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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
SKY NEWS
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SUBJECTS: Anzac Day; Defence deployments; Canberra-class amphibious landing ships; Joint Strike Fighter

DAVID SPEERS: Richard Marles, thanks very much for joining us this afternoon. First, on Anzac Day, this year, 2017, marks the centenary of some of our costliest battles during World War 1, in 1917. Why is this so important for Australians today, to reflect on, to remember?

RICHARD MARLES: Well, I think it is a really important day for the nation. It is a day which I think goes closest to touching the Australian character of any that day we acknowledge.

In part it is about acknowledging the particular service and sacrifice that comes with putting on the Australian uniform, and there is something very astounding about that, that when people put that uniform on in active service they do so with the knowledge they may never take it off. In the case of the First World War 60,000 Australians perished, and that was their reality.

The scale of that tragedy in the early years of the Australian nation, I think also put an indelible mark on us as a country, and so wherever you go around Australia you will find memorials, particularly to the First World War. It absolutely touched every Australian by virtue of the sheer scale of it, and 1917 was very much a part of that.

I think the other issue, David, is that whilst the Australian character existed before the First World War it really was the first time it was on display internationally. It was, in a sense, the crystallisation of it, and so egalitarianism, looking after one another, as Charles Beam, the official war historian described it, as being mateship – all of these are what we think of as being Australian today, what makes us special as Australians, but they came to the fore and were first acknowledged in the First World War, and all of that is commemorated and acknowledged today, so it's not our national day, but in my mind it's very clearly the most important day for our nation.

SPEERS: Hard to disagree with anything you've just said there. War fighting has changed, of course, so much over the last century. Today we still have troops in Iraq, we still have troops in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister, as you know, has been to visit both of them, both theatres, to mark this Anzac Day.

We've been back in Iraq for about two and a half years now. We've been in Afghanistan for most of the last 16 years. Honestly, how long do you think we are going to be in these theatres?

MARLES: I think you will find that Australia playing its role on the global stage is an enduring feature of the way in which the Australian Defence Force is engaged, and I think that's how it should be.

When you look at the reason we have a defence force and what's that about, it goes very close to the question of who we are as a people, as we've just discussed in terms of the way we view Anzac Day, and I think part of that is that we are a country that when others in the world ask for help we would be wanting to be one of those countries which provide that help.

So, in the case of Iraq, when they asked for assistance, we want to be one of those countries which is willing to provide that assistance, so be it Iraq, be it Afghanistan-

SPEERS: -Sure, but there are plenty of countries that would ask for help and hope to get help, no doubt about that, but I guess we also have to judge, don't we, from time to time, periodically, what we're achieving and how long we're going to remain committed.

MARLES: Of course, and there's a whole lot of issues which go to whether or not any particular engagement is in the nation's interest, but I guess the point I'm trying to make is being one of those countries which seeks to play its part in the world is very much about who we are as a people and the way in which we want to engage with the world, and that's why you do find Australians not only engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also we've had Australians engaged on a long-term basis in the Middle East. We've had Australians engaged for many years now in South Sudan. These are parts of the world where assistance is sought and where we are engaging, and you're right – that is not an open cheque and we can't do it everywhere.

We do need to be assessing what's in the national interest, and in respect of both Iraq and Afghanistan in different ways. We've seen acts of terrorism emanate from those parts of the world. Afghanistan under the Taliban was one of those places where terrorists trained, and indeed there were connections between it and the Bali bombings where a number of Australians died.

In terms of the contemporary situation with ISIS, they are seeking to make Australia a target. We obviously have a national interest in seeing-

SPEERS: -And we are seeing progress in Iraq, no doubt about it. We're seeing ISIS lose territory in Iraq, so there's progress there. I note the Prime Minister said today that Australia remains committed to utterly destroying ISIS.

Is that your understanding of our mission? Was it originally to train the Iraqi army to do that job? What's the actual mission as you understand it?

MARLES: It's both of what you just said. Our mission is absolutely to contest and defeat ISIS. No question about that at all, but we need to be doing it in a way which is sustainable.

I think one of the lessons which was learnt from the Iraq war back in 2003 was a simple moving in and occupying scenario doesn't necessarily bring an end to the issues involved, and if we're going to have a sustainable situation there we actually need to be empowering the Iraqi Army itself to do the work here, and that's why the particular way in which we are engaged in Iraq to defeat ISIS is training the Iraqi national army to do the work that it's doing, so I think it is an appropriate engagement.

