

Afghanistan

Mr BALDWIN (3.51 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Defence. Can the minister confirm that on his recent visit to Afghanistan he made a speech to the seriously injured troops not once but twice, and the only reason he went back for a second time was that he forgot to mention the Prime Minister in the first speech?

Mr FITZGIBBON—I thank the member for his question. I am delighted to confirm for the House that, fortuitously, I was able to recently visit the injured troops in Taran-Kowt. I was fortunate to be in the region, travelling through Dubai on my way home from Gallipoli, where I delivered the dawn service speech and other speeches. I went to Taran-Kowt also, of course, to pay my respects to Lance Corporal Jason Marks, who lost his life only days before.

It is true that I visited the wounded troops in the hospital and it is true that I did so twice—for a very, very good reason. I spoke to the injured soldiers once and then received a phone call from the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister asked me to extend his best wishes to the injured soldiers. As you would expect, I returned to the hospital and extended, on his behalf, the Prime Minister's best wishes. I am very surprised that the opposition would seek to make political capital from the defence minister's visit to a fallen soldier and to other soldiers severely wounded defending our country in the most dangerous of circumstances. Shame on them!


40th Anniversary of the Battles of Coral and Balmoral

Mr CRAIG THOMSON (3.54 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. What is the government doing to recognise the 40th anniversary of the Battles of Coral and Balmoral?

Mr GRIFFIN—I thank the member for Dobell for his question. As the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition have already said today, we honour a select group of Australians who, 40 years ago, did their duty by our country at a very difficult time in our history. The funding that has been provided to support a range of commemorative activities has come from my department, the Department of Veterans' Affairs. I acknowledge the member for Dunkley, the previous minister, for the work he did in a bipartisan fashion with respect to ensuring that these matters are properly commemorated. A veterans committee, set up under Don Tait and Garry Prendergast, has done what is I think, as those who know Vietnam vets well would know, a difficult job. It has ensured the provision of proper commemoration in a manner for which there has been broad support within the veterans community. I pay tribute to them and their organising committee for the work that they have done.

A series of functions have been held. On a public basis we had last night, as was mentioned, a ceremony here in the Great Hall where some 1,400 to 1,500 veterans, their families and next of kin were present, as well as many members of parliament from both sides of the House. Comments were made on behalf of both sides of the House and respects were paid to those who had lost family members to that particular battle. Some 26 young Australians died at that time.

Today I was joined by the Prime Minister, the member for Mackellar and the Governor-General, amongst others, at a commemorative ceremony at the Vietnam Forces National Memorial on Anzac Parade. It was a very moving occasion—but a bit more sombre than last night—where, again, respects were paid to the many who were lost so long ago. Tomorrow there will be a function on Mount Pleasant at the Artillery Memorial for the 102nd Field Battery where the title of 'Coral' will be bestowed by the Governor-General. It is a specific honour title and is the first time it has happened to an Australian battery. It acknowledges publicly and clearly the very serious role that they played with respect to the battle of south Coral. We then move on to Townsville later this week, where there will be a dawn service and further commemorative activities on the weekend and an opportunity for even more of those who were involved to get together with their mates and share some memories about what occurred 40 years ago.

Spending some time last night talking to the families of those who lost loved ones so long ago was a particularly moving experience. It was a difficult time for those who lost, in some cases, their sons, brothers or husbands. The good thing about last night was the overwhelming sense that this was a commemoration which needed to occur and an opportunity for many people to have some closure. There were beers last night, there were tears last night and there was an opportunity for many to catch up with people they had not seen for a long time. As other people have said, we need to remember at this time the courage and sacrifice of those who fought on our behalf so long ago. As well, we remember today what our forces are doing overseas, which was also part of what was said earlier today in question time.

Mr Billson—Do not forget Bill Rolfe.

Mr GRIFFIN—I thank the member for Dunkley. There is no doubt that the work of the Department of Veterans' Affairs has been an important part of ensuring this has worked well. I would particularly like to mention Brigadier Bill Rolfe, the Repatriation Commissioner, who, from the military side, has played a very important role in getting this together. He should be congratulated for his work.

I would urge all members to remember on this occasion the sacrifice of those so long ago. Remember their

families. Remember their mates. What happened 40 years ago is an important part of our military history. It is something we should honour our veterans for, as we honour them on all other occasions.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!