

ON THE OCCASION OF
THE AUSTRALIAN BRAVERY ASSOCIATION, NEW SOUTH WALES BRANCH
DINNER
BALLINA, 24 AUGUST 2019

From time to time, when the Chief Justice is unable to do so, other judges have the honour of representing him in the Official Party at Investitures at Government House, when as you will all know the Governor presents the recipients of honours and awards with their decorations and medals. Without fail, the highlight of those ceremonies, in which our community recognises those who have rendered it great service, are the bravery awards. Time after time, accounts are recited of great deeds of ordinary Australians, who have voluntarily jeopardised their own lives and welfare, to come to the aid of their fellow human beings. For some – such as members of the Defence Force, police and emergency services - putting their lives on the line is an incident of their duty. But for many it is not; yet men and women of your kind voluntarily assume great risks, for no reason other than to respond to the plight of their fellow men and women. And doing so often comes, as we know, at a considerable cost.

You will all probably have heard or read in the news that last week, in Sydney, on the afternoon of Tuesday 13 August, a very disturbed young man, armed with a knife, in a frenzy, stabbed one woman in a hotel, and slit the throat of another in Clarence Street, near Wynyard. A dozen or so men - who moments earlier were going about their mundane daily business - ran into the face of danger to confront a man brandishing a bloody knife and, pinning him to the ground, averted the further bloodshed on which he was bent. What they did, and how they reacted, is typical of many of your stories; how they responded to the exigencies of the moment is typical of how many of you have responded. One day they, or some of them, may join your ranks as recipients of bravery awards. But their story - pieced together from various media reports, and which might well be clarified with further time and additional

evidence – provides a vehicle to illustrate the qualities of men and women of your kind, without talking about or singling out any one of you.

Firefighters Gonzalo Herrera, Mitchell Bennetts, Mike Stuart and Bennett Gardiner, from Drummoyne, were stuck in traffic in the CBD after a routine callout. From his driver's seat, Mr Bennetts saw a "sea of people running for their lives", as the assailant emerged, bloodied and wielding a knife. He started air-horning the fire truck, but that did not deter him. With no time for a plan, Mr Bennetts parked the truck, and armed himself with a Halligan Tool (a long-handled bar with a claw blade and a tapered pick). Then he and Mr Herrera, who picked up a chair, gave chase, as the assailant began running towards a nearby café, lunging at a woman, and hitting a car window on his way.

Meanwhile, in the street, traffic controller Steve Georgiadis heard loud screaming and shouting coming from nearby Wynyard Park, and saw a dozen or so men, without weapons, in pursuit, yelling 'Stop him', and 'Get out of the way'. Mr Georgiadas, who is nearly 68, had played a bit of rugby in his youth, and knew what he had to do – on an earlier occasion, he had crash tackled a robber running from a nearby store. This time, unarmed, and with no knowledge of what the assailant had done, he prepared to crash tackle him; but as he got close saw the massive knife, which he judged was too high to kick, so he moved to one side in order to be able to tackle the knifeman sideways, without being stabbed.

Until then it was an "ordinary day in the office" for Paul O'Shaughnessy, when he looked out the window and saw a man on the street below with a knife in his hand. He alerted his brother Luke, and together they raced down to help, then following a blood trail to find the assailant. Luke grabbed a milk crate on the way.

Even a lawyer demonstrated courage. John Bamford had had lunch at his usual cafe and was walking past a nearby pub when he heard what was going on. He picked up a wicker chair and chased the knifeman who had jumped onto a car bonnet while wielding his bloodied knife and screaming at passers-by.

Just as traffic controller Georgiadis was about to crash tackle him, the assailant stumbled; the knife fell out of his hand; Georgiadis stood on it to secure it; within moments the knifeman was knocked down from behind by Bamford with his chair;

and firefighters, office workers and lawyer combined to pin him to the ground with a milk crate and chairs - even after the knifeman said he had a bomb in his bag.

As the names and occupation of those whom I have mentioned indicate, men and women of this kind come from all walks of life and all cultural backgrounds,

Men and women of this kind do not seek recognition, and they are humble and self-effacing about what they have done; usually, they say “anyone would have done it”. Next day, the solicitor Mr Bamford was back at work, going about his business. Having tried unsuccessfully to evade the media and avoid publicity, he said: “I had to do something about it. There was no choice. I wasn’t really frightened, I didn’t know what was going on. When something like this happens on your doorstep out of nowhere, you have no choice. You have to do something about it. That is just the way it is.”

Men and women of this kind are always ready to give the credit to others. Paul O’Shaughnessy, the office-worker who had run out with his brother to apprehend the knifeman, downplayed his own role, saying “My brother, he was the hero. He got a grip of him, along with another guy we don’t know, and put a crate on his head”. Lee Cuthbert, another office-worker who joined in, directed the credit elsewhere: he said “The guys that followed him through the streets with various weapons and all sorts of things, they’re the heroes. There were two gentlemen who got to him first, and they were the real heroes”. The traffic controller Georgiadis was also quick to credit others: he said “There were a lot of heroes. A lot of them chased him without a weapon on them”.

Men and women of this kind, whose courage exposes them to trauma are not unaffected by it. When the traumatic events near Wynyard had concluded, the firefighter Mr Herrera made his way back to the truck and became emotional. “I just wanted to cry and call my wife”, he said. “That’s how I felt.” Many of these men and women are affected afterwards as a result of the trauma to which their courage has exposed them. Yet every one of them would feel a lesser human being had they not acted as they did.

And men and women of this kind retain their humanity, as traffic controller Georgiadis did, even in those adrenalin-pumped moments, when he intervened to prevent some of the mob from harming the now-captured knifeman. He reported “I

thought they were going to kill him. I got scared. I was screaming at the top of my voice for them to stop kicking him". Having displayed courage in preparing to crash tackle an armed assailant, he then demonstrated compassion in protecting him once he was subdued. The two go hand in hand, for it is compassion for others that impels, instinctively or otherwise, most truly brave acts.

It is a great privilege to be in the company of, and even more to be permitted to address, you, men and women of this kind.