



PRIME MINISTER

142/92

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

BATTLE OF GONA

All Australians should remember this week the debt of gratitude they owe to the troops who, exactly 50 years ago, overcame fierce defences to occupy the Japanese stronghold of Gona, in Papua.

The campaign in Papua did not end with the recapture of Kokoda. It involved further months of bitter fighting in malarial swamps, against an increasingly desperate enemy.

There were 8,500 Australian and American casualties in the Papuan campaign. Two-thirds of them died in the battles for the Japanese beachheads around Gona, Buna and Sanananda. These men died in vicious hand-to-hand fighting around the Japanese bunkers; their Japanese opponents died rather than surrender.

I recall the words of Dudley McCarthy, the official historian, who wrote that the fighting around Gona, Buna and Sanananda was "so appalling that most hardened soldiers would remember it unwillingly, and as their most exacting experience of the whole war."

Australians should remember this week men such as Colonel Ralph Honner, who led his militiamen across the Kokoda Track and into the maelstrom of Gona; men such as Lieutenant Bob Sword, who served throughout the Kokoda campaign but who died leading his platoon against the coastal machine-gun posts; and men such as Private A.J. Skilbeck, who repeatedly crossed open ground under heavy fire, carrying messages and wounded comrades.

These men were real Australian heroes.

While we all honour the men who fought on the Kokoda Track, we must never forget the heroes who fought the Papuan campaign to its conclusion through the vicious battles at Sanananda, Buna and Gona.

Canberra
10 December 1992