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PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
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This place honours those who died on the Burma-Thailand Railway. It reminds us of the worst of which humanity is capable, and the best.

Almost one in five of the thirteen thousand Australians who worked on the Railway died.

With them also died thousands of men from Great Britain, Burma, New Zealand, Malaya, Java, India, The Netherlands and Thailand.

Although they were criminally mistreated and denied their rights under international convention, those from the allied nations died as prisoners of war. The vast majority of those from Asia - upwards of three hundred thousand of them - died as slaves.

To visit Hellfire Pass and see the scale of the work men were driven to do is to be reminded that the task itself was inhuman.

When we are told of the speed with which it was done, the hours the men worked, the disease they suffered and the brutality and sadism that they endured, we begin to understand why the Burma-Thailand railway ranks among the most evil acts of World War II.

The images of our countrymen returning from those camps gaunt and debilitated remain in the minds of every Australian who ever saw them. The knowledge of what was done to them remains as shocking now as it was when it was first revealed almost fifty years ago.

It is not because those inhuman acts can in any way be excused or forgotten that we have come now to think less about the cruelty and more about the means men found to endure it - and to help their comrades endure it.

The Burma-Thailand Railway has become one of those episodes in our history from which we have chosen to draw inspiration. It has become a legend of courage, comradeship, sacrifice and resourcefulness.

And we have come to recognise that these qualities were embodied in one man, Sir Edward Ernest "Weary" Dunlop, the soldier and doctor whose remarkable bravery and skill saved so many lives, eased so much suffering and, when it was so desperately needed, inspired so much faith.

No Australian of his generation is more universally admired than Weary Dunlop, and it is our duty to make sure that Australians of future generations know what he did and understand the greatness of it.

When we teach his story there is one great theme we should not neglect - his great respect and affection for the Thai people.

We should remember, as he always did, that were it not for their assistance - exemplified in the deeds of his great friend, Boon Pong - the lives of countless more Australian and Allied prisoners of war would have been lost.

From the war's end until his death last year, "Weary" Dunlop returned the friendship by working to improve the standard of medicine in Thailand and to deepen understanding between our two countries.

It is worth remembering that Australia's first major engagement with Asia was in war. In Korea and Malaya and Vietnam it was again war.

Today it is a partnership with Thailand and other countries of the region. A partnership which will extend the domain of our common interest and reduce the ground for conflict.

It seems to me that there could be no better way to honour those Australians who suffered and died here than to succeed in this enterprise. No better way to see that what they endured, and what their allies and hundreds of thousands from the countries of Asia endured, will not happen again.

Tomorrow I go to Vietnam. The Australians who fought and died there have been justly honoured in Australia as those who were here have been honoured, and for the same reasons - for the sacrifice they made, the faith they showed.

In Vietnam the lesson is the same. The wounds have to be healed. The terrible legacy of the past must not cripple future generations.

We must never forget, but for the sake of future generations and in the name of those who died, the memory should not hold us back, but inspire us to find the way to peace and friendship, justice and prosperity.

The best lesson we can draw from this place is that here we saw the best in ourselves.