

QUIET STRENGTH: WHAT FEEDLOT PEOPLE AND SOLDIERS HAVE IN COMMON

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for the welcome. It is a privilege to open BeefEx and to spend time with an industry that matters greatly to Australia, but whose contribution is not always well understood beyond its own fence lines.

I have spent most of my working life with soldiers. I have served with them in training areas and headquarters, on operations in Timor-Leste, Afghanistan and Iraq, and alongside partners across the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific. Since leaving full-time service, I have spent more time looking at the forces changing our world: war, technology, energy, food, climate, national resilience and the uneasy condition of the international order.

More recently, I have also had the opportunity to learn something about feedlots and the people who run them. At first glance, the Army and a feedlot may seem an unlikely pairing. One exists to fight and deter wars. The other turns livestock, grain, water, science, capital and human judgement into a reliable supply of high-quality food.

But spend time with the people and the resemblance becomes clearer.

Both communities begin work before most Australians are awake. Both accept responsibility for living things. Both rely on teams in which everybody has to do their job. Both know that equipment matters, systems matter and technology matters, but that people still determine the outcome. Both operate under pressure, often far from the attention of the public. And both know that when conditions deteriorate, character is not something you announce. It is something you reveal.

That is what I want to speak about this morning: quiet strength.

It is the strength to serve without requiring applause. The discipline to do routine things well when nobody is watching. The judgement to recognise a small problem before it becomes a crisis. The willingness to take responsibility for the team, the animal, the mission and the country. It is an old Australian quality, but it is not an obsolete one. In the world now taking shape, we are going to need much more of it.

A WORLD UNDER PRESSURE

We meet in 2026 at a consequential moment.



The war in Ukraine is well into its fifth year. It has consumed lives and resources at a scale many assumed modern Europe would never see again. It has shown us trenches, mines and artillery alongside drones, artificial intelligence, commercial satellites and cyber operations. It has also reminded us that armies still depend on very physical things: fuel, food, ammunition, railways, roads, workshops and people willing to keep moving supplies while someone is trying to stop them.

The Middle East has moved from chronic instability to a crisis with global consequences. The disruption around the Strait of Hormuz is not a distant maritime story. Before the current conflict, about a quarter of the world's seaborne oil trade passed through that narrow waterway. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates also sent almost one-fifth of global liquefied natural gas trade through it, with no practical alternative route for most of those cargoes. In March, crude and product flows through the Strait fell from roughly 20 million barrels a day to just over two million. The shock moved immediately into freight, aviation, fertiliser, manufacturing and household energy bills.

That is the first practical lesson of 2026. Geography still matters. Chokepoints still matter. A missile or drone strike thousands of kilometres away can change the price of diesel in regional Australia, the cost of moving grain, the price of fertiliser and the margin on every animal in a feedlot.

The crisis has also exposed the limits of substitution. Europe reduced its dependence on Russian pipeline gas after the invasion of Ukraine, only to become more dependent on globally traded LNG moving through exposed sea lanes. Asian buyers have competed for the same cargoes. Some have switched back towards coal and oil when gas prices became unaffordable. Energy transition has not removed energy security from national strategy. It has made the system more complex, and complexity creates new points of failure.

In East Asia, strategic competition continues to sharpen. China is stronger, more assertive and more capable. The pressure placed on the Philippines in the South China Sea is not an abstract dispute over maps. It is part of a wider contest about whether larger powers can change accepted rules through persistent coercion. Taiwan remains a major source of risk. Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia and other regional states are strengthening their own capabilities and building new partnerships, partly because they recognise the danger and partly because they are less certain about what friends and allies will do when the moment comes.

That uncertainty matters. Alliances are essential, especially for a nation of Australia's size, but an alliance is not a substitute for national capacity. Friends are more likely to help a country that has already helped itself. Deterrence rests not only on weapons and formal treaties, but on the visible ability of a society to absorb disruption and keep functioning. This is why I use the phrase the securitisation of everything.

Energy policy is now security policy. Telecommunications are security policy. Ports, railways and roads are security policy. Data centres, payment systems and satellites are security policy. Water, medicines, critical minerals, fertiliser, veterinary supplies and agricultural chemicals are security policy. Food is security policy.



This does not mean that everything should be controlled by government or treated as a military problem. It means that governments, businesses and communities must understand how ordinary systems become strategic under pressure. A component manufactured in one country, shipped through one port and delivered on a just-in-time schedule may look efficient in normal conditions. In a crisis it may become the weakest link in an entire industry. Over the coming months, I expect four broad pressures to remain with us.

