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978-1-107-03227-9 - Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War

Edited by Peter J. Dean

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The year 1942 represents the first time that the shadows of war from a great power conflict touched the shores of Australia. The bombing of Darwin and the Japanese air offensive against northern Australia, the attack on Sydney Harbour and the battles for the air, land and sea gap to Australia's north occurred within a critical period of Australia's history. This critical year is the focus of this text. Specifically, it concentrates on Australia after the fall of Malaya and Singapore through to the end of the battle for the Beachheads at Gona, Buna and Sanananda in January 1943. This period was described by the then Prime Minister, John Curtin, as the 'battle for Australia' and includes the creation of the South West Pacific Area (SWPA) under US General Douglas MacArthur, the defence of the air and sea approaches to Australia, the mass arrival of US forces in Australia and the campaigns in Papua and the Solomon Islands.

Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War is a military history but the need to contextualise and provide for a broad understanding of the events of this year means that its coverage often roams beyond the strict confines of time, location and discipline, at times taking in such perspectives as politics, social relations and cultural experience. The book is written for a general audience, as well as students of history and scholars. The intention is to be both accessible and scholarly – never an easy task, but one that I believe has been achieved. This edited collection of work is designed to provide a coherent story of Australia's experiences in 1942. However, the whole is only a sum of its parts and in order to appease the reader who desires to

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read chapters in order of interest rather than number, each chapter has been designed, where possible, to provide a comprehensible stand-alone piece of the wider story.

As noted, 1942 was a challenging time for Australia. In the face of a modern great-power conflict the nation had to navigate unprecedented challenges without the support of its traditional protector, the British Empire. In forging a new alliance and setting new directions Australia matured as a nation. The events also helped to cement the role of the Anzac legend in Australian society.

The Anzac legend, however, preferences the First World War and battles in far-off Turkey, France, Belgium and the Middle East over the events that occurred on Australia's doorstep in the Pacific during 1942–5. While commemorative activities around the 50th Anniversary of the end of the Second World War in 1995 were heavily supported by the Australian government, there is little evidence of their impact or resonance. With a change of government soon after the Australian Remembers Campaign, the new Prime Minister, John Howard, used his family links (via a grandfather in the Royal Naval Division) to the campaign at Gallipoli and his devotion to ties with Great Britain and the monarchy to help shift the focus of the Anzac legend back toward the landing at Anzac and the experiences on the Western Front.¹ This has meant that, aside from the prisoner-of-war experience,² the only area of the Second World War that has retained any sense of public consciousness is the battle for the Kokoda Trail.³ Beyond this campaign, 1942 does not seem to resonate with the Australian public. So should it hold a more important place in the already crowded space of the history of war in Australia?

The key to answering this question is to establish just how important this year is in Australia's history. In response, Australia's pre-eminent military historian, David Horner, AM, argues convincingly in Chapter 1 that 1942 is in fact a 'pivotal' year in Australian history. While Gallipoli in 1915 might be firmly in the national consciousness as the birthplace of the Anzac legend, or even Australian national identity, it is in the shadow of Australia's relationship with Great Britain. 1942, as Professor Horner notes, is the year in which, devoid of the traditional reliance on Great Britain, Australia faced the threat of invasion for the first and only time since European settlement. In response Australia mobilised; industrialised; fought a number of vital battles; ratified the Statue of Westminster; forged a relationship with the United States of America; shifted power to the Commonwealth through legislative and taxation reform; and set the stage for postwar migration. Other than being the birthplace of Anzac, 1915, as a year, pales in comparison to the influence of these events and reforms on Australia's history.

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David Horner's chapter forms the foundation for this work. It is the very trunk from which the following chapters branch out to cover the critical events and issues of 1942. From Horner's comprehensive outline of the importance of 1942 in Chapter 1 it would be very easy to delve right into a key battle or political reform. While such events are exceptionally important, when faced with the threat of attack or possible invasion it is critical to reflect on how the 'enemy' looked to Australians at the start of the Pacific War. What type of relationship did Australia have with the Japanese? How did this change over time?

