



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP AT
THE AIR FORCES' MEMORIAL - RUNNYMEDE, SATURDAY, 4 JUNE
1994

We have come to Runnymede on the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day to pay tribute to some of those who gave their lives in defence of liberty.

We honour all those whose memory is preserved here. Never were men braver or more selfless. They gave their lives so that we might enjoy freedom.

We honour in particular our countrymen: those Australians who left their homes and all they loved to cross the world and fight in a war against evil.

Their deeds bestowed great honour on Australia, indelible honour on themselves.

We should tell our children what this war concerned. Why Australians came to fight alongside the British, the Americans and the Canadians. Why a generation of Australians believed freedom was worth dying for. Their spirit can nourish the life of a nation.

Shortly before I left Canberra my office received a letter from an Australian, Mr Martin Pirrie, whose father's brother commanded a small coastal craft off the coast of Normandy on D Day. It was his 24th birthday. In support of the Canadians he went within range of the enemy's guns and, with others of his crew, was killed. His brother learned of the event while serving with the Australian infantry in New Guinea. Mr Pirrie wrote:

I cannot help but feel that in many ways young Richard typified the spirit of those Australians who fought and died in the war and reflected the values and spirit of the country they gave their lives for in a foreign land.

It is true. It is why we remember them wherever they served.

6599

It is appropriate on the eve of D-Day's anniversary that we pay tribute to all the Australians who served in European campaigns: those who fought against the odds in Greece and Crete; those who spent precious years of their lives in prison camps in Europe; those who served in the forces of other allied nations; those who fought and died in the crucial war at sea.

In Australia the memory of every one of them who died is held sacred: their names are recorded on the walls of the Australian War Memorial with the 100,000 others who made the supreme sacrifice for their country.

The names of 1397 Australians - more than a quarter of all our airmen killed in Europe in World War II - are inscribed here at Runnymede. They number among the eighteen thousand Australian servicemen and women with no known grave.

The Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier is for them.

The principles for which Australians fought in Europe are universal ones. Liberty, justice and human decency do not know the boundaries of nations or cultures, any more than courage and sacrifice know them.

So it is right that they should be honoured here among those from other countries with whom they fought and died in common cause.

And it is right that they should be honoured in the country from which came the most stalwart resistance to tyranny. For Britain embodied the courage democracy needed. Britain inspired the free world and those whose freedom had been taken from them. There can be no doubt she inspired those whose names are recorded here.

In the course of the war two Australian Prime Ministers, Robert Menzies and John Curtin, came to Britain and were moved by her example.

John Curtin visited shortly before D-Day. When he returned to Australia, he reminded the Parliament of the epic dimensions of the British effort. It is worth our being reminded now.

"They have thwarted an invasion by a great and powerful continental foe" he said.

At the risk of their local defence they have conducted campaigns overseas, and are at present engaged in the greatest of all. They have maintained command of the sea over a large part of the globe. They have conducted an air offensive in Europe. They have produced immense quantities of munitions and supplies not only for their own requirements, but for other members of the United Nations.

Fifty years later the admiration John Curtin expressed lives on. It is true that in fundamental ways our future is less closely intertwined with Britain's than our past.

But whatever different paths we take the history we share - the story we share - goes with us. The battles we fought together will be remembered. The men and women who fought them will be remembered. And Britain's heroic defence of freedom will never be forgotten.

Nor shall the Australian airmen of this memorial be forgotten.

Twenty thousand Australian aircrew served in Bomber Command - 3486 were killed, a death rate to compare with that on the Western Front in World War I.

They were young men. They knew how high the risks were. Rollo Kingsford-Smith commanded No 463 RAAF Lancaster Squadron. The Squadron had an operational aircrew of about 240, yet in the 18 months after November 1943, 546 were killed or posted as missing in action.

Mr Kingsford-Smith wrote to me a few weeks ago:

Young inexperienced crews coming into my Squadron knew their death was almost certain, yet their morale was always high and they fought the Germans and the weather with equal determination. Other Australian squadrons and Australians in RAF squadrons would tell a similar story.

These Australians served their country as those who fought at Gallipoli and on the Western Front had served. They fought in that tradition. The loss of their young lives was an immeasurable loss to their loved ones - an immeasurable loss to Australia.

But it can never be doubted that they fought in a great cause.

Mr Kingsford-Smith tells me that "many next-of-kin of those Air Force men feel Australia has forgotten them.."

From today let there be no doubt that we will always remember them.

RUNNYMEDE
4 JUNE 1994

6601