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INSTITUTE PROCEEDINGS

John and Craig Laffin

an edited version of vote of thanks proposed at the Institute's Mid-year Luncheon at Victoria Barracks, Sydney, on 26 May 2010 by

Brigadier P. R. Carey, AM, RFD, ED (Retd)

Immediate Past President, Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales



I'm honoured to propose this vote of thanks. I knew John Laffin personally only in the last few years of his life, but had known of him and read his books for many years before. I had often thought of the Great War as a terrible tragedy; which deterred me from studying its causes, events and aftermath. Two men, John Laffin and Gordon Maitland, sparked my attention to it to the extent that it has become a dominant interest to me.

John, like Gordon, was a man of great dignity, perseverance and dedication, whose skill with the written language gave him a prominent place in Australian military historiography. John's work is well known throughout the English-speaking world and parts of the non-English-speaking world as well, as recent memorials in France and Belgium attest. His dedication to the legend, memory and honour of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was the abiding passion of his life. It drove his perseverance to ensure the spirit of the AIF would stay alive in perpetuity.

John was a journalist, teacher, lecturer, historian and author. Prior to enlisting in the 2nd AIF, he worked for *Smith's Weekly* and the *Wagga Advertiser*. After the War, he worked for a number of newspapers and magazines before moving with his family to England. He lived overseas for almost 40 years, teaching in secondary schools in English, history and geography. A prolific author, he wrote something like 130 books – many on military history, but on other subjects as well. I doubt that anyone has been able to count the number of lesser articles and monographs he produced.

He travelled extensively, especially on the Western

Front and in the Middle East. He acquired a vast library of valuable books, many of them of extraordinary heritage value. Forty of our members travelled to France in 1998 for the unveiling of the Australian Corps Memorial at Hamel, erected largely as a result of John's work.

John returned to Australia in the mid 1990s and set about creating unique, lasting memorials for the AIF. Foremost among them was his founding of an association dedicated to 'keeping the spirit alive' – the Family and Friends of the First AIF, an organisation with over 800 members that awards scholarships and travel grants, and conducts public events to commemorate the AIF. John is its Founder and Patron-in-Memoriam.

The importance of today's luncheon lies in the vast library John acquired and to an act of supreme generosity on the part of his son, Craig. We are here to say thanks to him and his wife, Kathy. Until now, our library has been described by people who should know as probably the best military history library in the southern hemisphere. Craig has donated some 4000 volumes of his father's books to the Institute. Many of the books are old, out-of-print and priceless in their heritage. They formed the basis of much of John's work. They now constitute the Ursula Davidson Library's Laffin Collection, contributing even more prestige to the Library and I venture to suggest that Library is now among the best in both hemispheres.

Craig and Kathy your generosity knows no bounds and we hope that the collection is seen as a fitting memorial to your father and to your family.