

Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Honner

Good morning, everyone,

Today, as we commemorate ANZAC Day, I am going to tell you the story of Lt Colonel Ralph Honner, an Australian soldier who fought in the second world war.

Lt Col Ralph Honner was born in Fremantle, Western Australia, in 1904. One of six children, Ralph was the only one in his family lucky enough to receive a full education. After completing his schooling Ralph became a teacher and later, a lawyer. During this period, Ralph played AFL, University Athletics to state level and met Marjory Bennett who he would later marry and raise a family with.

In 1939, at the start of WWII Ralph joined the Second Australian Imperial Force. He recruited fit farmers and miners to his 2nd/11th Battalion and over the next few years, he rose through the ranks from Captain to Major, earning a Military Cross in the process for acts of gallantry during active duty. Ralph fought with distinction in North Africa, Greece, and Crete. After the battle for Crete was lost, Ralph escaped to the mountains and with the help of locals evaded German capture for nine months. He was then evacuated to Egypt by submarine.

Ralph returned to Australia in 1942, where he was briefly reunited with his family. He'd been away for three years, and his children didn't even recognise him. Can you imagine what that was like for Ralph and for his young children?

He was then swiftly promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and was sent to Papua New Guinea to fight against Japanese forces along the inhospitable and treacherous Kokoda track.

Ralph was given command of the poorly trained and equipped 39th Militia Battalion and was ordered to stop the Japanese advancing past a small town called Isurava. When he met his battalion, he discovered they were outnumbered and suffering from disease. They were battle weary following intensive fighting in harsh tropical conditions. Put yourself in Ralph's shoes. What a shock that must've been to see. It just goes to show the strength and courage of these soldiers in the midst of the war.

Although extremely exhausted, the 39th Battalion were able to maintain their cohesion and confidence under Ralph's command. The Lieutenant Colonel led his men in a fighting withdrawal and helped to slow down the Japanese advance towards Port Moresby.

After a brief rest, the 39th Battalion were brought back to the fighting at the Gona beachhead in December 1942 where Ralph again demonstrated his skills as a formidable battle commander. He had turned his battalion from a demoralised force at Isurava to a powerful unit that contributed to an important victory in Gona, for which he was later awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

Ralph went on to take command of the 2nd/14th Battalion, leading them during a campaign in the Ramu & Markham Valley's in PNG, but this was destined to be Ralph's final battle. He was seriously wounded, which led to his ultimate departure from the army in 1944.

After retiring from his legal career on the War Pensions Tribunal in 1968, Ralph became Ambassador to Ireland, and resided in Dublin. When he met the Queen, she saw his service medals and commented "Oh, a real soldier." Ralph returned to Manly and later passed away on 15 May 1994, aged 89.

He is commemorated by the Ralph Honner Kokoda Education Centre, which opened in 2009 as part of the Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway, in Concord West, Sydney. Ralph is recognised as one of the main heroes of the Kokoda Track.

Ralph's son John Honner visited our school in 2016 to meet with a group of our students and parents before they hiked the Kokoda Track in the footsteps of the 39th Battalion.

Whilst researching the life of Lt Col Ralph Honner I found a powerful & moving speech he delivered to his men after their stand on the Kokoda Track and I will share some of it with you now:

"I don't know a lot of you by name, but I know you.

We met at Isurava.

We fought there together and every step of the way here.

Now we are relieved and we will leave the battle.

And every day the enemy supply line stretches further.

He suffers now as you have suffered.

The battle we fought for the track may have just saved your nation.

At Imita we will stop him.

*Brigadier wants you to know.....**your** gallantry, **your** courage, **your** fortitude are an inspiration.*

And I want you to know that you are some of the finest soldiers that I have ever seen.

You have seen things in this place that no man should witness.

Some of these things you must forget.

But history will remember you, and in the years to come others will wish that they had your conviction."

I would personally like to thank Ralph for **his** gallantry, **his** courage & **his** fortitude. He is an inspiration.

Thank You