Keynote Address

Menace at Home – Australia Under Attack 1939-1945

David Horner

In 1942, for the first time since the arrival of the Europeans, Australia faced the prospect of foreign invasion. The invasion did not happen, but the war touched the shores of Australia with an intensity not seen before or since. At the same time, Australian forces were in action around the world – in the skies over Europe, in north Africa, Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies and New Guinea. These battles have tended to overshadow, in public memory, what was going on in Australia. But the battles and potential battles at home involved as many Australian service men and women as those overseas.

This morning, I want to do three things. First, I want to provide the strategic and defence policy background as to why the battles took place in and around Australia. Second, I want to detail how Australia came under attack. And third, I want to outline how Australia responded to the threat of attack.

To understand the strategic and defence policy background we need to go right back to Federation in 1901. At that time, soldiers from the Australian colonies had already served overseas in support of the Empire - in New Zealand, Sudan, South Africa and China. However, the leaders of the new Commonwealth government were wary of sending forces overseas in support of the Empire. Therefore, the 1903 Defence Act, declared that Australia would have only minuscule permanent forces. Australia's part-time militia was not permitted to serve overseas.

Some historians have described two camps within the senior ranks of the permanent forces: the Australianists and the Imperialists. The Australianisms believed that Australia was best defended by having a large part-time force that would be kept for service in Australia. The Imperialists believed that Australia was best defended by contributing to the Empire's defence, even if that meant forces might need to be sent overseas.

These two approaches to Australian defence have continued right through to the present time, although the names have changed. Forward defence and support for the US or Western alliance are more recent manifestations of the Imperialist school. Defence of Australia, or continental defence is a successor to the Australianist school. These schools are not absolute. Both schools have existed side by side, with one side being more prominent at any time.

Because of the restrictions of the Defence Act, Australia needed to raise a separate, volunteer force, the AIF, for service overseas in the First World War. The chance of Australia being attacked in the First World War was very remote. But Australia still maintained its part-time Citizen Forces to help defend Australia.

After the First World War the Imperialists wanted to build up the Navy so it could support Britain's Royal Navy and help secure Australia. The main feature was the Singapore strategy, by which Britain would send its main fleet to Singapore in time of threat. All the Australian Army had to do was to provide sufficient forces to deal with enemy raids. However, reflecting the Australianist view, many in the Army believed that the Singapore strategy was flawed. They had identified Japan as a threat, and they believed that Australia

needed to have sufficient forces at home to deal with a possible invasion.

After the outbreak of the Second World War the Australian government made three decisions that seemed to support an Imperialist point of view. First, the government agreed to place its major ships under the control of the British Admiralty, and the ships were deployed away from Australia. Second the government decided to raise a volunteer force, the Second AIF, for service overseas. By the beginning of 1941 three AIF infantry divisions were in the Middle east. And third, the government signed up to the Empire Air Training Scheme, by which airmen were trained to serve with the British Royal Air Force in Europe. This meant that it was hard to build up the RAAF for home defence in Australia.

But the Australianist view was not completely abandoned. Before the end of 1939 the government introduced conscription for the part-time citizen forces, with its establishment of five infantry divisions and two cavalry divisions. In mid-1940 the government decided to raise and equip a militia force of 250,000 men for home defence. The limitation was lack of facilities and equipment.

Similarly, some naval units were still deployed around Australia. Since Australia could not purchase destroyers or cruisers from Britain and its larger units were serving overseas, Australia decided to build local defence vessels called corvettes. The first of these was laid down in February 1940 and seventeen had been completed by the time of the Pacific War. The Royal Australian Air Force was being built up at home, although the problem was purchasing sufficient aircraft.

The government and its military advisers wanted to build up the forces for home defence, against the distant prospect of a possible Japanese invasion. But in the first fifteen months of the war the greatest danger at home seemed to come from the activities of the Communist Party, that was seeking to undermine the Australian war effort. To deal with this threat, and after much bureaucratic wrangling, in February 1941 the War Cabinet approved the establishment of the Security Service. The Communist threat declined after June 1941, when Hiter's Germany invaded Rusia. The Security Service were remodelled as the war progressed, but there was never a major internal threat. Australians with German or Italian heritage were interned as a precaution.

Gradually, the view about the appropriate strategy began to change. In August 1940 the German auxiliary raider Orion operated in the Tasman Sea and sank several ships. In December 1940, along with the Komet, it attacked the Australian protectorate of Nauru, which caused the introduction of Trans-Tasman convoys. Mines from the German raider the Pinguin sank two ships and damaged another off the Australian coast in the second half of 1940. After that there were no more raiders in Australian waters until November 1941 when the German raider, Kormoran, sunk the Australian light cruiser HMAS *Sydney* off the coast of Western Australia.

