

Submission to IPAN People's Inquiry

Ross Gwyther. July 2021

Saving Australia during World War II – a persistent myth?

This submission focuses on an underlying argument often advanced for the importance to Australia of the Australia-US Alliance. It is commonly believed that the US came to Australia's aid during World War II to resist a Japanese invasion of Australia. Thus *to ensure Australian security today, we need an alliance with the United States – the country who “saved” us during WWII*. The argument in this paper has been inspired by an essay by former Chief Historian at the Australian War Memorial, Peter Stanley – entitled “Dramatic Myth and Dull truth: invasion by Japan in 1942”¹

Summary of this paper:

- A Japanese invasion of Australia was a real possibility during 1941 and early 1942
- By April 1942 Japan had decided that it was not logistically possible to invade Australia.
- The US forces saw Australia as a necessary base from which to fight the Japanese forces
- The two major battles (Coral Sea and Kokoda) were in reality battles over the Japanese aim of cutting links between the US and Australia, rather than battles to defend Australia.
- There has been a continued promotion of the “invasion myth” from 1942 until the present time
- The historical reality is that, rather than “the US saving Australia”, Australia played a significant role as a forward American base – if effect helping to “save the USA”..
- Hence above argument for continuing the US alliance has no historical basis.
- *An appendix on the signals intercepts that enabled US and Australian military leaders to be fully aware that the Japanese plans for invasion had been abandoned by the Japanese by April 1942.*

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The Second World War commenced in the Pacific when Pearl Harbour was bombed on December 7, 1941. For people in China the war had commenced much earlier in July 1937, with the very brutal Japanese invasion of large parts of China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan and Nanjing.

Memory of the brutality of Japanese forces both in China, and then in south east Asia, has clouded any objective discussion of the origins of the war. Humphrey McQueen² has pointed to one factor leading to war, namely the intense resentment amongst Japanese people of the rule of European colonial powers in China, Malaya, Borneo, the East Indies and the Phillipines, and the impact that these colonial powers had on restricting Japanese access to raw materials. However the underlying factors leading to the war are not the subject of this paper.

The rapid Japanese advance through South East Asia during the few months following Pearl Harbour, as well as the intense bombing of Darwin (February 19th, 1942), gave rise to real fears in the Australian Government that a Japanese invasion of Australia was likely. For example on 2 January 1942 the Sydney Morning Herald warned in its editorial: *It is not too soon for the Australian Government to plan and prepare this people for a 'scorched earth' policy, guerilla fighting, and all*

¹ Stanley, in Craig Stockings (Editor) “Zombie Myths of Australian Military History” 2010, UNSW Press

² Humphrey McQueen, 1991, “Japan to the Rescue”, Heinemann Australia

*else that 'total war' entails*³. Under SMH headlines of “NO SURRENDER' CALL TO AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE and INVASION THREAT” on 17th February, Prime Minister Curtin said *"the protection of this country is no longer a question of contributing to a world at war, but of an enemy threatening to invade our own shore."*⁴ Australian State Governments established committees to plan for mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of Australian civilians, with a policy of scorched earth and denial of enemy access in the case of Japanese invasion⁵

During these early months of the Pacific War, the United States saw Australia as a base from which to conduct its war against Japan. Brigadier Dwight Eisenhower (later to be General and then US President) was commissioned to brief the US Army Chief of Staff Marshall on 14th December 1941 shortly after Pearl Harbour. He listed under the heading "Steps to be Taken,": *“Build up in Australia a base of operations from which supplies and personnel can be moved into the Philippines. Speed is essential ...Get planes to Australia..Initially, utilize the bombs and ammunition now in Australia and to be carried on carriers and fast merchant vessels. Establish fast merchant ship supply service from US to Australia for maintenance. Ferry from Australia to Philippines.*⁶ Later that month he again reported *The United States interest in maintaining contact with Australia and in preventing further Japanese expansion to the South-eastward is apparent. But they are not immediately vital to the successful outcome of the war. The problem is one of determining what we can spare for the effort in that region, without seriously impairing performance of our mandatory tasks.*⁷ Nowhere was there mention in his memos of assistance to Australia in the face of invasion.

The US focus on Australia as a base continued – with Supreme Commander of the South West Pacific Area, General Macarthur, setting up his operations by July 1942 in Brisbane after the US withdrawal from the Philippines in March that year. By 1943 there were more than 250,000 US troops based in Australia⁸.

The Japanese military successes in south east Asia [in Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines, and Dutch East Indies] during the first two months of the war took their own planners unprepared.... For the next two months Japanese Imperial General Headquarters debated the question of where to go next⁹.. Along with some of the extreme militarist and nationalist voices in Japan, the Japanese navy under Rear Admiral Ugaki Matome was in favour of invading Australia to cut it off as a base for the Americans. However the Army was strongly opposed, seeing that as logistically impossible. The Chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet, Admiral Yamamoto, was also against an invasion.¹⁰ By early April 1942 this debate was resolved by abandoning any invasion plans.

