AUSTRALIA’S PERILOUS YEAR
By JOHN BUCKLEY, OBE, ED.

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AUSTRALIA'S PERILOUS YEAR
JANUARY 1942 — JANUARY 1943

By John P. Buckley, OBE, ED

SPECIAL ISSUE

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By The Prime Minister of Australia,  
The Honourable R.J.L. Hawke, A.C.

COLONEL Buckley’s account of Australia’s Perilous Year comes as a splendid and timely contribution to the commemoration of our nation’s Bicentenary.

For there can be no doubt that 1942 was for Australia — as a nation and as a people — the most important single year of all those two hundred.

It was the turning point in the making of modern Australia. In the fire of that tremendous crisis were forged all the elements which have shaped our natural life and destiny, to this day.

The transformation of our international relations; the building of a new industrial base; the acceptance of the over-riding responsibility of the national government for the nation’s economy — all emerged from the emergency of 1942.

And there can be no doubt that the seeds of the great post-war immigration program were sown in those days of maximum danger, when the old cry of “Populate or Perish” seemed to take on a new meaning, immediacy and urgency.

Above all, 1942 was the year in which Australians first achieved a genuine sense of national identity and national unity.

That was the key to our ability to meet the crisis. It remains the key, in different times and different crises.

Colonel Buckley pays high tribute to the leadership of John Curtin and his associates, both military and civilian.

He reminds us once again of the epic decision Curtin made to bring the Second AIF home. But he reminds us, too, of the fact, all too often forgotten these days, that the Curtin Government also decided to keep the 9th Division in North Africa, to play the decisive role in the decisive stage in the Battle of El Alamein, itself a great turning point in the whole War in the West.

These two decisions must be seen together, if Curtin’s sense of Australia’s responsibilities is to be understood and appreciated fully. One expressed his basic commitment to Australia’s security and sovereignty. The other reflected his equal commitment to the wider world cause for which Australia and the Allies were then fighting.

Nearly fifty years later, I find it immensely satisfying to be leading a Labor Government which has re-stated those twin commitments, in a modern and contemporary context.

The son of Kim Beazley, Curtin’s successor in the seat of Fremantle in 1945, is now Australia’s Minister for Defence.

And Kim Beazley Junior has re-stated and re-affirmed the Curtin philosophy in these terms: “The Australian people expect that Australia shall be able to defend itself. The Australian Government accepts its duty to provide Australia with defence forces able to meet that expectation. But for Australia, defence self-reliance must be set firmly within the framework of our alliances and regional associations.”

Colonel Buckley has much to teach us about the past from his own knowledge and experience. Like all the best things written in this Year of the Bicentenary, he speaks about the past so that we can all learn lessons for the future, that great new future which can very truly be said to have begun in “Australia’s Perilous Year”.

R. J. L. Hawke
Introduction

THIS is a summary of the worst period of jeopardy in Australia's 200-year history. It recounts the time when the nation, practically defenceless, faced a strong, vigorous and ruthless invader who in just three months had destroyed everything in its path. This seemingly invincible foe had virtually arrived at our doorstep, when the army, navy and air force were fighting the Axis enemies abroad, thousands of miles from Australia's shores.

When Singapore fell to the Japanese and the islands to the north of Australia were being overrun so easily, as a member of the overseas AIF I recall vividly how horrified we all were and the anxiety we felt about what might happen to our homeland. Already Darwin and other places in the country had been heavily bombed. Never before had the nation been so threatened.

It was almost a miracle that the majority of the AIF returned safely to Australia in the months March to May 1942. On arrival at Fremantle, we were quick to sense the anguish and despair of the civilian population. They feared that an invasion was imminent — and so did we!

Hopefully this article will serve to inform our younger generations and the hundreds of thousands of migrants who are now so proud to be Australians, of the devastating crisis that this country faced in 1942-1943 and of the seriousness of the struggle to preserve its sovereignty.

With the timely help provided by the United States of America, the nation did survive, but at awful cost of life and limb.

Let us never forget that period when the whole of Australia was mobilized and led to victory by John Curtin, our greatest Prime Minister; and in my opinion, the most patriotic Australian ever to emerge in our first 200 years.

The author's previous contributions to the Defence Force Journal include articles on Lieutenant Generals, Sir Edmund Herring and Sir Vernon Sturdee; Sir Frederick Shedden; Prime Minister, John Curtin and Archbishop, Sir Frank Woods.

A regular soldier, the author served in the AIF in the Middle East, New Guinea, France and Germany.

In 1949, he resigned from the Army to become an Assistant Secretary in the Department of Defence and later as a First Assistant Secretary, for a period of 24 years. During this time he served on top level Committees with the Department, Inter-Departmental Organisations and International Committees.

John Buckley served directly under Sir Frederick Shedden for 7 years and was associated with him for a further 15 years when the latter was writing a book on Australian Defence Policy.

The author was awarded a SEATO Leadership Grant in 1968 by the U.S. State Department for advanced studies in the United States. He visited the United Kingdom and Canada on Defence matters at various times.

In writing this story, the author had the advantage of knowing and in many cases working with the principal persons mentioned in the narrative.

He completed the story on his 75th birthday.
AFTER World War I, the defence of Australia was locked in to Britain’s Imperial Singapore Naval Base policy. It was believed that by constructing an impregnable base on the north shore of Singapore Island, British interests in the Far East would be protected against any potential aggression in the region. At the same time, it was intended that Australia and New Zealand could rely on the base as a bastion for their own defence.

In 1921, approval was given by the British Government to commence work on the naval base. At the time, it was considered that the security of the base would depend on the ability of the Royal Navy to control the approaches to Singapore. Obviously, the base would need protection from attack by sea, land and air. But was it so protected?

The basis on which the defences were planned was to “hold the fort” until the arrival of a powerful Royal Navy fleet from Europe. It was calculated that such a fleet could be in Singaporean waters within just a few months.

Because of economic conditions in the 1920s and early 1930s, it was not until 1933, when Japan withdrew from the League of Nations, that the British Cabinet decided to accelerate the building of the Singapore base. In the meantime, the situation had changed. Air power had enlarged the problems of defence. The use of likely enemy aircraft carriers and the ever increasing range of conceivably hostile bomber aircraft now had to be taken into account.

In 1937 the defence of the Singapore base was subjected to re-examination. In that review it was assumed that:

- Any threat would be seaborne; and
- A fleet of sufficient strength could be made available at Singapore within 3 months to protect British interests including India, Australia and New Zealand.

Britain’s Singapore defence policy became the linchpin on which the Australian policy for defence was based; until the surrender of the island to Japanese forces on 15 February 1942. In the years before the disaster, successive Australian Governments had sheltered behind the policy as an excuse for doing precious little in the way of providing in peacetime, defence facilities in Australia. It took public concern arising from the 1938 Munich crisis to prod the Government into taking some action.

Several senior Australian Army officers viewed the Singapore policy with scepticism. Among them were Chauvel, Lavarack, Wynter and Sturdee. They had to be careful in making public statements on the subject, as Wynter was to discover. He was “banished” to Brisbane for a lecture he gave in Melbourne to the United Service Institution of Victoria, because the text of his address was used by John Curtin to attack the Government of that time.

It is true to say that the Lyons Government had no compunction in employing strict censorship over serving officers to stifle any criticism of the Singapore defence policy, even though it had become known that senior members of the Army and Air Force were strongly opposed to it. As Chiefs of the Australian Naval Staff were seconded from the Royal Navy (from 1919 to 1931 and again from 1937 until 1948) their support for the UK policy could be understood. In deliberations on the Singapore policy, it seemed that whenever the opinions of Australian Chiefs of Staff differed from those of the UK Chiefs, the latter’s invariably were accepted by the Australian Government.

It is remarkable that even when disagreement between the British and Australian Governments was at its worst and relations were most strained, Australia’s Chief of the Naval Staff and the Chief of Air Staff were both officers who had been seconded from the United Kingdom. This was no fault of the Curtin Government as they had inherited the appointments from the Coalition Government. This situation imposed great responsibility upon the Australian Chief of the General Staff (Sturdee) as he was placed in the position of having to safeguard his nation’s interests at meetings of the Chiefs of Staff and Defence Committees. Fortunately, the two seconded British Chiefs, after some debate, consented to support Sturdee’s recommendations.
Throughout most of his early adult life, John Curtin, who was to become the great Australian wartime Prime Minister, had been a pacifist, totally opposed to any form of conscription for military service. In fact, during World War I, he led an anti-conscription group believing that war was caused by capitalists and imperialists and that conscription of Australians for overseas service would mean “subservience to British militarists”.

However, in the mid-1930s, as the real dangers posed by Germany, Italy and Japan were becoming all too apparent, Curtin found it necessary to begin modifying some of his earlier theories about the causes of war. He started to identify some ominously developing signs pointing to the fact that Australia’s security could be at risk.

No doubt, the writings of Lieutenant-Colonel H D Wynter, CMG, DSO (later Lieutenant-General), greatly influenced Curtin in his search for a defence policy that could fit in with the Labour Party’s thinking at that time. Wynter believed that the views of the Australian Government in office and the Imperial Defence Policy, based as they were on the primacy of the Royal Navy and the impregnability of Singapore, were wrong and posed great danger for the long term safety of Australia and Far East areas of British influence. He argued that the really decisive instruments for Australia’s defence would be the Army and the Air Force and that the nation should be doing everything it possibly could for its own defence.

Curtin was given a copy of Wynter’s paper which, as mentioned, he used in Parliament in his speech of attack on the Government. Defence as a topic, now took on greater importance for both the Government and Curtin’s Opposition, but to some extent, this had the effect of forcing the Government to be more determined in its justification of the Imperial defence policies it had embraced.

At this time, Curtin not only had to battle against the Government but also the majority of his own Labour Party and some of the more powerful unions.

There were Labour Party identities and trade union leaders who were opposed to their party becoming involved in any way in planning for war. Curtin was years ahead of a great number of his fellow party members. His attitude was increasingly apolitical and pragmatic as his patriotism grew, almost to a level of obsession.

The transformation of Curtin’s views on Australian defence and the subject of war in general, was described aptly to me by Sir Frederick Shedden (wartime Secretary of the Department of Defence) as being “equivalent to St Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus!”

In brief, John Curtin’s defence policy for Australia was developing along lines being advocated by some of the key officers in the Army. Nevertheless, he still had lapses of pacifism in not wanting Australia to be involved in a European war, or in any war for that matter. It was the stark aggression of Nazi Germany and Italy plus his long held suspicions about Japan that began to have considerable impact on his thinking and his actions. When war broke out in September 1939, Curtin’s un-
certainties and any pacifist leanings ended abruptly, never to reappear.

Some three or more years before the war, accompanied by his daughter Elsie (now Mrs Macleod) Curtin stood, deep in concentration, gazing out at the Indian Ocean from a beach in Western Australia. Elsie asked him "Are you thinking of the election Dad?" He said "I was thinking what our reactions would be if we saw the Jap fleet coming in past the island." "Do you think they ever will come?" she wanted to know. "The only question now is when" replied her father.

In formulating his thoughts on defence policy, whilst in opposition in the mid-1930s, Curtin was eager to move Australia towards gaining some form of close defence association or understanding with the United States of America. He wanted his nation to have a powerful ally in case Imperial defence policy for Australia's protection might fail in the event of Britain herself being embroiled in a European war when Australia needed defence assistance. However, the then American policy of total military isolation was such that any approach of that nature would not have been at all welcome.

Curtin was convinced that if ever the deadly threat posed by Japan were to materialise when Britain was at war in Europe, then only America could prevent invasion of Far East and Pacific nations. Clearly, he had been thinking of an alliance with the USA for some years before the fateful month of December 1941.
In pre-war years, the three Australians who were most outspoken in drawing attention to the deficiencies, as they saw them, of the Singapore Defence Policy, were Curtin, Wynter (referred to earlier) and Sturdee. In the early 1930s in a lecture at a General Staff exercise, Sturdee had described a militant Japan as a great threat to Australia's security.

In the mid-1930s, it was Sturdee who tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Lyons Government to approve the manufacture of a 25-pounder gun and ammunition together with other warlike stores.

Not many years later, it was fortunate indeed that Curtin as Prime Minister and Sturdee as Chief of the General Staff held the top political and military positions when the Japanese onslaught was at its peak. It was said that this was their finest hour, but more of that later.

In essence, the Singapore Policy was the principal cause for the neglect of Australia's home defence preparations. When war did break out, Australian defences were practically non-existent. Shamefully, they were desperately inadequate to provide real defence against any likely invader.

For years, governments had used the Singapore Policy and its imagined protection as reason for doing nothing in spite of the proddings of Curtin and the few concerned senior regular soldiers. Assurances had been given by the UK many times, right up until 1941, confirming their intention to despatch a fleet to Singapore in time of need.
Outbreak of War

On 3 September 1939, Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies, with Curtin's support, announced that Britain had declared war on Germany, thus Australia was also at war with Germany.

Then followed a mad scramble to improve Australian defences which had been so disgracefully neglected since the end of World War I. Not only was the Singapore Policy the excuse of Governments for having done nothing, but other reasons were:

- The League of Nations — imagined protection!
- The Treaty of Versailles — promise of peace!
- The Geneva Disarmament Conference — promise of peace!
- Geographical isolation of Australia from European conflicts.
- Imperial Defence Planning and the worldwide power of the British fleet.
- The many assurances given by Sir Maurice Hankey during his visit to Australia in 1934 and at other times.

Hankey, as Secretary of Britain's Committee of Imperial Defence for several years, became a powerfully influential adviser to a succession of UK Prime Ministers on anything to do with defence. He was said to have been the initiator of Imperial Defence planning between World Wars I and II. Frederick Shedden, the Australian Secretary of Defence, worked closely with Hankey in London for two years in the late 1920s/early 1930s and benefited greatly from all that he learnt from his almost legendary mentor. Sir Maurice later became Lord Hankey and a member of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's Cabinet and later in the Churchill Cabinet.

At the outbreak of war the Australian Army was in an awful shambles. There were no tanks; no modern field artillery (apart from a few World War I vintage guns); no Army motor transport; insignificant quantities of obsolete wireless equipment; small arms weapons and ammunition were inadequate and only a few machine guns brought back from Europe in 1919 were available. There were no stocks of clothing to equip the recruits. We were almost entirely dependent on overseas sources for procuring equipment for our armed forces.

Forty-nine years later, I remember very clearly the parlous state of the Army and our defences in 1939. The less said about the RAAF the better. The RAN was a little better off in that at least it had a few ships. Our outer defences were almost non-existent. I was sent to Darwin in December 1939 to install some fire-control facilities to enable the obsolete coast defence guns to be used. The primitive fire control gear had been removed from RAN ships used in World War I, as were the guns. There was no fire control for Darwin's four 3-inch anti-aircraft guns. Such was the condition of the coastal and anti-aircraft defences then.

The only field artillery pieces in Darwin were four 18-pdr guns (mounted on steel rimmed wooden spoke wheels) which could not be towed at more than 10 mph. They had been brought back from World War I.

Key rangefinders for all types of artillery weapons were subject to moisture penetration and according to custom, had to be sent by sea to the Maribyrnong Government Laboratory in Victoria, to be repaired. Sometimes there were no rangefinders left in Darwin! These few examples indicate how the Army had suffered from neglect between World Wars I and II.

Returning now to what was happening in Canberra; through the early days after the outbreak of war, Federal Parliament was recalled by 6 September 1939. From the outset, Curtin rejected the Menzies proposal for a Government of all parties. He thought the most useful role for the opposition would be in independently examining Government policies. The Labour Party would preserve its own entity; but would support all measures for the welfare and safety of the Australian people and the British Commonwealth of Nations.
Early War Measures

Curtin urged immediate control of prices, interest rates, rents, raw materials and other commodities to prevent war profiteering. He said the civil liberties of the people must be safeguarded and that Parliament should remain in session.

A few days later, Curtin was to reiterate the ALP's policy of opposition to manpower conscription for the services and sending Australian troops and war materiel to Europe. He believed that all our resources should be kept in Australia, because even though the country seemed safe from attack at the time, the situation could change quickly.

Although he was very greatly concerned about the possibilities if a rampant Japanese force were loose in the Pacific, he still held strong reservations about becoming involved in any campaign overseas. He had not forgotten the ghastly “blood bath” battles at Gallipoli and in Europe in 1914-18.

Curtin firmly supported Menzies declaration of war, but he maintained the hope that some means could be found to bring the conflict to an end — war was never right! In the meantime, the National Security Act was passed and the Government moved to organise the country for war.

As well as being Prime Minister, Menzies became Minister for Defence Co-ordination. At this stage, Mr Shedden, Secretary of the Department of Defence, played a most significant role in proposing suitable Government machinery for the higher direction of the war. He was a brilliant defence administrator and consultant, already well regarded in defence circles in both the UK and USA. He quickly established himself as a key figure in formulating Australian war policy. The Government was fortunate indeed to have such an experienced and gifted officer as head of its Defence Department.

On 29 November 1939, Mr Menzies announced that the 6th Division, 2nd AIF, would be sent overseas as soon as it was fully trained. Subsequently, two further divisions, the 7th and 9th plus thousands of Corps and Army Troops were despatched also to the Middle East and Lieutenant-General Blamey was appointed GOC. The major portion of the 8th Division was sent separately to Malaya under Major-General Gordon Bennett.

Curtin was still against sending Australian forces overseas until the further alignment of conflicting International Powers became clearer. I believe he was still very conscious of the possibility that Japan would seize an opportunity to attack at any time.

Blitzkrieg in Europe

On 10 April 1940, Hitler’s power-drunk Nazis invaded Norway and Denmark. At least it was now clear to politicians overseas and in Australia that Germany was “hell bent” on overrunning Europe and all prospect of negotiating peace with such a dictatorship was hopeless. A month later, Germany unleashed the blitzkrieg on the Netherlands, Belgium and France. The British Army was trapped but heroically fought its way out at Dunkirk — one of the greatest evacuations of all time.

Italy declared war on the allies in June 1940 just before the French surrendered. The British Commonwealth now stood alone against the Axis enemy. The British Expeditionary Force had lost much of its equipment in Europe in the final stages of the battle and at Dunkirk. Had Hitler chosen to invade England then, Britain would have had very little with which to defend herself. Although at this stage, Australia was extremely short of weapons and ammunition reserves, it sent some small arms and other items of equipment to assist a desperate Britain, whose main resources were invincible courage, tenacity and the leadership of Churchill.

With the UK fully preoccupied with her own defence and indeed survival, Japan began to impose her political will on British, French and Dutch possessions in Asia. By August 1940, the French surrendered their influence in Indo China giving Japan control of the China Sea and bases in the region. The Japanese asked the UK to close the Burma Road, the only route then functioning for the supply of goods through India to China. This Britain did for a time, using as justification, the effects on the road of the monsoon season. The Japanese were making the most of their opportunities! It will be remembered that Japan had invaded Man-
Shedden sitting next to Brigadier Geoffrey Street (Army Minister) at a Defence discussion with Menzies, who was Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Co-Ordination in 1941. (Pic.—Aust. War Memorial).

churia in the early 1930's and later China. This invasion continued during World War II.

**Menzies Calls for a National Government**

With the desperate situation in Europe and the Japanese becoming increasingly aggressive in Asia, Prime Minister Menzies again called for a National Government of all parties. This was considered by a special Labour Conference in June 1940. The delegates were against it and countered with a proposal to set up an Advisory War Council, of all political parties, to advise Cabinet on the conduct of the war and post-war planning.

This was not accepted by Menzies, so the stage was set for an election. In the meantime, the National Security 1939 Act (amendment) was passed in the House and was supported by Curtin in spite of strong criticism by members of his Labour Party. This Amendment gave the Government far reaching powers.

