

A Lesson from Long Tan for Today!

Chaplain Peter Dillon



Chaplain Dillon is currently serving as Army Chaplain at Victoria Barracks, Brisbane. He is pictured here with his wife Elaine.

'God and the Soldier all men adore, in time of conflict but no more - for when war is ended and wrong is righted, God is forgotten and the old soldier slighted.'

These words have a timeless element about them for they accurately describe the fickleness of human nature with respect to mankind's attitude towards God and the soldier in times of war and peace.

In war, the soldier is vulnerable to the fickleness of the weather as were the men of Delta Company 6th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment on the afternoon of 18th August, 1966. For they were engulfed in a torrential monsoon deluge, when engaged in the conflict of what we now know as the Battle of Long Tan.

The poet and the prophet could be excused for saying that on that day the very heaven's wept at the sight of men made in the image of their maker, embroiled in mortal combat.

But the soldier does not enjoy the luxury of an armchair philosophy - to him is given the horrendous and often thankless task of sorting things out at the sharp end.

We are told that history repeats itself and so often we see in history how the high idealism of the pacifist is wrecked on the sharp rocks of life's realism.

The Good Book says 'The heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked...'

We need to heed this truth of our Maker's own evaluation of us, His creatures; and be constantly alert and on guard for the wickedness which can rise up within us and within our fellows to fuel the fires of human conflict. For war and the threat of war, is never far from us.

So we need to pray for our leaders that they will be given wisdom and patience in their negotiations for peaceful settlement of disputes. Man and women everywhere should work for peace and justice.

The profession of arms is one means of working to secure peace and justice and would to God that more people in our community would see the soldier as part of their Nation's peace-keeping resource.

From time to time we all come up against bullies - at school - at work - at sport - and in National and

International affairs of State, and if negotiations break down, then we need to be ready to resist the bully with whatever force it requires to overpower him.

So as part of our Nation's Defence Force, we need to be prepared - Body, Mind and Soul:

- To prepare our **Bodies** physically so that we might be able to endure hardships and physical privation.
- To prepare our **Minds** professionally so that we might be able to successfully deploy as a fighting force to resist aggression.
- To prepare our **Souls** spiritually so that we might stand for what is good and noble and true, and having fought to a standstill, to yet stand our ground.

This is where mateship and esprit de corps become so vital, for they are built on the spiritual qualities of moral courage, loyalty and faithfulness. The Will to stick it out and see it through - through thick and thin!

We are made in the image of God with respect to the spiritual dimension of our lives. In this sick world, our profession of arms is vital to our National life. It is also an honourable profession. It was to a Roman soldier that Jesus gave His highest commendation, and the spiritual qualities required in a soldier are presented in the Bible as examples of life to follow.

As soldiers our need of spiritual depth to our lives is vital if we are to fulfill our duties faithfully, for we are called to be men and women whose loathing for war is only surpassed by our love of freedom and justice. Caught in such a cross-fire conflict of thought and feelings, I can do **no better** and I must do **no less** than point you to the greatest cross-fire conflict of all history - by pointing you to the Cross of Christ and inviting you to reaffirm, or perhaps for the first time, affirm the truth contained in the words of an old hymn:

'On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand'

We remember with gratitude and pride those soldiers who paid the supreme sacrifice at Long Tan, and during the Battalion's two tours of duty in South Vietnam. We stand alongside their loved ones - parents, wives, children - we acknowledge their continuing great loss and we pray that God's strengthening presence will abide with them always.

And as their comrades, both past or present, we reaffirm our pledge to uphold the ideal for which they died - 'Duty First':

- Duty to our God and
- Duty to our Fellow Man

I conclude with words allegedly found on the body of a Changi Prisoner of War, who having 'been there and done that' has left us a testimonial of his journey:

I SEARCHED FOR MY GOD, BUT MY GOD I COULDN'T SEE;
I SEARCHED FOR MY SOUL, BUT MY SOUL ELUDED ME;
I SEARCHED FOR MY BROTHER, AND I FOUND ALL THREE.