



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP

ANZAC DAY - ELA BEACH, PORT MORESBY,
10.30AM, SATURDAY, 25 APRIL 1992

Today marks the 77th anniversary of the most famous battle in Australia's history.

And in New Zealand's history.

On this day through all those years we have repeated the words "Lest we forget".

And we have not forgotten.

The message has always been - remember their bravery and sacrifice, their willingness to lay down their lives for their country, and for their friends.

Gallipoli and the history of the Australian nation are indissoluble. It is inscribed in legend.

The legend was cemented in the terrible battles in Europe and the Middle East between 1915 and 1918.

It was sustained between the wars when the monuments were built and the rituals of the nation born at Gallipoli were defined.

The spirit of Anzac became the canon of Australian life: the ideals to which we aspired, the values by which we lived.

The legend was re-visited in 1939 when Australian troops again left for the Middle East, again fought heroically, again with New Zealanders - and again, some might say, too often against the odds.

Sixty thousand young Australians died in the First World War; 30,000 in the Second.

The great majority of them lie buried on the other side of the world. In France and Belgium, Libya, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Crete.

They also lie in Singapore and Malaysia, Burma, Borneo and other countries of this region, including of course, Papua New Guinea.

Countless others died prematurely as a result of war, or had their lives and the lives of their families scarred by war.

War has shaped Australia's history in the twentieth century like nothing else. Shaped and twisted it.

At times it has stifled it.

We will continue to hold the memory of those who served and died as inextinguishable and sacred.

We will continue to remind ourselves - "Lest We Forget".

Legends bind nations together. They define us to ourselves.

But they should not stifle us. They should not constrain our growth, or restrict us when we have to change.

Anzac is a commemoration of the most universal human values.

But it does not confer on us a duty to see that the world stands still.

The Australians who went to two World Wars, or to Korea, Malaya, Vietnam, went to secure a place in the world for their country and its ideals.

The world moves on. Our country must move with it.

Today I think we should remember that.

Today we would do well to remember the ~~two~~ great dramas which were played out fifty years ago.

We all should know the story better than we do.

We should remember not only the battles which were fought here in Papua New Guinea, or in Malaya, or at El Alamein, Tobruk, or Greece and Crete: or those who suffered and died in prison camps in Singapore, Burma and elsewhere in the world.

We should remember all those, but we should also remember the battle fought out in Canberra and London and Washington - for in large part it was that battle which made success here in Papua New Guinea possible.

In that battle John Curtin defied those people Australia had never before defied.

He insisted to his counterparts in London and Washington - his friends, our friends - that Australian troops then serving in the Middle East should return home and defend Australia.

shortly after, he defied them again. And he defied those in Australia who criticised him for his defiance - those who said it was a great blunder to defy the British and Americans.

He defied them, and insisted that the returning troops not be diverted to Burma, but come home and fight the Battle for Australia.

John Curtin was right.

Just as he was right when he declared that in the hour of crisis, after the fall of Singapore, Australia looked to the United States - free, he said "of any pangs as to our traditional links of kinship with the United Kingdom."

"We know that Australia can go and Britain still hold on", he said. "We are therefore determined that Australia shall not go.."

In doing this he took the Anzac legend to mean that Australia came first - that whatever the claims of Empire on the loyalty of those who died in the Great War, the pre-eminent claim had been Australia's.

The Australians who served here in Papua New Guinea fought and died, not in the defence of the old world, but the new world. Their world.

They died in defence of Australia and the civilisation and values which had grown up there.

That is why it might be said that, for Australians, the battles in Papua New Guinea were the most important ever fought.

They were fought in the most terrible circumstances. One correspondent wrote: "Surely no war was ever fought under worse conditions than these. Surely no war has ever demanded more of a man in fortitude."

They were fought by young men with no experience of jungle warfare. By the very young men of the militia with no experience of war at all.

They were fought by airmen of outstanding courage, skill and dedication.

They were fought against a seasoned, skilful and fanatical enemy.

At Milne Bay the Australians inflicted on the Japanese their first defeat on land.

Sir William Slim, who was then commanding the 14th Army in Burma, wrote: "It was Australian soldiers who first broke the spell of invincibility of the Japanese army; those of us who were in Burma have cause to remember."

On the Kokoda Trail it was again the young and inexperienced militia men - this time of the 39th and 53rd battalions - later reinforced with soldiers of the 7th Division, who fought gallantly - and eventually won.

When it seemed that Papua New Guinea would fall, when it seemed it would be another Singapore, another Rabaul, these troops gallantly held out and finally drove the enemy back to the sea.

These were the heroic days of Australia's history.

It would be wrong to let this day pass without paying tribute to the people of other countries whose bravery and selflessness helped win the day - including the British and other Commonwealth servicemen and women who fought in the war against Japan.

While Australians fought the enemy here in Papua New Guinea, the United States forces held them out at sea and on Guadalcanal.

What they did then created the enduring bond between Australia and the United States.

Today we must also pay tribute to the servicemen of Papua New Guinea who fought and died under Australian command.

And, perhaps above all, we should honour and express our profound admiration for the Papua New Guinean carriers whose stalwart support was crucial to the final victory.

The support they gave to Australian soldiers, the terrible conditions and dangers they endured with the soldiers, the illness, injury and death many of them suffered, constitutes one of the great humane gestures of the War - perhaps the great humane gesture of our history.

It has never been forgotten, and never will be forgotten. It is the best possible reminder that these battles were fought, not for the glory of war, but for humanity.

And it, too, created an enduring bond - between Papua New Guinea and Australia.

Ladies and gentlemen, these days there is a relatively new memorial to the Anzac legend in Australia.

Sitting on the hill near the new Parliament House, it is a modest monument inscribed with these words: "Look around you - these are the things they believed in."

In the end they believed in Australia - in the democracy they had built, in the life they had made there, and the future they believed their country held.

Not all generations are called on to risk and sacrifice their lives for their beliefs - but all generations need to believe.

On this Anzac Day it seems appropriate to remind ourselves of our responsibility to renew that faith and loyalty.

There can be no better way, surely, to honour those who so gallantly fought and died here.