**Federal Election**

Menzies policy speech for the 21 September 1940 Federal election was a depressing one. He promised little except greater effort to meet the dire emergencies facing the country. He pointed to the squabbling Labour Party factions which he claimed would prevent the ALP from forming an effective alternative government.

Curtin responded by attacking the inefficiency of the Coalition Government (comprising the United Australia Party and the Country Party); he declared that the war would be prosecuted with increased vigour by a Labour Government; and he promised better pensions and more pay for servicemen who were being grossly underpaid.

The Coalition narrowly won the election but its losses of seats and the ALP's gains gave the balance of power in the House of Representatives to two independents. This was a precarious position for the new Government.

Because Curtin had spent so much time outside his own electorate campaigning for others, he just managed to scrape in after being forced to wait for some time before the voting results were known. Whilst he did not have to rely on the soldiers' vote to retain his seat in Parliament, it was clear that the majority of the servicemen in his electorate had voted for him. This evidence suggested that Curtin was popular with Army voters and there were signs that his popularity was growing. The troops could identify with him. Also, it was becoming known by the people that Curtin could handle the extremist elements in his party. Already he was demonstrating that he possessed the qualities and skills of a leader who could lead the nation through the trials and difficulties of war.
Whilst his leadership qualities were apparent to almost everyone else, Curtin himself had doubts about his ability to lead the country effectively. He became known in his party as the reluctant Prime Minister.

He believed that with the AIF deployed in the Middle East, Australia was in a dangerous situation because of the increasingly expansionist ambitions of Japan, which were becoming more and more obvious. It could be said that Curtin was becoming more obsessed (rightly so) with the potential and real threat posed by Japan. He believed that all our troops should be in Australia and not overseas.

During Prime Minister Menzies four months overseas visit to the Middle East and London in early 1941, some plotters in the Coalition were expressing concern about the need to strengthen the resolve and impetus of Australia's war effort. By the time Menzies returned to Canberra in May 1941, he was beginning to lose the confidence of several of his own party members. This worsened and slowly, over some months, developed into a political crisis.

Curtin's Leadership in Opposition

Menzies again appealed to Curtin to participate in a National Government. Although Evatt was pushing him to accept the proposition, Curtin repeated his rejection of the offer. He was biding his time for when the Labour Party would be able to govern in its own right. Some of the more divisive members of factions in the ALP were beginning to be more cooperative and responsive to his leadership. The three bitter factions in NSW began to understand the need to settle their differences instead of continuing to behave publicly and emotionally in an irresponsible and undisciplined manner. Only Curtin could have had the patience and dedication to "keep the lid on the cauldron." Under his guidance, members of the party were learning fast. Meanwhile, the problems for Menzies were becoming greater and greater.

Throughout this period, Curtin conducted himself with absolute integrity. Some of his supporters thought he was too soft on Menzies and the Coalition Government. In August, the Prime Minister wrote to the leader of the Opposition once more urging him to join in a National Government.

In reply to Menzies approach, Curtin submitted four vital considerations:
1. A workable Parliament is essential for the prosecution of the war.
2. The Prime Minister was no longer able to give Australia stable government.
3. I disagree with your assertion that a government led by myself would not be able to secure a workable Parliament and political stability. I feel I have the right... to expect... the same measure of cooperation... as the Labour Party has unswervingly given.
4. In view of your statement that you cannot secure political stability... you should return your commission to the Governor-General.

(“John Curtin” by Lloyd Ross, page 212)

On 29 August Menzies was replaced as Prime Minister by Arthur Fadden. Curtin realised at that time that if a Labour Government were in office, it could be in serious trouble with an unevenly divided House of Representatives and a minority in the Senate. He therefore played his cards very carefully in spite of strong pressure by Evatt and his associates to move against Fadden. The opportunity was not long in coming.

The two independent members, Messrs A.W. Coles and A. Wilson, had become concerned about the growing instability of the Coalition Government, so they began thinking of Curtin as the nation's leader and sought assurances on his capability to fill the role. Amongst other things, they were pleased to be convinced that Curtin was and intended to remain a strict teetotaller.

On 3 October 1941 the vote was taken. Wilson and Coles voted against Fadden's Government giving Labour a victory; 36 votes to 33. Curtin was summoned by the Governor-General and from that time on, his self-confidence started to develop most remarkably. To some extent, he was still the reluctant Prime Minister, but almost overnight he became the leader Australia needed so urgently.
John Curtin, Prime Minister

No other Australian Prime Minister has ever had to commence his term of office facing such tremendous problems as those which beset Curtin in October 1941. The country was almost defenceless and the cream of its military forces was overseas deployed as follows:

- 6th, 7th, 9th Divisions and Corps Troops (approximating the strength of another division) were in the Middle East (totalling more than 100,000);
- 8th Division in Malaya (about 18,000 troops);
- The Air Force mainly in Europe (more than 10,000) after training in Canada;
- The Navy was scattered over operational theatres in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, Indian and Pacific Oceans.

What was left in Australia were mainly partly-trained Militia with practically no weapons or warlike equipment for use against an invader. Although action was in hand to manufacture weapons and ammunition locally, the lead time required to greatly improve the situation was the critical factor. In this respect the Menzies Government deserves credit for their effort to rectify the predicament. Essington Lewis (BHP), Laurence Hartnett (General Motors Holden), John Storey and others had been brought into service to organise war production with the object of making Australia as self-sufficient as possible. This was indeed a tall order and one which would take some years to achieve.

Despite all of these dilemmas, when Curtin took up his Prime Ministerial duties, his friends noticed a complete change in his personality and behaviour. His health improved, as did his confidence. He was no longer neurotic or hesitant. One associate described the change as a transformation.

Sir Paul Hasluck considered that Curtin’s service as a member of the Advisory War Council from October 1940, also had some influence on his change of thinking. John Curtin’s primary aim now was to gear Australia for total war so that the country could defend itself against the enemy.

He was determined to give his nation the leadership it deserved and to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to the tasks ahead. No man could have been willing to do more for his country in its hour of greatest danger, nor could any person have had a greater love for his country than John Curtin.

On 7 October 1941 the Labour Ministry was sworn in by Lord Gowrie, who was to become Curtin’s close friend and confidant. Curtin, as well as being Prime Minister, also took on the vital portfolio of Minister for Defence Coordination. The ever loyal Chifley was appointed the new Treasurer. Only Beazley, Forde, Holloway and Chifley had previous experience as Ministers when they had served in the Scullin Government.

All of the new Ministers quickly followed Curtin’s example of working up to 15 hours a day. They were novices and like Curtin, had to learn their jobs quickly. Fortunately, they had Shedden (later Sir Frederick Shedden) Secretary, Department of Defence, as their adviser on war organisation, priorities and procedures. Having been trained superbly overseas, Shedden was well equipped to serve as the most senior defence administrator. His dedication and ability left nothing to be desired. He was to become Curtin’s most trusted and able defence consultant. (For details of Shedden’s career, see the Defence Force Journal No. 50, January/February 1985).

There was no delay in adopting a full-speed ahead attitude. Until the Labour Government could implement its own policies, the best of Menzies Coalition Government policies were singled out and given priority by Curtin.

Relief of Tobruk 1941

Earlier, during Arthur Fadden’s brief term as Prime Minister, Generals Blamey and Morrishead in the Middle East were worried about the medical condition of members of the 9th Australian Division which had been caught up in the siege of Tobruk. The Australian troops had been there for months valiantly holding out against the enemy’s fierce attacks from land, sea and air.
Blamey’s appeal to the British Commander, General Auchinleck, to have the Australians relieved, became the subject of some bitter debate. Finally, Auchinleck referred the matter to Churchill and it was brought to the political level by an exchange of cables between Churchill and Fadden. This started on 11 September 1941.

Churchill’s lengthy cablegram ended “I think you will weigh very carefully the immense responsibility which you would assume before history by depriving the Australians of holding Tobruk till victory was won.” Blamey continued with determination his own representations direct to Auchinleck.

In typically blunt style, Fadden replied by telling Churchill that he was more interested in “the health of the troops rather than history” and that the garrison had to be relieved. Fadden and Curtin were good friends, had considerable respect for each other and had much in common, including the fact that both were sons of policemen. Curtin supported very firmly the stand taken by Fadden.

On 14 October, a week after the change of government in Canberra, Churchill raised the matter again, this time with Curtin. Perhaps he thought that the new, inexperienced Prime Minister would be easy to convince. He was soon to learn that John Curtin was not one to be easily overawed nor would he be subservient to a world figure. Churchill was to discover that he had met his match whenever he tried to pressure Curtin, and Roosevelt would learn the same thing. Curtin had no hesitation in ignoring their bullying tactics.

Curtin’s reply to Churchill was most positive. The troops had to be relieved. Faced with this firm resolve and having no alternative, the British Prime Minister proceeded to direct Auchinleck accordingly.

But, Churchill did not forget this first clash with Curtin and thereafter was ever ready to be critical of him. This unfortunate attitude persisted until the two men met in London in May 1944. Their face to face discussions there led them to have great respect for each other. From that time, they became quite friendly.

The outcome of this first clash with Churchill was important because:

- It demonstrated to the British Government that Curtin would safeguard Australian sovereignty against world leaders. He would not be bullied by Churchill.
- The Australian people could see that they now had a courageous and firm leader.
- It showed that Curtin had confidence in his own military advisers and would support their opinions in any international arguments that might arise.
- The AIF became aware that their Prime Minister would stand up for their welfare and had their interests at heart. Hopefully, he would ensure that there would be no more...
operational debacles such as at Gallipoli, Greece and Crete.
- Essentially, it increased Curtin’s stature as well as his own confidence. In his first few weeks as Prime Minister, he had “won his spurs” in spheres of strategy and international politics. This would prove to be im-
portant later because of the many catastrophes that lay ahead.
- Australian sovereignty was of great concern to Curtin. By his recent actions he had given Churchill notice of this fact. It would take both Churchill and Roosevelt some time to realise that Australia was no longer a British colony.

(Years later Sir Frederick Shedden, with whom I worked and was closely associated for nearly 20 years until he died in 1971, told me that in the closing months of Curtin’s life, he had asked Shedden to ensure that he would be remembered mainly for all his Prime Ministerial efforts to achieve international acceptance of Australia’s sovereignty)

Sinking of HMAS Sydney

Shortly after Curtin became Prime Minister, his first traumatic experience was to be told on 19 November 1941 that in a naval action off the Western Australian coast, the RAN had experienced its first major loss in the war. The cruiser HMAS Sydney was missing with her full complement of 645 officers and men.

This tragic news required Curtin to face up to the task of notifying the Australian people, and more particularly, the relatives of the missing crew. As a most compassionate man, the Prime Minister sought to carry personal responsibility for his countrymen and whatever went wrong. He took the burden far too seriously, even blaming himself for losses of life in the forces. By nature a worrier, he suffered enormous anxiety every time he knew of any large scale engagement in which Australian forces were involved.

He went to Government House to see Lord Gowrie, his friend, adviser and confidant, to discuss the Sydney tragedy. Lord Gowrie, one of Australia’s most able and distinguished Governor-Generals, suggested that he wait a few days before making the melancholy announcement — better news might arrive. Curtin accepted this advice.

There was mutual respect and affection between Gowrie and Curtin which helped each to discharge his onerous wartime duties. At this
Shedden with Prime Minister Menzies and General Blamey — Middle East, 1941. (Pic.—Aust. War Memorial).
time Australia was very fortunate to have Gower in office. Most Sunday afternoons when John Curtin was in Canberra, he could be found with Lord Gower who admired the Prime Minister's personal courage and compassion. The Scots aristocrat and the Australian socialist formed a strong combination and were greatly supportive of each other.

(Note: Mr John Blanch is currently writing a biography of Lord Gower which will be a welcome addition to Australia’s wartime history)

The Japanese Threat — Attack on Pearl Harbor — 7 December 1941

In formulating his thoughts on defence policy whilst in opposition in the mid-1930s, Curtin was eager to move Australia towards some form of close defence association with the United States. Let me repeat, he wanted his country to have a powerful ally in case Imperial defence policy for Australia’s protection proved useless due to any UK involvement in Europe. There is no doubt that Curtin had been thinking of an alliance with USA some years before December 1941. In 1940 and 1941 he was certain that if Japan declared war while Britain was fighting for her very survival, then only America could prevent an enemy invasion of the Pacific nations.

In the meantime in 1941, the progress of talks between USA and Japan dragged on in Washington. The signs were clear; Japan was about to enter the war. The only question was — when? Churchill remained confident that Japan could be conciliated; but still he despatched HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse to protect British interests (also Australian and New Zealand) in the Far East.

Curtin was in Melbourne for a War Cabinet meeting on 5 December 1941 and that night planned to travel home to Perth. He was about to leave his hotel for the train when Shedden informed him that a Japanese expeditionary force was on the move. Curtin decided to remain in Melbourne and the Victoria Palace Hotel became his “command post.” He always used this as his Melbourne base and was idolised by the hotel staff.

On 7 December, the Prime Minister was informed that as well as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Singapore was being bombed and an enemy landing was being attempted on the east coast on Malaya.

At War with Japan

Curtin broadcast to the nation on 8 December 1941:

“We are at war with Japan. This has happened because in the first instance, Japanese naval and air forces launched an unprovoked attack on British and US territory. . . as a result, the Australian Government this afternoon took the necessary steps which will mean that a state of war exists between Australia and Japan. . . We Australians have imperishable traditions. We shall maintain them. We shall vindicate them. We shall hold this country and keep it as a citadel for the British speaking race, and a place where civilisation will persist.”

Curtin regarded this as Australia’s gravest hour.

Hot on the heels of the declaration of war came the shocking news that both the Prince
of Wales and the Repulse had been destroyed by enemy action! Now all the doubts about the defence of Singapore were starting to cause very great concern, even alarm.

In Melbourne, the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General Vernon Sturdee, was more concerned than most. His lecture and other predictions in the early 1930s of a Japanese attack on Australia had every possibility of becoming a reality. He looked to the future with foreboding and gained no satisfaction at all in recognising that his earlier warnings, as well as those of Lavarack, Wynter and Curtin had been in vain.

Sturdee was painfully aware of the state of Australia’s run-down home defences, yet he was the man now charged with the responsibility of protecting the nation with a deplorably inadequate defence capability, especially while the country’s well trained fighting units were all overseas.

At this time of crisis, Australia was very well served by this calm, unflappable General as its Army Chief. (For more on Sturdee’s career, see Defence Force Journal No 41, July/August 1983).

Sturdee worked well with Curtin and found the change from the Menzies Government to his satisfaction. There had been too many lawyers in the Coalition Ministry. Too many politicians (of all parties) seemed to think they knew everything there was to know about the Army, strategy and tactics! Sturdee wondered at times whether some of them really needed military advisers.

The situation now was desperate. The national need for leadership and teamwork had never been so vital. The team of Curtin, Shedden, Blamey and Sturdee was about to be tested to the maximum.

2. Pool US and UK resources.
3. Set up an American, British, Dutch and Australian Area Command under the command of General Wavell.
4. Set up a Combined Chiefs of Staff with UK and US officers only.

Australia had not been consulted nor was she represented at the Washington meeting. Curtin cabled Washington stating his concern about the situation in the Western Pacific, concluding his cable as follows:

“Should the United States desire we would gladly accept US command in the Pacific Ocean area. The President has said that Australia will be the base of the utmost importance but in order that it shall remain a base Singapore must be reinforced. . . .”

The situation in Malaya was deteriorating rapidly, or as an Australian civilian officer stated, it was assuming landslide proportions. Curtin again cabled Roosevelt on Christmas Day 1941. Roosevelt replied that he and Churchill had given urgent consideration to Australia’s request and promised that effective air assistance would arrive in the very near future. Churchill’s reply was full of platitudes which sounded good; but meant little. In fact, like so many of his unreal promises to Australia in that period, it was risky to accept them at face value; however, Britain’s world-wide commitments and her own predicaments understandably were of more pressing urgency for the UK Prime Minister.

Australia Looks to USA

As the situation went from crisis to crisis in Malaya and the islands in the Western Pacific, Curtin had published in the Melbourne “Herald” on 27 December, his historic message seeking American support for Australia’s defence:

“Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.”

The statement caused a sensation. Churchill was decidedly upset and so was Roosevelt who thought Australia was trying to ingratiate herself with the USA in which case, this message would have had the opposite effect. It smacked of panic and disloyalty, thought Roosevelt.
In fact, Curtin very effectively had forced the two allied leaders to realise that from the outset, Australia had played a consistent and important role in the war and would continue to do so in the future. At last Churchill and Roosevelt knew they were dealing with a man who was prepared to stand up solidly for the security and sovereignty of his country and was willing to cooperate in the allied strategy.

Apparently they had forgotten that the 2nd AIF had played a major role in the first battles in the Western Desert, in Tobruk, in Greece and Crete, in the Lebanon and Syria, then again in the desert. The AIF’s performance in the Middle East had been second to none while the RAN and RAAF were also making their very valuable contributions to the war effort overseas. Curtin was proud indeed of Australia’s record. He felt fully justified in having his say, come what may! Events were to prove him right.

Initially, Roosevelt was uncooperative on Australia’s claims for participation in the decision making processes for the conduct of the war in the Pacific. He did not, or would not, understand that Churchill, as Prime Minister of Britain, was not also the head of Australia. Apparently, he too thought of Australia as a British colony! Later, when he knew the facts, he changed this attitude and became much more willing to cooperate.

The Japanese forces pressed on down the Malay Peninsula with speed and success. Churchill began to ask questions about the “impenetrable” defences of Singapore. To his horror, he was told they did not exist because the gigantic coast defence guns could only fire out to sea. They had not been designed or deployed to fire across the Causeway nor were there any static defences facing the Causeway. Only now, far too late, was Churchill becoming devastatingly aware that Singapore could not be defended from the land!

The “Inexcusable Betrayal”
Cablegram — 22 January 1942

When Curtin was informed that Churchill was considering abandoning Singapore, he sent his next famous cablegram to the British Prime Minister:

“... After all the assurances we have been given, the evacuation of Singapore would be regarded here and elsewhere as an inexcusable betrayal. Singapore is a central fortress ... we understood that it was to be made impregnable ... Even in an emergency, diversion of reinforcements should be to the Netherlands East Indies and not to Burma ... We expect you not to frustrate the whole purpose by evacuation ...”

Churchill was more worried about Burma and India, if Singapore fell. He was not giving much thought to Rabaul and islands to the north of Australia, nor indeed to Australia itself which was now most dangerously exposed. Soon Rabaul, Timor, Ambon and other strategic islands were to be lost, as was the Java Sea naval battle. Curtin said “No country faced a greater danger with fewer defence resources.” Darwin was bombed. Complete mobilisation was ordered on 19 February 1942. The Government now could call up anyone it needed and material of any type could be diverted for war production.

Return of the AIF

The “impenetrable” bastion of Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. Mary Gilmore expressed the feelings of so many Australians in a poem she wrote for Women’s Weekly magazine shortly after the disaster:

“They grouped together about the chief And each one looked at his mate, Ashamed to think that Australian men Should meet such a bitter fate!

Black was the wrath in each hot heart And savage oaths they swore, As they thought of how they had all been ditched By ‘Impregnable Singapore’.”

At this time STEPSISISTER Force consisting of the 7th Australian Division, Corps Troops and elements of the 6th Division were returning from the Middle East for deployment in the Netherlands East Indies and adjacent islands. I was serving with HQ 1 Aust Corps, travelling on the Strathalan.

On leaving the Middle East, nearly all the troops were embarked in converted passenger
ships which were not tactically loaded. AIF fighting equipment was loaded separately into slow-moving cargo ships which in most cases were soon some hundreds and even thousands of miles behind the units to which the weapons, vehicles and other essential equipment belonged. None of our ships had any convoy escorts or air cover during this voyage.