First, energy markets will remain volatile even if fighting in the Middle East eases. Damaged infrastructure takes time to repair. Shipping insurers price risk quickly and remove it slowly. European gas storage is entering the northern winter below preferred levels, while Asia still needs affordable energy to support growth. Australia is a major energy exporter, but that does not immunise Australian businesses from international prices or domestic distribution constraints.

Second, the global order will become more transactional. Middle powers will hedge. Countries will build overlapping partnerships rather than rely on one institution or one patron. Trade will continue, because every country needs it, but governments will ask harder questions about who controls supply, where goods move, and what happens when political relations deteriorate.

Third, war will continue to reach into civilian systems. Ukraine has demonstrated attacks on rail networks, ports, power grids and digital services. The Middle East has shown how inexpensive drones can threaten infrastructure worth billions. Cyberattackers do not have to destroy a feed mill, a processor or a freight network. Sometimes stopping its scheduling, payment or control system for a few days is enough.

Fourth, trust will become scarcer and therefore more valuable. In a noisy information environment, institutions that tell the truth, keep promises and deliver consistently will have strategic weight. Australia's reputation as a safe and reliable producer is not merely a marketing advantage. It is a national asset.

NATIONAL RESILIENCE BEGINS WITH FOOD

Defence people often talk about readiness. Usually they mean whether a force has enough trained people, working equipment, supplies and plans to respond at short notice. A nation also has a readiness condition.

Can it feed itself? Can it move food from where it is produced to where people live? Does it have fuel, spare parts, chemicals, vaccines, skilled labour and transport capacity? Can communications and payments continue after a cyberattack? Can the system cope when a flood closes one route, fire closes another and an overseas crisis interrupts critical imports at the same time?

Australia is a major food-producing nation. That fact can make us complacent. We produce enough food in aggregate, but national resilience is not measured only by total tonnes. It is measured by whether the system can convert production into dependable access.

Food does not move by national average. It moves through particular roads, rail lines, ports, cold stores, saleyards, processors and distribution centres. It depends on particular inputs.



Australia imports much of its liquid fuel and many of the chemicals, machinery components and pharmaceuticals that modern production requires. A country can be rich in cattle, grain and technical expertise and still experience serious disruption if the links between them fail.

That is why the Australian Government commissioned a national food-supply-chain assessment this year as part of the development of the National Food Security Strategy. The language of that work is important. It is about keeping production and supply chains moving, securing critical inputs and maintaining open trade. In other words, it is about preparedness.

Feedlots sit at a critical junction in that system. They connect extensive grazing with grain production, animal health, transport, processing, domestic retail and export markets. They allow the supply chain to produce consistent beef despite variability elsewhere in the system. They provide options when seasonal conditions turn. They convert feed with precision, manage animal welfare intensively and give processors a more dependable flow.

The scale deserves wider recognition. Feedlots now support around 36 per cent of Australia's cattle slaughter. In 2023–24, the industry contributed about \$4.6 billion in value added and supported approximately 24,000 full-time-equivalent jobs across its direct and indirect activity. In the first four months of 2026, Australia exported more than half a million tonnes of beef, 16 per cent more than in the same period a year earlier. Those figures are commercial achievements, but they are also measures of national capability.

They tell us that feedlots are not at the edge of the food system. They are part of its load-bearing structure.

Resilience, however, is not the same as self-sufficiency. A resilient industry has alternatives. It understands its dependencies. It holds some margin. It trains for disruption. It shares information early. It knows which risks can be accepted and which must be reduced. The military calls this redundancy. If a force has only one communications link, it does not really have communications. If there is only one supply route, there is no secure supply route. If only one person understands a critical system, the unit has a vulnerability disguised as expertise.

The same logic applies to food. Alternative suppliers, backup power, water security, cyber protection, spare capacity, trusted local relationships and a workforce that can improvise are not inefficiencies. They are the price of remaining effective when conditions are no longer ideal.

CLIMATE, CONSUMERS AND THE DEMAND FOR PROTEIN

The pressure is not only geopolitical. Australian agriculture has always lived with climate variability. The country moves between drought, flood, heat, fire and occasionally all of them in close succession. The Bureau of Meteorology's maps tell us scientifically what people on the land already know personally: rainfall variability across much of Australia is high to extreme.

Feedlots are not outside that climate system. They are one of the mechanisms through which the beef industry manages it. But they also depend on water, grain, transport, energy and



good animal-health systems. A failed crop, a heat event, a flooded road or an energy shock can travel quickly through the operation.

