

DEFENCE POLICY

AUSTRALIA AND THE NEGLECT OF DEFENCE

ECHOES OF 1942 IN THE FORMULATION OF PRESENT SECURITY POLICY*

DR ALBERT PALAZZO

ABSTRACT

The provision of national security is one of the essential responsibilities of government. As the Japanese advance neared Australia in early 1942 it became clear that Australia's interwar political leadership had failed to provide adequately for the nation's security. This article explains how in 1942 Australia found itself virtually bereft of military power as well as the steps to remedy the crisis. In doing so, the article questions whether the recent budgetary decisions by today's political leadership will also result in an Army with a similar degree of unreadiness, and one that is incapable of meeting the challenges of today national security environment.

* An earlier version of the article was presented at the Military History Heritage – Victoria Conference in Melbourne in April 2012. It will be published later this year by Cambridge University Press in a book titled *Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War*.

INTRODUCTION

When Japanese bombs fell upon Darwin on 19 February 1942 the situation facing Australia appeared grave. Singapore had surrendered, much of the Netherlands East Indies had been overrun, the Japanese had occupied Rabaul and would soon land on New Guinea, and Australia's 8th Division was in captivity. In addition, the US position in the Philippines had been effectively decided, although the defenders of Corregidor would hold out until 6 May. Making Australia's position appear even more desperate was that, as David Horner has noted, 'Most of its trained soldiers were overseas, mainly in the Middle East. The RAAF had few planes in Australia, many of the larger vessels of the small RAN were in distant waters, and the home defence force, the militia, was poorly trained and equipped.'¹ The Japanese advance had been so rapid and unchecked that fear of imminent invasion swept the country and panicky coast dwellers fled inland—even though today we know that the Japanese never had any intention to penetrate so far.²

This article will explore how Australia found itself in this desperate situation. First it will examine the assumptions and decisions that led to Australian territory being virtually bereft of military power as the Japanese threat neared. Second, it will discuss the measures initiated by Australia to remedy this deficiency and the steps taken to convert the country into one of the lines of Allied attack that would lead to Japan's defeat.

In doing so, this article will provide a case study on the Australian government's efficacy in the determination of national security policy that has ongoing relevance for today. Defence is one of the core responsibilities of government. This article will not pretend that it is an easy responsibility; it is certainly not. But to be successful the articulation of an effective national security policy requires leadership, honesty and resoluteness by the nation's political and military leaders, even if unpopularity is the result. The decisions taken by Australia's interwar and Second World War leaders resonate with lessons applicable today. Australia's security environment has entered into a period of flux as strategic change sweeps the Asia-Pacific region. How Australia negotiates the opportunities and hazards of this period of unsettlement will greatly determine its future, perhaps even its survival. In 1942, Australians discovered that their government had not adequately addressed the risks of Japanese militarism. The present requires a better effort.

But to be successful the articulation of an effective national security policy requires leadership, honesty and resoluteness ...

AUSTRALIAN UNPREPAREDNESS FOR NATIONAL DEFENCE

That Australia found itself at war with Japan, and that its territory would soon come under attack from Japanese forces, should not have come as a surprise to the government's political and military leaders. After all, a succession of Australian governments, and their military advisors, had determined that Japan represented the country's primary security threat. This assessment was longstanding and was reached soon after the nation's founding in 1901. The Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 and its emergence as a great power confirmed Australia's perception of a deterioration in its security situation.³ This found expression in numerous national security studies while senior military officers spoke openly and directly of the threat Japan posed to Australian territory and interests. For example, the members of a 1920 conference of the Army's senior officers were quite emphatic that Japan was Australia's only identifiable potential enemy. The conference also reconfirmed that Australia would not be able to resist Japanese aggression on its own but would require the assistance of a friendly great power.⁴

The post-First World War territorial settlement only served to reinforce Australia's fears. Japan retained control of the German island colonies it had seized in the Central Pacific and, because Australia received a mandate over the former German territories in New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago, the two countries were now virtually neighbours, if still separated by sea.⁵ The effect of the confirmation of the new boundary was that from Australia's perspective Japan no longer represented a distant menace but a near one.

Japan's actions in 1941 confirmed that there was nothing wrong with the rationality of Australia's national security policy and the objectivity of those responsible for its determination. Its designers had correctly deduced that Japanese militarism posed a realistic threat to the nation's welfare. What is at issue, however, is the linkage between the government's risk assessment process and the design and implementation of a national security strategy by which to offset the danger Japan posed to the nation's security. In determining national security policy it is vital not only to determine the risks correctly, but also to provide for appropriate mitigations of said risks, if the process is to have legitimacy. It is to the failure of the Australian government to balance policy objectives with an efficacious security strategy that this paper will now turn.

