

## Speech

Address By

**His Excellency Major General Michael Jeffery AC CVO MC**  
**Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia**

On the occasion of

## The raising of the 39th Personnel Support Battalion

Shrine of Remembrance, Melbourne  
8 August 2006

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- Mr Bruce Mildenhall MP, Parliamentary Secretary to Premier and Cabinet, representing the Premier of Victoria
- Lieutenant General Peter Leahy AO, Chief of Army
- Major General Mark Kelly AM, Land Commander
- Brigadier Mick Kehoe, Commander 17 Brigade
- Mr Alan Moore, President, 39<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion Association and veterans of the 39<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion
- Lieutenant Colonel Daryl Clark and members of the 39th Personnel Support Battalion
- Mr Frederick Saku, representing the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels
- Ladies and gentlemen

Good afternoon, and very well done on a splendid parade.

As Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Defence Force - I am privileged to be here today to honour the members of the 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion – men I am proud to describe as amongst Australia’s most gallant soldiers, men to whom our nation is indebted for their heroic service on the Kokoda Track and in the later horrible fighting at Gona and Sanananda. Buna, Gona and Sanananda is a story about many great soldiers, units and Brigades; PTE Kinsbury VC, the 2/14<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 21<sup>st</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> Brigades; but today’s service is to honour the battalion that took the initial brunt of the onslaught – the 39<sup>th</sup>.

And it is the men of the 39<sup>th</sup> who are an important component of the living embodiment of the Kokoda legend – a legend which, with the passage of time and a growing awareness, may well rank alongside that of the original ANZAC’s in terms of courage displayed and hardships endured and overcome.

In 1942, no-one could have imagined that this previously untried, poorly equipped and poorly trained militia battalion of around 750 men, sent to Papua New Guinea, on a passive garrison role, would soon find itself engaged in a battle of significant strategic importance along the Kokoda Track.

Their selfless and courageous deeds, through individual and collective bravery of the highest order, delayed the Japanese advance on Port Moresby and its airfields, the capture of which way well have provided Japanese control of the sea approaches to Northern Australia. Such was the fury of the fighting, that by the end of the brutal Kokoda, Gona and Sanananda campaigns the unit’s strength had been reduced to fewer than forty.

The Kokoda campaign commenced on 21 July 1942 when Japanese forces landed by surprise on the north coast of Papua at Buna, and marching west, advanced rapidly across the Owen Stanley Ranges towards Port Moresby.

The Japanese were battle-hardened, well-equipped and specially trained for jungle warfare, numbering over five full strength battalions and supported by a sizeable array of combat support units including mountain artillery and combat engineers. The effect of this massed combat power was the ability to apply continued pressure upon the Australians and to therefore maintain the offensive. This advance caught the Australian High Command by surprise, such that the only unit available to immediately deploy to meet the imminent threat to Port Moresby was the 39<sup>th</sup> militia battalion.

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It was 'B' Coy, under Captain Templeton (later KIA), who had the unenviable task of taking the initial brunt of the Japanese advance from Buna, back to the Kumusi River then to Oivi, and finally to Deniki, when linking up with the rest of the battalion, it took part in the fierce battles at Kokoda and Isurava.

Indeed it was on this day, the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, sixty-four years ago that 'A' company of the 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion successfully counter-attacked and recaptured the village of Kokoda. After holding it for two and a half days against repeated heavy assaults the company was forced to withdraw to the battalion position at Deniki and after further hard fighting to withdraw again to fight in the gallant defence of Isurava.

In suffering the full brunt of the Japanese advance to Kokoda, the 39<sup>th</sup> had lost its first Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Bill Owen at Kokoda Village. Owen was temporarily replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Cameron and then by Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Honner who was a brilliant, battle experienced veteran of the Middle East. His orders were to hold the Japanese at Isurava, about 10 kilometres south of Kokoda.

Taking up his new command on 16 August 1942, he had found his soldiers already exhausted from fierce fighting in the most inhospitable of conditions, many suffering tropical diseases, and facing a numerically superior, confident and ruthless enemy.

Yet the 39<sup>th</sup> had been transformed into a remarkable unit – evidenced by an invalid contingent sent out of battle, defiantly returning back up the track to fight again when they heard their mates were in serious trouble.

