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Paul Dunbavin: Honour men and women who served, and continue to serve, on Australia Day

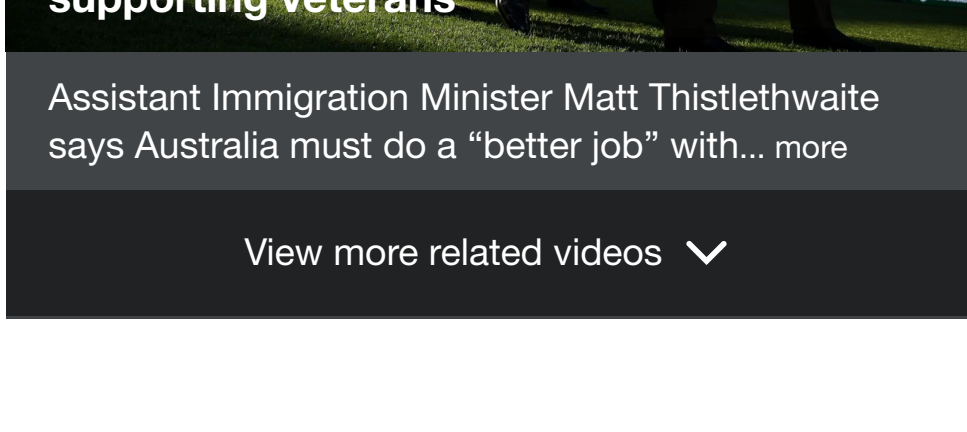
Australia Day is a time to reflect on our nation's achievements and challenges, but it's also an opportunity to honour the men and women who have served, and continue to serve, in its defence.

Paul Dunbavin

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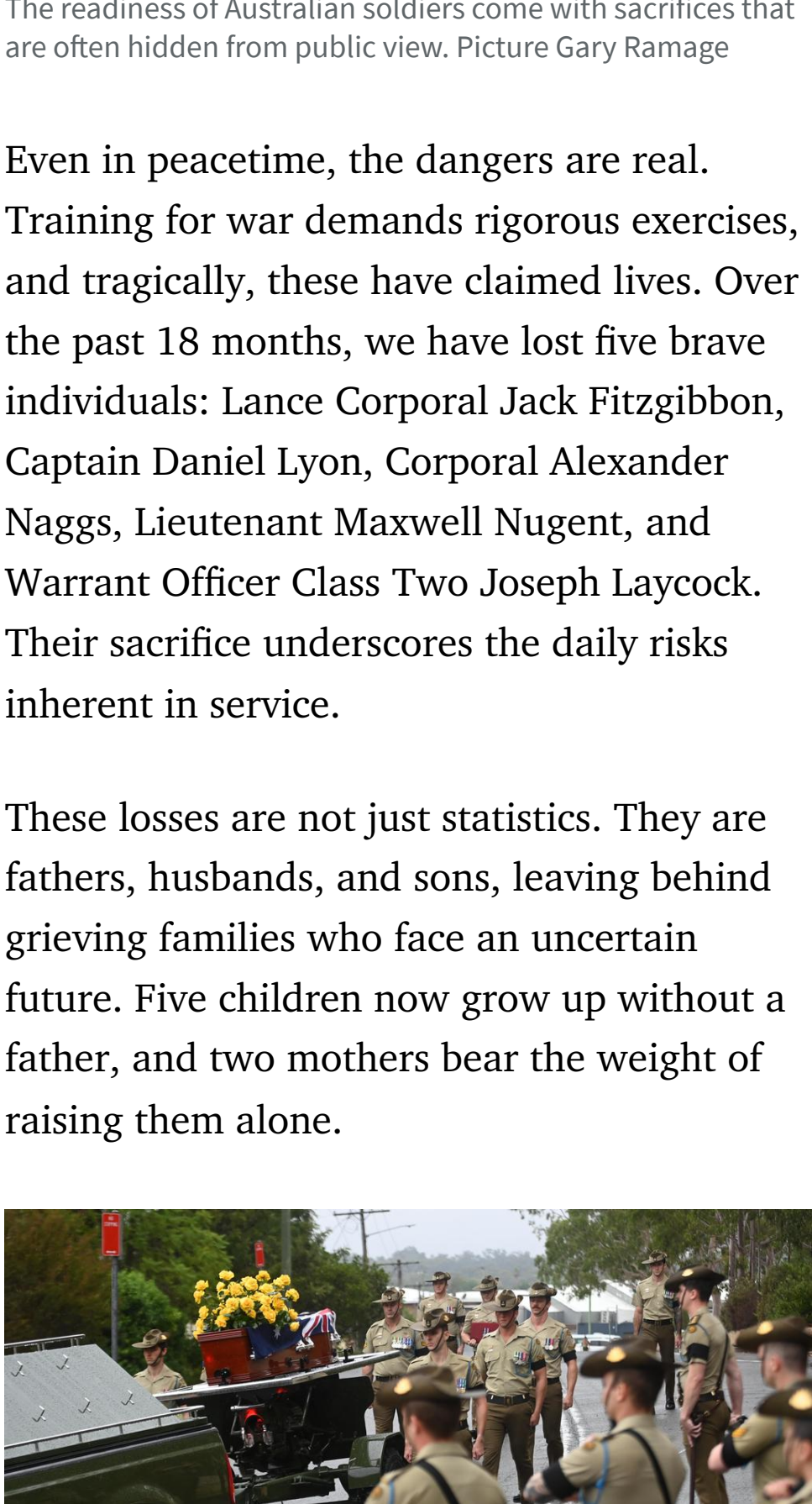
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No matter which side of the Australia Day debate you sit on, the majority of us share a deep love for this country. This shared love compels us to pay our respects to our current serving members, not just on January 26, but every day of the year.

