

CHIEF OF ARMY SPEECH
VP DAY COMMEMORATION
KOKODA TRACK MEMORIAL WALKWAY
CONCORD, NSW
22 AUGUST 2008

Cr Angelo Tsirekas – Mayor of the City of Canada Bay, Mr John Murphy – Member for Lowe, Ms Sue McDonald – rep NSW Treasurer, Mr Effie Cauchie – rep DVA, Mr Danny O’Connor – General Manager of Concord Hospital, Mr Don Rowe – NSW RSL State President, Mrs Diana Bland – President of the War Widows Guild, Mr Ron Brown – President of the NSW National Servicemen’s Association, President and members of the Kokoda Memorial Walkway Board, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour to be here with you today as we pause to reflect on the very real sacrifices and fabulous achievements of the Australian people in their contribution to the Allies’ Victory in the Pacific in the Second World War.

On August 15, 1945, Prime Minister Chieflly announced to the nation that the Japanese had agreed to unconditionally surrender, and as a consequence, the Second World War was over. Australians reacted to the surrender in a tremendous mood of joy, with spontaneous celebrations breaking out all over the nation. For a jubilant Australia wildly celebrating on 15 August one thought was paramount. The war was over.

But, in the immediate aftermath of these celebrations, Australians began to appreciate that, because of the six years of war, the world had changed. And, Australia too was forever changed by this most destructive of conflicts.

We gather here this morning to commemorate the end of war in the Pacific 63 years ago. Of the many occasions and anniversaries we commemorate in the course of each year, including those marking the conclusion of past conflicts, this one is of particular significance. The Pacific war was the first and only time in the short history of our nation when our territorial integrity was subject to threat, and when acts of war were carried out against our people on – and above - Australian soil.

VP Day is an important occasion for all Australians. But it holds special meaning for those who endured the Second World War, particularly for our veterans, and for those whose loved ones did not return or who returned suffering grave physical and mental injury. Today, as we reflect on the service and sacrifice of our veterans we should take a moment to consider what it was they fought for sixty-three years ago.

While the early years of World War II in Europe and the Middle East brought little change to daily life for most Australian families, the bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941 signalled the start of Japan's rapid advance through the Pacific. The day after crippling the US Navy's Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour, Japan landed its first troops in Malaya. A powerful Japanese offensive ensued, and Australia hastily prepared for possible invasion.

With the majority of our 2nd AIF, naval and air forces already heavily committed in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, Prime Minister John Curtin decided to withdraw most of them to meet the requirements of defending Australia.

In January 1942, the Japanese forces captured Rabaul, the capital of the Australian-controlled territory of New Guinea. Within weeks, Australian and Dutch forces had surrendered the island of Ambon in the Netherlands East Indies. When Singapore fell on the 15th of February 1942, 15,000 men of Australia's 8th Division were taken captive which was the start of over three long years in captivity. The loss of Singapore meant the "Malay Barrier" had been breached, and Australia was in potential danger.

The war arrived on Australia's shores on the morning of 19 February 1942 with a devastating air raid on Darwin. Nearly 260 Japanese fighters and bombers attacked the port. They targeted the shipping in the harbour twice during that day, killing 252 Allied service personnel and civilians. In succeeding months air attacks were made on many towns in northern Australia including Wyndham, Port Hedland and Derby in Western Australia, Darwin and Katherine in the Northern Territory, Townsville and Mossman in Queensland, and Horn Island in the Torres Strait.

In May 1942, three Japanese midget submarines attacked Sydney Harbour, followed by several minor attacks on Australia's southern coastline by conventional Japanese submarines. This included the shelling of Newcastle. In the following months, Japanese submarines sank six Allied merchant ships off the east coast of Australia. Several more merchant ships were hit in 1943 and, in May that year, 268 perished when the Australian Hospital Ship Centaur was sunk in Queensland waters.

These attacks, and the Japanese landings in Papua New Guinea in July led to most Australians feeling a great sense of peril. While debate today questions whether the Japanese had really developed a coherent strategy to invade Australia, it would have been extremely difficult at that time not to imagine Australia being the next objective of the Japanese. The first six months of 1942 were indeed a grim time for Australians, and its allies in the Pacific.

But in September of that year, Australian forces achieved something that no other allied force had yet achieved. At Milne Bay, a combined force of Australian Army, Air Force and US forces defeated the Japanese for the first time. Victory here and a few weeks later the recapture of Ioribaiwa in New Guinea by the Australians on 28 September, marked a turning point, the seemingly "*unstoppable*" Japanese had been stopped. This was an important psychological victory.

