

A speech to commemorate the 82nd The Battle-for-
Australia

by

Group Captain Dennis Tan,

representing

The Chief of the Royal Australian Air Force Air Marshal Stephen Chappell,
DSC CSC OAM.

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Chermside Historical Precinct

61 Kittyhawk Drive

Chermside, Queensland.

1. Acknowledgement of country.

I acknowledge that today we meet on Turrbul Country and I want to acknowledge their Elders, past, present and emerging. I acknowledge and welcome all Aboriginal and TS Islander people here today. In particular, I also wish to acknowledge all Aboriginal and TS Islander men and women who have served in the defence of Australia.

2. Acknowledgments of distinguished guests.

- A. Major Mark Vele, representing Her Excellency, the Honourable Dr Jeanette Young AC PSM, Governor of Queensland.
- B. My colleagues from the ADF and RNZDF. CDRE Holley; BRIG Cornelia; COL Bagley
- C. Consul General of PNG. Mr Reatau Maraki Rau, Mrs Susan Rau.
- D. Political leadership.
 - i. Political leaders from Federal, State and local politics:
 - ii. The Hon Anika Wells MP. Minister for Aged Care and Minister for Sport
 - iii. Tara Hatzismalis. Dept of Veterans' Affairs.
 - iv. Mr James Sullivan MP. State Member for Stafford
 - v. Mr Tim Nicholls MP, rep for leader of the State Opposition. Member for Clayfield
 - vi. Lord Mayor Brisbane rep. Councillor Danita Parry
- E. Queensland RSL Ms Wendy Taylor and COL Kerry Gallagher Rtd. RSL Queensland plays such an important role in caring for our veterans, which we recognise today as a vastly diverse group.
- F. Current and ex-serving veterans.
- G. Finally, to Patrick O'Keefe OAM, the president of the Battle-for-Australia Commemoration Committee, thank you to you and the committee for helping us to remember important events such as the Battle-for-Australia. This is the 25th consecutive service conducted by this organisation which Pat has led from its inception in 2000. This is Patrick's last service as President. Pat, Thank you for a magnificent contribution to our understanding of Australia's military history.

Introduction

On the first Wednesday of September, we commemorate the Battle-for-Australia. Today we remember the 82nd anniversary. This commemorative day is a time for us to recognise all those who served in the defence of the Australia: in the sea, land and air battles in our near region. Their efforts contributed substantially to the defeat of Japan.

The Battle-for-Australia was not one battle, nor was it fought in a single location. This term describes a series of battles and events that occurred on between 1942 and 1945 in a region that we would broadly describe today as the Indo-Pacific region, our main area of strategic focus. The operations that fall within the subject title of the Battle-for-Australia are those which were intended to halt or disrupt the southward advance of the Japanese Imperial Army. On this day, I also reflect on the importance of Victory in the Pacific Day for all Australians on the 15 August each year, a day after Japan entered into an unconditional surrender on 14 Aug 1945.

Context and History

First, a very brief summary of a few key points of WW2 history.

For starters, we recognise that WW2 was not a single war but multiple simultaneous wars across the globe. A two-ocean war.

At the end of WW1 on 28 June 1919, the treaty of Versailles was signed and Germany was weakened, impoverished and bitter. A rebuilding of German nationalism and industrialism was needed, and this led to a rise in the popularity of Hitler from 1919 onwards who, along with the Nazi party was democratically elected¹. Germany grew rapidly as an industrial power, hungry for resources.

From 1938 Germany invaded Austria²; Czechoslovakia³, Poland⁴, Denmark, Norway⁵, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Yugoslavia, Greece and Russia. Britain and France declared war on Germany on 3 Sep 1939⁶ and

¹ on a platform consisting of anti-communism, antisemitism, and ultranationalism

² in 1938 in the Anschluss

³ Mar 1939

⁴ Sep 1939

⁵ 1940

⁶ In response to the invasion of Poland

France fell quickly⁷ which led to the Battle of Dunkirk⁸ on 26 May 1940 and the evacuation of British and Allied forces from France.^{9 10}

Great Britain was on her own and relied heavily on Australia and others for support. Winston Churchill's greatest desire was for support from the United States who entered the war on 7 December 1941 when Japan attacked Pearl Harbour.

Australians fought in Great Britain, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa through to the end of WW2 and although we're here today to remember the Battle-for-Australia, we will never forget the stories and sacrifices of our Sailors, Soldiers, Airmen and Nurses who fought in the Atlantic, European, Middle Eastern and North Africa theatres. *Lest we forget.*

The reason that this historical context is important is because it explains the often scarcity of resources or preparations for the Battle-for-Australia which didn't commence until February 1942 when Singapore fell to the Japanese. By that point, Australia had been committed to war in Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa for nearly three years. One example is when the 6th and 7th Division Australian Imperial Force returned to Australia on 1 April 1942 having fought in the Middle East and North Africa and by September those same troops were fighting the Japanese on the Kokoda Trail. A second example is the sacrifices made in Bomber Command in which some 4000 Australian lives were lost.

