



PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
POW CEREMONY, AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL, 14 FEBRUARY 1995**

I am honoured to speak to you today at this commemorative service for Australian Prisoners of War.

This year we are commemorating the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II.

In Europe they are commemorating the liberation of their countries from occupation and tyranny; the end of a war which took the lives of millions and wrought devastation on a scale unequalled in history.

They are celebrating freedom and honouring the dead - including those 6 million Jews who died in the Holocaust.

Because many thousands of Australians fought in Europe and the Middle East, we in Australia are sharing in this commemoration.

We are also commemorating the end of the war in Asia and the Pacific, which was no less a fight for freedom over tyranny, and the price in death and suffering was just as high.

It was also, for a time, a fight to save Australia.

In all, more than 27,000 Australians died in the Second World War. Their sacrifice, like those who have died in every war, will never be forgotten.

We pledge this as Australians.

Here at the Australian War Memorial and at memorials in communities throughout Australia we remember those who made the supreme sacrifice.

They are also remembered at memorials overseas.

In the past three years I have visited some of them - in Britain and France, New Guinea and in Thailand.

In Thailand last year, at Kanchanaburi, I attended a service for the Australians who died as Prisoners of War on the Burma-Thailand Railway. Their story is legendary.

Thirty thousand Australians were POWs in various parts of the world. It is they who we are honouring today: the Australians who died in captivity.

We are paying tribute to the Australians whose desire to serve their country and the cause of freedom led them to *leave* their country and *lose* their freedom.

Their privations were profound.

To remember the sacrifice of our POWs today we need to imagine not just the physical suffering they endured, but the psychological suffering - the terrible loneliness and the sense of loss, the homesickness and the helplessness they had to live with.

And we need to ask ourselves what gave them the faith and courage they needed to live with the adversity and fight off the despair.

How did they keep hope alive?

We know from accounts like those of Barney Roberts and Weary Dunlop, and from what Max Jagger has said this morning, that paramount among the sustaining values of Australian POWs were those indefinable bonds between them which we call mateship.

Today we should remember the basis on which those bonds are built - the love of freedom and fairness, the pragmatism, resourcefulness and perseverance and above all the love of this place. The love of Australia.

They are sustaining values for this generation too.

Perhaps, then, we should bring two messages to this commemoration.

One is the message of faith and courage, the victory over adversity which can teach us and inspire us now.

The other is that we should never forget the evil that was done in these prison camps.

The outrage we feel about what was done on the Burma-Thailand Railway or on the Sandakan Death March should never fade.

Our children should know about these things.

We must not forget.

Yet, as the life of Weary Dunlop tells us, we must allow the wounds to heal.

If Australians sacrificed their lives and freedom so that we could be free, we owe it both to their memory and our children to see that Australia is kept free of old hatreds and bitterness.

Today, and throughout this year, these are the messages I think we should convey - we honour the sacrifice of that heroic generation and we give meaning to it by making real their hopes for us and those who follow.