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978-1-107-08346-2 - Australia 1944–45: Victory in the Pacific

Edited by Peter J. Dean

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a sibling of two previous works: *Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War* and *Australia 1943: The Liberation of New Guinea*. While following a similar theme and approach, both of the two previous books had a different focus. *Australia 1942* was centred on Australia's first traumatic year of the Pacific War, from the fall of Singapore to the victory in Papua in January 1943. It discussed the battles of 1942 that were fought in the air and sea approaches to the Australian continent and in the islands of the archipelago to Australia's north. That book not only placed these events in their strategic context but also more broadly addressed the major reforms and issues that occurred in Australian politics, the economy and in the relationship Australia had with Japan in the lead up to the war. It did so in order to provide a broad overview of the changes that Australia underwent as a result of the onset of the Pacific War.

Australia 1943 had a somewhat narrower focus. That book focused heavily on Australia's role in the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) during 1943, including its strategic challenges and the broader context of US and Allied strategy. *Australia 1943* was much more centred on military operations and strategy. The broader context was provided by an examination of Allied and Japanese strategy in the Pacific as well as the operations undertaken by US forces in the South Pacific Area (SOPAC) and the SWPA. It focused on the decisive campaign that occurred in New Guinea between January 1943 and April 1944. That narrower approach did not seek to deny the critical importance of the home front. Rather it was a reflection of the fact that many of the major policy and social

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reforms in Australia's war effort occurred in 1942, and that 1943 was a year of execution and implementation.

For *Australia 1944–45: Victory in the Pacific*, the focus has shifted again. This time the approach is designed to bring together the themes from the first two books. It once again focuses on strategy and operations, but also revisits the home front and shows how the period of 1942–43 relates to 1944–45. As such this book includes a number of chapters that go beyond the strict confines of the period 1944–45 in order to provide depth of understanding to the operations of this period and also to cover material that had only been touched on briefly, or indirectly, in the first two volumes. While no book is capable of providing full coverage of all areas of Australia's wartime experience, all three books have attempted to provide coverage of key areas, themes and military operations within the context of major developments in Australia within the context of US and Japanese strategy and operations.

One of the major factors for this wider aperture, in comparison to *Australia 1943*, is so as to include a number of more thematic chapters. These chapters tie the home front sections of *Australia 1942* to the period of 1943–45 to round out this story. Also included are chapters on some key developments in military affairs such as jungle warfare and Australian and Allied intelligence activities, special operations and amphibious warfare. These chapters trace these elements of military art all the way through from 1942 until the end of the war and place them in their Allied rather than just Australian context in order to better understand Australia's role and approach.

Australia 1944–45 covers the period when the main battlefield of the war moved even further north and away from Australia, and when US primacy in the SWPA had become cemented. This work focuses on the Australian operations in the 'bypassed' areas of New Guinea and the surrounding islands and the strategically dubious campaign in Borneo. The New Guinea operations were fought principally to secure Australian mandated territories, clear up Japanese outposts in order to free Australian troops for participation in the planned invasion of Japan in 1945–46 and in order to release men from the military to support the war economy, which played a major role in both the Australian and Allied war effort in 1944–45. Despite this rationale in that most horrible of military terms, and one that is often completely at odds in relation to the intensity and nature of the fighting, the Australian operations in New Guinea during 1944–45 are often described as 'mopping up'. The operations in Borneo, while tactically and operationally highly successful were

undertaken for uncertain strategic reasons. In fact despite the military personnel in the New Guinea operations feeling left behind and marginalised, their role was more significant to the longer term aims of Australia's war strategy than the operations in Borneo, especially if, as believed at the time, the war would continue into 1946–47 and an invasion of Japan was required.

Like the campaign that immediately preceded this period, the major Australian operations in the Pacific theatre in 1944 and 1945 are neither well known nor well understood. They are also somewhat controversial. In particular the question of the necessity (or not) of the Australian operations in New Guinea and Borneo is often asked in the history of this period, as well as whether or not, as British historian Max Hastings controversially claimed in 2007, Australia was 'bludging' in relation to its commitment to the war. These controversies were at the forefront of the minds of most of the historians who wrote chapters in this book. For different reasons, the historians in this book hold that both of these implications are mistaken. In order not to subject the reader to a deluge of counter claims, rebuttal of the tag of 'unnecessary war' in New Guinea and of 'bludging' has been largely contained in the first chapter of this book, written by Australia's pre-eminent military historian, David Horner. However, the power and enduring nature of these claims means that they are addressed directly and or indirectly in different ways throughout this book.

