

**Jump TO Article**



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

[www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership](http://www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership)



**Jump TO Article**

## HISTORY NOTE

# *The Battle for Australia 1942–1945*

**The Honourable Charlie Lynn, MLC**

Parliamentary Secretary for Veterans Affairs, New South Wales<sup>1</sup>



*The Battle for Australia commenced with the bombing of Darwin in the Northern Territory on 19 February 1942 and ended with the surrender of the Japanese imperial forces in Wewak in the Papua and New Guinea Mandated Territory on 15 August 1945.*

**Key words:** Battle for Australia; Singapore; Java Sea; Sunda Strait; Coral Sea; Midway; Papua; Milne Bay; Kokoda Trail; New Guinea; Salamaua; Lae; Guadalcanal; Wewak.

I acknowledge those who have served our nation in uniform and those who have sacrificed their lives in defence of freedom. I also wish to congratulate the Battle for Australia committee for their vision and their perseverance in commemorating the battles that saved Australia from 1942 to 1945.

While this commemoration causes us to pause and reflect on the sacrifice of our servicemen and women during the darkest days of the war in the Pacific it also reminds us of the Returned & Services League motto adopted soon after the Great War in 1923 – ‘the price of liberty is eternal vigilance’. Sadly the motto was ignored by the next generation of political leaders after the Great War of 1914-1918.

In 1933 Colonel Vernon Sturdee, director of military operations and intelligence at Army Headquarters, warned that Japan would pose the major threat to Australian security. He predicted that: *“the Japanese would act quickly, they would all be regulars, fully trained and equipped for the operations, and fanatics who like dying in battle, whilst our troops would consist mainly of civilians, hastily thrown together on mobilisation, with very little training, short of artillery and possibly of gun ammunition.”*

Our most eminent military historian, Professor David Horner, wrote a damning indictment of our political leadership in his book *Crisis of Command*. According to Horner: *“It is now generally agreed that the Australian defence policy between the wars and until the fall of Singapore was, at the best, naively optimistic, and at the worst, some might say, close to treason.”*

7/12/42 is firmly embedded in the consciousness of our parents’ generation. It was the day that Colonel Sturdee’s prediction materialised with a surprise attack on the United States Naval fleet at Pearl Harbour in Honolulu.

The Japanese military were well prepared for their mission. For generations their national psyche had

been conditioned by the State religion, Shinto, which inculcated respect for the Emperor, the Head of the Japanese family, and respect for one’s ancestors. All Japanese authorities – religious, educational, entertainment and the media – ceaselessly indoctrinated the population with the divinity of the Emperor and the divine nature of Japan’s expansionist role. To die for the Emperor on the field of battle was the most noble of all sacrifices. Fanatical Kamikaze suicide pilots were an outcome of this extreme indoctrination.

The Japanese were thus a brutal occupier of foreign lands. Their invasion and occupation of China in 1937 was an omen of things to come. Civilian massacres, beheadings, public hangings and mass rape were committed against the Chinese population in the name of the Emperor. They did not subscribe to any conventions of war in their quest to expand their empire.

Despite this aggression Colonel Sturdee’s warning continued to go unheeded by Australia’s political leaders. Our awakening came on 7 December 1941 with Japan’s brazen attempt to sink the powerful United States Pacific Fleet anchored at Pearl Harbour. Australia’s political chooks had come home to roost.

Our gallant Australian Imperial Force was engaged in Britain’s war against Nazi Germany in Europe, Africa and the Middle East and our Militia forces were stretched to the limit in meeting the demands of rapid mobilisation. Our only hope for stemming the Japanese advance lay with the British fortress in Singapore and small outposts in the South West Pacific.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour was quickly followed by invasions of the Philippines, Thailand, Burma and the Malayan Peninsula. Their strategy was to create an Asia-Pacific Co-Prosperity Sphere which aimed to eliminate Australia by either capturing its industrial centres or isolating it as an effective base for United States forces.

Only the Australian 8<sup>th</sup> Division, with two brigades in Malaya and one split between Ambon, Timor and Rabaul, stood as our frontline defence against any advance towards Australia. History records they were soon overwhelmed by Japanese forces that quickly dispelled the myth surrounding the impregnability of the Singapore fortress.

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on an address to the Annual Service of Commemoration of Battle for Australia at the Cenotaph in Martin Place, Sydney, at 11.00 a.m. on 3 September 2014.

