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AUSTRALIA 1942 IN THE SHADOW OF WAR

In 1942, the shadow of modern war reached Australia's shores for the first time. In this compelling volume, leading historians explore why 1942 was such a pivotal year in Australia's history, and explain how the nation confronted some of its greatest challenges. This broad-ranging study covers key issues from political, economic and home-front reform to the establishment of a new partnership with the United States; the role of the Air Force and the Navy; the bombing of Darwin; as well as the battles of Kokoda, Milne Bay, the Beachheads and Guadalcanal.

Australia 1942 provides a unique and in-depth exploration of the controversy surrounding the potential for invasion. Japanese and Australian historians offer perspectives on Japanese military intentions and strategies towards Australia and the South Pacific. Generously illustrated, it is essential reading for anyone interested in one of Australia's most decisive and critical years.

Peter J. Dean is the Director of Studies at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, the Australian National University and a Senior Lecturer at the Australian Command and Staff College. He is the author of *The Architect of Victory: The Military Career of Lieutenant-General Sir Frank Horton Berryman* (2011), a contributing editor to the Second World War journal *Global War Studies* and a managing editor for the journal *Security Challenges*.

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PETER J. DEAN



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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

FOREWORD

The Hon Kim Beazley, AC,
Ambassador to the United States of America

On 8 May 1942, John Curtin riveted the House of Representatives with an adjournment speech on the naval battle then raging in the Coral Sea:

As I speak, those who are participating in the engagement are conforming to the sternest discipline and are subjecting themselves with all that they have – it may be for many of them the last full measure of their devotion – to accomplish the increased safety and security of this territory.

Given the critical character of the battle, the uncertainty then as to its outcome and the spontaneous nature of the Prime Minister's words, I would argue that in Australian political discourse this comes in character as close to the great brief orations (greatest of all being Lincoln's Gettysburg address) as Australian politics has ever come.

For the political class in Australia, one utterly steeped in the powerful grip of the logic of British Imperial Defence, the emotional shift Curtin's words captured was probably more important in broadening the Australian strategic mind than any cold calculation. In 1942 we learned the language of both self-reliance and new alliances in planning for our survival, even if, as fear of a threat to our national security receded, the traditional commitment to the United Kingdom was revived in later years in modified form.

In the First World War, the vigour, toughness, resilience and fortitude of Australia's volunteer army had created a consciousness of an individual Australian type and character. However, it was a character burnished in

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

Edited by Peter J. Dean

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii FOREWORD

the bosom of what was to be that war's validation of the effectiveness and value of the system of Imperial Defence. Only a couple of months before Curtin spoke, confidence in that structure crashed on land with the Japanese capture of Singapore, at sea with the sinking of British warships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, and at the front door with the bombing of Darwin and the fall of Rabaul.

It is impossible now to recreate in our minds the sense of vulnerability, shock and anxiety felt by the political leadership in Australia and many in the population, particularly in early 1942. Subsequent historical analysis disproves the theory of a Japanese intention to occupy Australia. No such confidence in Australia existed when the battle of the Coral Sea took place and as the long struggle along the Kokoda Track commenced. Curtin understood that defeat in the Coral Sea would likely terminate the Australian position in New Guinea – a position established consciously decades earlier with the intention of locking Australia's strategic front door. Without the strategic victories at Coral Sea and Midway, Australia's war would have become immensely complicated and a Japanese thrust to control the island chain dominating the easiest connection between the United States and Australia, entirely possible. As it happened, Coral Sea, Midway and the successful conclusion of the dual and related struggles in Papua and on and around Guadalcanal, had clearly secured Australia's position by early 1943.