Preparedness therefore has to include climate as an operating condition, not as a once-a-decade exception. Shade, water, drainage, feed inventories, heat-load management, emergency power, animal observation and workforce planning all become elements of resilience. There is no glamour in most of this. There is only the quiet discipline of being ready before the weather changes.

Consumer expectations are changing as well. Some people want lower-cost protein. Some want premium grain-fed beef with consistent eating quality. Some want stronger assurance on welfare, biosecurity, provenance and environmental performance. Some are reducing meat intake. Others, particularly in emerging economies, are adding more animal-source foods as incomes rise.

The global picture is not the simple story sometimes told in wealthy cities. According to the latest OECD and FAO outlook, global meat consumption is expected to reach about 412 million tonnes by 2035, around 12 per cent above the recent base period. Beef consumption is projected to grow, even as poultry grows faster. Population, urbanisation and rising incomes across Asia and other emerging regions remain powerful drivers.

That matters because protein is not a cultural accessory. It is part of human development. For children, pregnant women, older people and communities moving out of poverty, access to nutrient-dense food can have lifelong consequences. The argument for meat cannot rest only on tradition, and it should not dismiss legitimate questions about sustainability or welfare. It should rest on evidence, standards, efficiency and an honest account of nutrition.

Australia is well placed if it remains trusted. We have land, skills, strong animal-health systems, traceability, research institutions and access to markets that value quality. But future customers will ask more questions. They will want assurance that animals were cared for properly, that biosecurity is credible, that claims can be verified and that supply will continue when other producers falter.

The response should not be defensiveness. It should be professional confidence. The best answer to scrutiny is performance that can withstand scrutiny.

That brings me back to something soldiers understand. The public may not see the years of training behind a successful operation. They see one moment, often through a camera. Feedlot people may spend every day managing welfare, nutrition, water, heat and health, while the wider public sees one image without the context required to interpret it.

The answer is not to retreat behind the fence. It is to explain the work, open the profession where appropriate, correct false claims and keep lifting standards. Institutions lose trust when they demand it. They earn trust when their behaviour is competent, transparent and consistent.

THE LIGHT HORSE AND THE PEN RIDER



There is an Australian figure who connects agriculture and military service more clearly than almost any other: the light horseman.

The Australian Light Horse was drawn heavily from rural communities. These were mounted infantrymen, not conventional cavalry for most of their history. Their horses gave them mobility. Ordinarily, they rode to the battle, dismounted and fought as infantry. They had to understand the animal beneath them, the country around them and the condition of the men beside them.

Their skill did not begin when the shooting started. It was built through thousands of ordinary acts: watering, feeding, grooming, checking hooves and saddlery, reading fatigue, maintaining equipment, navigating and keeping formation. Their combat power depended on care.

That is the first connection with a pen rider.

A good pen rider is not merely a person on a horse moving cattle. He or she is an observer, a mobile sensor and an early-warning system. The pen rider reads posture, gait, appetite, breathing, social behaviour and the subtle signs that one animal is beginning to fall away from the mob. Effective action often comes before certainty. The value lies in noticing early enough to change the outcome.

Soldiers call that situational awareness. It is the ability to detect what does not fit. A track where there should be none. Silence at the wrong time. A change in the pattern of life. One member of the patrol moving differently because exhaustion or fear has begun to take hold. Technology can assist, but awareness is still a human discipline built through attention and experience.

The second connection is trust. A horse responds to calm competence. So do cattle. So do soldiers. Shouting can create movement, but it does not create trust. People follow leaders under pressure when they believe the leader understands the situation, shares the risk and will not spend their lives carelessly.

The third connection is stewardship. The light horseman depended on his horse and had a duty to care for it. The pen rider carries a similar responsibility. Neither relationship is sentimental. Both are practical, demanding and deeply ethical. An animal is not a machine. It cannot tell you in words what is wrong. The human has to pay attention.

And the fourth connection is quiet competence. The work is often solitary. Success may be the problem that never becomes visible: the sick animal pulled early, the broken gate found before a movement, the water issue fixed before heat arrives, the exhausted soldier taken off point before judgement fails.

On 31 October 1917, that culture of horsemanship, discipline and trust was tested at Beersheba.

The town sat on the eastern end of the Ottoman defensive line protecting Gaza. Earlier attempts to break the line had failed. Beersheba had to be taken quickly, and its wells mattered. By late afternoon, time and water were running out. The 4th Light Horse Brigade



was ordered forward. At about 4.30 pm, the 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments began their advance.

