THE SENATE

ADJOURNMENT

World War II

SPEECH

Tuesday, 28 February 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Senator McEwen (South Australia—Government Whip in the Senate) (20:04): This year we are acknowledging the 70th anniversary of many significant events that occurred in our region during World War II. Many Australian troops and civilians died or were injured in those events, which included the fall of Singapore, the bombing of Darwin, the sinking of the HMAS Yarra and the HMAS Perth—the anniversary of which is today—the invasion of Rabaul and the battles of the Kokoda Track. These all occurred in 1942.

In 1988, then Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke said of 1942:

It was the turning point in the making of modern Australia. In the fire of that tremendous crisis were forged all the elements which have shaped our national life and destiny, to this day.

... ... ...

Above all, 1942 was the year in which Australians first achieved a genuine sense of national identity and national unity.

The increased interest in our engagement in World War II, and especially in our engagement in the Pacific region, is evident in the well-attended remembrance services and other events around the country. At these events, we hear about the many instances of bravery, selflessness and mateship which, as Prime Minister Hawke said, gave us a genuine sense of national identity.

Another event we remember this year is the 70th anniversary of the sinking of the SS Vyner Brooke off the coast of Bangka Island near Sumatra and the subsequent massacre by Japanese soldiers of the survivors, including 21 Australian nurses. This dreadful incident occurred on 16 February 1942. The SS Vyner Brooke had left Singapore for Batavia on 14 February—just prior to the Commonwealth surrender on the following day—with a view to, hopefully, making it to Australia. On board were civilian and military evacuees from Singapore and the 65 nurses who had been caring for Australian wounded as part of the 2/13th Australian General Hospital. It is not known exactly how many people were on the ship, but estimates including the crew suggest that there were around 250, many of whom were civilian women and children.

Off the coast of south-east Sumatra in the Bangka Strait, the Vyner Brooke was bombed by the Japanese. The nurses on board, under the extraordinary leadership of matrons Olive Paschke and Irene Drummond, had been caring for the passengers during the voyage and had made the decision that, should the ship be attacked, they would not leave the ship until all passengers had been assisted off it. As the ship sank the nurses helped those that they could to leave the ship. At the same time, they witnessed horrific injuries and many dead.

Survivors, including at least 22 of the Australian nurses, eventually made it to shore on Bangka Island. They were joined there by other survivors from the Vyner Brooke and from other ships that had suffered the same fate. It is believed some 70 ships were bombed and sunk in the Bangka Strait within a 48-hour period at around the same time.

Bangka Island was occupied by the Japanese and, with no food, water or hope of rescue, the 100 or so people who had survived the shipwrecks surrendered to the Japanese. Most of them were then murdered, with the men being taken away from the women and then shot. The surviving nurses were then ordered to walk into the sea off Radji Beach and were also gunned down. Of those nurses, only one survived, Vivian Bullwinkel, whose resilience meant she also endured internment as a prisoner of war and was able eventually to tell the story of the Bangka nurses.

While the horrible story of Bangka Island is relatively well known, not so well known is the fact that the events of that day have been remembered in South Australia at a ceremony that has been held every year since 1955. Indeed, I was disappointed to see on the Parliamentary Library website’s FlagPost section, which conveniently
lists the various military events of 1942 and the planned 70th memorial services, that under the explanation of the Bangka Island incident it says there are no known events planned to commemorate its 70th anniversary. This, of course, is not the fault of the library; I am sure many events this year are organised on a local basis and will not get national recognition. It does not diminish their importance.

The Bangka Day memorial service is held each year on the Sunday closest to 16 February at the South Australian Women's Memorial Playing Fields at St Marys in Adelaide's southern suburbs. Both the longevity of the ceremony and the fact that those playing fields exist is testament to a number of people who, back in the 1950s, were determined to see sporting facilities for women established in Adelaide and who were determined to remember the sacrifice of the Bangka nurses.

Once the plans for the sporting grounds were in train, it was decided to use the establishment of the grounds as an opportunity to have a permanent reminder of the contribution women made to our Army, Navy and Air Force in World War I and World War II. Special emphasis was given to remembering the women nurses who died at Bangka and, over the years, the annual memorial service has always paid tribute to the Bangka nurses and other women who have served, and died, in our defence forces.

The story of the South Australian Women's Memorial Playing Fields is a classic example of a small number of people who have a vision to meet a community need and then work hard to bring their plans to fruition. As I said, in the early 1950s a group of representatives from women's sporting organisations and from girls schools decided a dedicated facility was needed that would be suitable for developing women's participation in sport and for holding national and local competitions.

The then premier, Sir Thomas Playford, made available eight hectares of land at St Marys, and the community groups set about clearing the land to create the ovals and courts that are still used today. The first sports played there were tennis, softball, cricket and hockey. Establishing those grounds was an expensive exercise and the committee worked hard to raise money through functions like balls and fiestas, and through donations, for the initial establishment of this very valuable contribution to the Adelaide community.

The South Australian Women's Memorial Playing Fields Trust was established in 1967, and it worked hard to manage and maintain the grounds until the late 1980s when, because of financial pressures, the state department responsible for recreation and sport leased the site and, some years later, on-leased it to the South Australian Cricket Association so that women's cricket in South Australia had a home.

The trust continues to oversee the memorial aspect of the site and organises the Bangka Day memorial service there each year. The service is held at the May Mills Pavilion, named after one of the founders of the fields. May Mills OBE is a very interesting women. She was a teacher and sports mistress at Unley High School, alma mater of our own Prime Minister. She was the first woman to present a paper to the Royal Geographical Society, a President of the Teacher's Union, a candidate in state elections for the Country Liberal Party and the first woman in South Australia to get a drivers licence.

The annual memorial service is attended by hundreds of ex-service personnel, representatives of all the services, community leaders, nursing organisations, family and friends of the Bangka nurses and their descendants, representatives of sporting organisations and Mrs Liz Scarce, wife of the Governor of South Australia and the patron of the trust.

Each year a guest speaker addresses the audience with some aspect of the Bangka story. This year a very moving address was given by Mr Ian Shaw, whose book *On Radji Beach* is a comprehensive account of the story of the Bangka nurses. I am indebted to him for the material for this speech.

The South Australian Women's Memorial Playing Fields Trust and supporters of the fields are always concerned about funding for the site and about the protection of the site itself which, as Adelaide has grown, has ceased to be on what was considered, in 1955, to be the outskirts of Adelaide and is now well and truly in the middle of an area undergoing significant residential and commercial development.

In South Australia we are very proud of the South Australian Women's Memorial Playing Fields and the Bangka Day memorial services that are held there. It is always a pleasure to drive past or visit the fields and see young women playing soccer, cricket or other sports there on a weekend. It is a living memorial to a group of truly
extraordinary women whose sacrifice should always be remembered. The site should be afforded whatever protections governments and local authorities can provide.