Robert Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister at the commencement of the Second World War, informed the Australian public that the country was at war soon

The effect of the confirmation of the new boundary was that from Australia's perspective Japan no longer represented a distant menace but a near one.

after the expiration of the ultimatum that Britain and France had given Germany following its invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939. Menzies had no hesitation in taking the step and he saw no leeway for Australia to pursue an independent path. Australia was a part of the British Empire and the Empire was at war.

Even though an imperialist, Menzies proved reluctant to dispatch any of Australia's admittedly limited military strength to the other side of the world. Despite the approaching crisis Australia's military capability was nearly nonexistent when the war broke out. The Defence budget had suffered heavily over the preceding two decades and as a result the nation's military forces were unprepared for war. The Army was undermanned, poorly trained and largely equipped with leftovers from the First World War. Due to the restrictions of the *Defence Act* the existing part-time militia could serve only within Australia and as a result the country would have to raise an expeditionary force from scratch for overseas service, as it had done in the previous conflict. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) had suffered even more than the Army during the interwar period and had barely survived as an independent institution. The aircraft it did have were largely obsolete and were no match for modern war planes.⁶ Of the three services Royal Australian Navy (RAN) had fared the best, but the fleet was small, as were the majority of its ships.

Menzies reluctance to send Australian forces to Britain's aid was not because of their modest capabilities, however. The Australian Prime Minister displayed little enthusiasm for taking this step mainly out of a concern for Japan's intentions. Japan had already demonstrated a preference for military expansionism as the peoples of Korea, Manchuria and China well knew, and soon so would the inhabitants of the French colonies of South East Asia. The unknown was at what point Japan would become a sated aggressor, if at all. Before agreeing to dispatch Australia's military strength to Europe and the Middle East, Menzies sought reassurance from imperial authorities that Australia would not be left undefended if Japan decided to push southwards.⁷ Britain needed to offer reassuring security assessments before Menzies agreed to London's demands.

In October the government decided to dispatch part of the Australian fleet to European Waters and to the nation's participation in the Empire Air Training Scheme. But it was not until the end of November that Menzies acquiesced to demands to send ground forces and he did so only after he receiving a promise that in the event of war with Japan the Admiralty would 'make such dispositions as would enable them to offer timely resistance either to a serious attack upon Singapore or to

Menzies sought reassurance from imperial authorities that Australia would not be left undefended if Japan decided to push southwards.

the invasion of Australia and New Zealand.⁸ At the end of November the government agreed to dispatch the newly raised 6th Division to the Middle East. The first contingent sailed in early January 1940.⁹

Australia reached this decision point not specifically as a result of Germany's invasion of Poland. Rather, that act was only the catalyst that revealed two long-standing, but known and understood, potential problems in the government's conception of its national security policy. The government's security policy supported a navalist strategy that in turn rested on great power acquiescence. It was up to the Royal Navy to prevent an enemy from approaching Australia's shores and the policy downplayed the need for land forces. In addition, in doing so, it emphasised the defence of territory at the expense of interests, while still insisting on the security of Australia's interest within the imperial network. This was an incompatibility that the government chose not to reconcile, because to do so would have prevented it from achieving the second objective of its security policy: a desire to transfer the greatest possible share of defence responsibility onto the shoulders—and finances—of a great power.

After the end of the First World War Australia decided to base its security on what was to become known as the Singapore Strategy. In brief, the Singapore Strategy placed the defence of Australia in the hands of the Royal Navy. In case of war in the Pacific the Imperial Fleet would sail to the east where, from its base in Singapore, it would undertake operations to prevent a hostile country from attacking or invading Australia and New Zealand.¹⁰

In accepting the Singapore Strategy as the basis of its security policy the Australian government continued its reliance on a great power as the guarantor of national security. Yet from the start the Singapore Strategy had a flaw; there was nothing to prohibit an aggressor from deciding to attack when the Imperial Fleet was distracted by other and more pressing demands. The Army's leaders made this point frequently to their civilian masters. For example, at a 1923 meeting of the Council of Defence, General CBB White questioned the ability of the Royal Navy to come to Australia's aid.¹¹ They insisted that it was unimaginable that the British government and people would consent to the dispatch of a major part of the fleet to the other side of the world. This was because 'command in the Atlantic is of vital importance to the British people, command in the Far East is not'.¹²

However, the Singapore Strategy came with an implied obligation, one that reinforced the existing obligations of kith and kin. If Britain came under threat Australia would have no choice but to come to its aid. This was because if the mother-country fell,

... 'command in the Atlantic is of vital importance to the British people, command in the Far East is not'.

