

Anzac Day Speech 2023

Good morning veterans, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

On Anzac Day each year, New Zealanders across the world come to services like this to commemorate all the men and women who have served in, and those that currently serve in our armed forces. We especially remember those who gave their lives for our country.

The grievous losses suffered by our country in the First World War brought grief and despair to homes across New Zealand. The heavy casualties at Gallipoli came as a particular shock because New Zealand had no previous experience of the huge toll that artillery, machine guns and the other weapons of industrial warfare could inflict.

Each generation of New Zealanders has had its own struggles and crosses to bear, but those who fought in the First World War had more than their fair share of misfortune: a world war, an influenza pandemic, an economic depression that brought nations to their knees, and then another even more terrible global conflict.

The grief brought by war to New Zealand was illustrated in newspapers. Not only did they contain new casualty lists from around the world, but also many 'in memory' notices placed by grieving families and friends. An example was Private Nelson Bell, who had been killed in action in Greece on 27 April 1941. The notice read in part:

Not just to-day, but every day,

In silence we remember.

Tragically there has been many notices marking the deaths of soldiers, sailors, and aviators killed in the bitter fighting of various conflicts. These notices speak to just how widespread and long lasting the grief was that had been brought to New Zealand by war during the 20th century. Let us hope that we are fortunate enough to be spared such ordeals in this century.

In more recent years the Defence Force has been involved in a wide range of operations overseas in places as diverse as Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, Iraq and South Sudan.

The lesson we need to draw from these collective experiences, from all of the conflicts going back to the time our soldiers went ashore at Gallipoli, is that peace can be maintained only if we have faith in, and defend the international system that was built after the Second World War to outlaw the use of armed aggression in international disputes. If ever we needed a reminder of what happens when this system breaks down, the recent events in the Ukraine have provided it. This Anzac Day we should not shy away from recognising that there are those in the world who are prepared to use violence in its most extreme forms in an effort to achieve their ends. Peace is not a given; it has to be worked for, nurtured and cherished. New Zealand, in common with all other peace loving nations, has a role to play in the maintenance of the international order; as the alternative is unimaginable.

Whilst the maintenance of peace is always our primary focus, one of the lessons we have learnt through the sacrifices made by New Zealanders in various conflicts that we remember today, is that we must make sure we are ready for any eventuality and are not caught unaware or unprepared.

A century ago, during the first months of 1923, a significant number of war memorials were unveiled across New Zealand. Many speakers at the unveiling ceremonies stressed that the memorials, no matter how substantial, were an inadequate but nonetheless powerful symbol of the "sacred obligation" New Zealanders' had to honour those who gave their lives for our country. This obligation remains with us today.

It is now more than a century since the end of the First World War and nearly 80 years since the end of the Second World War. The sacrifices made by New Zealanders in those conflicts and in more recent wars, however, do not diminish with the passing of time.

For thousands of years human beings have recognised that there are two kinds of death. The first is physical and the second when your name is spoken for the last time. We who are gathered here should do all that we can to ensure that the names of those who made the ultimate sacrifice for New Zealand are not forgotten and do not go unspoken.

Our service today is a powerful demonstration of New Zealanders continuing commitment to honouring what these men and women did for New Zealand. When you look at the names of the fallen on our war memorials and elsewhere, think about both what these named men and women gave, as well as that endured by their comrades who were lucky enough to survive. Think about the pain suffered, the lives cut short, the dreams unfulfilled and the grief felt by those left behind. Their legacy has created the conditions and environment for us to live in today.

I would like to conclude with the words inscribed on the Thames High School War Memorial below the list of 27 old boys killed in the First World War:

“Remembering the dead, let the living be humble”.

We will remember them.