

SPEAKING NOTES FOR THE PRIME MINISTER  
KANCHANABURI WAR CEMETERY  
4 FEBRUARY 1989

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FOR ALL AUSTRALIANS, THE STORY OF THE POWS WHO BUILT THE BURMA RAILROAD RANKS WITH GALLIPOLI, THE BATTLEFIELDS OF FRANCE AND TOBRUK AS ONE OF THE MOST EVOCATIVE AND POWERFUL REMINDERS OF THE BRAVERY AND THE SACRIFICE OF AUSTRALIANS AT WAR.

- SO IT IS WITH HUMILITY AND A SENSE OF HONOUR THAT I HAVE JUST LAID A WREATH DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF THOSE WHO LIVED AND DIED BUILDING THE BURMA RAILROAD.

THE DIMENSIONS OF AUSTRALIA'S LOSSES ON THIS INFAMOUS PROJECT ARE UNSPEAKABLY VAST.

- NEARLY TEN THOUSAND AUSTRALIANS WERE FORCED TO WORK HERE.
- MORE THAN 2,500 DIED HERE - FAR FROM THEIR HOMES AND FAMILIES, IN CONDITIONS OF APPALLING HARDSHIP AND, NOT INFREQUENTLY, CRUELTY, SUFFERING EXHAUSTION, DISEASE AND HUNGER.

SIDE BY SIDE WITH THEM WERE MORE THAN 50,000 PRISONERS FROM ALLIED NATIONS - NEW ZEALANDERS, BRITONS, CANADIANS, DUTCH, AMERICANS - OF WHOM NEARLY TEN THOUSAND DIED.

- CONSCRIPTED LOCAL WORKERS - THAIS, BURMESE, MALAYS AND OTHERS - SHARED THE WORK, AND THE SUFFERING.

ONE CAN ONLY IMAGINE THE SENSE OF DESPAIR FELT BY SERVICEMEN WHO, HAVING BEEN CAPTURED IN THE THEATRE OF WAR, HAD YET TO FACE THEIR SEVEREST TEST AS PRISONERS OF WAR.

- BUT IF THERE IS ANYTHING UPLIFTING ABOUT THIS EVIDENCE OF THE WASTE AND HORROR OF WAR IT IS THAT THESE PRISONERS, THESE AUSTRALIANS WITH THEIR RESILIENCE, THEIR COMRADESHIP AND THEIR COURAGE, ALSO MADE AN ENDURING REAFFIRMATION OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT.

WE THINK OF SIR EDWARD DUNLOP - 'WEARY' DUNLOP - FOR HIS BRAVERY AND SELFLESS DEVOTION TO DUTY, OFTEN IN CIRCUMSTANCES OF EXTREME DURESS.

THERE WERE ALSO THE THAI VILLAGERS, WHO RISKED THEIR LIVES TO SUPPLY FOOD AND MEDICINE, TO WHOM I PAY DEEPLY GRATEFUL TRIBUTE.

- ONE, MR BOONPON, AT GREAT PERSONAL DANGER SUPPLIED THE MEAGRE WANTS OF THE PRISONERS.
  
- HIS NAME IS ASSOCIATED WITH THAT OF 'WEARY' DUNLOP. THE BRAVERY OF BOTH OF THOSE MEN IS REMEMBERED IN THE FELLOWSHIP ESTABLISHED IN THEIR NAMES WHICH FACILITATES POST GRADUATE SURGICAL STUDIES FOR THAI DOCTORS IN AUSTRALIA.

AT THAT TIME OF SHARED HUMAN SUFFERING, FORTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, THAIS AND AUSTRALIANS WORKED TOGETHER TO CONFRONT A COMMON ADVERSARY.

- AUSTRALIANS AND THAIS STILL STAND SHOULDER TO SHOULDER.
  
- BUT NOW WE FACE THE CHALLENGES OF PEACE AND PROSPERITY, AND IT IS MY CONFIDENT BELIEF THAT THE FRIENDSHIP FORGED IN THE PAST BETWEEN OUR TWO PEOPLE AND OUR TWO COUNTRIES WILL STAND US IN GOOD STEAD FOR THE FUTURE.