Australia's security policy would unravel. Britain's survival was essential for Australia's security, although the inverse, it should be recognised, was not necessarily true.

Yet, instead of seeing the Singapore Strategy as requiring Australia to invest in defence capability, it was viewed by the Australian government as an endorsement of the massive cutbacks that the government imposed after the signing of the Washington Naval Treaties in 1922. The onset of the Great Depression worsened the military service's position even further. Such savings resulted in a considerable reduction in the country's military establishment to the extent that the Army, for example, was essentially a 'mothballed' force that would require considerable reanimation in order to restore any degree of capability. Unfortunately, by the onset of the Second World War little had been done to restore the force's strength.¹³

This article is not minimising the problems the Great Depression created for the Australian government. These were indeed challenging times. But what must be remembered is that even in hard times governments do not reduce the spending of public monies to zero. Rather, the critical question facing governments in times of austerity is how monies are allocated. During the interwar period the Australian government's adherence to the Singapore Strategy gave it a rationale for a reduction of the defence estimate, far below levels that its military advisors thought wise. In doing so, the government reduced its own defence force's capability to impotence while devolving responsibility of the nation's defence to Britain. At the time, this may have appeared to be an efficient allocation of resources, but it was a decision that led to the implementation of a strategy which was incapable of meeting defence policy.

Perversely, once the war began, the government still continued to go slow on defence rearmament, and it was not until June 1941 that Menzies called for an 'unlimited war effort'.¹⁴ This contrasted with the casualness of the 'business as usual' mantra that had been his government's preferred catch-phrase up to that point.¹⁵ Moreover, as the Army raised the 2nd AIF for overseas service the government continued to neglect the militia home defence role. In fact, the militia's condition worsened as its best soldiers transferred to the AIF. In a denial of the true situation, financial considerations, more suited for peacetime conditions, still dominated the government's decision making. The Treasury's attitude was that 'the war should not be an excuse for undue extravagance on the part of the services'.¹⁶ Instead of intensive training, militia soldiers continued to report to all-too-brief camps at which they experienced limited training with obsolete weapons. As Jeff Grey has observed, the 'home army was in a dreadful shape'.¹⁷

The Treasury's attitude was that 'the war should not be an excuse for undue extravagance on the part of the services'.

A few days after Japan's entry into the war the Chiefs of Staff presented the government with the advice that it was 'necessary to establish and train now the force that would be required to prevent and to meet an invasion'. David Horner has observed that 'Clearly this would have been an admirable aim a year earlier.'¹⁸

In late January 1942 the Chiefs of Staff presented to the government a major appraisal of the force's readiness. The report was damning and highlighted the defence force's inability to defend the country. One of the report's conclusions was that the Army could make improvements at one point only by weakening a different point.¹⁹ The Air Force was in a particularly dire state and it was no great exaggeration when a RAAF senior officer observed in February 1942 that the Air Force had 'hardly a feather to fly with.'²⁰

Some of these ongoing liabilities can be explained by competing demands across the empire for scarce resources, such as modern guns, tanks and planes. After all, Australia had outstanding orders from overseas suppliers for all manners of equipment. But such an explanation is inadequate and, possibly, too kind. In preparing for war time is unforgiving, and when allowed to slip away it cannot be regained. The government had neglected defence requirements throughout the interwar years and commenced rearmament far too late. Once the war began the failure to bring the militia on to a war footing prior to the Japanese onslaught signalled the government's continued faith in the imperial fleet for the nation's defence, no matter the worsening situation in the Far East. This guaranteed that the militia would remain incapable when the threat did come.

In addition, this policy of national defence avoidance contains more than a suggestion that the Australian government believed military strength could be extemporised at will. Perhaps this reflects the nation's ongoing faith in the citizen soldier and the myth of the natural warrior ability of the Australian male.²¹ Yet what this belief fails to recognise is that armies, like navies and air forces, require long lead times if they are to attain effectiveness and sustained maintenance if they are to retain skills. As is true for the sea and air domains, land power is more than the sum of the abilities of individual soldiers. Rather it is their deep integration into a system of combined arms that creates combat capability. Just as the addition of a ship to a fleet needs considerable lead time to allow for design, construction, trial and adoption, the same is true for land forces. If Australia wanted effective divisions in 1941 it needed to begin their creation in 1939, if not sooner.