The biggest change came as the Japanese threat developed in late 1940. If Singapore fell to the Japanese, the Singapore strategy would be a failure. In December 1940 Prime Minister Menzies decided to go to London to seek reinforcements for Malaya and the government decided to send an infantry brigade from the 8th AIF Division to Malaya to help defend Singapore.

In February 1941 the cabinet endorsed a major change in Australia's strategic focus. Australia accepted responsibility to defend Timor, Ambon, New Guinea and Nauru, and the 8th Division was retained for use in the Australian area and the Far East, rather than deploying it to the Middle East.

Over the next few months small numbers of troops – all that was available – were deployed across the near region. In response to German raiders shelling Nauru, the army sent two 18-pounder guns with crews to each of Nauru and Ocean Islands. A battalion (from the 8th Division) along with supporting artillery arrived in Rabaul, and a militia battalion from Brisbane arrived in Port Moresby. Under the Defence Act, the militia could not be sent outside Australia, but Papua was Australian territory.

In July 1941 Independent Companies went to New Ireland and New Caledonia. A brigade of the 8th Division went to Malaya, bringing the division there to a strength of two brigades. The division's remaining brigade went to Darwin, from which its battalions could be sent forward to Ambon and Timor as soon as the Netherlands authorities agreed.

In mid-December 1941, soon after the outbreak of the war with Japan, two AIF battalions were deployed from Darwin to Ambon and Timor respectively, while an Independent Company went to Portuguese Timor. The following month two militia battalions went to Port Moresby, bringing the force there to brigade strength, the limit of the force that Australia could maintain.

The long-standing view about Australian defence policy had been overthrown. It was no longer sufficient to defend the Australian continent by deploying army units within Australia. The approaches needed to be secured. But by sending forces to

the Middle East and Europe in support of imperial defence, Australia reduced its capacity to deploy forces to the region in defence of Australia. In retrospect, Australia could have fully mobilised its militia in early 1941 rather than waiting until the outbreak of war with Japan. Even then, however, Australia had insufficient naval and air forces to support units deployed to the region.

During 1941 the Australian government also took several major steps to defend Australia at home. In June 1941 a Combined Operational Intelligence Centre, a Central War Room and a Combined Defence Headquarters were established in Melbourne. Area Combined Headquarters were established in Townsville, Melbourne, Fremantle and Darwin. In August 1941 Lieutenant General Sir Iven Mackay was appointed GOC-in-Chief Home Forces. Meanwhile in May 1941 the government took over the Volunteer Defence Corps. It had been established by the RSL in July 1940 for men aged between 18 and 60 including those in reserved occupations.

After the outbreak of the Pacific War the part-time militia was called up for full-time service, bring the number to almost 250,000, and even 5,000 members of the Volunteer Defence Corps were called up for full-time duty on aerodrome defence and coast watching.

You will be familiar with the rapid advance of the Japanese in December 1941 and January and February 1942. The Japanese landed in New Britain and defeated the Australian garrisons there, seized Singapore, and soon took over the Netherlands East Indies, including capturing the Australian battalions on Ambon and Timor.

Perhaps the first battle in the direct defence of mainland Australia came in January 1942 when Allied transport

ships sailing towards Darwin were attacked by two Japanese submarines. Three Australian corvettes were deployed from Darwin. One of the corvettes dropped depth charges on a Japanese submarine and sank it.

The Darwin area was the focus of the most intense attacks on the Australian mainland. On 19 February the Japanese mounted a major air attack on Darwin. Area Combined Headquarters at Darwin disregarded early warnings of the impending attack. Air raid alerts were not sounded until just before the first wave of aircraft appeared over Darwin. Several American fighters on patrol were taken by surprise, with most shot down. In and around the harbour, ships, wharves and parts of the town suffered great damage. Three Allied naval ships and five merchant ships were sunk, and another ten ships were damaged. Most of the 260 or so people killed that day were victims of this first wave.

The first attack ended 42 minutes after it began. Just over an hour later the second wave arrived, targeting the military airfield. Six RAAF servicemen were killed and nine aircraft on the ground were destroyed. Some troops and civilians showed great courage. The first two Military Medals for bravery in battle on Australian soil were awarded to anti-aircraft gunners for their actions. Other servicemen and some civilians rescued crewmen from burning ships, many of whom were badly injured. There was also an element of panic. Some civilians and servicemen 'went bush' or fled south, fearing the raid marked the start of an invasion. This panic and the true extent of the losses was hidden from the Australian public by strict censorship. Japanese attacks on the Northern Territory continued during 1942.