Australia's near-total mobilisation in 1942 is a fascinating and admirable story. It is well told here. With civil conscription for single Australian women and, for the South Pacific battlefronts of 1942, civil and military conscription for men, and the direction of Australian industry, Australia was one of the most (arguably the most) mobilised belligerents in the Second World War. The story, and the associated battles, is deservedly inspirational, impelled in part as it was by the sense that for our allies we were a strategic backwater. Churchill and Roosevelt fashioned a priority for the struggle against Hitler – a fight in which thousands of Australian airmen participated throughout the war. Another battle in which Australian soldiers played a critical role in 1942 was the battle of el Alamein, described by Churchill as 'the end of the beginning' in the Western European theatre. In that fight the Australian Army provided 10 per cent of the troops for almost a quarter of the casualties.

A little too much can be made of the 'beat Hitler first' strategy. General Douglas MacArthur, sent to command in the South West Pacific Area, was the only identifiable American heroic general (deservedly or not) at the time. Even though he did not have more US soldiers than Australian under

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Edited by Peter J. Dean

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

his command until 1944, he was sent with the intention of conducting offensive operations. More important, the leadership of the United States Navy was determined that an effective retaliation against the Japanese would be conducted immediately, with Australia at one end of an axis anchored at the other in Hawaii.

The man responsible for this policy was Admiral Ernest King, who features little in Australian history. He conceded that the general strategy of the focus on Hitler left the Pacific theatre forces with 'very few lines' of military endeavour but the most important of these in his mind was support for 'Australasia'. This meant securing the island chain between Australia and Hawaii. 'Such a line', he said, 'would be offensive not passive'.¹ His offensive was envisaged for the Solomon Islands but came to include Papua.

It was no accident then that, despite the vulnerability of Hawaii and an anticipated carrier struggle in June at Midway, half of the US Navy's carriers in the Pacific was committed against a superior force, part of which was on its way to Port Moresby, in the Coral Sea in May. At the time, Admiral Nimitz's Hawaii headquarters estimated the Japanese to be superior in carriers, battleships and shore-based air strength. Further, King had little confidence in Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, the man in charge of US forces for the battle. This was high-order risk taking. We are used to the Americans as an ally in times of American superiority. In 1942 they proved a useful ally when they understood they were not. There was no querulous concern to concentrate around Hawaii until American mobilisation in 1942 would enable a push in 1943 or 1944. From the outset the Australian–Hawaii axis had to be held and the Japanese kept off balance.

Nevertheless 1942 is Australia's story. Whatever our allies thought, we believed we could and had to make a stand for ourselves. Papua dominated our thinking. Milne Bay and Kokoda rapidly became iconic. Only in recent times have we really appreciated the interrelationship between those struggles and the largely American effort in the Solomons (not exclusive: Australian coast watchers were vital in that fight and Australian naval units were also engaged). At home joy and frivolity were frowned upon, though Curtin obtained distraction and relief watching Aussie Rules games in Canberra. Australians lost lives in numbers as our year of living dangerously unfolded, and memory lingers in many families. In my own, my Uncle Syd, captured in Rabaul, was killed when an American submarine sank the *Montevideo Maru* on its way to Japan.

We remember our greatest generation. We remember too our friends. Over 1 million American service personnel passed through Australia

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Edited by Peter J. Dean
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

x FOREWORD

during the war: 100 000 of them in 1942. An American, Douglas MacArthur, commanded our troops. He was an ambiguous figure then and subsequently both in Australia and the United States. For members of the Curtin government he was less so. To them he was a hero with our nation's best interests at heart. Arthur Calwell, then Minister for Information and Opposition Leader at the time of MacArthur's death, said of him:

Now he is dead. There is neither rank nor station nor prerogative in the democracy of the dead or the republic of the grave. For us, however, Douglas MacArthur belongs to the immortal dead. But he belongs forever in the hearts and history of the Australian people. In the words of the poet, this country, as does his own, owes him 'the debt immense of endless gratitude'.²

Something like that is owed 'our greatest generation', and 1942 was the year it was tested.

Notes

- 1 Walter R. Borneman, *The Admirals*, Little, Brown & Company, New York, 2012, pp. 258–9.
- 2 Arthur Calwell, *Be Just and Fear Not*, Lloyd O'Neill Publishing, Melbourne, 1968, p. 106.

