



PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OPENING OF THE EXTENSIONS AT THE
HEIDELBERG REPATRIATION GENERAL HOSPITAL
MELBOURNE - 24 APRIL 1989**

On the eve of Anzac Day 1989, Australians once again recall, with sorrow and with pride, the sacrifices made by our servicemen and women in defence of liberty and peace around the world.

At Gallipoli and in France, at El Alamein and Tobruk, in Greece and Crete, at Kokoda, in the Coral Sea, and at Long Tan, and at hundreds of other battle fields throughout the globe, Australian forces have distinguished themselves by their valour and their tenacity.

War Graves around the world show the immensity of the sacrifice Australians have made. Only this year, I had the honour of laying a wreath at the Commonwealth War Cemetery near the River Kwai in Thailand which honours the Allied prisoners who gave their lives on the Burma Railroad. Later this year it will be my privilege, in France, to visit Villers Bretonneux, where men from the First AIF fought and died in the great battles of 1918.

In ceremonies around the nation tomorrow, Australians will pause to remember those who fought, and those who did not return home from the fighting.

But Anzac Day is not just an occasion on which we should look backwards to the exploits of war. It is also an occasion for us to look to the present and to reaffirm our determination, as a community, to repay the debt we owe our veterans.

Today with the opening of this new ward here at Heidelberg, we are demonstrating anew our determination to repay that debt as fully as we can.

Throughout Australia, Repatriation Hospitals are being upgraded with new buildings and new medical equipment, in order that veterans continue to receive the very best of health care, provided by dedicated staff, and backed up by access to the best medical technology available.

Here at Heidelberg there have been dramatic changes, with the expenditure of some \$42 million over the last six years on new and refurbished buildings and new equipment.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the medical, nursing and administrative staff at Heidelberg for their dedication and skill in supporting our veterans.

I am also pleased to announce that the Government has allocated another \$1 million for new radiology and cardiology equipment at Heidelberg and its counterpart hospitals at Concord in Sydney, Greenslopes in Brisbane, and Daw Park in Adelaide and new orthopaedic and urological equipment at Hollywood in Perth.

Veterans deserve the best in health care.

Here at Heidelberg, and around the nation, they are receiving the best in health care.

I want to make clear my Government's complete determination to ensure that, as the health care needs of veterans change over the years, they continue to get the best.

That is why we are moving to integrate Repatriation hospitals into the State system.

Integration will ensure that veterans continue to have access to the best medical staff and equipment, and it will provide veterans with a greater choice, often including placement in hospitals closer to their homes.

The Veterans' Affairs Minister, Ben Humphreys, and I, have guaranteed on a number of occasions:

- . no repatriation general hospital will be transferred to a State until a satisfactory agreement has been reached on matters such as priority of access and quality of health care for veterans and war widows, and unless the interests of hospital staff have been adequately safeguarded; and
- . no final decision will be taken if the RSL has reasonable cause for dissatisfaction with the proposed arrangements.

There is nothing equivocal about these guarantees and there is no secret agenda.

This is not a step towards abolishing the Department of Veterans' Affairs or eliminating the special and separate status that veterans have in our community.

Indeed I want to tell you today that the Government is absolutely committed to maintaining a separate Department of Veterans' Affairs answerable to its own Minister.

Under this Government, the Department will continue to exercise the Commonwealth's responsibility for veterans' health care and it will continue to respond to the particular needs of veterans, of war widows and of their dependants, to ensure that those people receive the compensation to which they are entitled and which they deserve.

Anybody who questions this Government's commitment to meeting, through the Department, the needs of veterans, or who casts doubt on that commitment, is only seeking to mislead.

The philosophy and objectives expressed in the Department of Veterans' Affairs corporate plan are based on ensuring that the delivery of services to veterans meets the needs of those veterans.

The Department is committed to:

- . helping veterans to cope with their disabilities and to improve their health and well being;
- . delivering in the best possible way benefits, health care and other services that meet the changing needs of beneficiaries; and
- . developing and promoting policies within Government that meet the needs of all veterans, war widows and their families.

I have given you my promise that the Department of Veterans' Affairs will retain its current role and status - and that promise will be kept.

Ladies and gentlemen,

While we contemplate the changing health needs of the ageing veterans of the two World Wars, let us not forget the lesser number of equally important veterans - the 50,000 who served ~~in~~ Vietnam.

As a group, these veterans have endured special difficulties since their return to Australia.

We have tried to meet these needs through means such as the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service.

I have always made it clear that whatever one's views about the controversy that surrounded the Vietnam War, no one can ever doubt the commitment and the courage of the Australian soldiers who were called upon to fight it.

I was very pleased to attend the Welcome Home Parade in Sydney in October 1987, which, at last, gave fitting honours to the men who fought there.

The Government has also agreed to the construction of a memorial to the Vietnam Veterans to be built in Anzac Parade in Canberra. We have allocated a site and we will be providing a sum of \$200,000 towards the cost of building the memorial. I trust this will work as an incentive to others in the community to support this valuable memorial.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Next year, we will be celebrating the 75th anniversary of the event that in many ways still defines the Australian identity and consciousness - the landing by the ANZACs at Gallipoli.

This will be an anniversary that Australians will want to mark with dignity and special awareness of its significance.

It is not too early to begin now our planning of how we should honour that occasion.

Recently the Defence Minister, Kim Beazley was asked by a group of World War One veterans to assist them to make a pilgrimage to Gallipoli for the 75th anniversary.

Mr Beazley passed on the request to me and we have agreed that there could be no more fitting way for the nation to honour the achievements of these veterans, and of recalling the sacrifices of their comrades-in-arms, than to send a party of veterans back to Anzac Cove on Anzac Day, 75 years after the first landing.

So I am pleased to say today that the Government has decided that we should make one of the RAAF's 707s available for this purpose, together with all the necessary support.

In addition, I feel that it would be appropriate for me as Prime Minister to attend this ceremony - and might I add, I would find it deeply moving in a personal sense to be there. Accordingly, I am considering the possibility of doing so as part of an official overseas visit next year.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Australian veterans community deserves our deepest support.

The Government, on behalf of the community, is doing what it believes is necessary to safeguard and advance the well-being of our veterans.

Our concern must embrace, as it does, the oldest World War One veteran and the youngest man serving today with the United Nations peacekeeping force in Namibia - a contingent which will, for the first time, receive full repatriation coverage in view of the hazardous nature of their service.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs will continue to meet the diverse and changing needs of those veterans in a way which respects the debt we owe to them.

It is in this context - with a message of our continuing commitment to the veterans - that I now have the pleasure of declaring this ward block open.
