

### Bringing the troops home

John Curtin took office on 7 October 1941 as Australia's third prime minister during World War II, and the fourth since the death of Joe Lyons in office only six months before the war began. When the Japanese Empire attacked on a broad range of fronts, including a devastating air raid on the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, he had been in office for little over two months. Six weeks later the same planes bombed Darwin. Curtin, a former pacifist and campaigner against conscription for overseas military service during World War I, a man who had never held a ministerial post, now had to govern Australia at a time of unique peril.

Prior to its surprise attacks on the United States and Malaya, Japan had been for years engaged in the Second Sino-Japanese War, the largest Asian war of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Fought against China intermittently from 1931, full-scale hostilities commenced on 7 July 1937 and continued until the Japanese surrendered in 1945. In 1942 the Japanese had the upper hand. This conflict, sometimes overlooked in Australian memories of World War II, is the key to the controversy between Australia, the British and the Americans over the use of Australian troops in early 1942.

Following the United States' declaration of war on Japan on 8 December 1941, China became an ally of the British and the USA. At this time President Franklin Roosevelt coined the term *The Four Policemen*, referring to the combined strength of the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union and China. In the months following, safeguarding the only land route connecting the British colonies of India and Burma with China became a major issue, as the Allies tried to support the Chinese war effort against Japan. This route was a 1,154 km road connecting Burma with Kunming, China, completed in 1938. Known as the Burma Road, it had great strategic significance. Without it, crucial American military supplies could not reach the Chinese. And if the Chinese were defeated by the Japanese, it was likely that hundreds of thousands of Japanese military personnel would be deployed elsewhere, to strengthen the defence of Japan's other conquests.

After the war Churchill argued that the Australian Advisory War Council and War Cabinet failed to objectively view the entire strategic situation. He claimed that, had they done so, none would have urged the neglect of Burma. The loss of Burma's port at Rangoon in 1942 led inevitably to the cutting of the Burma Road. However most historians suggest that the elements of the Australian 7<sup>th</sup> Division that could have reached Burma in time to defend Rangoon would have made very little difference to the inevitable British defeat there.

The city was taken by Japan barely two weeks later, and the leading ships in the convoys carrying the 7<sup>th</sup> Division did not include the heavy weapons and vehicles the Australians would have needed to make any impact on the situation. It is possible that Churchill did not understand that the ships were so widely separated. It is also possible that he considerably underrated the fighting capacity of the Japanese.



On the other hand, it seems that Curtin and his military advisors did not fully appreciate the importance of keeping China in the war, and were single-minded in their resolve to strengthen Australian defenses without acknowledging that a Japanese victory in China posed a significant long-term threat to Australia.

In recent years there has also been a debate about the seriousness of the threat of Japanese invasion of Australia in 1942. Some historians argue that from mid-1942 Curtin knew, from intercepted cables, that the threat had abated, but that he maintained the rhetoric of imminent attack in order to strengthen Australia's resolve to fight. Others argue that Curtin had every reason to believe that there was still a possible threat to Australia. Some maintain that this view was not simply a reasonable perception at the time, but that elements of the Japanese armed forces had actual plans for invasion.

The Japanese conquest of Burma, while devastating for the Burmese, also had an appalling consequence for many thousands of Allied Prisoners of War, including nearly 15,000 Australian servicemen captured at Singapore on 15 February 1942 and others captured elsewhere. The Japanese needed a reliable supply route from Bangkok to Rangoon but their shipping was vulnerable to submarine and aerial attack. They set their prisoners and an army of forced laborers to the task of filling the gaps in existing railway networks. Construction began in June 1942. An estimated 90,000 Asian laborers and at least 13,000 Allied POWs died during construction of the Burma-Thailand Railway, including 2,646 Australians.

Meanwhile, the Allied supply chain to Kunming in China was maintained successfully but at great cost. During 1943 up to three thousand tons of supplies a month were carried 'over the Hump' from India by air, with hundreds of American cargo aircraft flying across the Himalayas every day. Close to a thousand airmen died. Construction of new land routes from India began in late 1943, while Chinese, British and American troops successfully drove the Japanese out of northern Burma. The Burma Road was reopened in January 1945 and Rangoon was liberated by British and Indian troops in May 1945.

### Further Reading

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