

AN INVITE TO SANDHURST 20th ANNIVERSARY OF ARMY RL



The letterbox rattled, the dogs barked and my wife went to collect what the postman had delivered.

It was the usual delightful array of circulars, bills and the odd worrying bank statement, but she handed over one missive addressed to me that I hadn't been expecting. It is no exaggeration to say that, when I opened it, I had a tear in my eye.

This neatly typed, official-looking, envelope contained an ornate card stating that, Major General Richard Semple, President of Army Rugby League, requests the pleasure of the company of Mr David Hinchliffe at the Army Rugby League 20th Anniversary Dinner, Friday 2 May, 2014, commencing 19.00hrs in the Indian Army Memorial Room, the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst.

It was a little while before I took in the fact that not only was I being invited to Sandhurst, the historic bastion of our military elite, but actually being asked to go there to celebrate 20 years of the playing of rugby league in the armed forces.

For those unaware of the epic battle to gain recognition for the sport in the military ranks, the significance of this celebration and its location will mean little. But for the folk involved it is the equivalent of Wakefield Trinity announcing the signing of Wally Lewis; simply stunning.

I have very many memories of the campaigns and struggles on behalf of the 13-a-side code mounted by the All Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group during my 18 years in the Commons, but the Armed Forces battle seemed best to illustrate, in the most black and white terms possible, the way that snobbery and class discrimination were at the heart of attempts to prevent the development of our version of rugby.

I can't remember who it was that put it to me bluntly, many years ago, that the only reason rugby union is played widely across the world, while rugby league isn't, is down to 15-a-side being spread by British Armed Forces wherever they were posted. Just as the restricted geographical concentration within the UK was down to rugby union banning those involved with league, the limited international spread of the game was down to it being tacitly outlawed in our Forces.

But the eventual acceptance in the Army, Navy and RAF didn't just happen as other barriers to the game's development were gradually overcome and professionalism in all sport became more the norm. It arose directly because of the courage of service personnel who, against threats of disciplinary action in some instances, stood up to be counted.



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The Army struggle to hold the Navy during a 2009 game
ripphotos.com

Without their courage, and willingness to even put their careers at risk, the political campaign being fought in Parliament by the All-Party group, established to help end such overt prejudice, would have got nowhere.

Despite the insistence of Defence Ministers and senior Forces figures that there was no interest in league, the Parliamentary RL Group had the actual names of vast numbers in the services who had been denied the right to play their favoured pastime.

As we sit down to eat on 2 May, those who stood up for our game in the Forces will be very much in my mind and teary eye and be heartily toasted as such.

I shall remember, as well, political colleagues who are no longer with us who played their parts in this important fight - my old friends (Lords) Geoff Lofthouse and Merlyn Rees and the then Conservative Sports Minister, Iain Sproat, who became a key ally in the fight for free movement between the two codes of rugby.

I won't need any Sergeant-Major at Sandhurst to tell me to stick my chest out. It will already be swollen with pride recalling the privilege of having played a small role in a very important battle for our great game.

David Hinchliffe



Two decades old: Army Rugby League *SWPtv.com*

THE BRIDGE OF SIGHS ST HELENS HONOURS PRESCOTT



When it comes to antiquity the Steve Prescott Bridge is a mere pup to the Ponte Vecchio in Florence.

Historically, the newly-named link between Langtree Park and St Helens town centre will never boast the significance of Iron Bridge, spanning the River Severn in Shropshire, and opened in 1781. And Sydney's Harbour Bridge isn't about to be superseded as one of the world's most photographed structures by the newcomer with a Tesco superstore as its backdrop.

But for thousands of fans who will make the briefest of crossings from one side to t'other, the Steve Prescott Bridge will be forever Merseyside's Bridge of Sighs.

Sighs for a father, husband, thoroughly decent bloke and very good rugby league player struck down in his prime. But boy, didn't #Prekky1 pack a lot into those 39 years? A fortnight later, his name would be attached to the annual Man of Steel award - a lasting and deserved tribute to the man. And while sadness was the underlying emotion at a ceremony to christen the bridge, it was also another occasion to celebrate the life and work of this much loved son of St Helens.

They came in their hundreds too, through a rain storm, soaked down to their replica shirts for the tributes, for the music (take a bow Tom Loughlin, son of ex Saints star, Paul Loughlin) for a chance to acknowledge the life and times of Steve Prescott.

Sure there was temptation to stay wrapped in the warmth and shelter of the Langtree Park media room like some nameless individuals. But then you remembered what Prescott endured during his seven-year fight for life