Perhaps this reflects the nation's ongoing faith in the citizen soldier and the myth of the natural warrior ability of the Australian male.

RECALIBRATING NATIONAL DEFENCE

Japan's entry into the Second World War completely changed Australia's strategic position. Whereas for the first two years the war seemed a distant disturbance, it was now in Australia's backyard. Civil defence suddenly took on a new urgency and coastal dwellers learned to live with a blackout, or considered fleeing inland. For the government the need to provide for the defence of the continent became a task that it could no longer ignore. Australia had two options: provide for its own defence by increasing its military forces and capabilities, and seek the additional assistance of a great power protector. The government would do both.

On 27 December 1941 John Curtin, only two months into the job as Prime Minister, issued a statement that formalised a shift in Australia's security focus from the United Kingdom to the United States. Curtin said:

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.²²

In fact, Curtin was being a little disingenuous as the transfer in security affiliation had been underway for some months.

In early October 1941—two months before the start of the Pacific War—Australia received an approach from the United States (via the United Kingdom) seeking access to Australian bases by elements of the United States Army Air Forces.²³ The United States made similar approaches to the United Kingdom regarding access to Singapore and to the Dutch government in exile for access to military facilities in the Netherlands East Indies. In making these approaches the United States was exploring ways to strengthen the air defence of the Philippines and adjacent territories. By opening its airfields Australia would enable the United States to transfer air units between Hawaii and Manilla without them having to traverse Japan's Central Pacific territories. The Australian government replied to the United States with an emphatic yes, stating that 'the Commonwealth Government welcome[s] the United States proposals ... and will do everything necessary to arrange for the facilities required in Australia and its territories ...'²⁴

... the United States was exploring ways to strengthen the air defence of the Philippines and adjacent territories.

In November 1941 Major General Lewis H Brereton, Commander of the Philippine based US Far East Air Force, made a secret visit to Australia.²⁵ More detailed and expansive requests for basing rights from the United States soon followed. Australia agreed to give the United States access to airfields at Rabaul,

Port Moresby, Townsville, Darwin, Rockhampton, Brisbane and a variety of smaller fields in Queensland and the Northern Territory.²⁶ The United States also agreed to provide Australia with the guns and equipment it needed to improve the defences of Rabaul. The US Navy sought these improvements as it hoped to use the harbour as a base for operations against Japanese forces in the Caroline Islands. The United States agreed to provide Australia with six 7-inch coast guns, eight 3-inch anti-aircraft guns, as well as radar sets, search lights, sonar buoys, anti-submarine nets and other equipment. Australia's part of the arrangement was to provide the personnel required to staff these enhancements, approximately 1600 additional personnel.²⁷ Again Curtin readily agreed to these requests.²⁸

At a conference in Melbourne on 22 November 1941 the United States broadened its request from just transfer rights to basing rights. This request was made in two parts: the basing of squadrons for the purpose of training, and the basing of squadrons for the purpose of conducting offensive operations against the Japanese. Ultimately, Brereton hoped to operate up to 50 per cent of the Far East Air Force's strength from Australian bases. Locations identified were: Townsville, Charter Towers, Cloncurry, Batchelor, Port Moresby, Rabaul, Broome and Darwin. In addition, Australia gave the United States permission to set up maintenance facilities at Alice Springs, Daly Waters, Longreach and Charleville and an engine repair workshop in Townsville. In total, the plan called for the basing of up to seven squadrons plus associated command, administrative and support elements. In manpower terms this represented the basing of over 8000 US military personnel in Australia, at a time when Australia was not at war with Japan.²⁹

Of course, events in the Far East moved far too quickly for the implementation of most of these plans, and few eventuated, at least in the form agreed upon. However, by mid November at least thirty-five US B-17s had traversed Australia en route to the Philippines.³⁰

Once the war in the Pacific began the new relationship between Australia and the United States intensified as the two countries became formal allies. The catalyst for increased cooperation was the arrival of General Douglas MacArthur in Australia on 17 March 1942.³¹ The US General saw Australia as a base from which to organise a counterstroke against the Japanese, striking initially towards the Philippines and then on to Formosa and the enemy's homeland. MacArthur's desire to go on the offensive as soon as possible—a desire that was matched by Australia's land commanders—worked well with Curtin's hope to secure Australia with the help of the United States.