CONTENTS

Foreword	<i>page</i> vii
Photos	xiii
Maps	xv
Charts	xvi
Acknowledgements	xvii
Contributors	xix
Abbreviations	xxii
Introduction	1
PART 1 AUSTRALIA IN 1942	9
1 Australia in 1942: A pivotal year <i>David Horner</i>	11
PART 2 RELATIONS, POLITICS AND THE HOME FRONT	31
2 World wars and the anticipation of conflict: The impact on long-established Australian–Japanese relations, 1905–43 <i>Pam Oliver</i>	33
3 The overlooked mission: Australia and home defence <i>Albert Palazzo</i>	53
4 The home front and the American presence in 1942 <i>Kate Darian-Smith</i>	70
5 ‘Dangers and problems unprecedented and unpredictable’: The Curtin government’s response to the threat <i>Ross McMullin</i>	89
PART 3 AUSTRALIA UNDER THREAT	103
6 The Japanese Army’s ‘unplanned’ South Pacific campaign <i>Hiroyuki Shindo</i>	106

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03227-9 - Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War
Edited by Peter J. Dean
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xii CONTENTS

7 Japanese strategy and intentions towards Australia <i>Steven Bullard</i>	124
8 The air raids on Darwin, 19 February 1942: Image and reality <i>Alan Powell</i>	140
PART 4 THE WAR ON AUSTRALIA'S DOORSTEP	157
9 Vanquished but defiant, victorious but divided: The RAAF in the Pacific, 1942 <i>Mark Johnston</i>	161
10 A novel experience: The RAN in 1942, defending Australian waters <i>Ian Pfennigwerth</i>	179
11 On Australia's doorstep: Kokoda and Milne Bay <i>Karl James</i>	199
12 Anzacs and Yanks: US and Australian operations at the Beachhead battles <i>Peter J. Dean</i>	217
Conclusion: 1942 in reflection	240
Index	242

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by Peter J. Dean

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PHOTOS

Photo 1	The Naval Base, Singapore, refitting a British warship, September 1941	<i>page</i> 14
Photo 2	The <i>Montevideo Maru</i>	17
Photo 3	Australian Coastwatcher Captain W. F. Martin Clemens at Guadalcanal, 18 August 1942, with US 1st Marine Division	23
Photo 4	General Douglas MacArthur with General Sir Thomas Blamey and Prime Minister John Curtin, 26 March 1942	26
Photo 5	Function at the Japanese Consul General's residence, late 1930s	34
Photo 6	Staff of T. Iida & Co, Melbourne, 1930s	38
Photo 7	Nakamura family, Mosman, 1938	41
Photo 8	US Army Air Corps Boeing B-17D aircraft en route to the Philippines, November 1941	61
Photo 9	Members of the 15th (Militia) Brigade undergoing bayonet training	63
Photo 10	Australian Women's Army Service, 1942	64
Photo 11	Air-raid practice at No. 113 Australian General Hospital, September 1942	71
Photo 12	Crowds queue for their ration books in a suburban issuing centre, June 1942	73
Photo 13	US servicemen strolling arm-in-arm with Australian girls along the banks of the Yarra River	80
Photo 14	Studio portrait of Australian Prime Minister John Curtin	92
Photo 15	Night scene of a convoy at sea as the AIF returns from the Middle East	95
Photo 16	Minister for War Organisation and Scientific and Industrial Research, John J. Dedman	97

