



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

**Morant, Lieutenant Harry 'Breaker', Handcock,
Lieutenant Peter, Witton, Lieutenant George**

SPEECH

Monday, 12 February 2018

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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<p>Date Monday, 12 February 2018 Page 30 Questioner Speaker Kelly, Mike, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Dr MIKE KELLY (Eden-Monaro) (10:24): I rise to thank my good friend the member for Wright for raising this motion. I salute his support for men and women in the Australian Defence Force and the interest he's taken in this issue. I also acknowledge the descendants who are in the chamber with us today on what has been an issue that has been a deep scar on and deep trauma of the Australian experience over many years. It was in the context of one of the more traumatic conflicts that our men and women in the Australian Defence Force have been involved in—the guerrilla warfare counterinsurgency environment is the most challenging circumstance that serving men and women can be involved in. We all know the stories that there have been through the years of being unable to identify the enemy clearly in that environment, the severe tension and trauma that is put upon those people in working through difficult environments of being sniped at and, in more modern times, attacked by improvised explosive devices. The incident that comes to mind too, most recently, was the killing of the cook in Afghanistan, Private Jones, and the emphasis that that then places on leadership in these circumstances, where we have to ensure that we're wrapping around our personnel, that there are no revenge or retaliation motivations, and also that people that we identify who are experiencing the stresses and traumas of these environments are properly identified and provided with support.

One thing that really jumps out at you if you look back at the history of this war, as I have. In also drawing on my own personal experiences in many deployments, I've noted that your standards start to get brutalised and can decline. This first happened to me in Somalia. It really came as a shock to me when I identified this happening. I understood then that one of my biggest roles as an officer was to maintain standards, to identify these kinds of pressures and problems that can arise. Many times in my own deployments there were circumstances where it would have been quite easy—no-one would have known—to fudge issues and problems in a way that would have been completely counter to the long-term strategic objectives we had and the interests of our soldiers in both their safety and their mental health in subsequent years.

Coming back to that experience in the Boer War, one of the things that really jumps out at me is the issue of the mental health of Breaker Morant himself. When his good mate Captain Hunt was killed and his body mutilated, something clearly snapped in him. It was identified by all the observers who were there that he was a completely changed person after that. Because this was an irregular unit, there were clearly failures of leadership about managing those personal matters in that brutal environment. Of course different standards applied at that time about how prisoners who were wearing uniforms were dealt with. The circumstances in which these people found themselves created this massive mental trauma that should have been better managed.

As has been alluded to, the issue of the 'justice' process was the greatest heinous issue of all. When you look back and think that we became a nation during the course of this war, and our government was not even informed for a couple of months about the process that took place and that these men were executed and Witton imprisoned, that led to the fact that we weren't going to let that ever happen again. So, if there's anything positive that we can say came out of this, it was that Australians on all sides of politics, and in our national approach to these issues, were never going to be subject to military justice again. And just as well, because in the First World War there was a lot of intense pressure to bring Australian military personnel under military justice. The British executed over 300 people—306 people, including Canadians and New Zealanders and Irish—but no Australian was executed. We were subject to our own discipline system. The reason that happened was the experience that occurred in this unfortunate and tragic circumstance.

So it's important and it's great that we've learned these lessons. I might also say, to the great credit of the Australians serving in the Boer War at that time, that many of them identified and were ashamed and disgusted by some of the practices that were going on there, given, obviously, signals by higher command, and actually raised this issue en masse in a petition to say, 'These need to be investigated and dealt with.' We've learned that lesson. We need to maintain that standard. If we take any lesson out of this, we need to preserve the integrity and the reputation of the slouch hat. Obviously these injustices of the past need to be remembered.