

**THE FOUNDATIONS OF VICTORY:
THE PACIFIC WAR
1943-1944**

**THE PACIFIC WAR, 1943,
AND AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL MEMORY
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The Pacific War of 1943-44, and particularly the campaigns in New Guinea, have been marginalised in the Australian national memory of war.¹ Teaching the history of the Second World War to undergraduate students over the past decade, I have been struck by the almost complete ignorance of these campaigns. When asked to recall battles in which the Australian defence forces fought during the twentieth century, students inevitably answer, 'Gallipoli', a battle which has acquired a hegemonic place in the national memory of war. If pressed a little further, they might remember Villers-Bretonneux or Pozières, and—when moving on to the Second World War—Kokoda, Changi, the Burma-Thailand railway, and possibly even El Alamein. But the names Huon Peninsula, Finschhafen, Sio, Sattelberg, Madang, Ramu Valley, Markham and Ramu rivers, Wewak and the Bismarck Sea, have no resonance. Buna and Gona, one student surmised, might be in Vietnam.

As Peter Stanley observed in 1993, the New Guinea campaigns of 1943-44 are also something of 'a green hole' in Australian military historiography.² In the decade since Stanley coined that memorable phrase, Lieutenant General John Coates has published his passionate defence of the 9th Australian Division's campaigns on the Huon peninsula,³ and his superb *Atlas of Australia's Wars* in *The Australian Centenary History of Defence* series.⁴ The latter devotes considerable space to the land, naval and air actions in the South West Pacific Area in 1943 and 1944. But with the exception of studies of the Battle of the Bismarck Sea by Lex McCauley⁵ and Alan Stephens,⁶ not a great deal more has been done to fill the 'green hole' of Australian military historiography.

Nor have the campaigns of 1943-44 figured prominently in the growing calendar of public ritual and war commemoration in Australia. The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed an extraordinary growth in the memory of war, not only in Australia but globally.⁷ The reasons for this are complex, and the subject of considerable debate internationally. In Europe, where the Holocaust was initially at the heart of the concern with memory, the end of the Cold War is thought to have 'unfrozen' memories of the past that had formerly been constrained by ideology and the rigid dichotomies of East-West enmity. Moreover, new agendas of national building in the former Soviet empire have led to the 'return' of the past: that is, the mobilisation of collective memories in order to create founding myths, assert new minority identities and provide social cohesion during the painful dislocations accompanying the conversion from centrally planned to market economies. The 'memory boom' has also been encouraged by a *fin de siècle* mood: a need, as not only the twentieth century but also the millennium closed, to make sense of what the British historian Eric Hobsbawm has called the 'age of catastrophe'.⁸ This period coincided with the ageing of the victims of the Holocaust and the veterans of the two world wars. Both generated a sense of urgency and anxiety about the loss of memory based on personal recollection—an urgency most notable, in Australia's case, in the news media's semi-hysterical countdown to the death of the last Anzac in 2002.

For Australia also the mood of national reflection was accentuated by the bicentenary of white settlement in 1988, and the centenary of federation in 2001, both of these being occasions for celebratory nationalism and identity building. Australian governments (both Labor and non-Labor), and official agencies such as the Australian War Memorial and the Department of Veterans' Affairs created a new ritual of war commemoration. This included a plethora of anniversary celebrations, of which the 'Australia Remembers' campaign of 1995 was the most elaborate; regular pilgrimages of veterans and politicians to battlefields and former prisoner-of-war camps; and the creation of new museums and memorials at, for example, the Western Front, Kokoda, Hell Fire Pass, Sandakan, Anzac Parade, Canberra, and late in 2003, Hyde

Park, London. In essence, as Jan-Werner Müller has said, "communicative memory", that is, living oral memory based on personal recollection, is passing into "cultural memory"—with "cultural memory" now commonly understood as the cultural representations which lack the immediacy of first-hand recollection'.⁹

However, very little of this commemorative activity has been focussed on northern New Guinea, with the exception of Buna and Gona which have been incorporated into the commemoration of Kokoda. Even Ross Bastiaan, that remarkable 'carrier of memory'¹⁰ who has created and placed some 137 bronze plaques at sites of significance to Australia's war history across the world, has placed only two plaques in northern New Guinea. Moreover, even the plaques at Wewak are advertised on the relevant web site as being in memory, not of the 1943-44 campaigns but rather the final campaign of 1945, and of Ted Kenna VC. In contrast, there are 16 Bastiaan plaques worldwide that commemorate the Gallipoli campaign; 15 large and small plaques on Kokoda (including one at each of Buna, Sanananda and Gona); and seven on the Burma-Thailand railway.¹¹

What explains this neglect of the campaigns of the South West Pacific campaigns of 1943 and 1944? Perhaps it relates to a sense of place. No one who visits Gallipoli fails to comment on its topography and the extraordinary physical power that the landscape exerts on the visitor or pilgrim. Corregidor, the island fortress at the mouth of Manila Bay and the scene of great suffering of US and Japanese troops during the Pacific War, has a similar, palpable sense of the presence of the dead. Is one of the reasons that naval and air actions, such as the Battle of the Bismarck Sea on 2-4 March 1943, lack a hold on the public imagination because they lack this sense of place? The sinking of a ship leaves only an empty expanse of ocean that could be anywhere in the world. There are no ruins, no lasting scars of battle on the landscape, as on the Western Front in France. Similarly, air offensives, such as the strategic bombing offensive against Germany, another relatively forgotten campaign in Australian national memory, left only visual images of black skies and flashes of light—except, of course, for scenes of devastation in the cities of Germany which are too morally complicated to be the stuff of celebratory mythology.

