

EDITORIAL

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As during much of our history, young Australians, as members of our defence forces, are currently risking their lives on distant shores. Whatever political views one may hold, they must have the support of all Australians, while we await solutions that do not “grow from the barrel of a gun”. All service or ex-service people know support from home is everything. As someone who served in the Viet Nam era, I well remember feeling extremely aggrieved when public opinion shifted away from the “domino theory” and service people were being directly blamed for our national political errors of judgement. It was decades before proper recognition was accorded Viet Nam veterans. If war is indeed failed foreign policy, then we must explore all other avenues. In the current Iraqi conflict, war may prove to be no real solution. (See “Iraq – The Risks of Following Intelligence and Not Wisdom”, p. 30.)

This winter my own old comrades are in town. Submarines Association Australia is holding its annual convention in Hobart. It is a chance for me to meet up with blokes I haven't seen for some three decades and an opportunity to talk with youngsters serving in the new Collins Class submarines. Can they be so young? Can they be ... women? Times have certainly changed.

We collectively reflect on why the hell we volunteered for submarine service. The money? (It attracted an extra 50c per day in the late '60s.) To belong to a corps d'élite? To escape the rigorous formal discipline (the technical term was “bullshit”) of “general service”? We certainly looked down from below on “gens” or “skimmers”! I reckon most were driven by wanting, in extreme youth, to do something different. Looking back, it is hard to imagine a more unusual life than that of a submariner's, although, at the time, we saw ourselves as ordinary blokes just doing our job.

One ordinary young bloke, a country boy from Barrington in Tasmania's North-West, did something truly extraordinary. Ordinary Seaman Teddy Sheean became a hero when, not yet 19, he gave his life for his shipmates. As with the Viet Nam vets, it was many years before his selfless courage was acknowledged. One of Australia's Collins Class submarines was named in his honour. His story is told in this issue.

We also tell the stories of the German and Japanese submariners who sailed their “iron coffins” to the shores of Tasmania during World War II. They too were ordinary blokes – caught up in monstrous events.

Looking back in middle age on my own modest career in the submarine branch – well, I wouldn't have missed it for quids! And did we think it was worth it?

Deep down, I think we did.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Warren Ryan". The signature is stylized and written in a cursive-like font.