

Speech

Address By

His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd)

On the occasion of

Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Fall of Singapore

Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial, Ballarat
15 February 2017

Singapore was supposed to be an impregnable fortress.

The 'Gibraltar of the East'.

The centre of British naval power in Asia.

The guarantor of Australia's security.

But after just a week of resistance, the Island fell on the 15th of February 1942.

Suddenly and sharply, Australians realised that our future, our security, our survival, was now at stake.

The great fortress of the British Empire in the East had fallen!

Still fighting for its own survival on the other side of the world Britain was no longer in a position to defend its, or Australia's, interests in Asia.

The ties to Britain that had bound us so strongly since colonial times were not ruptured, but were loosened.

And the focus of our war effort and our alliances shifted, and shifted irrevocably.

The fall of Singapore was a turning point, a seminal moment, in the war and whose influence on our security and strategic outlook are still felt to this day.

But the fall of Singapore was not only a strategic defeat.

It also brought a terrible human cost.

For the thousands of Australians who surrendered, along with so many others, it marked the beginning of an ordeal of unimaginable horror and brutality....

at Changi;

at Sandakan;

on the Thai Burma Railway;

and beyond;

...a fate awaited that should be visited upon no human being.

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They suffered as no one should ever suffer.

They were treated as slaves:

- Tortured.
- Degraded.
- Starved and beaten.
- Marched and worked to the brink of exhaustion, to the edge of death—and beyond.

It belies comprehension, there could be no justification.

Amongst all this, they were resilient, displaying mateship, ingenuity, compassion and camaraderie.

For those magnificent, gallant men and women—whether in uniform or not—theirs was not the explosive and immediate courage of the battlefield on land, sea or in the air.

It was instead a form of ‘slow burn’ courage—stoic, enduring, often unto death—a courage of daily sacrifice and determination not to give in, not to despair.

This redeemable fortitude got many through those dark times.

It eased the suffering of those who did not survive.

And preserved the dignity and humanity that captivity and ill-treatment cannot dampen or displace.

I acknowledge the veterans here today.

What you endured, the story of your service and sacrifice, touches us all.

You hold a special place in my heart and in the heart of this nation.

Three quarters of a century on, we remember the fall of Singapore.

An event which in so many ways defined our spirit, our fortitude and our place in the world.

Thank you.

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