

Invictus Games

Last year I was involved as a volunteer at the Invictus Games in Sydney.

For those that don't know, the Games are an international sporting event for people who became injured or sick whilst serving in the Defence Forces. There were about 500 competitors from 18 different countries.

The events are categorised as Adaptive Sports, and enable people with varying needs to compete with each other.

My experiences were mostly behind the scenes, where I did get to meet many of the competitors without actually seeing them compete.

The week before I was at Olympic Park for some training, and a group from one of the countries had recently arrived. They were touring the precinct to orientate with the venues and facilities, and obviously excited about the days ahead. One person stood out as he was not joining in with the jokes and banter, but was facing away from the group, scanning the surroundings, and demonstrating the hyper-vigilance of a person who has been in a conflict zone. His shoulders were tense, his knees flexed, his brow furrowed, and he looked me in the eye as I walked towards the group. I smiled and raised my eyebrows in that way that says "Hi, you don't know me but welcome, and I'm glad you're here", and at that moment he smiled back, shrugged his shoulders, and with a wry grin acknowledged that he needed to relax and enjoy himself. We didn't speak, but that was OK because we had connected, and I began to realise what a huge and special experience was ahead of me.

My first shift was at the Tennis Centre, where there had been

a deluge the night before, and though everything was dry, a lot of mulch had been washed over the pathways. Not a problem for most of us, but the tyres on the wheelchairs used for wheelchair tennis are very narrow and operate at very high pressure, so a lump of woodchip could cause a blowout. An hour with a big yard broom had everything tidy and ready for the competitors to arrive. The nature of the Invictus Games means that people can compete in as many sports as they like, and will often form mixed teams from a number of different countries, just so they can participate. This happened with a partnership between two men from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, who had never met, but joined to play doubles at the games. There were news reports about these men as one was badly affected by the sound of a helicopter overhead which triggered his post traumatic stress. He was supported by his tennis partner, they hugged and sang songs together, and were joined by service dogs who played a big part in providing comfort to the competitors. After some time they continued their game, and afterwards behind the scenes, we provided somewhere quiet for them to be, and transport was arranged. Their team was appropriately called "Unconquered" as were all the multi-national teams.



I was also involved in the track and field events, and had a wonderful time at the Discus. Adaptive sports are for people

with differing types of illness or injury to compete in the same event. The seated discus enables people with lower limb weakness or amputation to compete on a "level playing field". The athletes are strapped onto a throwing platform, which is in turn shackled to the ground with strong chains and turnbuckles. They each take some practice throws, and then have 6 competition throws. It is logistically more difficult for them to take turns like at other athletic meets, so competitors need to be intensely focused for that time in the circle. The rest of the time they sit together in the shade, chatting, laughing, poking fun at the judges and each other, and even joining in with the music being broadcast around the stadium. It's a very relaxed atmosphere for people that have obviously experienced some of the worst things that life can bring. There was time to chat, and the competitors were clearly enjoying their experience of Sydney and Australia, with tales of trips around the city, and visits to some of the popular sites.

The recognition that Australia has for its Military is demonstrated on ANZAC Day when we reflect on what it means to serve your fellow Australians, your community and your country. Whilst it is a solemn commemoration, we also take time to celebrate the freedoms afforded us by those that have served. The Invictus Games is as much a celebration of those freedoms, as it is reminder of the trauma and suffering that the competitors may have endured.

It was an honour to be able to give back a little to the people that have given so much more. My role was small, but I know I made a difference, and that feels right.