... this represented the basing of over 8000 US military personnel in Australia, at a time when Australia was not at war with Japan.

In a mutually beneficial arrangement MacArthur and Curtin worked together to draw US resources to the South-West Pacific, a tactic in which they were largely successful.³² By the end of 1942 there were over 160,000 US personnel in Australia and New Guinea and MacArthur's command would eventually total in excess of 750,000.³³ As a result Australia would become a major base of operations for an allied offensive against Japan.

However, in turning to MacArthur, Curtin did sacrifice some degree of the nation's sovereignty. MacArthur's influence over Australian military affairs became immense as he became Curtin's primary military advisory, not General Thomas Blamey, Australia's senior-most officer. Curtin would also place Australian forces under MacArthur's command, a privilege the US General retained until the war's conclusion.³⁴

GALVANISING AUSTRALIAN STRENGTH

While seeking US assistance was vital in safeguarding the nation, the Australian government also undertook to increase the country's military and infrastructure capabilities. The AIF would be brought back from the Middle East while the militia was brought up to a war footing. In addition, across the north of Australia, a massive military construction boon commenced as the nation transformed itself into a base for war.

While it served Australia's interests, the return of the AIF from the Middle East to Australia was not an Australian initiative. Instead, the decision's origins lay in London. The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, recognised that reinforcements were urgently required in the Far East if the Allies were to contain the Japanese advance. Sending the 6th and 7th Australian Divisions back to the Pacific Theatre, rather than British troops, was a logical decision. Where Australian influence was decisive, however, was in the AIF's ultimate destination. Churchill viewed military requirements from the centre of an empire and perceived the threat to Burma as more immediate than that which Australia faced. Consequently, he wanted the Australian troops to reinforce that theatre. Curtin, however, insisted that the Australians return home, which they did, although only after the two political leaders had exchanged strong words.³⁵ Eventually, the 9th Australian Division also returned to Australia, and the three divisions went on to play a critical role in turning the tide in New Guinea.

The AIF, however, was only one of Australia's land forces. The other was the long neglected militia—or Citizen Military Force as it would become known. As noted

... across the north of Australia, a massive military construction boon commenced as the nation transformed itself into a base for war.

above, the militia had been ignored in favour of the AIF since the war's outbreak in 1939. By early 1942 it was more than 30,000 soldiers under strength—only a third of the force was on full-time duty at any one time—and still suffered from serious deficiencies in weapons and equipment.³⁶ The remainder rotated through three-month camps that provided little continuity and at best fragmented training.³⁷ In many ways the militia had become a basic training organisation for the AIF while it remained an inefficient force of part-time green soldiers.³⁸

Making the situation worse was that as the Japanese attack neared, the militia remained deficient in most categories of weapons and equipment. An inventory conducted in November 1941 showed that some critical categories, such as anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, were only at 50 per cent of requirements, while others, such as tanks, were virtually non-existent. Mechanical transport was also well below requirements with the force meeting less than half of its needs for trucks. It was only in basic weapons, such as rifles, that supply came closest to meeting demand, although shortages still remained.³⁹

Bringing the militia up to strength was a chaotic activity that was carried out in necessary haste. The CMF underwent a series of reorganisations as units were swapped between formations in order to provide some force that was combat ready, while others were broken up and its members transferred in order to bring surviving units up to strength. The militia also had to be reorganised at the unit establishment level as its structure remained on the prewar pattern, whereas the AIF had been reorganised to the British standard when it was in the Middle East. Thus the composition of AIF and militia battalions was different, a situation that should have been addressed much earlier. The result was that by 1943 the militia bore little resemblance to its prewar design.⁴⁰

Of course, those in the militia continued to serve under the restriction of the *Defence Act*, which prevented their dispatch outside of Australia or its territory. Because of this Australia maintained what was in effect two armies for service in a single theatre. It was not until February 1943 that the government modified the *Defence Act* to extend the service obligation to anywhere in the South-West Pacific Area. Yet despite this extension, few militiamen were to serve beyond Australian territory.

