

FALL OF SINGAPORE 65TH ANNIVERSARY

Mr DAVID ELLIOTT (Baulkham Hills—Minister for Counter Terrorism, Minister for Corrections, and Minister for Veterans Affairs) (16:27): As not only the member for Baulkham Hills but also the Minister for Veterans Affairs and a former member of the defence force I commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Fall of Singapore and the service and sacrifice of Australian prisoners of war. This morning I attended a solemn ceremony at the Cenotaph with the Governor to commemorate this anniversary of the Fall of Singapore and the inhumanity of its aftermath. The fall struck fear into the heart of every Australian, as the carnage in the Pacific theatre shattered the perception that Australia's isolation would guarantee her security.

Throughout 1940 and 1941 the world was preoccupied with the war against fascism in Europe and North Africa. Only a single division, the 8th Division, was retained and sent into the Pacific. Originally intended for deployment in the Middle East, by early 1941, with the looming possibility of war with Japan, the division was sent to Malaya on 2 February 1941. On 8 December 1941, at dawn, Japanese forces invaded Malaya, with landings on the north-eastern coast of the Malay Peninsula at Kota Bharu. An hour later, on the other side of the world, Japanese naval air forces attacked the United States naval base at Pearl Harbour. On 3 February 1942, after a courageous fighting effort, the 8th Australian Division was forced to retreat to the island of Singapore. Just eight days later, using heavy artillery barrage, the Japanese began their assault on the island.

Staring into the eye of inevitable defeat, and faced with the suffering of over a million civilians and refugees, General Percival, the senior British commander, ordered his troops to cease hostilities at 8.30 p.m. on 15 February 1942. The defeat signalled a shift away from the way Australia approached its defence. When Prime Minister John Curtin addressed the nation a day later, he remarked, "The protection of this country is no longer that of a contribution to a world war but the resistance to an enemy threatening to invade our shore." While we would continue to fight alongside our Allies in battles to come, Australia was also faced with the need to put up a bulwark against those who sought to denigrate our way of life from the north.

I commend the bravery of approximately 1,800 Australian soldiers who were killed or listed as missing in action as a result of the defeat, but I also want to shine a light on the unimaginable cruelty endured by the men and women of the 8th Division who were interned as prisoners of war and pushed to breaking point by torture, forced labour, malnutrition and disease. The end of the campaign in Malaya and Singapore was overshadowed by the imprisonment of 130,000 British and Commonwealth troops, 15,000 of which were Australian. We also remember the 32 Australian nurses who withstood horrific conditions in civilian internment camps in Sumatra after the sinking of the *SS Vyner Brooke* which carried 65 Australian nurses, as well as the deaths of the remaining 33 who perished during the sinking or were shot and killed at Radji Beach. We must not and cannot think of these inconceivable sacrifices as horrors confined to the pages of history but rather as an enduring effort to protect the freedoms we so often take for granted. The defeat and

its consequences have had a defining impact on the way Australia saw its strategic interests and its role in the region for the past three-quarters of a century. On behalf of all members, I am proud to acknowledge and thank those who sacrificed their lives and their liberty for Australia, to whom we are forever indebted.

It would be remiss of me not to congratulate the 8th Division Association for the way in which it held the last of its solemn ceremonies today. It is sad to think that on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Fall of Singapore the Governor had to give an epilogue noting that this would be the 8th Division Association's last commemoration of the Fall of Singapore. It would also be remiss of me not to add that, when the Returned and Services League [RSL] is going through deep and divided investigations into the way it has been operated, this morning I was delighted to commemorate privately with Glenn Kolomeitz, the general manager of the RSL, who is aware of the sacrifices made by the men and women who are members of his organisation. On behalf of all members of this House, I wish Glenn every success as he reforms the RSL and returns it to being the organisation it is meant to be, defending veterans' honour, welfare and sacrifice. That is the reason the RSL has been around for 100 years.

Mr GARETH WARD (Kiama) (16:31 : 5): Along with my friend the Minister for Veterans Affairs, I mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Fall of Singapore. A commemorative ceremony took place in Martin Place at 11.00 a.m. today. The Fall of Singapore was the most significant military loss in modern history and holds special significance for Australians. With Singapore captured, the war had come much closer to Australia. This anniversary recognises that some 21,000 Australian military personnel became prisoners of war and would face 3½ years of captivity in places whose names are now infamously etched into our history: Changi, the Burma Railway and Sandakan. The majority of personnel came from the 8th Division, as the Minister mentioned. The seventy-fifth anniversary in Sydney will mark the final gathering of the division's association. At the conclusion of the service, its organisational banner will be folded for the last time and the association will cease to exist. Today the guest speaker at this ceremony was Lieutenant Colonel Neil James (Ret.), Executive Director of the Australia Defence Association. I thank the Minister for his statement.