Whilst the exchange of cables between Churchill and Curtin was going on about our destination, we were anchored in Colombo wondering where we were to be sent. One thing we did know was that it would be a slaughter if we were put ashore without any equipment with which to fight the enemy!

Although we were unaware of the Curtin/Churchill debate at the time, we were appalled later to learn that Churchill had wanted us to be diverted to Burma to try to save Rangoon. Didn’t he know we had nothing to fight with? And, was he aware that the Japanese were almost on the doorstep of a practically defenceless Australia?

Some of the leading Australian troops had arrived already in the NEI and soon were lost to the advancing enemy. It was clear that ABDA (American, British, Dutch and Australian) Command would soon fold up. Curtin, therefore, signalled Churchill asking that the AIF STEPSISTER Force be returned direct to Australia.

This crossed with a proposition from Churchill that the Force be diverted to Burma. Churchill’s 20 February 1942 message stated:

“I suppose you realise that your leading Division (7th) . . . is the only force that can reach Rangoon in time to prevent its loss and the severance of communication with China . . . There is nothing else in the world that can fill the gap.”

It became known later that Churchill had also influenced Roosevelt to apply pressure on Curtin to comply with the UK proposal. But, on receiving Churchill’s message, Sturdee, the CGS, very strongly urged Curtin to reject the request forthwith and to demand the return of the AIF because Australia’s safety was reaching such a critical stage. When the War Cabinet was considering this vital question, Sturdee found it necessary to offer his resignation immediately if his advice was rejected. Having made his dramatic statement he got up from the table and left the room. He meant every word he said!

That evening, Curtin talked with a couple of trusted newspaper reporters and asked “Am I
justified in taking the risk of sending men, whose arms and equipment are on ships far behind them, into places where the Japanese may very well reach them before their arms and equipment do?"

In the meantime, unknown to the Australian Government, Churchill had ordered that the convoys be diverted to Burma, because, as he was to say “We could not contemplate that you would refuse our request.” What hide!!

Curtin decided that Sturdee’s firm recommendation had to be accepted, so Churchill was advised next day that the AIF must be returned to Australia. It had been a sleepless night for Curtin while he pondered on what action he should take, but as Peter Ryan, Director of Melbourne University Press, was to add later “Spare a thought for Sturdee.”

As history was to prove, thus was a disaster avoided. Churchill’s plan could have had catastrophic potential, of dimensions far too terrible to contemplate!

**Colombo to Fremantle**

From the time the *Strathalan* sailed from Colombo, we sighted no other ship or aircraft. We heard “Tokyo Rose” on the radio telling us the AIF would be returning in a “sea of blood” because Japan had full control of the seas and air throughout our route home.

Later we were to hear how John Curtin agonised for almost every hour of our dangerous voyage. He could not sleep. He became most anxious and was worrying himself sick fearing that his decision could mean the decimation of the Australian Force. He became ill and for long periods shut himself alone in his room. It was not until after his loyal and trusted Private Secretary, Mr Fred McLaughlin (a deeply religious man) managed to persuade the Prime Minister to join him in prayer for the safe return of the AIF, that Curtin was more at ease.

McLaughlin, who was known as the “Prince of Private Secretaries,” served in that capacity under Prime Ministers Bruce, Curtin and Chifley. Having known and worked closely with him for 20 years or so, it was he who described to me Curtin’s apprehension and terrible anxiety during that very trying period. This information was later confirmed to me by Sir Frederick Shedden.

Many years afterwards the brilliant British historian, Ronald Lewin, had this to say (page 176 of “The Chief”: his biography of Lord Wavell):

“... even if the Australians had been allowed to disembark at Rangoon, They would have been swallowed up ... in an inevitable catastrophe ...

In the Official History, Lionel Wigmore wrote in the “Japanese Thrust” (page 465):

“It is now evident that the 7th Division would have arrived only in time to help in the extraction from Pegu (near Rangoon) and take part in a long retreat to India. In that event it could not have been returned to Australia, rested and sent to New Guinea in time to play the crucial role it was to carry out in the defeat of the Japanese offensive which would open there in July. The allied cause, therefore, was well served in the sound judgement and solid persistence of General Sturdee who maintained his advice against that of the Chiefs of Staff in London and Washington; and by the tenacity of Mr Curtin who withheld the well-meaning pressures of Churchill and Roosevelt.” (Writer’s note: Well meaning for whom? Certainly not for the safety of Australia!)

As Curtin will be remembered as a great Australian Prime Minister who stood up to Churchill and Roosevelt, so too should Sturdee be remembered as the Australian General who won out against the Chiefs of Staff in London and Washington. Neither should it be forgotten that Curtin also had to stand up to some members of his own Australian Advisory War Council and senior Australian political representatives in London who were prepared to yield to Churchill’s “Directive” to send the 7th Australian Division to Burma.

The combined efforts of the two great leaders, Curtin and Sturdee, contributed enormously to Australia’s salvation in the dark days of this perilous phase of her history. There were many senior officers who regarded this as the most momentous time of decision faced by Australian authorities in the Second World War.

Following the surrender of Singapore, much has been written about what was described by some as the panic of certain Australian politicians. David Horner and a few other historians have mentioned this, but I am not aware that
anyone ever accused John Curtin of being in a state of panic at any stage — deep anxiety, yes — for the safety of the nation, its gallant servicemen and for their wives and families. But panic, NO!

Certainly, General Sturdee would not have agreed with any such suggestion. He had great admiration for Curtin and his courage. Throughout this critical period, Sturdee had demonstrated very convincingly his own remarkable ability to remain calm and quite unflappable. In his book “The Commanders” published in 1984, David Horner wrote of Sturdee “... he was the rock on which the Army and indeed the Government rested during the weeks of panic in early 1942.”

The matter of the return of the AIF to Australia was brought to finality by a cable to Churchill from Curtin on 23 February which concluded:

“We feel a primary obligation to save Australia not only for itself but to preserve it as a base for the development of the war against Japan. In the circumstances it is quite impossible to reverse the decision which we made with utmost care, and which we have affirmed and reaffirmed.”

It should be remembered, however, that even in these critical months, Australia still had agreed to leave the 9th Australian Division in the Middle East — where it would serve so gallantly and earn its glorious reputation at El Alamein. Also, parts of the 6th Division were deployed in Ceylon to bolster its defences.

Meantime, the Japanese forces were crashing on through the Netherlands East Indies and islands north of Australia. The AIF on Timor provided numerous courageous examples of how to combat this oriental menace. A few hundred Independent Company soldiers were able to pin down some 15,000 enemy and prevent them getting any closer to launch attacks on the Australian mainland. The story of these brave young Diggers is very well recorded in Sir Bernard Callinan’s book “Independent Company.”

When these relatively small forces were sent to their isolated areas to hold as long as possible, important coast defences and aerodromes and to delay the enemy’s advance, there were no more reserves of trained personnel and equipment left in Australia that could be sent to reinforce them. They were on their own and had to do the best they could. At this time too, tremendous efforts were being made to strengthen the mainland defences, with what limited resources there were. Another important factor was that when these forces were deployed to their island outposts, the “myth” of the Singapore bastion was yet to be exploded.

Another force which found itself at an awful disadvantage was the one that had been sent to Rabaul. When the Japanese attacked there, the AIF were hopelessly outnumbered but some, including my good friend C. O. (Bill) Harry, walked for days through the jungle, dodging enemy patrols, until ultimately they managed to escape, by good fortune surviving to fight another day.

This was a disastrous and sad time for Australia and its depleted, ill equipped armed forces.

As one of those who returned to Australia with STEPSISTER Force, although unaware of it at the time, I shall ever be grateful to Prime Minister Curtin for his compassion and deep concern for our safety. Our convoys were so vulnerable for the whole of the voyage but luckily, the many threats that had been broadcast by “Tokyo Rose” did not materialise.

It was in the first week of March 1942 when a number of us where looking skyward from the deck of the Strathalan and saw, coming towards us, an obsolete aircraft making a deafening roar and struggling to stay airborne. We knew then that Fremantle could not be far away and soon we could be on home soil again. The city of Perth was alive to the dangers of enemy attack. Air-raid shelters were being dug in most home gardens and it was easy to sense the unmistakable atmosphere of apprehension in the community.

After refuelling, our convoy hastened on to Adelaide where we disembarked on 16 March (my birthday) and found the people to be truly magnificent. They welcomed our thousands and thousands of returning troops as heroes and billeted us in private homes. Soldiers’ wives and girlfriends from other States were invited to come to Adelaide for a few weeks. AIF units were regrouping before moving on to new defence destinations. There was not much leave for those who were rushed to Darwin and other exposed areas. But thanks to Curtin and Stur-
There have been a few misguided historians (mostly born during or after the war with Japan) who, with all the benefits of hindsight and in an era of “no threat” complacency, have theorised that Australia was not really in any danger of being invaded at that stage of the war. Any such wishful thinking and erroneous judgement must be positively and immediately corrected lest in years to come, this fiction becomes accepted as fact. Let there be no doubt at all, the nation was in an exceptionally grave predicament at that time. There was virtually nothing to stop any marauding invader. For the first (and hopefully the only) time in its history, Australia was at the very brink of potential defeat and disaster.

Of course, there was the “Tiger of Malaya” General Yamashita, who was quoted as having said “Australia was in no danger of invasion.” But is it realistic to imagine this senior officer giving any other answer to his interrogating captors? On the other hand, Admiral Yamamoto, whose forces had attacked Pearl Harbor, had volunteered and was ready to lead the Japanese attack on mainland Australia. In the event that campaign was postponed, but only until Burma had been subjugated!

I can assure any of those who might choose to rewrite the history of that period that with every valid reason, from Prime Minister Curtin down, there was genuine fear of an enemy invasion of Australia. It was a very close call indeed. May this truth never be forgotten by future generations of Australians — and their Governments.
After much deliberation and debate, Roosevelt agreed that General Douglas MacArthur should become Supreme Commander of the South West Pacific Area. This meant the USA was now committed to provide aid for the defence of Australia. Curtin had worked strenuously to achieve this result, although later there were to be conflicting explanations about the events leading up to MacArthur's appointment. At the time, this action was just what was needed to boost the flagging morale of the Australian people. I was serving on the staff of HQ Home Forces then and can recall the great jubilation and relief felt by us all when we knew the Americans were to join us in the SW Pacific war.

No doubt the US Chiefs of Staff realised that Australia was the only reliable base for the allied war against Japan, not only because of geographical location, but also for the provision of land, sea and air base facilities; plus the added attractions of ample supplies of food, stores and other equipment (which were provided in huge quantities) required for the prosecution of the war. Also the Australian Army could be employed to fight the Japanese in the approaches until American forces could be deployed to assist them.

There were, of course, plenty of dividends for the Americans in coming to the aid of Australia in 1942. They did so primarily because of their national interests, which fortunately coincided with Australia's own interests, as perceived in the overall strategic situation.

The American forces who first arrived in Australia were raw but eager to learn from specially selected AIF combat officers, about modern warfare in the Middle East and elsewhere. Sir Iven Mackay arranged for officers from HQ Home Forces to give series of lectures to the US officers and troops who were based in Victoria. They required many months of intensive training before they were considered ready for operational duty, but even then, their early performance in New Guinea had its ups and downs until that great soldier General Eichelberger was appointed to command. He was told by MacArthur to win — or not come back!

Most fortunately, from 18 March 1942 when MacArthur arrived in Australia, he and Curtin
became close friends and remained so until Curtin's death in July 1945. Curtin was attracted by the flamboyant American, who in turn developed a great liking and respect for the Prime Minister. This harmonious relationship enabled them to co-operate without any noticeable disagreement. They had identical interests for the conduct of the war although each had his own reasons. Curtin thought essentially about the safety of Australia, whilst MacArthur was determined to honour his promise to defeat the Japanese and return to the Philippines. "I shall return," he had vowed. Those words were to be engraved indelibly in the history of the war in the Pacific.

A few days after his arrival, MacArthur stated:

"My faith in ultimate victory is invincible. I bring to you tonight the unbreakable spirit of the free man's military code in support of our just cause... There can be no compromise. We shall win or we shall die, and to this end I pledge you the full resources of all the mighty power of my country and all the blood of my countrymen."

The General was dismayed to find that only about 20,000 US servicemen of various Corps and Services had arrived in Australia and almost the whole of the AIF was still overseas. As recorded earlier, all that was available in the land were numbers of militia troops at varying stages of training, very few major warlike stores, and very little fighting equipment.

**Directive to MacArthur**

On 3 April 1942, the following instructions were sent by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff to General MacArthur:

1. The South West Pacific Area has been constituted as defined;
2. You are designated as Supreme Commander of the South West Pacific Area and of all Armed Forces which the Governments concerned have assigned or may assign in this Area;
3. As Supreme Commander you are not eligible to command directly any national force;
4. In consonance with the basic strategic policy of the Governments concerned, your operations will be designed to accomplish the following:
   a. Hold the key military region of Australia as bases for future offensive action against Japan, and strive to
check Japanese aggression in the SWPA.
(b) Check the enemy across Australia and its essential lines of communication by the destruction of enemy combatant, troop and supply ships, aircraft and bases in Eastern Malaysia and New Guinea — Bismarck — Solomon Islands region.

(h) Prepare to take the offensive.

(10) The Governments concerned will exercise direction of operations in the SWPA as follows:
(a) The Combined Chiefs of Staff will exercise general jurisdiction over the ground strategic policy and over such matters as necessary for proper implementation, including the allocation of forces and war materials.
(b) The United States Joint Chiefs of Staff will exercise jurisdiction over all matters pertaining to operational strategy. Chief of Staff of the whole Army will act as the Executive Agency for the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff. All instructions to you will be issued by or through him.

At the same time, Admiral Chester Nimitz, USN, was appointed Supreme Commander of the Pacific Ocean Area. His directive included:
(a) Hold the island positions between the United States and the SWPA necessary for the security of the lines of communication between these regions; and for supporting naval, air and amphibious operations against Japanese Forces.
(b) Support the operations of forces in the SWPA.
(c) Contain the Japanese Forces within the Pacific Theatre.
(d) Support the defence of the North American continent.
(e) Protect the essential sea and air communications.
(f) Prepare for the execution of major amphibious offensives against positions held by Japan, the initial offensive to be launched from the South Pacific Area and the SWPA.

In regard to both of these directives, the Australian Prime Minister insisted that Austra-
alian troops should not be moved outside Australian territory without prior agreement. Curtin was also unhappy that Australia was not represented on the Committees which were to control strategic policy and operational policy. However, a partial solution gave the right of appeal by a commander to his own Government.

Method of Working — Curtin and MacArthur

At his first meeting with the Prime Minister, it was agreed that MacArthur would deal directly with Curtin on all major matters of policy and procedures. Matters of important detail would be handled through normal Government channels. Existing policies and procedures for supply and personnel matters were to continue. Importantly, unified control would apply in combat (Hasluck: *The Government and the People* Vol. II (page 114). It was agreed that they would meet as required for “War Conferences” and the only other person to be present would be Shedden, Secretary of the Department of Defence, who in Hasluck’s opinion, was the arranger, facilitator and sometimes the prompter of their collaboration. MacArthur soon recognised Shedden’s great influence with Curtin and used this fact to his advantage. As a loyal and close confidant of the Prime Minister, Shedden did occupy a powerful position.

Curtin, Shedden and Blamey were to receive some criticism for “giving in” to some of MacArthur’s requests. However, those critics seemed to overlook the facts that Australia was then in a critical war situation, was dependent on the USA for military assistance, and was most grateful for all the help provided. So why antagonise MacArthur unnecessarily while his requests were reasonable? On MacArthur’s part, at no time did he act in any way detrimental to Australian interests. He was quick to appreciate the strength of Curtin’s sincerity, fierce patriotism and his understandable reaction to any challenge to his country’s sovereignty.

It was not long before Curtin and MacArthur were co-operating in a manner that was to cause some concern to both Churchill and Roosevelt. MacArthur once told Menzies that it would be a good thing for the allied cause if only there were some way in which Mr Curtin could take over either of the positions then held by Churchill or Roosevelt! (Shedden Notes, 20 October 1942).

In particular, the Curtin/MacArthur attitude was to try to modify the “beat Hitler first” policy, so that the Pacific theatre could get a fairer share of the allies’ war equipment and fighting manpower. To further this aim, Sturdee was sent to head the Australian Military Mission in Washington, to press at the highest levels for Australia’s entitlement for military support. Curtin, MacArthur and Blamey all regarded this appointment as vital to the SWPA war effort.
CURTIN was in no hurry to change the Australian Government’s senior representatives in London and Washington.

In London was ex-Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce who was well regarded in diplomatic and British Government circles. He was to remain in that appointment until the end of the war. Although one of the most patriotic of Australians, he was at times accused of being more British than the British. He had a close and very workable relationship with Prime Minister Curtin of whom he once said “I could not wish to work for a better man.” Those of us who served at Australia House in war years, admired the excellent work of Mr Bruce; later Viscount Bruce of Melbourne. Mr John Oldham, who was on Bruce’s Wartime Staff in London (now a well known Canberra resident) spoke of Bruce’s very high admiration for Curtin. So also did another Staff member, the late Alfred Stirling.

Mr Richard Gardiner Casey, DSO, MC, was appointed Minister to the United States in 1940 by the Menzies Government. He was a popular and successful representative in Washington until he fell under the spell of Churchill who invited him to become Minister of State to the British Government in the Middle East.

Curtin was annoyed by Churchill’s offer to Casey because of Australia’s need at that precarious stage of the war, to have in Washington, the most effective high level representative possible. Nevertheless, Casey accepted and the appointment went ahead. This did nothing to ease the tensions that had arisen between Curtin and Churchill as a result of their earlier exchanges of terse cables over the fate of STEPSISTER Force.

There were many Australian officials who regarded Casey’s new appointment as one of limited influence, despite its high sounding title, and of no real benefit to Australia. Subsequently, he was appointed Governor of Bengal. Some people considered that Casey accepted the appointments, because he could not bear to work under Dr. H. V. Evatt (Foreign Minister in the Curtin Cabinet).

Casey’s move from the Washington scene was yet another major problem for Curtin to handle at a critical time when he was being almost overwhelmed by enormous worries about the defence of Australia. Curtin did not forgive Casey for leaving Washington where, in Curtin’s opinion, he could best serve Australia’s interests. Likewise, Casey deeply resented Curtin’s stand on the Middle East appointment, therefore some of his later comments about Curtin deserve to be viewed in that light.

Sir Owen Dixon was appointed to Washington to replace Casey and he proved to be an outstanding success. Curtin was exceptionally pleased by his performance. General Sturdee who was in Washington at the same time as Sir Owen, regarded him as one of the greatest Australians in his lifetime.

The Prime Minister was a great patriot and had no time or mercy for those who would not do their utmost for Australia’s defence. On occasions, unions were castigated by him for taking strike action. He threatened them with dire consequences unless they saw the light. As he said in the House of Representatives: “Men are dying for Australia in battle today. There is no excuse for those who refuse to work.”

With all of Curtin’s problems with Churchill and Roosevelt, plus the Japanese menace advancing so rapidly through Australian outposts in Ambon, Rabaul and Timor, every day seemed to bring some new and dreadful crisis or calamity. It was at this point that Curtin decided to make a direct appeal by radio to the people of the United States.

He was determined that his beloved Australia would be saved from disaster. Destiny had chosen him as the man to face up to the task and he would not shirk any step that he considered essential.

Finally, he did achieve his goal, but tragically, when victory was in sight, his seemingly superhuman efforts brought about his premature death, only weeks before the Japanese surrender.
Curtin appeals to the People of the United States

On 14 March 1942, the Prime Minister broadcast the following by radio:

"Men and women of the United States, I speak to you from Australia. I speak from a united people to a united people, and my speech is aimed to serve all the people of the nations united in the struggle to save mankind.

