

Today, we gather to stop and observe the day that ended – World War 2, as those who can remember was called VJ day or victory over Japan or as it now referred to as VP day or victory in the Pacific.

In doing so, we in the RSL do not glorify war. War is so wasteful. So painful. So bloody stupid. Twenty years before a war, nations are friendly and help and need each other, twenty years after a war they are once again friendly and help and need each other.

As you know World War 2 was fought in the Middle East, Africa, Europe and quite differently in the Pacific. Japan had been fighting a war of conquest in China since the early 1930's, and by the end of 1941 had invaded Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, New Britain, what we now call Indonesia, and many Pacific Islands.

We in Australia came very close to being invaded also. During late '41 and mid '42 there were 97 air raids on the Australian mainland. Darwin, Broome, and here in Queensland – Townsville and Mossman.

Japanese submarines even entered Sydney Harbour, and over 45 ships were sunk off the coast of Queensland and New South Wales, including the infamous sinking of the Hospital Ship "Centaur" just 40 miles from where we now stand.

The United States quickly came to our aid at a time when a great proportion of our forces were engaged in the Middle East. Most of those - used to the hot dry sands - were brought back to fight in the mud, humidity and thick jungles to our north.

Over twenty two thousand of our men and women were taken prisoner by the Japanese and suffered the most disgusting, appalling and disgraceful conditions that a human being can inflict on another. 8031 Australians died in captivity.

But fight back we did, and 66,553 men were wounded and 39,366 were killed. Finally, the Americans used the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Japanese surrendered.

And so RSL members gather here today – not to celebrate the end of the War, for “celebrate” is a word that just does not fit when we think about war. We gather to commemorate the event.

We do not assert a soldier’s character above a civilian’s, or one race, or one nation, or one religion over another. We merely gather as a group to honour the memory of thousands of young men and women who went forward with their love of this country - with all their hopes and energy – and, as Weary Dunlop said: They gave up all their tomorrows so that we can enjoy today.

Because of their sacrifice we enjoy today independent nationhood which gives is the freedom to move, to think, to speak, to worship, to have a say in the election of our governments, to enjoy a proper legal system, to own and dispose of property, to raise a family and educate our children.

Thanks to them, we now have a patriotism that is quiet but deep and we stand united as proud Aussies irrespective of where we were born, and we have a lifestyle where we enjoy an abundance of light and space, which is the envy of the world.

We mustn't let them down. We must promise to take the torch passed from their hands and continue to struggle to take this wonderful Australia forward and continue to protect it from any person or persons who would want to destroy its way of life.

Lest we forget.

*"Fellow citizens, the war is over."*

Few announcements in Australian history have provoked such spontaneous displays of emotion as Prime Minister Ben Chifley's on 15 August 1945. On that day, Japan announced it would surrender to Allied forces. Victory in Europe had been achieved on 8 May 1945 and Japan's surrender ended World War II, which had raged for almost six years.

Finally, the war was over and, for Australians at home and those serving abroad, it was a time to rejoice. Australians poured onto the streets, dancing, waving flags and enjoying the freedom for which they and their servicemen and women had sacrificed so much. Those famous scenes of people dancing in the streets still resonate today, epitomizing the relief felt by Australians at the end of the war.

Thousands looked forward to the return of their loved ones. But overshadowing the joy was the somber realization that this war had seen the loss of 40 000 Australians. There was barely a family not touched by tragedy in some way. As the euphoria died down, Australians marked the war's end with services and

family gatherings, giving thanks for peace and remembering the dead.

Australians serving around the world experienced mixed emotions. They could look forward to returning home, but thoughts turned also to mates who did not live to see peace. In operational areas, troops let off flares during celebrations, or toasted the war's end from water bottles or mugs of tea, some staying alert in case of a last minute attack. The 14,000 Australian prisoners of war still alive in Japanese prison camps had to wait longer for their captors to admit the war was over – some died, or were killed, before the news was broken.

For some servicemen and women, the war's end meant they could start a new life: establish careers, marry and build homes. For others, it meant they could pick up where their civilian life had stopped when they enlisted.

Those who had suffered as prisoners of war or internees, or as a result of their war service, often faced a struggle to recover. The tenacity, spirit and courage of veterans in recovering after the war has been respected and revered by Australians ever since.

VP Day signaled a time of renewed hope and enthusiasm after the dark years of the war. In the months following, Australian servicemen and women returned to Australian shores. Soon, a

new wave of immigrants arrived from Europe. Many were veterans themselves, while others had been civilians caught up in the war's horrors, including the Holocaust. There came also 'war brides' who had married Australian servicemen; while others fare welled Australians who sailed for other countries after marrying foreign servicemen.

Some one million Australians served during the World War II; almost 40,000 were killed and 30,000 were taken prisoner.

John Hirst Edmondson, the first Australian to be awarded a Victoria Cross during World War II, was born in Wagga Wagga in New South Wales in 1914. His parents' only son, Edmondson was 26 when he enlisted and was posted to the 2/17th Battalion AIF.

On 13 April 1941, he was involved in a bayonet charge against a party of German troops on the perimeter of the Australian-held area. The Australians were outnumbered and during the hand-to-hand fighting his platoon commander, Lieutenant F Austin Mackell, called for help. Edmondson, despite being mortally wounded himself, managed to shoot or bayonet at least three of the enemy. Mackell survived but John Edmondson 'lay all night on a stretcher at the back of the battle pit' and died the next morning on 14 April 1941.



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On 14 June 1941, Lieutenant-Colonel John Crawford, his Commanding Officer, wrote to Edmondson's father in Liverpool, NSW:

His extreme gallantry was such that I submitted a certain recommendation for an Award of a Decoration by the GOC Middle East. My recommendation has now been returned with a suggestion that the circumstances were such as to warrant a posthumous award of the Victoria Cross. I have now submitted such a recommendation, and have every hope that it will be granted. If so, it will be the first award to a member of the AIF.

[Letter of 14 June 1941 to Mr Edmondson from Lt-Col John Crawford, 2/17th Bn AIF. AWM PR89/56]

John's parents received the news of his award on 4 July 1941.

World War II was Australia's first and only taste of global war that reached our shores. Men and women were called upon to serve in the armed forces or merchant navy or in essential

industries. Nearly one million served in uniform – most in the Pacific or on the home front. The war ultimately cost 40,000 Australian lives. Of these, 19,000 servicemen and women, more than 600 merchant seamen and several hundred civilians lost their lives in the Pacific and south-east Asian theatres, including more than 8000 who died in captivity.

On 2 September 1945, on board the American battleship USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay in Japan, Australia joined other Allied signatories to accept Japan's formal surrender, reflecting the critical role Australia had played in her defeat.