



## PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
OPENING OF GYMNASIUM AT HMAS COONAWARRA  
DARWIN - 25 APRIL 1991**

---

On Anzac Day 1991, it is proper for the thoughts of all Australians to turn to the men and women who are serving in the armed forces of our country - to those who served our country with such valour and distinction in the past - and, most of all, to those who paid the supreme sacrifice in defence of liberty and peace.

It is now seventy six years since the ANZAC tradition was forged at Gallipoli, and half a century since Australia's sons and daughters rallied to the call to arms against tyranny and oppression in the Second World War. This December will see the 50th Anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbour, which plunged our whole region into catastrophic war.

In that challenge, Australians endured much and they sacrificed much. But thanks to the resourcefulness, energy and sheer courage of Australians, and of our allies, the cause of liberty prevailed. As a result, the years since that terrible era of warfare have seen dramatic and fundamental change within this region and throughout the world.

In an atmosphere of peace and security, former adversaries have achieved international reconciliation and mutual understanding. This region, once characterised by instability and conflict, has led the world in economic growth and dynamism, to the benefit of all its peoples.

Today, we have within our grasp the attainment of goals for which previous generations have fought and for which they have made many sacrifices. In particular, we can see the way towards the attainment of the original goals of the United Nations Organisation - goals which had been denied and delayed throughout the anguished years of the cold war but which today - as the world community demonstrated in Kuwait - are closer to fulfillment than they have ever been.

But hand in hand with these opportunities goes the need for vigilance. The qualities of professionalism, dedication and courage which the Australian Armed Forces have displayed and nurtured since their inception remain of relevance now. And here at HMAS Coonawarra, let me say that the Royal Australian Navy remains a vital part of our nation's self reliant defence capabilities.

Nowhere was this more ably demonstrated than in the recent Gulf conflict. With little warning, the men and women of the Navy embarked upon an arduous and hazardous tour of duty, and discharged with distinction the tasks with which they were entrusted. In doing so, they earned the respect of their colleagues in the coalition forces in the Gulf. And even more importantly, they earned the respect of the people of Australia for proving, once more, Australia's reputation as a nation which is willing and able to take a stand against aggression, and to meet its obligations as a responsible member of the international community.

Many of the men and women who formed the Australian naval task force have already returned home. Only last week I welcomed home HMAS Brisbane and HMAS Sydney from their tour of duty in the Gulf. But let us not forget those Australians who remain, their tasks not yet complete - the clearance diving team, which has been engaged in the mammoth and delicate task of clearing Kuwaiti ports, and the crew of HMAS Westralia, who provided such able and timely support to the coalition naval forces.

On this day, when we acknowledge the sacrifice of so many Australians, it is important also to turn our thoughts to those many other Australian service personnel contributing to important peacekeeping tasks in the trouble spots of the world.

On Anzac Day 1991 we wish them all well and a safe return when their work is done.

Ladies and gentlemen

It is fitting on this day, also, to acknowledge the important contribution made to the defence of the north by a small group of Australians whose efforts and dedication have to date gone largely unrecognised and unrewarded. It should never be forgotten that in the dark days of World War II, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were among the many Australians who stepped forward to play their part in Australia's defence.

I am pleased to announce that the Government has approved payments to about 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who served full-time alongside the Defence Force in the Second World War, when Australia itself was threatened with invasion.

These people, who were not formally enlisted or paid at the time, carried out such tasks as patrolling, reconnaissance, coastwatching and training for guerilla warfare. The nature of their training and their tasks clearly shows that they were expected, and willing, to fight against the enemy if the need had arisen.

These Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders include those who served with the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit, based in Arnhem Land, and the Snake Bay Patrol, based on Bathurst and Melville Islands, certain crewmen on Royal Australian Navy ships "Heather" and "Viking", and a number of Aborigines at Groote Eylandt who participated in the defence of the airfield.

The untaxed payments will be based on the military salary and allowance rates for a private soldier during the Second World War, adjusted to reflect the change in the value of money since 1945.

Those eligible for payments, and their dependants, may also be eligible for repatriation benefits under the normal criteria.

After almost half a century, the Government derives great pleasure from being able to recognise, with just and deserved recompense, the significant contribution made by these members of our community.

Ladies and gentlemen

Just as the world has changed, so our thinking about the defence of Australia has grown and matured. Nowhere is this more evident than here in the north of Australia.

The Government's 1987 White Paper on Defence specifically recognised the crucial role of the northern sea-air gap in the defence of Australia. This thinking, together with the concept of defence in depth and the need to protect our off-shore economic assets, is fundamental to our defence posture and has shaped the development of our northern defence infrastructure.

The Air Force's chain of northern air bases, the Army's emerging facilities in Darwin for 1 Cavalry Regiment and, not least, the Navy's Patrol Boat base and communications facilities here, are testimony to the Government's resolve to maintain and expand the fundamental infrastructure necessary to provide properly for our defence needs into the twenty first century.

It is easy to consider our national defence priorities in terms of big ticket items, new bases, new submarines or warships. But we should never forget that the equipment is only as good as the person operating it. When we strip away the rhetoric, and the glamour of high technology, we come face to face with the highly trained, well motivated and dedicated men and women of the services - especially in the Royal Australian Navy. These are the people who showed in the Gulf, and who show time and again in the waters off our northern shores, that they are more than equal to the demands which we as a nation make of them.

These service men and women have well earned the respect with which they are held in the community: they personify our defence, as the many men and women who preceded them did, and as those who follow them will do.

Their well-being cannot therefore be divorced from the overall capabilities of our Defence Force. For this reason, I am especially pleased to be able to be here today in this new physical fitness centre, constructed by Hansen Yuncken Constructions at a cost of over \$2.25 million dollars.

It would be remiss not to acknowledge at this point the sterling work of Hansen Yuncken and all its employees, and of the designers Australian Construction Services, in bringing this valuable project to a successful conclusion.

This facility, along with the many other improvements being undertaken here at HMAS Coonawarra, demonstrates in the most tangible way the Government's determination to accord proper priority to meeting the needs of our service personnel.

I have much pleasure in declaring this physical fitness centre open.

\* \* \* \* \*