Other areas of northern Australia also suffered attacks. On 3 March 1942 Japanese aircraft attacked Broome's harbour, township and airfield. Dozens of people were killed or wounded and 24 aircraft were destroyed. A small number of raids also occurred on the north-east coast of Australia. In July 1942, Japanese flying boats conducted three minor raids on Townsville, which caused little or no damage.

By March 1942 there was a very real fear that the Japanese would invade Australia. Barbed wire defences were strung out along beaches to hinder any Japanese landing; air raid trenches were dug; and 'blackout' precautions minimised the glow of lighting from streetlights and buildings. Gun emplacements were set up around key harbours. Anti-aircraft guns and searchlights were positioned, while garrison troops guarded important installations.

During this period of concern, General Douglas MacArthur arrived in Australia to assume command of the Southwest Pacific Area, and General Sir Thomas Blamey came back from the Middle East to be appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Army

The Australian Army was then organised and deployed to defend Australia. With Army headquarters in Melbourne, the army had five subordinate headquarters, the First Army, based in Sydney, the Second Army in Melbourne, the 3rd Corps in Perth, Northern Territory Force in Darwin, and New Guinea Force in Port Moresby. Each was responsible for defending their respective areas. The army in Australia included the equivalent of eight infantry divisions, two motorised divisions and an armoured division.

The North Australia Observe Unit, nicknamed the Nackeroos or Curtin's Cowboys, was formed to provide early warning of Japanese activity in northern Australia.

This was the time of the so-called Brisbane Line. The line certainly existed, and many soldiers remember digging trenches, but it was not government policy to withdraw behind the line. Rather, defensive positions were dug around all the cities by militia soldiers who were enlisted in those cities. So there was also a Townsville line and a Newcastle line.

While these divisions were supposed to deal with a possible Japanese land invasion, anti-aircraft and coast defence organisations dealt with possible air raids and raids by enemy ships. These organisations were massive. By the end of 1942 Australia had two heavy anti-aircraft regiments, 32 static heavy anti-aircraft batteries, eleven light anti-aircraft regiments and sixteen independent light anti-aircraft batteries. The anti-aircraft artillery force numbered 32,000 men - the equivalent of two infantry divisions. These figures do not include the anti-aircraft units deployed overseas. Later, women soldiers were used to staff searchlight units and to work on radars, predictors and range finders. By December 1943, 3,600 women were employed in anti-aircraft searchlight and coast defence units.

Most of the anti-aircraft units saw no action. In the Northern Territory the main defence was provided by RAAF fighters. But to give some indication, in 1943 the heavy anti-aircraft batteries in north Queensland (which included Thursday Island) and the Northern Territory fired almost 10,000 rounds while the light anti-aircraft batteries fired 9,500 rounds. During 1943 they reportedly destroyed 29 enemy aircraft, probably destroyed another 27, and damaged 32.

The coast defence organisation consisted of some 57 batteries around the Australian coast. The fifteen batteries in the Sydney-Port Kembla area were manned by 6,000 personnel. Newcastle had four batteries with six six-inch Mark VII guns and two 9.2-inch Mark X guns, manned by more than 1800 men. In addition to the fixed defences, the army raised twelve mobile batteries to be deployed around the coast. There were also sixteen special radar detachments. The coast guns saw little action, although the Newcastle battery fired four rounds at a Japanese submarine in June 1942 but did so a full thirteen minutes after the submarine had first fired.

The main threat to shipping in Australian waters came in 1942 when the Japanese launched a submarine campaign off Australia's east coast. On the night of 31 May–1 June, three Japanese midget submarines entered Sydney Harbour, avoided the partially constructed Sydney Harbour anti-submarine boom net, and attempted to sink Allied warships. Two midget submarines were detected and attacked before they could engage any Allied vessels. The third submarine attempted to torpedo the heavy cruiser USS *Chicago*, but instead sank the converted ferry HMAS *Kuttabul*, killing 21 sailors. The Japanese raid raised serious questions about the effectiveness of Australian port defences at that time.

Immediately following the raid, the five Japanese fleet submarines that carried the midget submarines embarked on a campaign to disrupt merchant shipping in eastern Australian waters. In the two months after the attack on Sydney Harbour, 14 Allied merchant ships were attacked and six of those were sunk. Some 60 merchant seamen died in these attacks, with 29,000 tons of shipping lost. This forced Australian ships to

sail along the east coast in convoys and reduced the efficiency of Australian coastal shipping.

In the early hours of 8 June 1942, two submarines bombarded the ports of Sydney and Newcastle. One submarine fired 34 shells at Newcastle but caused little damage. The attack lasted about 20 minutes, until just after fortress gunners fired in reply.