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by Peter J. Dean

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv PHOTOS

Photo 17	Japanese Special Naval Landing Forces landing by boat on Buka Island in the Solomon Islands, 1942	110
Photo 18	Informal group portrait of Japanese soldiers gathered on a hillside in Papua	114
Photo 19	Japanese Mitsubishi A6M3 (Zero) fighter aircraft damaged and abandoned near the Buna airstrip	120
Photo 20	Admiral Nagano Osami	130
Photo 21	Captain (later Rear Admiral) Tomioka Sadatoshi	131
Photo 22	Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku	132
Photo 23	The Darwin Post Office and Post Master's residence, after the first Japanese air-raid on 19 February 1942	141
Photo 24	The SS <i>Neptuna</i> explodes at Stokes Hill Wharf, Darwin, 19 February 1942	144
Photo 25	Wreckage of RAAF Wirraway planes in a hangar at the Darwin aerodrome, 19 February 1942	146
Photo 26	RAAF Brewster Buffalo aircraft of 453 Squadron, Sembawang airfield, Malaya, c. November 1941	163
Photo 27	Beaufighter aircraft of No. 30 Squadron RAAF, Owen Stanley Ranges, 1942	171
Photo 28	Squadron Leader R. C. ('Dick') Cresswell, commander of No. 77 Squadron RAAF	175
Photo 29	The RAN's Bathurst-class corvettes HMAS <i>Deloraine</i> and HMAS <i>Colac</i>	186
Photo 30	HMAS <i>Australia</i> under attack during the battle of the Coral Sea	188
Photo 31	HMAS <i>Canberra</i> sinking following the battle of Savo Island	194
Photo 32	Militiamen from the 30th Brigade carrying out manoeuvres outside of Port Moresby, July 1942	201
Photo 33	Members of the 39th Battalion withdrawing after the battle of Isurava, September 1942	206
Photo 34	Japanese Type 95 Ha-Go light tanks used in the abortive landing at Milne Bay	211
Photo 35	Japanese defences at the Beachheads	220
Photo 36	US troops of 128th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Division move up to the Buna front	222
Photo 37	Bodies of four dead Japanese, killed in the Buna action, lying beside a large pillbox, 28 December 1942	233

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by Peter J. Dean

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

MAPS

Map 1	South West Pacific Area, 1942–5	<i>page</i> xxiv
Map 2	The Japanese advance, 1942	xxv
Map 3	The Australian theatre	32
Map 4	Pre-war Japanese connections: Australia and Southeast Asia	37
Map 5	Japanese plans in the Pacific, 1942	104
Map 6	Allied operations: Timor to Guadalcanal, 1942	160
Map 7	The battle of the Coral Sea	187
Map 8	Kokoda Trail: Retreat and advance, 1942	203
Map 9	The Allied advance in Papua, October–November 1942	219
Map 10	The battle of the Beachheads, November 1942 – January 1943	226

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03227-9 - Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War
Edited by Peter J. Dean
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CHARTS

Chart 1	Command organisation in the SWPA, 1942	<i>page</i> xxvi
Chart 2	Command organisation: defence of Australia, 1942	32
Chart 3	Japanese Command organisation, Imperial General HQ	105
Chart 4	RAAF Command organisation, 1942	158
Chart 5	RAN Command organisation, 1942	158
Chart 6	New Guinea Force Command organisation, Kokoda and Milne Bay, 1942	159
Chart 7	Advanced New Guinea Force Command organisation, Beachheads, 1942	159
Chart 8	Australian Army formation capability assessments, 1942	231

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by Peter J. Dean

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Particular thanks must go to David Horner who, as always, generously provided me with his sage advice and continues to encourage me in my endeavours, and to Kim Beazley, Australian Ambassador to the United

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by Peter J. Dean

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03227-9 - Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War
Edited by Peter J. Dean
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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

Edited by Peter J. Dean

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

Edited by Peter J. Dean

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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ABBREVIATIONS