They moved from a trot to a gallop across several kilometres of exposed ground. Turkish artillery and machine-gun crews engaged them. The horsemen passed through the artillery's effective range faster than expected. With long bayonets carried like swords, they crossed the trenches, some dismounting to fight while others drove into the town and secured the wells.

Beersheba has become a national legend, and legends can flatten human experience into a single heroic image. The charge was courageous, but it was not reckless theatre. It succeeded because reconnaissance, planning, timing, combined action and disciplined initiative came together. It was the visible culmination of skills learned far from the battlefield.

Most importantly, the horses were not incidental. The Light Horse could make that advance because men and animals had endured the desert together. Water discipline was operational discipline. Horsemanship was combat power. The trust built through routine care became speed and cohesion when it mattered.

A modern pen rider is not going to Beersheba, and feedlot work should not be romanticised as war. The consequences are different. But the underlying professional truth is recognisable: crisis performance is borrowed from daily standards.

You cannot manufacture trust at 4.30 in the afternoon if you neglected it at 5.30 that morning.

A CENTURY OF SERVICE

The nexus between agriculture and service extends well beyond the Light Horse. In the First World War, 416,809 Australians enlisted from a population of fewer than five million. Rural districts contributed heavily. Farms lost sons, workers and future owners. Those who remained carried the burden of production. The front and the farm were connected by food, horses, wool, labour and grief.

In the Second World War, that connection became even more organised. When rural labour shortages became acute, the Australian Women's Land Army helped keep farms operating. The Army itself established farming companies in the Northern Territory to grow fresh produce for the force. Men with agricultural experience were selected because the military needed their practical knowledge. Food production was not behind the war effort. It was within it.

Australians served again in Korea, where bitter winters, steep country and extended supply lines tested endurance. They served in Vietnam, where small teams patrolled in heat and monsoon, relying on fieldcraft, discipline and mutual trust. Many came from regional communities. Many returned to them carrying experiences they did not readily discuss.

In East Timor, Australian troops arrived amid violence and institutional collapse. The mission required force, restraint and constant engagement with local communities. Soldiers had to secure roads and towns, protect vulnerable people, restore confidence and help create the conditions in which ordinary life could begin again.



In Iraq and Afghanistan, we operated in environments where the tactical fight was only part of the problem. Soldiers worked among farming communities whose lives depended on water, seasons, livestock, markets and local relationships. A damaged irrigation channel could matter as much to a village as a security incident. Understanding the human terrain required humility. It meant listening to people whose knowledge came not from formal rank, but from a lifetime in one valley.

Across all of those wars, service was sustained from home. Families carried absences. Communities raised money and welcomed people back. Farmers produced food. Truck drivers moved it. Manufacturers supplied equipment. Nurses treated the wounded. None of Australia's military history belongs to the military alone.

The connection continues today through reservists, veterans, defence families and regional towns. Agricultural communities understand service because they practise a form of it every day. They work through Christmas, storms, market falls and machinery failures because animals still require care and the country still requires food.

I want to be careful here. Farming and feedlot work are businesses. People invest capital, take risk, employ staff and rightly expect a return. Calling the work service must never become an excuse to take it for granted or pay less for it. In the Army, service above self does not mean the individual has no needs. It means the mission and the team give purpose to the sacrifice.

The nation still owes its people good leadership, proper equipment and honest recognition.

The same is true of agriculture. Australia cannot praise farmers in a crisis and ignore the conditions required for them to remain viable in peace. Resilience has a cost. Biosecurity has a cost. Training, infrastructure, animal welfare, environmental performance and spare capacity all have costs. If the nation wants these capabilities available when disruption comes, it must value them before the disruption.

WHAT EACH PROFESSION CAN LEARN

There are several things I believe the military can learn from your industry.

The first is a respect for natural systems. Defence organisations can begin to believe that plans create reality. Agriculture cures that illusion. Weather, biology and time impose their own authority. Good operators plan, but they also observe and adapt.

The second is commercial discipline. Every input has a cost, every delay has a consequence and poor decisions compound. Defence needs more of that clear relationship between resources, time and outcomes.

The third is intergenerational thinking. Many agricultural businesses make decisions whose full value will be realised by the next generation. Governments and military organisations often struggle to look beyond a budget cycle or posting tenure.

And the fourth is grounded innovation. Feedlots use nutrition science, data, automation, genetics, animal-health surveillance and environmental systems because they solve practical



problems. The test is not whether the technology sounds impressive. The test is whether it improves the outcome.

There are also military habits that may be useful to national food resilience.

