

SPEECH - AWARD OF THE LEGION OF HONOUR
VETERANS
OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR
RAAF BASE AMBERLEY – 5 MAY 2016

Ipswich Mayor, Mr Paul Pisasale,

Air Commodore Scott Winchester, Commander of the Combat Support Group

Lady Jane Edwards, Honorary Consul of France in Queensland,

Honourable veterans,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

It is a great pleasure and a great honour, to welcome you this afternoon in RAAF Base Amberley for such a special occasion. I would like to warmly thank Air Commodore Winchester for hosting us today.

The *Légion d'Honneur* was created by Napoleon a little more than 200 years ago. The awarding of this medal is the most solemn manner, and perhaps the most moving manner for France to pay tribute to remarkable men or women, citizens of France or of the world.

Today, this is the case for 10 outstanding men:

- Mr Cyril BORSHT
- Mr Keith BRADY
- Mr Lionel COPP
- Mr Bernard COSTELLO
- Mr John FLINT
- Mr Norman GAMPE
- Mr Ronald HICKEY
- Mr Robert JUBB
- Mr Lionel RACKLEY
- Mr Donald SOLIN

Their names will find their way in the Pantheon amongst those that deserve the utmost respect from our old nation.

Organising such a ceremony on the eve of the 71st anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe with the victory of the Allies is highly symbolic.

It is a way to remember what Australia and the United Kingdom has been able to do for my country, a country that twice in a generation became the ultimate battle field, where two different ideas of mankind, and also of power and glory were struggling against each other.

It is a way to express once again, as loudly as possible, how deeply grateful France is for the sacrifice of these young men and women.

You all have supported your mates at sea, in the air, and on the ground making the landing and the advance of Allied divisions possible, in spite of heavy resistance from Nazi troops occupying France.

Mr Cyril Borsht and Mr Keith Brady, your paths are very similar. I am glad France has made the reunion of two “Brothers in Arms” possible today. You both enlisted in the RAAF on the same day, 20 June 1942. You both served as pilot within the 463 RAAF Squadron and participated in the same bombing missions over Le Havre, Brest and Boulogne. Unfortunately Mr Cyril Borsht you were less fortunate as you became a prisoner of war for 8 months.

Mr Lionel Copp, you joined the RAAF in 1942 and served with the 14 RAF Squadron. You participated in intelligence gathering missions over the Mediterranean and you were part of the Allied invasion of Provence in August 1944.

Mr Bernard Costello, you joined the RAAF in 1943. You completed bombing missions over Normandy and Northern France in support of Allied troops on the ground. You also took part in Operation Manna and Operation Exodus at the end of the war.

Mr John Flint, you joined the British Royal Navy in 1942. As a seaman, you were on board one of the first landing crafts to land on JUNO Beach on D-Day. Your involvement in the liberation of Europe also brought you to the Netherlands.

Mr Norman Gampe, you enlisted in the RAAF in 1942. You served as a pilot in the 619 RAF Squadron and completed bombing missions over Europe in support of Allied progression.

We also have two other “Brothers in Arms” today with Mr Ronald Hickey and Mr Robert Jubb, who both ended the war as pilot in the 462 RAAF Squadron and participated in bombing missions over Normandy. Mr Ronald Hickey first served within the 466 RAAF Squadron, while Mr Robert Jubb was primarily part of the 76 RAF Squadron.

Mr Lionel Rackley, you joined the RAAF in 1941 and served as a Pilot within the 630 RAF Squadron. You were engaged in several bombing missions over Tours, Paris area and Normandy between April and June 1944.

Mr Donald Solin, you enlisted in the RAAF in 1942. As a pilot in the 624 RAF Squadron, you conducted several flights over Southern France for “Special duties” before joining the Italy-based 146 RAF Squadron.

It is always difficult to address men who did exceptional things. I am impressed by the way you faced your destinies, by your courage and your sense of sacrifice. I am impressed also by the capacity that you demonstrated to remain stand up men in spite of the sounds and fury that were surrounding you.

It is thus with emotion and much humility that I address you today. Humility upon becoming acquainted with the path you followed.

Humility before the courage you demonstrated as you took part in the Liberation of France.

Humility, also, in the face of your modest assumption that you did nothing but your duty and that the real heroes are your fallen comrades.

This is why, I wish at this point to spare a thought for your Brothers and Sisters in Arms, be they French, British or Australian who gave their life and their youth.

It is sometimes said that war is the business of men.

In your case, Honourable Veterans, it was mainly the business of adolescent youth. When you signed up, on the eve of the Second World War only some of

you had reached the early twenty. 1944, the year that brought you to France, in the footsteps of your elders who, 30 years before, had been thrown into the hell of trench warfare.

That year also, you entered legend. You became Heroes.

You were no longer only fighters, you had become liberators, no longer merely men but living symbols of our common values: the spirit of resistance, the spirit of Liberty and the spirit of mateship.

As Winston Churchill said: *“never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”*

I have come today to tell you, in the name of the French Republic, and in front of your families and friends, that we have not forgotten; that we have remained grateful.

There are 10 of you before me, 10 distinct lives and pathways, but true knights of an epic tale: that of the impressive support that Australia and the United Kingdom have provided to France twice in a century, at the darkest hours of our modern history.

Honourable veterans,

You are the memory of our liberation.

A memory recalled in thousand stories, stories made of remembrance and pain sometimes, but mainly of pride, friendship and gatherings, as is the case today.

It is always difficult to know if we may have been one of these heroes or what we would have done in the test of war, as we live today in a time of relative peace, inherited from the courage of our elders.

I am unable to answer this question but I can say that I would have wanted to resemble these men.

I would have wanted to resemble you.

This is why I will conclude with a single word.

A word that was posted in all major French cities throughout 2014 as part of the program to commemorate the Great War.

A word pronounced by the President of the French Republic, François Hollande at the Australian War Memorial in November 2014 on the occasion of the first ever state visit by a French President to this country.

A word that I find is not used often enough but which contains a wealth of meaning: gratitude, acknowledgement and friendship of course.

Perhaps tonight, thanks to you, the most beautiful word of the French language.

This simple word is: “**MERCI**”. Thank you

It’s time now to bestow the Légion d’honneur upon you:

- Mr Cyril BORSHT
- Mr Keith BRADY
- Mr Lionel COPP
- Mr Bernard COSTELLO
- Mr John FLINT
- Mr Norman GAMPE
- Mr Ronald HICKEY
- Mr Robert JUBB
- Mr Lionel RACKLEY
- Mr Donald SOLIN

Au nom du Président de la République, nous vous remettons les insignes de chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur.