NATIONAL COMMEMORATION TO MARK THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF CASSINO

THURSDAY 16 MAY 2019

HALL OF MEMORIES
PUKEAHU NATIONAL WAR MEMORIAL PARK
WELLINGTON
The struggle for Cassino in early 1944 was one of the most brutal and costly battles involving New Zealand forces in the Second World War. For the New Zealand Division, this German strong point southeast of Rome would prove the most tragically elusive prize of the Italian campaign.

By this time the Division, led by Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg, had been seasoned by more than two years of active warfare. With a strong sense of camaraderie forged in the heat of battle in Greece, Crete and North Africa, New Zealand’s predominantly amateur soldiers had transformed themselves into the ‘Div’ – a formidable fighting force, with a reputation for quiet but dogged efficiency.

In late 1943 the Division arrived in Italy, now under German occupation. In November the New Zealanders joined the Allied effort to breach the Germans’ defensive ‘Gustav Line’ by attacking its eastern margins. After initial success in crossing the Sangro River, their advance ground to a halt in the face of determined German resistance around Orsogna. The New Zealanders were withdrawn from the stalled front line in January 1944, having suffered 1600 casualties during their first two months of combat in Italy.

The Germans’ success in blunting the Allied advance now prompted an effort to push through the strategically pivotal Liri Valley and on to Rome. The entrance to the valley, however, was just over ten kilometres wide and was overlooked by the 500-metre-high Monte Cassino, topped by an historic Benedictine monastery. Augmented by the Germans’ meticulous deployment of minefields, fortifications and flooding though demolition of stop-banks, Cassino was a defender’s dream and an attacking army’s nightmare.

Temporarily commanding a New Zealand Corps bolstered by the inclusion of the 4 Indian Division, Freyberg now steeled himself and his forces for the battle ahead. Desperate to minimise casualties, he requested a massive bombardment of the German defences to precede the assault. This was approved by the Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean, General Sir Harold Alexander. The subsequent aerial bombardment on 15 February laid waste to the monastery and its environs. Controversy about
this decision would persist long after the war was over. Tragically for the
waiting New Zealand soldiers, most of the German defenders survived
and exploited the ruins of the town and monastery to create an even more
formidable set of defences.

Nevertheless, the plan proceeded. The Indian Division would take the
monastery hill from the north while the New Zealanders attacked the town
from the south. Because of the flooded ground and demolitions, only a
single battalion could be used in the New Zealand attack. It fell to the 28th
(Maori) Battalion to initiate the assault on the town’s well-defended railway
station around midnight on 17 February.

After one of the fiercest and costliest battles in the annals of this legendary
unit, the Maori seized positions in and around the station. But the equally
courageous engineers behind them were thwarted in their efforts to clear
a path through the flooded terrain for reinforcements. Without that much
needed support the isolated Maori soldiers were forced to withdraw after
a withering counter-attack by German infantry backed by tanks. It was the
first of numerous bitter disappointments for the New Zealanders at Cassino.
(The Indians’ attack to the north was similarly unsuccessful.)

A series of other brave but unsuccessful assaults followed. After another
heavy bombardment, New Zealand forces fought their way into the
devastated town on 15 March. Once again, the Germans offered tenacious
resistance from hidden positions in the maze of rubble that was once
Cassino. After eight days of fighting, Freyberg decided the cost was proving
too high and ordered his troops to cease seeking to advance. Shortly
afterwards, in early April, the New Zealand Division withdrew from the
Cassino area. Almost 350 lives had been lost and more than 1200 wounded
in a costly failure which ranks among New Zealand’s worst military
disasters.

Cassino eventually fell in May 1944 – to British and Polish troops, with
support from New Zealand artillery. The Gustav Line was finally breached.
Allied forces entered Rome on 4 June, two days before the D-Day landings
at Normandy. The success of the cross-channel invasion meant that
Italy became an undeniably secondary theatre of operations. The Italian
campaign’s main purpose was now to divert part of the German war effort
and to tie down forces which might otherwise have been used to defend
France and Germany itself.

The Commonwealth war cemetery in Cassino holds the graves of 464 New
Zealanders while a further 55 names are listed on the Cassino Memorial.
In total, 2176 New Zealanders are buried in Italian war cemeteries or
commemorated on memorials.
ORDER OF SERVICE

ARRIVAL
Official guests

The Honourable Grant Robertson
Minister of Finance and Associate Minister for Culture and Heritage
representing the Government

His Excellency Fabrizio Marcelli
Ambassador
Italy

Nicola Willis MP
Representing the Leader of the Opposition

Air Marshal Kevin Short
Chief of Defence Force
and
Mrs Sherryll Short

His Worship Justin Lester
Mayor of Wellington

Jack Steer
Chief Executive
Royal New Zealand Returned and Services’ Association

Official guests are welcomed by Rear Admiral David Ledson ONZM (Rtd),
Chair, National War Memorial Advisory Council, and Bernadette Cavanagh,
Chief Executive, Ministry for Culture and Heritage

The official party move up the steps to the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior

RESPECTS PAID AT THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR
Whakamaharatanga, the Remembrance Bell tolls four times as the official
party pay their respects at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior

KARANGA
The karanga is called by June Jackson MNZM, Taranaki Whānui, as the
official party moves up into the foyer of the Hall of Memories

Please stand

PROCESSIONAL
Whakamaharatanga, the Remembrance Bell tolls six times the official party
processes to the front of the Hall of Memories

The colour of the 5th battalion, Royal New Zealand infantry Regiment is
marched in

Please remain standing for the National Anthems

NATIONAL ANTHEMS
Uniformed personnel salute

The National Anthem of Italy will be sung by Declan Cudd

The National Anthem of New Zealand will be sung by Anon Vocal Ensemble

Please be seated
My father came back from the war unable to disparage the motives of Mussolini, because ‘he simply picked the wrong horse at a time when those who were honest thought Hitler was going to win’. Principle has no place in war, or, if not quite that, can rarely sustain itself when flak’s flying and you’ve no choice but to keep your head down. His sentiments I think. He said, ‘Most of us fought because we had to, and because we were scared of saying No.’ But I don’t see him as either cowardly or brave any more than he sees himself as having Saved the Free World. I asked him once if he’d ever killed a man face to face and he told me of a day at Cassino when he’d been sent forward to watch and recce. ‘I wouldn’t have been 200 yards from Jerry’s position when, to my amazement, I saw a German soldier emerge from cover and sit on a stone wall in the sun. He had his shirt off, sunbathing in full view. I drew a bead on him and then lowered my rifle. I couldn’t do it. I could have killed him easily. I never told anyone of the incident.’ For years after the war I listened to his speech punctuated with Italian words: andiamo, buon giorno, amici, uno momento. I was uno bambino. He had found another language which he loved as much or more than his own. It made me realise we could have been other, born of others and brought up somewhere else with different ways of expressing similar, or not so similar, things.
PRAYER OF REMEMBRANCE

LAYING OF WREATHS
Wreaths are laid by the following:

The Honourable Grant Robertson
on behalf of the Government and People of New Zealand

Nicola Willis MP
on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition

His Excellency Fabrizio Marcelli
Ambassador
on behalf of the government and people of Italy

His Excellency Leasi Papali‘i Tommy Scanlan
Dean of the Diplomatic Corps
On behalf of the government and people of Samoa

His Excellency Zbigniew Gniatkowski
Ambassador
On behalf of the government and people of the Republic of Poland

His Excellency Gerhard Thiedemann
Ambassador
On behalf of the government and people of Germany

Cdr Ted Summers
Defence Advisor
On behalf of the government and people of Canada

Commander Guy Haywood
Defence Advisor
On behalf of the government and people of the United Kingdom

His Worship Justin Lester
on behalf of the City of Wellington

Air Marshal Kevin Short
and
Mrs Sherryll Short
On behalf of the men and women of the New Zealand Defence Force and their families

Jack Steer
on behalf of the Royal New Zealand Returned and Services’ Association

WO2 Logan Wood
and
POCDG Brena Cook
New Zealand Cadet Force
representing the Youth of New Zealand

During the wreath laying Anon Vocal Ensemble sings from the rear of the Great Hall
PRAYER IN COMMEMORATION OF THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF CASSINO
Chaplain Class 2 Kevin Brophy
New Zealand Army

Please stand

THE COMMEMORATION
The Last Post

Uniformed personnel salute

The flags of Italy and New Zealand, on the upper forecourt, are lowered to half mast

THE ODE
Warrant Officer Jack Rudolph
New Zealand Defence Force

E kore rātou e korohetia
Pēnei i a tātou kua mahue nei
E kore hoki rātou e ngoikore
Ahakoa pēhea i ngā āhuatanga o te wā
I te hekenga atu o te rā
Tae noa ki te aranga mai i te ata
Ka maumahara tonu tātou ki a rātou

Response: Ka maumahara tonu tātou ki a rātou

Jack Steer
Royal New Zealand Returned and Services’ Association

They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember

Response: We will remember them

1 minute silence
THE ROUSE
The flags of Italy and New Zealand, on the upper forecourt, are raised to full mast head

THE BLESSING
Chaplain Class 2 Kevin Brophy, New Zealand Army, delivers the Blessing and Dismissal

RECESSIONAL
The official party process to the Foyer

In the Foyer, The Honourable Grant Robertson, His Excellency Fabrizio Marcelli, Air Marshal Kevin Short and Mrs Sherryll Short, are invited to sign the Visitors’ Book. The official party then move to the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior

FLORAL TRIBUTES LAID ON THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR
The Honourable Grant Robertson, His Excellency Fabrizio Marcelli, Air Marshal Kevin Short and Mrs Sherryll Short, place their floral tributes on the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior

Other members of the official party place their floral tributes on the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior

THE DEPARTURE
The official party moves from the upper forecourt to the departure point

THE FAREWELLS
The Honourable Grant Robertson and and His Excellency Fabrizio Marcelli, Vice Marshal Kevin Short and Mrs Sherryll Short; are farewelled and depart

Guests and veterans are invited to place poppies on the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior


Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.
This National Commemorative Service was arranged by the Visits and Ceremonial Office, Department of Internal Affairs, in partnership with the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, the New Zealand Defence Force, and the Royal New Zealand Returned and Services’ Association