

## **2015 Anzac Day Address – Dr Neal Jones**

The Master of King's College invited guests, Kingsmen, present and old, friends and family.

James Alexander Robinson, born 20/01/ 1888. At Nudgee, Brisbane.

The eponymous room is here at the College, but his contribution to Queensland in the areas of military service, education and public service, extends well beyond these college walls.

He accumulated many nicknames during his long life, perhaps some best not repeated here, but since he was my grandfather, that is how I will refer to him.

Grandad was educated at New Farm primary school, first as a pupil, then as a pupil/teacher and later as an assistant teacher. His role as pupil/teacher, began in 1901, hence his involvement in educating others began from the age of 13.

He entered King's College, (then at Kangaroo Point) in 1913 beginning a long association with the college and the University of Queensland.

He was a founding student of King's and the first President of the Students Club. He was teaching at the teachers training college and attending night classes at university,

He excelled at sport, and won university blues for cricket and tennis.

After receiving his Bachelor of Arts in 1915, he joined the 26<sup>th</sup> infantry battalion, AIF as lieutenant. The 26<sup>th</sup> battalion was part of the 7<sup>th</sup> brigade, a unit which still exists at the Gallipoli barracks, Enoggera, here in Brisbane.

Grandad served in the 26<sup>th</sup> at Gallipoli enduring all of the dangers and appalling conditions for which that campaign is well known. He told a story of how all men were issued with 1 pannikin of water per day. The officers were expected to preserve correct military bearing, so while the enlisted men would enjoy their portion, the officers first had to shave in it prior to consumption.

He survived this conflict and with the remainder of the 26<sup>th</sup> battalion, shipped out to the western front. He served with distinction, being promoted in the field to major, was awarded the DSO and mentioned in despatches on 3 occasions. He was wounded by gunshot, and recuperated in England. On re-joining his unit, he was again promoted to Lt. Colonel, and made commander of the 26<sup>th</sup> battalion.

A notable achievement among many was a suggestion to British command that the German tank Mephisto, disabled in no-man's land, be snatched from under the Teutonic noses. The British reply was "your show Robinson, do what you like".

Grandad recruited the help of 2 British tanks and volunteers from the 26<sup>th</sup>. Under heavy fire, they were able to salvage this prize as a war souvenir. Only 20 of these A7V sturmpanzerwagons were ever produced and the sole remaining example is the Mephisto currently housed in the old railway workshop in Ipswich, as part of the Queensland museum collection.

Grandad would later drily remark, that capturing the tank, was easier than keeping it out of the hands of the Sydney based military "big wigs" who apparently fancied the prize.

It seems that powerful allies were recruited, including the premier of Queensland, the Governor and legendary war correspondent Charles Bean, to secure the return of the Mephisto to Brisbane.

Back in Brisbane Grandad returned to lecturing at the training college, in mathematics, perspective, model drawing and believe it or not, drill. Just how the trainee teachers reacted to military drill has not been recorded, suffice to say his strict military discipline became legendary.

In 1921, he married Alice Morgan, daughter of Sir Arthur Morgan former premier and lieutenant governor of Queensland. This marriage produced a son and 4 daughters, my mother, Margaret, the oldest of the girls. He moved to Rockhampton as principal of the State High School, before returning to Brisbane as Principal of the teachers training college in 1935. He supervised the relocation of the college to Kelvin Grove, lifted entrance standards, introduced diploma courses, developed enduring connections with the University of Queensland and committed himself to a life of education until 1954, when he retired.

Consistent with his passion for teaching, he continued in various roles at the training college, teaching immigrants and in mates of the infamous Boggo Road Jail. He served on the board of adult education, the Queensland institute of educational research, and the senate of the University of Queensland. Of course he was also long serving President of the King's College Council.

He was made a member of the British Empire MBE, in 1966 for services to education. I suspect, this meant much more to him than his war service awards.

Grandad seemed to accumulate nick names. As commander of the 26<sup>th</sup> battalion, he was known as "old uniformity" - not too hard to reconcile that with respect for the uniform and discipline.

His friends called him Reg – I'm not sure of the derivation. Others knew him as "The Colonel". His family nick name was "Face" – a reference to the withering expression he used to transfix and

immobilize the hapless object of his attention. He seemed to accept this name with good grace. Perhaps he was proud of it?

His students at the teachers training college knew him as “Rocks”, again a reference to his demeanour and bearing. Teachers who I encountered later when I was a student, would emphasize his toughness but also his strict sense of fairness, and openness to common sense.

He seemed ambivalent when it came to family discipline, bearing in mind that corporal punishment was the norm at that time. The offender, would be taken into the bathroom, and sternly lectured while he beat on the bath tub with a heavy leather strap. Those listening were left to wonder.

He has been referred to as “eccentric and idiosyncratic in manner” by one biographer, and he certainly had a penchant for ruffling feathers when it suited. His sense of humour was dry, possibly acerbic. On the occasion of the birth of my young sister, 11 years my junior, our family travelled from Toowoomba to Chelmer eager to present the new arrival to our patriarch. With stern face, he pronounced “what a peculiar child “only my mother was unfazed. She knew what to expect from her father.

While completing my education at a Queensland GPS school I, and other students, became embroiled in a bitter dispute with a dysfunctional and sociopathic headmaster. This might sound like an extreme or biased opinion, but 45 years of retrospection has not altered my opinion. This dispute ended with the board of trustees sacking the headmaster and my expulsion being revoked. I faced my grandfather with trepidation. Had my behaviour warranted expulsion from the family?? Had I committed acts of sedition? (They

opened a file on me at ASIO) He listened carefully to my version of the unprecedented events, (they had already been reported in the Courier Mail front page.) He pronounced, "You have fought a great battle and won a great victory." Stern but fair- a reputation validated.

When my oldest brother Ross (present) graduated as a Dentist and joined the Navy to fulfil his scholarship obligations, Grandad couldn't wait to sponsor him as a member of the United Services Club. Introductions were made, and beers were procured. Despite intensive training in student beer drinking, Ross fell badly behind the pace, prompting Grandad to exclaim, "Don't you like your beer Ross"? This phrase has entered into family mythology and is oft repeated, (He's still a slow beer drinker)

Enough of Beer. Grandad was a man's man and loved his rum, whisky and cigarettes. 60 unfiltered ardaths or craven A's, was the usual quota, with a few bowls of good pipe tobacco to finish. Despite his sporting prowess, he could not be described as health conscious.

As he grew older, and I became vaguely aware that he was not immortal, I would inquire, "How are you today Grandad," his reply, invariably was, "better than I deserve to be, young man ".... Realist.

As I think of him pottering around his dahlias and veges looking more like a swaggie than a colonel, stretching his families patience with interminable golf stories, splicing this with his achievements, I see an enigmatic complex, unique character.

I want to thank the Master of King's College, Greg, for the opportunity to speak on this occasion, and for the indulgence of the listeners for the dryer aspects of this speech. For those of you who know the name and the room, I have tried to colour a human picture of a great man, James Alexander Robinson.