One could say that Australia fought two wars during WW2: the war in Europe against Germany and the war in the Pacific with Japan as our adversary. Germany and Japan (and Italy) were allies in WW2 under the Tripartite Pact of 27 September 1940, but even though their objectives were related and overlapping, they were of little practical help to each other due to the vast distances that existed between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

A second key piece of history is the second Sino-Japanese War 1937 - 1945¹¹ between Republic of China and the Empire of Japan. This war is also considered to part of WW2 and among other titles is known as The Asian

7 22 June 1940 armistice signed between France and Germany

8 And Operation Dynamo which was the evacuation of British and allied forces from France.

9 On 22 June 1941, Operation Barbarossa commenced which was Germany's invasion of Russia

10 Operation Dynamo

11 7 July 1937 – 2 Sep 1945

Holocaust. The war started with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. One terrible event was the Nanjing Massacre or the Rape of Nanjing which saw somewhere between 40,000 – 300,000 deaths. The imprecise number of deaths is both disturbing and staggering.

In December 1941 the Japanese Army had reached a strength of 2.4 million men backed by over 3 million reservists. They were hardened by the tough campaigns in Manchuria and China. The individual was schooled to subordinate himself to the public good. Ultimate loyalty was to the Emperor. Failure in duty or capture was a disgrace to the family of the soldier. The highest honour was bestowed on those who fell in battle.

This historical context is important because it explains why Imperial Japan was such a dangerous and vicious adversary¹².

Finally, I want to acknowledge that today, Australia shares extremely positive friendships with both Japan and Germany.

The many battles and events....

Our remembrance of the Battle-for-Australia today helps to us never forget a series of significant battles and events.

We will never forget the 15 Feb 1942 when Singapore fell to the Japanese. Prime Minister John Curtin likened the fall of Singapore to the Battle of Dunkirk in that Dunkirk was the beginning of the Battle of Britain, and Singapore was the beginning of the Battle-for-Australia.

In a single week of fighting on Singapore Island, more than 880 Australians were killed. There were more dead than wounded. 130,000 allied troops were taken prisoner. 15,000 Australians from the 8th Division remained as POWs for the remainder of the war. Many were sent to the Thai-Burma railway. One third of Australia's POWs did not survive.

The advance of the Japanese forces down the Malayan Peninsula was remarkable. The failures of the General Officer Commanding, Lieutenant General Arthur Percival and other senior leaders, were also remarkable. Percival was to sign the largest surrender of forces in British history.

¹² Consider early Japanese history in which the Samurai were the warrior class that was abolished in 1870s during the Meiji era when the Japanese people moved from being an isolated feudal society a modern, industrialized nation state and emergent great power, influenced by Western scientific, technological, philosophical, political, legal, and aesthetic ideas.

We should never forget the Bangka Island Massacre which occurred on 16 Feb 1942 when 21 Australian Army nurses and 60 Australian and British soldiers were killed by the Imperial Japanese Army on Radji beach in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) in an appalling incident. Following the fall of Singapore, 65 Australian Army Nurses had been evacuated by ship¹³ which was bombed and sunk. 22 of the nurses survived the swim to Bangka Island which was occupied by the Japanese. The nurses were ordered into the surf and machine gunned to death. Of the 22 nurses shot, one survived, LTCOL Vivian Bullwinkel. Her story is remarkable and deeply compelling.

We should never forget that on 19 February 1942, Darwin, with a population of only 2000, was raided by 188 Japanese aircraft. Around 250 people were killed. Between 1942 and 1943, Japanese aircraft attacked Australia's mainland and Navy and merchant ships were sunk. By November 1943 the towns of Port Hedland, Derby, Katherine, Horn Island and Townsville, had all been attacked.

We should always remember that during The Battle of the Java Sea¹⁴ on 27 Feb 1942, HMAS Perth was badly damaged and sunk on 1 Mar 1942. 353 personnel lost their lives. Of the 328 who survived, most were sent to the Thai-Burma railway. Only 214 lived to be repatriated to Australia at the end of the war in 1945.

Battle of the Coral Sea occurred between 4 – 8 May 1942. Often described as the battle that saved Australia, the Battle of the Coral Sea is the largest naval battle ever fought off Australia's shores. In early May 1942, an American carrier force intercepted a Japanese carrier force in the Coral Sea and, after a fierce aerial battle the Japanese turned back. Three US ships and fifteen Japanese ships were sunk. At the same time, hundreds of kilometres to the north, HMAS Hobart and HMAS Australia were part of a task force sent to intercept a Japanese invasion fleet heading for Port Moresby. This force was attacked by enemy aircraft but, because of actions in the Coral Sea, the invasion fleet also turned back. These actions were the first major setbacks to the Japanese during their advance south and broke a mindset that the Japanese were unstoppable. If Port Moresby had fallen to the Japanese,

¹³ the Vyner Brooke

¹⁴ 8 Mar 1942. Japan invades New Guinea.

9 April 1942 Defeat of US forces in the Philippines.

Australia would certainly have been under serious threat. This was not the last time the Japanese would attempt to take Moresby.

One month after Coral Sea¹⁵, after a further naval defeat in the Battle of Midway, Japan abandoned their plans to capture Fiji, Samoa and the New Hebrides.

We must always remember that on 31 May and 1 June 1942 Japanese midget submarines launched a surprise attack on Sydney Harbour. They sunk a requisitioned Sydney Harbour ferry, HMAS *Kuttabul*, and 19 Australians and two British sailors died. On 1 January 1943, the naval depot at Garden Island was commissioned as HMAS *Kuttabul*, and remains so named to this day, to further perpetuate the memory of the 21 men killed during the attack. This bold attack was a huge wake-up call to Sydneysiders and Australians who had generally regarded the war to be somewhat distant.

The Kokoda campaign marks the course of one of the most important battles for Australians in the Second World War. The stories of incredible hardship for soldiers from all sides are truly captivating. From 21 July - 16 November 1942, Australians halted the furthestmost southward advance by Japanese forces in Papua and then pushed the enemy back across the Owen Stanley Range. We should also remember that during the battle, Papuan and New Guinean men were employed as carriers and assisted in evacuating the seriously wounded and sick troops to safety, sometimes under fire. Their compassion and care of the casualties earned them admiration and respect from the Australians, who dubbed the men the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels.

625 Australians died, and some 1600 were wounded in the four months of fighting in the vicinity of the Kokoda Track. Casualties due to sickness exceeded 4000.

Across the same time period Aug 42 – Feb 43, the United States was fighting in the significant battle of Guadalcanal which played a significant role in diverting Japanese attention from Port Moresby.

And we should always remember the sinking of HMAS *Armidale* off the coast of New Guinea and within a few miles of the Australian Coastline on 1 Dec 1942 in which 100 Australian and Dutch lives were lost. It's significant for all

¹⁵ 4 June 1942 Battle of Midway

Australians that on 1 December 2020, Ordinary Seaman Teddy Sheean was posthumously and belatedly awarded a Victoria Cross for his final actions aboard Armidale at just 18 years of age.

Australian service personnel also played a key role at Milne Bay¹⁶, Buna, Gona¹⁷, Sanananda, Wau, the Huon Peninsula, Wewak and Bougainville. Southward advancement of the Imperial Japanese army in Papua was eventually achieved.

Reflection

Prussian General Carl Von Clausewitz is quoted from 'On War', first published in 1832, to say that war is 'a clash between major interests that is resolved by bloodshed'. This was certainly true of the largest and bloodiest war in history, World War Two, in which some 50,000,000–70,000,000 deaths were incurred. Australia suffered nearly 40,000¹⁸ service deaths during WW2, mostly in Asia and the Pacific campaigns. Many more were wounded in action – some so seriously as to end their service. Some 22,000 Australians became prisoners of the Japanese during the war, of whom about 8,000 lost their lives.

But what does this mean for our future? It is my contention that the nature of war as described by Clausewitz will never change and will always be a violent clash of opposing wills in order to achieve a political objective. The character of war however, will indeed change and we are constantly seeing new technologies, tactics, enemies and narratives emerge. Our political and military leaders should not ever consider that there is an 'easy' and non-violent way to wage war – it is always going to be a horrible business.

Enduring themes of warfare such as the Political Objective; Logistics; Geography and Leadership were relevant in WW2 and the Battle-for-Australia as they are to this day.

The values that we pursue in the ADF today of Service, Courage, Respect, Integrity and Excellence are as important today as they were for our forebears in the Battle-for-Australia.

¹⁶ 25 Aug 1942 Battle of Milne Bay

¹⁷ 16 Nov 1942 Battle for Buna-Gona (PNG)

¹⁸ 39657

A final word.....

The Defence Force is an instrument of National Power. An instrument of Government. Here to serve the government of the day. Service in the ADF means you have written a 'blank cheque' and contract with potentially 'unlimited liability' to the government and the people of Australia. A blank cheque that for many Australians was cashed in WW2 when lives were lost. The responsibility on our political and military leadership when the ADF is utilised, particularly in a war fighting capacity, is truly enormous.

So, to our serving personnel and veterans, when I say, 'thank you for your service', you will understand what I mean. In particular, to our few surviving veterans of WW2 and the Battle-for-Australia, and their families, I say, "*thank you for your service*".

Ladies and gentlemen, today on this 82nd anniversary for the Battle for Australia, I ask you to remember our past. If it's for no other reason other than to ensure that we avoid the same tragedies in the future. Thank you for being here today. Thank you for remembering.

Lest we forget.

17:40