"On the great waters of the Pacific Ocean, war now breathes its bloody steam. From the skies of the Pacific pour down a deathly hail on the countless islands of the Pacific. The tide of war flows badly for you in America. For us in Australia it is flowing badly.

"Let me then address you as comrades in this war and tell you a little of Australia and Australians. I am not speaking to your Government. We have long been admirers of Mr Roosevelt and have the greatest confidence that he understands fully the critical situation in the Pacific, and that America will go right out to meet it. For all that America has done, both before and after entering the war, we have the greatest admiration and gratitude.

"It is to the people of America I am now speaking; to you who are or will be fighting, to you who are sweating in factories and workshops to turn out the vital munitions of war, to all of you who are making sacrifices in one way or another to provide the enormous resources required for our great task. I speak to you at a time when the loss of Java and the splendid resistance of the gallant Dutch together give us a feeling of both sadness and pride. Japan has gone one step farther in her speedy march south, but the fight of the Dutch and Indonesians in Java has shown that a brave and freedom-loving people are more than a match for the yellow aggressor given even a shade below equality in striking and fighting weapons.

"But facts are stern things. We, the allied nations, were unready and Japan, behind her wall of secrecy, had prepared for war on a scale of which neither we nor you had any knowledge. It was therefore but natural that within twenty days after Japan's first treacherous blow I said on behalf of the Australian Government that we looked to America as the paramount factor on the democracies' side in the Pacific.

"There is no belittling of the Old Country in this outlook. Britain has fought and won in the tremendous Battle of Britain. Britain has fought and with your strong help has won the equally vital Battle of the Atlantic. She had a paramount obligation to supply all possible help to Russia. She cannot, at the same time, go all out in the Pacific. We, with New Zealand, represent Great Britain here in the Pacific — we are her sons — and on us the responsibility falls. I pledge you my word: We will not fail. We will pull knee to knee with you every ounce of our weight.

"We have all made mistakes. We have all been too slow. We have all shown weakness, all the allied nations. This is not the time to wrangle about who has been most to blame. Now our eyes are open. The Australian Government has fought for its people. We never regarded the Pacific as a segment of the great struggle. We did not insist that it was the primary theatre of war. But we did say, and events have unhappily proved us right, that the loss of the Pacific can be disastrous.

"Who among us, contemplating the future on that day in December last when Japan struck like an assassin at Pearl Harbor, at Manila, at Wake and Guam, would have hazarded a guess that by March the enemy would be astride all the south-west Pacific except for General MacArthur's gallant men and Australia and New Zealand? But that is the case, and realising very swiftly that it would be the case, the Australian Government sought a full and proper recognition of the part the Pacific was playing in the general strategic disposition of the world's warring forces.

"We looked to America, among other things, for counsel and advice, and therefore it was our wish that the Pacific War Council should be located in Washington. It is a matter of some regret to us that even now, after ninety-five days of Japan's staggering advance south — ever south — that we have not obtained first hand contact with America.

"Therefore we propose sending to you our Minister for External Affairs, Dr H V Evatt, who is no stranger to your country, so that we may benefit from his discussions with your authorities. Dr Evatt's wife, who will accompany him, was born in the United States.

"Dr Evatt will not go to you as a mendicant. He will go to you as the representative of a
people as firmly determined to hold and hit back at the enemy as courageously as those people from whose loins we sprang, those people who withstood the disaster of Dunkirk, the fury of Goering’s blitz, the shattering blows of the Battle of the Atlantic. He will go to tell you that we are fighting mad, that our people have a Government that is governing with orders and not with weak-kneed suggestions; that we Australians are a people who, whilst somewhat inexperienced and uncertain as to what war on their own soil may mean, are nevertheless ready for anything, and will trade punches, giving odds if need be, until we rock the enem back on his heels.

“We are, then, committed heart and soul to total warfare. How far, you may ask me, have we progressed along that road?

“I may answer you this way. Out of every ten men in Australia four are now wholly engaged in war as members of the fighting forces or making the munitions and equipment needed to fight. The other six, besides feeding and clothing the whole ten and their families, have to provide the food and wool and metals which Britain needs for her very existence.

“We are not, of course, stopping at four out of ten. We had over three when Japan challenged our life and liberty. The proportion is growing every day. On the one hand, we are ruthlessly cutting out unessential expenditure so as to free men and women for war work, and on the other, mobilizing woman-power to the utmost to supplement the men. Four out of ten devoted to war, we shall pass to five and six out of ten. We have no limits.

“We have no qualms here. There is no fifth column in this country. We are all the one race, the English speaking race. We will not yield easily a yard of our soil. We have great space here, and tree by tree, village by village, and town by town, we will fall back if we must. But that will occur only when we lack the means of meeting the enemy with parity in materials and machines.

“For remember, we are the Anzac breed. Our men stormed Gallipoli. They swept through the Libyan desert, they were the ‘Rats’ of Tobruk, they were the men who fought under ‘bitter, sarcastic, pugnacious’ Gordon Bennett down through Malaya and were still fighting when the surrender of Singapore came!

“These men gave of their best in Greece and Crete. They will give more than their best on their own soil, where their hearths and homes lie under enemy threat.

“Our air force is in the Kingsford Smith tradition. You have no doubt met a lot of them in Canada. The Nazis have come to know them at Hamburg and Berlin, and in paratroop landings in France. Our naval forces silently do their share on the seven seas.

“I am not boasting to you. But were I to say less, I would not be paying proper due to a band of men who have been tested in the crucible of world wars and hall-marked as pure metal.

“Our fighting forces are born attackers. We will hit the enemy wherever we can, as often as we can and the extent of it will be measured only by the weapons to our hands.

“Dr Evatt will tell you that Australia is a nation stripped for war. Our minds are set on attack rather than defence. We believe, in fact, that attack is the best defence. Here, in the Pacific, it is the only defence. We know it means risks, but ‘safety first’ is the devil’s catchword today.

“Business interests in Australia are submitting with a good grace to iron control and drastic elimination of profits. Our great labour unions are accepting the suspension of rights and privileges which have been sacred for two generations, and are submitting to an equally iron control of the activities of their members. It is now ‘work or fight’ for everyone in Australia.

“The Australian Government has so shaped its policy that there will be a place for every citizen in the country. There are three means of service — in the fighting forces, in the labour forces and in the essential industries. For the first time in the history of this country, a complete call-up or draft, as you refer to it in America, has been made.

“I say to you, as a comfort to our friends and a stiff warning to our enemies, that only the infirm remain outside the compass of our war plans.

“Australia is the last bastion between the west coast of America and the Japanese. If Australia goes, the Americas are wide open.

“It is said that the Japanese will by-pass Australia and that they can be met and routed in India. I say to you that the saving of Aus-
tralia is the saving of America’s west coast. If you believe anything to the contrary, then you delude yourselves.

“Be assured of the calibre of our national character. This war may see the end of much that we have painfully and slowly built up in our one hundred and fifty years of existence. But even though all of it go, there will still be Australians fighting on Australian soil until the turning point be reached, and we will advance over blackened ruins, through blasted and fireswept cities, across scorched plains, until we drive the enemy into the sea.

“I give you the pledge of my country. There will always be an Australian Government and there will always be an Australian people. We are too strong in our hearts, our spirit is too high, the justice of our cause throbs too deeply in our being, for that high purpose to be overcome.

“I may be looking down a vista of weary months and soul-shaking reverses, of grim struggles, of back-breaking work. But as surely as I sit here, talking to you across the war-tossed Pacific Ocean, I see our flag. I see Old Glory, I see the proud banner of the heroic Chinese, I see the standard of the valiant Dutch. And I see them flying high in the wind of liberty over a Pacific from which aggression has been wiped out; over peoples restored to freedom; and flying triumphant, as the glorified symbols of united nations strong in will and in power, to achieve decency and dignity, unyielding to evil in any form.”

(Digest of Decision, No. 22, 1942; pages 9-13)

**Comment**

The address to the people of the United States was a master diplomatic triumph which was relayed also to the United Kingdom, Canada and many other countries. It was printed in major American newspapers.

This was Prime Minister Curtin at his best. It was he who initiated, forged and nurtured the close relationship with the United States in war, which still continues in peace. But this has not been just a one sided deal. Australia has given much to the world-wide interests of the USA and in return, has received great advantages to her own defence.

On 5 March 1942, General Sir Thomas Blamey was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Military Forces; but he did not know this until he returned to Australia on 23 March.

He and Prime Minister Curtin were to develop a close relationship despite differences in their personal attitudes and points of view which would become apparent. Their greatest and overriding common interests were unwavering loyalty to their homeland and its people and a fierce determination to preserve the nation’s security.

There were some Cabinet members who tried to “white ant” Blamey at times, but Curtin consistently and staunchly supported the gifted General. In return, Blamey was always loyal to his Prime Minister and if ever anyone tried to speak disparagingly of him in Blamey’s presence, the would-be detractor would be sharply reprimanded.

It says much for Curtin’s leadership and his aura of command that he held the loyalty, respect and admiration of both MacArthur and Blamey, his two principal military advisers, throughout his term as Prime Minister.

In addition to his duties as C-in-C, Blamey was appointed Land Forces Commander under MacArthur. Lieutenant-General Brett was appointed Commander Allied Air Forces and Vice-Admiral Herbert Leary as Commander Allied Naval Forces.

Soon after his return to Australia, Blamey embarked on a major reorganisation of the Australian Army. In this, he was greatly assisted by a plan which Sturdee had submitted for Government approval only a month earlier. On 9 April 1942, Blamey defined his proposals as follows:

(a) The existing Army Headquarters to become General Headquarters (later Allied Land Forces HQ — LHQ);

(b) First Army (Lavarack) located in Queensland and NSW;

(c) Second Army — previously called Home Forces — (Mackay), located initially in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. Later, mostly in NSW;

(d) III Corps (Bennett) located in Western Australia;
Sergeant Kari, of the Royal Papua New Guinea Armed Constabulary, who gave distinguished service whilst working with Peter Ryan, M.M. (Coastwatcher and later Director of Melbourne University). It is thought that Kari is still alive.
Some 6th Division troops and HQ (Herring)
Darwin, Northern Territory Force;
(f) New Guinea Force (Morris). About a brigade
group plus coast defence, anti-aircraft and
other special troops;
The new organisation was to become effective
on 15 April and would comprise ten Australian
divisions (seven infantry, two motor and one
armoured). Also, an incomplete American Army
division (41st) had arrived and it was to be
followed in May by another, the 32nd.
On 18 April, General MacArthur formally
assumed command of the Australian Forces.
His command now totalled 38,000 Americans,
more than 100,000 AIF and 265,000 Australian
Militia. On 25 April, MacArthur issued his first
directive: Allied Land Forces were to prevent
any enemy landing on the north-east coast of
Australia or on the south coast of New Guinea.
Interestingly, MacArthur and Blarney did not
materially strengthen this force until 15 May
when the 14th Brigade Group, another militia
formation, began moving to Port Moresby. But
by that time, a Japanese attack was believed to
be imminent.
The training and morale of the troops in
Papua New Guinea left much to be desired in
this early stage.
Later, MacArthur and Blamey came in for
some strong criticism for having delayed so long
before despatching to New Guinea, battle
experienced AIF units which had returned from
the Middle East.
Small detachments of the New Guinea Vol­
unteer Rifles were positioned throughout the
Wau — Salamaua — Lae area. They were sub­
jected to frequent air raids from 21 January,
then on 7 March, 1942 Japanese forces landed
at Lae and Salamaua. Following that the air­
field at Wau became a close target for the
enemy, so in April, Kanga Force was set up to
defend, that area.
From January 1942, other very small detach­
ments were deployed secretly throughout New
Guinea by an elite Signals unit, the New Guinea
Air Warning Wireless Company. Reports by
these "Spotter" stations on enemy air, ground
and sea activities were to prove of tremendous
value for allied operations. These detachments
functioned in isolated and most dangerous areas
with the Japanese determined to destroy them
at all costs.
It is now time to mention the vital naval
actions which took place in the Coral Sea and
at Midway, soon after which the Japanese mil­
itary might began to falter. These two very
significant naval battles were also to have a
major impact on the fighting in New Guinea,
as may be seen later.
By the end of March 1942, Japan had conquered Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaya, Singapore and almost the whole of the Netherlands East Indies. Japanese forces had penetrated into parts of Burma and had taken most of the Philippines, excluding Corregidor. There was no prospect of relief anywhere to be seen, especially by those nations that had been overrun.

The Japanese Government and people were rejoicing ecstatically over all the phenomenal successes their invincible forces had achieved in only four brief months. The power drunk Government was absolutely confident that its supremacy over its victims in Asia and the Pacific would last forever.

As at April 1942, Japan held a line extending from Burma through NEI, Timor, Rabaul, Bougainville, Gilbert Is, Marshall Is and Wake Is and most of the seas in between.

Japanese leader Tojo was convinced that after the mauling the Western Powers had suffered at the hands of his victorious Japanese forces, they would not have the will to fight on indefinitely. Therefore, instead of taking time to consolidate their ill-gotten territorial gains, with all the rich resources of rubber, oil, metals and other strategic and commercial items, together with almost limitless manpower for enslavement, the Japanese Government decreed that it was their destiny to go on and make further large scale seizures of even more foreign territory for their exploitation.

They decided to invade the Aleutians, Midway, Fiji, Samoa, New Guinea and other Pacific islands. They reasoned that the capture of Port Moresby and Fiji would sever communications between the USA and Australia and that New Guinea would provide Japan with a firm base from which to attack eastern mainland Australia. Also, they knew that by capturing Midway island, they could pose a major threat to the American base at Pearl Harbor.

The enemy were looking to the future. Their planning envisaged using the target objectives, when under their control, as springboards for further expansion of the Japanese Empire.

Throughout this period of despair for the allies, concern for the safety of Australia reached its peak. In the midst of so many reports of failure, the only encouraging news was of the gallant resistance put up by the Australian Independent Company in Timor and its success in holding back what had seemed to be the enemy's relentless push southwards.

The return to Australia of the AIF 7th Division and some Corps Troops had been a wonderful morale boost for the people, but enemy bombing attacks on Darwin and other towns, together with the midget submarine attack and shelling in Sydney Harbour, were drastic reminders of the constant and increasing threat of imminent danger.

The implementation of Japanese plans for further expansion started at the end of April 1942. In the first phase, they hoped to take Port Moresby and Tulagi (off the north coast of Guadalcanal Is) in the Solomon Islands. Port Moresby's attraction was that it would give them control of Papua New Guinea and provide a protective base for their large naval force at Rabaul. Also, it would be the vital stepping stone from which to mount attacks in strength on eastern and northern parts of the Australian mainland.

Admiral Yamamoto, Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Navy, who had directed the enemy attack on Pearl Harbor, volunteered to lead the intended assault on Australia. However, it was the egotism and over-confidence of this Japanese "Admiralissimo" as he was nicknamed, that would bring about his downfall and pave the way for Japan's ultimate defeat.

As a result of his efforts, American and British naval power in the Far East had been almost annihilated and the British Eastern Fleet had been driven from eastern parts of the Indian Ocean.

With the advantage of having broken a Japanese Navy code, allied Intelligence became aware of a considerable concentration of enemy naval and transport shipping at Rabaul. Simultaneously, there were large scale troop movements to Rabaul from the Japanese main
base at Truk. These activities were interpreted as preparation for an imminent powerful enemy thrust to the south.

In early May, American aircraft carriers were still deployed on missions in other regions of the Pacific. When the brilliant Admiral Chester Nimitz, USN, studied details of the Japanese build-up at Rabaul, his conclusion was that the enemy’s most likely prime objective would be Port Moresby. To counter such a threat, he quickly set about moving his own naval forces into the Coral Sea area.

Rear-Admiral Fletcher, USN, was patrolling in the vicinity at this time. His force included the aircraft carrier USS Yorktown and three heavy cruisers. A few days later, he was joined by Rear-Admiral Fitch, USN, with another carrier the USS Lexington and two more cruisers. Next to join were the cruiser USS Chicago plus HMAS Australia and HMAS Hobart under the command of Rear-Admiral Crace, RN.

By 5 May, the three allied naval groups were stationed in the Coral Sea facing the eastern extremities of New Guinea. Thus the stage was set for what was to be a memorable and historic naval engagement. Clearly an allied defeat in the Coral Sea could open wide to enemy attack, the eastern coastline of the continent.

Early the next day, searching allied aircraft spotted a large enemy force approaching the Jomard Passage from the north. Admiral Fletcher immediately headed for the Louisade Archipelago and as he approached on 7 May, he detached a task force of cruisers and destroyers to block the southern exit of the Jomard Passage.

At about noon, US Navy aircraft discovered the Japanese aircraft carrier Shoho and some of her escort near the northern entrance to the Jomard Passage. Aircraft from USS Yorktown and USS Lexington were sent to attack as a result of which they sank the Shoho and a light cruiser.

On 8 May, aircraft of both sides on sighting the opposing main forces separated by distances too great for surface gunfire, immediately engaged. Within a short time, the Japanese carrier Shokaku had been severely damaged and put out of action while the Zuikaku had lost nearly all of its aircraft. USS Yorktown and Lexington were both damaged, the latter so badly that she had to be abandoned and sunk.

Both forces having suffered serious losses, were forced to disengage. Admiral Inouye withdrew to the north and managed to get the transports and remnants of his fleet back to Rabaul. Admiral Fletcher withdrew southward. Both sides claimed victory but as the losses had been about evenly matched, the Japanese still retained naval superiority in the area.

Nevertheless, the Coral Sea Battle had been a strategic success for the US Navy. They had stopped the Japanese attempt to attack Port Moresby and forced them to postpone their plan. Also, it was the first battle at sea in which no surface gunfire had been used; carrier-borne aircraft had determined the outcome.

The Australian people were jubilant when they heard news of the Coral Sea Battle result. It was regarded as the first major turning point for the allies in the Pacific war and it offered the long awaited hope that it could yet be possible to halt the Japanese thrust southwards.

This was encouragement of the best kind, coming at a time when it was so badly needed. It was a stimulus for greater effort which the Government knew was so essential. Australia was still under great threat. The Japanese enemy still had the will and the means to invade the country which at that time was so ill-prepared to defend itself. It was still a perilous period for Australia!

The great significance of the battle of the Coral Sea as a turning point for the United States and Australian forces in their war in the Pacific, has not been forgotten since World War II. In early May each year, this major event in our history is commemorated jointly with our American allies. Long may that commemoration continue.

**Battle of Midway**

America’s Midway Island in the central Pacific, 1000 miles west of Pearl Harbor, had its own military airfield. Admiral Yamamoto regarded it as a key objective from which he would be able to threaten the American forces at Pearl Harbor. He therefore devised a plan to draw the US Fleet up to the Aleutian Islands, to facilitate his capture of Midway with a strong attack force of carriers and heavy cruisers. His intended feint attack on the Aleutians was planned for early June 1942.
Admiral Nimitz, quick to realise that the attack on the Aleutians was a preliminary action to an attempt on the main target of Midway, deployed his forces accordingly. On 4 June, the Japanese blitz on Midway commenced under the command of Admiral Nagumo. As his first attack was unsuccessful, a second massive air strike was necessary. While he was reorganising for this, aircraft from the US carriers Yorktown and Enterprise attacked the enemy fleet with great success.

The Japanese carriers Akagi, Kaga and Soryu were fatally hit by American dive-bomber squadrons and by nightfall had all been sunk. The USS Yorktown was lost to attacking aircraft from the Hiryu which in turn was destroyed by the Americans. With Admiral Nagumo's loss of four aircraft carriers, the battle had turned overwhelmingly in favour of the US. The Japanese commander was forced to break off and withdraw with the Americans in pursuit.

