Your Excellency, Your Grace, distinguished guests, veterans and families, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls.

On behalf of the Board of the Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway, it is my privilege to close today's service with our sincere thanks.

First, to Her Excellency the Honourable Sam Mostyn AC, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia. Your Excellency, your presence today honours this occasion and all those Australians and Papua New Guineans whose service and sacrifice we remember. We are also profoundly grateful for your continued support as Patron of the Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway. Your patronage means a great deal to us and helps ensure that the courage, sacrifice and legacy of the Kokoda veterans will never be forgotten.

I would also like to extend a very special thank you to the Honourable Richard Marles MP, Acting Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, for joining us today.

Your presence reflects the enduring national importance of Kokoda and our shared responsibility to honour those who served, remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice, and

preserve their legacy for future generations. Thank you, Acting Prime Minister.

We are deeply grateful to His Grace, Archbishop Rochus Josef Tatamai, Archbishop of Rabaul. You have travelled from Papua New Guinea to be with us, and that speaks to the enduring bond between our two nations, a bond forged on the Track and kept alive in places like this. Thank you for your prayers and your friendship.

I would also like to thank the Honourable David Harris MP, NSW Minister for Veterans Affairs, for his involvement in today's service and for his ongoing support of the Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway. Minister, your commitment to our veterans and to keeping the Kokoda story alive for future generations is deeply valued by all of us here. Since taking on the Veterans portfolio, Minister Harris has been an outstanding friend and supporter of the Walkway. With just one exception, Minister Harris has attended every one of our commemorative services during his time in the portfolio. That is a remarkable commitment, and one that has meant a great deal to our veterans, volunteers and families.

Your steady presence and genuine interest in our work have helped keep the story of Kokoda, and the sacrifice of those who served in Papua New Guinea, alive for new generations. We understand Minister Harris will be retiring. We thank you for your service, and we wish you all the best in your next endeavours.

Our thanks also go to the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the NSW Government, the City of Canada Bay and RSL NSW. Their continued support keeps the Walkway a place of remembrance, learning and reflection for the whole community.

Music has carried us through today, and for that we thank the Australian Military Wives Choir, the Corrective Services NSW Band, and our piper Andrew Iverson from the Sydney University regiment. You have given voice to what words alone cannot.

To the Catafalque Party from the MLC School Cadet Unit: your discipline and dignity did great credit to your school and to those we honour. Thank you.

We thank Concord Repatriation General Hospital for the love and care you give to the Remembrance Rose Garden and its plaques. Every rose tended and every plaque cared for is an act of remembrance in itself, and families who visit feel that care. Our thanks also to the Chaplains of the hospital's Pastoral Care Department, whose care for veterans and their families continues every day of the year, not only on days like this.

A special thank you to the children of Concord West Rhodes Preschool. You remind us why remembrance matters: so that the next generation knows the story.

Our thanks also to the Royal Horticultural Society for creating the official wreaths used in today's service

I would also like to acknowledge John Gatfield OAM, who has announced his retirement. For thirty years John has given his time, his energy and his heart to the Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway. So much of what we stand in today carries his mark. John, we know you are with us in spirit, and on behalf of everyone here, thank you for three decades of extraordinary service.

A very special thank you to Alice Kang, who planned and coordinated today's events. Bringing together dignitaries, choirs, bands, cadets, clergy and our whole community is no small task, and Alice did it with skill, grace and endless patience. Today was an excellent occasion, and that is in large part thanks to her. Alice, thank you.

And to our own Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway staff, volunteers and guides. You give your time week in and week out, and today's service simply would not happen without you. Thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in thanking all those who have made today possible.

Over the years, I have had the extraordinary privilege of getting to know many of our Kokoda veterans. And I have to say, there is a sadness for me today as I look out and no longer see those familiar, wonderful faces. Men like Reg Chard and Bruce Robertson, who shared so many of these Kokoda commemorations with us over the years.

They were extraordinary men who lived through experiences that most of us could never begin to imagine.

And what has stayed with me most is not simply their courage in battle, although that courage was extraordinary. It was their quiet grace, their humility and their remarkable resilience.

These were men who had witnessed the very worst of humanity, who had endured unimaginable hardship, suffering and loss. Yet so many of them carried those experiences without bitterness, without seeking recognition, and often with a gentle humour, a kindness and a generosity of spirit that I found deeply humbling.

They taught me something about courage that goes far beyond the battlefield.

That true strength is not always loud. Sometimes it is found in quiet dignity, in compassion, in the ability to endure great hardship and still find room in your heart for kindness.

I have often thought about the lessons those wonderful men left with me. And as the years pass, and we lose that extraordinary generation, I feel an even greater responsibility to remember not only what they did, but who they were.

Because in the end, it is not only their stories of courage that stay with us, but the humanity of the men who lived them.

I believe there is something deeply courageous about choosing kindness in a world that can sometimes — and perhaps especially now — be very unkind.

There is a passage about grace and resilience that I would like to leave you with today, because whenever I read it, I think of those Kokoda veterans we were all so fortunate to know.

"It takes grace to remain kind in cruel situations. Kindness isn't weak. It's the quiet rule of strength.

When the world shows its teeth, snarling and ready to bite, it's easy to grow claws in return.

Grace stands battered and bruised and still chooses to extend an open hand.

That's the real fight. To stay soft, to stay human, when life tries to harden you into something less.

Grace is the armour of the brave. Worn not for glory, but for the soul."

And perhaps that is one of the greatest legacies the Kokoda veterans have left us.

Not simply a story of extraordinary bravery and sacrifice, but a reminder of the kind of people we should all aspire to be.

People of courage. People of resilience. People who understand that kindness is not weakness, and that grace, even in the face of adversity, is one of the greatest expressions of human strength.

Those wonderful men and women may no longer be standing amongst us, but their spirit, their example and the lessons they taught us remain.

And the greatest way we can honour them is not only to remember their courage, but to carry something of their grace into the way we live our own lives.

Lest we forget.