



John Charles Sheppard

House of Assembly

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Electorate: Franklin

VE DAY - FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY

Mr SHEPPARD (Franklin) - I move -

That on the fiftieth anniversary of VE Day this House recognises the sacrifices made by the many Tasmanians who fought in the Second World War and of the families who waited for them.

In honour of the fiftieth anniversary of VE Day I would like to talk about the sacrifices made by Tasmanians during the Second World War, both those who fought and the loves ones who waited upon their return. I am going to focus on one couple named Jack and Val. This is a simplistic story but one which illustrates the influence of World War II on Australian families.

Jack and Val grew up in Ranelagh and Seven Mile Beach respectively. Jack was in the militia at Brighton and Val was a cook at the Friends School when they got married on 30 October 1939. As Australia and its allies had already decided to go to war against Germany Jack did what many proud Australians did and enlisted to fight for his country. He was sent in November 1939 to train at Puckapunyal in Victoria along with his best mate, another Jack.

While on training the two Jacks got up to some mischief. Once, they crawled underneath the Officers Mess with a brace and bit and drilled holes into the wooden floor and into the beer barrels, which they drained into some containers and the beer was then shared among other mates. This was at the end of their training so they did not get caught. That was just one of the funny stories.

On 15 April 1940 the two Jacks sailed from Melbourne with the 6th Division. They were the first division of Australian soldiers to go to fight and were sent to Palestine. Meanwhile, Val was expecting their first child, due to be born in September that year.

In Palestine the two Jacks were transport drivers and drove around the desert picking up supplies and transporting soldiers to and from the front. Another task of these two Jacks was to drive to where the fighting was to bring back injured soldiers, called 'shellshocks', to base camp. For this brave action the two Jacks were told by the commanding officer that they were to receive commendations for their actions but they were never received.

The two continued their work during some bombing raids carried out by German Stuka bombers, which would dive straight down before letting their bombs go at their enemies. Of all the supplies they carried, however, the most famous was the 150 per cent overproof rum which had a miraculous effect on the 'shellshocks' and occasionally

had medicinal benefits for them too. This was always shared around the camp when they got back.

Of all the time the two Jacks spent away at war it is the time in the Middle East that holds their best memories. It was here that Jack learnt of the birth of his new daughter, Dorothy, born on 5 September 1940 in Hobart. Back in Hobart, Val struggled on her own with a new baby. With no family support she was able to find a small cottage to live in and found kindness and friendship with the landlords who owned it. They remained great friends for the rest of their lives.

After a time the 6th Division was sent to Greece to defend it against German attack. Again the two Jacks drove their truck amidst the bombing raids of the Stukas, taking soldiers away from the German army and supplying the soldiers with their supplies. This proved both amusing and extremely dangerous. The men on the back of the truck could see the Stuka bombers coming before the two Jacks could. The only warning of any danger was for one of them to notice that the men had all jumped out and were hiding in culverts at the side of the road. The two Jacks were always the last two out of the truck and the closest to the explosions. I remember them telling me on one occasion that they all dived for this huge culvert that went under the road. One Jack was at one end and one at the other when a large bomb went off about 50 metres away. The shock absolutely blew their lungs out - one swallowed his cigarette and the other's false teeth popped out. So there were very amusing times but sad times as well.

As the Germans finally took Greece, they were evacuated by boat back to the Middle East. Before reaching their destination, the destroyer they were aboard was diverted back to pick up survivors from the boat that had been bombed by the Stuka bombers. As fate would have it, their own boat became overloaded and they were all taken to the nearest island which was Crete. On arrival at Crete they were each given five rounds of ammunition to fight the oncoming Germans. Under the orders of a British commander they set up to defend the island.

Without their truck the two Jacks continued their transport of supplies by foot. One day when they returned to their camp they found it deserted as everyone had marched to another part of the island for evacuation. When they arrived they were told, along with many hundreds of soldiers, there was no room for them on the boats. The two Jacks were forced to hide without either food or ammunition but finally they were caught by the Germans and shipped back to Greece and then by train through Europe to Germany. One crust of bread was their only meal during this week-long train ride. Thus started a long and hard three and a half years as prisoners of war in Stalag 13B.

The very cold winters were new to these men and the despair was even worse. For much of the time they worked for farmers, which required very long and hard days but at least they were given some food by the farmers for their efforts. A wireless was constructed by one of the other prisoners of war and hidden in the ceiling of their hut. This gave them news from Britain so at least they knew that what the Germans told them was lies. The only news that Val and her daughter had was that Jack was missing in action. She was certain he was alive and never lost her belief that Jack would come back to her. Six months later Val was informed that he was a prisoner of war and some communication between the two of them was possible once again.

The two Jacks finally managed to get released on a prisoner-exchange program in 1944 on the premise that they were medical officers. After being questioned by the German prison commandant about how many teeth were in the human head the two Jacks did a quick count with their tongues and gave conflicting answers, but in the end they were both sent home. The final train ride from Burnie to Hobart took the two Jacks home to their families. It took them fifteen minutes to disembark from the train and they were unsure how they would fit into the new world.

Jack and Val are now in their fifty-sixth year of marriage. They had two more children after the war. Jack worked as an auctioneer while Val worked as a cook until their retirement. The memories of those days are as vivid as the days themselves. The emotion is just as strong today as it was then.

Jack and Val were typical of many families at that time. It was their ability to survive in adverse conditions that set the stage for their lives ahead. They instilled in their children this attitude and also the ethics of hard work and pride in Australia. Jack and Val have had a full life and are a very important part of Tasmanian and Australian history, and I am proud to have them here tonight to listen to my speech and very proud to be their son.

Members - Hear, hear.