



PRIME MINISTER

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

I have been privileged in the past three years to visit some of the cemeteries in Asia and the Pacific and in Europe where Australian servicemen and women lie buried. It has been my duty to utter some words of tribute on behalf of the Australian people and participate in services to commemorate their deeds and sacrifice.

It has been one of the great privileges of my life. But it is a humbling experience. No Australian can fail to be affected by these places.

This year, as part of the Australia Remembers program, many veterans of our World War II campaigns have made pilgrimages to the battlefields and these cemeteries. I think it is beyond the capacities of my generation to appreciate just how deep their feelings must have run.

It is not, however, beyond us to understand and it is our duty to try. It is our duty to convey to our children what the deaths of those Australians mean to all of us - and will always mean.

Most Australians will never stand among the graves in Bomana and Lae, or Singapore or Kanchanaburi or Yokohama or in any of the cemeteries in Europe, Britain or the Middle East. But all of us should know that Australians are buried there.

We should know why, and the meaning it contains for us.

We cannot know what their last days were like; what suffering they went through, what pain and longing and despair they endured so far from home. We can only imagine. And fifty years later we can feel the loss of their lives as our loss.

To stand among those graves is to recognise the profound truth of the ties that bind us as Australians. These are Australians like ourselves. But these Australians gave their young lives: gave them so we might live in peace and freedom, gave them so we might enjoy the blessings of life - and enjoy them in the country they loved.

Contemplate those graves, or the 40,000 names on the World War II Honour Roll at the Australian War Memorial, and the story of this country, and the story of every one who calls it home, takes on an irresistible meaning.

It instils in our national life a sense of duty.

The story tells us that there was a generation of men and women who so loved this country, and the freedoms and way of life we now enjoy, they were prepared to lay down their lives. There were Australians who so loved what is just, they defended it to the death.

We cannot think about this without understanding the debt we owe them, and the duty we have to honour their memory.

To truly honour them is much more than a ritual task. It is to take the knowledge of their sacrifice into our daily lives and the life of Australia. It is to love this country and give to it as they did - which is to say with that same faith from which their inspiration, effort and endurance flowed.

It is to believe in freedom as they did, defend freedom as they did. To work together as they did.

It is to make this country as strong and secure as they made it.

Time has changed our perspective on the world and on ourselves. We have had to adjust our thinking to accommodate necessities. In many ways I think we are better for it. It may be that we are less naive and more worldly than the Australians of fifty years ago. I believe we are more tolerant and more open.

But if we are to succeed as we should we will always need their strength, their collective spirit, their sense of duty, their faith. We will need their inspiration

I hope that this Australia Remembers year has reminded us all of these things.

Never did a generation of Australians have more reason to celebrate than those of 50 years ago. In pure and simple terms they were celebrating a victory. They had fought for what they believed in and won. They had trusted in their values and in each other and they had been vindicated. Now they had every reason to expect the rewards of peace and prosperity.

What we have done this year is to join them in this celebration, in this same confident belief in the future.

Today we should recognise that we have the same unbreakable link to those people who danced in the streets 50 years ago as we do with those who lie in those graves in New Guinea and Borneo and Thailand and Japan.

We are part of the one story.

I think this Australia Remembers year will have been a triumph if it has reminded us of that. I hope our commemorations this year have reminded the Australians of today that they have as much reason to celebrate as those of 50 years ago.

And the reason is the same: We are a free and independent people, we live in peace and we have a great future.

And we have these things in common - and we have a duty to Australia.