Despite these impediments remarkable progress was made. In a mid-year report to the Advisory War Council it was admitted that the Army had been transformed from an ill-armed and ill-trained force to a sound and efficient one. One suspects, however, that this was an overly optimistic assessment, as the report goes on to note

Making the situation worse was that as the Japanese attack neared, the militia remained deficient in most categories of weapons and equipment.

that a further three months were required before the Army would be ready to undertake any task it might be called upon to perform. The RAAF lagged somewhat behind the Army due to difficulties in acquiring modern aircraft, as well as the continuing need to provide personnel to the Empire Air Training Scheme for service in the European Theatre. As a result the report did not expect the Air Force to be completely ready before mid-1943. The Navy also suffered from handicaps, primarily related to its lack of integral air power; the report's writers believed that without carriers the Australian fleet would never reach its full potential.⁴¹

As the militia developed the Australian government also focused its efforts on improving other components of national power. The government continued to expand the nation's coastal defence and anti-aircraft system, the latter handicapped by a shortage of 3.7-inch anti-aircraft

guns. Throughout the interwar period coastal defence improvements had advanced at a torpid pace, largely due to underfunding. The commencement of the war had seen a big push to finish the planned defences. Now, to further protect the coast, the United States provided Australia with a number of 155mm gun batteries. As the war was to be fought in the islands to the north the Australian Army raised an entirely new arm—water transport. Formed in September 1942 this arm would eventually include 1900 watercraft ranging from workboats to ocean going ships.

In 1942 the government further expanded its home defence force, the Voluntary Defence Corps. Its origin was as a privately formed body of enthusiastic Australians and it was formed under the sponsorship of the Returned Sailors', Soldiers' and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia. In May 1941 the VDC became a part of the army and the following year a corps of the CMF.⁴²

During 1942 the VDC grew rapidly and quickly exceeded its initial establishment of 50,000. By the end of the year it had doubled in size and the government sought a further expansion, despite Blamey's opinion that there was little military need. Its contribution to the nation's defence was mixed and the VDC's raising was not without cost. The force competed with the militia for scarce weapons, uniforms and other equipment, and the government struggled to prioritise requirements between the two services. Moreover, the need for the VDC passed quickly. After all by mid-1942 the threat of invasion had past but the home guard continued to grow. It was not until late 1943 that the government proved able to contract the scale of the organisation.

As the war progressed the government also made greater use of women in the military. Women began to replace male personnel in a large range of military tasks, including coastal and aerial defence positions, radar and radio operators, cipher and

... the Army had been transformed from an ill-armed and ill-trained force to a sound and efficient one.

signal positions, as well as administrative and clerical roles. In 1942 the government called for a virtual doubling in the number of women serving in such tasks.

Simultaneously with improvements in its military capabilities Australia also had to address an inadequate infrastructure base, particularly in the country's north. Logistics are correctly known as the 'lifeblood of war', and without adequate support it is difficult, if not impossible, to project and sustain military power.⁴³ Viewed from the perspective of early 1942 the ability of the Australian countryside to serve as a base for war would not have looked promising to those tasked with taking the war to the Japanese.

When US military staff toured the north of Australia in late 1941 they were not impressed by what they found. After Brereton visited Batchelor, near Darwin, he described the airfield's condition as rudimentary—three American B17s had already been wrecked attempting to land there.⁴⁴

In early 1942 another US general commented that 'Australia is as undeveloped as the central United States was before the Civil War, or even more so. Everything that is developed is on a miniature scale.'⁴⁵ This condition would not last long, however.

The need to transform Queensland into a base for war touched off a massive construction boom across the state, as well as the Northern Territory. Part of the work was done by Australian and US military engineers but the state construction authorities—such as the Queensland Main Roads Commission—were also critical. The Australian government also formed a national body called the Allied Work Council, which raised its own labour force known as the Civil Constructional Corps (CCC). At its peak the CCC had an enrolment of more than 53,000 men and by the end of 1942 had completed over 750 jobs with another 1200 underway.⁴⁶

The improvements these agencies implemented were profound. For example, by the war's end Queensland hosted over 200 airfields, with associated support facilities, and the Australian Army had built its critical Jungle Training Establishment in the Atherton Tablelands. The Allied Work Council laid 7500 kilometres of new roads while its workers improved many existing roads to a military traffic standard. New ports also appeared; the Brisbane River would host a US submarine base while Cairns became a major maritime trans-shipment hub. Without such infrastructure improvements the South-West Pacific Theatre would never have been able to serve as a line of counterattack against the Japanese.

The force competed with the militia for scarce weapons, uniforms and other equipment, and the government struggled to prioritise requirements between the two services.

