

**AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS  
IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45**

**THE BALANCING ACT:  
THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE WAR IN THE  
SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC, 1944-45**

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One of the primary issues in the early planning for this inaugural Army History Conference was to ensure that Australian amphibious operations of 1944-45 were viewed in the context of Australia's participation in the total war effort and, equally important in our view, against the background of contemporary Australian public perceptions of the contribution being made by the Australian Army to the prosecution of the war.

This paper seeks to address that issue, albeit briefly. Contemporary records suggest that three major issues affected the Government's conduct of the war in this period: conflicting demands for a share of the rapidly decreasing pool of available Australian manpower; the increasingly acrimonious public and Parliamentary debate regarding the employment, equipping, organisation and senior leadership of the Australian Army; and the conflict between the Government's perception of the continued need for security through censorship and the growing public demand for prompt, accurate reporting of Australian military, particularly Australian Army, achievements in the war.

By January 1943, the Government had been forced to recognise that there was a critical shortage of manpower in all areas of the economy. From an estimated working population of 3.2 million at the end of the previous year, net enlistments had taken some 689,000 personnel including 33,000 women, with a further 173,000 being employed in war production and the Allied Works Council. Nearly a million more were employed in supplying food, clothing, transport and other services to Australian and Allied forces. Government was committed to the view that Australia's future depended upon her forces being of such a scale as to guarantee her an effective voice in the peace settlement in the Pacific.<sup>1</sup> That voice could only be guaranteed if Australian forces, especially the Australian Army, played a significant role in the future campaigns in the Pacific.<sup>2</sup>

Skilled labour was a critical area of shortfall with an additional 11,500 being the estimated requirement in the period between January and June 1943. But it was the vital rural sector that was of greatest concern to Australian and British governments alike.<sup>3</sup> The normal separation rates from the services were not only inadequate in number to address this concern but, in a majority of cases, the personnel were physically unsuited to the industry. The industry was not without blame either, with farmers pressing for the release of relatives and friends to return to the land as they were unwilling to pay award wages to new workers. Understandably, few were prepared to return to the land from higher paying jobs in industry even when released. Adding to the problem was the slow rate at which women were returning to civilian employment. Only 1,000 were added in 1944-45 against a target of 10,000. A high proportion of those who did join civilian industry were found to be non-effective while it was difficult to use the power of direction against those women who did not rejoin the work force. Government faced the paradox of growing unemployment queues while targets for food production were not achieved.

By mid-1943 the defeat of Germany was believed to be within sight and there was an acceptance of the view that the Allies had turned the corner in the war against Japan. After October 1943, the concerns of post-war reconstruction grew to dominate most aspects of official and private sector planning.<sup>4</sup> There is ample evidence of government concern to ensure that Australian industry was positioned to make the transfer from a war footing to peacetime production in what would be an intensely competitive arena. Equally, it was

concerned that Australia not be caught with large stocks of surplus goods when the vast British and American stockpiles were released. The release of large quantities of surplus war stocks, especially vehicles and shipping, in early 1945 in the midst of vigorous public debate over the equipping of the AIF reflected this concern, though the timing might have been more felicitous.

It was anticipated that on existing manpower levels the demand for consumer goods and housing at the end of the war, whenever that might occur, would be so far in excess of supply that Australia would face a period of very rapid inflation followed by an equally rapid and severe depression. By the early months of 1944, government was convinced that this scenario could only be averted if the conversion of manufacturing industries to meet peacetime needs and the restoration of the housing industry were already well advanced when the war ended. Moreover, care would be needed to ensure that the labour market was not overloaded with ex-servicemen lacking the necessary educational and technical skills. These views generated intense pressure for the accelerated discharge of servicemen beyond the normal discharge levels.<sup>5</sup>

From the Army perspective, it is important to remember that Curtin was known to support the long-standing Labor policy that Australia's best long-term defence could be secured by building up the RAAF to the limit of Australia's capacity, a view also argued constantly by Shedden, Secretary of the Department of Defence.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as Day points out, Curtin was of the view that food, together with a limited but not insignificant military effort, would be Australia's best contribution to the war effort.<sup>7</sup>

In August 1944, War Cabinet endorsed Curtin's recommendation for a reduction of 30,000 in the strength of the AMF and 15,000 in the RAAF with the gross intake of the three Services being maintained at 3,000 per month. Of the 45,000 to be released in this way, 20,000 were to be restored to essential civilian industry by the end of December 1944 and the balance by June 1945. Cabinet noted that these releases were to be in addition to normal discharges.<sup>8</sup> Dedman, Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, was soon arguing in forceful terms for an additional 40,000 to be released between December 1944 and January 1945.

