

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

THE CURTIN GOVERNMENT, BRITAIN AND BORNEO

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The Curtin Government, Britain, and Borneo. This was the topic suggested by the conference organisers. At first glance though an unlikely enough trilogy. It might be asked: what could they have in common? We are all aware that it was John Curtin as an Australian Labor Party Prime Minister who, in January 1942, told the British Conservative Party Prime Minister Winston Churchill that the evacuation of Singapore would be regarded as 'an inexcusable betrayal'. Mythology or truth tells us that John Curtin was constant in his protection of Australian interests, that it was his insistent tenacity which saw the 6th and 7th Divisions returned to Australia instead of being diverted to the Netherlands East Indies or Rangoon and to inevitable destruction or barbaric captivity. We are told how different Curtin was to Robert Menzies, an outright Empire Man who denuded Australia of any defence capability with his fulsome offer of Australian forces to fight overseas in a distant war. It was Curtin who led his government away from Britain and towards the Americans and, for that, Winston Churchill never forgave him. Small wonder, therefore, that British-Australian relations changed forever.

What then of Borneo? Relatively few Australians would have known anything about this second largest island in the world. Three quarters of it belonged to Holland, while the remainder - the states of Brunei and Sarawak, and the territory of North Borneo - came under British protection. British influence in North Borneo was the result of purely entrepreneurial capitalism. North Borneo had been administered by the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company since 1881, largely for the benefit of London-based shareholders. By 1920, the company was raising revenue from local charges twice that needed for expenditure on services.¹

Good business sense surely, but one might not expect John Curtin, with his democratic socialism, to have had much sympathy with protecting such a system; nor with the social values of this strange outpost of the Empire. Recruited by the company in 1939, a young Australian medical practitioner found there '... a cosy, correct but rather ethereal group'. With only seventy-five Europeans from a population of 14,000, it proved difficult to find sufficient players for good doubles tennis because some of those Europeans were 'in trade'.² An American woman married to a company employee found the significance placed on '... doing and saying the right thing' irksome. For men to be without '... coats, ties, tails, or mess jackets' at the right time was quite unthinkable.³ Again, one wonders what Curtin, steeped in the Yarra Bank tradition and Australian egalitarianism, would have made of that.

At once, then, the main question: why were Australian lives lost in 1945 under an Australian Labor Government in an attempt to retake from the Japanese a Dutch colony; Brunei, a traditional sultanate; North Borneo, the virtual property of London investors who appointed their own Governor; and Sarawak, with a confused international status but a state which had been ruled by the Brooke family as Rajahs since 1842.⁴ These territories came under either Dutch or British protection. The fact that all legal, social or military pretensions were swept aside by the Japanese early in 1942 is beginning to answer the question. To be under the protection of British or Dutch armed forces in Borneo, or anywhere else in South East Asia, was virtually a guarantee of being under no protection at all.

To defend the whole of the Netherlands East Indies, the Dutch mustered only three light cruisers, seven destroyers, fifteen submarines and barely more than two under strength divisions supported by a varied collection of second rate aircraft. In defence of Balikpapan, Dutch naval forces fought bravely but, once the Japanese landed the one weak battalion there, wisely withdrew to the jungle after destroying oil installations.⁵

The Japanese capture of North Borneo was even simpler. As early as December 1940, the British deemed the area indefensible. One battalion was deployed for static airfield defence and the destruction of oil facilities. Once these Indian troops made contact with the Japanese, they suffered heavy losses, while the Japanese themselves claimed that, in occupying British North Borneo, not a single battle casualty was recorded.⁶ Disaster was to follow in Java. The *Orcades* arrived in Batavia on 17 February 1942 carrying 3,400 members of the 7th Division. On 8 March, what was left of the force surrendered and 2,700 Australians became Japanese prisoners of war.⁷ If the Curtin government viewed British military advisers and indeed the British government with a somewhat sceptical eye, and found the United States and particularly General MacArthur more attractive, then perhaps it is not surprising. Curtin inside two years, however, came to adopt an Imperial position which would not have disgraced a perceived image of Robert Menzies. When this transition is examined, it is tempting to think that Curtin's newly acquired Imperial sentiments were another reason why Australian young men found themselves on Borneo in 1945.