CONCLUSION

Government defence thinkers had correctly assessed the risk Japan posed to the country. Yet, despite identifying the correct policy objective, a series of interwar governments failed to provide adequate means with which the nation's military forces might counter this threat. These governments took comfort in the false promise of the Singapore Strategy and they saw it as an opportunity to cut defence capabilities and expenses in a period of increasing threat. When war came, the true nature of this 'peace dividend' was revealed to be a 'peace liability' and the nation's military forces had to struggle to regain capability that had been allowed to wane.

In the end Australia was never at a risk of invasion and the continent remained a minor theatre in the enemy's plans. This fact, however, should not excuse those who had reduced the nation's military forces to impotence. A national security policy that is based upon the kindness or limited ambition of your opponent is a hollow one.

Australia would muddle through in the end. It would reinvigorate its military strength and, in conjunction with the United States, turn back the Japanese. This reanimation of strength was left critically late, however, as political leaders failed to consider the lengthy time required to regain capabilities that are so quickly lost. By the time the nation began to address the danger, the Japanese threat was real and immediate; a situation that could have been avoided—or at least made less grave—had the government pursued a more rational and honest defence policy.

As the course of security decision-making in the years leading up to 1942 demonstrates, it is easy to be self-deluding about defence requirements. The governments of the interwar period, and even after the outbreak of the Second World War, avoided the hard decisions, preferring instead to assume that all would be well, or at the very least a saviour would arrive in the nick-of-time. Their failure to address national defence with the seriousness it deserved placed the nation in a dangerous position from which there was no easy or quick escape. In effect, this was a dereliction of duty because the development of an effective national defence policy and the provision of the means to enact this policy is a basic obligation of all governments.

In the national security world it is incumbent upon decision makers that they both identify a correct defence policy and provide the means for its animation. The two steps are equally essential. The difficulty of this task should not be minimised; it requires insight, intellect and courage and can only be undertaken successfully if

The need to transform Queensland into a base for war touched off a massive construction boom across the state ...

it is taken seriously. As the nation's leaders of 1942 discovered, the consequences of the failure to do so can be severe, even unimaginable. Let us hope that Australia's leaders of today are aware of this.

ENDNOTES

- 1 D Horner, 'Curtin and MacArthur at War: How Australia lost control of the war effort to an American general', *Wartime*, No. 2, April 1998, p. 34.
- 2 M McKernan, *All In! Australia during the Second World War*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1983, pp. 103–04. For a refutation of the invasion threat, see P Stanley, *Invading Australia: Japan and the Battle for Australia, 1942*, Viking, Camberwell, 2008.
- 3 A Palazzo, *The Australian Army: A History of its Organisation, 1901–2001*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2002, pp. 39–40.
- 4 See 'Report on the Military Defence of Australia by a Conference of Senior Officers of the Australian Military Forces,' Vol. 1 & 2, 1920, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, AWM1, item 20/7.
- 5 J McCarthy, *Australia and Imperial Defence 1918–39: A Study in Air and Sea Power*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1976, pp. 7–8.
- 6 G Jones, *From Private to Air Marshal: The Autobiography of Air Marshal Sir George Jones*, Greenhouse Publications, Richmond, Victoria, 1988, p. 78.
- 7 D Horner, *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy, 1939–1945*, George Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1982, p. 23.
- 8 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 9 J Robertson, 'The Distant War: Australia and Imperial Defence, 1919–1941' in M McKernan and M Browne, *Australia in Two Centuries of War & Peace*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1988, p. 227.
- 10 The Singapore Strategy is discussed in I Hamill, *The Strategic Illusion: The Singapore Strategy and the Defence of Australia and New Zealand, 1919–1942*, Singapore University Press, 1981; and McCarthy, *Australia and Imperial Defence*. See also, A Meaher IV, *The Road to Singapore: The Myth of the Great Betrayal*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2010.
- 11 'Minutes of the Council of Defence,' 30 August 1923, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A9787, item 4.
- 12 'Appreciation of Australia's Position in Case of War in the Pacific,' 23 March 1932, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, AWM54, item 910/2/4, pp. 1–2.
- 13 Palazzo, *The Australian Army: A History of its Organisation*, pp. 106–08.
- 14 P Hasluck, *The Government and the People, 1939–1941*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1956, p. 363.
- 15 Quoted in McKernan, *All In!*, p. 25.
- 16 G Long, *To Benghazi*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1965, p. 41.