Meanwhile it was known that Yamamoto was standing off with a powerful fleet of modern battleships and cruisers. On 5 June he used part of that force to bombard Midway Island. Another Japanese force was approaching the area but without air cover, the enemy was forced to pull back. Attacking the withdrawing force, the Americans sank a battleship and severely damaged another Mogami which managed to limp home to Japan.

The battles of the Coral Sea and Midway were large scale, hard fought engagements in which both sides lost most valuable ships and huge numbers of aircraft. The tide of battle shifted from side to side and the element of luck favoured each side from time to time but by now, the Japanese were losing their naval supremacy in the Pacific.

Although Admirals Yamamoto and Nagumo had been responsible for the skilful Japanese successes in the first four months of the Pacific war, their arrogant confidence was shattered by the loss of their four aircraft carriers at Midway. Yamamoto realised that without air superiority, his fleet and the invasion forces it was protecting, had little chance of success.

One very great advantage held by Nimitz was the intelligence available to him which provided him with advanced knowledge of many of the Japanese intentions. It was this same facility which would be the cause of Admiral Yamamoto's death when his plane was shot down subsequently.

The US Navy's remarkable victory at Midway was vitally important to the allied war effort. It excited great rejoicing in America and especially in Australia. Its main effect was that it unbalanced the Japanese naval and air superiority in the central and south Pacific areas. Japanese domination of the Pacific Ocean had been dealt a great setback, but the enemy still had the resources to mount major offensives, as would become apparent later.

The salutary lesson the Japanese did learn was that the allies were just as courageous and determined to win the war as were the sons of Nippon. Until this time, they had thought that their "unstoppable" victories were against a decadent and even pusillanimous foe.

The Australian Government and General MacArthur understood clearly that one battle had been won; but there were many other battles, and the war, still to be won. Australia was still in extreme danger. It was not yet safe.

On 17 June, Prime Minister Curtin, in a wireless broadcast to the nation, warned that Australia could still be lost. In another broadcast on 25 June he said, inter alia, that Japanese forces still had the initiative.

Having been severely checked by the Coral Sea and Midway battles, the Japanese decided to switch their effort to the capture of New Guinea, in particular Port Moresby, by landing their forces on the north coast and proceeding overland via Kokoda. Milne Bay would be taken by troops moving along the coast.

Let us return now to what was happening in other vital areas of New Guinea.

The limited scope of this narrative is such that in references that follow, to various operational engagements, only some of the battalions and brigades that were involved, are mentioned. Official War Histories and other books on specific battles and campaigns provide more comprehensive details. Two particularly good such reference sources are McCarthy's Official History Kokoda to Wau and Keogh's book The South West Pacific 1941-45.
Early Land Battles in New Guinea

Wau — Salamaua — Lae

Wau, about 270 km north of Port Moresby, was a busy and well known prewar mining centre in New Guinea, but it had no overland route to Port Moresby. Nearly all supplies had to be flown in over the high mountain ranges. Leading to Salamaua from Wau were two native tracks which passed over precipitous slopes, through almost impenetrable jungle and at times, across raging torrents.

On the same day Rabaul was attacked by the enemy (21 January 1942), Lae and Salamaua were subjected to heavy air raids. Elements of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles had been deployed to defend the area. Following the air attacks, action was taken to start evacuating European residents from Lae and Salamaua to Wau and thence, depending on the availability of light aircraft, by air to Port Moresby. It seemed incredible that by 7 March 1942, the Japanese had succeeded in advancing as far as the north coast of New Guinea and were able to land at both Lae and Salamaua!

The principal enemy target in this area was the airfield at Wau which Major-General Morris was determined to hold, but this presented him with enormous problems in providing troops and supplies for the task. At short notice, he despatched to the area a platoon of the 2/1st Aust Independent Company. He planned to send in Kanga Force about the end of April but this had to be done by air which took until late May.

During early July, the Japanese increased their garrison strength on the north coast. At the same time, the Wau area was bombed regularly by the enemy (In later paragraphs I will deal with the Japanese offensive in other parts of Papua New Guinea during this period; but before doing so will mention the final action at Wau).

Later, in January 1943, the Japanese made a strenuous effort to capture Wau. Their attack coincided with the arrival of the AIF 17th Brigade (Brigadier M.J. Moten), which immediately went into action as its units landed on the airfields. This was the case too for 2/1st Field Artillery Regiment which also was flown in. It was a touch and go situation for several days but by late February, the Japs were cleared from around Wau. Kanga Force had performed its missions with great courage and ability.

After the Midway battle, MacArthur had decided to recapture Rabaul which necessitated the occupation of Salamaua and Lae. To achieve this, the first step was to construct an airfield at Dobodura, near Buna. A small force of infantry and engineers was given orders to march from Moresby to Buna via Kokoda and it was to be joined by another group to be moved by sea.

Major-General Morris sent the 39th Aust Infantry Battalion (less one company) together with about 300 all ranks of the Papuan Infantry Battalion, plus supporting services, to secure the Kokoda airstrip. Maroubra Force, as it was known, was also to delay any Japanese advance along the track to Kokoda and deal with any enemy airborne landings.

In the meantime, Japanese General Headquarters had made the decision that Port Moresby must be taken. As no navy aircraft were available (after the Midway action) then the port would have to be taken by troops travelling overland, from the north coast of the island. To accomplish this, a Japanese force was landed at Buna on 21 July. The enemy landing was reported immediately to N.G.F. H.Q. by signals spotter post in the area.

No one had told the Japanese that the route from Buna to Port Moresby via Kokoda was impassable — as was believed by Major-General Morris and his staff; who thought the route was a military obstacle of gigantic proportions — precipitous mountains; swamps; fast flowing streams; almost unbearably hot and humid conditions in flat areas; bitterly cold in the mountains; dreadful insect infestation; malaria and other debilitating diseases such as scrub typhus.
and dysentery. There was an annual rainfall of some 300 inches and in the wet season, as much as 10 inches could fall in 24 hours.

Morris was of the opinion that even if the enemy were able to overcome the physical obstacles in their path, they would be most vulnerable towards the end of the Kokoda Trail when their supply problems would be greatest. That, he reasoned, would be the best time for him to counter attack. However, the orders he received were to prevent the Japanese advancing any distance along the track from Buna.

It took a very short time indeed for the monstrous problems to become apparent in conducting military operations along the trail. Rapidly it was transformed into a bog of hazardous ascent and descent. There were limits to what equipment and supplies could be carried; a native carrier could carry only enough food for himself and one soldier, to last for six days. It became obvious very early that air-dropped supplies in large quantities would be the only solution.

It must be mentioned that the native carriers were organised in very large numbers by Lieutenant H.T. Kienzle who became renowned for all his marvellous work throughout the terrible campaigns. The “Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels” as they were known, and their magnificent contribution to the war in New Guinea, were a most valuable asset to our combat troops. It would be no exaggeration to say that without the help of the “Fuzzy Wuzzies”, the campaign outcome could have been vastly different for the allies. Before the war, Kienzle was a rubber planter, well experienced and respected by the local natives, and most knowledgeable about the country and its people. He died in Queensland in January 1988 at the age of 82.

On landing at Buna, the Japanese invaders set about their mission with vigour. They had been well prepared for jungle warfare and soon were driving the inexperienced Australian troops before them. By 27 July, they had surrounded Oivi just short of Kokoda which soon was taken despite the efforts of the young soldiers (average age 18 years!) serving with the 39th Battalion who to their great credit, were not overawed by the fearsome enemy they faced. They fought well and made the enemy battle ferociously for every position. The youngsters of the 39th carved their unit’s name in Australian history.

Rowell, Commander of New Guinea Force

Lieutenant-General S.F. Rowell took over command of new Guinea Force on 12 August 1942 and Major-General Morris became Commander of ANGAU. Brigadier Selwyn Porter was appointed to command Maroubra Force which now included the 53rd Aust Infantry Battalion.

The Japanese advance caused considerable concern (some called it panic) at MacArthur’s GHQ. The 21st and 25th Brigades of 7th Australian Division, AIF (GOC Maj-Gen A.S. Allen), were sent to Port Moresby. 18th Brigade was sent to Milne Bay by 12 August.

The Americans, on landing at Guadalcanal Island at this time, caused the Japanese to divert some of their troops from New Guinea, but not long afterwards, these were replaced by new reinforcements who were landed at Buna, bringing General Horii’s force strength to more than 10,000 plus engineer construction/combat units.

The serious weaknesses of the Australian Army supply system created problems of disastrous dimensions for units and detachments trying to hold back the Japanese who kept pressing forward. Under the persistent and capable Horii, the enemy were making good progress in their drive towards Port Moresby.

Brigadier A.W. Potts was replaced as Commander, 30th Aust Brigade (some thought unfairly) because of the Japanese successes, but he had been let down badly by the failure of the supply organisation.

Lt-Gen Rowell had been involved earlier with the battle for Milne Bay, so before returning to the command crisis which arose, concerning Generals Blamey and Rowell, the Milne Bay operations deserve attention.

Milne Bay Battle

Milne Bay was a very important strategic base at the eastern tip of New Guinea. It was the key base for the defence of Australia and control of the Coral Sea. The bay is approximately 30 km long by 15 km wide and surrounded by
mountains. The flat areas were mainly boggy except where there were coconut plantations. The local climate was awfully uncomfortable and the whole area subject to all imaginable tropical diseases to wreak havoc on the health and endurance of Australian soldiers.

Work was commenced in June 1942 to improve as soon as possible, the primitive conditions at Milne Bay. This was to construct several airstrips, provide limited port facilities and improve the few roads that existed. Progress was very slow due to bad weather and shortages of materials; but under the vigorous leadership of Brigadier John Field, his 7th Brigade exerted tremendous effort to complete their many tasks.

Brigadier Field was born at Castlemaine, Victoria, the son of a well known World War I veteran, Colonel J.W. Field. Field Jnr had distinguished WW II service in the Middle East and Greece. He had lectured in Engineering at the University of Tasmania before joining the 2nd AIF. By the end of the war he had been awarded the CBE and DSO and had commanded 3rd Division for several months. After that he was State Electricity Commission Superintendent at Yallourn, Victoria for several years.

On 13 August, Major-General Cyril Clowes arrived to take command of Milne Bay Force. He was accompanied by Colonel F.O. (later Sir Frederick) Chilton, GSO 1, who had a most notable record of service in the Middle East and Greece. Later, Lt-Gen Sir Frank Berryman described him as one of the truly outstanding brigade commanders of the 2nd AIF. He won two DSOs, but there were some senior Generals who said he should have received at least three!

At the same time, Brigadier G.F. (later Sir George) Wootten arrived with his 18th Brigade. A most competent brigade commander, Wootten was soon appointed to take over the famous 9th Australian Division. By the end of the war, he had been awarded the CB, CBE, DSO and bar and DSC (US).

Thus, when the Japanese did launch their attack on Milne Bay, they had to face four of the most experienced senior combat officers who had seen active service with the AIF in the Middle East. Clowes was an imperturbable officer and was aptly nicknamed “Silent Cyril.” I remember being a student in 1939 when he was Chief Instructor at the School of Artillery at South Head in Sydney. He had a clear, sound military knowledge and very good application but was not a gifted conversationalist, especially with junior officers!

The Operational Instruction issued by Clowes for the defence of Milne Bay was clear and concise. Offensive action against the enemy was to be the keystone of his plan. In essence, 7th Brigade was to hold the enemy assault from whichever direction it might come. The battle experienced 18th Brigade was to be held in reserve until the enemy’s intentions became clear, then it was to be committed to action.

The Japanese had overpowering naval superiority in the region and when they made their landing on the night of 25 August, they were able to select their own targets at will. For the early days of the attack, the weather was foul and visibility was badly restricted. The two squadrons of RAAF aircraft performed splendidly when they were able to fly.

Some savage attempts were made by the enemy to capture the airstrips, the base installation and stores but while the fierce engagement lasted, Milne Force acquitted themselves meritoriously giving an excellent demonstration of offensive action. From the signals and instructions received from GHQ in Brisbane, it was clear that the higher command were “prickly” and inclined to show signs of alarm too readily. By contrast, Lt-Gen Rowell let Clowes get on with the job he had to do, without any interference. Rowell did, however, ensure that he knew at all times, what was going on.

Clowes fought the battle as he had planned it, against a ruthless and ferocious enemy. It should be noted that there were no maps, very few roads, limited signal communications and the never ending tropical rain downpours which made everything so trying and difficult. John Field and George Wootten were outstanding brigade commanders who exhibited their skills exceptionally well in this campaign.

The battle for Milne Bay was the first decisive defeat experienced by the Japanese on land. They had chosen the place of their attack and had the initiative with troop deployment but the Australian defenders proved to be more than a match for them. At that stage, the only American assistance available was provided by a few engineer troops who were in the area.

The result of this battle was to give the Australians confidence in knowing they could meet
and defeat the enemy on equal terms. I doubt if Cyril Clowes ever received the great credit that was due to him for his calm and very effective leadership in this battle. However, he was entitled to have the satisfaction of knowing that he was the first allied General to inflict on land, an unmistakable defeat on a significant Japanese force.

Even so, MacArthur and to a lesser extent, Blamey also, found some grounds for criticism of the manner in which Clowes had handled the initial Japanese attack. Hindsight was to prove that Clowes had been right!

Needless to say, this victory at Milne Bay was another great morale boost for the Australian people; more so this time because it was their own troops who had been triumphant. Nevertheless, there still was plenty of anxiety and fear that an invasion of the mainland could be attempted by the Japanese, even though the Milne Bay news had helped to reduce the tensions.

It was at this point that theories started to arise about the north-west of Australia being a likely target, open to attack from Timor.

On 6 September, MacArthur was still most unhappy about the lack of naval strength in his SWPA command. He sent a message to Washington for General George Marshall as follows: 
"Due to lack of maritime resources, I am unable to increase ground forces in New Guinea as I cannot maintain them... if New Guinea goes, the result will be disastrous..."

MacArthur and John Curtin kept up a barrage of requests for additional naval, army and air forces and equipment. The war in the Pacific was expected at that stage, to have to take second place to the allied war efforts in Europe and the Middle East. Whilst Churchill and Roosevelt had agreed that their first priority would be to defeat Hitler in Europe, MacArthur and Curtin were not prepared to accept that policy and continued to contest it at every possible opportunity. Curtin made many direct appeals to both Churchill and Roosevelt for help in the Pacific during this period.

Now let us turn to the unfortunate but important command crisis that was developing between Blamey and Rowell over the handling of the Kokoda Trail campaign. To say the least, it was a tragedy that this conflict became so bitter and so public at such a critical time of the war in New Guinea.
Crisis of Command

Rowell Returned to Australia

As the Australian withdrawal on the Kokoda trail continued, Lt-Gen Rowell made strong representations for an AIF brigade to supplement his defences. His preference was for the 25th Brigade, but it was earmarked for Milne Bay, so was not available immediately. As soon as the Milne Bay situation stabilised, the brigade was assigned for service at Kokoda. It was commanded by the original CO of the 2/1st AIF Battalion, NX 3, Brigadier K W Eather (later, Major-General and awarded CB, CBE and DSO).

By 14 September, Brigadier Porter handed over the command of operations in the forward areas to Brigadier Eather, whose brigade was deployed in the Ioribaiwa — Uberi area. Eather could see no prospect of successfully holding a defensive position at Ioribaiwa and tried hard to obtain approval to pull back to Imita Ridge, which would be easier to defend and which would be a good place from which to launch his offensive.

Major-General Allen told Eather that if he could not hold Ioribaiwa, then he would have to fight the battle at Imita but with no further withdrawals. These orders in turn were confirmed by Rowell thus:

"Confirm your orders to Eather. Stress the fact that however many troops (Japanese) they must have walked from Buna... any further withdrawal is out of the question and Eather must fight it out at all costs."

Imita was only about 66 km from Port Moresby. By 17 September, the deployment on Imita Ridge was complete. Rowell, Allen and Eather were confident that they could hold the Japanese and with the expected arrival of additional troops and supplies, that they would be able to push the enemy back to the beachhead.

However, it was quite a different story in Canberra. The War Cabinet and Advisory War Council were becoming increasingly anxious about the way operations were being conducted in New Guinea.

On 9 September, the Minister for the Army and Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Frank Forde, directed General Blamey to go to New Guinea as soon as possible to review the situation there and report back to the War Council. Blamey arrived in Moresby on 12 September and had discussions with the top Army officers, including Rowell. He returned to Australia on 14 September. He reported to the War Council on 17th and concluded his review by stating that the commanders and staff on the spot in New Guinea were confident that the enemy would not be able to take Port Moresby by land operations. He agreed with that assessment.

It came as a great shock to the Prime Minister to be telephoned by MacArthur the same day, to say that he was very worried about the situation in New Guinea. In effect, MacArthur accused the Australian troops of inefficiency and pointed out that while they outnumbered the enemy, who had to rely on lengthy lines of communication, the Australians were still withdrawing. He claimed that they were not fighting well enough!

MacArthur recommended to Curtin that Blamey personally should take command in New Guinea “...to energise the situation”. He asked Curtin to speak to Blamey, which Curtin did. This placed Blamey in a very awkward position. Although he had expressed his confidence in the ability of the Australians to hold the line, he had no alternative but to do as he was directed by his Prime Minister and the Supreme Commander.

General Blamey was under great pressure at this time. Not only was he responsible for defending Australia, but now he was being ordered to fight in person, the battles in New Guinea and to suffer MacArthur's taunts that the Australian soldiers would not fight! In addition, he had to keep looking over his shoulder lest some other ambitious General, of those who were keen to get his job, might try to supplant him as Commander-in-Chief. There is no doubt that Blamey was the one and only General who could have coped with all those stresses, for so long and until his task was done — with success.
Likewise, Lt-Gen Rowell was under great strain as GOC, New Guinea Force. Not only was he coping with enormous problems such as the battle of Milne Bay, withdrawal from Buna and operations in the Wau area. He also had to deal with some stupid orders and directives from GHQ where senior staff officers were totally ignorant of the New Guinea terrain and the deplorable conditions in which the troops had to live, move and fight. As an example, he was asked once by GHQ to prepare the Owen Stanley’s for demolition!!

Rowell was aware of the growing anxiety at GHQ and amongst some political figures in Canberra. When he knew that Blarney was coming to New Guinea, he seemed obsessed with the thought that the C-in-C would be taking over his command. Yet it was evident to most people that it was not Blarney’s intention to remain in Port Moresby for long, as he did not bring an Army Headquarters staff with him. Instead, he decided to use Rowell’s HQ, New Guinea Force. This was the primary cause of the disagreements that arose between the two strong-willed Generals and became magnified within a few days, especially when Blarney issued orders to Clowes at Milne Bay.

It was most unfortunate that the situation deteriorated to the point where the Commander-in-Chief found it necessary to dismiss Rowell from the theatre. Regrettably, Sturdee was in Washington at the time. He had excellent rapport with both Blarney and Rowell and maybe his calming influence could have settled the conflict before it reached open rupture. Perhaps he would have cautioned Rowell to curb what he had to say to Blarney. Later, as Acting C-in-C in late 1945, Sturdee nominated Rowell for the post of Vice-Chief of the General Staff and in 1950, recommended him for appointment as CGS.

Sturdee also had great admiration and respect for Blamey and unlike some other senior Generals then serving, he was unswervingly loyal to his C-in-C. Sir Alfred Kemsley and John Hetherington both wrote of Sturdee’s special loyalty to General Blamey.