Few of us know about the considerable number of Japanese citizens who made Australia home in the years before the war and that, despite the White Australia Policy, many were fully integrating into Australian society. Nor is the extent of the commercial relationship between these two countries well known or understood. As Pam Oliver sets out in Chapter 2, this is a complex and often misunderstood relationship that is much more nuanced than our general understanding, shaped by war-time propaganda and postwar antipathy, has allowed.

On 7 December 1941 Australia was not well prepared to defend itself. The First World War was supposed to be the 'war to end all wars' and the subsequent moves to limit armaments such as the Washington Naval Treaty (1922) as well as the impact of the Great Depression had major effects on the inter-war defence of Australia. The maintenance of Australia's commitment to the system of Imperial Defence had seen the AIF's infantry divisions deployed overseas, along with the ships of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and aircrews of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) up to 1942. Home defence relied on a largely untrained militia and a few tanks, guns and obsolete planes. As Albert Palazzo outlines in Chapter 3, Australia found itself in a 'desperate situation' in 1942. This chapter explores how Australia got there, what the government did to remedy the situation and how Australia was repositioned as a major Allied base to support the defeat of Japan, while balancing the needs of self-reliance and the machinations of great and powerful friends.

These were just some of the far-reaching decisions that Australia had to make in 1942 in order to bolster its defences. It moved swiftly to mobilise the population from what Blamey called a bunch of 'grazing gazelles' into a society organised on an effective war footing. These moves caused a number of major changes to the home front. As Kate Darian-Smith reveals in Chapter 4, this was part of the government's move to encouraging an 'All-in' war effort. These moves affected the role of women in the work force and the domestic sphere, saw the introduction of widespread rationing

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and civil-defence measures. But one of the most significant changes in Australian society from 1942 was the arrival of mass numbers of US service personnel. This new partnership and the decision to establish Australia as major base of operations against the Japanese meant that some 1 million US servicemen were to make their way to Australia during the course of the Pacific War, with 100 000 arriving in 1942. These troops, with their different culture and language, were to have a major effect on Australian society.

These changes had to be managed by an inexperienced minority government. John Curtin became Prime Minister not long before the Japanese assaults on Pearl Harbor and Malaya, and in Chapter 5 Ross McMullin explains how the Curtin government responded to the crisis of 1942. Critical to assessing its performance is an understanding of Labor's background leading up to its ascension to power. From this rocky platform Curtin and his ministers were able to forge a new partnership with the US C-in-C General Douglas MacArthur; recall the AIF to Australia; negotiate new conscription laws; institute austerity; and place a renewed emphasis on the war effort. As McMullin outlines, it is an impressive record.

The second half of the book turns its attention to more strictly military matters. In chapters 6 and 7 Hiroyuki Shindo and Steven Bullard provide us with the exceptionally important perspective of the 'other side of the hill'. Japanese plans for the South Pacific and Australia have been major points of contention and debate in Australia. After the fall of Singapore Curtin announced the 'battle for Australia', but did the Japanese really have designs to invade the continent? How did Japanese plans for the South Pacific unfold? As Hiroyuki Shindo argues, it would be a grave mistake to assume that the plans of the Japanese Imperial General Staff were set well in advance and that they were undertaking a long and considered plan for their conquests. What emerges is a General Staff split along service lines, with the Imperial Japanese Navy dragging its very reluctant Army colleagues into ventures in the far corners of the South Pacific.

This divergence in views is even more evident when it comes to Japanese plans for Australia. As Bullard notes 'it is impossible to find among Japanese military planners a coherent and simple policy in regards to Australia'. Most of the debate within the Japanese command was, in the end, academic, as Fleet Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto focused his command on drawing the US Navy into a major fleet action, and an invasion of Australia could only have resulted from an impossible number of 'counterfactual turns of history'.

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The Japanese did, however, strike Australian soil and their air campaign against northern Australia started on 19 February 1942 with the attack on Darwin. The impact of this attack sent reverberations across Australia far beyond the 230 deaths caused by the raid. But as Alan Powell lays out in Chapter 8, while we know a great deal about the bombing of Darwin we are still left with a legacy of unanswered questions. Why was such an overwhelming force used for a mere tactical operation? Why were Darwin's critical and vulnerable oil tanks not targeted and why did such a considerable attacking force leave behind so little damage relative to their numbers? Beyond these intriguing questions is the legacy of history, memory and commemoration. Here, Professor Powell explores the contrasts between the 'reality of the raids and the evolving image of them'. He reveals our changing interpretations of this event through the written history and the phases of commemoration that have culminated in Prime Minister Julia Gillard calling in 2012 for 19 February to become a 'new national day of commemoration'.