One is to rehearse failure. Do not let the first discussion about a prolonged power outage, cyberattack, fuel shortage or transport closure occur after it begins. Tabletop exercises are inexpensive. They expose hidden dependencies and clarify who has authority to make decisions.

Another is to identify mission-essential systems. Not every function is equally important in the first hours of a crisis. Water, animal welfare, feed delivery, communications, people safety and access may take precedence. Knowing that order beforehand reduces confusion.

A third is to build relationships before they are needed. In operations, the worst time to exchange business cards is during the emergency. Feedlots, suppliers, processors, transport firms, local councils, emergency services and governments should know how they will share information and solve problems when normal arrangements break down.

Finally, develop junior leaders. The person closest to the problem will often see it first. If every decision has to travel to the top, the organisation will be slow precisely when speed matters. Clear intent, strong standards and trust allow people at the edge to act responsibly. That is as true for a pen rider as it is for a patrol commander.

CHARACTER, VALUES AND PURPOSE

When people ask me what holds a military unit together under pressure, they often expect a technical answer: training, command systems, weapons or communications. All of those things matter. But the final answer is culture.

Culture is what people do when the plan is failing, the leader is absent and nobody outside the team will ever know who carried the extra load.

It is built from character, values and purpose.

Character is the habit of choosing what is right when the choice is inconvenient. In a feedlot, it is the welfare concern acted on immediately, the maintenance fault reported rather than hidden, the difficult conversation with a colleague, the decision not to cut a corner even when time and margin are tight.

Values turn those choices into a shared standard. Words on a wall are not values. Values are the behaviours an organisation rewards, tolerates and corrects. If safety is a value, production pressure does not erase it. If respect is a value, it extends to junior staff, contractors, animals and critics. If excellence is a value, learning continues after success, not only after failure. Purpose answers the question of why the work deserves our effort.

For soldiers, purpose is service to the nation, protection of others and loyalty to the people beside us. For feedlot people, purpose includes producing safe and nutritious food, caring for



animals, sustaining regional communities, supporting families and maintaining Australia's reputation as a reliable partner.

Purpose does not make hard work easy. It makes hard work intelligible.

There will be difficult years ahead. Climate variability will continue. Input costs and markets will move. Technology will alter jobs. Public expectations will become more demanding.

Global crises will interrupt systems that once seemed dependable. Some criticism will be fair and should drive improvement. Some will be poorly informed and deeply frustrating.

In those moments, the strongest response will not be louder claims. It will be visible standards, credible evidence and the confidence of people who know their work matters.

CONCLUSION

Let me finish where I began, with quiet strength.

At Beersheba, history remembers the gallop. It remembers the dust, the speed and the courage of men crossing fire towards the trenches. But the charge began long before 4.30 that afternoon. It began in Australian paddocks. It began with young people learning to ride, to read country, to care for a horse and to work with others. It was sustained through the unrecorded routines of watering, feeding, checking equipment and looking after a mate. The spectacular moment rested on unspectacular discipline.

That is true of military service. It is also true of your industry.

Australia sees the product in the cabinet, the export figure in a report or, occasionally, an image from beyond the fence. It does not always see the person riding a pen in the early light, watching closely for one animal that is not quite right. It does not see the nutritionist adjusting a ration, the maintenance team keeping water flowing, the livestock manager preparing for heat, the driver taking responsibility on a long road, or the family carrying the risk behind the business.

Yet that is where national resilience is made.

It is made by people who accept responsibility before recognition. People who understand that care and performance are not opposites. People who know that a team becomes dependable through thousands of small acts. People who will do what is required when the weather turns, the market shifts or the wider system fails.

Soldiers and feedlot people do not perform the same work, and we should not pretend that they do. But they recognise something in one another: service, practical judgement, loyalty to the team, respect for the living, and a willingness to carry responsibility without making a show of it.

In an age of noise, that quiet strength can be overlooked. It should not be.



Australia will need military strength in the years ahead. It will need energy strength, industrial strength, cyber strength and diplomatic strength. But beneath all of them it will need the strength to keep communities functioning and people fed. Food security is national security, and the people who produce our food are part of the nation's strategic depth.

Your work reaches well beyond the feedlot fence. It reaches into regional towns, Australian households, overseas markets and the resilience of the country itself.

So my message at the opening of BeefEx is simple.

Keep telling the real story. Keep holding the standard. Keep investing in your people. Keep preparing for conditions you hope will never arrive. And never mistake a lack of public visibility for a lack of national importance.

Quiet strength is still strength.

Thank you.