Ralph Honner later wrote: *“When, on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the complete relief of the 39<sup>th</sup> was ordered for the following day, I had sent back, under Lieutenant Johnson the weakest of the battalion’s sick to have them one stage ahead of the long march to Moresby – they were too feeble for the fast moving fighting expected at the front.”* Two days later, Johnson, learning of the plight of the 2/14<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> Battalions, led his soldiers back – the fittest of the unfit returning into battle.

Barrett’s work, “We Were There” provides the essence: *“The battalion was in trouble, so twenty-seven out of thirty went back. The three who didn’t were minus a foot; had a bullet in the throat, and a forearm blown off. We never did it for God, King and Country – forget that. We did it because the 39<sup>th</sup> expected it of us.”*

Such conduct in the face of unimaginable odds, of men prepared to give every ounce they had, physically and mentally, when nothing more could reasonably be expected of them, epitomises the incomparable spirit of the 39<sup>th</sup>. After rest, reinforcement and re-equipping, the 39<sup>th</sup> went on to further its fighting reputation through its deeds in the bloody Battle for Gona in December 1942, in which it suffered 278 casualties from a unit strength of 350. It then took part in the equally heavy fighting for Sanananda, which saw the final defeat of the Japanese in the Kokoda campaign.

Regrettably however, the reward for the 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion’s exemplary service, was for it to be disbanded; removed from the Order of Battle on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 1943; its personnel scattered far and wide in random groups large and small throughout a number of AIF and militia units. And so it remained until today.

My friends, the 39<sup>th</sup> entered the annals of distinguished military history more than six decades ago but this occasion today ensures that the inspiring deeds of a magnificent battalion will be passed onto a new generation of Australian servicemen, the 39<sup>th</sup> Personnel Support Battalion. I know that 39 PSB will be feeling inordinately proud to inherit the responsibility for maintaining the splendid traditions of the original 39<sup>th</sup> with its extraordinary contribution to the Kokoda legend.

I speak from personal experience when I address the new 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion. I have been one of many thousands of Australian servicemen and women who have been prepared for operations by you. It is fitting that the re-raised 39<sup>th</sup>’s role is to ensure that our servicemen and women are properly prepared, equipped and supported while on operations.

This is in stark contrast to the men of the 39<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion, who were inadequately prepared for the tasks that faced them in New Guinea in 1942, and who had to rely on raw courage, determination and mateship in the face of overwhelming odds.

In every aspect, the 39<sup>th</sup> Personnel Support Battalion looks very different to the old 39<sup>th</sup>. Its organisation reflects recent developments in how the Australian Defence Force trains and fights. It is manned by officers, soldiers, sailors and airmen from each of the three Services. This is readily visible in the composition of the guard. The battalion is also well-served by embedded Australian Public Servants.

Of interest to the original 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion, is that over one-third of the unit is manned by reserve personnel. I have seen all of these components operate and I am proud to say that they work as one team, to produce a truly competent and joint service

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outcome.

The 39<sup>th</sup> Personnel Support Battalion has been structured into three companies. Headquartered in Randwick Barracks, in Sydney's eastern suburbs, the 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion also has elements located in Darwin, Townsville and Brisbane. I also note that there are some twenty personnel deployed on operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor, and the Solomon Islands, who I feel sure will be celebrating the raising of the 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion in their own way.

It is therefore with great pleasure that I will shortly present to Lieutenant Colonel Clark, the Commanding Officer, the unit flag of the 39<sup>th</sup> Personnel Support Battalion, proudly displaying the "mud-over-blood" colours with the unit badge and motto "factis non verbis", "deeds not words".

I am most grateful to the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy for agreeing to the suggestion that the name of a great infantry battalion once again take its place on the Australian Army Order of Battle.

In conclusion ladies and gentlemen, I trust that today's events will ensure that the inspiring deeds of the original 39<sup>th</sup> will receive due recognition for its part in creating the extraordinary Kokoda legend, and that this legend will now live on through the professionalism, spirit and dedication of its worthy successor, the 39<sup>th</sup> Personnel Support Battalion.

Thankyou.

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