Years after the war, when I worked with Sir Frederick Shedden, he often discussed with me, various wartime leaders and gave me his candid opinion on how they had performed during the war. He told me that Sturdee had strongly urged Curtin in early 1942, to appoint Blamey C-in-C. According to Shedden, Sturdee firmly believed that Blamey was the only General who could “effectively handle politicians and more senior British and US Generals”.

With hindsight, it seems that extraordinary circumstances, the responsibility for which can be traced back to MacArthur and Curtin, led to the crisis of command that sadly developed between Blamey and Rowell.

There is no doubt that most senior officers who were familiar with the events of those days, were of the opinion that Rowell should have shown greater willingness to co-operate with Blamey and make more reasonable allowance for the position in which the C-in-C had been placed.

It could be that a principal cause of the conflict lay in the almost intolerable stresses and strains which both of these senior officers were experiencing at the time, in the ghastly conditions of the New Guinea theatre of operations.
FOLLOWING Rowell's dismissal, Lieutenant-General Herring was appointed GOC, NGF. As a commander, he proved to be an excellent choice.

It should be stated that by now, the situation on the Kokoda Trail was as Rowell had predicted. Namely, the Japanese forces had reached the “end of their tether” at Ioribaiwa.

By the time Herring arrived, additional forces and supplies had reached Imita Ridge and the air dropping of supplies had been developed into a very workable and mostly reliable technique. Herring was quick to recognise the great importance of air supply in the Owen Stanley ranges and in this, he was fortunate to have the strong support of the 5th USAAF.

There were colossal difficulties to be overcome, not least the lack of visibility in the thick mountaintop clouds. There was a great need for airstrips in the mountains, on swampy ground and in jungle terrain. Fortunately, Herring got on very well with the USAAF commanders and in very short time, great mutual respect and goodwill became firmly established.

Blarney and Herring were quick to reach a clear understanding on their respective roles and responsibilities. Herring was quoted later as saying that they worked well in tandem; usually in complete harmony. However, while Blarney lived and worked at New Guinea Force Headquarters, this tended to cloud Herring’s part in the actual conduct of operations (“Ned Herring” by Stuart Sayers, page 222).

MacArthur began to get impatient about the slowness of the advance towards Kokoda and he thought Allen was not pressing the attack vigorously enough. Blarney and Herring knew something of the enormous difficulties of Allen’s task, particularly with the indescribable horrors of terrain, huge medical problems and the terrible scarcity of supplies.

But Allen’s many messages to Blamey, giving excuses for his troops’ lack of progress, finally caused his removal and replacement by Major-General George Vasey. Allen was critical of MacArthur, Blamey and Herring for not understanding thoroughly the deplorable, almost inhuman conditions of nature and disease on the Kokoda Trail, nor did they visit him to see for themselves how bad the conditions really were.

Too often, soldiers were receiving no rations and had to go hungry until supplies could get through. Evacuation of wounded to receive proper medical attention became almost impossible. The conditions were just too devastating for anyone to comprehend unless they had personal experience. This applied to many at HQ New Guinea Force, to others back in Australia and even Blamey and MacArthur.

There was a good deal of sympathy for “Tubby” Allen. He had a highly distinguished record of service in the Western Desert, Greece, Lebanon and Syria where he had commanded the 7th Australian Division with great success. Always a straightforward officer, he was not one to be overawed by his superiors. When he had an opportunity to see MacArthur later, he told him how much the American’s messages had distressed him, particularly when he received them under such terrible circumstances.

MacArthur replied “But I have nothing but praise for you and your men. I was only urging you on.” Allen responded cryptically “Well, that’s no way to urge Australians!”.

Two years later, Blamey recommended Allen for a knighthood. He cited Allen’s distinguished operational service in North Africa, Greece, Syria and New Guinea where his Division “... stemmed the Japanese attack on Ioribaiwa Ridge and later moved to the attack ... and remained in command up to the time when the Japanese were driven over the top of the Owen Stanley Range ...” In all, Maj-Gen Allen had
Lieutenant-General Sir Edmund Herring. (Pic.—Herald and Weekly Times, Melbourne).
commanded 7th Division for more than three years, but unfortunately, he did not receive the knighthood that Blamey had recommended.

There is little doubt that the planning, tactics and preparations made by Potts, Rowell and Allen made the tasks of their successors very much easier. In each case, advances were made within a few days (even hours in some cases!) of them taking over. A point of interest is that at one stage, when Vasey was getting a little battle weary, Blamey wanted to recall Allen to resume command of 7th Division, but Herring insisted on Vasey remaining as GOC.

The Official Historian, Dudley McCarthy, was to say:

"There was little General Vasey could add immediately to General Allen’s planning. Allen’s efforts threw open the mountain paths for the new commander to follow to Kokoda, almost at the moment he took over — just as General Rowell had started the Australians on the road back from Imita Ridge in September although to some, it appeared that General Blamey had initiated the advance" (Official History, Kokoda to Wau: McCarthy).

Much of the early credit and fame which was showered on Herring and Vasey, began with the efforts of the deposed Rowell and Allen. However, the new commander of New Guinea Force was able, sound, efficient and a most capable leader who seized his opportunities with outstanding success in the battles which followed at Buna, Gona, Sanananda, Lae and Finschhafen.

Herring did not receive the credit he deserved in the subsequent stages of his service in New Guinea. Some considered that Blamey’s close presence overshadowed Herring’s work as GOC, NGF. It was not until Herring was knighted later in the campaign that the Australian public realised what an excellent job he had done. Incidentally, he was the last Australian soldier to receive a knighthood until after the war was over.

The team of Blamey, Herring and to a lesser extent Vasey, was set now to push the invader back to the coast. They were lucky that the battle at Guadalcanal would prove to be of considerable help to them.

Operations on Guadalcanal

The American invasion of Guadalcanal created a forceful reaction at Japan’s Imperial Headquarters and determined efforts were made to dislodge the US force. Strong enemy naval groups protecting transports with reinforcements and supplies, made many attempts to attack the US troops. The battle became bloody, the enemy had some success against American ships and for a time, were able to land troops and stores.

By giving priority to Guadalcanal, the Japanese had to scale down their operations on the Kokoda Trail. General Horii was ordered to move back in orderly fashion, to the beachhead at Buna and hold the base there until Guadalcanal had been taken. He was informed that further attempts would be made to take Port Moresby during November.

At this time, Japanese troops on the Kokoda Trail were fatigued, sick and half-starved; yet they still were able to mount a succession of ferocious defensive battles as they fell back towards Buna. There is no doubt that the enemy’s attempt to gain control of Guadalcanal lessened the danger they posed on the Kokoda Trail.

If they had been able to provide sufficient reinforcements and supplies in New Guinea, it would have been a bloody and long drawn out retreat by the Japanese to Buna. As it was, the campaign was no picnic for the Australians as General Horii executed his withdrawal with the same skill and determination he had displayed when he led his offensive actions.

Let us return now to the allied offensive on the Kokoda Trail and MacArthur’s plans for the coming months.
GENERAL MacArthur was concerned about what the enemy’s next moves might be if they were successful at Guadalcanal. In such an event, he considered they probably would stage a concerted attack on Port Morseby. On the other hand, even if defeated at Guadalcanal, they still could have the capacity to attempt a major assault on Port Moresby.

It was very important to MacArthur to have forces available in strength within striking distance of Buna, so that he could employ them to forestall any enemy build-up or attempts to launch large scale attacks from that base. Also, he needed a firm base of his own with airfields on the north coast, to support future allied operations.

His plan required the 7th Australian Division to recapture the Kokoda Trail and the enemy’s Buna beachhead. The 32nd US Division was to make a two-pronged attack, moving partly by air and partly by sea. The 2/12th Australian Infantry Battalion was to secure Goodenough Island.

In drawing up his plan, MacArthur had to make sure that the allied troops could be extricated if his operation failed because of enemy intervention. At that uncertain and risky stage, the possibility of having to evacuate all allied forces from New Guinea could not be totally overlooked. The Australian mainland, relatively, far too close to the front line!

Meanwhile, three days after Maj-Gen Vasey relieved Allen at Myola, the Japanese withdrew from Kokoda and on 2 November, Brigadier Eather’s 25th Australian Brigade marched into the village.

The priority task assigned to the Australian Engineers was to rehabilitate the vital airstrip.

The airfield at Kokoda was ready by 5 November for Herring to fly in to discuss an advance to Oivi and Gorari where the Japanese were believed to be preparing to make a determined stand. If that happened, they were fully expected to fight fiercely and bravely.

Herring stressed to divisional commander Maj-Gen Vasey the importance of keeping pressure on Horii’s blocking troops. Unlike some top level allied commanders, Herring had the ability to admire the enemy’s capability of preparing and holding their defensive positions. The Japanese General Horii invariably was well up forward with his front line troops; at times being seen in the saddle, riding on a white charger!

At this time, Lt-Gen Herring was giving great support to Vasey. He also visited Milne Bay several times to confer personally with Maj-Gen Clowes. Kanga Force operations in the Wau district were another of Herring’s many responsibilities. By now, he was regarded as a very capable GOC who had the full confidence of his subordinate commanders.

On the night of 11/12 November, after days of bitter and really vicious hand to hand fighting, the remaining enemy troops got away from the Oivi/Gorari position. The Australian 25th and 16th Brigades had performed magnificently.

When Herring had first gone up to Kokoda, it was a new experience for him to observe at close hand, the grim conditions under which his units were operating in the Owen Stanleys.

Jungle warfare required of troops, great endurance; superb physical condition; the right mental attitude to accept the frightful weather and countless hazards of the jungle; ability to persevere despite scarce and poor rations; determination to carry on even when sick with fever, ulcers or disease; and above all, a very high order of dedication, discipline and personal courage.

Soldiers knew quite well that if they were wounded, or became ill, they might have to face seemingly interminable delays before they could expect to receive medical attention or be hospitalised. Of course, it would be very much
worse for them if they were cut off by the enemy.

They knew they would have to wait their turn to be carried out on makeshift stretchers by Fuzzy Wuzzy bearers, slithering and sliding for hours or even days, along narrow tracks, in places deep with mud, and patiently having to give way to combat troops and native supply columns bearing ammunition and food, all moving forward; across swift flowing streams; clambering up and down gut-wrenching and near impossibly difficult steep mountainsides and the deepest of ravines; at times sweltering with humid heat, or shivering with an unimaginable intensity of cold; being constantly wet and clammy; coping with mosquitoes and leeches; wondering if there would be friend or foe around the next corner of the track in the claustrophobic density of wet dripping jungle; and wondering when and where there would be something to drink and eat.

The walking wounded had to be content with these same conditions. It was only their spirit of determination and the assistance they received from others who were able to offer help, that got them through. Goodness knows how some of them survived such horrors.

It makes me sad, so very sad, to recall such lamentable conditions in which the flower of Australian youth had to struggle, fight, suffer and die in World War II, in those hellish jungles and elsewhere. In my service, I had opportunities to compare active service conditions in the Middle East, New Guinea, France and Germany. This experience convinced me beyond any doubt, that the very worst of those theatres of operations was New Guinea!

Stories of wounded soldiers and their experiences in New Guinea have been written in a great number of post-war books. Two which describe very accurately the sufferings of some of the unfortunate troops are To Kokoda and Beyond by Victor Austin and Retreat from Kokoda by Raymond Paul.

In another excellent book Recollections of a RMO Dr H.D. Steward wrote:

"Courage takes many forms and is as relative and inconsistent as most other human qualities. There is courage of hot battle, sometimes of the man who despises all the risks and sometimes of the man who has to fight down his own fear. There is the courage of sheer endurance shown by the men who limped or crawled out of Alola, or the men who struggled for weeks to rejoin their units and fight again. There is the special courage of the prisoner of war, fighting isolation and despair without the least assurance of ever coming out alive.

The men and women who served their country in war and in so doing, were wounded or suffered long term medical problems, deserve everything possible in the way of treatment and compensation that society can provide. Indeed, this was the very promise given so genuinely and solemnly by Prime Minister Curtin on 8 May 1944 in an address he gave to a large gathering of servicemen at the Boomerang Club at Australia House, London. He was visiting UK for the British Commonwealth Prime Ministers' London Conference.

We heard his words very clearly when he expressed his and the Australian people's deep gratitude for what we were doing for our nation, and pledged to us that Australian Governments would look after all servicemen and their families for as long as they needed assistance after the war. He gave us that unequivocal assurance with great sincerity and we trusted him when he told us we had no cause to worry about our own or our families' future.

Yet these days, there are some who would deny this and feel no shame in making members of the wartime forces, continue to battle for year after year, with what they have every right to perceive as a different enemy; the bureaucracy.

It is a matter of very great sorrow in this bicentennial year to realise that there are fellow Australians, mostly of younger generations, who would brand the (now old) servicemen and women as "warmongers" whose purpose is to "glorify war" whenever they gather on Anzac Day to honour the war dead and enjoy the company of fellow survivors of battles past.

Sadder still is the fact that now there are some churches in Australia at which Anzac memorial services may no longer be held (!) because their church leaders have chosen to distance themselves from returned service people in the community, in what they call "the cause of peace!"

At the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, some years ago, the late Sir Edmund Herring, great Christian and great soldier, voiced for all ex-servicemen and women who know it to be so very true; these words: "The greatest peace
lovers are those who have suffered the horrors of war at first hand."

There are numerous surviving veterans who firmly believe it is about time the few “anti-service” churchmen of today, who make their views known so publicly, took time to recognise the great contributions of service to the churches that have been made over the years by so many servicemen and women, including eminent soldier laymen such as Generals Sir Harry Chauvel, Sir Julius Bruche and Sir Edmund Herring, to name just a few.

Now, to revert to the November 1942 operations in New Guinea.

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**Japanese Defences at the Beachhead**

After the battle at Oivi — Gorari, the 25th Australian Brigade followed closely on the heels of the Japanese rear parties and reached the banks of the Kumusi River at Wairopi on 13 November. Many enemy soldiers, including General Horii, were drowned in the raging river when they hurriedly tried to cross on improvised rafts the previous night.

Horii was replaced by Colonel Yokoyama who took over more than 6,000 combat troops dug in in exceptionally strong positions in the beachhead. As the Japanese had freedom of movement by sea, he could expect to be resupplied and reinforced from Rabaul. He also had special navy construction and landing troops under his command.

By 15 November, the 32nd US Division had concentrated in the Pongani — Natunga area and 7th Aust Division at Wairopi.

General MacArthur brought an echelon of his GHQ when he arrived in Port Moresby, to direct operations against the beachhead. He, and indeed most senior officers, thought it would be only a matter of days before the whole operation was finalised; they thought it would be a push-over. But instead, it turned out to be one of the hardest fought engagements in the SWPA with alarming casualties, both battle and medical.

The Japanese defences were very skilfully designed, exceptionally toughly constructed, cleverly camouflaged and very well sited. They could not be detected from the air and even on land, were very hard to identify.

The enemy defences covered a front of about 16 km from Gona to Cape Endaidere. They could be supplied by landing craft moving troops and supplies by sea at night and hiding inshore from aircraft by day. The coastal plain was an impossible region of jungle, swamp and extreme humidity. Except for a few narrow strips of sand and corduroy tracks that had to be built, the terrain was impassable. Malaria, scrub typhus, dengue fever and dysentery were endemic. So also were “dhoby” itch, “Singapore ear,” tinea, ringworm, ulcers and never ending attacks of dermatitis.

It was clear from the outset that the Japanese were determined to fight to the death in defence of this desolate coastline. As Lt-Gen Herring reported: “They had to be dug out of the burrows like rabbits.” It was almost impossible to get at the enemy bunkers, so tenaciously were they defended, to the point of fanaticism.

New Guinea Force orders assigned the Buna — Cape Endaidere sector to the 32nd US Division and 7th Aust Division’s mission was to capture Gona and Sanana. Both divisions started their advance on 16 November.

There was intense enemy fire which swept every line of approach. Soon all allied attacks were brought to a grinding halt. A week after the offensive began, the Americans were held up on all their fronts. On 25 November, Herring visited Popondetta and was alarmed at what he saw. He returned to Port Moresby and with Blamey, went to discuss the situation with MacArthur.

On 28 November, Herring opened his advanced headquarters at Popondetta. At last, he was able to take a firmer grip on operations. This new location had the advantage of being on the main line of Vasey’s advance to the coast. It was only 13 km from Dobodura which was to become the main allied air base. It was also close to US Maj-Gen Harding whom Herring visited on 30 November, accompanied by MacArthur’s deputy (Sutherland) from GHQ. They both were most displeased by what they found.

Previously, MacArthur had offered Blamey and Herring additional American troops from the 41st US Division, but Blamey told him he wanted Australians because they would fight! It served MacArthur right to be told this in
view of his earlier unfair criticism of the Australians’ performance on the Kokoda Trail.

Acting on Sutherland’s report, MacArthur decided to replace Harding and called for Lieutenant-General R. Eichelberger to come from Rockhampton to take command of the American troops at the beachhead. On his arrival at Port Moresby, Eichelberger received his instructions direct from the Supreme Commander in the following terms:

“Bob, I’m putting you in command of Buna. Relieve Harding. I’m sending you in Bob and I want you to remove all officers who won’t fight. Relieve regimental and battalion commanders if necessary, put sergeants in charge of battalions and corporals in charge of companies — anyone who will fight! Time is the essence. The Japs may land reinforcements any night (they did) . . . Bob, I want you to take Buna or not come back alive . . . Do you understand?”

Eichelberger replied “Yes sir”.

On 1 December, Eichelberger flew to Dobodura. He and Herring liked each other at once. This was the beginning of a friendship which lasted until Eichelberger’s death on 26 September 1961. In his book *Our Jungle Road to Tokyo* Eichelberger wrote: “When the going is tough in a brawl, or in a battle, there is no better fighting partner than the man from Down Under.”

He described Herring in the following terms: “My immediate superior in the field was Lieutenant-General Herring . . . and the friendship we established in the wilderness will, I am sure, last our lifetimes. . .”

It did. They exchanged visits to each other’s country until the year Eichelberger died.

The dogged, bloody battle for the beachhead continued with the Japanese still fighting with the greatest ferocity and obsession. The allied troops became exhausted, sick and in desperate need of reinforcement, while the Japs in their bunkers did not falter in any way in vigorously conducting their defensive operations.

The Australian 21st Brigade and 39th Battalion who had done so well in the Owen Stanley’s, captured Gona on 9 December after which the former mission station had all the appearance of a slaughterhouse! The young soldiers of the 39th were superb but at the end of the campaign, only 7 of their officers and 25 other ranks remained.

In the battle of the beachhead bunkers, it became possible to bring into action a few 25-pounder field guns under the command of Major W.H. Hall of 2/5th Field Artillery Regiment. These guns were worth their weight in gold as also were a few 3.7-inch “pack” guns under Major Paddy O’Hare of the 1st Mountain Battery.

On one occasion, Bill Hall (now Brigadier Sir William Hall) was up a banyan tree directing his guns firing at the enemy over open sights. Hall was very lucky. Japanese snipers were trying to shoot him out of the tree but he stayed there directing fire. For his gallantry, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

It is of interest to note that Sir William Hall later was Federal President of the RSL for many years. He was awarded two orders of knighthood for his outstanding service on behalf of war widows and ex-servicemen and women. At age 82, he still works 3 days a week as Chairman of Trustees for a number of RSL Trusts and is busy on innumerable charity organisations as Patron, Chairman or Director. A Great Australian.

**Beachhead Battle — State at Christmas 1942**

After five long weeks of battle, little progress had been made on the Buna — Sanananda fronts. The Americans were held up and unable to advance any further at many points. At Sanananda they established a road block and held it, but Australian efforts to clear the enemy from both sides of the road failed. At this stage, Vasey had received some reinforcements but now he had 1,600 fewer troops than when he commenced his attacks.

