

SPEECH BY PREMIER NATHAN REES

DEDICATION OF THE LT-COL RALPH HONNER EDUCATION CENTRE KOKODA TRACK MEMORIAL WALKWAY FRIDAY, AUGUST 14, 2009

Members of the Honner family
Distinguished veterans
Colleagues in public service
Rusty Priest and Kokoda Memorial board members
Fellow Australians

I also acknowledge two people closely associated with this project

- Alan Jones, a great friend and advocate of this memorial;
- and Morris Iemma, whose support for the education centre is the reason we are here today.

Our best wishes are with them both.

Our thoughts are also with the eight families grieving the loss of their loved ones, who were making their pilgrimage Kokoda for the very same reason that brings us here today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Sixty-four years ago tomorrow, the most terrible conflict in human history came to an end.

The Second World War lasted six years, cost \$1.5 trillion and claimed 50 million lives.

For one long agonising year following Pearl Harbour, that war came to our very doorstep – the first and only time Australian soil has ever been directly threatened by a foe.

There has been some debate in recent years as to whether Japan ever intended to invade Australia.

But to my mind, such debate is futile because at the time – with Malaya, Singapore and the Philippines in Japanese hands, invasion seemed inevitable.

Even without an invasion, control of New Guinea would have given Japan air and sea supremacy, rendering us prisoners in our own land.

Whatever way you look at it, the fight for Kokoda was every inch a fight for Australia.

A struggle for national survival at our moment of maximum peril.

That struggle was largely in the hands of one small group of men from Melbourne – the 39th Battalion: all that stood between Australia and the might of Japan.

As the former Governor General and distinguished soldier Michael Jeffrey noted, the 39th went into battle *“previously untried, poorly equipped and poorly trained.”*

They emerged a few months later as *“among Australia’s most gallant soldiers, men to whom our nation is indebted.”*

They were mainly youths, 18 and 19 years old, destined for garrison duty, not front line combat.

They were called ‘chockos’ – chocolate soldiers – because it was thought they would melt in the tropical heat.

But this band of brothers, which existed as an independent formation for just 640 days, went down in history as one of the greatest fighting forces Australia has ever sent to war.

This bunch of “ragged bloody heroes” gave so much that only seven officers and 25 men could be mustered on the Battalion’s return to Port Moresby.

No unit could claim a greater place of honour in our national story.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Kokoda stands with Gallipoli as a defining episode in our history.

Unlike Gallipoli, Kokoda was a smashing victory, a feat of arms forever to be studied and celebrated.

But like Gallipoli, Kokoda was also a showcase of the poor planning and preparation that so often occurs in war – a circumstance only redeemed by the qualities of the ordinary Australian soldier:

– Courage – Endurance – Mateship – Sacrifice.

To which could be added a fifth quality – Leadership – because when the men of the 39th battalion went into battle, they were led by an extraordinary Australian, Ralph Honner.

Honner was described by Michael Jeffrey as a *“brilliant, battle-hardened veteran of the Middle East”*, and by WB Russell as *“one of the most capable, courageous and versatile officers in the Second AIF.”*

In those crucial four months of August to December 1942 – especially at the turning point of Isurava – the Japanese advance was halted, reversed then overwhelmingly crushed.

It was the first defeat inflicted on the Japanese army in the Second World War.

Field Marshal Slim wrote that the Australian victories in New Guinea *“broke the spell of the invincibility of the Japanese Army”*, inspiring Allied troops to greater daring across the Pacific.

But there was no happy ending for the fighting 39th.

When the job was done, the Battalion was disbanded, its name stripped from the Order of Battle and its members scattered far and wide.

That insult was only repaired three years ago, when the 39th was reinstated as an operational unit of the Australian Defence Force.

Today we provide a further acknowledgement by naming this centre after the Battalion’s most famous commander, Ralph Honner.

We name this centre not only for his leadership in war, but also for his half-century of service in peacetime – service he chose to render here in Sydney, though he was proudly West Australian by birth.

Ralph Honner was Chairman of the War Pensions Assessment Appeal Tribunal for two decades, renowned for his fairness and understanding.

President of the United Nations Association in this State.

President of the NSW Branch of the Liberal Party.

And Australian Ambassador to Ireland, where Ralph and Marjory became renowned as “warm , gracious and always approachable” hosts.

Beyond his public achievements was a man I’m very sorry I never knew.

By every account, Colonel Honner was decent, self-effacing and scrupulously honest.

A man of the highest integrity and unassuming faith.

He loved literature, including my favourite work, Paradise Lost, and held chivalry as a lifelong ideal.

One commentator, Patrick Lindsay, observed:

“He was a true renaissance man: a wonderful orator, a fine writer, sportsman, teacher, lawyer, soldier, superb leader and diplomat.”

I can only think of one other Australian of the era who approaches that description, Sir Roden Cutler – rare company indeed.

Ralph Honner’s death 15 years ago was a loss to the nation, a loss acknowledged even by his enemies when a Japanese veteran, alone and uninvited, approached his coffin during the funeral and bowed in respect.

How fitting, then, that we name this place in his honour.

But this centre is not just a tribute to one man.

Through Ralph Honner’s name, we salute every Digger who slogged through those dreadful months of rain and bloodshed on Kokoda.

We honour the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels, only now being given the medals they long ago earned.

And we especially remember the men who ended their days on the Track, never to see Australia again.

Of these men, Ralph himself wrote:

“They died so young. They missed so much. They gave up so much: their hopes; their dreams; their loved ones. They laid down their lives that their friends might live. Greater love hath no man than this.”

This building – like the adjacent Walkway – is therefore an insurance policy against forgetfulness.

It points to a future when none of us will be around ... when only education will keep the story of Kokoda alive.

This centre is a gift from our generation to the next, so that together we can honour a generation which saved and rebuilt our nation.

And if the men and women of World War Two are “the greatest generation” – and they surely are – then the men of the 39th are the greatest of the great.

They richly deserve to be honoured.

They greatly need to be remembered.

Through this centre, they will never be forgotten – nor will their brave and gallant leader.

On behalf of the people of New South Wales, I proudly dedicate the Ralph Honner Education Centre and officially declare it open.

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