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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**Main Committee**

**CONDOLENCES**

**Australian Natural Disasters**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 22 February 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Mr ROBERT** (Fadden) (7.56 pm)—Many members have stood in this House and regaled us with stories of great heroism, survival, tragedy and sadness. And whilst those stories have become matters of public record, history will record some of the great deeds that were done during the floods. I want to put on the public record my thanks to our fighting men and women, who did so much for so many in a time of need. For so many years Australia's fighting men and women have come to the fore not just to protect Australia's interests at home and abroad but to protect Australians in a time of desperate need in national emergencies. It is fitting that I focus just on what our fighting men and women, the Australian Defence Force, contributed during that horror period of some weeks, not just in Queensland but around the country, when Mother Nature wreaked her worst across this wide brown land we call home.

In the aftermath of the devastation in Queensland, Headquarters Joint Task Force 637 commenced Operation Queensland Flood Assist. This task force, based at Enoggera Barracks in Brisbane, was commanded by Major General Mick Slater, who was seconded to the Commonwealth to lead Queensland's flood recovery. Major General Mick Slater is a Queenslander and a former commander of Australian led forces in East Timor. He earned a Distinguished Service Cross for his command in East Timor and he was also the commander of Army's 1st Division based at Gallipoli Barracks. In March 2006 he led the response to Cyclone Larry. I assure the nation that Major General Slater is a bloody good bloke and doing an outstanding job. At the time, ADF Commander Colonel Luke Foster also assumed command. He was replaced by Brigadier McLachlan, who assumed command of the joint task force on 17 January.

In fact, ADF elements have been assisting since December 28 in Queensland and have roamed across the country. At the height of the disasters more than 1,900 Army, Navy and Air Force personnel were deployed to support the Queensland people and across Victoria as well. Elements of the 6th Battalion, who were reserve forces staying back when the battalion deployed to war, were sent out to assist. Men and women were recalled from leave to assist in the same manner. The ADF also provided significant specialist capabilities and, importantly, the manpower that was desperately needed in the aftermath of the floods and Cyclone Yasi. Troops from the 8th/9th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment were deployed to the heart-wrenching search and recovery task in Grantham and the Lockyer Valley. Soldiers from Gallipoli Barracks at Enoggera were deployed to assist with general support. ADF helicopters provided a vital early response, brought in supplies and conducted some of the most daring airlift rescues during the day and, more importantly, at night. The commanders of those aircraft said operational flying in Afghanistan and Iraq did not compare to what they had to endure, especially on that fateful night of Tuesday, 11 January.

Our fighting men and women brought more than great logistic resources; they brought one of the finest things needed in time of disaster—they brought confidence. There can be nothing better than to see the joy of people, who had been on the ground struggling, when armoured protected mobility vehicles, Bushmasters, came along with hundreds of soldiers. It let the communities know they were not forgotten and that, indeed, the Defence Force—that fighting capacity of Anzac renown—had come to support them. The confidence that brings to communities is second to none, which is what person after person accounted to me. They felt sheer joy at seeing our men and women in uniform turning up. It let them know that they were not alone.

At one point 19 aircraft were flying continuously out of RAAF Base Amberley in support of the Queensland operation. Navy clearance divers were used to survey all of Brisbane's 16 river bridges for damage and blockages. HMAS *Huon* commenced operations on 18 January fitted with, obviously, sophisticated sonar equipment to search the debris that posed navigational hazards to shipping in Moreton Bay and the Brisbane River—particularly good use for a Minehunter I would have thought.

Joint task force 664 was established under the command of Brigadier Stewart Smith of 3rd Brigade to deal with the Cyclone Yasi response. Specialist aviation engineering, health and logistic assets were on standby. Patients were transferred from Cairns to Brisbane completely emptying the Cairns Base Hospital on board a Royal Australian Air Force C130 Hercules and two C17 Globemasters. Fifty elderly Townsville residents were

also transferred from a nursing home and the ADF assisted Queensland police in droves. My only disappointment in the ADF response was the lack of an amphibious capability that would have been desperately needed. However that is a matter of the public record.

If we work through on a day-by-day basis the nation can get a feel for the capability and resources that the ADF put into assisting victims. On 1 January a RAAF Hercules flew to flood devastated Emerald where 1,200 people had already abandoned their homes. The last route to Rockhampton had been cut, Madam Deputy Speaker Livermore, the member for Capricornia, as three Defence Force helicopters provided the city's only lifeline of food and medical supplies—which is lucky for you because you are probably too thin already!

On 3 January Defence personnel working closely with Queensland emergency services provided subject matter expertise as well as the planning and coordination of the ADF support. They provided support in evacuating people from Theodore, Emerald and Condamine. Emergency food drops were conducted and medical supplies were also provided. Three Army Black Hawk helicopters provided relief support for Emerald and relocated to Rockhampton for relief work along the Fitzroy River.

On 5 January a C130-J Hercules delivered groceries to Mackay. Air Force personnel were working 12 hours around the clock loading pallets onto aircraft. Resupply flights were occurring up to three times a day. Fifty tonnes of groceries, including long-life milk, Weet-Bix, batteries, pasta, rice, baked beans, Coke, toilet paper, nappies and baby formula have been delivered to Rockhampton and Mackay to keep our regional cities moving.

On 6 January the Royal Australian Navy evacuated the local hospital in the town of St George. In fact not even a lightning strike could stop the delivery of rescue supplies from RAAF Base Amberley. A Hercules transport aircraft was forced to return after being hit by lightning during a supply mission.

RAAF Base Richmond C130 aircraft and Defence staff based at Richmond began airlifting supplies north to flood-stricken Queensland towns. Townsville based Chinooks started bringing in water filtration plants.

