

1943 – Rising in Adversity

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Veterans - Those that have served, those that continue to serve, and the families that love and support them. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Mr Day, a veteran of the Battle for Australia.

Students – Thank you for being here with us today. As we look back today upon the service and sacrifice of those that so courageously served in the Battle for Australia, I challenge you to also look forward. To contemplate how you will honour their sacrifice and rise to the defence of Australia, if not the world, in the face of adversity. We look to you to not only follow in the finest traditions of those that have gone before, but to take that which we have learnt in order to build a world that is more peaceful, loving and kind than we dare to imagine.

In the words of John McCrae *To you from failing hands we throw the torch; be yours to hold it high.*

While 1942 was the high-water mark of Japanese aggression in the Pacific, the danger had far from passed when 1943 appeared upon our calendars.

As so eloquently explained by Lotus, Angela, Madalynn and Mackenzie, Australian and American forces fought to defend Australia by repelling the advance of Japanese forces in New Guinea: The Battles of Gona and Buna in January; the Battle for Salamaua from June to September and the Battle for Lae in September. All involved fierce and heavy fighting, against a formidable adversary, rapidly advancing across the Pacific towards Australia.

Japanese submarines were operating along Australia's coastline and Japanese air raids terrorized northern Australia. The enemy was tenacious and to some, the invasion of Australia seemed imminent.

Thousands were killed and injured on both sides, and casualties streamed back from the front to military and civilian hospitals throughout the country. Ordinary Australians were reminded that freedom is not free, acknowledging that the Battle for Australia would come at an inconceivable and irrev-ocable price.

Men, women and children across the country realised that this conflict was no longer a war confined to Europe and North Africa, but a direct threat against Australia - our home and our very way of life.

They realised that it was a threat to the legacy that they intended to pass to you: a free and privileged society, bursting with opportunity and choice, and in the face of such adversity, Australians rose to defend our nation and the islands to the north.

As you study military history, it can be easy to assume that the veterans of the Battle for Australia, fought for *their* lives, for *their* freedoms, for the future *they* wanted for *themselves*.

Please know that that is not true. It is not true for them, nor is it true for me nor for those with whom I have served. They fought and they died for the generations that would follow. For my generation, for yours and for all those to come.

Yet I suspect that the legacy that they created, is one which they may not have anticipated:

A legacy of knowledge - the lessons learnt from the consequences of global warfare; and

A legacy of inspiration – the unique and redeeming qualities of those that rise in adversity, no matter the odds.

The Battle for Australia relied heavily upon the fortitude of its people and the will of our allies. In 1942 we were down, but we were not out. In 1943, our nation would rise, battered but not defeated, and ready to stare down the foe.

As a former Nursing Officer in the Royal Australian Air Force, I have taken that inspiration to shape my own life: to serve Australia and humanity, with the hope that I might leave the world a better place, for those that would follow.

I took inspiration from my nursing and medical forebears. Those who served with allied troops at home and abroad, those that served alongside them at the front; that repatriated the wounded and ill back home; and in having done both, those that soothed the pain of the horror for the survivors of war. Those that would rise in the face of adversity.

During my own career, I have faced incredible personal adversity. Severely injured in a helicopter crash in East Timor in 2004, I was physically and psychologically disabled by my sacrifice, yet I had escaped death. I was down, but I was not out. Privileged with a legacy of inspiration I fought to rise in the face of adversity, to not only continue to serve, but to lead men and women in war in Afghanistan. To the veterans who have served before me, to Mr Day, thank you.

A great story of inspiration for me, was from the Battle for Australia in 1943. The story of AHS Centaur.

The Centaur was a merchant ship, pressed into military service at the declaration of the Second World War. With the intensity of war on Australia's doorstep in 1942, the Centaur was fitted out and registered as a hospital ship, to meet the needs of the growing number of casualties. Painted white with a green band huge red crosses on her hull and deck, she was lit brilliantly at night so that and under article 5 of the Hague Convention, she was afforded protection from attack.

On the morning of Wednesday, 12th of May 1943, Centaur sailed from Sydney with 332 souls on board, including personnel of the 2nd/12th Field Ambulance; 12 nurses from the Australian Army Nursing Service and 74 civilian crew. They set course for Port Moresby to deliver medical supplies and to bring home the wounded.

Two days after leaving Sydney, the Centaur passed Brisbane, to meet her tragic fate.

It was 4am. The night was dark, yet the Centaur shone like a beacon of hope upon the ocean's surface. Cradling her sleeping passengers and crew in their quarters, she forged northward to meet the war and to fulfill her mission to provide refuge and transport to its ever-increasing number of casualties.

In the dark depths beneath the ocean's surface, the Japanese Imperial Navy submarine I-177 pursued its own wartime mission. Hunting shipping off Australia's east coast, under the command of Captain Hajime Nakagawa.