The South-West Pacific Area, and consequently Australia, was made secure as the result of four allied victories: Coral Sea, Midway, Papua and Guadalcanal. Curtin officially admitted that the danger of Japanese invasion had passed. It might be churlish to suggest that quickly afterwards, the Curtin government may have realised that the Americans were no longer useful. They had, however, caused problems. In October 1943, Curtin conceded to Sir Ronald Cross, the British High Commissioner, his 'great affection and admiration' for MacArthur and remarked 'If he had been born in Australia and had gone to Duntroon, he could not have shown a higher concern for Australian interests'. But for Curtin, it was also true that the Americans were using their overwhelming military strength to gain post-war commercial advantages. As Cross was told:

We keep on getting people out here with letters saying they are President Roosevelt's personal representative who seem to be spying out the land.⁸

A certain element of trust did seem lacking.

A difficult truth must be acknowledged: political and economic conflicts do not stop simply because allies are engaged against a common enemy. It might also be unpalatable to recognise that political leaders will use the lives of their people in order to secure objectives seemingly far removed from direct military victory. Examples are many.

The British colony of Hong Kong had been deemed indefensible, but to be held as long as possible for the sake of prestige and to satisfy Chiang Kai-shek. Canada suffered dearly. In November 1941, nearly 2,000 of their under-trained and under-equipped troops were sent there to help achieve these objectives. Hong Kong was held valiantly for eighteen days at an overall cost of 4,500 battle casualties; some 9,000 troops were taken prisoner.⁹ One might wonder also how many thousand Bomber Command aircrew were killed trying to demonstrate to the Soviet Union that the allies were taking a serious part in the war after refusing to open a second front in 1942 or 1943. One main reason why the Australian 6th Division was committed to the disastrous campaign in Greece was spelt out by the British Chiefs of Staff Committee in February 1941:

Politically it seems to us that there would be serious disadvantages if we were to fail to help Greece. The effect on public opinion throughout the world, particularly in America, of deserting a small nation which is already engaged in a magnificent fight against one aggressor and is willing to defy another would be lamentable.¹⁰

The Division lost 320 dead while 2,030 were taken prisoner of war. Our own controversial Mandate campaigns were partly justified by General Blamey on the grounds that the areas concerned were 'Australian territory and therefore should be retaken by Australian troops'.¹¹ The military reasoning was perhaps harder to follow.

Clausewitz is right: war should be a continuation of politics. Moreover, the political influence a state can have on any post-war settlement is generally dependent on the strength and the location of the forces it can put in the field. The Curtin government realised it. In October 1943 it agreed it was:

a matter of vital importance to the future of Australia and her status at the peace table in regard to the settlement in the Pacific, that her military effort should be concentrated as far as possible in the Pacific and that it should be on a scale to guarantee her an effective voice in the peace settlement.

Wary of the massive American power which was certain to bring immense post-war benefits, the Curtin Government turned sharply back to the British Empire and to Whitehall policy makers for support. It wanted a British military presence in the South-West Pacific Area; the flirtation with the Americans was over. Never a marriage, it was more a casual, if necessary, affair.

This shift in opinion was noticed by British observers. Action was suggested. In May 1943, General RH Dewing, Head of the United Kingdom Liaison Staff, told London that American influence should be counteracted by the dispatch of at least some British troops.¹² A member of Dewing's staff urged an air presence: two Lancaster squadrons would be particularly useful. Australia, it was argued, should be supplied with the very best British aircraft. Otherwise the prognosis was glum: Australia would:

first be squeezed out of active participation in the theatre and then Americanised in respect of all aviation equipment. Both would have disastrous repercussions in the post-war conversations and adjustments in the Pacific.¹³

Curtin agreed entirely. Cross was told: 'The British should take part in the Japanese war to keep the British flag flying'. Evidence suggests that public opinion shared similar views. Captain Alan Hillgarth, Chief of Intelligence, Eastern Fleet, reported in March 1944 that the Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University down to a taxi driver and factory worker were 'openly anxious for British forces to turn up to balance the Americans'.¹⁴ For them to do so, however, was always going to be difficult. There was the commitment to the 'Beat Germany First' strategy and the fact that, from April 1942, the Pacific theatre of operations had been deemed an American responsibility. For discernible reasons, the American had little wish to welcome British forces. When Curtin made his one and only visit to Britain in April-May 1944, all this and more was made plain.