The alternative strategy adopted (termed by the Japanese command Operation FS, namely an occupation of New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa) was to cut Australia off from supply by the United States, and thus reduce its effectiveness as a base for the Americans. This strategy was behind the Japanese plans to occupy New Guinea and in particular Port Moresby. The naval battle of the Coral

³ Sydney Morning Herald, 2nd January 1942, p1

⁴ SMH, 17th February, 1942, p1

⁵ Sue Rosen “Scorched Earth”, Allen and Unwin, 2017

⁶ Merle Miller “Ike the Soldier” Putnams, 1987

⁷ Matloff & Snell “Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare 1941-41 Centre of military History 1999 (P157)

⁸ Americans in Australia,SLV <http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/australia-wwii/home-wii/americans-australia>

⁹ Horner (1993) “Defending Australia”, War and Society, V11, No 1, p3.

¹⁰ Frei “Why the Japanese were in New Guinea” Symposium Paper, <http://ajrp.awm.gov.au/ajrp/remember.nsf/pages/NT000020CA>

Sea, carried out by US forces, and the long and gruelling Kokoda battle carried out by Australian troops, were in reality responses to this revised Japanese strategy of “containment”¹¹.

After April 1942 there were never again any plans for Japan to invade Australia. This historical reality was recognised in all official histories of the war written during the 1950 and 1960s, for example by Paul Hasluck¹² and Dudley McCarthy¹³. When asked if the Japanese had ever planned such invasion, General Tojo head of Japanese Imperial Forces, replied : "*We never had enough troops to do so . We had already far outstretched our lines of communication . We did not have the armed strength or the supply facilities to mount such a terrific extension of our already over-strained and too thinly spread forces . We expected to occupy all New Guinea, to maintain Rabaul as a holding base, and to raid northern Australia by air . But actual physical invasion—no, at no time .*"¹⁴

All serious historians from the 1950s up until the present have made it quite clear that Australia was in no danger of Japanese invasion during the Pacific war. However there has been a continual message being promoted amongst the general community around two points – that the United States did save Australia from invasion, and that Australia should accordingly maintain a close alliance with the US.. This messaging commenced from immediately following the war, and has continued to date. On the 4th May 1946 commemoration of the naval battle of the Coral Sea was had newspaper headlines “*Sea Battle that saved the Nation*”¹⁵.

The Australian –American Association had been founded in 1936 by some of the most reactionary forces in Australia – Sir Keith Murdoch, Sir John Latham, Frank Packer and Richard (later Lord) Casey.¹⁶ At the end of the war they campaigned to erect a monument to the alliance. President of the funds appeal Conrad Horley said “*This memorial will not only show our gratitude to the Americans who saved us from Japanese invasion but will also mark our determination to work with the United States, keeping the English speaking peoples close together in the interests of peace,*”¹⁷. By 1950, Prime Minister Menzies was promoting their appeal for funds, saying “*.. erect at Canberra a striking and beautiful national memorial to the vital and unforgettable contribution made by the USA to the safety and defence of Australia in World War II*”¹⁸ The monument, an American eagle atop a gigantic pole (irreverently termed by Canberrans the “chook on the stick” or the “stoned crow”¹⁹), stands as an ongoing testament to the mythical basis of the US Alliance and its negative implications for Australian society.

In recent years both the Coral Sea Battle and the Kokoda campaign have been commemorated as having saved Australia from invasion. In 1992 Sir Eric Neal, the Chairman of the Australia-United States Coral Sea Commemorative Council, was quoted in the Canberra Times as saying that the battle saved Australia from invasion.²⁰ Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating, argued that “*the soldiers at Kokoda 'died in defence of Australia' and so, for Australians, 'the battles of Papua New Guinea were the most important ever fought'.*”²¹

¹¹ Brown & Anderson “Invasion 1942?”, Parliamentary Research Background Paper No 6, 1992

¹² Hasluck “the Government & the People”, in Australia in the War of 1939-45, Series 4, Vol I & II, AWM

¹³ McCarthy “South West Pacific Area – First Year” in Australia in the War of 1939-45, Series 1, Vol IV, AWM

¹⁴ McCarthy “South West Pacific Area – First Year” in Australia in the War of 1939-45, Series 1, Vol IV, AWM p113

¹⁵ Melbourne Herald, 4th May, 1946 p4.