Australia Day is a time to reflect on our nation's achievements and challenges, but it's also an opportunity to honour the men and women who have served, and continue to serve, in its defence. While we enjoy the freedoms this nation offers, we must not forget those who stand ready to defend these values at significant personal cost.

Without their efforts, our future existence would be at risk. Supporting and celebrating these individuals is not just a gesture of gratitude; it is essential for our national security. As fewer people are willing to enlist, both our national morale and defence capabilities face significant challenges. This concerning trend underscores the urgency for collective action to reverse it.

Today, Australia faces one of its most uncertain strategic environments since World War II, alongside domestic security challenges, highlighting the critical need for preparedness. This readiness comes with sacrifices that are often hidden from public view.



The readiness of Australian soldiers come with sacrifices that are often hidden from public view. Picture Gary Ramage

Even in peacetime, the dangers are real. Training for war demands rigorous exercises, and tragically, these have claimed lives. Over the past 18 months, we have lost five brave individuals: Lance Corporal Jack Fitzgibbon, Captain Daniel Lyon, Corporal Alexander Naggs, Lieutenant Maxwell Nugent, and Warrant Officer Class Two Joseph Laycock. Their sacrifice underscores the daily risks inherent in service.

These losses are not just statistics. They are fathers, husbands, and sons, leaving behind grieving families who face an uncertain future. Five children now grow up without a father, and two mothers bear the weight of raising them alone.



Lance Corporal Jack Fitzgibbon is farewelled at a funeral in Cessnock last March. He was one of five brave individuals the ADF lost in the past year. Picture: NewsWire/Jeremy Piper

While government support is immediate, it often falls short in addressing long-term needs. This is where organisations like the Commando Welfare Trust step in, ensuring these families receive the care they deserve.

Beyond physical dangers, the demands of service have lasting impacts on mental health. The [Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide](#) highlights [sobering statistics](#): permanent ADF members are nearly six times more likely to have suicide-related contact with police or paramedics compared to their reserve or ex-serving counterparts. Despite this, many hesitate to seek help, underscoring the urgent need for proactive support.

An emerging concern is the impact of blast exposure, particularly [Mild Traumatic Brain Injury](#) (mTBI). Often termed an “invisible injury”, mTBI results from repeated exposure to explosions, leading to long-term cognitive, emotional, and physical challenges. US research has identified alarming links between blast exposure and early-onset dementia, depression, suicide, chronic pain, and severe emotional distress. Experts predict that Australia may face a tidal wave of cases in the coming years and worry about our ability to deal with it.

The implications of mTBI for Australia remain uncertain, but the warnings are clear. We must act swiftly to prevent injuries during training, prepare to address emerging cases, and provide ongoing support for affected personnel.

Addressing these contemporary issues demands awareness, resources, and a commitment to ensuring that no soldier is left behind.

It is our shared responsibility to ensure that those who serve receive the recognition, support, and resources they deserve.

Paul Dunbavin is a retired Special Forces Major with over 35 years' experience serving in the Australian Army