

Flying Doctor Memory Lane makes one final ANZAC Day dawn service possible – Ray's Story

The Australian army has always meant a great deal to Ray Buckley. As an 18-year-old, Ray completed seven years of National Service with the Citizen Military Forces, and was on constant standby for war. In the years that followed, he became a steadfast presence at Horsham's ANZAC Day dawn service, even enacting ceremonial roles in full military uniform. Every dawn service has been important to Ray, but this past service held extra special meaning for him and his family, as it was to be Ray's last.

In early March, Ray went to visit his doctor after experiencing intense back pain. A few tests later, Ray and his family received a heartbreaking diagnosis: Ray had an aggressive and rapidly growing cancer on his spine. He was given six weeks to live.

As his condition deteriorated, Ray was moved into palliative care at Wimmera Base Hospital, but he held onto hope that he would somehow still be able to attend one final dawn service. Upon hearing this, Grampians Health palliative nurse Nicole Miller contacted the team at Flying Doctor Memory Lane – a free service offered by the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) Victoria, which enables people in end-of-life care the opportunity to safely revisit a place of personal significance. Within five minutes, Memory Lane coordinator Beth McIlwain confirmed that the Flying Doctor was to make Ray's final wish a reality.

At 5am on ANZAC Day morning, the Memory Lane team met Ray, wife Joan and son Nathan at the Wimmera Base Hospital, then headed to Sawyer Park in time for the dawn service.

"They had [dad] there early enough that he could watch the veterans march in and to watch me light the torch," says Nathan. "They tilted his gurney so the foot of it was out the door, to give Dad the best view."

"I have to commend Amos Amolo from Memory Lane because for the entire time, he had his arm under the gurney to hold it up enough so Dad could see everything that was going on."

At 8am the next morning, Ray passed away, with Joan and Nathan at his bedside. Nathan notes how special it was for the whole family for Ray to spend his last morning at the place he loved the most.

"On the ride back [from the dawn service], he was very thankful that he was able to be there."