

**BATTLE FOR AUSTRALIA COMMEMORATION**  
**THE CENOTAPH, MARTIN PLACE, SYDNEY**  
**4 SEPTEMBER 2024**  
**BRIGADIER PHILLIP BRIDIE, AM, ADC**

Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen,

Today we commemorate what Prime Minister Curtin called the “Battle for Australia”. In 1942, when Australia was under its greatest threat after the Fall of Singapore on 15 February, he warned:

“The fall of Singapore can only be described as Australia's Dunkirk ... [The] fall of Dunkirk initiated the battle for Britain. **The fall of Singapore opens the Battle for Australia.**”

“What the battle for Britain required, so the battle for Australia requires ....”

He further stated that: “The protection of this country is no longer that of a contribution to a world at war but the resistance to an enemy threatening to invade our own shore ... It is now work or fight as we have never worked or fought before ... On what we do now depends everything we may like to do when this bloody test has been survived.”

A few days later, on 19 February 1942 the Australian mainland was attacked by Japanese aircraft during the Bombing of Darwin.

We commemorate the “Battle for Australia” on the first Wednesday in September as this day represents the first defeat of Japanese forces on land during the Battle of Milne Bay, which they evacuated by 7 September.

This year is the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1944. Our darkest days were behind us by then of the back of the hard-fought victories of 1942 & '43. But the war in the Pacific still had some way to go & 1944 saw tough campaigns & sacrifice for Australian forces.

In the Battle of Australia, our troops were mainly engaged in land battles in New Guinea, the defeat of the Japanese at Wau, & in clearing the Huon peninsula. This was Australia's largest & most complex offensive of the war & was not completed until April 1944. The Australian army also began a new series of campaigns against isolated Japanese garrisons stretching from Borneo to Bougainville, involving more Australian troops than at any other time in the war. The first of these campaigns was fought on Bougainville & New Britain, & at Aitape, New Guinea.

On 5 August, Japanese prisoners of war housed in the detention camp in Cowra, NSW staged a breakout with 545 Japanese prisoners escaping from the camp. 231 Japanese soldiers died & four Australia soldiers were killed.

On 21 October, in the arguably the first attack of this nature, the heavy cruiser *HMAS Australia*, operating in the Philippines, was hit by a kamikaze aircraft, killing 20 including the Captain, Emile Dechaineux, & wounding 54.

On 25 November, Reg Saunders of the 2/17<sup>th</sup> Battalion became the first Aboriginal commissioned officer in the Australian Army.

I have the honour of being the Honorary Colonel of the 1<sup>st</sup> / 15<sup>th</sup> Royal NSW Lancers. My Regiment changed names a few times during WW2 serving in New Guinea as the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion in 1943 & '44, & in Balikpapan in '45 as the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Regiment. This year saw the passing of the Lancers' last WW2 veteran, LCPL Bert Castellari, at the age of 100. During the war, Bert was the CO's loader/operator, which meant he was a soldier of immense talent, as only the best served in the CO's tank crew. He participated in all these battles & was at the Battle of Balikpapan in July '45, our last major operation of the war. The Battle of Australia website has an article from Bert called “Down

a Steep Slope”, which relates a rather hair-raising story of his negotiating a very steep hill in New Guinea driving a Matilda tank. This he did himself, as the rest of the crew had sensibly “jumped ship”. After the War he returned to his pre-war occupation in newspapers & he was a war correspondent for the Sydney Morning Herald during the Korean War; the AWM has a photo of him in Korea on their website. In Canberra in the seventies, he worked as press secretary to five ministers of the Hawke Government. In recent years he has been in constant correspondence with the Regimental Association, & a valued contributor. I had the privilege of visiting Bert this year for his 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday in Canberra, along with the CO, RSM & the Regiment’s youngest soldier. He was still living in his own home, well loved by his neighbours & still cogent & quick witted. His loss for the Lancers is significant as the last of his ilk.

We tend to concentrate on those service personnel on the front line in battles. However, preparing & training for war & providing the essential support for operations is inherently dangerous. Many Australians from the three Services, died or were injured in what we euphemistically call “non-battle” casualties. Flying particularly so, & there were some 6,300 RAAF non-battle casualties in the War, a high percentage of these killed.

Last year I had the opportunity to visit my great uncle, FO Daniel Courtman in the Commonwealth War Grave Commission’s, Townsville War Cemetery. Daniel was killed on 6 July 1943 in an 8 Squadron Beaufort bomber, A9-264, which was destroyed by fire after a forced landing two miles southwest of the Bohle River air strip near Townsville. 8 Squadron was a torpedo bomber squadron & conducting pre deployment training to take their part in the “Battle for Australia” before they moved to Goodenough Island in the Solomon Sea off the mainland of Papua New Guinea. Next to Daniel are the three other crewmen killed in the accident; FLGOFF John Goodisson, FLTSGT David Cole, & PLTOFF John Mitchell. Their headstones were pristine as was the lawn & gardens, a fitting tribute to their memory & sacrifice. If you haven’t visited a Commonwealth War Grave here or overseas, I strongly recommend you do so. It is a moving experience.

As continuing evidence to these inherent dangers, there is the recent loss of four of our soldiers in the MRH-90 Taipan helicopter accident in Queensland on 28 July last year, & the loss of 18 lives in the Black Hawk helicopter tragedy at the Townsville Field Training Area on 12 June 1996.

Today as the number of those who stood up & served our Country in WW2 is rapidly diminishing, we remember their service & sacrifice. Freedom has a price. Freedom is the reward of their courage & conviction to defend our country against all odds & for all people. We honour their legacy by cherishing & nurturing this hard fought freedom.

**Lest We Forget**