Yet this is not an adequate explanation for the 'invisibility' of 1943-44. The terrain in which the campaigns of late 1943 were fought had a dramatic topography. It demanded physical achievements on the part of soldiers that easily matched those of the Kokoda Track. To quote a history of the 2/2nd Australian Pioneer Battalion that operated in the area of Shaggy Ridge:

The area was one of swift-flowing mountain streams, dense, dank rain forest and almost vertical mountain sides. Little was known of this crazily moulded terrain where foothills rise sheer from river beds to 5,000 feet—rugged mountains almost continually capped with rain clouds. Isolated ridges thousands of feet high, unnamed since the beginning of time.¹²

The going was painfully slow, as the leading company had to feel its way forward up the narrow ridge ... In one spot that was almost impossible to traverse—a steep-sided cliff— they rigged lawyer vines between trees to act as a handrail and allow us to pull ourselves up.¹³

There is no inherent reason why the razor-back features of Shaggy Ridge and Mount Prothero should be less memorable than the now mythologised landscape of the Sphinx, Walker's Ridge, the Nek, Chunuk Bair at Gallipoli—except perhaps, that the topography of New Guinea is culturally and physically remote. Was it too alien to engage a western imagination? A veteran of the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion said recently that what he remembered most about the New Guinea campaigns was 'the isolation', the sense that he was fighting in a profoundly primitive country, disconnected from the world outside.¹⁴

Perhaps we need also to look to the nature of the fighting in 1943-44. Although the amphibious operations along the coast on north New Guinea were, as Edward J Drea has said, a 'series of breathtaking landings', in a tradition of 'classic manoeuvre',¹⁵ much of the campaign consisted of grinding attrition. It constituted a series of relatively low-level actions that require some specialist military knowledge to appreciate. For the lay person there is none of the awful simplicity of, say, the charge at the Nek on 7 August 1915, or the brutal simplicity of 'going over the top' on the Somme.

Then there is the consideration that the New Guinea campaigns of 1943-44 may have suffered, in retrospect particularly, from the perception that they were not central to the grand strategy of defeating Japan. General Douglas MacArthur's progressive marginalisation of Australian forces from the US triumphalist attack against the Philippines is now well known.¹⁶ Indeed, even in 1945 this marginalisation was the subject for considerable public debate within Australia itself.¹⁷ Perhaps for this reason the campaigns in New Guinea, even though they were the necessary precondition for MacArthur's later successes, have slipped from the national memory. The Anzac legend has always been a means of enhancing Australian nationalism—and nationalism of a particularly chauvinistic and celebratory kind. It is noteworthy that the two battles that are at the core of Anzac mythology, Gallipoli and Singapore, are those which allow Australians to shift blame for military failure to Britain, the imperial power whose dominance had to be challenged, like the authority of a parent, if Australia were to engage in nation building. More particularly, both Gallipoli and Singapore can be attributed to Winston Churchill, whose attempts to divert Australian troops to Burma in the crisis of February 1942 make him a natural villain in the Australian nationalist narrative. Kokoda, meanwhile, also has the capacity to be constructed as a defining moment of Australian nationalism when the nation was 'saved' from invasion.

The New Guinea campaigns of 1943-44, in contrast, are tinged with the realisation that at this stage of the Pacific War Prime Minister John Curtin was surrendering a 'measure of sovereignty' to the United States.¹⁸ The centrality of the US alliance to Australian defence policy since 1951 presumably explains why official carriers of memory have been loath to articulate this view. Memory, it is widely recognised in the now massive scholarship on this subject, is often a means of legitimising present politics; it 'shapes the frameworks for foreign and domestic politics'.¹⁹ The predominantly conservative governments of the postwar era have therefore not railed against MacArthur's arrogance, as Prime Minister Paul Keating did against Britain, when in 1992 he marked the 50th anniversary of the fall of Singapore with accusations of British betrayal.²⁰ Yet, if Australian criticism of the US handling of the wartime alliance has been muted, the sense of discomfort at the essentially anticlimactic nature of Australia's role in the defeat of Japan remains.

