

MERICI COLLEGE ANZAC ASSEMBLY 2026

ADDRESS TO THE COMMUNITY

SQUADRON LEADER NICOLE SMITH

Good morning respected guests, teachers, parents and students.

I stand before you today not only as an officer in the Royal Australian Air Force, but also as a mother – A mother whose daughter, Poppy, is a student here at this school.

Her name connects our family's past and present.

Like the poppies that grow across old battlefields, her name carries stories of service, sacrifice, and hope – stories from my own career, from her father's, and from generations before us.

I am proud to say I am the first woman in the family to graduate from university and to serve in the military.

But I stand on foundations built by others – many of whom never imagined that their daughters, granddaughters, or great-nieces would one day stand here in uniform.

In my family, the legacy of service feels very close.

One of those stories belongs to my great-uncle, Lieutenant William Henry Dawkins.

William graduated third in the inaugural class of the Royal Military College, Duntroon. On 25th April 1915, he landed at Gallipoli.

Under relentless fire, his responsibility was water – finding it, securing it, and making sure it reached the troops.

After successfully sinking wells and establishing water points, William was killed during a routine inspection.

He was 22 years old.

Today, Dawkins Point at Gallipoli bears his name.

It is one small place on a peninsula far from home, but it reminds us of something enduring; that service is often quiet, practical and deeply selfless.

As we reflect on stories like William's, we also acknowledge that the wars which shaped our nation changed not only battlefields, but the lives of women forever.

When men went to war, women stepped into roles they had never been permitted to hold – As nurses, munitions workers, organisers, communicators and leaders.
Not because it was easy, but because it was necessary.

These women proved – often without recognition – that courage is not limited by gender, and that service takes many forms.

That shift began a journey that continues today, and it made space for women like me to serve, and for girls like you to dream bigger futures.

This year marks my 19th year in the Air Force. That number surprises me too.

Across postings and deployments, I have learned that service is sustained by hope – hope for those we love back home, and faith that what we are doing matters.

I have served in the Middle East and on a United Nations Peacekeeping mission in South Sudan.

These were challenging environments, but they were also places where I witnessed quiet strength every day – particularly from women whose work often went unseen, yet made all the difference.

ANZAC Day also calls us to remember - not only those who serve, but those who support them.

I want to speak for a moment about children – about the daughters and sons who live with worry and pride at the same time.

During my first deployment, while I was away from home, a grocery cashier in Jerrabomberra asked Poppy where her Mummy was.

Poppy replied “she’s away in the Army”.

She then bent down and thanked my then two year old daughter, Poppy, for her service.

That moment stayed with me.

It eased the guilt that many serving parents carry – the guilt of missing milestones, birthdays, ordinary days.

And it reminded me why service matters:

So that children – especially girls – can grow up with freedom of choice, safety and opportunity through education.

During my time deployed to Africa, I often thought about my daughters.

I saw beautiful children playing with makeshift toys, bathing in uncertain water, and navigating dangers no child should face.

One young girl I encountered had a severe infection in her leg. Despite my training, there was very little I could do to help her.

That helplessness stays with you. It reinforced something important:

Behind uniforms and ranks are real lives.

And behind every conflict are children and families whose futures depend on stability and peace.

Yet even in those moments, hope found a way.

On Christmas Day, thousands of kilometres from home, I shared a simple meal with my colleagues – a homemade dessert from ingredients sent from Australia.

It wasn't about the food. It was about connection – about reminding each other that we were not forgotten.

That tradition has existed since the First World War: Letters and packages from home, from schools and strangers, symbols of gratitude and care.

I once received a letter thanking “the blokes” serving overseas.

I wrote back, politely and proudly, to say that a woman – and a mother – was reading his words.

Coming home from deployment brings its own challenges.

I remember scrolling through photos on my phone – images my husband had taken of Poppy while I was away.

Ordinary moments I could never get back.

My heart sank.

But I also knew that my service was part of building a country that would value her potential, a country where girls sitting here today can choose their own paths – in uniform or far beyond it.

Throughout our history, women have served with distinction – often without recognition.

During the First World War, The Endell Street Military Hospital in London was staffed entirely by women – surgeons, nurses and orderlies – who treated over 24,000 wounded soldiers, including Australians and New Zealanders.

These women understood not only physical injury, but emotional and psychological trauma – long before “shell shock” was widely recognised.

Their work laid foundations for the care we provide veterans today.

Closer to home, Women like Florence Violet McKenzie – Australia's first female electrical engineer – challenged convention and created opportunity.

She founded the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service and trained thousands in technical skills when the nation needed them most.

Women like Robyn Harrison, who refused to accept barriers placed before her and her "domestic situation", paved the way for today's female aviators and leaders in the Air Force.

These women did not serve for recognition. They served because they believed their contribution mattered.

As we commemorate ANZAC Day, we also honour families – parents, partners, sisters, daughters – who share the burden of service.

To the students here today, especially the young women beginning to imagine your futures: Know that resilience, courage and leadership come in many forms.

Service does not always wear a uniform.
But it always calls for integrity, compassion and courage.

ANZAC Day is not only about remembering the past.
It is about carrying forward what matters.

Hope is what sustains us through challenge.
Faith – faith in each other and in ourselves – is what allows us to persevere.
At the heart of every story we remember today is an unwavering belief that even in the darkest times, our actions can make life better for others.

Like my great-uncle William, and like the many women and men who have served since, ANZACs did not seek glory, they answered a call.

Today, we honour them not only with words, but with how we live – with decency, courage and care for one another.

May we carry their legacy forward with hope in our hearts and faith in the future we are shaping together.

Thank you.