Rarely, if ever, has so much planning brought about so little a result as the efforts made by Britain to orchestrate its entry into the Pacific war. In May 1944, however, Curtin stressed how welcome it would be. The 'deep sense of oneness' with the United Kingdom had not been affected by the events of 1942; there was 'no variation in the outlook of Australians or in their loyalty to His Majesty the King'. The Empire was a 'civilising agent' and the 'British flag should fly in the Far East as dominantly and as early as possible'.

Churchill, though, had to make it quite clear. The Americans had made the Pacific its main theatre for naval and air forces; it possessed an amphibious lift able to accommodate twelve divisions, and all the United Kingdom could do was to regard itself as the junior partner. It was while Curtin was in London, however, that Borneo first appeared on the agenda. Churchill saw three possible courses of British action. Sumatra might be attacked; there could be an advance on MacArthur's flank as he moved towards the Formosa-Luzon-China triangle; or there could be a north Australian based attack directed at North Borneo. But all depended upon amphibious lift. In turn, this depended on American generosity. It could be withheld. As Churchill realistically, if sorrowfully, argued, this alone was 'an indication of the control they intended to exercise in the Far Eastern War'.¹⁵

Thus here was a political legacy of Britain's inability to defend its interests and possessions in 1942. Churchill himself was now determined, however, that the defeat of Japan would 'create such a position that powers both great and small would be able to enjoy what was their own'. At this point, it would be satisfying to argue a simple thesis: the OBOE operations, which naturally entailed the retaking of North Borneo, were agreed upon in London between Churchill and Curtin as a joint effort to reassert British influence in the region by the use of combined forces. Evidence alas cannot support such a view. The reason why Australian lives were lost in these operations remains elusive.

It is true that agreement was reached in October 1943 that a British Pacific Fleet should be assembled in order to sail from Australian bases. Planning for its employment was still proceeding in November 1944 when it was estimated that Australia would be called upon to provide 21,156,000 pounds sterling to keep it operational for one year.¹⁶ At first glance, Brunei Bay would seem to provide an ideal harbour. But not so. The British Far Eastern Fleet, which arrived in Sydney on 12 February 1944, was destined for no such destination. Churchill, seeing its political value, was determined that it would be involved in the main action against Japan. Again, one might think that Borneo was an objective because it was a logical place from which to launch a combined offensive against Singapore. Given if only the loss of the 8th Division, Australia would certainly have had an interest in that. Berryman, Blamey's Chief of Staff, certainly thought, in January 1945, that a projected attack on Singapore was a reason for the OBOE operations.¹⁷ Indeed, an Australian brigade had been nominated for such a possible operation. On 13 July 1945, however, Britain shortly told the Australian government that no Australian assistance would be required.¹⁸ The action against Borneo was planned by MacArthur's staff. The British Chiefs of Staff were merely consulted but, as D Clayton James argues in his masterly biography of MacArthur, 'Up until the actual invasion of Brunei Bay, the British still thought the operation was useless.'¹⁹

There is, however, one certainty. In terms of the fighting in 1945, 1st Australian Corps, comprising the 7th and 9th Divisions, which had been training for months in the Cairns-Atherton region, were under-employed. Despite MacArthur's assurances, they had been shut out of the Philippines operation. One might argue that Borneo was a suitable backwater where the Corps might be used. An opportunity appears to have arrived in January 1945 when Berryman wrote to Blamey recounting MacArthur's views that the main assault on Japan would have to wait until more resources became available from Europe. If so, it was argued, 'then a good deal of amphibious shipping should be available for that period and GHQ are anxious to make full use of it'.²⁰ It is almost tempting to think that the operation was undertaken for this purpose.