Australia was not alone in facing these problems. Churchill was under enormous pressure to accelerate the return of servicemen to civilian employment and to speed the conversion of British industry from a wartime footing to ease the burden of the British population. The problem for the British government was how to provide a convincing show of military might in the Pacific and South-East Asia without deploying British servicemen. One stratagem was to offer Australia a mini-fleet of an aircraft carrier, at least one cruiser and up to six destroyers. Britain would supply the ships, Australia the crews and the support infra-structure. The proposal was strongly supported by Admiral Royle, the British head of the RAN, who championed it in War Cabinet. In the prevailing climate, such a proposal was beyond the resources available, regardless of any logistic or strategic considerations. Royle's proposal was finally rejected, but only after some heated exchange between Curtin and Royle.

The manpower problem is epitomised by the comment in a letter from the Acting Minister for the Army to the Acting Prime Minister, Forde, on 23 May 1944 that the question was whether the direct contribution of the AIF to operations in the South-West Pacific was to be reduced and the food front maintained and increased.<sup>9</sup> Butlin goes further and suggests that, by that time, there was a simple choice for government - military adventurism in the form of expeditionary forces under MacArthur's command that was likely to be of dubious military significance or preparation for the avoidance of massive unemployment after demobilisation.<sup>10</sup>

Objective consideration of the problem was not helped by the debates over the employment, equipping and senior leadership of the Australian Army that had been growing in intensity from the middle of 1944. The three issues soon became intertwined. The withdrawal of certain AIF divisions for rest and re-equipment had been announced in mid-1944 but there had been a virtual news blackout on the Army since that time. On 10 January 1945, *The Canberra Times* reported the announcement by MacArthur that the Australian Army had relieved American forces in the Solomons, British New Guinea and New Britain some three months

earlier. In its editorial that day, titled 'Personal and Missing Friends', the *Times* leads off 'Will anyone knowing the whereabouts of Australian soldiers in action in the South-West Pacific area please communicate at once with the Australian Government' and goes on to castigate the Government for failing to tell the 'Parliament and people' of the achievements of its own troops. It is perhaps the most trenchant example of a controversy waged in the major newspapers during this period. Nor was the damage purely domestic. The long absence of any report of Australian Army activity against the enemy and MacArthur's use of the term 'Allied', interpreted as meaning American, had led to public statements by American officials and members of Congress that Australia was not pulling its weight in the war.<sup>11</sup>

The question of equipment shortages surfaced in the daily papers and the Parliament in early March with correspondents and Opposition members reporting poor signals equipment, severe shortages of mechanised equipment, road building plant and, most critically, flame throwers and antitank weapons to defeat Japanese bunkers.<sup>12</sup> The effectiveness of the latter were graphically demonstrated in stories and pictures of the American campaigns currently being waged further to the north. Blamey argued publicly that flame throwers were unpredictable weapons and difficult to employ in this terrain.

The Acting Minister for the Army, Fraser, was despatched on a fact finding mission with an message from Curtin to Australian soldiers requesting them to tell him of any problems with equipment and assuring them that 'what can be done will be done'. This begs the question what should Fraser know that the Minister or the Prime Minister did not know already or that Blamey had not told government.