The fall of Singapore sent shockwaves through the Australian community. For the first time Australians experienced the fear of imminent invasion. We faced the loss of our homes and our country and many turned to prayer as a last resort for their safety. Prime Minister Curtin declared the Battle for Australia had begun.

Four days later Darwin was bombed. This was followed up with bombing raids across our northern cities from Broome to Townsville. The Japanese navy sank ships off our east and west coasts. A Japanese victory in the Battle of the Java Sea and Sunda Strait prepared the way for a successful invasion of the Dutch East Indies and landings on the north coast of New Guinea. Curtin paced the floor of his office every night wondering where the main attack would come from – via our northern cities, the west coast or the east coast.

Although the South West Pacific was not the highest priority for America due to a secret agreement between Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt to help Britain first, the forces allocated were sufficient to stall the Japanese offensive.

A Japanese invasion force steaming towards Port Moresby was thwarted in the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 and defeated in the Battle of Midway the following month. Japanese military planners were then forced to reconsider their plans of expansion and to concentrate their forces on consolidating the territory they had already captured. These plans included an expansion of their positions in New Guinea with an advance across the Owen Stanley Ranges from the northern beach-heads at Buna and Gona.

The scene was set for a bitter campaign in some of the most formidable jungle terrain on the planet. Heroic young Australians fighting with rifle, bayonet, grenade and fist slipped and slithered, panted, plodded, sweated, bled, sickened, dropped and died in a sodden and crinkled hell of mountain and jungle and swamp before they turned the tide and forced the Japanese to retreat from the last line of defence at Imita Ridge. British Field Marshall and former Australian Governor General, Sir William Slim of Burma, later remarked that we should never forget that it was the Australians who finally broke the spell of invincibility of the Japanese with their victory at Milne Bay and on the Kokoda Trail.

The tide of the Pacific War had turned but many battles were to be fought at Salamaua, Lae, Nadzab, the Huon Peninsula, the Finisterre Ranges and Guadalcanal before the Japanese finally surrendered at Wewak on 15 August 1945.

I have noted that former Australian War Memorial historian, Dr Peter Stanley, has challenged the concept of a battle for Australia because his research has revealed that the Japanese did not intend to invade mainland Australia. Unfortunately our servicemen and women did not have access to that information in 1942! We do know, however, that Japanese naval strategists

did initiate plans to invade but these were resisted by the Imperial Japanese Army who had a more realistic appreciation of the resources required to support such an endeavour.

Dr Stanley argues that there was no particular name for such a battle on any particular date. I would therefore like to use this occasion to help him out. In 1942 the colony of Papua and New Guinea was a mandated Australian territory. The Battle for Australia therefore commenced with the bombing of Darwin in the Northern Territory on 19 February 1942 and ended with the surrender of the Japanese imperial forces in Wewak in the Papua and New Guinea Mandated Territory on 15 August 1945.

In the mid-1990s I attended a commemorative service with the few remaining veterans of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division at this Cenotaph. I would like to leave you with the words of the late Sergeant Stan Bryant after he spoke of the heroic sacrifice of his mates in Malaya:

*"I say to all you here tonight, to you who are responsible for governing this country, to all you who hold positions of leadership in the community, to all Australians. It is from the servicemen and women we honour today that you inherited this land.*

*These were the men who helped build this nation. They were the ones associated with the building of our harbours and our bridges. They sealed the roads across the black soil plains, and they built the railways across Australia. Then they fought off the Japanese invasion so that you could inherit this country.*

*You now have the fruits of our labours. The cities and the harbours and the plains are yours. We few survivors are aged and can only look on with pride and wish you success in the future. But I do charge you, to accept the responsibility of your inheritance and nourish and guard them with care.*

*And remember always those who never returned. They paid the price of your future. Only they know the real cost. And remember – remember – at the signing of the Japanese surrender at Wewak on 15 August 1945 we solemnly promised God that we would never forget."*

In a speech at the Isurava battle-site in 1997, Lieutenant Colonel Phil Rhoden, who assumed command of the 2/14<sup>th</sup> Battalion during the battle of Isurava said: *"Those of us now reaching the end of our time should continue to see that our children and their children embrace the notion that the death of the brave is never in vain and, a good action is never lost to the world while there is but one actor or observer left to preserve the record of the event."*

I commend the Battle for Australia Association for their initiative and their commitment to ensure that the sacrifice of our brave men is never forgotten.

## **Lest We Forget**