Then there is the question of the human cost of operations in New Guinea. Because of the very success of the Battle of the Bismarck Sea and the Allied operations on the Huon Peninsula, the number of Australian casualties was low. John Coates has calculated that in the Lae offensive of September 1943 and the earlier fighting around Wau and Salamaua, Australia lost 1,231 killed and 2,867 wounded—as opposed to Japanese losses of around 35,000.²¹ One is reminded of a competition in the 1930s in Fleet Street, then the heart of British newspaper publishing, to find the most boring headline. The winner was 'Small earthquake in Chile. Not many killed' Irreverent though it may seem to say it, given the personal tragedy that every individual loss of life involves, in the memory of war, disaster and catastrophe seem to have a greater hold on the popular imagination than success.

The small loss of Australian life also means that there have been fewer carriers of the memory of the war in New Guinea. No memory of the past survives, at anything other than the level of the individual person, without some agency, some act of will. Gallipoli was immortalised by the writings of CEW Bean, both as war correspondent and official historian.²² The Burma-Thailand railway entered Australian national memory so effectively because journalists and writers like Rohan Rivett and Russell Braddon were determined that it should not be forgotten. Their books were enduring best sellers, as were those of the nurses interned in Sumatra.²³ And of course the memory of the railway was immortalised globally by the book and film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.²⁴ The campaigns of 1943-44 have had no such cultural carriers of memory.

For all these reasons, the conference at which the papers in this volume were presented was of great significance. It included representatives of government, the defence forces, veterans and academics. With so many different carriers of memory gathered together with the one purpose, the campaigns of 1943-44 might at last move a little further to forefront of Australian national memory.

Endnotes

1. I am using 'national memory' in the sense of 'collective memory, or 'a social framework through which nationally conscious individuals can organise their history', as opposed to 'mass individual memory 'which is the 'recollection of events which individuals actually lived through': Jan-Werner Müller, 'Introduction', in Müller (ed), *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.
2. Peter Stanley, 'The Green Hole: Exploring our Neglect of the New Guinea Campaigns of 1943-44', *Sabretache* XXXI: 2 (1993). Perhaps this neglect owes something to the lack of popular appeal of the relevant official history, David Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1961).
3. John Coates, *Bravery Above Blunder: The 9th Australian Division at Finschhafen, Sattelberg and Sio* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1999).
4. John Coates, *An Atlas of Australia's Wars*, vol VII of *The Australian Centenary History of Defence* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001).
5. Lex McAuley, *Battle of the Bismarck Sea* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991).
6. Alan Stephens, 'Australia's Forgotten Victory: the Battle of the Bismarck Sea', *Australian Defence Force Journal* 101(1993).
7. For an excellent introduction to the literature on the growth of memory globally since the 1980s, see Müller, 'Introduction', esp 13-19, and TG Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper (eds), *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3-7.
8. Quoted in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 4 March 1994.
9. Müller, 'Introduction', 13-14.
10. I owe this term to the French historian, Henry Rousso and his influential *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991). 219-21. Carriers of memory, Rousso argues, divide into 'official carriers', that is, the ceremonies, monuments and celebrations organised by national or local governments; 'organisational carriers', who are groups who 'sometimes become attached to a rather static image of the past, which they then promote actively as well as passively'; 'cultural carriers', who express often highly individualistic views of the past in a variety of media, including film, literature and television (their view is usually implicit rather than explicit); and finally 'scholarly carriers', who 'reconstruct the facts and propose ways of interpreting them'.
11. Details of the plaques' location and chronology of their development can be found on the Australian Bronze Commemorative Plaques web site: www.plaques.satlink.com.au.
12. EF Aitken, *The Story of the 2/2nd Australian Pioneer Battalion* (Melbourne: 2/2 Pioneer Battalion Association, 1953), 224.
13. *Ibid*, 229.
14. Interview of author with Bill Dowrick Geelong, 30 June 2003.
15. Edward J Drea, *The US Army Campaigns of World War II* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1993), quoted in Coates, *An Atlas of Australia's Wars*, 256.
16. David Horner has detailed this process in his many publications on high command during the Second World War: a succinct summary of his argument is to be found in 'Strategic policy-making, 1943-45' in M McKernan and M Browne (eds), *Australia: Two Centuries of War and Peace* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial in association with Allen & Unwin, 1988), 272-95.
17. See Peter Charlton, *The Unnecessary War: Island Campaigns of the South-West Pacific, 1944-45* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1983).
18. Horner, 'Strategic policy-making', 272.
19. Müller, 'Introduction', 2.
20. Don Watson, *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart: A Portrait of Paul Keating PM* (Milsons Point, NSW: Knopf/Random House, 2002), 15.
21. Coates, *An Atlas of Australia's Wars*, 254.
22. CEW Bean, *The Story of Anzac*, 2 vols (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1921, 1924).
23. Rohan Rivett, *Behind Bamboo: An Inside Story of the Japanese Prison Camp* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1946); Russell Braddon, *The Naked Island* (London: Werner Laurie, 1952); Jessie Simons, *While History Passed* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1954), later published as *In Japanese Hands: Australian Nurses as POWs*; Betty Jeffrey, *White Coolies* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1954).
24. Pierre Boulle, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1956).