What comes out of this brief study of the origins of the Borneo operations is that minor powers need considerable political acumen when dealing with powerful allies. On 30 June 1945, the Advisory War Council discussed the strategic importance of the Balikpapan operation. Opposition members were told that they were 'part of General MacArthur's strategic plans'. Not satisfied, the question was asked: 'what were these strategic plans'? The government clearly had no conception. All that was known was that they were being considered by the Combined Chiefs of Staff and, until such a decision was known, even an Australian indication was quite impossible.²¹ What, of course, was being planned by MacArthur was the invasion of Java using the Australian corps. Estimates of Japanese strength vary, but by August 1945 there were possibly between 40,000 and 50,000 troops positioned in Java. The projected operation would have resulted in an Australian disaster. One commentator has remarked that the result, in fact, would have been the most tragic blood bath of the Pacific War.²² One can only hope that the Australian government could have prevented that.

So why were Australian lives lost in Borneo? Firstly, they were not lost to accommodate the British or British policy. Rather, the Australian effort was directed by MacArthur. The Australian corps was inactive and therefore ought to have been employed. Surplus amphibious lift was available which made such employment possible. Borneo was supposed to lead to Java and this was part of another country's Empire. All together, when we consider the Curtin government, Britain and Borneo, a very strange episode does seem to emerge.

Endnotes

1. Owen Rutter, *British North Borneo: An Account of its History, Resources and Native Tribes*, London, 1922, Appendix 111.
2. Derwent Kell, *A Doctor's Borneo*, Brisbane, 1984, p 28.
3. Agnes Keith, *Land Below the Wind*, London, 1939, p 54.
4. See RWH Reece, *The Name of Brooke: The End of White Rajah Rule in Sarawak*, Kuala Lumpur, 1982, Appendix for opinions on the legal status of Sarawak.
5. Major General Woodburn Kirby, (ed), *The War Against Japan*, London, 1957, Vol 1, p 298.
6. Japanese Monograph No 26, *Borneo Operations 1941-1945*, Tokyo, 1957, p 14.
7. See John Robertson and John McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy 1939-1945: A Documentary History*, St Lucia, 1985, section 15.
8. PRO: Premier 3-159/2, Sir Ronald Cross, 'Notes of a talk with John Curtin in Canberra, 22 October 1943'.
9. Not surprisingly, Canadian historians are scathing in their condemnation of the policies which lead to this 'shameful tragedy'. See Ted Ferguson, *Desperate Siege: The Battle of Hong Kong*, Toronto, 1980; Carl Vincent, *No Reason Why: The Canadian Hong Kong Tragedy*, (Stittsville, 1981).
10. Robertson and McCarthy, op cit, Document 63, p 88.
11. AWM: Blamey Papers, Press Conference, Swan Barracks, 9 July 1945.
12. PRO: Air 20/3001, Dewing to War Office, 15 May 1943.
13. PRO: Air 20/2024, Air Commodore McLean to Vice Chief of the Air Staff, 3 December 1943.
14. PRO: Prem 3 159/10, Report on Visit to Australia, 6-28 March 1944.
15. The above from CA46, MP 1217, Item 5, Box 5, Australian War Effort and British Commonwealth Forces, Meetings of Prime Ministers, April-May 1944 particularly minutes of meetings 2/3 May 1944.
16. PRO: Adm 116/5404, 'Examination of Potentialities of Australia as a base for RN Forces', November 1944.
17. AWM: Blamey Papers, Berryman to Blamey, 22 January 1945.
18. AA: Crs A 2682, Advisory War Council Minute, 19 July 1945.
19. D Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur*, Vol 11, 1941-45, Boston, 1975, p 715.
20. Blamey Papers, Allied Land Forces SWPA, Berryman to Blamey, 22 January 1945.
21. Crs A2632, Minutes of Advisory War Council, 30 June 1945.
22. D Clayton James, op cit, p 717.