



PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP
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*****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

Ambassador, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be in Townsville to pay tribute to this brave city on the 50th anniversary of the end of the war in the Pacific.

I have always had a feeling Townsville's story is probably not as well known as it should be.

Not all Australians are aware that the city was bombed on four occasions in July 1942; and not everyone appreciates the stress and hardship it endured during the War.

The Japanese airmen were not as accurate as they might have been with their bombs, but the incidents do give us some idea of the pressure the people of Townsville were under and the strategic importance of Townsville to the conduct of the war.

In the darkest days when a Japanese invasion of the Australian mainland seemed imminent, a report by Sir John Lavarak recommended that 10,000 civilians be evacuated south. The evacuation never happened, but between 1939 and 1942 about twenty five percent of Townsville's population left

This place was an entry point for refugees from South -east Asia after the fall of Singapore; and a refuge for soldiers, sailors and airmen returning from battle in New Guinea and the Pacific.

Townsville was also, of course, a major embarkation point for troops and supplies, and it was the most important Allied airbase in Australia

This was the home of the "Kennedy" Regiment, 31st Battalion which served in the Middle East and at Kokoda, Buna and Gona; and, when linked with the 51st Battalion, at Lae and Ramu Valley, and at Balikpapan in Borneo.

Then, as now, Townsville was recognised as a vital link in the chain of Australia's northern defence.

As Allied forces led by the United States first resisted and then began to drive back the Japanese, Townsville's role became pivotal.

It was the home to the 5th American Air Force - and I believe it still is, in the sense that they have Freedom of Entry to the city.

Its presence involved thousands of civilians and military men and women, both American and Australian, in the service of the US Army Air Force.

During the War Townsville was host, all told, to 90,000 troops - the highest soldier/civilian ratio of any Australian city.

There were two RAAF squadrons - No 7 Beaufort Bomber and No 80 Kittyhawk.

The No 1 Wireless Unit of the RAAF was located here at a top secret Central Bureau of Intelligence base intercepting and decoding Japanese signals.

Among those engaged in Intelligence were members of the Women's Auxiliary Australian Airforce and the Australian Women's Army Service.

The RAN worked out of Townsville of course, shipping Australian and American troops to New Guinea and the Pacific Islands and providing escorts and patrols.

As the most important Allied Military and Air base in the north of Australia and the Headquarters for Naval Intelligence, no city in Australia - no community in Australia - made a greater contribution to victory in the Pacific.

You can't turn a civilian town into a military base without putting strain on the community. But Townsville clearly withstood the strain. The civilian population returned, the city grew and developed.

Today the city combines the twin strands of its history as a frontier town and a garrison town. It has an important place in Australia's economic future and a continuing strategic role in our defence.

Two thousand nine hundred soldiers of the Australian Army's Third Brigade are here as part of the Ready Deployment Force. Among their many essential tasks are conventional military operations protected evacuations of Australian nationals, and the provision of personnel and equipment for UN or multinational operations.

The Brigade has recently distinguished itself in operations in Somalia, Cambodia and Bougainville and provided support to Australia's medical contingent in Rwanda which arrives back in Townsville in about ten days.

The RAAF took over Townsville Aerodrome in 1939 and it maintains a significant presence, with 1,250 personnel providing support for air operations.

The Army's 5th Aviation Regiment, which is also based at RAAF Townsville, was deployed to Cambodia to support UN sponsored elections, and more recently to Buka in Bougainville as part of Operation Lagoon.

So the Townsville tradition continues. As I've said on other occasions, this is one of the outstanding cities of Australia.

It has the strength which comes from its place on the northern frontier. It has withstood the ups and downs of droughts and depressions which afflict rural life.

And carried more than its share of the weight of the war - and emerged stronger than it began.

In 1995 there are signs in Townsville to remind us of the past: in particular those memorials to the great alliance with the United States - the Coral Sea Memorial and the memorial to the 5th American Air Force.

With Ed Perkins here today I want to pay tribute to the American men and women who fought and died so bravely in the war against Japan - they fought for our freedom as well as America's, and you may be sure that this country will never forget that.

But, above all, today I want to pay tribute on behalf of the nation to the people of Townsville, for all they did for Australia during the war and all they continue to do.

I mentioned the visible signs of Townsville's contribution to the war - but I think the real indication lies in all that has been done since, all that is being done now.

It lies in the spirit of the place and the people. I think that is what counted - and today it has been my privilege to join you here in tribute.