¹⁶ Joan Beaumont “*Australian Memory and the US Wartime Alliance*”, War & Society, V22 No 1 p71

¹⁷ Sydney Morning Herald, 20th April, 1950

¹⁸ Melbourne The Age, 2nd May, 1950

¹⁹ Beaumont, op. cit., p85

²⁰ Horner (1993) op. cit., p1

²¹ Sean Dorney, “*Beyond the legend of Kokoda*”, The Interpreter, Lowy Inst., 24 May, 2017

In July 2021 a petitioner to Brisbane City Council said *“We, the petitioners, in the midst of the 80th anniversary period of World War II, call upon Brisbane City Council to: Firstly, name the new Cycle and Pedestrian Bridge to be built across Breakfast Creek at historic Newstead, “Battle of the Coral Sea Memorial Bridge”, in honour of the event that changed the course of World War II in the Pacific Theatre; and, secondly, Call on council to name the small park that faces on to Brisbane River at the intersection of Racecourse Road and Breakfast Creek Road, “Pensacola Convoy Place” to commemorate the first of many fleets that helped turned the tide of battle for Allied Forces stationed in Australia, thereby thwarting an expected invasion of this nation by Japanese Imperial Forces.*²²

The arguments in this paper are not meant to denigrate in any sense the sacrifices of Australian (or American) people in resisting the aggressive militarism of a Japanese empire intent on replacing the rule of European colonial powers in south and east Asia with its own “Greater East-Asia Co-prosperity Sphere”. Throughout the Pacific war, Australia played a very significant part together with the USA in the defeat of Japanese imperialism. Neither is the argument meant to imply that there was not real suffering at the hands Japanese attacks on Australia, as in the bombing of Darwin, and attacks on Townsville and Sydney. Throughout the first 2 years of the war in the Pacific, Australia was likely to be attacked by Japanese forces. But it is now clear from historical sources that Japanese attacks on Australia were aimed at breaking the role of Australia as a base for US forces, rather than as preludes to invasion.

In conclusion, the argument that the Australian-US Alliance is necessary for the defence and security of Australia, has no historical basis in our experience of World War II.

Coda.

During the years between the two World Wars, the British and American Governments devoted considerable resources to intercepting and decoding German and Japanese diplomatic communications, as well as shipping and army coded communications. Mathematicians were recruited to help in decoding of this “signals intelligence”

The story of British success in breaking German codes in World War II is well known through the Bletchley Park story on TV. Less well known is that US forces had a similar operation to collect Japanese signals intelligence, including the diplomatic signals they termed “Magic”. By September 1940, the Americans, by courtesy of “Magic” were reading most of the Japanese diplomatic messages and were aware of Japanese preparations for war, almost on a day to day basis.²³

After Pearl Harbour and the immediate threat to Australian security, the Australian army, navy and air-force also established special units, entitled “wireless units” to collect and decode the Japanese diplomatic signals as well as coded Japanese military signals and report on a daily basis to the Australian military leadership. When the head of the US forces in the Southwest Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur, escaped with his forces from Japanese occupation of the Philippines, and set up headquarters in Brisbane, the US and Australian signals intelligence sections combined their work and results.

²² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/canongarlandmemorial/>

²³ Jack Bleakley “The Eavesdroppers” AGPS Press, 1991, p4

As early as 11 April, 1942, allied collection of Japanese military communications concluded “..that it was not practical for Japan to launch a major offensive against Australia”²⁴. Furthermore, MacArthur had access to American intercepts of Japanese diplomatic traffic known as MAGIC, and on 18 April these reported the discussions between the Japanese foreign minister and the German ambassador to Tokyo, revealing that there was no plan to invade Australia²⁵

The Australian political leaders however maintained the fiction throughout the rest of 1942 and 1943 that we faced a Japanese invasion. This deception at the time was perfectly understandable as a strategy to mobilise popular support for the war effort. However promotion of that invasion myth in later years was either because of a lack of understanding of the historical record, or out of a need to build popular support for a continued Australia US Alliance.

With the invasion myth firmly laid to rest, it is time for all Australians to honestly assess whether this alliance – a cornerstone of Australian foreign and defence policy - should continue. The arguments around the invasion myth, and its implications for Australian foreign policy have strong and compelling resonances in today’s political climate. The cold war warriors of ASPI ply their argument that Australia faces a desperate threat from China. They use this argument as evidence for a continued reliance on the US Alliance.

However, more measured voices in the popular discourse are now questioning this latest version of the “*Australia is under threat – let’s rely on our big and powerful friend*” trope. For example Hugh White, a long time respected commentator on foreign affairs, has elaborated how there is very little evidence at all of a Chinese threat to Australia.²⁶ Indeed the only danger that China poses to a country such as Australia is precisely because of our continuing close alliance with the US as it encircles China with military bases, and threatens China’s steady growth in prosperity for its peoples..

In my view our response to a continued military alliance with the United States is to say a definite “no more”. Instead we need to develop an independent, peaceful and non-aligned foreign policy, without recourse to any other “great and powerful” nations, and instead based on a policy of armed neutrality, friendship and diplomacy.

²⁴ Horner (1993), op cit. p7

²⁵ Horner (1993) op cit p7

²⁶ Hugh White 2021 “China threatens the West’s primacy – not its democratic systems”, The Interpreter, Lowy Institute.