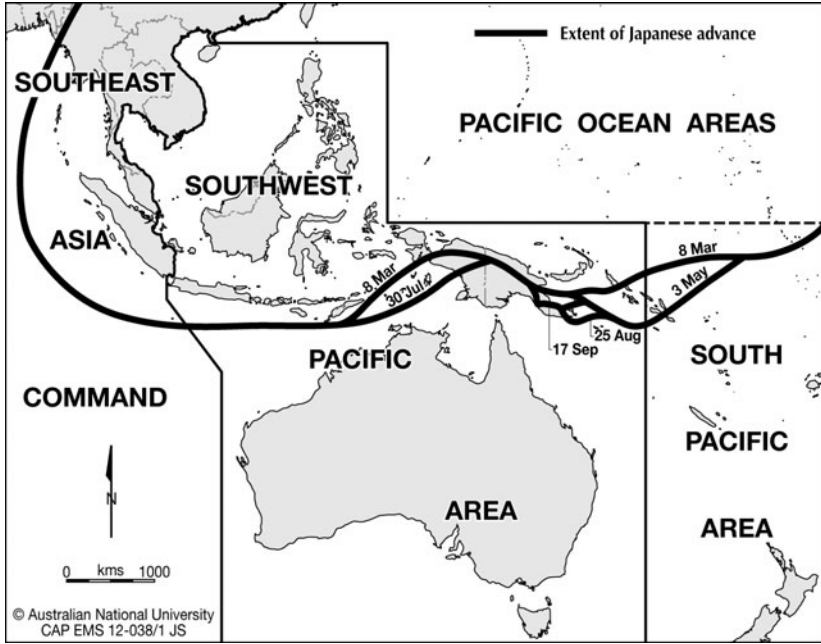
5SNLP	5th Special Naval Landing Party
AAF	Allied Air Forces
Adv GHQ	Advanced General Headquarters; MacArthur's headquarters in Brisbane/Port Moresby
Adv NGF HQ	Advanced New Guinea Force Headquarters (Corps HQ-subordinate to NGF)
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AJRP	Australia–Japan Research Project
AMF	Australian Military Forces
ANGAU	Australian New Guinea Administration Unit
ANU	Australian National University
ARP	Air Raid Precautions
ASW	Anti-Submarine Warfare
AWM	Australian War Memorial
CCC	Civil Construction Corps
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CMF	Citizen Military Force
CO	Commanding officer
FRUMEL	Fleet Radio Unit Melbourne
GHQ	General Headquarters, SWPA
HQ	Headquarters
IJA	Imperial Japanese Army
IJN	Imperial Japanese Navy
MHHV	Military History and Heritage Victoria
NGF	New Guinea Force (Corps, later Army level command based at Port Moresby)
NOIC	Naval Officer-in-Charge
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RACAS	Rear Admiral Commanding the Australian Squadron

