

VICTORY IN THE PACIFIC (VP) DAY
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA, 15 AUGUST 2020

Thank you to the RSL Tasmania and to State President Robert Dick and CEO Noeleen Lincoln for inviting me to deliver this address to mark the 75th Anniversary year of Victory in the Pacific Day, known to us all as VP Day.

I begin this speech by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land: the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

This is my sixth year as Governor of Tasmania and the second occasion on which I am delivering the VP Day address – the first being in 2015 to mark the 70th Anniversary. That was of course at the Hobart Cenotaph; and in this unusual and unsettling year I do consider it a particular honour to again be associated with this most meaningful and memorable wartime commemoration.

That it brought World War Two to an official end made it a tremendous day of celebration. But that was tempered with the awful reality what had happened throughout the world between the years 1939 and 1945. And we remember too that VP Day did not mean an automatic cessation of hostilities. Many Japanese units and individuals either did not receive news of surrender, or were unwilling to cease fighting. This meant that Australian joy and relief went hand in hand with continued fighting, albeit sporadic.

What I did not know and what considerably surprised me, was that Australia through Prime Minister Ben Chifley and Minister for External Affairs HV Evatt had to argue first with Winston Churchill and then Theodore Roosevelt to appropriately recognise Australia's role in the War in the Pacific. The *Launceston Examiner* of the day reported it as follows and I quote:

As for the surrender ceremony, these are the facts: The U.K. Government proposed on August 12 that an Australian service representative should attend the surrender, but only as attached to the U.K. service representatives. This proposal, representing the so-called U.K. "initiative" in the matter, was quite unsatisfactory, and in a reply of August 14 Australia nominated General Blamey as a "direct" representative of Australia and not as "attached to" the U.K. representatives.

We claim, in short, that Australia was entitled to be represented in her own right – that is, as a principal Pacific Power in the war against Japan.

The Dominions Office replied on August 17 that the U.S. Department of State had rejected Australia's claim and that General Blamey could only “accompany” the U.K. representatives. Thereupon the Australian Government took up the matter direct with General MacArthur and with the U.S. Acting Minister at Canberra. The result was that the U.S. Government acceded to Australia's claim to be represented directly in recognition of the outstanding part that Australia had played in the war against Japan.ⁱ

End of quote.

That aside, the Allies from many diverse nations, big and small, had finally triumphed in what was a greatly shared effort to defeat totalitarianism. And indeed the magnanimity of Australians may be recalled in this communication to London one week after VP Day:

The Lord Mayor of Melbourne (Sir Thomas Nettlefold) has sent the following telegram to Mr Churchill: “In this great hour of victory in the Pacific, on behalf of the six Lord Mayors of the capital cities of the Commonwealth of Australia, I send to you a message of congratulation for your indomitable courage and devotion, without which in the dark days of 1941-42, victory would not have been possible. In the hour of victory we must never forget what you did for humanity.”

And here are two contemporary individual memories I will quote to you – not Australians, but Americans, recalling their VJ Day memories:

“We cried, we hugged. Bells were ringing. Everyone went outside and everyone was hugging...There was real cohesiveness in the nation with everyone working for a shared goal.”ⁱⁱ

And:

Born in August of 1939, my memories of World War Two are mostly of ration books and shortages of sugar, leather shoes, metal for pennies. My grandmother would save ration stamps for sugar until she had enough for one of her famous chocolate cakes ... She and grandpa then went to the neighbours to share the cake ... Right now we need some of that same spirit of sacrifice and togetherness to get us through this corona virus crisis. I had Covid-19 and was lucky not to be hospitalized. PLEASE wear masks and stay safe to keep all your family and others safe.ⁱⁱⁱ

And so it is that here in Australia on VP Day, we remember the years 1942 to 1945 in the Pacific region, and the conflicts in Singapore, Borneo, Malaya, Papua, New Guinea and New Britain. We acknowledge every Australian individual who served in that expansive theatre of war. Some 40,000 Australians died in World War Two. Over 17,000 Australians died fighting in the war against Japan, with some 8000 dying as a result of being in Japanese captivity. Many more were prisoners of war, and for those who survived it was to be many months after VP day before they returned home.

Nor do we forget the pain and vast loss of life of Japanese civilians when the two atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some of you may have read a recent ABC News story about a little Japanese girl, Koko Kondo, who was just 8 months old when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and ten years old when she travelled to the US with her mother and siblings to meet one of the US Airmen who had dropped the bomb on her city for a television show.

She said the anger and hate she felt when she first saw him dissipated when, as he spoke about the bombing she saw tears begin to well in his eyes and she thought, "Monsters don't have tears." She came to realise that people on both sides of war suffer and her hatred shifted from the individual airmen who dropped the bombs to war itself.^{iv}

This week has brought recognition to one individual, Ordinary Seaman Teddy Shean, in the form of a recommendation that he be posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for valour in the presence of the enemy during action in the Pacific, in the Timor Sea in 1942. His story is well known and so I will not now repeat it, except to say that his courage as an 18-year-old exemplified what was for millions of soldiers and civilians a terrible period in history; one that we must be most vigilant in preventing again.

Hence, a commemorative day such as this one, VP Day – Victory in the Pacific Day – is intended not in fact as a celebration but to remind us of the sacrifices of our fellow Australians who did not come home and those who did but were forever changed by the experience.

Lest We Forget.

ⁱ Examiner, Saturday 25 August 1945, page 7.

ⁱⁱ The Cincinnati Enquirer, Friday 25 August 1995. V-J Day 75th Anniversary article. Mildred Pritza, Illinois recollection.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-06/atomic-bomb-survivors-75-years-after-hiroshima-nuclear-attack/12501636>