Herring, who had changed his advanced Headquarters location from Popondetta to Dobodura, decided that Vasey needed more help to maintain pressure on the enemy. As he had already brought forward all of his reserves, additional troops were required as a matter of urgency.

On 24 December, Herring visited Vasey who proposed that a regiment of the US 41st Division be brought up from Australia to strengthen his force. Herring flew to Port Mo-
resby the next day and put his proposition to Blamey who agreed and told Herring to go direct to MacArthur to see if it could be arranged.

MacArthur's opening words to Herring were: "How is the battle going? I hope you realise young man, if we don't win this battle, I am finished, and so is your General Blamey! I don't know what will happen to you."

MacArthur agreed with Vasey's suggestion, now supported by Herring and Blamey, and after a few air transport problems, the 163rd US Regiment arrived. The fierce fighting did not abate in any way, but by 3 January, the Japanese were cleared from Cape Endaidere and the Buna Government station. The 2/9th Australian Battalion, part of Brigadier Wootten's formation, performed magnificently in the attack on Cape Endaidere.

The courage of the Japanese defenders was described as "frenzied fanaticism." The battle for Buna had drawn in the whole of the 32nd US Division as well as the 18th Australian Brigade and two squadrons of 2/6th Aust Armoured Regiment, together with supporting artillery and engineers.

Once again, Brigadier Wootten did extremely well and he richly deserved his promotion that followed soon after, to the rank of Major-General as GOC, 9th Aust Division.

The Buna battle cost some 2,900 allied casualties (900 Australian). Japanese dead numbered 1,400.

Although the end of the campaign was now within sight, the enemy were determined to fight on to the very end. Later evidence indicated that there might have been some cannibalism in bunkers that were surrounded but held firm for several days.

Much to the amazement of everyone at HQ New Guinea Force and the divisional commanders involved in the battle, MacArthur declared that the campaign was over, except for a bit of "mopping up!"

MacArthur decided to return to Australia on Saturday morning, 9 January 1943, after advising Blamey not to delay his return beyond what he considered necessary. Apparently though, he was surprised when Blamey followed him only four days later.

Clearly, Blamey had no intention of remaining at Port Moresby, leaving the field wide open in Canberra for MacArthur to consult with the Australian Government, conducting discussions so as to favour the American forces and MacArthur himself! Besides, Blamey still was prepared to fight, if necessary, to retain his own appointment as Commander, Allied Land Forces. This was important to him as large contingents of senior Americans were expected to arrive soon in Australia.

Sir Frederick Shedden informed me years later that MacArthur had told him, he thought Blamey would stay on in New Guinea until at least the battle of the beachhead was over, so that he (Blamey) could claim some of the credit. However, Shedden understood Blamey's reasons for returning and Shedden thought he was wise to do so at that time.

Herring carried on as GOC, New Guinea Force and thus, without interruption, was able to get on with conducting the final battle of Sanananda. Lt-Gen Eichelberger had been given command of the area east of the Owen Stanleys and Major-General F.H. Berryman had been appointed as Herring's Chief of Staff at HQ, NGF.

The battle for Sanananda swayed in the balance for some time. Herring, Eichelberger, Vasey and Berryman were all very concerned about mounting further attacks after the allies, including 18th Aust Brigade, had suffered several setbacks.

Herring and Eichelberger had in mind different solutions to the Sanananda problem. Eichelberger wanted to surround the area to cut off supplies and pound the enemy with artillery and mortar fire; whereas Herring preferred to attack. In a reply message to Herring, Eichelberger said he hoped he might have better news tomorrow. He did — because Vasey had notified him in his typically colourful language "The bugger's gone!" This meant that the enemy were starting to withdraw and some of the bunkers now were unmanned.

Later it was learnt that the enemy withdrawal had been directed by Imperial Japanese Headquarters on 4 January as part of a plan to move gradually to a defence line Lae — Salamaua. When ordered to withdraw, Japanese troops generally seemed to finish off the struggle in a frenzy. Mostly, they did not give up anything without a last vicious, bloody fight.

By 20 January, Herring was satisfied that "The heart and the core of the Japanese positions on the coast had been seized." In his Order of the Day, issued on 22 January to mark the completion of the recapture of the
Buna — Gona area, he expressed heartfelt congratulations to members of all allied formations and units who had taken part in the operations.

Thus Herring, who had made such a significant contribution to the campaign, had the final word. It was due primarily to his skills of leadership and the close rapport he established so easily with Eichelberger and other Americans that there was such harmony and splendid cooperation between the allied troops. Furthermore, he was able to get the very best out of Vasey, Wootten, Eather, Dougherty, Moten and other outstanding Australian commanders. Also, it should be recalled that General Blarney had sent Herring to ask MacArthur for additional American troops at a very critical stage of the Sanananda operations. If Blarney did that in the belief that Herring might have more chance of success in obtaining the Supreme Commander’s cooperation, he was right!

It was strange that so few of the Australian public seemed to know who Herring was and what he was doing in New Guinea, until the end of the campaign. It was his seniors and subordinates who attracted most of the publicity. But that did not fuss Herring. Like Sturdee, he was content to get on with whatever task he had in hand, leaving the limelight to others.

Both Herring and Eichelberger deserve high commendation for having operated together in so many stressful situations, with such concord. The warm friendship they shared was all the more remarkable considering the nature of the relationship that existed between their respective more senior fellow countrymen back in Port Moresby. At that level, there were times when their rivalries became all too public or the Supreme Commander would indulge in making outrageous demands on the Australians!

Herring was very deeply impressed by the outstanding performance of the soldiers under his command. He paid a special tribute to the infantry:

“Seldom have infantry been called upon to endure greater hardships or discomforts than those provided by the mountains, the swamps, the floods, of tropical New Guinea. All this you have endured with cheerfulness and meantime have outfought a dour and determined enemy on ground of his own choosing in well prepared defences. Your achievements have been such as to earn the admiration and appreciation of all of your countrymen.”

(Ned Herring by Stuart Sayers, page 245)

At the end of the battle, remnants of the 39th Battalion had to march across the airstrip at Dobodura. As mentioned previously, the unit’s strength had been reduced to only 7 officers and 25 other ranks. A bystander was heard to ask caustically and in a loud voice “What mob is that?” The second in command of the unit turned about and shouted back “This is no mob. This is the 39th!”

Australia paid a very high price for the victory at Buna, Gona and Sanananda. MacArthur’s exhortations to “take Buna today” and other such demands, did not help to keep the casualty rate down. In the nine weeks from 20 November 1942 to 22 January 1943, the Australian battle casualties numbered 5,700 and the American 2,900.

The Australian forces suffered 15,500 medical casualties up to the end of 1942, including 9,200 cases of malaria. Of the total of 14,600 American troops who served in the combat area, 8,600 of them became medical casualties.

(The South West Pacific 1941-1945 by Colonel E.G. Keogh)
The Perilous Year Ends January 1943

THE allied victory on the Kokoda Trail; the successful battles for the Buna, Gona and Sanananda beachhead; the American and Australian naval victories in the Pacific; plus the Japanese defeat at Guadalcanal, collectively provided clear evidence that the military might of the land of the “Rising Sun” was no longer at its zenith. Instead, its power was beginning to show signs of decline.

No longer could the enemy hope to bring together the ships, aircraft and soldiers in strength sufficient to enable them to launch, and more importantly, sustain a major invasion attack on mainland Australia.

The allies’ war with Japan had lasted for over twelve months to reach this satisfactory stage. Yet it would take another two and a half years of gruelling, grinding and bloody battles to be fought in New Guinea and other parts of the SWPA before Japan finally would be brought to surrender.

Nevertheless, Australia had passed through the most dangerous and critical year of its history; the period from January 1942 to January 1943 in which the nation’s very survival was in jeopardy.

Under Prime Minister Curtin’s leadership, the country had been fully mobilized and was making great progress in the production of military equipment, aircraft and ships. Top industrialists Essington Lewis, John Storey, Laurence Hartnett and others achieved what seemed to be miraculous results in establishing and organising Australia’s war production capacity.

The Allied Works Council under Ted Theodore was fulfilling its role with great success in building aerodromes, roads and bridges and in general construction, even in the remotest areas. Primary producers were providing food in huge quantities for Britain, India and other nations overseas, as well as for all the American Armed Forces in the SWPA and for Australia’s own Armed Forces and its people at home.

Women had replaced men in nearly all fields of endeavour. Of Australia’s total population of 7 million, there were some 840,000 women making their contribution in the services and the work-force. Included, as detailed (page 269) in Hasluck’s book The Government and the People were: 8,800 in the Nursing Services; 1,400 WRANS; 18,000 AWAS; 16,000 WAAAF; 190,000 in direct war work; 39,000 in munitions, shipbuilding and aircraft industries; 106,000 in other defence works; 55,000 in rural and 27,000 in transport industries; and another 158,000 in commerce.

Food, clothing, petrol and other essential commodities were rationed. Servicemen home from overseas had to become accustomed to the scarcity of meat, sugar, butter, cigarettes, alcohol and so many other goods. For the first time, they needed coupons to buy clothing items, even swimsuits! Dress material for wedding and other gowns was just one of numerous luxuries that would have to wait until after the war. Travel was restricted to essential journeys only. Building supplies had to be controlled strictly. Servicemen and citizens alike had to share these and all other hardships of a nation at war.

Every effort was made by the Government to ensure that the sacrifices were spread evenly throughout the populace. The Prime Minister set an example by living austerely. To his very great credit, at no time did Curtin ever forget the fighting servicemen and their needs. His son John served with the RAAF for most of the war.

The whole of the population had become involved in the war. Every man and woman was affected personally, some of course, more than others. Therefore, with each success or failure in the national struggle, the joy or grief was shared by all.

Although at this time early in 1943, Curtin, MacArthur and Blamey realised that the direct danger to Australia was receding, it was not until mid-year that this was announced publicly. It was MacArthur’s expressed opinion that the threat of invasion of Australia was eliminated by the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943, when Japanese attempts to land additional forces in Lae had been frustrated by their overwhelming defeat — with the sinking of most of their transports; i.e. 12 enemy ships, including 4 destroyers.

On 10 June 1943, Prime Minister Curtin released the following press statement in Canberra:
"... As in the case of Britain, we had a close call at one stage. The Battle of the Coral Sea was a deliverance and the return of the AIF enabled us to stop the Japanese advance in New Guinea just in time.

"I do not think the enemy can now invade this country. We have proved that, with the resources we have had, together with the command of the sea established by the gallant United States Navy by decisive victories at Midway Island and the Solomon Islands. We are not yet immune from marauding raids which may cause much damage and loss. I believe, however, that we can hold Australia as a base from which to launch both limited and major offensives against Japan . . . ."

With that clearly stated assessment of the situation, the Prime Minister, while still necessarily and sagely sounding a cautious note, was able to announce officially the ending of what unquestionably had been the most perilous year in the history of his great and beloved Australia.
As may be expected, leading Australian personalities of World War II who have been mentioned in earlier chapters, went on after January 1943 to make most significant contributions to the war effort and to the community as well, in post-war years.

There were other very well known senior officers of the Australian armed forces who also won fame but were serving in other places in the time-frame of this treatise.

Notable in this respect was Major-General L J Morshead who, as GOC, 9th Australian Division, was still serving in North Africa. In October 1942, he led his famous formation with great distinction at the historic battle of El Alamein. He was to become Lieutenant-General Sir Leslie Morshead and at various times, commanded 1st and 2nd Aust Corps, New Guinea Force and Second Aust Army.

Major-General George Vasey continued to command 7th Australian Division most successfully until sadly, he was killed in an air crash near Cairns, North Queensland on 5 March 1945.

In January 1944, Lieutenant-General Sir Iven Mackay was appointed High Commissioner for Australia in India. General Sir John Northcott, who became the first Commander-in-Chief of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan, was appointed Governor of the State of New South Wales and at times, was Administrator of the Commonwealth of Australia. Northcott was outstanding as C.G.S. 1942/45. Hopefully, some good author will write a biography of this talented General and Administrator. Lieutenant-General Sir John Lavarack became the Governor of Queensland.

Following are some details of interest and a few comments on the service and contributions of:

**Lieutenant-General Sir Edmund Herring**

Following a brief period of leave in Australia, Herring returned in May 1943 to command New Guinea Force. He planned and led the operations to capture Lae, Salamaua, the Markham Valley and Finschhafen with conspicuous skill and aggressiveness.

During this period, Wootten, GOC 9th Aust Division and Vasey, GOC 7th Aust Division were under his command. Both owed a lot to Herring for his guidance and direction. He had the ability to remain calm and composed no matter how stressful a situation might be. In these operations, a number of exceptionally savage battles were fought to drive the enemy further away from Australia.

At age 51, Sir Edmund was appointed Chief Justice and then Lieutenant-Governor of the State of Victoria. This was not a "bowler hat" for him because both Curtin and Blamey had further plans for his military service. Herring served in his civil appointments for a record term before he retired.

Whilst serving in the Middle East earlier in the war, he was appointed Chancellor of the Anglican Church in Victoria. He served his Church for nearly four decades and was renowned for his most outstanding service. He was aptly known as a great Christian and a great soldier. He probably did more for the modern Anglican Church in Victoria than anyone. One of the founders of the ecumenical movement in Victoria.

He died in January 1982 at the age of 89 years. He was one of the greatest men the writer ever had the honour to know.

(For further details, see *Defence Force Journal* May/June 1982 “Great Christian — Great Soldier” by J P Buckley. Also the book *Ned Herring* by Stuart Sayers)

**Lieutenant-General Sir Vernon Sturdee**

In August 1942, Sturdee was posted to Washington, D.C. for a year, to represent Australia at a most senior military level for the prime purpose of obtaining additional equipment and manpower assistance from USA for allied operations in the SWPA.
Having achieved highly successful results in the Washington post, he returned to Australia to take command of First Aust Army, with operational headquarters in New Guinea. Thus, he held the top Australian Army field command for the final year of the war.

In December 1945, he was appointed by the Government as Acting Commander-in-Chief when General Sir Thomas Blamey retired from active duty. He became Chief of the General Staff in March 1946, for a second term, on the reconstitution of the Military Board and continued to serve as CGS until he retired in May 1950.

Lt-Gen Sturdee will be remembered best by the classical description of well known military historian David Horner who wrote: "... he was the rock on which the Army and indeed the Government rested during the weeks of panic in early 1942."

When the writer returned from the Middle East in March 1942 and reported for duty at HQ Home Forces, then located at Ivanhoe Grammar School in Melbourne he was told by GOC Sir Iven Mackay in one conversation that during the critical exchange of communications between Churchill and Curtin, there were certain politicians (not Curtin) who lost their heads whereas Sturdee had remained quite unruffled. His whole attitude reminded Sir Iven (a pre-war headmaster of a well known Sydney grammar school) that Kipling could have had someone like Sturdee in mind when he composed the poem "If" and wrote the lines

"If you can keep your head when all about you Are losing theirs and blaming it on you ..."

Lieutenant-General Sir Vernon Sturdee died in May 1966, aged 76.

Regrettably, the Australian Army has done little to commemorate the late General's service to the nation. A student block at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra has been named after him; as has the Commander's residence in 3rd Military District; and also a Syndicate Room at the Australian Command and Staff College at Fort Queenscliff. Officers of much less distinction have had major barracks, installations or facilities named after them.

While these three facilities, and a few suburban streets bear the Sturdee name, this seems inadequate recognition for one of the nation's very highest ranking and distinguished leaders of World War II whose role during the darkest days of Australia's history, ought never be forgotten!

(For further information see Defence Force Journal, July/August 1983: "Sir Vernon Sturdee" by J P Buckley)

Sir Frederick Shedden

As Secretary, Department of Defence, Shedden continued to give most outstanding service. His remarkable experience and knowledge of defence policy and administration together with his organisational skills, were of enormous assistance to Prime Ministers Curtin and Chifley. He had the rare distinction of being recommended by a Labour Government (at Prime Minister Curtin's insistence) for a knighthood. This was initiated by MacArthur who pressed Curtin to recommend the award and in doing so, stated that he would recommend Shedden for the highest U.S. Civilian award, if he had the power to do so. It is of interest to note that the K.C.M.G. awarded to Shedden, is now in the safe keeping of the Kyneton Historical Society, the town where Fred Shedden was born. (The author was able to arrange this with the executors of the Shedden estate). This was conferred on him in mid-1943 in recognition of the major contribution he had made to the success of the first phase of the campaign in the SWPA to protect Australia from enemy invasion.

It was Shedden who identified Blamey's capabilities before World War II. He appointed him Director of Manpower, which gave Blamey an ideal opportunity to prove and demonstrate his abilities to the Lyons Government. Years later, Sir Frederick told me he had organised that appointment for Blamey because he was so firmly convinced of his potential as a Commander-in-Chief, should the nation need one in the event of war breaking out. How right that assessment proved to be!

In the early post-war period, specifically at the request of the Chiefs of Staff (Sturdee, Collins and Jones), Shedden was appointed by the Government as Chairman of the Defence Committee. He was a key figure and most competent adviser to the Governments of Chifley and later Menzies on the ANZAM, ANZUS and SEATO Treaties and bilateral agreements between Australia and both the UK and USA.
Shedden was very highly regarded by General MacArthur who did not take long to perceive the influence this senior Public Servant could wield in the War Cabinet and with Prime Minister Curtin. Likewise, Shedden had a very warm working relationship with MacArthur, as he did also with Curtin, Blamey and later, Chifley.

I served with Sir Frederick Shedden for seven years as a First Assistant Secretary in his Department of Defence. Later, after he retired, he worked on for another fifteen years in an office adjacent to mine at Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, researching and writing a history of Australian Defence Policy.

Throughout that time, I was closely associated with him on a daily basis. This gave me the unusually pleasant and interesting privilege of being able to talk with him often and hear a great many of his anecdotes, opinions and judgements.

I regard him as unquestionably the most brilliant and competent expert on Australian Defence Policy ever to serve as Head of the Defence Department. Certainly, no other Secretary of the Department has ever been able to compare with him.

Australia was fortunate indeed to be served in its highest Defence echelon by such an eminently proficient team as that of Curtin, Shedden, Blamey and Sturdee in the 1942 period of gravest national danger, and later in World War II.

(For further details of Shedden, see Defence Force Journal January/February 1985: "Sir Frederick Shedden" by J P Buckley)

Sturdee always had a high regard for him. So did General Blamey who recommended to the Government that Berryman be given the Chief of the General Staff appointment at the end of the war. Instead, he was to serve for several years in Sydney as GOC, Eastern Command.

I served there for three years on his staff; a period I consider to be the most fruitful and happy of my Army career.

Berryman was a great soldier and he received the respect and admiration of all who knew him.

On his retirement from the Australian Regular Army, Sir Frank became head of the Royal Agricultural Society in New South Wales and was appointed to the Boards of a number of large business companies.

It's a pity that Berryman and Rowell had to come up together for the appointment of C.G.S. Both were eminently suitable. Berryman would have had much to contribute. His war record was superb.

After his dismissal from HQ, New Guinea Force and reversion to the rank of Major-General, Rowell was sent back to the Middle East as GOC, AIF Details. Shortly afterwards, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff asked for his services at the War Office where he was appointed Director of Tactical Investigation.

With the approaching battle for Europe, this was a very important assignment. It was concerned with tactics, equipment performance and equipment policy, leading up to D Day and subsequently, operations in France, Holland, Belgium and Germany.

Maj-Gen Rowell was always most helpful to Australian Army officers serving in the UK and North-West Europe at that time, especially in arranging attachments to 21 Army Group. I can vouch for this as he organised a number of attachments for me in 1944-1945.

On his return to Australia, he was appointed Vice-Chief of the General Staff early in 1946; then in April 1950, he became Chief of the General Staff.
His book *Full Circle* was published by Melbourne University Press in 1974. It is a very good book and is well worth reading.

