

Origin of the Returned and Services League Motto

'The Price of Liberty is Eternal Vigilance'

In the Fourth Century BC, the Greek military leader and Athenian Orator Demosthenes said in comment on the activities of the neighbouring kingdom of Philip of Macedonia:

'There is one safeguard known generally to the wise, which is an advantage and security to all, but especially to democracies as against despots. What is it? Distrust?'

Over 2000 years later, in 1790, John Philpot Curran said in his speech upon election as Lord Mayor of Dublin, Ireland:

'The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance'

Some sixty years after this speech, Wendell Phillips said in an address before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1852:

'Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty'

The words have also been attributed to Thomas Jefferson but no one has yet found any records of Jefferson using the sentence.

In the early 1920's the Victorian Branch of the League suggested that the League should have a Motto and the New South Wales Branch subsequently recommended the words:

'The price of liberty is eternal vigilance'

It is not known how the New South Wales Branch came to suggest this Motto, whether they adapted the historical quotes or whether it was an original idea, however, in November 1923, the 8th National Congress of the RSL agreed upon the Motto as it now stands. It is as relevant today as the spirit of the thoughts expressed by Demosthenes so long ago.

'The Price of Liberty is Eternal Vigilance'