Such claims like those made by Max Hastings and Peter Charlton must be viewed within the context of the Australian contribution to the Allied war effort in 1944–45, Australia's strategic policy, Australia's role and position vis-à-vis the US and broader Allied strategy as well as the command structure and the personalities of senior commanders in the theatre during the period under examination. While rebutting these claims is not the principle driving force of this book, its organisation and layout is designed (as per the previous books) to provide such context to Australia's role in the great Allied effort to defeat Japan. Ultimately, as the chapters in this book will attest, given its requirement to support the Allied war effort both operationally and economically Australia was far from 'bludging', especially when reflecting upon how Australia's strategic approach was influenced by the character of the Allied coalition.

In addition while Australian air, land and naval forces may not have been concentrated together in the main operations against the Japanese during this period it was nonetheless an exceptionally important period for Australian strategy. As Stephan Frühling has noted, this period saw the

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‘first instance of a new, distinctly Australian approach to strategy in a coalition context in which Australia contributed to achieve a specific Australian – as opposed to shared Empire – interest[s] ... From [then] on Australia [has] paid increasing attention to achieving its own, specifically Australian objectives when making contributions in a larger coalition context’.¹

In order to establish the importance of this period and these campaigns to Australia’s military history the authors of this book will cover a range of key issues and events. In order to cover the scope and length of time of this volume the book has been divided into five parts: Strategy; Australia at War; Green Armour and Special Operations; The Naval and Air War; The New Guinea Campaign; and The Borneo Campaign.

Of paramount importance to directing Australia’s war effort was the consideration of matters of policy and strategy. In part 1, David Horner AM, Peter J. Dean and Kevin Holzimmer, and Hiroyuki Shindo outline the challenges for Allied and Japanese strategy at the national and military strategy levels. These chapters provide the foundation for understanding the development of Australia’s military operations in 1944 and 1945.

Part 2 comprises chapters on two very important aspects of the Australian experience of war: the ordeal of Australian prisoners of war in the Pacific War and the experience of the Australian home front. In chapter 4 Joan Beaumont outlines the broad experience of the Australian prisoners of war and delves into some new and unique insights from the period of 1944–45. In chapter 5 Michael Molkentin draws together the threads of the Australian experience on the home front from where the relevant chapters in *Australia 1942* left off. He investigates the extent of government control over the Australian war economy and society through an analysis of manpower, rationing, censorship, and the political impact of Australia’s ‘total war’ effort.

Part 3 delves into two important thematic areas that cut across the whole period of 1942–45, but reached their principle significance in the final two years of the war. In chapter 6 Daniel Marston investigates the nature of fighting the ‘jungle war’, especially the process of learning and adaptation. In chapter 7 John Blaxland outlines the critical role that intelligence played in the Allied success in the SWPA. He outlines the broad ranging intelligence network established in the SWPA, focusing on the critical role of Australia in this Allied effort through the period of 1942–45.

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In part 4 chapters 8 and 9 cover the naval and air aspects of the period 1944–45, focusing on the RAN and the RAAF. As a maritime theatre of war, air and naval power in the SWPA were critical to the Allied success, these chapters outline the continued hard work and high tempo of operations of the RAN and the RAAF and assess their contribution and importance to Australian strategy and the Allied war effort in the Pacific War.

Part 5 and part 6 cover Australia's major combat operations during 1944–45. In part 5 Lachlan Grant and Karl James detail the major commitment Australia made to operations in New Guinea, covering not only the tactical actions but also broader strategic issues as well as the experience of the soldiers in these campaigns. In part 6 Rhys Crawley and Peter Dean start off by providing another of the thematic chapters covering the training and logistics aspect of amphibious warfare in the period of 1942–45 that were critical for the Australians to develop in order to undertake the highly complex assault landings in Borneo in 1945. This final part then details the three Oboe operations. Tony Hastings and Peter Stanley undertake a critical assessment of the landing at Tarakan, while in the final two chapters Garth Pratten undertakes a close analysis of the performance of the 9th Division at Brunei-Labuan and the 7th Division at Balikpapan.

Balikpapan was to prove to be the last major Allied landing of the Pacific War; soon afterwards the dropping of the atomic bombs would end the war with Japan. As for all countries involved, the war would have a lasting impact on Australia. To sum up this book and the trilogy, one of Australia's leading authorities on the Second World War, Michael McKernan, provides an afterword that addresses the legacy of the war in the Pacific for Australia – a conflict that saw, for the first and only time, direct attacks on Australian soil by a foreign power and the country geared up for total war. It was a war that redefined our role in the Asia-Pacific region, reshaped our relationship with the United States, and changed the political, economic and social makeup of the country.

Note

- 1 Stephan Frühling, 'Australian Strategy and Strategic Policy' in Peter Dean, Stephan Frühling and Brendan Taylor, *Australia's Defence: Towards a New Era*, MUP, Melbourne, 2014, p. 189.

