



**R S L N S W**

### **James Brown, RSL NSW President VP Day Speech 2018**

Your Excellency, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, and most importantly the veterans and their families who are here amongst us today. This land's custodians are the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and I pay my respects to you. And I particularly want to pay my respects to those veterans of the Pacific Campaign who we are fortunate to have amongst us here today. I am immensely proud to offer you thanks on behalf of the League, on behalf of this city, this state, and this country for the service you have given us so that we can be here today commemorating and acknowledging victory in the Pacific. This day belongs to you and your grandchildren.

The RSL's motto for much of the past century has been "the price of liberty is eternal vigilance", and I want to speak to you about vigilance here today.

But first let us try and imagine what this day 73 years ago. As we've heard, the declaration of Victory in the Pacific came in the morning. And not long after 9am, this place was filled with thousands of Australians, celebrating in such a way that the Sydney Morning Herald's journalists described it as a form of "mild lunacy".

From the windows above us and around us, the Sydney Morning Herald described "synthetic snowstorms falling upon the revellers below" and the streets around us were buried in masses of paper which spread a rustling carpet throughout the streets. As the journalists put it: "many great telephone directories were sacrificed in the celebration that day". But the feat of Sydneysiders fell on them happily.

We are a smaller crowd today. It is hard for us to think that nearly a million of Australia's seven million-strong population served during the Second World War on our behalf. To put that in today's terms, that would be the equivalent of the entire population of Melbourne being in uniform, nearly 3.5 million people. 1 in 12 Australians served overseas. And of course, 40,000 Australians paid the ultimate sacrifice both here and abroad. And today, as we have every year for the past 73 years, we honour that sacrifice by the laying of wreaths against stone.

The scale of the Second World War is perhaps best marked in its ending. Planning for Australia's demobilisation began in early January 1945. Nearly 600,000 personnel had to be brought home. The majority of whom had known nothing but continuous military life for more than three years. Those of us here in the audience today who have served know all too well that when you're in the military your time is rarely your own. And so for all those hundreds of thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen and airwomen who returned to our shores and this city, demobilisation for them meant freedom for the first time in many years, as they returned to their families and homes.

And for those Australians serving here on the home front, the end of the war meant freedom for them too. The ability to once again travel interstate without having to ask permission. Being able to leave your lights on at night and not fear for the repercussions. A return to normality and the small luxuries of everyday life. Freedom from the fear and uncertainty of six years of fighting. Victory brought light, and it brought life, back to this city.

In the months after the war ended, 3,000 soldiers a day were demobilised – the demobilisation centres worked six days a week. And the soldiers who returned sought employment, assistance to purchase tools and take up their former trades. For my grandfather, who served in New Guinea, that meant finding his job back in the furniture shop that he worked in before he joined the Corps. They wanted land settlements, they wanted housing, and above all else they wanted training to get back to being everyday citizens.

In the years after the Second World War nearly 17,000 demobilised soldiers went on to complete university degrees, many of them going on to serve with distinction in public life. By the middle of February 1947, there were just 60,000 left in the Australian navy and military. For those who had returned, for those who had fought, for those who had served, beyond normal life, beyond their families, what they wanted above all was to continue their camaraderie that they had experienced in military life; to find somewhere they could reflect on their experiences, to seek the support of their colleagues and comrades in arms.

And so many thousands joined the RSL and other organisations. Our members, when they returned, made plans for a new League headquarters here on Martin Place – and their plans might have surprised you. In the foyer of their new headquarters they wanted a children's creche, so that families would be welcomed. They wanted an auditorium, so that ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen could receive educational training, and better themselves for their new lives ahead. And they wanted a war correspondents' room, so that their stories could and would be told in the years to come. The people of Sydney took up a collection, heard this call, and committed to provide returned soldiers, sailors and airmen with their new home. And in that new home, ANZAC House, inscribed in the foyer: "the price of liberty is eternal vigilance".

73 years on from the end of the war, the service and sacrifice of our veterans demands that our vigil continue.

First, that we may remain free. In our region, on this Pacific Ocean today, there are still countries where you cannot be free. Without laws that are fair. We must be vigilant to ensure

our democracy prospers, that it is sustained, that we cannot be bullied or coerced. And that our way of life and our system of government can remain sovereign to all Australians.

This requires us to be vigilant for our security. The peace settlements of 1945 sought to drive militarism from this part of the world forever. But we have not achieved that yet. Defence spending is growing faster in the Asia Pacific than in any other part of the globe. And less than two generations after the horror of Hiroshima, new nuclear-armed powers are menacing our region. The waters of South China Sea are now watched by missiles and machine guns, and submarine fleets in this region alone will grow by more than 20% in the next 8 years. Maintaining peace in the Pacific is getting harder and must be more present in our thinking.

And lastly, we must remain vigilant for our veterans and their families, who have given so much, who have seen so much, and who demand our status, our respect and our recognition. It is fitting that this year will see the Invictus Games come to Sydney. Their message is much the same as it was in 1945: 'unconquered'. It will bring the veterans family together in a way that we haven't seen before, and help us to reflect, pause, and commemorate the service of our veterans, and our ongoing commitment to look after them and their families.

This cenotaph is stark, and yet beautiful. But it's nothing if not a scar on the sandstone heart of our city. The men and women who lovingly built it over many years had no idea when it was opened in 1927, that only 12 years later they would be engaged in a fight for Australia's survival. The scars of Australian service and sacrifice can still be seen today – in the Ironbottom Sound of the Solomon Islands, in Timor, in the Indian Ocean, in the Coral Sea, in Malaysia, and Singapore, and Papua New Guinea, and Burma, in Darwin, and Townsville, and of course in many homes here too.

Lest we forget