The employment of veteran combat soldiers to relieve American forces who had been content to contain the Japanese aroused similar passions. The general argument ran that the front line had moved north and these forces should be in the forefront of defeating the Japanese, either in Malaya or in the relief of Singapore. The press and the Opposition referred to Blamey's statement to War Council in September 1944 that no large scale offensive operations were contemplated against the by-passed Japanese which he said was an 'impotent force' and contrasted that with his contemporary advice to Government that these Japanese had to be 'eliminated' and 'completely beaten now'.<sup>13</sup>

Curtin summarised the issues in his address to the House on April 24, '... that the operations [presently undertaken by the Australian Army] should not have been undertaken in the circumstances, indeed that the operations should not have been carried out at all, but that Australian Forces should be employed in more offensive action elsewhere.' Referring to criticism that the Army should be given a major job in the front line, Curtin said that, on his return from London in June 1944, he told MacArthur that he was anxious that Australian Forces should be associated with the advance and that they should be represented in the operations against the Philippines. He said that MacArthur had requested Australia to provide two divisions for the advance but that 'our non-participation in the Philippines campaign was entirely due to the great and rapid success of the earlier phase of the operations.' Curtin repeats his statement made in the House on 22 February that Australia had a political responsibility to clear the enemy from those territories for which the Australian Government was responsible.

The debate resolved little. Curtin's speech was replete with references to assurances given by Blamey to the Government but contained little to suggest that Blamey was in fact acting to carry out the strategic plans of the Australian Government. The world shortage of shipping was blamed for any delays in the delivery of equipment without any discussion of Government moves to anticipate the obvious or to defer the release of shipping to the private sector. As for the need to eliminate the Japanese, Curtin argued that the Americans were following the same policy in the Philippines.

The attacks on Blamey and the higher organisation of the Army had been voiced in the press and in Federal Parliament on numerous occasions in this period. Central to these attacks was the alleged poor relationship between Blamey and his subordinate generals and the assertion that this was actually denying the Army the benefit of the best leadership at a critical time in

the war. Blamey further inflamed the situation by using a radio address on 15 April in support of a War Loan to attack both the Opposition and the press. The speech was seen by many as bringing his office into the political arena.

General Eisenhower was reported as saying that war correspondents should be encouraged to mention the identity of units actually in the line when these have obviously been previously identified by the enemy arguing that it improved the morale of both the troops involved and civilians at home.<sup>14</sup> The Australian Army and the Department of Public Relations appeared to operate on the opposite view. Up to the time of the landings in Borneo there was little mention of Australian Army units and still less of senior Australian Army commanders. As *The Sydney Morning Herald* pointed out, there had been only one mention of General Vasey in the preceding year and that was to announce his death in a plane crash. It goes on to argue that while every Australian was familiar with the names of subordinate British and American commanders, few could name Australian field commanders or the units they commanded.<sup>15</sup> However, the problem was not that simple. Government had agreed in 1942 that the issue of communiques on the activities of Australian forces under his command should be made by MacArthur and not by the Prime Minister. While this was consistent with practice in other theatres, there was not the subsequent amplification by national headquarters of individual achievements that occurred in Europe and North Africa. The bitter fights between some major Australian newspaper proprietors and the Minister for Public Relations, Arthur Calwell, and attacks by other ministers on war correspondents did not help Army's cause.<sup>16</sup>

The situation is best illustrated by the accounts of the landing at Tarakan. *The Sydney Morning Herald* of 2 May, quoting Tokyo Radio reports, announced that a famous Australian division was in action in Borneo. *The Age* the next day in a piece headed 'MacArthur silent on Borneo' said that all new information was being received from Tokyo Radio except for a report from the Netherlands agency *Antara* stating that Netherlands forces are fighting with the Australians. Finally the 9th Division is announced as the force, based on the identification of colour patches on the pugarees shown in pictures published in the *New York Times*. Melbourne's *The Age* in announcing this on 5 May carried a report from its correspondent at MacArthur's Headquarters that the identity of the AIF force had not been released 'as a result of a request by Australian authorities'.<sup>17</sup>

The early debate on equipment and the press should be contrasted with the situation in later months. Thus press reports of the fighting on Borneo and the assaults in New Guinea carry stories, quoting Army sources, announcing that the flame thrower is the most effective weapon against pill boxes and that they played a major role in the attack on Sauri on the main track leading up to the Prince Alexander Mountains. Reporting the 3rd Division landing on Balikpapan, *The Age* of 3 July reported that GHQ had provided a special press and communications boat for the over 40 press and radio correspondents enabling press and broadcasting despatches to be sent to America and Britain. GHQ issued a communique detailing the names of the divisional and brigade commanders.

