

Salutations;

Many Papuans and New Guineans fought the enemy when the war came to Papua in 1942 – either with the Allied forces or with the Japanese – as carriers, labourers, and informers. Of these, some 3,000 of them fought as regular soldiers under the banner of the Papuan and New Guinea Infantry Battalions. All fought for their own reasons: some were teenagers who joined to attain status, or because they were coerced into joining. Others made the transition from the constabulary into the army.

After the setback of the Coral Sea Battle, the enemy decided to try a two-prong assault on Port Moresby with their land forces. On 21 July 1942, they landed near Gona with more than a thousand, mostly Tolai, carriers. Lightly equipped, the 3,000 troops quickly set off inland for Kokoda, where there was a small but vital airstrip – their springboard for the final attack on Port Moresby.

They were virtually unopposed until they ran into a PIB ambush at a place called Awala. They brushed this puny defence aside and advanced. Kokoda was in their hands barely a week after the landings.

What a lot of people today do not realize is that this historic PIB ambush at Awala was the beginning of **a bond – a bond** of camaraderie, love and friendship, commitment and understanding, courage and perseverance, and of loyalty and the ultimate sacrifice, between warriors of mostly different races, but fighting a common enemy – **a bond** that would span throughout the duration of the war, right up to the disbanding of the PIB in 1946; **a bond** that would be reignited with the reformation of the PIR in 1951 and continue right past 1976 when the newly independent state of Papua New Guinea assumed full ownership of its armed forces right up to this very day.

For the Papuan, it mattered little where the war intruded from; only that his immediate territory had been invaded; and therefore, it was his tribal duty and responsibility to fight off the invaders of his land. The Kokoda campaign therefore, became, for the most part, a fight to keep the invaders away from their own villages and livelihood.

Today, as we solemnly gather here to commemorate the Battle of Kokoda, and the 10th anniversary of the Rotary Kokoda Memorial Wall, I would like to pay homage and tribute to all those Papuan and indigenous soldiers who fought for the safety and livelihood of their homes and villages.

Unbeknown to them, they were part of the world's greatest struggle against tyranny and oppression by an enemy fully committed to world domination; and they triumphed.

In the same vein, I would also like to pay my respects to those young Australian warriors, who saw fit to lay down their lives in the defence of their homes. It is for these men, and those who walked out of this Battle alive, that we must work hard to forever keep their memories, lest we forget.

These warriors, despite the difference of their lifestyles and upbringings, stood together as one, to fight off the invader.

This bond, between the Australian and the Papua New Guinean warrior, forged in blood, in the jungles of Kokoda, has remained right up to this very day, as one of the commonwealth's strongest bilateral relations between any two of its members.

So, as I stand here, humbly, in your esteemed presence, my Australian friends, many of whom I gladly call my brothers, have been up in Port Moresby these past 12 or so months, helping us play host to the year-long Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) series of meetings, that will culminate with the Leaders' Summit this November. This is this very bond I am talking about.

I will conclude by saying that the Battle of Kokoda, and the ensuing battles after that, was the biggest ever capacity building exercise provided to thousands of Papua New Guineans by Australia then. The knowledge they acquired during that war, be it on leadership, navigation, as medics, cooks, storemen, logistics, and teachers of men – all these capacity was put to good use when they returned home to their villages after the war. Some entered politics, others continued to serve their local communities in their own respective capacities. Most used these training to better the livelihood of their communities.

Seventy-six years on, this legacy has continued. Today, another massive capacity building exercise is again in motion in Port Moresby, as PNG prepares to complete its hosting year with the APEC Leaders' Summit in November. Again, our brothers from Australia are assisting us with its preparations.

We Papua New Guineans of this generation, are optimistic that the capacity building and training offered by Australia to hundreds of our officials, will again be put to good use beyond APEC, to better our lives, and in that process, advance our ever burgeoning relations to the next levels.

I pray that God continues to nurture this friendship forever, lest we forget.

Thank you.