

BROOME AIR RAID — COMMEMORATION

Statement

HON NEIL THOMSON (Mining and Pastoral) [6.35 pm]: I also wish to comment on the speech made by Hon Dr Brian Walker. It was with respect and pride that I and my colleagues witnessed his presentation in the hardest of times. Please accept my deepest condolences and also my greatest respect.

I would like to speak today about the eightieth anniversary of the Broome air raid. It was an unusual anniversary this time around. The commemoration was postponed because of a looming cyclone and also because of the COVID-19 situation. In saying that, what actually occurred was a very quiet and heartfelt demonstration of community, love and respect and also inclusion.

I was made aware on the day, in the morning, when a couple of people and I went to the memorial, to the cenotaph, to present a wreath, even though the official ceremony did not occur. At that time, I met representatives from the RSL who alerted me to the fact that members of the Sikh community had travelled to Broome to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the tragic attack that occurred on 3 March 1942 on our soil, with the loss of at least 88 lives, many of them women and children who were refugees, along with service personnel, their husbands and their family. Many lost their lives in Roebuck Bay and some lost their lives off the coast, at Cable Beach.

Eight senior members of the Sikh community, including members of the Sikh Association of Western Australia, led by its president, Devraj Singh, along with many other committee members, had travelled to Broome by road. During the time they were travelling, they were advised that the ceremony had been postponed. It was very touching to see the RSL president, Jack Wickham, and other members of the RSL go out of their way at very short notice to organise a special afternoon tea. We had a very touching time when, at 4.45 pm, in the normal RSL tradition, there was the ode and remembrance of the fallen. That was very touching. I think the members of the Sikh community were very pleased and proud that people in the community had taken the time to recognise their arrival, notwithstanding the fact that the ceremony had been postponed. In saying that, I was deeply interested because I know a little bit about the Broome raid, being a member of the community.

I was not aware of the very heroic Manmohan Singh, who was a pilot officer. I undertook to the community to present a little story today that highlights the diversity of our community, going back 80 years, when people were living in very difficult times. Manmohan Singh was a pilot officer who was killed in Roebuck Bay on 3 March 1942. He was the son of Dr Makhan Singh, who was born in Rawalpindi, which is now Pakistan, in September 1906. Dr Makhan Singh was a recipient of the Kaisar-i-Hind medal from the government for his distinguished public service as a medical practitioner. Manmohan came from a line of medical practitioners, but he had different ideas. He was educated in Rawalpindi and then travelled to England, where he studied to be a civil engineer. He received his Bachelor of Science four years later at the University of Bristol. That is where he took up flying. He studied aeronautical engineering and was given a scholarship by the British government. He joined the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve as a pilot officer and was appointed to RAF Coastal Command. He was in command of a Sunderland flying boat during the Battle of the Atlantic, with the role of finding submarines. Later he became a flying officer for the Royal Indian Air Force, based in Singapore. Of course we know about the terrible events in Singapore in 1942, with the Japanese invasion. He had responsibility for a Catalina flying boat in the No 205 Squadron for operations in Indonesia and the Philippines. After withdrawing from Singapore due to the extent of the losses, his squadron moved to Java and then to Broome, Western Australia, where he contributed to the rescue of Dutch civilians.

I have stood on the jetty reflecting on his story. If members can imagine standing on that new jetty looking across Roebuck Bay, his aircraft would have been at 10 o'clock, sitting in the mud of the tidal flats about 500 metres away. It was there on that fateful day, 3 March, that there was a strafe. Although he survived the initial strafing, he unfortunately later drowned in the harbour because he could not swim. It is a very touching story that the Sikh community is extraordinarily proud of. I guess it provides a great connection to Australia and our diverse community. It is about the defence of Australia and our democracy. Of course, at this time it is a poignant reminder of that, considering the current matters in Ukraine and the importance of our vigilance and our alliances with other countries, including India and democracies across the world, with which we stand in the face of aggression.

I want to commend the Returned and Services League of Australia for its kindness. I want to commend the members of the Sikh community who travelled to Broome to commemorate someone about whom there is a certain level of veneration and for whom they have respect. He was someone who stood out from the norm, you could say, in those times, but who also represented the future of our diverse and wonderful community. I thank the community for its respectful treatment of the visitors and acknowledge Manmohan Singh for his service. Thank you.