



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

CONSTITUENCY STATEMENTS

Zaro, Mr Enemarki

SPEECH

Wednesday, 5 March 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

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Mr ENTSCHE (Leichhardt) (10:22): I rise today to pay tribute to a remarkable elder of the Torres Strait Islands, Mr Enemarki Matthew Zaro, who passed away on 7 February of this year, aged 96. Known as 'Papa Zaro', the proud Dauareb and Meriam elder was one of the few remaining members of the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion, which helped the Australian Defence Force and Allied forces in their fight to protect Northern Australia from 1942 through to 1945. Of the 880 men originally in the battalion, there are only three today who are still with us, and the late Mr Zaro was the last surviving member of the 116 Mer volunteers.

I have long held an interest in the accomplishments of these servicemen. The unit was unique, being the only Indigenous Australian battalion ever formed by the Australian Army. Mr Zaro stood proud alongside his compatriots and Australian soldiers in defence of Australia against the looming invasion by the Japanese Imperial Defence Force during the darkest days of WWII. On 14 March 1942, Japanese fighter planes targeted Horn Island as part of their campaign to cripple military positions in Northern Australia. The island's aerodrome was a strategic but vulnerable operational base for Australian and Allied forces. Coast-watchers in New Guinea managed to send an alert of the impending raid and during the ensuing mid-air duel the Allied forces were outnumbered but still managed to ward off the attack. Horn Island was attacked eight more times by the Japanese over the next 16 months. Five hundred bombs were unleashed and more than 150 servicemen were killed, but the troops in Australia's most vulnerable military outpost managed to thwart the relentless attempts at invasion.

In 2002, on the 60th anniversary of the first bombing of the island, my good friend and Torres Strait historian Vanessa Seekee and I were successful in getting the government to award Star Medals to members of the Torres Strait Light Infantry. In 2012, on the 70th anniversary, Vanessa and I again called for more recognition of the event and an acknowledgment of the role that Torres Strait Islanders played in defending Australia. This month is the 72nd anniversary. We commemorate the life of Enemarki Zaro, a man dearly loved by his family, of strong Christian beliefs and integrity. He is survived by an extended family who can be very proud of their heritage and treasure their memories of a man who served his country in a very unique way.