

Speech

ADDRESS BY

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GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

ON THE OCCASION OF

ISURAVA CEREMONY – ANZAC DAY

ISURAVA, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

25 APRIL 2013

Friends, I feel privileged to be among you this morning, to stand on this hallowed ground and to honour those whose souls linger here.

I know that many of you came hours ago to witness the Anzac dawn in this sacred and beautiful place. Amongst us are trekkers, travellers, seekers and explorers. Each of us, in a way, a pilgrim, here to see and understand something of the revered Kokoda Track. Wherever we come from and wherever we go, this is a day that gives pause and silence to our journeys. *A moment* to remember the Australian soldiers, merchant navy men, and airmen - and members of the Papua and New Guinea local forces – who died defending this territory and ours. *Another moment*, to remember the hundreds of thousands of Australian servicemen and women who, across centuries, have fought and fallen for the freedoms and rights that are the essence of civilised humanity and the loved ones who farewelled them, ached for them, welcomed them home, cradled their damaged souls, grieved for them. The tranquillity of this clearing belies the desperate, bloody confrontations of the Kokoda Campaign which took place beyond. What history resides in these polished black ballasts, upright and sound!

Courage, endurance and selflessness anchored to the core of the earth beneath us; guarding the labours of the Australians and their Papua New Guinean allies in this valley. Inscriptions to the men who heartened the bonds of friendship and support between the nations, whose flags fly proudly astride. The valour of Private Bruce Kingsbury VC in the devastating Battle of Isurava, seemingly etched in this monumental landscape.

There is much to be told in the prosaic fragments of jungle subsistence and warfare that those men endured. The torrential rain. The raging rivers. The scorching, steaming days and the cold, black nights. The plummeting ravines and near vertical ascents. And the sucking, rotting floor of vine-strangled mud. This is where our men battled and scrambled; ate, slept and died. As food supplies thinned, so did their weary, pack-laden bodies. Weeks of dysentery and malarial fever; lack of nourishment and sleep hollowed out their boyish faces. But rarely their morale, or their raw courage and will. The ill, the wounded, the tormented kept going, one step after another. For some, even the loss of lower limbs would not persuade them to be carried; they insisted on sliding and crawling in the wake of their more able-bodied mates. It is beyond extraordinary what these men –many of them barely adults – were able to do in the most relentlessly debilitating conditions. They were in no doubt about the challenges they were facing with a numerically superior, confident and ruthless enemy. Yet stories abound regarding their individual and collective bravery, their willingness to give everything, physically and mentally, hardships borne, the most generous acts of mateship and sacrifice. And then there were the native Papuan porters – the cherished Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels whose careful, patient, kindly conveyance of the wounded along the track earned them their divine title. By their offerings of biscuits, chocolate, cigarettes and a decent cup of tea, the Salvation Army too revived many a soldier from languishing on the track.

Yet somehow still allowed were the quiet, poignant moments of brothers writing home, singing by the fire in the mist, farewelling one another in death, and the padre's final ministrations. There are butterflies in that formidable jungle.

Enormous butterflies of stunning colours and adornment. It seems that amid the most brutal conflict and withering fire, one or two of these timeless, ethereal creatures would settle upon a helmet, a bayonet, a shoulder just as men readied for the lethal charge.^[1] A reminder that peace can rise from battle, and hope from hostility; that natural, humane forces of good can and should prevail. Friends, we remember that today, and we remember those who led us here.

Lest we forget.

[1] Fitzsimons, Peter. *Kokoda*. Australia: Hachette, 2004, p281