**General Sir Thomas Blamey**

General Blamey continued as Commander-in-Chief until the end of the war and retired in December 1945. Of all the allied Generals who served in World War II, he was the only one to hold appointment as Commander-in-Chief from the beginning to the end of the war. He was well known as a brilliant and tough commander who could and did stand up for his troops against more senior allied Generals, particularly if they tried to interfere with organisational structures; eg. by trying to break up AIF formations. He was very conscious of Australian sovereignty and staunchly battled to preserve it whenever he saw the necessity to do so. Wavell, Auchinleck and MacArthur found him immovable when they tried to break up Australian Corps or Divisions.

Without any doubt, he was the only Australian General who could have survived all the military and political pressures he encountered in the six years of the war. He came through without faltering and gave every impression that he thrived on adversity.

But when the time came for him to step down, the Government treated him shabbily. As an act of "grace" on his retirement, he was given the well aged Buick staff car he had used in the Middle East and in Australia. It had some 50,000 miles on the speedometer and its market value was about $800. That is all he received. However, in earlier years, Monash had received nothing; and Chauvel was given the use of a horse — when available!

General Sir Thomas Blamey, GBE, KCB, CMG, DSO, ED, was promoted to the rank of Field-Marshal on 8 June 1950 and on 16 September, received his treasured baton from the Governor-General, Sir William McKell. The presentation was made at the Repatriation General Hospital, Heidelberg, where Blamey had become a frail patient.

Australia's greatest soldier and only Field-Marshal, died at the hospital on 27 May 1951. He was given a military funeral in which an escort of 4,000 servicemen marched with the cortege from Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance to the Fawkner Crematorium. The city was silent as more than 500,000 people lined the route, many of them unashamedly with a tear in the eye. Some young writers, who take every opportunity to criticize the brilliant Field Marshal, should do more accurate research and less publicity seeking, to do justice to one of Australia's greatest sons.

He was a man to be remembered.

The Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey Memorial Trust, with Brigadier L. D. King as its chairman, is very active throughout Australia in arranging suitable prizes, orations and commemorative services etc, to ensure that Sir Thomas Blamey's deeds and unique service to Australia are not forgotten.

**Prime Minister J B Chifley**

Mr Ben Chifley succeeded the Right Honourable John Curtin as Prime Minister of Australia when Curtin died on 5 July 1945.

Chifley had been a most loyal supporter and first class stand-in for John Curtin through periods of the latter's illness. Thus, he was experienced and well qualified for his transition to the Prime Ministership.

As he had been Minister for Defence in the Scullin Government in 1931-1932, Chifley had considerable interest in Defence policy. That background proved to be valuable when, shortly after becoming Prime Minister, he was faced with great national problems such as:

- Post-War Reconstruction
- Demobilization of the Services and Industry
- Occupational Force for Japan
- Peace Treaties
- Post-War Economy
- Peace-Time Armed Forces
- Disposal of Huge Stocks of War Equipment and Supplies
- Settlement of War Debts
- Immigration Policy

Chifley was a worthy successor to Curtin. He backed CGS Sturdee in setting the scope of the post-war Army to ensure that the major Army Schools and facilities would remain; and that the strength of the Armed Forces would
be maintained at levels essential for their peacetime roles, including responsibilities in occupied Japan.

Prime Minister Chifley also approved the establishment of the Australian Joint War Production Committee. As the first Executive Member of that organisation, I am aware of the encouragement he gave the Committee and its efforts to make certain that war production potential and capacity in Australia, were safeguarded. He was very keen on maintaining production self-sufficiency to the greatest possible extent.

He was a man of very great courage and determination. He demonstrated this when he sent Army personnel in to work the open cut coal mines in NSW in 1949, to maintain supplies for essential services while mine workers remained on strike. Under Sturdee’s leadership, the Army did not let Chifley down. Day and night shifts were worked and searchlights were used at night so that no time would be lost. Within three weeks, the troops were breaking all previously known coal production records!

Chifley’s Minister for Defence, Mr J J Dedman, held his portfolio for more than three years and was highly successful in the appointment. He did a great deal for the Services.

Chifley was vigorous in his condemnation of any organisation or person not prepared to give fullest support to Australia’s war effort. Consistently, his approach was positive. Everyone knew where he stood, firm and resolute. To him, national sovereignty and survival were of paramount concern; and above politics!

He had been a prominent, energetic anti-conscriptionist in the Great War of 1914-1918. In World War II, however, when the nation for which he now carried great responsibility, was threatened by the prospect of enemy invasion, he was realistic enough to dismiss his former ideologies to embrace the highest order of patriotism. This he did without reservations of any kind and in a most exemplary manner.

The Prime Minister was quick to realise the impossible situation that had arisen in having an Army consisting of a voluntary AIF which could be sent overseas on active service, whereas the AMF was restricted to mainland Australia’s home defence. American conscripts who had been brought to the SWPA to help defend Australia and its Territories, were puzzled why most of the country’s own soldiers could not fight alongside their allies in New Guinea in what was their common, although primarily Australia’s cause.

By using superb political tactics and timing, Curtin managed to rectify this gross absurdity by getting the Militia Act of 1943 passed by Parliament; but this success was at a cost to his health. He was greatly troubled by the intransigence and taunts of some members of his own Labour Party who were unwilling to support him on this legislation. Although the Prime Minister got the bill through, he suffered from all the worry he was caused in achieving that goal.

The Brisbane Line

Never has so much valuable time and space been given to a “non-event” as was devoted to what was called the “Brisbane Line” which
dragged on for months from February to December 1943. The two principals in the case who alleged that the previous Menzies Government had approved a plan to abandon to an invader the region of Australia above a line drawn north of Brisbane, were ALP member Eddie Ward and General MacArthur.

Ward knew a Federal election was imminent and purely for political reasons, he wished to make the opposition parties appear to have been willing to commit what he called an act of "national betrayal".

To be honest, MacArthur’s motive has to be described as self-aggrandisement. His claim was that as a great leader, he had abandoned the "defeatist" Brisbane Line concept as soon as he arrived in Australia in March 1942.

As was proved later, there was no truth in either claim. However, the honourable, loyal and super-sensitive Curtin could not publicly deny Ward’s allegation. More importantly, he could not contradict MacArthur without creating a blaze of publicity and discrediting the allied Supreme Commander at a critical stage of the war.

The Prime Minister asked Blarney to examine the allegations as he had been serving in the Middle East when the so-called Brisbane Line plan was conceived. After investigation, Blarney reported that there was no such plan. A Royal Commission was then set up, but it had to be aborted when Ward refused to testify.

War historian Paul Hasluck wrote that this episode was one of the few occasions when “Curtin fell below his customarily high standards of honesty and courage.” However, there were few who doubted that Curtin was mainly protecting MacArthur, for at the time, to say the least, it would have been disadvantageous to the allied cause for the General to be disparaged by Australia’s Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister asked Blamey to examine the allegations as he had been serving in the Middle East when the so-called Brisbane Line plan was conceived. After investigation, Blamey reported that there was no such plan. A Royal Commission was then set up, but it had to be aborted when Ward refused to testify.

War historian Paul Hasluck wrote that this episode was one of the few occasions when “Curtin fell below his customarily high standards of honesty and courage.” However, there were few who doubted that Curtin was mainly protecting MacArthur, for at the time, to say the least, it would have been disadvantageous to the allied cause for the General to be disparaged by Australia's Prime Minister.

The May 1944 Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference in London offered Curtin the opportunity to visit Washington and London. He decided to attend the conference and en route, see Roosevelt in USA, then Churchill in UK. He had much to discuss at the highest levels. There were urgent matters concerning manpower; industry; supply of foodstuffs; strategy for the conclusion of the war; and in particular, the necessity for Australia to be consulted in major planning for the Pacific.

The Australian delegation comprised Curtin, Blamey and Shedden.

Discussions in Washington were most cordial and there were no significant disagreements. Roosevelt and Curtin warmed to each other immediately. The President of the United States had been looking forward to meeting this character from “Down Under” with his reputation for fearlessness, persuasiveness and pugnacity on any matter adversely affecting the sovereignty of Australia. They became instant friends and Mr and Mrs Curtin were invited to stay for a weekend at the Roosevelts’ country estate.

In London, Churchill went out of his way to welcome and treat Curtin as a great national leader. To Australians serving in London at the time, it seemed that Churchill was trying hard to bury the past. Wisely, no mention was made of the disagreements between the two Prime Ministers of early 1942 and the exchanges of their terse cables.

Curtin was an outstanding success and was shown friendship and respect everywhere he went. He received the Freedom of the City of London and an honorary doctorate was conferred on him by Cambridge University. His speeches of response when accepting these honours, were brilliant and well reported.

His primary interest and contribution to the Prime Ministers’ Conference concerned planning for the war in the Far East and post-war problems in the Pacific.

It was apparent to many in London that the state of Curtin’s health was deteriorating, yet he bravely carried on with his demanding official schedule. He was pleased with the success of his visits to both Washington and London but was very glad to return to Australia.

Early in November 1944, Curtin suffered a serious illness in Melbourne where he had to remain in hospital for several weeks. By late December 1944, he returned to Canberra and took his place again in the House of Representatives. He was far from well but with relentless determination, he set about returning fully to his duties. Chifley, his ever faithful deputy, tried to relieve the Prime Minister of as much work as possible but Curtin would not spare himself in any way.

The Prime Minister had coped with nearly four long years of enormous problems, all of which he handled with great ability. In the last six months, he had been dealing with many very important matters, some of which were:

- Balancing the war effort
One matter on which he focused attention concerned the employment of Australian troops in the remaining stages of the war with Japan. He began pressing MacArthur for clarification of his thoughts on policy for that phase of the conflict. The Prime Minister did not want the Australians to be used exclusively for "mopping up" operations, nor did Blarney; but MacArthur was playing his cards carefully.

The Supreme Commander was intent on his American forces getting sole and undivided credit for liberating the Philippines. Curtin was equally determined that Australia must continue to share the burden of the Pacific war, as an equal allied partner, until Japan surrendered. To him, it would be just unthinkable for Australia to cease assisting its great ally at any stage before the war ended; especially after the US forces had come to the nation's aid at its time of desperate need, when the threat of enemy invasion was so close. There are some young writers who think, with hindsight, Australia should have ceased to take an active part in the last years of the war — I strongly disagree.

The Prime Minister held firmly to the view that Australia had every right to a place at the Peace Table. Justification for this was his nation's significant contribution to the defeat of the Japanese and the fact that Australia had continued the fight to the very end. No craven approach for Curtin!

In the final months of his life, he was protected from the cares of office by his ever loyal and solicitous deputy, Ben Chifley. On 29 April, the Prime Minister was admitted again to hospital. His reserves could not keep up with the demands his overwork were making on his health and well-being. He had given Australia his all, until there was nothing more to give (Hasluck: The Government and the People).

John Curtin died on 5 July 1945 at the age of 60 years. His body lay in state in King's Hall, Parliament House, Canberra, whilst the whole country mourned the passing of its great leader, the patriot who gave his life in service to his nation.

He was given a State Funeral and buried at Karrakatta Cemetery in his own electorate of Fremantle. The service was conducted in the presence of the greatest gathering of notables and members of the community ever seen at a funeral service in Western Australia. The late Sir Alfred Kemsley once told me that one of the saddest mourners at the service was General Sir Thomas Blamey.

General MacArthur wrote: “Mr Curtin was one of the greatest wartime statesmen, and the preservation of Australia from invasion will be his immemorial monument.”

The London Times and other international newspapers — carried most impressive tributes to John Curtin and described in laudatory terms what he had done for his country.

On 18 July 1945, a Memorial Service for John Curtin was held at Westminster Abbey, the venue for so many Royal and State occasions.

The Abbey overflowed with mourners. The elite of the British establishment and representatives of allied nations had come to London to honour the memory of the great Australian Prime Minister — the only Australian ever to be so honoured. Curtin had won the admiration of British and American, as well as his own people, by his leadership and his well-known struggles to safeguard Australia's sovereignty.

I was privileged to be an usher at this very moving Service and so was able to observe how much distinguished members of the huge congregation shared a genuine sense of loss and deep sorrow. It was a most sincere and noble tribute being paid in a far distant country, to a very great Australian.

Often I have been asked who arranged that special Westminster Abbey Service. It has always been my belief that it must have been Winston Churchill. As a final tribute to a one-time greatly respected adversary, such a magnificent gesture would have been very much in keeping with Churchill's character. I do know that Mrs. Curtin received a cablegram from the British Government on her arrival at Perth Aerodrome from Canberra, requesting her permission for the service to be held in the Abbey. Churchill was Prime Minister at the time.

For several years after Curtin's death, there were many warm tributes written by his former political opponents, all of whom gave him great
credit for his service to the nation and praised him highly. For example:

W.M. Hughes, World War I Prime Minister had this to say. "For nearly four years John Curtin led this country through its darkest days. By his unswerving courage, wise leadership and winged words he roused the people of Australia to action. The Prime Minister died as he would have wished, at the post of duty. Of no man could it be said more truly that he gave his life to his country." Billy Hughes was never renowned for using flowery language about others — this must have been the exception.

Sir Arthur Fadden, one time Prime Minister, in his book They Called Me Artie wrote: "There was no greater figure in Australian public life in my lifetime than Curtin."

Sir Robert Menzies, Prime Minister for many years, in Afternoon Light wrote: "... he had a marked capacity for securing the confidence of the Australian public; a confidence which, as Prime Minister from 1937 to 1941, I had lost ..."

Lord Bruce, ex-Prime Minister, was quoted in The London Years by Alfred Stirling as having stated: "Curtin was excellent, an extraordinary receptive and perceptive man. I'd never desire to work under a better man."

Sir Paul Hasluck, in the Official History, The Government and the People, Volume II: "The Prime Minister (Curtin) did not live to see victory, although victory was on its way. He had lived out his own text: 'We have a heavy responsibility. I ask every Australian man and woman to go about their allotted task with full vigour and courage. We shall hold this country and keep it as a citadel for the British speaking race and as a place where civilisation will persist.' ..."

Australians were fortunate indeed to have their greatest Prime Minister leading the nation in those critical years of World War II. Apart from a very simple memorial at Creswick, little has been done so far in Victoria to commemorate the late John Curtin. He claimed many times that he had educated himself at the Victorian State Library and that the Yarra Bank had been his "university." Some day, hopefully, something will be done to perpetuate this great Australian’s name in the state of Victoria, as has been done in other states and the Australian Capital Territory.

My efforts to get the State Government to do something worthwhile have been unsuccessful. Likewise, my approach to the "Big Australian" where John Curtin was employed at "Titan", for eight years have been without success. A pity!

It is my hope that something will be done to honour this greatest Australian — lesser people have been honoured with great extravagance; but the man, in the words of Dame Mary Gilmore "He saved Australia" has been forgotten. Perhaps the State Library could be called the Curtin Library". He got his education there — also he was to say that the "Yarra bank was his University". Could it be called Curtin Yarra Park" or some such suitable name?

(For additional details, see Defence Force Journal July/August 1985: "A Soldier’s Tribute to John Curtin" by J P Buckley)

Conclusion

THERE is great wisdom in the maxim that people and nations who ignore the lessons of history, do so at their peril. With the passage of time, it is human nature to relegate to the background, unpleasant lessons of life, or of history. Such, it seems to a large extent, has been the fate of vital lessons on national defence security which were so starkly apparent to Australia in 1942-1943. But for the turn of the tide of war in the Pacific, or Australia's deliverance as Curtin described it, in the perilous year of 1942, any thoughts of celebrating our bicentenary 46 years later, could have been vastly different to what they are today.

In an era in which the words "no threat" have gained relatively overpowering importance, Australia must beware of ever adopting again any modern equivalent of what was termed by some as the "Maginot Line mentality" when, until February 1942, the defence of Australia depended so totally on the "impregnable" Singapore base and the Royal Navy. The tragic capture of the Singapore bastion, and the loss of so many young allied troops, emphasised dramatically the lesson that the cost of complacency (in defence preparedness) is far too high for any nation.
In this wonderful Australia of ours, there is far more to unite its people than to divide them. National spirit and defence are matters in which unity of purpose at all levels, is absolutely vital. It is imperative that every effort be made to achieve national unity on defence policy while there is still time. It will be far too late for any national leader to begin seeking such an essential ingredient for survival after the first shot in anger is ever fired again!

There are many extremely important lessons to be learnt from Australia's experiences of 1942-1943. Some of them are:

- While Defence Treaties and Agreements with allies are very important to Australia's Defence Policy, they are of far less importance than our own determination and resolve to have maximum self reliance in our defence capability. No other nation will come to our assistance unless, at the time, there are overriding advantages to them in doing so. Otherwise, we will be on our own.
- Defence planning for self sufficiency must give high priority to potential war production capacity to meet wartime needs of Australia's Armed Forces.
- Contingency plans for manpower and material controls for war should be prepared and kept up to date in peace-time.
- War Book planning is vital to ensure that all authorities are made aware of the procedures and responsibilities to be exercised under wartime emergency conditions.
- The Chief of the Defence Force and Chiefs of Staff of the Australian Armed Forces must be of Australian nationality!
- One Army only should serve the nation. Never again, in any future war, should there be separate forces such as AIF and AMF!
- Australian commanders must recognise the need to safeguard national sovereignty when their troops serve with allies under more senior allied commanders.

In reflecting on lessons from past years, it is important to accept the fact that international relationships, treaties and alliances can and do change, therefore, defence planning must provide considerable flexibility. For example, who could ever have imagined in 1942-1945 that Japan would be Australia's principal trading partner in our bicentennial year?

With blood, sweat and tears, Australia, led by its outstanding and greatest Prime Minister,
won through the nation’s most perilous year against almost overwhelming odds.

Dame Mary Gilmore, renowned Australian poet, wrote of John Curtin:

What though we send him forth
With pomp and proud device,
Yet for his epitaph, three words suffice—
“He saved Australia!”

In the many fields of battle throughout World War II, particularly in 1942-1943, our sailors, soldiers and airmen served their nation selflessly, with great courage and distinction. Too many paid the supreme sacrifice but they, and those who survived, had every reason to be proud of their magnificent contribution to the success of Australia’s struggle for survival as a nation.

“Now some misguided people criticise or ignore the heroism of those gallant young Australians. Those who did survive, many badly wounded and suffering pain for the rest of their lives, are attacked as war mongers” if they express any opinion, about current affairs in Australia. A few churchmen take every opportunity to have a “shot” at ex-servicemen and women — its trendy to do so!

A famous Australian soldier and High Court Justice, the late Major-General the Right Honorable Sir Victor Windeyer, who served in the 2nd AIF with the 9th Australian Division, once wrote:

“As the years go by, the days of our service . . . remain ever memorable — proud memories of dangers shared and duty done; of good humour and cheerfulness of comrades, alleviating hardships and making sadness bearable; of discipline and dedication, making victory possible.

These are the memories that it is good for us cherish and good for our nation to know that we cherish . . .”

Nor should we ever forget the eulogy of one of the greatest leaders of World War II, Field Marshal Viscount Slim of Yarralumla, who as Commander-in-Chief of the British Fourteenth Army in Burma, had this to say about the battle of Milne Bay:

“It was the Australian soldiers who first broke the spell of invincibility of the Japanese Army.”

May the deeds of all, service and civilian, who were involved in saving Australia in its most perilous year of World War II, and the lessons of that critical period of the nation's history, never be forgotten by Australian Governments and people of future generations!

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Having been privileged to be acquainted with Curtin and Blarney and to work at various times for Lavarack, Mackay, Shedden, Sturdee, Rowell, Berryman, Herring, Bennett and Robertson, I have used that experience as background for this article.

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