The RAN and RAAF are often overlooked in the Anzac legend and Australia's history of war. The Army dominates, not just through sheer enlistments, size and battles, but also by the powerful legacy of evocative landscapes. Gallipoli and Kokoda allow commemoration and pilgrimage to flourish where the remembrance of air battles and naval actions cannot. This should not, however, diminish the importance of the contributions of the Air Force and Navy to the war effort and to the defence of Australia and its mandated territories in 1942. The key to defending Australia and defeating the Japanese in the SWPA was a maritime strategy and key to implementing that strategy was the role of the Air Force in establishing air superiority and the Navy in projecting force throughout the vast SWPA and landing troops on its hostile shores. These were not easy objectives to achieve in 1942.

As Mark Johnston reveals in Chapter 9, the RAAF was in a pitiful state in 1942. Its twin problems were a lack of modern aircraft and the European Air Empire Training Scheme, which sent a high number of recruits to the European theatre. The lack of modern aircraft was to prove devastating to the RAAF's aircrews. Fighting Zeros with Buffalos, Wirraways and Hudsons was a virtual death sentence. But the RAAF would fight back. Improved aircraft such as the P-40 and truly modern aircraft such as the Beaufighter would allow the RAAF, in collaboration with the US Army Air Corps, to make a substantial contribution to the air defence of Australia and to victory in the campaigns in Papua.

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Australia's Navy may well have fared best of the three services in the inter-war period but its position at the beginning of 1942 was not enviable. The protection of Australia's 60 000 kilometres of coastline with an exceptionally small number of ships was a near impossible task. But as Ian Pfennigwerth reveals in Chapter 10, when it was placed under MacArthur in 1942 the US inherited a small but highly effective and combat-proven force. Despite the loss of the cruisers *Sydney* and *Perth*, and in the latter half of the year the *Canberra*, the RAN proved itself to be an effective and resilient organisation that forged an excellent working relationship with its new ally. It provided an essential service to the nation, and the foundation laid in 1942 in the Pacific was to see it remain on the frontline of Australia's war effort to the very end.

The last two chapters of this book cover the three largest ground operations in the SWPA that the Australian Army was involved in during 1942. The battle of the Kokoda Trail has taken on mythological status that arguably sees it rank second only to Gallipoli in the Parthenon of Australian military campaigns. In Chapter 11 Karl James explores the nature of this campaign and the equally important operation at Milne Bay. Despite the heroic struggle along the Kokoda Trail and the decisive victory at Milne Bay, 1942 would not end on a high for the Australian and US armies in Papua.

The optimism resulting from these two victories was to deteriorate in the malaria-ridden swamps of Papua's northern shore. As Peter Dean explains in the final chapter, the battles for Gona, Sanananda and Buna were the worst, in terms of casualties, in the whole South Pacific in 1942. The stubborn Japanese defences, assaulted by ill-trained and poorly supplied Australian and US forces cast a dark shadow over the successes of 1942. Borne from a combination of poor pre-war preparedness, failures in intelligence and an incorrect strategy forced on the SWPA's senior commanders, these battles and the reasons for their conduct remain controversial.

The end of 1942 looked very different from its beginning. The victories and Coral Sea, Midway, Kokoda, Milne Bay, Guadalcanal and the Beachheads had swung the balance of the war in the South Pacific firmly towards the Allies. But this outcome was not preordained in early 1942. It was to be a long, tough and bitter year with challenges at every turn.

Notes

- 1 This is not to overlook the commemorative activities and memorial construction undertaken during the Howard government era, which included the Hell Fire Pass Memorial in Thailand (opened on 24 April 1996), the

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memorials at Sandakan, Borneo (dedication 18 March 1999) and Isurava, Papua New Guinea (dedication 14 August 2002).

- 2 This area of history has, more often than not, focused on POW experiences in the Pacific over those in Europe during the Second World War.
- 3 As judged by the number of popular histories and documentaries, a feature film and the number of trekkers that have visited the Kokoda Trail.

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