

ADJOURNMENT

Recognition for Australian Prisoners of War

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (10.54 a.m.)—The Minister for Veterans' Affairs recently announced that, subsequent to the findings of the inquiry initiated by the Howard government, Harry Smith, Commander, D Company 6RAR, will be offered the Star of Gallantry; platoon commanders Dave Sabben and Geoff Kendall will be offered the Medal for Gallantry; and D Company 6RAR will receive approval to wear the former Republic of Vietnam's Gallantry Cross with Palm Unit Citation Emblem.

Citations, awards and medals do not praise war; they honour people. They honour the contribution of brave Australians who have served our nation in times of conflict and war. Notwithstanding the over 100,000 Australian service men and women whose graves are marked overseas, perhaps none are more deserving of recognition of their service to our nation than are Australian prisoners of war. For the first national memorial to service men and women built outside the ACT to be a memorial to the bravery and sacrifice of our POWs is certainly an acknowledgement of this.

Almost 35,000 Australian service men and women were held in POW camps between the Boer War, at the turn of the last century, and the Korean War, in the 1950s. This included over 8,000 Australian military personnel captured by German and Italian forces, predominantly in North Africa, Greece and Crete, and over 22,000 Australians captured in the Pacific during World War II. During the Korean War, 29 Australians were held as prisoners of war.

Well over a third of Australian POWs captured during World War II died in captivity, predominantly those captured in the Pacific theatre. It was in recognition of the unique ordeal of the POWs captured in the Pacific that the former Howard government made a one-off cash payment of \$25,000 in 2001 to all living Australian prisoners of war, civil detainees and internees who were held by Japan during the war. Recently, the Military Memorials of National Significance Bill allowed the POW memorial in Ballarat to be a national memorial, finally honouring our service men and women captured on the field of battle serving our nation.

Yet, for all the honouring of our POWs, there remains I believe a fundamental injustice that surrounds a POW's historical eligibility for the highest award in the land, the Imperial Victoria Cross. The VC was originally instituted in 1856 as a decoration to recognise gallantry in action by all ranks of the services. The VC was awarded to Australians under this imperial system of awards. Since its introduction, 96 worthy Australians have received the award.

Under the imperial system, POWs were not eligible for the VC or indeed for other medals, such as the imperial Defence Medal, as service as a POW was not acknowledged as appropriate service for these awards. Consequently, two Australians, Captain Matthews, who was a POW at the notorious Sandakan POW camp, and Private Madden, incarcerated in a Chinese POW camp, both received posthumous George Crosses, not the VC, as their actions were not deemed to be in the face of the enemy. I recently wrote to the Governor-General to seek representation to Her Majesty the Queen to address this historical grievance. It is unacceptable to say to an Australian digger who resisted the enemy during the horror of Sandakan or a Chinese POW camp that he did not endure in the face of the enemy, especially when you hear their stories firsthand.

The Victoria Cross for Australia was approved on 15 January 1991, replacing the imperial award, for the most conspicuous gallantry or a daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice or extreme devotion to duty in the face of the enemy. It is yet to be awarded. The Australian Defence instruction on gallantry and distinguished service

decorations appears clear that POWs are eligible for decorations for gallantry and distinguished service. However, the conditions under which our highest military honour may be awarded to these service men and women remain a little unclear. Whilst I have sought clarification from the director of personnel at the Department of Defence and have been assured that POWs are eligible for the Australian VC under current rules, the Defence instruction should be clarified to make absolutely sure that no future worthy POWs are excluded on technical grounds.

Considering that our military history is littered with tales of heroism in the face of the enemy, any former POWs whom we now honour with a national monument and who performed such acts of heroism should be considered for the Imperial VC. The cases of Captain Matthews and Private Madden, who openly resisted the enemy in the bravest manner and in a manner that led to their deaths, are two obvious, immediate cases requiring redress to rectify the injustice that saw the contribution of these men not recognised in the manner which they deserve.