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

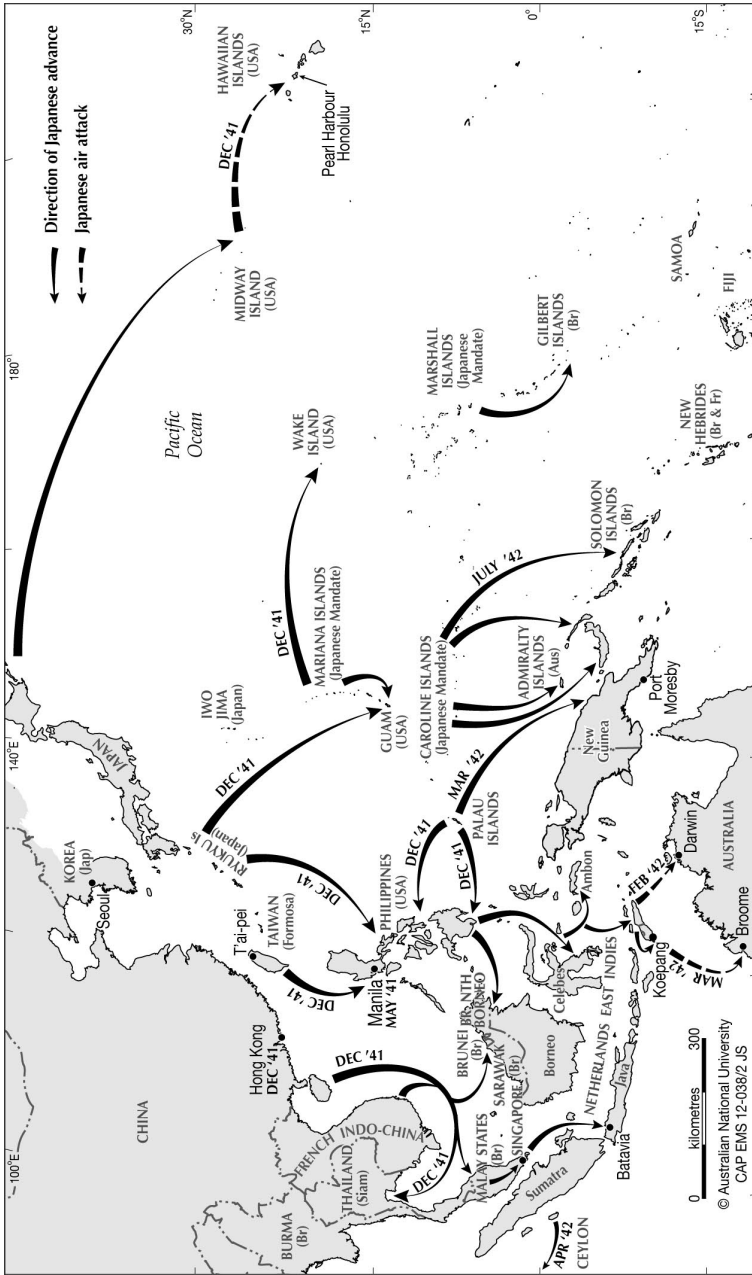
ABBREVIATIONS xxiii

RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RSL	Returned Services League
SDSC	Strategic and Defence Studies Centre
SWPA	South West Pacific Area
USAHEC	United States Army Heritage and Education Centre
VDC	Voluntary Defence Corps
WRANS	Women's Royal Australian Naval Service

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)



Map I South West Pacific Area, 1942-5



Map 2 The Japanese advance, 1942

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 Edited by Peter J. Dean
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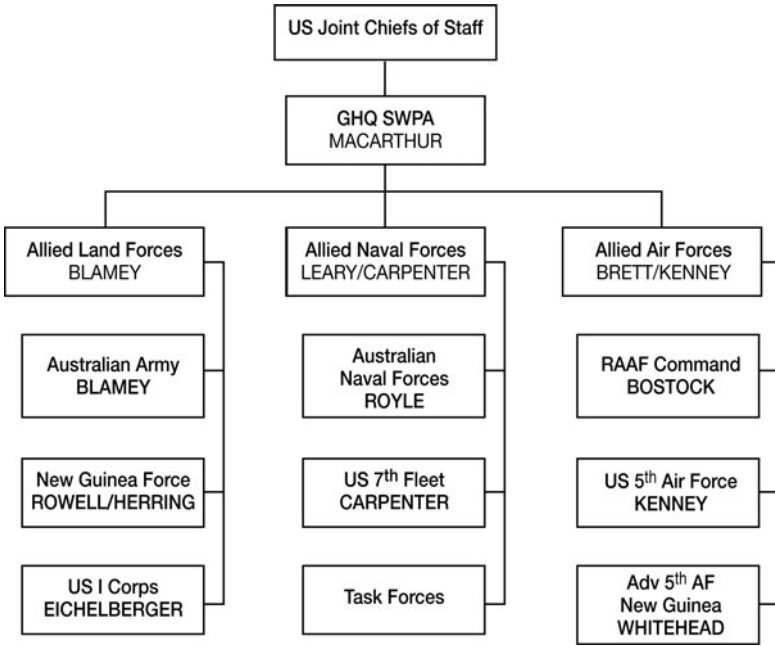


Chart 1 Command organisation in the SWPA, 1942