British Field-Marshal Sir William Slim, the brilliant commander of the XIV Army in Burma, later commented that:

Australian troops had, at Milne Bay, inflicted on the Japanese their first undoubted defeat on land. Some of us may forget that, of all the allies, it was the Australians who first broke the invincibility of the Japanese army.

Australian Brigadier John Field summed up Australian feelings more succinctly:

Our troops have proved the Jap is not a superman.

After the defeat of the Japanese at Kokoka and Milne Bay, Australian and American units between November 1942 and January 1943 fought the Japanese in northern Papua at Buna, Gona, Sanananda, Finshaffen and Wewak in a series of costly battles, where no quarter was shown or expected. By early 1943, Allied forces had halted Japanese offensives in the Solomon Islands and New Guinea.

In 1945, Australian land, air and sea forces launched coordinated assaults against the Japanese at Tarakan, Labuan and Balikpapan. These were the biggest, most complex and the final Australian campaigns of World War II. Preparations were then being made for what would have been an extraordinarily costly assault on Japan itself. However, with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, the Emperor of Japan finally realised the futility of continuing the war and was persuaded to surrender unconditionally on 15 August.

On the home front, Australians wanted a return to normality as soon as possible. Commonwealth wartime regulations were terminated. And there was gradual end to rationing and manpower restrictions. Women started returning to their homes, but many remained in the jobs to which they had won grudging admittance during the times of manpower shortages in the war. But a priority for the government was the demobilisation of Australia's largest ever military force.

Almost one million Australian men and women enlisted during the Second World War. It remains the largest commitment of Australian soldiers, sailors and airmen in our history.

During the early years of the war, over 22,000 Australian servicemen and almost forty nurses were captured by the Japanese. Most were captured early in 1942 when Japanese forces captured Malaya, Singapore, New Britain, and the Netherlands East Indies. Hundreds of Australian civilians were also interned. Although it is difficult for us to understand what these brave Australians endured, the fact that one third of our POWs perished in captivity is some indication of the appalling conditions they suffered. Most became victims of their captors' indifference and brutality. Tragically, over a thousand died when Allied submarines torpedoed the unmarked ships carrying prisoners around Japan's wartime empire.

For Australia, Victory in the Pacific Day ended 6 years of hardship, sacrifice and anguish. It heralded the start of what many people hoped would be a new era of peace. So in remembering the nearly one million Australian men and women who served, and the 40,000 who died fighting to protect the freedom we enjoy today, it is worth reflecting on the legacies of that great generation of Australians.

In the post-war period, Australia emerged as a more confident nation, one more open to the world. The slogan *populate or perish* won widespread acceptance and prepared Australians for a massive immigration program that would double the population within a generation.

The immigration program required a great expansion of employment and this was achieved by building on the industrial base created by the war. Steel-making had become a major industry turning sleepy seaside villages such as Wyalla into massive industrial complexes. Places like this continued to expand in the post-war years.

One of other the great legacies of the war is that Australia had forged a close relationship with the United States throughout the Pacific Campaign. It is a relationship that endures to this day, and is central to the economic health and security of our nation.

At the end of hostilities, Australia was able to forge a new relationship with Japan. Their post-war democratisation resulted in stronger economic ties with Australia, and today Japan rates among our closest trading and dialogue partners.

These are among the most important legacies of the many Australians who sacrificed so much in the lead up the Victory in the Pacific. But there were other legacies as well.

We commemorate and treasure the spirit of service before self that these wonderful Australians showed. They showed their firm belief that true democratic freedom must be nurtured and protected; and when threatened, is worth fighting and if necessary, dying for. This legacy is one that subsequent generations of Australians must continue to nurture and cherish as we struggle against those who would subvert democracy and challenge the individual freedoms that are so very fundamental to our culture and society.

The war in the Pacific tested the character and commitment of the Australian people. Whether they served in the sands of north Africa, the jungles of New Guinea, in the air over Europe on the high seas, or in the factories and farms of the home front, we remember today a generation of magnificent Australians who fought to protect our way of life; our democracy, our culture, our land.

We appreciate that through their valour, our country emerged from the Second World War with a new sense of economic, political and social independence. They inspire us with their example and our nation rightly owes them its deepest and most sincere gratitude.

Lest we forget.