

Young bloke from the bush who gave his all

Margaret Joseph



This Remembrance Day, we honour more than 100,000 Australians who gave their lives for our country.

Every name carries a story: of loved ones left behind, of adventures, of valour – and of suffering. Many lost their lives in battle. Others died in training, through illness or as prisoners of war.

Often, in the chaos of war, a roll of the dice seemingly determined whether a person lived or died.

Indeed, during Australia's commitment to the Vietnam War from 1962 to 1975, some young men were selected for service in a lottery based on their date of birth, potentially including service fighting the Vietcong.

In 1965, Paul Large's number came up in that ballot.

Paul was a country boy from Coolah, 370km northwest of Sydney, whose larrikin spirit endeared him to everyone he met. One of Paul's mates in recruit training recalled asking: "Where the bloody hell is Coolah?" He regretted asking, because "it turned out that Coolah was the best town in NSW". Paul would not stop bragging about his close-knit community!

Because Paul worked on the land, he could have sought an exemption



Private Paul Large of Coolah.

from service. But he had mates who were also called up and he did not want to let them down.

So Paul bade farewell to his fiancée, his family and his beloved Coolah Football Club and went anyway.

Just weeks after embarking for Vietnam in 1966, Paul was killed in the Battle of Long Tan. He was 21.

Many of Paul's fellow baby boomers would enjoy the opportunities of a modern, prosperous Australia. But thanks to the national service ballot, for some like Paul, their life's journey ended abruptly far from home.

Paul did not choose the timing of his service, but he chose to back his mates and fight bravely until the end.

Paul took pride in being part of something bigger than himself, as have countless others who served since Federation.

In fact, nearly 115 years ago, my own

great-grandfather applied to enter Duntroon, Australia's college to train army officers.

In 1911, George Wootten, 18, was working as a jackaroo, with few ambitions beyond riding and sailing. But George's father, himself a veteran, urged George to apply.

As George waited at Duntroon for his interview, he noticed a female secretary cross the room to open another door. George leapt up from his chair and opened the door for her.

George's split-second decision would lead to a career that spanned two world wars. For, as George discovered later, this scenario was a test.

At Duntroon, George's small act of courtliness was proof he could be shaped for military leadership.

That test was the first of many, including landing with the first Australian troops at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915. Awfully, one quarter of George's

class perished in World War I. We can hope that such brutal conflicts never occur again. But the question of why a person chooses service over self-interest is more important than ever, given our perilous world.

The decision to serve can carry heavy costs for veterans and their families.

In recent times, almost 50 Australians gave their lives in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Others have paid the ultimate price on peacekeeping operations.

Shamefully, our nation did not always recognise our Vietnam veterans.

Indeed, there was not even a ceremony to welcome Paul Large home on the sad day the plane bearing his remains arrived back in Australia.

Today, hopefully we better understand that all veterans deserve our honour for their sacrifice, no matter the circumstances.

Poet W. H. Auden wrote of the mysteries that shape both life and death: "Time only knows the price we have to pay/If I could tell you, I would let you know."

But we can know with certainty that true, self-giving service is always a choice and never a chance.

So, not just on Remembrance Day, but every day of the year, we remember those Australians who opened the door to service and never looked back.

We honour their courage to step forward for our country, and we thank them with full hearts for our peace and our freedom. Lest we forget.

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