I join Major General McLachlan in acknowledging the distinguished guests present this afternoon.

I also join in acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathering and pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and to any Elders with us today.

It was, like this morning, a chilly morning, on Wednesday 15 August 1945.

At 9.30am, those sitting around the family or workplace wireless - there was of course no TV, let alone electronic devices - would have heard their Prime Minister Ben Chifley, utter these long-awaited words:

“Fellow citizens, the war is over”.

Announcing then that the Japanese Government had accepted the terms of surrender, he continued:

“Let us remember those whose lives were given that we may enjoy this glorious moment and may look forward to a peace which they have won for us.”

There was no long oration. No chest-beating or scoring of points. Just a simple but dignified announcement of peace, and an expression of gratitude for the sacrifice made on behalf of others.

There was then of course, widespread jubilation. But it needs to be considered in context.

Victory in Europe had been announced just a few months before, on the 8th of May. It was met with what has been described as a “sombre air”.

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Victorians did mark the day – with over 100,000 gathering at the Shrine of Remembrance the following morning - but there was no escaping the fact: war was ongoing, and it was on our doorstep.

Our troops were still fighting. In fact, our troops were still engaged in Borneo to the very day that Prime Minister Chifley had made the long-awaited announcement of victory.

The tension that had built over the six years since war was declared, had only risen in the months that followed the Victory in Europe. Many sensed the end of the War was probably close. But they sensed too that it may not have been close enough to save their loved ones still fighting or still suffering in prisoner of war camps, in the Pacific.

And so, as noted in The Age on the 60th Anniversary of VP day, the “unprecedented scenes that erupted across Melbourne” were a result of “six years of pent-up emotion” finally bursting and overwhelming the nation.

There are many photos and accounts of the jubilation that followed Chifley’s announcement.

There’s also a striking soundtrack of a young ABC reporter’s account of the Victory Parade, albeit in Martin Place Sydney, just one hour after the news came through.

It was the voice of a broadcaster that many of us, at least those of us over “a certain age”, can readily recognise as Talbot Duckmanton, later Sir Talbot Duckmanton and the General Manager of the ABC. But right then, he was just a 23 year old reporter who had seen active service as a pilot, and who was now painting evocative word pictures of all that he could see in the streets.

The obvious noise of the crowd, the unusually light lilt in his otherwise well-modulated voice, and the abandonment of what was commonly a more restrained expression than he was currently using, made the joy of the occasion palpably clear.

He described “thousands and thousands of people”, and in describing Martin Place as full of “men, women and girls”, he allowed himself to editorialise, (I might add, quite in keeping with the time and the occasion), that they were “lovely girls too…..hundreds of them!”

Such observations could have applied equally to the scene unfolding in Melbourne.

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Crowds gathered in Swanston Street and in front of Flinders Street Station. They danced through Bourke Street, tearing and tossing business papers, flowers and all sorts of “unofficial confetti”.

But underlying the jubilation, there was a deep sense of loss. It could not be masked by the spontaneous moment of joy and relief.

Shortly after describing the ecstatic response of the Martin Place crowd, Duckmanton had hit a more sober note, describing the freshly laid flowers at the Cenotaph. He then observed that despite all the gaiety and rejoicing taking place across the nation, they had not forgotten that “our men, and our allies too, have paid a high price so we may rejoice in this way”.

And what a high price it had been.

Whilst the impact of war, and loss of life, can never be conveyed by numbers alone, the numbers do underscore the unbearable toll on young lives, and the shockwaves felt by so many families.

In total, over 39,000 of our men and our women lost their lives in the Second World War, the majority in the Pacific.

More than 30,000 were taken prisoner, some 22,000 of them during the Pacific campaign, and of those, 8,000 never returned. Forced work on the Thai – Burma railway, alone led to the deaths of over 2,500 Australians.

From September 1939 to August 1945, almost one million Australian men and women served in campaigns across the globe. Initially they fought in Europe, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Greece, Crete and the Mediterranean.

When Japan entered the War in December 1941, the nature of the threat to our nation dramatically changed. It was a particularly devastating time for the Allies as they fought to stop the advance of the Japanese through the Pacific in Malaya, Singapore, Timor, the Dutch East Indies and Papua New Guinea.