But such press reports in 1944 and 1945 were relatively rare events. Even a random perusal of daily papers of the period shows the overwhelming interest that was placed on the war in Europe, followed by MacArthur's drive towards the Japanese mainland and the war in Burma. New Guinea, Borneo, Balikpapan captured a place on the front page on the day but then became short paragraphs on page three or four. The Ardennes counter-offensive, the Russian race to Budapest, Vienna and the Baltic, the release of Australian prisoners of war from German prison camps and the unfolding horror of the Nazi concentration camps were the preoccupation of Australian newspapers. Domestic issues such as the death of Roosevelt, the British elections, the Australian government's proposals to nationalise the banks and the airlines and the endless succession of strikes in Australia occupied more newsprint than the bloody battles of Bougainville and Borneo.

It should also be remembered that substantial Australian forces were still involved outside the campaigns in our immediate north. By the time of the German surrender there was a total of 16,000 RAAF personnel engaged in the war against Germany of whom 12,300 were aircrew. This should be contrasted with the Pacific at the same time where the RAAF had 14,500

aircrew out of a total strength 138,000.<sup>18</sup> The RAN participated in support of the occupation of Akyab and a larger Australian force including the cruisers *Australia* and *Shropshire*, two destroyers, two frigates and three LSI supported the landing of the American 6th Army at Lingayen Gulf on the west coast of Luzon.

Australian servicemen and women were heavily engaged in the war in all theatres in 1944 and 1945. Climate, terrain, disease and the Japanese soldier made combat in Bougainville, New Guinea and Borneo no less deadly than it had been in the dark days of 1942. But for most Australians, for the Australian Government, the threat of defeat was long since gone. Securing the best position in the peace, or before it if possible, was the real task. One could be excused if one drew the conclusion from the constant litany of strikes, the vast pilfering of war supplies on the wharves and railways, that the preoccupation of civilian Australia was to ensure that it made the most of the gravy train before it all ended. Regardless of the strategic merit of the campaigns in which the Army was involved from 1944 to the end of the war, their efforts attracted scant honour in their own country on the day. For the majority, to be in Australia then was indeed to be in the lucky country.

### Endnotes

1. War Cabinet Minute 3065 of 1 October 1943.
2. This position had been established in Defence Committee Minute of 19 August 1943.
3. Butlin, SJ, Schedvin, CB, *The War Economy, 1942-1945*, Australian War memorial, Canberra, 1977, p 349.
4. Op cit, p 366.
5. Op cit, p 680.
6. Memorandum, Shedden to Curtin, 23 March 1944, CRS A5958/305:AA.
7. Day, D, *Reluctant Nation*, Oxford University Press Australia, Melbourne, 1992, p 202.
8. War Cabinet Minutes 3691 of 4 August 1944 and 3740 of 23 August 1944. 9. Quoted in PMC Hasluck, *The Government and the People, 1942-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1970, p 421.
10. Butlin, op cit, p 693.
11. *The Age* editorial of 8 January titled 'Putting Australia in a False Light' notes the view expressed in Washington by Representative Johnson that as the war had moved away from Australia, we have left the fighting to others. *The Sydney Morning Herald* editorial of 10 January 1945: 'There can be no doubt that it has done serious damage to Australia's reputation abroad'.
12. *The Age*, March 23.
13. *The Sydney Morning Herald* editorial of April 25 1945. The editorial goes on to quote MacArthur as saying that there were no military grounds for an offensive campaign.
14. Quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* editorial 13 April 1945 titled 'Our Anonymous War in the Islands'.
15. Ibid.
16. Dedman is quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* as saying 'No reliance could be placed on press correspondents who had all along been antagonistic to those directing operations' and asserting that they had obstructed operations.
17. *The Age*, May 5, p 1.
18. Webster, Charles & Noble, Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939-1945*, vol III: Victory, Part 5, HMSO, London, 1961, p 287.