

Paul 'Canonised' at Cuitana

Archdeacon Paul Mitchell

"Come on there you slackers, ... lift those knees! Now, I want you to get down on the grass and give me 40 push-ups!"

6.30am in the cool of the morning Cuitana Defence Force Training Centre is a beautiful place – except when being yelled at by a Physical Training Instructor Sergeant who is wanting to give a group of employers a realistic taste of what their Defence Reserves employees experience. Representing the Archbishop, I had the opportunity for two days of participation in an exercise being run for a regular Army Brigade.

After the push-ups, we moved tractor tyres from one side of a football oval to another more times than my legs want to remember. Pointless exercise? It may have seemed so except that some of the young soldiers who were 'mentoring' us may soon be posted to Afghanistan. Superb physical fitness and the ability to work hard and long at physically demanding tasks made our 'workout' seem like a walk in the park.

Australia has troops stationed in many places at home and abroad, working for our defence and providing assistance in places of ongoing conflict and significant need. When possible they are accompanied by chaplains, whose ministry and counsel is deeply appreciated. (The first recorded Christian

military chaplains travelled with the troops of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century).

There is an old saying that there are no atheists in a foxhole, but it is not only in times of conflict that God is keenly recognised.

Those who enter the regular or reserves Defence Force tend to have a high sense of commitment and community. Many I have met, both currently serving as well as diggers of conflicts past, have spoken of wanting to offer what they can out of a recognition of the way in which their lives have been blessed with gifts talents and opportunities.

Back to Cuitana. We were exposed to the heavy vehicles which they use, designed to range across rugged terrain where no roads run. That was exciting in the large trucks - and even more so in the smaller, faster command vehicles and armoured personnel carriers. We got to stand on a tank but unfortunately they were not available for a ride. As one of the others participating with me said though, what we did ride was 'better than Disneyland!'

As these young troops and their officers shared with us their work and introduced us to their procedures, training and tools I was impressed by their professionalism. Another deeper chord struck me though. As they exposed us to the various aspects of the Brigade, each group with their specialised field, these young men and women were very aware of the fact that what



Archdeacon Paul Mitchell (leaning on the muzzle) and his fellow employers come to grips with life in the forces. Courtesy: Defence Reserves Support - South Australia

they were able to do contributed to a larger effort. Without what they were each doing – from the medics to the tank commanders to the radio operators to the chefs – the overall effort would not be able to be completed. Every person in the Brigade had a role to play, and encouraged by a healthy competitive spirit, they knew that they were there to do their best. Every person was also deeply aware that without the others their efforts would have been wasted or of less value.

I was reminded of Paul's words to the Christians in Corinth (1 Corinthians 12) about community and working together. No one was saying, 'because I am only a chef and not out driving one of these vehicles I am worth less.' Nor were they saying 'because I do this or that I am worth more.' There was a very healthy sense of a shared task and purpose and the contribution which each part makes so that what is purposed actually happens. Joining the Defence Reserves

may not be for everyone. Those who do chose this life know they represent us all when offering assistance on the world stage, as we have in recent years in Rwanda, East Timor and many other places. It is not that all clergy are called to be chaplains, but some could and should be, especially given the rewarding experience of working alongside and sharing the journey with these dedicated young men and women.