As far as defence planners were concerned, the period of greatest threat came between February and June 1942. While we know that the Battle of the Coral Sea in early May was fought to prevent a Japanese landing at Port Moresby, to the government, the military chiefs, and the public, it seemed as though a Japanese invasion fleet had been prevented from reaching Australia. After four Japanese aircraft carriers were sunk in the Battle of Midway in early June, General MacArthur advised the Australian government that the threat of invasion had largely disappeared. But the government made no public announcement and the public and the troops still prepared to deal with a possible invasion.

However, the strategy was changing. Whereas previously the armed forces had focussed on the defence of Australia, in July 1942 General MacArthur now ordered an offensive, aiming to capture Rabaul. Meanwhile US Navy forces landed at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. The Japanese beat MacArthur to the punch. They landed in Papua on 21/22 July, setting off the Kokoda campaign. To many people then it seemed that Japan was aiming to invade Australia. We now know that was not the case.

After that, General MacArthur remained focussed on the New Guinea campaign, with the aim of regaining the

Philippines. An Australian Naval squadron and an RAAF Operational Group accompanied his advance.

From August 1942, RAAF Command, under Air Vice Marshal Bostock, was responsible for the air defence of Australia. By April 1943 the RAAF commander of the Northwest Area based in Darwin, under Bostock, had five Australian squadrons and one squadron from each of Britain, the United States and the Netherlands. Three squadrons were equipped with Spitfires. On 2 May 1943 20 Japanese bombers and Zero fighters attacked Darwin inflicting little damage on the ground. The RAAF fighters which intercepted the Japanese aircraft suffered heavy losses. However, seven weeks later on 20 June, the Spitfires intercepted a formation of 21 bombers and 21 Japanese fighters and shot down nine bombers and five fighters. Two Spitfires were shot down. This was the most successful encounter by the RAAF over Darwin, during which the Group Captain Caldwell, an ace from the European theatre, shot down his fifth Japanese aircraft. One book about the Spitfires in Darwin was subtitled *The Real Battle for Australia.* The last air raid on Australia was on 12 November 1943, when Darwin was attacked for the 64th and final time.

In March 1943 the Australian Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Royle, was appointed Commander South-West Pacific Sea Frontiers, responsible for the close naval defence of Australia including the conduct and protection of coast convoys around Australia. Royle had plenty of work to do, as Japanese submarines returned to Australian waters in January 1943 and mounted a six-month campaign along the Australian east coast. The Japanese deployed up to 12 submarines. The most successful, the I-21, sank six ships off the coast of NSW.

One of the heaviest attacks by Japanese submarines came on 15 June 1943, when the five Australian corvettes were escorting ten merchant ships and three landing ships. They were 150 kilometres off Smokey Cape when two of the ships were torpedoed. Two corvettes carried out depth charge attacks and the rest of the convoy escaped unharmed.

The last attack by a Japanese submarine off the east coast was made by *I-174* on 16 June 1943 when she sank 5,500 ton merchant ship *Portmar* and damaged a U.S. Landing Ship Tank as they were travelling in a convoy off the NSW north coast.

The single greatest loss of life resulting from a submarine attack in Australian waters occurred in the early hours of 14 May 1943 when *I-177* torpedoed and sank the Australian hospital ship *Centaur* off Point Lookout, QLD, with the loss of 268 lives. Hospital ships such as *Centaur* were legally protected against attack under the terms of the Geneva Conventions The ship had been appropriately lit and marked to indicate that it was a hospital ship and its sinking was regarded as a war crime.

The Japanese submarine offensive against Australia was broken off in July 1943 when submarines were redeployed to counter Allied offensives elsewhere in Pacific. The Japanese had attacked 21 ships and had sunk 14 of them. The Australian Naval authorities were concerned about a resumption of attacks and maintained the coastal convoy system and air patrols until late 1943 when it was clear that the threat had passed.

By that time, in June 1943 the Government had finally told the public that the threat of invasion had passed. Thereafter the forces devoted to the defence of Australia were gradually disbanded. Whereas in 1942 Australia had been defended by eleven divisions, by 1945 this had been reduced to

barely one. Most of the anti-aircraft groups around Australia had been disbanded. Similarly, the coast defence batteries were either disbanded or put in care and maintenance.

While there were relatively few battles over and around Australia, it was a frightening time for many Australians. The defence of Australia involved a huge effort, including the building of ships, the construction of aircraft and other munitions, and the mobilising of almost half a million defenders. Set against the famous battles fought overseas, the war in and around Australia has received much less attention. But for the men and women involved it was an experience that shaped the rest of their lives.