

Battle for Australia

4 September 2019

Commemoration Address

Harry Allie BEM

To begin, let me acknowledge the Gadigal people, the first inhabitants of this part of Sydney. For thousands of years, the Gadigal have called these southern shores of Sydney Harbour their home.

Under the streets that we walk today are the imprints of Gadigal feet, under the sun that provides light to our endeavours Gadigal ancestors worked and celebrated, nurturing the land which has provided the foundations of our Sydney metropolis.

We express our gratitude today for their story, their welcome, and for their legacy.

Our gathering place is a 'sacred site, a precious inheritance of land, and of ceremony'.

We have built a Memorial here, the Cenotaph, to indicate that we hold this site, at the western end of Martin Place, to be sacred.

We know some of its sacred history: as the site of recruitment during the First World War, as the home of Australia's Dawn Service tradition and, as many of you will know, as the place where Prime Minister John Curtin began to rally our nation in 1942 to face the 'Battle for Australia'.

History adds layers, and it is on occasions like this one, a time of remembrance of the past - its struggles and sacrifices, its triumphs and its legacy - that we can dig a little deeper.

If we can imagine a time when some of those layers had not yet been set down, before this was Martin Place, we would be standing on the banks of the Tank Stream, running towards where we are seated from under what is the GPO/Westin Hotel passing across our ceremony into Angel Place.

The Tank Stream was a water source fundamental to the survival of the first European settlers, but also to the first peoples, to the Gadigal.

The indigenous peoples nurtured this area for its fresh drinking water and for its food sources. But it was valued for more than this. At night, the southern stars would be reflected on the water's surface feeding the yarning of tens of thousands of layers of history. Physical and spiritual nourishment came from the flowing waters.

We share this site, a place of beginnings. And among those beginnings was the realisation in 1942 that Australia faced a real threat from those who would do it harm.

In that moment, we came together, as one nation, a land and its people, with its history and its promise, to keep our nation together.

Those years of the Second World War required displays of courage, and a conviction of duty, a determined commitment to peace, even in times of conflict, and a determined love of this nation. A unity of action and purpose.

The Australian Defence Force has, in each generation, been at the forefront of this unity. Time and again, the ADF has demonstrated this ... welcoming many indigenous men and women with dignity into service.

Into service of our country, when there is no time for misunderstandings, where the prevailing generalisation was not that we were different, but that we were all soldiers fighting for a cause.

A spirit of acceptance from which I was to benefit over more than two decades serving in the RAAF.

My tribe is the Gudjula, way up north in Charters Towers. In 1942 it was the site of an RAAF fuel depot, freshly commissioned. Many of the 3000 to 4000 indigenous people who served during the Second World War were in the RAAF which was more open to indigenous service at the time.

A handful are well known, such as fighter pilots Sergeant Len Waters, remembered up in Toomelah, NSW, or Flight Sergeant Arnold Lockyer who died tragically a few days after war's end. Or Lance Corporal Kath Walker who served in the Australian Women's Army Service. There were many indigenous women serving in the AWAS and in the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF).

And of course, up my way, there were the Torres Strait Islander units and the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit contributing to homeland defence. Our service was the service of all - ranging from cook to aircraft mechanic, from home-front surveillance to battlefield combat.

All serving men and women sought the common good.

There was a unity of purpose that time seventy- seven years ago, a unity of purpose that speaks to us today. In unity we can build a nation at peace, a nation we can be proud of.

May this place, the Cenotaph in Martin Place, the place of beginnings, be where we always remember the qualities that shone in times of crisis.

Gathering together today, we mark that Battle for Australia with our tributes and our respect. Together, we share our stories, we celebrate our culture, we remember our ancestors. As has been happening at this place for millennia. Like the water that once flowed beneath us, we are nourished by such history.

But may we also mark this sacred place today with our resolve. A resolve that an earlier generation's sacrifices may not have been in vain, that we today might even more strongly strive in unity for a land of freedom and of peace.

Lest we forget.