

VP Day Address – 81st Anniversary of Victory in the Pacific Day

Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway

Jason Yat-sen Li MP

Saturday 15 August

Distinguished guests, current serving members of our Defence Force, veterans and families.

It is a great honour to be with you today on Wangal Land, here at the Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway, representing the Honourable David Harris, Minister for Veterans, and the NSW Government, to commemorate the 81st anniversary of Victory in the Pacific Day.

On 15 August 1945, after six brutal years of war, at 8.44 that morning, the Australian Government received news that Japan had surrendered. The confirmation came by cable from London under a single code word – “Neon” – chosen because it was short, clear and unmistakable.

At 9.30 am, Prime Minister Ben Chifley addressed the nation by radio.

His opening words were simple and unforgettable:

“Fellow citizens, the war is over.”

Germany had surrendered three months earlier, in May. But for Australia, the war had not ended then.

Australian forces were still serving across the Pacific — in New Guinea, New Britain, Borneo, Malaya, Singapore and beyond.

Families were still waiting. Prisoners of war were still missing. The fighting, the fear and the uncertainty continued.

That is why 15 August 1945 carried such weight. It was the day the war finally ended for Australia.

Across the country, people poured into streets, churches, railway stations and public places. There was singing, prayer, tears and embraces. Across Australia, a nation exhaled.

But VP Day was never only a day of celebration.

It was also a day of grief.

Because victory came at a terrible cost.

Almost a million Australians served during the Second World War. More than 39,000 Australians lost their lives. More than 17,000 Australians died in the war against Japan, including around 8,000 who died in Japanese captivity.

By then, Australians had endured the fall of Singapore, the bombing of Darwin, the fighting in New Guinea, the long campaigns in Borneo, and the suffering of thousands of prisoners of war.

The Pacific War had not been distant. It had reached into Australian homes, Australian towns and Australian families. Looking back now, victory can seem inevitable. It was not.

For some families, VP Day meant relief.

For others, it confirmed an absence that would never be filled.

That is why this day matters. It is not simply a day of victory, but a day of remembrance — a day to understand the terrible price paid for peace.

That is why this place — this Walkway — holds such special meaning in that story.

The Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway links Rhodes Station and Concord Repatriation General Hospital. It reminds us that the story of war is not only the battlefield. It is also the journey home.

During the war, Concord Hospital was the 113th Australian General Hospital. It cared for those who served in the Pacific, including

Australian, American and Filipino troops; those who returned with wounds that could be seen, and wound that could not.

After the war, it became one of the great places of repatriation — a place where the long journey home continued.

The Kokoda campaign of 1942 remains one of the defining chapters of Australia's wartime experience.

Along the rugged tracks and steep ridges of Papua New Guinea, young Australians fought with extraordinary determination against overwhelming odds.

They fought not only against an enemy, but against the track itself.

The mud. The mountains. The rain. The hunger.

The fever. The exhaustion.

They endured disease, fear and constant danger.

Yet they never lost sight of their duty — to one another, and to the nation they served.

Kokoda asked everything of them.

And everything, they gave.

We also remember the Papuan people.

The men remembered as the “Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels” carried wounded soldiers to safety.

They guided, fed, supported and sustained Australian troops when help was needed most.

But they were not simply figures in an Australian legend.

They were people with their own families, their own communities, their own losses, and their own courage.

Their contribution belongs at the heart of the Kokoda story.

And it remains deeply embedded in the shared history of Australia and Papua New Guinea.

As we reflect on VP Day, we do more than remember military victory. We honour the values that continue to define us: service, mateship, perseverance and sacrifice.

We recognise all who served, those who never returned, and those whose lives and families were forever changed by war.

We remember VP Day today because remembrance gives meaning to pain.

And truth gives dignity to sacrifice.

This day reminds us that our history is not a straight line.

It is not always clean.

But it is shared.

Here in our community — one of the most culturally rich and diverse communities in Australia — these stories of war and loss are not distant echoes.

They live in the memories of so many who call this place home.

Families who fled the ash of war in Vietnam.

The ruins of Syria.

The partitioned towns of South Asia.

Or the quiet silences left by conflict in Europe and East Africa.

My own family carries such a story.

My parents were born in 1940s China, during the brutal Japanese occupation.

Before the war, my grandfather had studied in Tokyo and lived with a Japanese family who he adored — and who adored him.

In 1942, as a Japanese army unit advanced towards his village, he took my two-year-old mother by the hand and walked straight to the commander.

A bayonet was held to his throat.

Speaking in fluent Japanese, he told the officer about his studies, and about the people who had once welcomed him into their home.

The commander listened.

And then he gave the order: the village was not to be harmed.

That story has stayed with my family for generations.

And here in our community, in every language spoken on our streets, there are stories like these.

Stories of suffering, yes — but also of grace, of courage and of hope.

That is why VP Day still speaks to us.

Not because war is glorious.

Not because victory was easy.

But because this day asks us to remember with open hearts and a shared purpose.

And let me say this, especially to the young people here today:

This is your history too.

It is not something dusty and distant.

It is the reason we live in peace.

It is the reason you walk free.

You carry now the story of those who sacrificed everything.

And remembrance is not just about looking back.

It is about asking ourselves: who are we now because of what they endured?

Do we carry their courage in how we live?

Do we carry their humility in how we lead?

Do we understand that love of country is not found in flag-waving or slogans, but in how we show up for one another — and in how we protect, value and honour the freedom they secured?

These moments remind us that history does not sleep.

It waits, watching what we choose to learn.

The legacy of war is not just a lesson in loss, but a summons to conscience: to turn away from cruelty, resist the drift toward hatred, and keep lit the fragile, flickering flame of peace.

Not peace as rhetoric.

But peace as the daily, difficult work of empathy and restraint.

To the current serving members of our Defence Force, to our veterans, and to your families represented here today: thank you for your service.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the recent passing of Reg Chard, one of New South Wales' few remaining Second World War veterans.

Reg was dedicated to educating the community about the service and sacrifice of Second World War veterans through his work here at this memorial.

He understood that this Walkway is not only stones and plaques and trees. It is a classroom, a promise, and a bridge between those who endured the war and the children of the future.

His life reminds us that remembrance is not passive. It is teaching the stories again and again, so they are not lost.

I extend my sincere condolences to Reg's family, friends and all those whose lives he touched.

This is our task now.

To ensure VP Day, and the struggle that lay behind it, are not just remembered, but understood.

To recognise that those who served did not sacrifice in vain.

They served for a country they believed in.

A country they loved.

A country that, through remembrance, can be made more honest, more compassionate, more free.

Let us be worthy of that promise.

Because the past is not just behind us.

It lives in us.

And through us, it shapes the future.

Lest we forget.