- 17 J Grey, *The Australian Centenary History of Defence, The Australian Army*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2001, p. 121.
- 18 D Horner, 'Australia under threat of invasion' in M McKernan and M Browne, *Australia in Two Centuries of War & Peace*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1988, p. 248.
- 19 P Hasluck, *The Government and the People, 1942–1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1970, p. 38.
- 20 Jones, *From Private to Air Marshal*, p. 79.
- 21 The fallacy of this belief is addressed in Craig Stockings, 'There is an Idea that the Australian Soldier is a Born Soldier ...' in C Stockings (ed), *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History*, New South, 2010, pp. 93–115.
- 22 J Curtin, 'The Task Ahead,' *The Herald (Melbourne)*, 27 December 1941.
- 23 'Cablegram – Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to Prime Minister's Department,' 5 October 1941, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A5954, item 555/7.
- 24 'Cablegram – Prime Minister Department to Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs,' 11 October 1941, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A5954, item 555/7.
- 25 'General Brereton's Visit,' 13 November 1941, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, SP106/4, item SPCI/341.
- 26 'Air Defence in the Far East – United States Proposals,' 13 October 1941, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A2671, item 334/1941. See also L Brereton, *The Brereton Diaries: The War in the Air in the Pacific, Middle East and Europe, 3 October 1941 – 8 May 1945*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1976, pp. 25–30; and D Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force, 1939–1942*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962, pp. 184–86.
- 27 Minutes by Defence Committee held on Tuesday 7 October 1941, no. 142/1941, Defence of Rabaul, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A2670, item 333/1941; and 'War Cabinet Minute, 15 October 1941, Agendum no. 333/1941, Defence of Rabaul,' National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A2670, item 333/1941.
- 28 'War Cabinet Agendum, 344/1941, Air Defence in Far East – United States Proposals,' 13 October 1941, A2671, item 344/1941.
- 29 'Notes on Conference at Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, 21 to 23 November, to discuss United States Projects,' 23 November 1941, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A2671, item 334/1941.
- 30 Brereton, *The Brereton Diaries*, p. 25.
- 31 D Horner, 'Defending Australia in 1942,' *War & Society*, Vol. 11, No. 1, May 1993, p. 6.
- 32 'Advisory War Council Minute,' 26 March 1942, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A2684, item 967; and Horner, 'Australia under threat of invasion,' pp. 259–60.
- 33 Hasluck, *The Government and the People, 1942–1945*, pp. 224–25.
- 34 Horner, 'Australia under threat of invasion,' pp. 261–63.
- 35 'Notes for the Prime Minister's Statement on War Situation,' 20 February 1942, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, AWM123, item 157.

- 36 'Strength and Present Dispositions of the Forces to Meet Scales of Attack', National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A2671/1, item 418/1941; and J McCarthy, 'The Imperial Commitment, 1939–41', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 23, No. 2, August 1977, p. 181.
- 37 F Budden, *That Mob: The Story of the 55/53rd Australian Infantry Battalion, AIF*, Budden, Ashfield, 1973, pp. 1–2.
- 38 R Mathews, *Militia Battalion at War: The History of the 58/19th Australian Infantry Battalion in the Second World War*, 58/59th Battalion Association, Sydney, 1961, p. 1.
- 39 'Statement showing requirements of initial (fighting), training and 6 month reserve of certain items of equipment together with stocks available and percentage of those stocks in relation to the initial (fighting) requirements for AMF (order of battle) mobilisation, AIF in Australia and Armoured Division (AIF)', 30 November 1941, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A2671/1, item 418/1841.
- 40 Palazzo, *The Australian Army: A History of its Organisation*, pp. 149–51.
- 41 'Advisory War Council Minute', 17 June 1942, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A2684, item 967.
- 42 Palazzo, *The Australian Army: A History of its Organisation*, pp. 186–88.
- 43 A reference to J Thompson, *Lifeblood of War; Logistics in Armed Conflict*, Brassey's, London, 1991.
- 44 Brereton, *The Brereton Diaries*, p. 25.
- 45 Quoted in J Grey, *The Australian Centenary History of Defence, Volume 1: The Australian Army*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, p. 141.
- 46 See *The History of the Queensland Main Roads Commission During World War II, 1939–1945*, Government Printer, Brisbane, 1949; and 'Allied Work Council, Report June 1943', Australia War Memorial, Canberra, AWM70, item 233.

THE AUTHOR

Dr Albert Palazzo is a Senior Research Fellow with the Directorate of Army Research and Analysis in Canberra. He has published widely on the Australian Army and contemporary military issues. His current research is on the need for the Army to debate the future character of war.