Upon sighting the brightly lit Centaur, and displaying complete disregard for her protected status, Nakagawa closed the distance between the two vessels, in preparation to launch a torpedo strike.

Onboard the Centaur, Sisters Ellen Savage and Myrle Moston were asleep in the portside cabin that they shared. In the cabin next door slept Sister Eva King, close friend of Ellen Savage. They had served together in the Middle East on the Netherlands Hospital Ship *Oranje*, retrieving allied servicemen from the Middle East in 1941 – 1942. They shared a friendship forged in their shared experience of war.

Eva could not swim.

Knowing this, Ellen had vowed that if the two nurses ever found themselves in the water, she would carry her friend across her shoulders and keep her safe.

In the early hours of Friday the 14th May 1943, Captain Nakagawa launched a torpedo at Australian Hospital Ship Centaur. It struck the port fuel tanks, and the Centaur burst into flames.

Ellen and Myrle were thrown from their bunks by the explosion. Through their cabin window they saw that the ship was alight and immediately grabbed their life jackets and made for the deck. Amidst the chaos and confusion Ellen and Eva found each other on the deck as the ship listed. With their Commanding Officer, Medical Officer Colonel Manson, they jumped from the burning ship into the sea below.

Many were killed instantly by the force of the blast. Those that survived the initial impact fought through the debris and raging fire to make it to the deck. Men were heard screaming and banging on bulkheads but soon that screaming would end as the Centaur, with air escaping the submerging cabins and decks, let out what sounded like an agonizing groan as the bulkheads sheared and she began to disappear beneath the waves. In less than three minutes she would be gone ... her lights would blink and extinguish as the generators submerged and she would disappear into the darkness beneath the waves.

She sunk with tremendous force, dragging with her anything and anyone still floating on the surface. Having sunk so rapidly, few, if any were able to escape her pull, including Ellen Savage:

"I just went with the suction and I went right down and was caught in the ropes, and I thought that [it] was [all] over [for me] then all of a sudden I seemed to be released from that and I shot up like a cork. I noticed when I came up that the ship was completely gone." "I never saw Eva again."

Sister Savage was badly injured with a fractured nose, burst ear drums, a broken palate and fractured ribs. Yet, clinging to a raft with other survivors, she denied her injuries and instead focused on tending to the wounded with her limited supplies, her heartfelt prayers and her hymns. The dawn broke and the sun beat down upon them mercilessly. As the current dragged them further out to sea, sharks circled, yet the world remained unaware that the Centaur had been attacked.

No-one was coming to their aid.

After 35 hours at sea, the crew of an RAAF aircraft on anti-submarine watch spotted items floating on the water, whilst a sharp-eyed American sailor aboard the US warship – USS Mugford – reported to his captain that he had spotted some debris. The RAAF aircraft investigated and alerted the Mugford that there were survivors in the water. USS Mugford immediately commenced a search and rescue.

The world finally came to learn of the inconceivable loss of the hospital ship.

Of the 332 protected personnel embarked upon the Centaur, only 64 survived. 30 of the 74 civilian crew; 32 of the almost 200 Army medical personnel from the 2nd/12th Field Ambulance; one of the 12 nurses; and none of the 15 doctors, including Commanding Officer Colonel Manson.

The saviors who had set out from Sydney to ease the burden of the casualties of the Battle for Australia, had themselves become the casualties of war.

It is hard to imagine such a loss. And this was just one incident, on just one day in the Battle for Australia.

It is overwhelming, isn't it? It is a story in our history that has the potential to weigh you down, to drag you down like the suction of the sinking wreckage of the Centaur. But that it is not the intended legacy of knowledge or inspiration that is found in the story of the Centaur, nor that of the Battle for Australia, or any other adversity that we may face.

Despite the horrendous events that befell her, Sister Savage represented the fortitude and determination of those that served in the Battle for Australia. She returned to duty within two months of the tragedy, serving with the 113th Australian General Hospital until after the war. For decades on, she continued her work administering to those who needed her help just as she did while floating with the survivors in 1943. She was an ardent advocate for nurses – for their education, and for their right to marry, and whilst she was disinclined to speak publicly of the Centaur, she used her reluctant public profile to support Legacy and bereaved Australian military families.

Sister Savage, and those who served in the Battle for Australia, have shown us that we *can* rise in the face of adversity, no matter the odds.

I pray that the adversity experienced by those gathered here today, never involves a global war, nor a threat against Australia as ferocious as that of 1942 and 1943.

I do however have immense faith that no matter what adversity you may face, the legacy of knowledge and inspiration bequeathed to you by the veterans before you, will empower and equip you on your journey in this world. Their service and sacrifice combined with your own unique abilities will ensure that this country and this world will be a better place - more peaceful, loving and kinder than we dare to imagine.

To those who served in the Battle for Australia, thank you.

To those that will serve this great country into the future, whether in uniform or not - *To you from failing hands we throw the torch; be yours to hold it high.*