



Think Piece

This week marks a milestone for the Veterans SA Think Piece Series.

Our 100th contribution comes from [The Hon Martin Hamilton-Smith MP, Minister for Veterans' Affairs](#).

Martin spent 23 years in the Army, initially as an infantry officer before serving in the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR), commanding the 1st Commando Regiment, and commanding the Australian contingent with the Multinational Force and Observers in Egypt.

After leaving the Army, he built up a property development and private child care centre business that employed 125 people across two states.

Martin is an Independent liberal and is Minister for Investment and Trade, Defence Industries, Small Business, and Veterans' Affairs. He has represented the seat of Waite for almost 20 years. During that time he has also served as Minister for Tourism and Innovation, Leader of the Opposition and as Shadow Minister in a wide range of portfolios including Treasury.

He completed a Bachelor and Master of Arts from the University of New South Wales, and a Master of Business Administration from the University of Adelaide winning the Baron Partners' Prize in Strategic Management.

The Closest of Calls



On a day that none of us expected to die, the Australian Defence Force's core values of professionalism, loyalty, integrity, courage, innovation and teamwork saved my life. Call it inter-service cooperation, call it integration, call it trust, call it mateship – it separates the Australian military from all others.

At 0800hrs the Iroquois lifted off. RAAF pilot Dick MacKerras, co-pilot Noddy Sawade, two load masters and five of us from SASR. We were young. Very young. A routine free fall parachute sortie. 10,000 feet and 30 minutes later it would all be done. But it didn't go that way.

At 7,000 feet over the Indian Ocean off Swanbourne WA the engine failed. Bells rang. The dash board lit up. I waited for the chopper to explode or burn. The order came to abandon the aircraft. We were going down. I needed no encouragement. I was out of the side door and in the air in a split second.

That was the easy part of the day. As I looked below it was clear I was going into the Indian Ocean. As I hit the water the parachute enveloped me. At first I could swim, but unbreakable suspension lines soon encased me. In a matter of minutes, with both legs and one arm tangled, I was in trouble.

The pilots had put the aircraft down safely ashore but with a known engine fault they faced a terrible choice. The RAAF rule book said switch off the rotors and call for help. But that didn't happen. This crew had a choice. Let me die or fly an aircraft with a known engine problem into a rescue attempt with the high likelihood that the aircraft and crew may themselves finish up going down. In that event, we were probably all dead.

For this particular crew there wasn't a question. Only an answer.

The first attempt to hoist was a noisy and violent disaster. I was pulled back into the tangled coffin beneath me by downwash and the weight of the sodden parachute. The second attempt was at wave height and dangerous for us all. The loadmaster slashed the knife to cut the ties that bound me, but it was an impossible task. Ripped back off the skids I hit the water with a devastating thud. Although super fit I waved the third attempt at a hoist away, too exhausted. I resigned myself to my fate.

Then there was the silence of the wind and the waves. Drowning, and physically exhausted but calm, I had time to recognise this was likely to be my day to die. The parachute started to pull me under. Drowning wasn't painful. It was like a drunken stupor. The movie of my life became a slide show. I said goodbye to my parents and then my siblings and to others. I left my body and could see myself below, struggling in the tangled shroud which was my tomb. The light - yes the bright light. Then back to life, the roar of a helicopter at close range and the rotor wash. A crew member hit the water and swam to me with a flotation device, but I was as close to death as you can get.

Thanks to the RAAF a radio call had alerted local vessels. I was fished out of the water half dead and taken unconscious by ambulance to Emergency. I died and was brought back several times by paramedics and emergency doctors and nurses, others to whom I owe my life. I woke up on a ventilator.

This all happened on a Sunday morning in 1978. I was 25, a Captain SAS air troop commander. Both pilots were about the same age.

Jump forward to 2016 and to the Yuletide Christmas lunch at the RAAF Association at Mitcham in my electorate. A RAAF veteran came up to me and said "do you remember me"? It was co-pilot Noddy Sawade. It turned out that not only he, but pilot Dick MacKerras had both settled in Adelaide. A bit older and more battered, we had lunch last week and caught up on old times.

There were no bravery medals handed out as a consequence of the selfless courage of those four RAAF aircrew that day. There should have been. Two pilots and an air crewman saved my life three times that day by the decisions they made and the actions they took. They put themselves in grave danger and broke every rule in the book. I wouldn't be alive were it not for them.

All of us who have served, whether in war or peacetime training, have had to make these calls. Sometimes it doesn't end well. It would not have been a wrong call to shut down the engine and leave it to chance that day. There is no right or wrong in these situations. We need to be at peace with our decisions whenever and wherever they are made because hindsight is an easy master. This time we got away with it. Lucky me.

In the jungles of Vietnam the SASR and 9 Squadron (RAAF) Iroquois crews fought and risked death together daily. Even now, years later, SASR and 9 Squadron veterans are like brothers. So it is with Dick, myself and Noddy. So it will always be.

None of us had served in Vietnam. Too young. None of us invaded Afghanistan or Iraq. Too old. Although we each served in the Middle East, peacekeeping, and on operations in SE Asia, we were, for the most part, just a few of the thousands of servicemen and women who kept the warrior ethos alive in the air, on the land and at sea. For soldiers, sailors and aircrew, whether at war or peace, death and disaster are forever beside you patiently waiting for you to make a mistake.

This is the 100th Think Piece since I have had the honour to serve you as Minister for Veterans. I dedicate it to all the Dick MacKerras's and Noddy Sawade's of our world who served and who continue to serve our great nation in either peace or war - the silent achievers.



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