. It was the highlight of his year.

His father was unwell and unable to care for Joe. By now in his late 50s, Joe lived the last decade of his life in a nursing home at Hammondville, a much-loved and popular resident. Unexpectedly and understandably, Joe's body, which had endured so much, began to shut down and Joe died on December 20, 2012. Though it was Christmas Eve and many men had to travel long distances, there was a respectable and pleasing showing of 5RAR men at Joe's Ukrainian funeral. And that was that, his family thought. Not so.

At this year's Anzac Day parade in Sydney men of 5RAR provided a wheelchair, draped it with the Australian flag, placed a slouch hat on the seat, and Siggy pushed it throughout the march, behind the banner, alongside Brigadier Khan. In remembrance of Joe.

The men who arranged this wonderful tribute to Joe exemplified the true spirit of Anzac Day. Theirs was not some concocted emotion, some theme park tinkering. These men had been proud to serve with Joe, had grieved for him in his appalling wounds and shattered life, respected his family in their grief and caring, and done what they could for him and were proud to march on their day beside him.

Australians need to be very careful with Anzac Day. We speak with respect of those who were killed and we honour their sacrifice. We need to enter, deeply, into the grief that their loss caused and which might continue even beyond the first generation. We need to remember those whose lives were ruined by war and the long, lingering years in which they were forgotten but to a few. We need to be concerned about the effect on the lives of those who care for them and sustain them.

A former short-term national president of the RSL once posited that only a former senior military officer could ever be director of the Australian War Memorial. Because only such a man, he said, could understand the real impact of war. There are many members of our community who in their grief and intense personal family love could put the lie to that insult. Dr Brendan Nelson has been to war zones as a politician and minister but he has never worn a uniform. He seems to be a man comfortable wearing his heart on his sleeve. He needs to be wary and to move cautiously.

The emotions of Anzac Day are complex and varied. They must never be fake or contrived. We must never confuse the commemoration of Anzac Day with a celebration of our military and their service in war and peace. The military have their own appropriate and legitimate ways of doing this; their own ceremonies and rituals. Anzac Day is about their stories but it is not about them and if we blur the lines we diminish the day for everyone. Anzac Day is about men who served with blokes like Joe and honour their memory.

Joe Stawyskyj is not on the Australian War Memorial's roll of honour. His story will never be read out at the memorial's new daily Last Post ceremony. But we, as a nation, should never forget that the true cost of war is not encased only on that roll of honour. Tens of thousands of men from both world wars came back home to the type of life that Joe lived. Their families understood the awful truth of war. That truth is the central message of Anzac Day and if we lose that we have lost all. Tread very carefully those who would tamper with what has grown naturally and lovingly from the community over nearly 100 years.

Michael McKernan was Joe Stawyskyj's brother-in-law.



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