

AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

Godfrey Eugene "Rusty" Priest AM

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The NSW Governor referred to him as 'a soldier's soldier'; to the Parliamentary Secretary for Veterans' Affairs he was a man of absolute integrity; diplomats from Papua-New Guinea described him as a great friend to their nation; and to his daughter, Carole-Anne, Rusty Priest was simply "my hero".

The RSL State President from 1993 until 2002, Rusty Priest was honoured with a State Funeral at St Mary's Cathedral on October 2 (2013), followed by a procession under military escort to the ANZAC Memorial in Hyde Park where a further tribute was paid. Among the hundreds of people paying their respects were NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell, Federal Veterans' Affairs Minister Senator Michael Ronaldson, retired Army Chief Lt General Ken Gillespie, scores of RSL members and many people of all ages who counted Rusty Priest as a great friend.

Governor Marie Bashir said Mr Priest had lived a life of unstinting service, and described him as a fierce advocate for the men and women who had served this nation. "He was a formidable man" said Prof Bashir. He knew the RSL had to evolve in order to remain relevant". Parliamentary Secretary Charlie Lynn paid particular tribute to Mr Priest's determination to build the Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway to ensure the military link to Concord Repatriation General Hospital was not forgotten and to build on the ANZAC spirit. "The single word that stands out for me when I think of Rusty is integrity," said Mr Lynn.

Rusty Priest's early life was in Melbourne. Within days of turning 18, in July 1945, he enlisted in the 2nd AIF. After initial training at Cowra and then at Canungra, he was posted to Japan from April 1946 until December 1948 with the BCOF Signals Regiment, 8th US Army Signals Corps, and A Field Battery RAA. Having decided to make the Army his career, Rusty held a variety of postings over 22 years in uniform, including Artillery, Infantry and Combined Operations, which culminated in promotion to Warrant Officer Class 1 and a posting to the Directorate of Artillery in Canberra from which he retired in September 1967. He also qualified as an army pilot but never flew aircraft full-time because his skills in survey, sound ranging and radar were considered more important.

Rusty joined the Revesby Heights Ex-serviceman's Club and the local RSL sub-branch. From 1983 he held a variety of positions in the League before being elected State President in May 1993, and later, Deputy National President. He was made a Life Member of the League in 1994. On being made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 1997 Australia Day Honours, List, Rusty said the honour was a tribute to the hundreds of unseen workers in RSL sub-branches who dedicate their time to the League's members and to their local communities. "I shall wear this award with pride, as a member of an organisation which stands for all Australians, regardless of colour, race or creed," he said.

As NSW State President, Rusty dedicated himself to working for veterans' welfare and to rebuilding public enthusiasm for commemorating Australia's military history. He was instrumental in having the Glebe Island Bridge renamed the ANZAC Bridge and took special delight in placing a handful of sand from Gallipoli under the feet of the statue of the WWI Digger when it was installed at the bridge's western approach.

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In 2000, as the world's sporting elite gathered in Sydney for the Olympic Games, it was Rusty's enthusiasm that ensured that the IOC executive, politicians, diplomats and athletes assembled at the ANZAC Memorial in a Service for Peace and Fallen Olympians. The Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway was his pet project, and it is now well established as a living memorial, visited by thousands every year and providing an outstanding educational resource for students throughout the world. Rusty served as the Walkway's chairman until (2012) when he stepped aside and took on the position of patron.

Rusty Priest has been remembered correctly as having played a significant role in promoting ANZAC Day as the unique day of the year when Australians of all backgrounds turn out to salute our military heritage and the sacrifice made in Australia's name throughout the past century. More people than ever now attend the Dawn Services and the Marches, not only in Sydney, but in scores of other cities, towns and suburbs. Yes it was Rusty's efforts in 1997 to make ANZAC Day relevant to young Australians that attracted his most severe criticism. In my two decades of working with Rusty, I never saw him more shaken than when section of the media and the public turned on him for allowing the then Super League to use the words ANZAC Day Test for a rugby league match between Australia and New Zealand.

Rusty was accused of selling the ANZAC spirit. The attack was unfair and unwarranted, and it hurt him deeply. As he said, no one could stop the match and referred to as the ANZAC Day Test and in return for his support, Super League (owned by News Ltd) made a \$20,000 donation to the Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway. "In an ideal world there would be no football games on ANZAC Day, which I would prefer still to be dedicated as a day of solemnity," he said. "I viewed the association with Super League as a way of getting the ANZAC Day message to a new and younger audience. I can understand the concerns of members who fear the traditions of ANZAC Day are being whittled away. We are not in a position to prevent entertainment on ANZAC Day and my purpose has been to influence its direction in a manner which is sympathetic to all that we hold dear".

As was so often the case, Rusty was correct. He fought strongly to keep ANZAC Day as a solemn occasion, with retail and entertainment prohibited before 1pm. His message has resonated with a younger generation which attends these services and events in greater numbers than any time since WWII.

State President Don Rowe spoke for all members of the League and for the wider community when he described Rusty Priest as a mentor and one of the RSL's great leaders.