Attacks on Australian soil, in Darwin on the 19th February 1942 and very soon after in and Broome, during which over 350 Australians died, undermined any sense of security people might have felt here at home.
Anxiety was naturally heightened by the attacks on Sydney Harbour, Newcastle and Townsville that followed, as well as the continued bombing of Darwin.

Although the Battles of the Coral Sea, Midway, Milne Bay and the Kokoda Track between May and August in that same year did mark a turning point in the Pacific, the War was still far from over. The final bombing of Darwin - the 64th raid on the city - did not occur until 12 November 1943, well over 20 months after the initial attack.

In the midst of the devastation, there were innumerable stories of courage and resilience, of mateship and sacrifice. It is difficult to convey the scale of gallantry and fortitude displayed by our troops, over and over again.

The feats of Weary Dunlop are, of course, well known. And we know that twenty Australian soldiers received the Victoria Cross – our highest honour for valour - in World War 2, over half of them, in recognition of their actions in the Pacific.

But there were many others as well who demonstrated extraordinary courage and compassion in the face of an overwhelming and pervasive sense of defeat. Captain Ben Buckler was one.

Alone, he pushed through the tortuous Kokoda Track without sleep, without food and vulnerable to attack, to obtain air support for his wounded and weary contingent. His men later wrote “But for Captain Buckler, not one would have survived”.

And there are stories of astounding resilience and the strength of will to survive.

Sister Vivian Bullwinkel, an Australian nurse, was aboard the Vyner Brooke when it was sunk by Japanese bombers. She made it to shore with a group of soldiers and nurses.

The men were killed. The nurses were then ordered to walk out to sea where they were gunned down. Sister Bullwinkel lay still in the shallow waters waiting for a chance to escape, whilst her sisters lay lifeless beside her. She was later captured and spent three and a half years as a prisoner of war alongside many others, suffering relentless disease and malnutrition.

These are no more than a few brief sketches of the selfless heroism played out over and again by our soldiers in the Pacific.
This morning we were fortunate enough to host a number of the veterans at Government House. They shared with us some of the acts of great bravery that they had seen.

It is an interesting fact that they will more readily talk of the heroics they observed in their mates, than talk of themselves. But they were all heroic in the service they gave.

And although this morning there are inevitably reminiscences of the jubilation that, 70 years ago to this very day, was on display in every city and town across the nation, what is paramount is the commemoration of those young men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice and did not return home.

It is the recognition that many a soldier and nurse was never lucky enough to enjoy the many post-war pleasures that we have enjoyed.

They weren’t able to cluster around a television to watch “Leave it to Beaver”, “Father Knows Best” or “Sea Hunt”.

They didn’t feel the pride and excitement of watching “golden girl” Betty Cuthbert run in the 1956 Olympics. They never got swept up in Beatlemania, or marvelled when man first walked on the moon.

They never saw our distinctive Arts Centre Spire, never heard rock and roll, never knew of Menzies or Hawke, that Princess Elizabeth would reign as Queen for more than 60 years, that Everest would be conquered, or that hearts would be transplanted.

Above all, they never grew old with their sweetheart or watched their children have children, or saw the love in the eyes of their elderly parents when they just called around for a cup of tea and a chat.

We reflect today too on those who did come home, but whose enjoyment of all of those things was forever muted by the tragedy and trauma of what they had seen and endured during the War: things that no person should ever see or endure.

I want to be honest. I had initially approached this occasion with some trepidation. Trepidation borne only from the immense sense of responsibility I felt to do justice to such an important commemoration, and to those who died, were injured or forever changed. I felt ill-equipped to meet the task, conscious that I had no first-hand experience of the war in the Pacific.
However, I realise that I am part of a generation - no, generations - who have no first-hand experience either.

I realise that my generation are now becoming the “grown-ups”, the elders, the ones who must step up to ensure that the important stories are told. The stories given to us, like the ones given to me this morning, must be carefully conveyed to younger generations.

We are all like the runners in an Olympic relay event. As the baton is passed, we must prepare to pass it seamlessly to those running behind us in the hope that one day they will do the same.

And what we must reflect on today is the understanding that we are able to see, experience and enjoy all manner of freedoms, safety, inventions, good deeds and wonders because of the sacrifices made by all those men and women who served in the Pacific, when the threats to us were so very close.

And it is that reflection that enables us all, of any generation, no matter how far from 15 August 1945, to understand the deep resonance of the words: LEST WE FORGET.