I think we have learnt the lessons of the past. It is about building up the Iraqi national army, but our interest here is very much that that occur so as to not only assist Iraq to take back control of its own country, but to bring an end to ISIS, which makes threats in respect of our country all the time, so both are very much part of the missions here, and it's important that we see the task through.

SPEERS: Let me ask you about some Defence equipment issues. Reports today that our two largest warships in the Navy, HMAS Canberra and HMAS Adelaide, the amphibious landing ships, that there are maintenance problems there. They've been stuck in dock for more than a month now and no real timeframe from Defence for when they're going to be of service again. What's your understanding of what's going on?

MARLES: I'm as much in the dark as the Australian people are, and I think that's the real concern here. All we've heard from either of the two Defence ministers is a tweet from Marise Payne that it's not to do with oil. Well, that's great, but it would be good if we actually heard from one of the Defence ministers about what actually is going on here.

We're talking about the pride of the Royal Australian Navy. These are the two largest ships in the Royal Australian Navy. There appears to be no indication of when they're going to be operational. We don't have an assurance yet whether or not they will be fully signed off on time by the end of this year, but I think really significantly in the short term is we've got exercise Talisman Sabre coming up in the middle of the year.

Developing a world-class amphibious capability has been bipartisan policy in this country for than a decade now. It was seen to culminate in both these ships participating in exercise Talisman Sabre in the middle of this year, our biggest exercise with the United States.

SPEERS: A lot of viewers might think 'what does it matter if we miss an exercise?' You should explain, I guess, why these are so important, why we spend so much money getting ready for these things.

MARLES: Well, we do this exercise every two years. It's the single biggest exercise we do with our most important ally, and Talisman Sabre this year was about showcasing the capability of the two Canberra-class vessels.

Now, we need to know whether or not those vessels are going to be ready to participate in that exercise. I mean, that is a critical milestone in putting these vessels in a position where they can serve our Navy and our country as was intended, and we need better than a tweet from one of the Defence ministers last night to say it wasn't about oil.

Well, can they tell us exactly what is going on so that we're not in the dark, and when we can expect to see these vessels being operational, and whether or not they will be participating in exercise Talisman Sabre, and whether they will be able to be signed off as fully operational as planned by the end of the year.

SPEERS: These are Spanish-designed ships. Are you aware of what the contract entails here? Is there a warranty, for example, if there is a problem with the actual engine?

MARLES: I've read the reports, as you have, in this morning's media which raise that question, but I don't know any more than that, and again I think we need to be hearing from our Defence ministers, or one of them at least, as to whether or not any of that has been called into question, and exactly what has happened here.

I mean, why aren't the engines working as expected, or exactly what is the problem? It's not good enough to have two Defence ministers who are very keen to go and cut ribbons whenever the going's good, but when there is something difficult to face both of them go to ground.

It's an unprecedented situation that we've actually got two Defence ministers. It would be nice if one of them actually talked to the Australian people about what's going on.

SPEERS: Can I also ask you about the Joint Strike Fighter program. Australia, of course, has ordered 72 of these, costing around about \$100 million each.

The Australian newspaper reported on the weekend a host of problems are still troubling the Joint Strike Fighter, the F-35: structural flaws, software, weapons, site glitches, humidity impacts, and even whether laptops can be connected to them for maintenance. How confident are you about the progress on the F-35?

MARLES: Obviously, all those reports are concerning as well, but I think this is in a different category.

Firstly, we're not talking about an interim operational capacity in Australia until 2020, so there's a little more water to go under the bridge there until the JSFs come into any form of operational functionality in the Royal Australian Air Force, but sure, these are issues which need to be resolved.

I think we also need to bear in mind that we're talking about a next-generation technology. Quite often when you are talking about technologies of this kind there are a lot of teething issues. It's a ground breaking capability and is a very complex platform. It doesn't surprise me that there are going to be issues along the way. We need to have that cutting-edge platform.

The idea that people would be giving up on the JSF is obviously silly. It is a really important capability for the Royal Australian Air Force. All of these issues do need to be looked at and made sure they're resolved. There is some time, though, to get them sorted out.

Having said all of that, of course, the JSF has been running over time, really, since the very beginning of the project, so I don't know if we can be confident about any of the timelines associated with the JSF, but that said, it is an important project to be pursuing and we support it.

SPEERS: Alright, Richard Marles, sounds like you have a few issues you can raise with your co-host Christopher Pyne on your program Friday, particularly in relation to the Canberra-class amphibious landing ships. I appreciate you joining us this Anzac Day. Thanks very much.

MARLES: It's a pleasure, David.

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