

ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY MS QUENTIN BRYCE AC
GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF
OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE HALL OF VALOUR
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL, CANBERRA
21 FEBRUARY 2011

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to join you here this evening, at our treasured War Memorial.

It has been a special and sacred place for me since I first visited when I was at university.

There's a constancy and assurance in its presence, its handsome bearing its gentle, compassionate touch.

This ageless shrine holds our nation's memory of human endeavour and sacrifice in war.

Across generations, meticulous custodians have unwrapped the Memorial's annals for all Australians

to see: you've urged us to come in close, helped us make sense of them, and been sure to place them, at the heart of our country's history and maturing.

This Hall of Valour is a natural and timely progression of this undertaking.

In the regathering and reframing, the demeanour and arrangement of this space seek to reflect our experience of contemporary life, and our anticipation of where it may take us next.

Friends, the Victoria Cross, the highest acknowledgement of bravery in battle, was instituted more than 150 years ago by Queen Victoria.

In 1956, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, spoke at a parade in London's Hyde Park to mark the centenary of that occasion.

In recalling that troops from throughout the Commonwealth had received the supreme award, she said:

They were men of all ranks, and they came from all walks of life.

They were different colours and creeds.

They fought in many lands and with many different weapons.

But their stories are linked by a golden thread of extraordinary courage.

Each man…gave the best that a man can give and all too many gave their lives.

Among them, of course, were Australian men.

A select number had received the revered imperial honour before 1991, whereupon we instituted our own - the Victoria Cross for Australia - now the highest award for valour that we, as a nation, can bestow.

In a continuing tradition we refer to both as "the Victoria Cross" - its rigorous underpinnings preserved,

upheld and enforced.

There are 98 Australians who have received the Victoria Cross, and their actions span more than a century.

The first awards were to 6 members of the colonial forces in the Boer War.

Following that, there were 66 awards during the First World War; 20 in the Second World War; and 4 in the Vietnam War.

In the last couple of years, I've been privileged in this role to present the Victoria Cross for Australia to Corporal Mark Donaldson and Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith for their conspicuous acts of gallantry in action, in circumstances of extreme peril in Afghanistan.

These investitures have a profound and potent mood.

We search for words to acknowledge deeds and sentiments that dwell far beyond our familiar realm.

Silence and stillness are vested with a rare gravity.

And somehow the weight of the fine, distinguished medal, its gun metal and tightly woven crimson ribbon, its unqualified declaration: "For Valour" seem to best enunciate the extraordinary actions and character that it honours.

Vital leadership in times of mortal danger.

Rescuing comrades at the risk of one's own life.

Standing fast against overwhelming odds.

It is right that we recognise these transcendent human qualities; that we draw courage and inspiration from them; that they are our touchstones and our source of eternal hope.

Ladies and gentlemen, Captain Neville Howse was the first Australian to receive the Victoria Cross in South Africa in 1900.

His citation is succinct: "Captain Howse went out under a very heavy cross-fire and picked up a wounded man and carried him to a place of safety".

He went on in later years to extend his reputation and achieve high rank.

In the First World War, Lance Corporal Albert Jacka earned the supreme award on Gallipoli.

It was the first to an Australian in that war, and made Jacka a national hero.

His status was later affirmed when he gained the Military Cross and Bar as an officer in France, for acts considered by some to have equalled that for which he received the Victoria Cross.

Lieutenant Tom "Diver" Derrick was seen by many as the embodiment of all the best characteristics attributed to the Australian digger.

Tough, with a larrikin grin, he was also intelligent and thoughtful.

He gained the Victoria Cross in New Guinea in 1943.

The news of his death the following year devastated those in the ranks, and across the broader nation.

Within his division it seemed, as one soldier said, that "the whole war stopped".

In 1942, returning from a bombing operation to Italy, Pilot Officer Rawdon Middleton, who was badly wounded, flew his crippled bomber back to Britain and strained to allow his crew time to escape, before he crashed into the sea and was killed.

One of those he saved later wrote that his act was "an example of the unwritten law ... that a crew always endeavours to get back…and…that a pilot must think of his crew before himself".

In Vietnam, Warrant Officer Kevin "Dasher" Wheatley was killed after refusing to leave a mortally wounded mate.

His citation concludes: "His acts of heroism, determination and unflinching loyalty in the face of the enemy will always stand as examples of the true meaning of valour."

Friends, until recently, many people had no memory of a Victoria Cross being awarded to an Australian in their lifetime.

There had been no further awards since Keith Payne was awarded for his service as a warrant officer in Vietnam in 1969.

And it would be 40 years before the first award of the new Victoria Cross for Australia: to Corporal Donaldson, in 2009, and Corporal Roberts-Smith, only last month.

These 3 heroes are with us this evening.

They stay with us as strong, calm, exceptional forces of sensibility, reason, resilience, and courage.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am privileged once more to honour all that they exemplify in declaring open this magnificent and precious Hall of Valour at our Australian War Memorial.