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PART

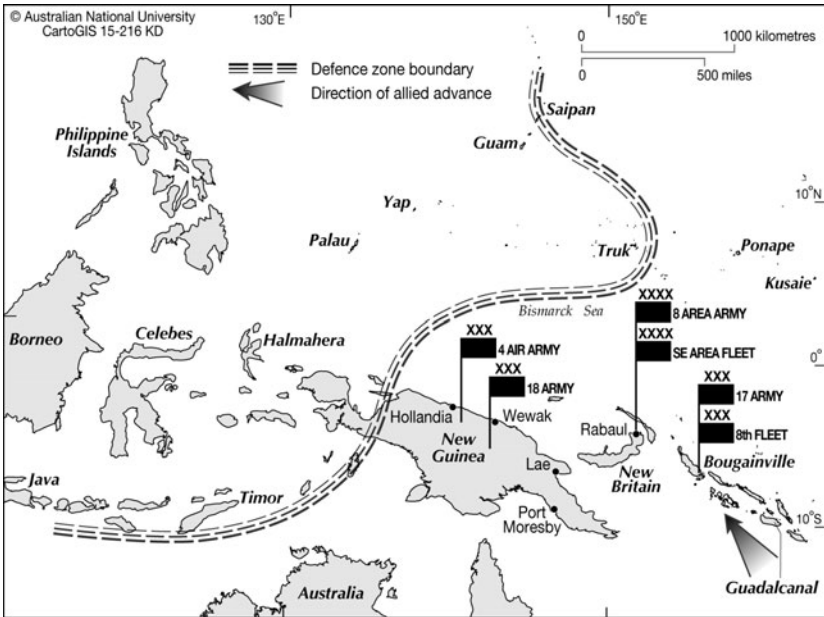


S T R A T E G Y

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Map 3: Alternative strategy options, Australia 1944–45



Map 4: Japan National Defence Zone

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CHAPTER |

ADVANCING NATIONAL
INTERESTS: DECIDING
AUSTRALIA'S WAR
STRATEGY,
1944–45
David Horner

Australia's war effort during the last two years of the Second World War has been the subject of considerable criticism, much of it ill-informed. Some historians have claimed that the operations in Bougainville and New Guinea were part of an 'unnecessary war'.¹ The British historian Sir Max Hastings went further when he claimed that 'as the war advanced, grateful as were the Allies for Australia's huge contribution towards feeding their soldiers, there was sourness about the limited contribution by this country of seven million people'. According to Hastings, the Australians were 'bludging'; he has claimed, for example, that the government cut the Army's size by 22 per cent because of the 'unpopularity of military service'.²

These claims are a distortion of what actually happened. The deployment of five Australian divisions during the 1943 offensives was hardly a 'limited contribution'. And in July 1945 Australia had more infantry divisions (six of its seven) in action at one time than in any other month of the war. Hastings was, however, right in one respect: in the last year of the war, the Commander-in-Chief (C-in C) of the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA), General Douglas MacArthur, sidelined Australia's troops into campaigns that could not affect the outcome of the war.

While it is important to examine views such as these, it is equally important to ask other questions. Why and how did Australia change its

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war strategy for 1944 and 1945? What were the alternatives? Were Australia's national interests advanced? Did Australia have the most appropriate machinery for determining its war strategy? What roles were played by the key individuals? The answers might help place Australia's war effort in a broader historical context and also provide some guidance for latter-day strategic decision-makers. In considering these issues it is important to remember that that strategy is not just about the deployment of forces, but also about the allocation of resources.

AUSTRALIAN WAR STRATEGY, 1942–43

Australia's war strategy in 1944–45 was built upon the strategy of earlier years. Australia's pre-war defence policy was based on imperial defence, and, as an outcome of this policy, in 1939 and 1940 Australian naval, land and air forces were deployed overseas to serve under British Commanders-in-Chief. After the outbreak of war with Japan and the entry of the United States in December 1941, Allied higher direction of the war was assumed by US President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Australia had little influence over their deliberations. Allied commanders-in-chief – all US or British officers – were appointed to command operations in the various theatres of war, and in April 1942 the US General MacArthur (who had commanded US forces in the Philippines) was appointed C-in-C of the SWPA, which included Australia and the islands to the north.

With Australia under threat of invasion, Prime Minister John Curtin placed Australia's forces under MacArthur's command. Curtin also looked to MacArthur for advice on strategic matters. As MacArthur told Curtin, 'we two, you and I, will see this thing through together ... You take care of the rear and I will handle the front'.³ The deployment of Australian forces within the SWPA was in MacArthur's hands, but in the emergency of 1942 Curtin had little choice but to accept this abrogation of Australian sovereignty.

Australia's war strategy in 1942 was relatively simple. Australia needed to raise and sustain as large an Army as possible to resist a possible Japanese invasion. Curtin also needed to persuade Roosevelt and Churchill to send resources to help defend Australia and to mount a counteroffensive against the Japanese. Unfortunately for Australia, Roosevelt and Churchill had agreed on a policy of 'beating Hitler first', thus relegating the Pacific theatre to secondary importance. With little capacity to influence Roosevelt and