Royal Australian Navy Commander Paul Moggach and his aircraft commander, Lieutenant Commander Tanzi Lea, were recorded trying to reach flood victims in the Lockyer Valley. It is recorded that low cloud, high winds, a lightning storm and rain that came in like a wall all combined to make it impossible, yet they still landed.

On 11 January—that fateful Tuesday night—two Sea King helicopters redeployed from Roma, then to Oakey and then to Amberley along with two more Black Hawk helicopters, Black Hawk 220 and 201, also based at Amberley. These four helicopters evacuated up to 300 people from Forest Hill to an evacuation centre in Gatton.

Indeed, the crew of one aircraft alone, Black Hawk 201, that fateful night rescued 146 people. Hundreds of people are alive because four platforms—two Black Hawk and two Sea King aircraft—responded in dreadful conditions, at night with full night-vision goggles in torrential rain. The conditions were horrendous, with powerlines down—antennas everywhere—but they kept flying throughout the night.

On 12 January, 223 ADF personnel along with 15 helicopters, six fixed-wing aircraft, trucks, a water purification detachment and other ADF specialist equipment were flown in to start assisting communities. On 13 January Private Mitchell Mead, a reservist with the 9th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, was pictured in the newspaper unloading local sandbags. With him were most of the 9th Battalion, including trucks. The entire Army Reserve unit turned out to support their community: 15 Bushmaster protected mobility vehicles; 16 trucks; an ambulance and over 100 troops were deployed to Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley to commence the clean-up and the search and rescue.

Amazing stories started to appear about what our fighting men and women were doing. Tonnes of food were arriving by 16 January at Townsville base, No. 1 Airfield Operations Support Squadron. Twenty-five reservists from Delta Company, the 9th Battalion of the Royal Queensland Regiment, were in Gympie to assist the Gympie Regional Council as part of its civil restoration. The minesweeper *Huon* was by that time working in Moreton Bay looking for debris. Two Royal Australian Navy hydrographic ships were assisting and 600 ADF personnel were working in communities in Brisbane, Toowoomba, Rockhampton, Townsville, Amberley, Roma, Theodore and St George. C-17 Globemaster and C-130 Hercules aircraft and many other aviation assets not deployed in our combat zones were by then working in South-East Queensland.

It was an unbelievable effort from our defence force in aid of the civil community. And nothing illustrates the ADF's effort better—without diminishing anything that our individual sailors, soldiers and airmen did—

than the story of the Blackhawk 201 and the two Sea King aircraft that flew that fateful night of Tuesday 11 January. Corporal TJ Southwood, Lieutenant Colonel Tim Witenden, Petty Officer Nicholas Anderson, Lieutenant Commander Scott Palmer, Chief Petty Officer Kerwyn Ballico, Lieutenant Simon Driessen, Corporal Rob Nelson, Warrant Officer Tony Young and Sergeant Bryson—these are the names of some of the pilots and crew that flew those four airframes, rescuing up to 300 Queenslanders trapped on roofs, in ceilings and on top of carports, many of them waiting for eight hours in the most horrendous conditions of rain, squall and storm.

You can almost picture it. Mum, dad and the kids are huddled on the roof, unsure. Phone lines are down and there is no electricity. They do not even know whether anyone knows where they are. Suddenly a sound fills the air above the raging storm, lights start to flash in between the raindrops and a black, thunderous shape stops above them. A man comes down in a sling, trying not to swing wildly as the breeze picks him up. The winch operator is trying to land him on an area the size of a desk in these tremendous conditions.

If you looked up from that roof you would have seen in the cockpit two pilots, night-vision goggles covering their eyes, desperately trying to keep the helicopter in a hover in horrendous conditions. You would have seen a winch operator hanging out the side of an aircraft, saturated, with night-vision goggles steamed up, in the most horrendous conditions, trying to avoid live powerlines as he sends a junior soldier down the wire to begin picking up people. That is how over 300 were rescued that night—person by person, house by house. That shows the calibre of the fighting men and women that we have. It is the calibre of those who rescued Australians.

Who can forget that immortalised image of a warrant officer, saturated, exhausted, goggles fogged up from the heat of his breathing into his eyes, holding a bedraggled small child, completely saturated, that he literally snatched to bring back up into a helicopter? As my parliamentary colleagues quite rightly talk about the flood and its victims, the horror, the sadness, the joys and the delights and the heroes, just let me put on the record that there is a group of men and women, up to 2,000, who served our nation because the Minister of Defence called them out. They got their heels together and served, as do almost 3,000 of our fighting men and women across the world today. Many of them are unsung heroes. Many of them will not know the results of their actions on those fateful days and that fateful night, yet their saving of hundreds of lives is without doubt and beyond dispute because of the capability and the capacity of our fighting men and women.

We as a nation are truly blessed to have such a professional fighting force that is so well trained and so willing to risk all to save the lives of other Australians. It is a credit to the Anzac spirit. It is a credit to us as a nation. Whilst no-one would wish such a devastating flood and cyclone upon us again, I know in my heart that, should such devastation again visit our shores, our fighting men and women will once again rise to the challenge, because that is who they are and that is what they do. If I can speak on behalf of all Queenslanders and all those in Victoria who were so ably assisted and so ably helped, we thank them for their service, which went above and beyond.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms K Livermore)**—I thank the member for Fadden for ending the debate on the condolences motion on that note. I understand that it is the wish of honourable members to signify at this stage their respect and sympathy by rising in their places.

*Honourable members having stood in their places—*

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER**—I thank the committee.