

## **ANZAC DAY 2015 ARTICLE WRITTEN BY CHRIS PARRY**

*But the band plays Waltzing Matilda, and the old men still answer the call, but as year follows year, more old men disappear, someday no one will march there at all.*

The line above is taken from the Eric Bogle song, 'And The Band Played Waltzing Matilda'. I remember a time in the 1980's when there seemed to be a popular sentiment that ANZAC Day would fade away when there were no more old Diggers to march.

It didn't work out that way. Across Australia, ANZAC ceremonies continue to grow and the sense of importance it has in our communities is encouraging people to travel to ANZAC services in communities abroad.

Maybe not quite 'abroad' but one of the dawn services in Western Australia that is increasingly resonating as a remarkable experience, beyond just the significance of the event, is the Rottnest Island ANZAC Day Dawn Service.

One of the best characteristics of a dawn service is that it takes a small level of commitment to get up at a time when you would rather be sleeping. There's a feeling that the small effort you have to make to attend the service is part of the respect you are paying.

As a family, we arrive at Hillarys at 4:00am for the departure of the 4:30am ferry. The queue is noticeably different for a Rottnest bound ferry. There is no tangled pile of bikes being hoisted in cages aboard the boat. There are no fishing rods, eskies and towels slung over shoulders. It is also very quiet.

Speaking to people on board, it's apparent that most of us are attending the Rottnest Dawn Service for the first time. Dawn, a rather apt name, remembers her father who had been in the merchant navy always saying he would have liked to have been out at sea and seen the sun come up over Australia on ANZAC Day. Merv, a Rottnest Volunteer Guide, is looking forward to preparing our Gunfire Breakfast after the service.

I haven't been on a sea in darkness for many years. Standing at the stern of the ferry and looking down at the churning white wake and then looking up at the stars I thought I was about to reminisce about my younger days on sailing ships but with the moment at hand and on my mind I thought about the ANZAC's making their way ashore in a variety of small craft, ill designed for the landing. At that moment, I thought what it must have been like to be heading towards an enemy shore, not just running around Blackboy Hill at the foot of the Darling Ranges.

It is the first time Rottnest Fast Ferries have taken a ferry from Hillarys for the Rottnest Dawn Service. Up in the wheelhouse I meet James, the skipper, and in between safely navigating in the darkness around bulk cargo carriers and cruise ships we talk about the appropriateness of Rottnest Island for a Dawn Service. In 1915, the first ships from the first convoy from Australia left Fremantle a day before the ships in Albany. Their last look at Australia was Rottnest Island.

Arriving at Rottnest just before 5:30am, we were directed to Thomson Bay beach where the service was due to commence. On cue, the first hues of orange began to rise from the east, backlighting the Perth city skyline, across the sea and land, 30km away.

While the roar of a crowd can be uplifting, the silence of a crowd can be more inspiring. I remember as a kid the Narrogin ANZAC Day Dawn Service, dark and cold, frost crackling under feet as we would make our way across the grass to the memorial, towards the orange glow of cigarettes being drawn on by old diggers, followed by a few raking coughs up and down the line. The lack of banter, the lack of chat. The will to gather in a silence that says so much.

All over the world, as the sun rises, those of us at ANZAC Day Dawn Services are quiet.

The service is held under the protection of flights of pelicans that glide overhead. The wreath laying includes representation from the Beaconsfield Primary School Rottnest Island Campus, 9 students who attend school on the island and who have also made a paper poppy display in the Old Salt Store.

With the growing light I am able to look around at the crowd and I am stunned. I had thought that gathered around my family was about 500 people but clearly there is a crowd of at least 1500.

After the service I speak to Penni Fletcher-Hughes from the Rottnest Island Authority. We stand in the Gunfire Breakfast queue and after discussing the numbers of people who have attended we both agree to just enjoy what is unfolding around us. People are standing at the shore of Thomson Bay, hugging each other and looking out to the rising sun over Perth, others are capturing photos of the Australian flag with the dawn sky behind and in the long breakfast queue a bracing breeze passes over us, carrying with it on the air the promise of bacon, eggs and onion in a warm roll.

I also speak to the Chairman of the Rottnest Island Authority Board, John Driscoll, who was the Master of Ceremonies for the service. John makes the comment that the wreath laying in particular is an example of the deep and broad community feeling for ANZAC Day on Rottnest with a wide variety of government agencies and volunteer groups represented.

We depart the island for the trip back to the mainland at midday. As always, when it's time to leave Rottnest it's not the happiest trudge down the jetty to board the ferry. This time it's a bit different. I feel connected to a new story, a new perspective and a new community of people so passionate about this remarkable event. Rottnest has given my family an engaging and enduring experience. We are all a bit tired but more than a bit proud to have been a part of a spectacular Centenary ANZAC Day Dawn Service that the Rottnest community made a lot of effort to deliver.

Also from 'And The Band Played Waltzing Matilda';

*And the young people ask, what are they marching for? And I ask myself the same question.*

I think we're all marching. We're all marching to ANZAC services all over the world. We're all marching to remember.