



Talk by Tom Uren at the Opening of Legacy Week - 23 August 2007

Thankyou for inviting me to be with you today.

I am aware of the wonderful work your organisation does for the children of servicemen and women who have dies due to their war service.

Today I thought I would talk to you about some of my own war experiences. It is without ego - I am now 86 years old - or as an Asian friend of mine said to me, "I have seen 86 Spring times".

In WWII, I joined the Royal Australian Artillery in October 1939. I was 18 years old and was stationed at North Head, Sydney. In mid 1941 I was transferred to the 2/1 Heavy Battery. We were destined to man two, six inch guns in Koepang - in West Timor. The battle of West Timor was brutal but after four days of battle our officers surrendered to an overwhelming force of Japanese militarists.

We were later transferred to Java, then on to Singapore for a short time. After that we travelled for five or six days on those heartless goods trucks to Bampong, then by truck to Konyu Camp, which formed one of a network of camps on the proposed railway to "house" prisoners - which included British, Dutch, Australians, a small body of Americans and many thousands of Asian work forces - although I never saw any camp where the Asian labour had shelter.

I was part of a small few that were cut off from the Timor crowd and attached to the Dunlop Group. I walked into Konyu Camp on January 26th 1943 and remained under his leadership for the next one and a half years. Little did I know that Col. Dunlop's group

travelled on the same ship as us from Java to Singapore!

From Konyu we moved to Hintock Mountain Camp then Hintock River Camp, then to Kinsayok, where we saw the first train to move through on the railway. We were transferred to Tamuan Camp and from there I was moved back to Singapore, then on to Byoki Maru (sick ship) that took a 70 day journey to Moji on the Island of Kyushu.

For the first nine months of the last year of the war I worked at a copper smelting works at Saganasaki. Then after three months of the war I was transferred to camp in Omuta - a lead smelting factory. Omuta was about 80 kilometres from Nagasaki.

There are many people and experiences that have nurtured my life. But my experiences serving under Weary Dunlop has had a lifelong and lasting experience on me.

We were at a place called Hintock Road camp or as Weary called in Hintock "*Mountain*" Camp. "*Weary*" that is a name of respect. He would tax our officers and medical orderlies and the men who went out to work would be paid a small wage. We would contribute most of it to a central fund.

Weary would send some of our people out into the jungle to trade with the Thai and Chinese traders for food and drugs for those who were sick and needy. In our camp the strong looked after the weak; the young looked after the old; the fit looked after the sick. We collectivised a great portion of our income.

Just as the wet season set in a group of about 400 British camped near us - for shelter they had tents. The officers took the best tents, the NCO's the next best and the ordinary soldiers got the dregs. Within six weeks only about 50 of them marched out; they died of dysentery and cholera. In the mornings when we would walk out to work, their corpses would be lying in the mud as we walked passed

them. Only a creek separated our two camps. On the one side the survival of the fittest, the law of the jungle prevailed and on the other side the collective spirit under Weary. That spirit has always remained with me.

If I was asked two and a half years as a prisoner what I thought of the Japanese, my feelings towards them was so strong I would have exterminated them from the planet.

During the first nine months of the last year of the war we were at Seganasaki, and we worked three shifts. There were no bathing facilities back in our camp, so after each shift we would use a communal bath, the Japanese workers, the indentured Korean workers and our Australians. We couldn't speak their language nor could they speak ours. As the body language came into play, the eyes, hands and heart. We discovered they were hungry and didn't want war.

The Japanese were older, kind and considerate. The humanism in my soul evolved and I discovered I didn't hate the Japanese but the militarism and fascism and I have developed that position all my life. I have been asked many times about the cruelty of our treatment. I express the view "it was indescribable". If I may I will give you a few statistical details which tell its own story.

Of our 22,000 service men and women that were captured in Malaya and Singapore, through what was then the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia and onto Rabaul, we represented 4% of all Australians that saw active service in WWII. But we represented 30% of the Australians that died on active service in WWII.

When our people returned home, (due to the horrific living conditions, the starvation experienced and the barbarity of our captors), they died at a rate four times greater than other Australian veterans.

Today, out of the original 22,000 only 1,200 are surviving and

only one third of them receive the TPI Pension.

The last camp I was in was Omuta which was a large camp of 1,700 prisoners, a mixture of British, Dutch, Australians and Americans from Batah and Corrigardore.

It was from Omuta that I saw the discolouration of the sky when the bomb exploded on Nagasaki.

We didn't know what it was; the Japanese guards who were a vicious group started issuing Red Cross parcels saying big boom war all over! At the time, like other prisoners, I was glad they had dropped the bomb, however as I have evolved I think the exploding of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a crime against humanity. I visited Japan in 1960 and spent some time in Hiroshima and again in 1990 when I visited Nagasaki and on both occasions I visited Kyoto.

"What lingers in my mind is the beauty of the gardens in Kyoto, during my 1990 visit: I stayed several days and was able to explore many of the gardens. One, in particular, was Sanzen - In Temple, one of the three imperial Buddhist Cathedrals and an exquisite, sensitive and serene environment. As I sat and meditated in those beautiful surroundings, my thoughts wandered back to the sadistic thuggery and brutality I suffered under the Japanese militarists for so many long years and I thought that the people who created this environment must have beautiful hearts, minds and souls. This is a side of the Japanese nature that the world should know more about."

Each year I speak to visiting Japanese students; during one such event in September 2005, I was speaking to a group of young Japanese at Macquarie University in Sydney. During the period of dialogue, one young Japanese student asked. "Mr Uren, what is your

philosophy?" I quoted the principles I lived by during my parliamentary life.

When I returned home I set it out on paper.

Tom Uren's Philosophy

- The strong should look after the weak.
- The young look after the NOT so young.
- The fit look after the sick.
- We should collectivise a substantial portion of our income to help protect our sick, needy and our people.
- We need to seek a more tolerant world.
- We should defend human and civil rights, wherever they are violated.
- Oppose violence, in a personal, national and international level. Oppose war as a solution to international problems.
- Protect, enhance and rehabilitate our environment. If we destroy it we are destroying a part of ourselves.
- Recognise we are inter-related to one another. Australians should recognise we are part of our planet.
- Why is it in time of crisis - we need each other?
- Why in normal times can't we be more of a collective?
- We should build friendship and understanding between people and nations.

That is not to say that I have not certain concerns about "Japanese governments". They failed to allow their education system to tell students about the crimes of their militarist during the 1930's and 1940's.

Even with those reservations, we have built a healthy relationship between the Australian and Japanese people in the post world WWII.

It is with great pleasure I declare open Legacy Week.