

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP
SANDAKAN MEMORIAL SERVICE
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The people whose initiative has built this memorial have done their country a great service.

It commemorates the most appalling event in Australia's war history.

Two thousand five hundred Australian and British soldiers were taken to Sandakan.

Only six survived - and, because the Japanese authorities covered up the story, it is only from these six that we know what happened.

Three times more men died at Sandakan and Ranau, and in the jungles between, than died in those heroic battles at Kokoda in New Guinea.

The Sandakan men did not die in battle - they were tortured, massacred or allowed to perish of disease.

Yet until now Sandakan has been forgotten.

The families of those who died received the most perfunctory of messages - they never knew what happened to their husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, uncles.

Knowing how and why makes a great deal of difference to those who are left behind. Knowing - even when the truth is awful - is better than the horror and dread of not knowing at all.

What is true for the loved ones left behind is also true for the country they never saw again. It is better to know.

Australians should know the truth about their history.

A nation is stronger for knowledge of its shared experience, and the experience of these men should be engraved in the national memory.

With this memorial we remember these Australian and British soldiers who fell victim to acts of cruelty and sadism as horrifying as any in World War II.

Sandakan must be known. It must not be forgotten.

I don't say this because one of my own family died there, or because the deaths of these men are to be regretted more than any others - whether they were in Burma, or New Guinea, or the Middle East or any of the other places where Australians have fought and died.

I say Sandakan must be known because all Australians should recognise that these men died in the defence of their country - they died as prisoners, as slaves, but they were no less at war with the enemy.

The final victory was as much theirs as anybody else's.

It must be known because it is a reminder of what was at stake in the Pacific War, and how much we owe all those Australian men and women and their allies who fought and finally won.

At stake was the democratic civilisation Australians had built in this country - and those ideas of what is fair and just in which they believed.

The land they loved was at stake, the land they believed in.

The events in Sandakan should be known because we should never forget that there have been generations of men and women prepared to die for Australia.

We owe a debt to them. Every succeeding generation owes them. Their sacrifice helped us survive.

It should also help us believe.

We should remember Sandakan for one reason above all others.

Sandakan was more than a battle between nations. More than a battle between conflicting ideologies.

It was a war between human decency and human depravity.

That is why I think we should remember the men who died there as we remember the victims of the death camps of Europe - as casualties of pure evil.

There was no glory in this kind of war, and nothing much to comfort those whose loved ones suffered and died.

With this memorial there will be some consolation in knowing that others know what happened at Sandakan.

If other Australians can come to know about these things the comfort to those who have lived with Sandakan for fifty years will be so much greater.

And as a nation, surely, we will be wiser and stronger. If there was no glory in the way these men died, perhaps there can be in their memory. Perhaps it can inspire in us the feelings for Australia that the men of Sandakan felt. They were all volunteers - men like Keith Botterill who, when recalling his escape from the death march, wrote:

‘We started at night, the native carried bamboo torches to light the way, until the moon came up. The next day I was lying down thinking I could not walk another step, when I looked up and saw an Australian face bending over me. He was a big six footer. He just sat down beside me and cried.’

So long as we have some sense of what Keith Botterill felt we will have an understanding of what it means to be Australian.

And so long as we remember the lesson for humanity at Sandakan we will be a better people and Australia a better place.