We come together this morning, young and old, friends and allies, to commemorate a watershed period in the history and, indeed, survival of civilised society.

A pivotal moment not just in the liberation of enemy-occupied France, but in the defeat of tyranny worldwide during World War II.

The historic and heroic events of D-day, 6 June 1944, on the Normandy coastline have come to be known as “The Longest Day”.

This was a logistically complex and daring Allied operation – huge in scope, meticulous in its planning, brilliant in its secrecy and deception measures, and, by any measure, stunningly successful.

In simple terms, D-day constituted the largest over-the-water invasion force ever assembled in human history.

Although Australia’s contribution was relatively small, it was still significant, valuable and at the centre of things.

Somewhere between 2500 and 3000 Australians took part in land, sea and air operations on D-day and in the period immediately before and after – and their story will be told in more detail later.

But suffice to say that those Australian men, including 14 who gave their lives in France on 6 June and the more than 200 who died in the wider seven-week battle for Normandy, served gallantly and with great distinction.

They demonstrated that although Australia, with almost one million men and women under arms, had been dealing with determined enemies in the Middle East and those on and near our own shores in the Pacific, we remained committed to the common cause of liberating Europe and defeating the Nazis.

Ladies and gentlemen.

As the tide and tempo of World War II turned in favour of Allied forces by early 1944, the American supreme commander in Western Europe, General Eisenhower, assembled a formidable force for an amphibious landing on the north-eastern coast of France.

The planning for this huge undertaking had been carried out by General Sir Frederick Morgan, and it included cunning deception arrangements that completely fooled the Germans as to the location and timing of the landings.

The immense Allied force consisted of:

• 1200 fighting ships;
• 10,000 planes;
• more than 4000 landing craft;
• about 800 transport ships;
• and hundreds of tanks.

Most significantly, the invasion force included some 155,000 troops – about 73,000 from the United States, and the remainder being mostly British and Canadian.

The invasion was originally planned for May, but it was pushed back because of a lack of landing craft.

And with uncanny timing, the worst weather in the English Channel in 25 years forced a further 24-hour delay until 6 June – when General Eisenhower finally ordered “Go!”. 

When the invasion occurred, it came with great power and decisiveness.

Following the “softening-up” of German positions by bombers, along with various radar-jamming and diversionary operations, the Allied armada arrived off Normandy before dawn without having been attacked.

Surprise was complete.

The focus of the landing was a string of five beaches, codenamed Sword, Juno, Gold, Omaha and Utah.

At four of these beaches, the waves of soldiers that came ashore met only limited resistance, and casualties were relatively light.

The big exception, of course, was Omaha beach, where the American 1st and 29th Divisions faced ferocious opposition – so graphically portrayed in the movie Saving Private Ryan.

Heavy German machine-gun fire and the sinking of US tanks in deep water seriously threatened the success of the Omaha landing.

But after some 2400 men had been killed or wounded in a matter of hours, the gallant Americans eventually prevailed.

The land invasion was crucially supported by Allied air forces, which, by destroying many bridges to the south and east of the coast, prevented the Germans from quickly sending in reinforcements and armoured reserves – the basis of General von Rundstedt’s defensive plan.

By nightfall on 6 June, the Allies had virtually secured a major beachhead, and they were poised to begin a thrust through France and into the heart of Germany.

The landing, however, of more than 132,000 soldiers from the sea and another 23,000 airborne troops did not, in itself, signal victory.

The Allies had to pour even more troops, some two million, and supplies into battle, contend with bolstered German ground forces, and fend-off enemy submarines in the Channel.

Only after seven weeks of fighting could the Allies claim control over the whole of the Normandy area and undertake their planned advance eastward.

The 27 war cemeteries scattered across Normandy are a stark reminder of the terrible human cost of D-day and beyond.

Those cemeteries hold the bodies of 110,000 dead from both sides of the conflict – including 22,000 from Commonwealth countries and 9000 of the 29,000 Americans killed.

Today, in reliving the story of D-day and acknowledging the role played by Australians, we keep green the memory of that dramatic and strategically significant event 60 years ago.

We think, too, of the thousands taking part in commemorative events in Paris and Normandy this weekend.

We thank the people of France and their government most sincerely for bestowing the Legion of Honour on 10 gallant Australian veterans of D-day – including six with us here this morning.
There can be no more gracious or fitting gesture to mark this important anniversary.

And, above all, we honour the sacrifice and bravery of all Allied servicemen and women who took part in that crucial phase of World War II.

Ladies and gentlemen.

It’s been a great pleasure participating in this special service with you today.

Thank you for your support of those who did so much for us 60 years ago.

Thank you.

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