

Hon MARTIN HAMILTON-SMITH MP

Speaking at 'Mitcham AFA Family' Book Launch

Thank you for inviting me to officially launch the Mitcham AFA Family. I still remember the first time I visited this AFA. I would have been no older than 11. At that age, I imagine, I was probably running amok outside on the greens while everyone was inside having fun. One thing I do remember, clearly, was the sense of vibrancy inside the AFA. That part has always stayed with me. Since then I have always known the Mitcham AFA to be an important and active community hub.

I want to commend Bernie O'Neil and Kevin Gogler on their work assembling and authoring this book, as well as all those who contributed in any way to its creation.

Reading this book, I was reminded of an experience I recently had when I was in London as part of an official delegation. During the trip, I managed to get a few minutes to myself, and so I decided to track down the RAF Bomber Command Memorial in London. The inscription on the base of the memorial by Churchill and was something to the effect of:

"The fighters are our salvation but the bombers alone provide the means of victory" – Churchill 1940

At that time, the bomber command suffered some of the heaviest losses in modern history. I have some close friends who are fighter pilots and they are some of the loveliest people I know. But it is worth noting that it is often the fighter pilots who garner most of the accolades and praise. They are the ones who are remembered as our Air Force's heroes. This quote from Churchill, I think, tells another, more accurate, story. Too many bombers made the ultimate sacrifice to protect the world from a horror too disturbing to imagine. Had they failed or faltered, our world would be a very different place today.

In World War II 216,900 men and women served in the RAAF in World War Two, of whom; 6,460 RAAF were killed in action; a total of 76 squadrons were formed.

With over 152,000 personnel operating nearly 6,000 aircraft it was the world's fourth largest air force.

I also had the honour of going to Korea recently, this gave me time and cause to reflect on the Korean War and the sometimes forgotten sacrifices of our nation's RAAF.

Very few people are aware that the 41 RAAF air crew were killed and seven captured. Sixty-six aircraft – 22 Mustangs and 44 Meteors – also were lost.

Not many people, not nearly enough, know this. Should we lose this many people in Iraq today it would be a tragedy that would stop the nation.

As ex-servicemen, we know the importance of being able to have somewhere to go and talk to other ex-servicemen. They are the ones that *get it*. They are the ones that understand.

The history of the Mitcham AFA goes back 70 long years, and it is testament to the hard work and unwavering spirit of its members that it has not only lasted so long, but also managed to flourish as an important community hub.

The Mitcham AFA was, at one point, the **largest RAAF branch in Australia**. This is an outstanding achievement and should be a source of great pride for all past, present and future members.

Being the largest branch in Australia doesn't happen by chance or luck, it happens because there are people willing to create something special.

One of the reasons why I love serving this electorate and this area, is that people here understand the importance of mateship and working together to create a better place for our friends and family. Reading this book only reaffirmed this belief of mine.

Within the pages of this book are hundreds of little stories about the men and women who worked tirelessly to help build and strengthen and enliven the Mitcham AFA, not for themselves, but for those around them.

I remember being here at the Mitcham AFA one year for an event. It was my first term in Waite and so I was doing the usual thing of trying to talk to every single person in the room. I approached a woman (I wish I could remember her name, many of you may know her, she may even be here today), introduced myself and asked, you know, "so, what's your story?" She told me that she was engaged to a young man who went away to war and who, sadly as many did, died on the battlefield. Because they weren't married, the mother was notified but this, at the time, young lady was not.

From then she had never remarried. She had always felt a connection to her passed fiancé. I'll never forget her because the AFA did a wonderful

thing and reached out to her. You reached out to this woman who had no official connection to the RAAF and you welcomed her into your community with open hearts. That is a rare and special display of kindness.

I would like to, if I could, read you a quote from the book that mirrors my sentiments:

“There is no doubt that the Branch’s provision for the welfare of its members, its contribution to recreation, social activities and benevolent causes, and its fostering of the spirit of friendship formed through active duty or service have perpetuated the honour and ideals of the air force and kindred ex-service organisations.”

The Mitcham AFA always promoted **equality and fairness** that was ahead of its time. It was one of the first Branch’s to encourage wives and widows to participate in committee matters. This sense of inclusion and ‘family’ is something the Branch should be very proud of.

When we decided as a country to send thousands of young men away to fight for the very survival of Australia, we didn’t understand the extent of the horrors we were sending them into. No-one knew, except for the mothers and the wives. It was the wives and the mothers that first felt the loss when the men left to go to war. It was the wives and the mothers who were the first to see the impact of PTSD in a young man’s eyes. It is heart-warming to know that the Mitcham AFA recognised the importance of wives and widows, and welcomed them into the club.

Looking around I can see some familiar faces that I know well. I would like to acknowledge a few of the people who I have got to know quite well over the many years I have been associated with this club.

Ralph Aston of course, who quickly became Vice President and then President of the Bowls Club. He served as President, on and off, from 1994 to 2008. Breaking the informal two-year presidential term limits. I’ve always admired the civility with which you guys have managed to hand over presidency. If only things were done so calmly in my job. But perhaps that’s just an air force trait. Ralph was at the forefront of most changes that were introduced to the club in the most recent two decades. He was leader of Bowls club, The AFA Branch, Editor of the Newsletter and chairman of committees. Ralph was awarded Medal of the Order of Australia in 2009

Walter (Wal or Wally) Beale served on the Committee from 1988 to late 2015. He was a tireless worker, applying himself to every practical task he could, from designing and fitting new furniture to helping members who lived with mobility disabilities.

Kevin Fisher served as Branch President from 1991-93. Went on to become the State AFA president from 1995-2005, as we all know. His company helped print the newsletter. Medal of the Order of Australia in 2007.

Don Roach joined the Mitcham AFA for its reputation for “wonderful bowls greens”. Took over role of treasurer in 1996, which as we all know is a difficult job to do and an even more difficult job to find someone who is both willing and able to do it. He was responsible for the club’s financial stability for many, many years. Awarded OAM in 2013.

Betty Bignell was my grade two teacher at Clapham Primary School. She was the first female member of the Branch Committee. She then became branch Secretary for 15 years. No other member was recognised with awards as rapidly as Betty had been. She was a wonderful human being.

It must be difficult for young people growing up today to imagine a time without peace. In this time without global conflict, how can they be expected to picture a world torn apart by war? But it was. In that time when our country was threatened, you were the ones who stood up for yourselves and for future generations. It is important that people growing up today are aware of the huge sacrifices made in time of war. We need to reach out and educate kids about the past’s mistakes. It is important that they feel connected to our collective past.

This is one of the reasons that, as Minister for Veterans’, I am working on an initiative where people are encouraged to name their children after someone who fought for our country in wartime; even a middle name. Something small like that is enough to give them a personal connection to one of the most important periods in Australia’s history. Bridging that gap would go a long way to instilling the values of mateship, honest hard work and self-sacrifice that were so important back then.

I would like to end by once again congratulating the compilers on this wonderful piece of local history that they have helped build. I would also like to commend the organisers for putting on this superb event.